

# NAVA: in conversation, Episode 10

[Introduction music]

Voiceover: The National Association for the Visual Arts is the peak body protecting and promoting the professional interests of the Australian visual arts. NAVA: in conversation is a series exploring the issues and challenges of working in the sector. We speak with artists, curators and administrators to gain insight into the experiences of contemporary practice and seek to propose ideas for change, progress and resilience in both local and global contexts.

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Brianna Munting: Today we're chatting with Liz Nowell, the CEO of the newly formed organisation ACE Open. Hi Liz, welcome to NAVA's in conversation podcast. So what exactly is ACE Open?

Liz Nowell: Well ACE is a new established contemporary art space which is based in the CBD is Adelaide and we're one of fourteen organisations that are part of the Contemporary Arts Organisations Australia network, the CAO network. So really we commission, present and discuss contemporary art and artists right through from emerging, mid-career and established artists working locally, nationally and internationally.

Brianna Munting: And how would you describe the vision of ACE Open?

Liz Nowell: I mean it's been a really amazing experience the past eight months because we sort of formed this new organisation and started it from the ground up so it has been a really great opportunity to you know rethink what a contemporary art organisation and an independent contemporary art organisation might look like, not only in Adelaide or in Australia but in the world, and so shaping a vision for the organisation being really central to that and has really given us, you know, we have really been provided an opportunity to, as I said, rethink what we are doing. Our vision really is around the idea of transforming, expanding, understanding and creating our world through contemporary art so were really passionate as an organisation and focused on looking our world and understanding our world through the lens of contemporary art.

Brianna Munting: That's absolutely fantastic and I think there's the potential for ACE to play such a unique role in both the South Australia and national landscape, but how did ACE come about?

Liz Nowell: The name or the organisation?

Brianna Munting: Both.

Liz Nowell: Well it was, you know, I had originally moved back to Adelaide as the Director of the Contemporary Arts Centre of South Australia which had been around for 75 odd years and that was based in Parkside on the city fringe of Adelaide and in the city in the lion arts centre was an organisation called the Australian Experimental Art Foundation and really there had been a conversation for many years around the necessity for two organisations, the

relevance which you know there was differing views on that. But there had been ongoing conversations for a number of years about creating one really strong organisation rather than having the two. And then you know as a result of funding cuts last year that happened we were sort of put in a position where both organisations needed to reconfigure what we were doing, how we were going to continue and the most logical, albeit you know, disappointing and hard on many levels as well, the most logical and sustainable forward was to merge the two organisations. So last year we spent the second half of the year, both AEAF and CACSA working, boards and staff, working towards amalgamating two into one new entity. And that was a really, obviously a really difficult process also a really incredible process to see two organisations working so collegiately, so selflessly and so quickly to sort of bring together this new organisation. So we amalgamated on 28<sup>th</sup> December I think it was.

Brianna Munting: Wow what a day!

Liz Nowell: Yeah it was very late in the piece. But it was also done really quickly actually, which is quite amazing, very quickly given what a huge task it is, merging two organisations, with all that history and those resources and infrastructure. So we amalgamated officially on 28<sup>th</sup> December and then throughout that sort of period both the board had gone through the process of independently appointing a Director and that was me, I was appointed the Director and we started in January.

Brianna Munting: Wow! Hit the ground running.

Liz Nowell: Yeah bit times. Didn't even have a bank account on the first day we walked in.

Brianna Munting: Oh my goodness! That's incredible.

Liz Nowell: No staff, no name, just me and my other colleague Sarita walked into a new building, for us, in the middle of January and went ok where to we start? [Laughs].

Brianna Munting: That's such an exciting opportunity, I really think when you talk about it being an independent contemporary organisation that's incredible and how do you see ACE's position locally in South Australia but also in a national and international discourse.

Liz Nowell: Yeah, I mean it's really interesting, I think reflecting on that because I worked in Sydney for a number of years and there's a lot more, there's far more galleries and institutions for contemporary artists to show their work in, in a sort of professional context. Whereas in Adelaide there isn't and, you know, there's obviously the Art Gallery of SA and the University museum but there's certainly not an as diverse an ecology because obviously it's a much smaller city than say Sydney or Melbourne. So for us in a local sense one of the sort of concerns I guess or points of contention with the amalgamation was, will this reduce, by amalgamating, creating one organisation, will this reduce opportunities for South Australian artists when there are already so few? So in a local context we are now the only contemporary art organisation, independent contemporary art organisation that will support artists, writers, and curators as well, across all stages of their careers. So that's quite a big responsibility and we need to think strategically how we can work locally and also nationally to create opportunities for South Australian artists and to help raise their profiles and propel their careers and I think nationally you know in terms of the context we are working in we're one of only, we are the only South Australian CAO network out of 14 organisations nationally which puts us in quite a unique position and I think a lot of curators and organisations and artists want to engage with South Australia, want to work with us and we're really feel that we can

really be a conduit to that conversation and bridging that gap, so nationally I would like to see us working with artists and organisations to make that distance smaller between not just the eastern seaboard but the rest of Australia and Adelaide so that we are sort of working in a more open sort of collaborative way with other regional centres and capital cities.

Brianna Munting: So how important then would be the relationships between ACE Open and the other areas within the arts ecology not just the CAO organisations?

Liz Nowell: Yeah I think we have a role, I mean if we're talking nationally, we're in partnership with the Next Wave Festival at the moment and Firstdraft so we've just commissioned, we're about to commission a South Australian artist to present new work as part of the Next Wave Festival that will then go on to Firstdraft so I think there's a lot of opportunity to work with organisations nationally. I'm really interested in presenting and supporting commissions of South Australian artists in other exhibitions, in other states, in other institutions. Part of our role I see as advocacy, so you know talking to the MCA talking to Carriageworks, talking to the NGV about South Australian artists and the level they are working at which is so high but also I see we have a major role in supporting Australian artists because you know I think, I want to bring great art to South Australia and propel Australian artist careers as well so I would like to see new commissions and residency projects where Australian artists are able to come in and immerse themselves in the Adelaide cultural space and sphere and create works that respond to social histories and sort of current political climate here. So I think collaboration is really poor for an organisation and I don't think we can afford to not collaborate. We are really lucky that we have five day studios and a residential apartment which means we are in a position to work with a lot of institutions and artists.

[Music]

Brianna Munting: And kind of thinking about that professional development then, what do you think are the responsibilities of ACE Opens to artists and to the sector as well?

Liz Nowell: Like I said before I think we do have a big responsibility because there's lots of great institutions in South Australia, but none that quite have the remit that we do and also the flexibility. We can support administrators, writers, curators, artists and audiences at all stages. So in that sense our remit is quite flexible and I think it is on us to think about what we can offer the sector and how we can better support the sector and give the South Australian sector a platform and more of a voice. So I think as well as exhibiting, as well as commissioning, as well as presenting we have a role to play in professional development, we have a role to play in bringing great talent, whether it's international thinkers, writers, national artists, international artists, to Adelaide to engage with the creative sector here so that they don't have to travel all the time necessarily to come into contact with these people. And the same applies to NAVA, not everyone from Adelaide, artists, can afford to go to Sydney and participate in programs or courses, so what can we do to bring that talent and acknowledge to Adelaide to interact with our sector.

Brianna Munting: Absolutely, and previously you talked about the significance of ACE being an independent contemporary arts organisation. How would you describe that independence and how do you see it functioning on an operation and programming level?

Liz Nowell: That's a really good question Brianna, I think for me independent because although we are government funded, we're not, it's arms length funding and I think that

gives us a certain autonomy to say what we need to say to take a strong position on things that the organisation believes in and I hope, I would hope that removes us a little bit from the political, I guess, political sort of dynamics that exist, for example in state institutions and government. I feel that we have a lot more, like I said, autonomy, we can say what we want to say. I think we all say that the arts aren't censored, and we don't believe in censorship, but I feel the more independent the organisation the less censorship they have to impose. A great example of that is that we just showed a South Australian Jake Holmes really impromptu, he's just been making these *C'mon Aussie, C'mon* posters, screen prints, which are in support of marriage equality and we've been able to put them up in our building and we are allowed to take a strong position on that. We can be pro marriage equality, we can convey that through art practice because we don't have to worry so much about sensitivities and political sensitivities because we are independent, so I think that's a really important thing. But I also think independence plays out in our program through not being scared to discuss or put forward really difficult ideas that may, some people may deem offensive or be really hard to swallow. I think we can be a lot more open in that regard, but also do things that might not seem safe, take risks, take really big creative risks on programming ideas, artists and do things that are a little bit more unconventional and challenge conventions because, you know, at the end of the day that is the freedom independence gives you.

Brianna Munting: And I have to say congratulations for that. Because really if you are looking at local and global social and political change, we're in this moment of crisis and the fact that ACE Open is able to be actively contributing and leading those discussions is a really important commitment, so we absolutely commend you on that.

Liz Nowell: That's our vision, you know, we sat down at the beginning of the year with a team and the board and myself and said why are we doing this? Why are we invested in the arts? I always think of NAVA's campaign Art Changes Lives, and it does. And art really does have the ability to transform the way we see the world and that is absolutely why I do what I do and why a lot of the artists I work with do what they do, and I want to lead an organisation that does really try to expand our understanding of the world through contemporary art and that means being fearless in taking positions, being fearless in leading that discourse and having tough conversation that are about much more than art, that are about the world we live in, you know.

Brianna Munting: Absolutely, I 100 percent agree that's where we are, and I think they are becoming more and more necessary because without having that there are way too many filters and perspectives that become dominate that are hugely problematic.

Liz Nowell: And I think art has a way of cutting through all the crap, you know, to be honest. A work can speak on so many levels in such a direct way and it can really affect and cause change in that sense just from experiencing one artwork. So that is really where our hearts and our heads are at with the organisation.

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Brianna Munting: And how did you get to being the Director? Can you describe your background before being at CACSA or ACE Open a bit?

Liz Nowell: Yeah so, I was never really going to be in the arts, no that's not true. I was going to be in the arts, but not in the visual arts. I don't come a visual arts background, I didn't really do art at school or do it at university, I did drama and theatre. I ended up doing a night

school in art history and just really enjoyed and worked my way up through a number of gallery jobs in Adelaide and I was the curator at Tandanya which was the National Aboriginal Cultural Institute and curated a big ProppaNow show with Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Albert, a whole range of Aboriginal artists and that was really, I guess, kind of the bridge into stepping out of Aboriginal art which is also contemporary art but also into that more broader contemporary art realm and then I ended up moving to Sydney as the curator at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery for about two year but I left because I realised that I had become a bit of, kind of institutionalised a little, I was only about 27 at the time so I had worked in all these institutions and I sort of wanted to get back to the start. So I ended up directing the SafARI Festival which essentially a contract job for two years and it was 26 emerging artists across seven artist run venues in Sydney to coincide with the Biennale of Sydney and so really kind of took a step back in a sense and got back to that grassroots level, started at the grassroots level. And then I ended up managing Tony Albert's studio for a number of years and worked as a lecturer at Sydney College of the Arts and eventually I ended up going to New York spent six months working at the Sackler Centre for Feminist Art in Brooklyn Museum working on a research project there and I was there for six month, had already been offered the job at CACSA so it was just a sort term thing and I came back to Adelaide.

Brianna Munting: Amazing. And do you think that, particularly the grassroots experience, and working and understanding artists' practices but also their needs, has informed the program and also operational practices of ACE?

Liz Nowell: Yeah totally because I think you know I think I realised quite, five years, six years into a career in the arts that yeah I sort of skipped that, that sort of stage of getting involved in a community, getting to know artists' practice and also growing with artists. Like a lot of those artists in SafARI we've really grown together, I've seen them go on to other things, I've worked with them on other project, I've seen them go from strength to strength and I think that's a really amazing experience. I've really believe in investing in artists, there's a lot of conversation around, there's a lot of expectation to show as many artists as possible and to not show the same artists over and over again, but I also think there is something to be said for a sustained investment in artists and supporting them throughout their careers, across lots of stages of their careers so I think in that sense the ACE program will, that will be reflected in the ACE program. We really want to work long term, big picture with a lot of artists you know they might start off doing a mentorship or having a project based show with us at ACE across and then in three years time they might go on to have a studio with us. And I think working with artists from the beginning, and investing in their practice, and watching it develop and grow is really important, and I'm not really ashamed to reflect that in the program.

Brianna Munting: Absolutely. And I think that's a unique point within ACE as well is this long term investment particularly in South Australian artists.

Liz Nowell: And that the thing, South Australian artists, yeah, absolutely.

Brianna Munting: And also you guys have made operational commitments to support artists whether that's in terms of artists fees or superannuation. Why did you want to make that part of the organisation's ethos?

Liz Nowell: I think we made that decision that from the beginning, and we are not going to get everything right, and we're continually learning, but we really want to set the bar for best practice in a lot of ways, in as many ways as we can and we want to work ethically and we

are committed to paying artists superannuation and I think it's crucial because it's tough being an artist and it's not a lot of money but it builds up over the years and it's really important for artists to think about their future. So we have where we can those kinds of operational commitments we also worked with the traditional owners, the Kaurna people in the community to be able to formally acknowledge country and place naming on our address so it's not just that we work in Adelaide, we work on Kaurdiyana which is Kaurna country so we really tried to imbed those idea and those ethics within the organisation from the get go and we will continue to add to them, you know, when things pop up, we're currently working on how can we support better support access needs and in terms of artists we really are committed to paying them properly and that's hard for organisations because we're obviously under a lot of financial pressure but I think we've got to get this right, we've got to start setting the bar and just making it a non-negotiable.

Brianna Munting: Absolutely. And it's so heartening to see organisations take that role and take that position because really it then kind of encouraged that best practice across the sector as well. So to take you back, where did the name ACE Open come from.

Liz Nowell: It's definitely an interesting name, I really like it, not everyone will but that's ok. What happened was, coming up with a name for an organisation is really difficult, and I didn't want to call it the contemporary something or you know I sort of wanted to get away from that. I actually wanted to call it the arts is for everyone. The board has sort of played with the idea of Adelaide Contemporary Experimental as like a homage to AEAF and CACSA. We just kind of came to this place well just call it ACE because I like the idea that and the board does as well that it doesn't really mean anything but in that sense it means something, because our sector is shifting and evolving so often we like the idea of a name that was able to constantly evolve and change with the times. So it's ambiguous in a sense but not out of laziness it was out of consideration the idea that its constantly changing its flexible it will mean different things to different people and it will mean different things at different times. Plus it's just a really positive, ACE is a really positive term, and of course the idea of being open in terms of, that's something that we really value as an organisation, being open to listening, open to change, inclusive and welcoming, so yeah that's kind of where the name came from.

Brianna Munting: Well, I like it and I think it's great and I feel like it's like a stamp like, 'ACE, Yeah!' Absolutely.

Liz Nowell: Yeah it's just of kind of fun and a lot of people, you know we've gone through a process of branding and everyone's saying it's very fun and I was like yeah, that's okay! You know, it can be fun, we can still have really great critical discussion and talk seriously and also have fun.

Brianna Munting: It's so important, a sense of play now days, we don't get that anywhere.

Liz Nowell: Everything's just so serious, you know, we should have fun and play is really important.

Brianna Munting: Absolutely, so for you what's the most exciting thing you were looking forward to with ACE Open?

Liz Nowell: I think, it's not necessarily one thing I'm most excited about. But I am really excited about, hopefully, is helping to contribute to building a stronger more visible and

prominent South Australian visual arts sector. To me, that would be, the mark of success, that is what I'm most looking forward to. There are so many amazing artists working in South Australia and I'm most excited about being able to bring those artists to the fore and to the rest of the country. And I think if we can do that, we've done our job really successfully. And the other thing I'm most excited about is creating those connections. So, creating amazing relationships between artists working globally and artists working in South Australia. So again, for example when I was at CACSA and we did a huge Richard Bell mural that was 20 metres long in a very public and prominent spot in the CBD, one of the artists that worked with him, an emerging artist, Luke, ended up performing in Richard's Biennale of Sydney 'Tent Embassy' and for me I get great joy in seeing people connect and what I'm most looking forward to seeing those connections grow between Adelaide and the rest of the world and bringing South Australian artists more to the fore.

[Music]

Brianna Munting: And can you maybe describe some of the projects or who of the artists you'll be working with over the next years?

Liz Nowell: Yeah, so, kind of, our first project for next year is, I'm not sure how much I'm allowed to say actually we haven't really had that conversation. But probably thinking more, the first project we're doing next year is really big, large scale commission by a new collective called Eleven. And Eleven is a group of, yes you guessed it, 11 Muslim artists working all across the country and includes people such as Khaled Sabsabi, Cigdem Aydemir, Safdar Ahmed, Abdul Abdullah, Eugenia Flynn. So, there's artists, writers, curators in that collective and we're debuting them I guess you could say. So, they've currently been commissioned by ACE to create all new work and that's opening in March next year. We're also committed to doing an annual South Australian artist commission which comes with an accompanying monograph, so, those artists haven't been announced yet, but we'll be doing two artists next year we've decided. So, we've doing two major essay artists' commissions with accompanying publication. We're also doing, as I said, the Next Wave commission which will be premiered in May at the Next Wave Festival with a South Australian artist. And, we're facilitating a reciprocal residency project in partnership with the Kochi Biennale Foundation. So, we're sending two artists to Kochi, Kerala to undertake residencies with the Biennale Foundation and we're hosting two Indian contemporary artists at ACE in Adelaide to undertake residences.

Brianna Munting: Amazing, you guys sound incredibly busy but you are going to be everywhere next year.

Liz Nowell: I've got an amazing team so it's pretty smooth sailing.

Brianna Munting: That's so exciting, well big congratulations, really ACE has launched as a new model everyone aspiring to. And I think that is a phenomenal achievement.

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Voice over: Head to our website [visualarts.net.au](http://visualarts.net.au) for more information on NAVA's advocacy and campaigns for improving the working environment for Australian artists and arts organisations.