

# NAVA: in conversation, Episode 11

[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: For this episode we hand over Kelli McCluskey and Sarah Rowbottam the Codirectors of Proximity Festival. Kelli and Sarah talk through the premise of the festival and provide an insight into what we can expect from the nine intimate performances accruing in Cathedral Square in central Perth. The festival runs from the 26<sup>th</sup> September through to the 7<sup>th</sup> October and you can find out more information by heading to the Proximity website.

[Music]

Kelli McCluskey: My name is Kelli McCluskey I am one of the cofounders/ cocurators of Proximity Festival and also the cofounder of pvi collective based in Perth.

Sarah Rowbottam: and I'm Sarah Rowbottam and I am also one of the cofounders/ cocurators of Proximity Festival and I am based in Perth as well. So, Proximity Festival is Australia's first intimate performance festival. We curate a season of intimate one to one performances every year and we occupy a different venue as well, every year, throughout Perth. So, we've worked with the Blue Room Theatre, we worked with the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, we've worked with Fremantle Arts Centre, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and this year we're going to be at Cathedral Square across multiple venues, including Town Hall, St George's Cathedral, state buildings, Perth Library, Outdoor Surrounds.

Kelli McCluskey: Yeah, it's a bit of a shift for us in terms of a non-art spaced institution it's much more of a neighbourhood precinct. And I guess just to clarify when we say a one-on-one, we mean one artist and one audience member at a time. So, it's a very intimate performance experience that you enter into as an audience member. I always like what you say about the festival being like an anti-festival.

Sarah Rowbottam: Yeah it is a bit of an anti-festival because we all assume festivals have really big crowds and really long lines to the bar and there's a sense of, almost comradery with huge groups of people but whereas with Proximity it's just such a reversing, it's about one person at a time and experience for a solo audience member.

Kelli McCluskey: So when you do occupy those spaces, it's a very strange occupation because it can seem quite covert or even everyday quite pedestrian, I think particularly with the context of Cathedral Square being, you know, negotiating public space, civic spaces, corporate spaces and some of it will go unnoticed whereas other will make themselves more apparent that they're performance works. But yes, I like that kind of anti-festival.

[Music]

Sarah Rowbottam: I think when we started we were putting very interesting restrictions on ourselves about one person alone in a room with an artist. When actually, one-to-one can be in a crowd and can be in public and there could be this additional layer of audience that could wander past and be witness to what's happening, but they may not actually know exactly what's going on for that audience member, or even if it's a performance at all. And I think that's a really interesting space to be playing in and I think that's why we've been drawn to start working in public space.

Kelli McCluskey: Yeah, with all of its fun parameters.

Sarah Rowbottam: I think a lot of people ask us whether we curate the festival thematically and we've been pretty adamant and certain on not putting a kind of theme or restrictions in some ways, well not restrictions but a theme on proximity because it think proximity is about intimacy, it is about proximity and that is quite a strong focus in itself.

Kelli McCluskey: Yeah it's enough, enough of a kind of boundary to kind of explore and I think if we were to lay anything else on top of that, curatorially, it's much more interesting to see with the artists, where they're coming from with their ideas. And how they can kind of craft their ideas into an intimate experience and for that to be their core focus because it's a very niche, I would say area, and I think, one of the things about the artists, there's all forms of art disciplines as well. So, it's not necessarily a festival full of performance makers or theatre makers, there are visual artists, musicians, there has been a huge range of diverse practices and each one of those artists are interested and exploring their ideas and their work in at a more intimate scale. So, it's kind of a challenge for everybody really.

Sarah Rowbottam: I think from an audience perspective, we've got the real die-hard Proximity fans that love interactive performance and are really wanting to engage as much as possible. And then there's the other audience, which are really intrigued but feel quite apprehensive about it and when I speak to those audience members I always say, 'do you prefer to have a one-on-one conversation or a group conversation?' and most of the time people would respond with a one-on-one conversation and I say well think about the shows like that, you're engaging in a one-on-one conversation and the artist is as nervous as you because they don't know who you are.

Kelli McCluskey: Or they don't know what you're going to do.

Sarah Rowbottam: So, the playing field is much more balanced than you think sometimes.

Kelli McCluskey: Why do it? Why do a festival like this? And I think, in my mind there's quite a very fundamental necessity for us as human being to connect on a very basic human level. And I think that, so much of our daily lives in some way, shape or form are mediated or we're mediating through our digital devices and there's such an onslaught of information and overwhelming sense of stuff that's going on in the world that it can be a very overwhelming and confusing place and to reduce something right down to a simple one-on-one encounter can be quite profound. And something without knowing it, we're kind of craving it. So, maybe it was a kind of realisation, that's much more of a philosophical reading of it. But I guess, that's in there too.

Sarah Rowbottam: Yeah, it's funny, I've had feelings recently where I've been feeling one-to-one is a very privileged art form. Maybe it is indulgent? Like it's rare to sometimes also get this time.

Kelli McCluskey: Hell yeah.

Sarah Rowbottam: And that's not a negative, but I think it's good to be very aware of the privilege and indulgence of the form.

Kelli McCluskey: Yeah, but to fight for its necessity to be there, I kind of feel like..

Sarah Rowbottam: It still has a very, it's place is still relevant and important to be in existence.

Kelli McCluskey: Where should we start? You and I?

Sarah Rowbottam: Yeah you and I, we you know, this is not our full-time job, we're doing so many different things, working at Perth Festival and working with other art collectives and Kelli runs pvi collective. So, Proximity is an important thing for us, but it's also been something that we tend to do in the background of our lives for quite a long period of time during the year until it comes to fruition and kind of have to knuckle down and do a lot more dedicated work on it. And I think that's a good thing about having it as an artist run initiative is that you have this flexibility to do it, but it also means that you don't necessarily have the right resources to be doing it as well.

Kelli McCluskey: That's right, that's a really good point. I think as well, that being artist driven is something not to take lightly because I think we bring those sensibilities as well as the experience of working for these other organisations that you mentioned earlier Sarah, there is also, without wanting to maternalise it, there's a very nurturing side to Proximity Festival that is very kind of aware of the artists' experience of generating creative content. But there's also this kind of hyper awareness you're making work for an audience of one and that requires quite a lot of thinking and working out and can be quite difficult to put into practice because obviously you need that other audience member there. So, for it not to be a lonely experience, for it not to be like you're shut off in a bubble. So, we very much want to, all the artists that are curated get brought together in the off year of our biennial and then we have a creative lab where we push forward people's ideas, we explode ideas out, we workshop, we work on sites, allow ourselves to respond to spaces and we basically develop a sense of comradery and we become crash test dummies for each other's work and are able to critically interrogate some aspects if people aren't performance makers, there might be a performance maker there or a sound maker and suddenly you realise there's this microcosm of a community that's kind of very self-supportive, it's very peer-to-peer. Which I feel is really quite unique.

Sarah Rowbottam: I think so as well, and I think it's not all rainbows and butterflies, it allows for people to challenge each other and have confrontation in conversations about not just making art, but also about cultural protocols and responsibility as an artist and also for audience and self-care and audience care and also to challenge us as well, I don't think we've ever done a festival where we haven't been challenged head on by the artist because we're asking a lot from them and they can equally ask a lot from us as well. And it's almost like we do create this kind of intensive.

Kelli McCluskey: But I think it kind of needs that intensity to push the ideas forward and to raise the bar for everyone in the room so that you really are kind of pushing at the boundaries of what your kind of comfortable with. But also, really interrogating the audience experience and I want to come back to that because I think that it's a fundamental mistake sometimes that some artists make when they put in for the process for Proximity Festival to want to be a part of it and suggest ideas but the ideas are not fully thinking about the experience of the audience it's almost like an imposed situation that the audience member doesn't have a full sense of choice or agency in. and so, I think we very much want to flip that around to kind of go, well what is the audience's experience? How do they enter into this work? What is the exchange that's happening or the interaction that is happening? What is it doing? What is it saying? How is it making them feel? And how do they leave the work? And to think of it very much from their perspective.

[Music]

Sarah Rowbottam: Yeah, I think we started Proximity being, we were trying to be as open and democratic as possible during our call out processes for the first four years of the festival, we did open calls, we invited people to come to the venues to wonder around we photographed, and video graphed the venues for interstate artists to have a look as well. And we really put it out there in the open, if you have an idea put it down on a one-page document and send it through to us. We were very conscious of the amount of administration applications with funding caused so we really just wanted to simplify the idea.

Kelli McCluskey: Streamlined, simple.

Sarah Rowbottam: And I think that worked for us for the first few years of running the festival and I think after the fourth year in terms of us building our reputation and knowing the artists that we might be interested in working with and people's timelines, we also started to see the benefits in doing a much slower curatorial process where we engaged with a lot of conversations with artists and well in advanced of the festival year and slowly formed and curated a program of artists rather than ideas. So, looking at and talking to artists and seeing where they're at with their practice rather than asking them to pitch an idea, to really believe they were in the right frame in their practice to be able to want to do this and then to consider what they might want to do and for us to back them with that idea. Or challenge them and come up with a new one. So, it's really changed in the last few years.

Kelli McCluskey: Essentially, it's nine artists that we are curating and those nine artists are curated into three streams, so, if you think about three artworks per stream, an A, B and C stream, you then have kind of, as an audience, can experience the whole lot and go totally hard-core at Proximity Festival in Cathedral Square for the whole day because it's a day time festival as well this year. Or you can select a specific stream. And those streams tend to be kind of clustered together with their experience and kind of find their own sub themes by themselves actually. So, it's a bit of an option for audience members to how far they want to enter into the whole proximity experience and interestingly what it means for the artists' is that they have a 20-minute piece that they run nine times a day over a period of ten days. So, if you just think about the actual logistics of that, it's a really tall order for someone with the greatest of performance chops you know, or durational performance practice but to be able to do that actually takes an incredible amount of stamina. So, to be wary of that and to look after, as much as we can, the artists and prepare them for what that is. Because it can often hit as a real shock like 'oh my god, I'm having to do this over and over and over again' but the beauty in it for me is that you're doing it with different people and it's going to be, like you

said in the very beginning Sarah, different every single time, so you're totally on your toes and you're totally learning about yourself and the work, anew each time the audience member come through the door. We normally don't give much away, about what the experience is actually going to be, we tend to frame each of the artist's work quite loosely and that's done intentionally to kind of not give the game away in case there is a reveal or if there is a space you enter that, you know will take you by surprise. And so, it's about knowing when not to reveal what's happening. So, I kind of like that slight covert nature of it, it kind of increases its appeal for me.

[Music]

Sarah Rowbottam: In program A this year, as an audience member you'd start with Martin Coutts and his work *Shell Game*, and *Shell Game* is a work that is roving through Cathedral Square and it places you in the centre of Spratly Islands, an international flashpoint where shipping, mango exports and the odd K-Pop star have been caught up. And I didn't know about the Spratly Islands actually before Martin mentioned this to me and I did some research and it is these little, literally pile of rocks out in the South China Sea.

Kelli McCluskey: They've become these kinds of highly contested spaces in terms of whose territory? Who owns them? Who has the right to what/ where? And also, activities that have been going on right under our noses without our knowledge. So, it's kind of interesting and I think Martin as a practitioner is completely obsessed with these islands and so, the experience he's kind of planned out is kind of transplanting or kind of layering one sense of space over the top of an actual physical space like Cathedral Square. And the whole work for him operates or the conversations operate within corporate foyers and so, he island-hops from corporate foyer to another with audience members and you gradually become aware of the situation in the Spratly Islands.

Sarah Rowbottam: You start to realise the uncertainty and future of the islands but also potentially your own. So, it's about the place and location that you're in as well.

Kelli McCluskey: And I guess that's where he's coming from with the work it's really, what do we really know about sense of place? And that seems to be a really fundamental question to be asking.

Sarah Rowbottam: It's something that comes up through the program, that you see quite a lot. Because at Cathedral Square is this very interesting mecca of civic and religious and private and corporate luxury hotels, it's really everything you could think of it's in this one square. But it's still finding its identity and I also think the artists are exploring its identity as well in the work. Hannah Bronte, who's a Brisbane based artist is creating quite a personal work called *Tress // Passing – Don't Touch My Hair* which is you know, probably an intentional Solange reference. Hannah is an uber, uber cool artist who is also a DJ and I think this work really brings together her love of textiles and rapping and hip-hop culture into one kind of experience and the way she's kind of framed it, is sonic encounter, which is braiding political, poetic and power laden rap to explore culture down to the root. For this work, I think Hannah is really, really backing the black matriarchy.

Kelli McCluskey: And just really giving it a voice and really raising its voice loud and screaming it from the rooftops in a way that's celebratory and joyful and also has a sting in its tail you know.

Sarah Rowbottam: From Hannah it's Cigdem Aydemir's work *The Ride* and I think Cigdem has this incredible aesthetic and visual presence about her work and if you've seen her work at Mona MoFo or statues wrapping in pink material or plastic wrap. She also has great videos of her blow drying her hijab into the air, this again, is a look at the experience of patriarchy in Australia in very playful and deviant ways and as an audience member you're asked to be an extra on a film set through an Australian landscape and what plays out on the film set is.

Kelli McCluskey: Is funny, is dark and you know, has an element of the critical cynic, which I'm always a huge fan of.

Sarah Rowbottam: *Exclusive* is the next work in that program which is made by Nat Randall from Sydney and I think everyone's quite aware of Nat's 24-hour performance feat that she's been doing around the different festival circuit. And this one is in a very similar format to *The Second Woman*, but it's call *Exclusive* and its really kind of looking at the nature of daytime television interviews and reality TV and the interview itself and the cult of the celebrity that is formed out of the interview. And, Nat is looking at this a durational work for herself and each audience member that comes into the room, is set the test of reviewing her and there's no question that's off limits, everything she will answer with will be the honest truth.

Kelli McCluskey: And everything's being recorded so for Nat, even though the audience, the nine audience members that go through that day they will get a 20 minute slice and their 20 minute interview opportunity but for Nat it exists as a whole durational event where she's on the whole time and I think that's a very sadistic challenge on that front, that's kind of where she's coming from and you know her previous work with *Hissy Fit* very much looks at that aspect of duration and the, I guess from a very contemporary feminist perspective.

[Music]

Kelli McCluskey: So there you have it! Proximity Festival is full of epic thematics, intimate experiences.

Sarah Rowbottam: Like every year, it starts off playful and political and it ends up being quite a 'what am I doing with my life?' You really get it to wonder between remarkably different buildings and have these quite personal and intense experiences for 20 minutes at a time. Fundamentally, we're trying to create a space and a support network in some ways for artists who want to make participatory work and it's no something that's readily accessible in Perth. To be able to do that when you leave, if you decide to go to university to study art or performance, there is no performance art unit, for example.

Kelli McCluskey: Or live art.

Sarah Rowbottam: Or live art unit, you know, so you are kind of left to your own devices and to find the people that might be interested in that form. Or go the eastern, not everyone has the ability to travel, we are very far away from other states. Rather than just focus on outcome, also focus on development as much as possible and yeah so, I would say, it is a producing and presentation model and I think that does come from our personal experiences of making and living in Perth and what feels like it needs and being responsive to that.

Kelli McCluskey: Yeah it is an intuitive thing.

Sarah Rowbottam: I feel like year after year were really pushing up on the idea of one-to-one, and what is one-to-one and I feel like the next step for us is to really like explode it another step further and I still feel like there is a place for one-to-one performance in Proximity but I think it has the ability to take a next big step and to start to work on projects that are about intimacy that are small scale but not necessarily just for one audience member at a time.

Kelli McCluskey: And what does one-on-one mean? We try to kind of, with the conversation, the public talks programs we do try to dip into where to next sometimes and in particular this year in response to being at Cathedral Square we have a public talk facilitated by Jeff Khan who is our provocateur for Proximity Festival we have a guest provocateur each time and we have been super lucky Jeff who people will know is the Artistic Director of Performance Space and has done Next Wave Festival and many other things, a big champion for live performance practice in Australia.

Sarah Rowbottam: And is originally from Perth.

Kelli McCluskey: And is originally from Perth! And so one of the panels that Jeff's taking is to do with kind of like whose neighbourhood is this? Whose space is this? What does it mean to be trespassing gently in these different worlds of civic, corporate, layered spaces but also on the land itself?

Sarah Rowbottam: And also in the acknowledgement that it is Whadjuk country.

Kelli McCluskey: That's right. And the other talk, which was where I was getting to, is called *I Switched My Robot Off* and that is looking at the impact of technology in performance practice and in particular some of the artists who are working with mediating their works, whether it be by Nat's television framing or people that are using text messaging or things like that, and its looking at I guess the influence of technology in practice but also technology as being almost like a third eye, or a secondary listening device. We all have these smart devices, well the majority of us do, that have the capacity to be listening all the time, so what does that mean to have somebody else, another entity, an intelligent machine, in the mix. So, I think already we starting to push at the edges of one-on-one which I find really exciting.

Sarah Rowbottam: We it's been really good, this year as well, now that we're in year five Kelli and I decided that we would do a retrospective of all of the works that have come through and been developed through Proximity Festival, we are calling it Proximity in Pictures and we've always had this ongoing struggled relationship with documentation, and I think anyone that has created a one-to-one participatory work and documented it would know what I mean, in terms of this ongoing question around how do you actually archive or document this, and should you, and what's its purpose.

Kelli McCluskey: If it is an ephemeral moment in time that is intended between you and this other person, is it right to be documenting it and then pushing it back out there for another audience?

Sarah Rowbottam: Or just, if you do do it, is it contextualised in the right way? We've decided that rather than exhibiting documentation we are creating a bit of a study room where you can come and watch past Proximity works and flick through photos and maybe read and listen to some audio recordings from works, and you know it's really experiencing the archive of Proximity through a multi-layered way. I think it's important to have that as a resource for people to acknowledge that its actually difficult to find documentation or a history of live

performance practice, especially in Perth, and to be able to offer that as a resource to people or a listening room is really exciting.

Kelli McCluskey: I really take your point about the lineage of performance practice, live art practice, and I think that we've really, with Proximity in Pictures, we have also been in touch with the Live Art Development Agency in the UL who have an extensive archive dedicated to experimental performance works and so the Proximity in Pictures the archive itself will be going over to the Live Art Development Agency to be permanently in their collection which is great.

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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.