

# NAVA: in conversation, Episode 12

[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: In this episode we speak with Rabbya Nasser and Hurmat Ul Ain, two artists from Pakistan who are in Sydney presenting a live performance work as part of the Public Body Owed To exhibition at Artspace. Rabbya and Hurmat are performance artists who have collaborated for several years they work as artists, curators and educators in Pakistan and internationally. In this episode, we discuss their collaborative practice, what we can expect in their work and what it means to be a performance artist today. More information about the Public Body exhibition can be found via the Artspace website.

[Music]

Rabbya Nasser: I am Rabbya Nasser, I make art, I teach art and I curate art, I write about art. Yeah basically I sleep art, eat art, I do all of that. And my practice is such that I am continuously making work because there isn't a real distinction between work and my everyday lived life and that's where my interest lies, that it is informed by everyday lived life. And yeah, I don't see my curatorial role or my scholarly activities as any different to my artistic activity because they're pretty much the same thing. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing but I curate shows like I make art and I don't see that difference. And teaching is a very, very important part of my practice, it informs my practice heavily.

Hurmat Ul Ain: I'm Hurmat and I've been working and living in Pakistan for quite some time now. I am an artist, I work across mediums, I do sort of think about my work in terms of performative terms and that cross over from a visual artist to a performance artist and back to a studio artist, it keeps on happening all throughout and that's where Rabbya's and my practice overlaps because I think we both think about ourselves at the centre of our work. And that might be a very, kind of, concern that arrives from self-portraiture but through very, very contemporary mediums. Apart from that I've also been teaching at the School of Art, Design and Architecture in Islamabad, where I am currently residing.

Brianna Munting: And how would you describe the work that you will be presenting at Artspace?

Rabbya Nasser: The one that we are doing on Friday is definitely a live art performance, it's durational, it's ephemeral, even its documentation is as such that you can show it later in anyway. We are not even video documenting it, so it's pure live performance art. But that's not what you meant?

Brianna Munting: No, no there's two things I want to say to that, one, I love the fact that there is no documentation from that because I think what you do is then take away the object defecation of work, which can happen with performance work and I think that's so important to do that. Because people are listening I'm going to try and ask more descriptions around the work if that's okay? So, we can kind of tell the story for the listeners, if that makes sense? So, what will be involved in the live performance work?

Rabbya Nasser: Lots of crying [laughs] yeah it's called *Dropping Tears Together* and what Hurmat and I are doing is chopping onions for a very long time, for four or five hours, yep.

Hurmat Ul Ain: Yeah, and it's a lot of onions so yeah we're looking at a few bags of onions there. So the idea is to do a task, a simple task, a domestic task, which is chopping onions, and onion is a very kind of important ingredient in a lot of South Asian cuisine especially in reference to what we cook in Pakistan. And it also has another layer in terms of like the conversation that we have with each other. For the last few years, around two, three years Rabbya and I have been living separately in like different countries and our collaborative practice is something that is sort of under, it's a concern right now in terms of where it is placed geographically. And so, these kinds of opportunities are where the piece becomes an avenue to learn more about each other and have a conversation that you normally may or may not able to have or have the opportunity. And it's layered with the task, so you could say it's masked with the task, it could be either. So yeah, we're looking forward to having you guys if you're going to be around?

Brianna Munting: Yeah absolutely, we will definitely be around. And I think that repetition of the task, because when I think about crying or chopping onions also reminds me of cooking, there's a sense of hospitality or a sense of openness to other people, and how is it as performers to allow people into that really private space?

Rabbya Nasser: Well the last time we did it, it's been performed four times and the last time we did it we invited, I actually loved it that time, we invited audiences to our house and in our kitchen we were chopping onions, and people could hang out in our living room and just enter the kitchen whenever they were ready, or go back to the living room hang out and come back and so on and so forth. So, it was a very private space it was our home and then the kitchen, where is in our culture, in the Pakistani culture we don't allow our guests in the kitchen, yeah the guests stay in the drawing room. So, in that sense, it worked very beautifully, but in the gallery also, we're lucky that the space that we are using is a small closed space and so practically it works also, the scents to accumulate better and as soon as people enter it will make them cry also. So the whole idea is that we cry together and they can stay for as long as they like or for as short as they like.

Brianna Munting: So a sense of intimacy is also really important.

Rabbya Nasser: Absolutely and there's another important layer to it that we don't decide on it very much and that is the story telling bit. The sharing of very, very intimate stories but sometimes it's just a silent piece. Other times when we feel like talking, if there is something there is talking for ourselves.

Brianna Munting: Does sound become important? Because I think, having not seen the work yet, but I think about the knife on chopping boards as this monotonous almost metronome that become a counter for the performance, for your bodies and crying as well

Rabbya Nasser: And it's almost semi-violent because we try and not do it in that fashion but definitely it's a knife against a chopping board, yeah and the sound.

Hurmat Ul Ain: So I think we're very aware of this idea that it's already, the insinuation of violence is already there in the piece and over such a long and consistent period of time. So I think we don't try not to over play that necessarily because in a way it's also about opening up, sort of doors, that allow the audience or are witnesses to sort of step up and be close and intimate because that is like holding a knife in your hand and being sort of aggressive with it in any way possible would completely change the piece. So, there is a certain, let's say, care involved in the sort of process of chopping but also getting the chopping right in terms of you know, how you, think about getting all the same kind of pieces. So, there is a certain meditative quality to your observation and what kind of chopping that you are doing, and you know, to get it just right.

Brianna Munting: Yeah absolutely, and the openness that it creates, as someone who's just chopped onions and balled last night I can understand that pain.

[Music]

Brianna Munting: How long have you two been working together collaboratively?

Rabbya Nasser: Officially since 2007 but before that when we were students at the National College of Arts when we were doing our undergrad. We spoke a lot about doing a collaborative degree show for our thesis', but we were not allowed to for whatever reason. Hurmat was in the painting department, I was in the sculpture department and there was lots of dialogue about work and our process of making work, so on and so forth. And the ideas and what interests us.

Brianna Munting: And how would you describe your collaborative process and how it functions between your disciplines as well?

Rabbya Nasser: It' like going to your friend's house with your toys to play really, that's how I would describe it [laughs] you are taking your toy tea set to your friend's house and 'let's play tea!'

Brianna Munting: But on tea, you were also a part of the Tea Collaborative project as well, can you describe how that works? Because a lot of your work is relational practice as well and how that situates itself with an international and local context.

Rabyya Nasser: Right, so when I was in Islamabad I was meeting up with these people surprisingly, who were also making work around tea and with tea and they were also doing a lot of sort of like cross-disciplines, so there was somebody who was making these tea cities, drawing them for a very long time and then there was another one of my collaborators from the Tea Collaborative she studies the practices of Wabi Sabi and you know accounts them and reads about them and things like that. So, we have this mutual interest to, you know, think about, and come together for meetings and have tea like any other respectable Pakistani [laughs] group of people who do. So, there is this constant idea that we come together for tea as opposed to, you know there's no culture for bars, you know, or coffee shops it's also a very recent affair in Pakistan, so tea places or tea stalls are very very an age-old concept. And what does it do to bring people together and what does it do to take it into places where maybe we don't belong. And so that idea is I think, constantly important because it also makes one think about whether you're pretending to do it or if you're doing it for somebody else's sake, because there are people who love tea at any point and there are people like myself I don't like tea. Like, the Pakistani way with the milk, I'm lactose intolerant so it's difficult to sort of have the chai the way we make it at home. But it's still a very, very social, inclusive practice you know. So I think people back home don't even ask who is going to have tea in a gathering is just the expectation that there are going to be more cups than number of people and everyone will have it. So, I think that sort of also resonates with what Hurmat and I do because we already work so much with food and we work with the idea of like, bringing people together and using food as a liaison so the Tea Collaborative does a similar thing but does that in public spaces. And it goes to these politicised public spaces, like one of our spots that we chose for the collaboratives Tea Party was the next morning after these riots happened in Islamabad at D-Chowk and basically, they had burnt down these big trucks and containers at that spot and they were putting the fire out at that time, so we just sat in front of one of these trucks and had tea there and just had our ritual. And obviously, there was a thing that we were shaking from the inside because we could either get arrested or in trouble, but it was about this idea that we will get through this moment and we just have to sit down and have tea.

Brianna Munting: So part of, if I was to prioritise a bit, is about slowing, you guys slow things down.

Rabyya Nasser: Oh, absolutely. That's very nicely put, thank you. Can use it for the next time? Because speaking of relational works there is another one I don't know if you're familiar with it, it's called the *Crow Effect* project where Hurmat and I invite complete strangers over for dinner for a three-course meal, and we do it only in foreign countries because we never do it in Pakistan. And the whole idea behind it is that we temporarily become hosts in countries that we are otherwise guests, so just power relations very so subtly but in a very interesting way. And speaking of how you were saying it's not documented, you were saying about *Dropping Tears Together* there are no photographs of us eating, of anything, there's no video recording, nothing. It's like having any other guest over at your house. The only way we document it is that we ask

our guests for a post dinner email and it's it. It's their version of what happened, we never use our version of what happened. And that single guest is the only witness, the only audience, the only participant for the work for that evening. So, it's relational.

Brianna Munting: That's fantastic and the fact that also that relationship between host and guest in geographies and you talking about the Tea Collaborative and all sorts this practice being performed, how important is geography and space and public space to your practice and to the ideas that your kind of intervening or changing those spaces.

Rabbaya Nasser: I think lately geography has become very important for me because as I'm travelling more and I was living in Ethiopia for over two and a half years and now in Sudan and I get asked where are you from? All the time. And the moment I say that and what it means and when I say Pakistan, what it means in the US and what it means in Ethiopia and what it means in Sudan it's very, very interesting. So, in Ethiopia people always start speaking in Italian with, they don't even think for a second that I'm not Italian, in Ethiopia generally, whereas in Pakistan I'm instantly Pakistani. And then I'm asked, can women go to school? Can women dress like this? Don't I feel liberated? Etcetera etcetera. And so that really informs my practice and I'm very interested in how we perform these kinds of identities which are more specific but then all sorts of identities the people that we are through our acts of representation in our everyday life. And then the *Crow Effect* project also in some ways does that because we are continuously playing the role of the cultural ambassador as artists. It doesn't matter if we are on a diplomatic trip or not we are constantly playing that role. Also, when you look at the work of an artist, where they are from helps you read that work, their gender helps you read their work, so, those are things that you can't escape. So, that really informs the work, this interest in performing these identities lies.

Brianna Munting: So, it becomes as you said before, performance itself is portraiture as well but also challenging other people's constructions.

Hurmat Ul Ain: I also feel like it's about challenging your own expectations of what you know a prescribed identity is. When Rabbaya was talking about this idea of moving and travelling and how does that effect or change how you think about yourself and who you are. I feel like that's the thing, when you lose your confidence about what you think you exactly are that's the moment in a way that magic starts to happen, that's also the moment when art starts to happen and you start questioning things instead of answering them and I feel like that can happen when you become aware of the structures of power that play in identity that play in hospitality that play in art, in everywhere. But you're also sort of aware where you stand in it. And instead of fighting against it you work with it, you take it. And I think that's where humour comes into it, in our work because we are very aware of this idea that the telling of a joke is the sort of like moment when power shifts from someplace else to you. And so, this kind of like play that Rabbaya was mentioning before, the playing of identities and the playing of roles and the playing of telling jokes is an important aspect to what we do.

Brianna Munting: I think in this time playful becomes even more important because there is not space for that anymore and to be able to facilitate that like you guys do is quite extraordinary and captures this moment of intervention that's really, really great.

[Music]

Brianna Munting: Why do you think there is such a critical mass of performance art that is in Pakistan and also within the movement of Pakistani artists across the globe?

Rabyya Nasser: I became interested in that in 2008, that's how I wrote this, my Masters stationed at the Art Institute was about performance art, and because I couldn't go back home for research I started writing about works that I knew of. And I noticed that most if not all of the works were made by women, and most if not all of the works were talking about performing an identity and performing self-portraiture. Or maybe this was my interest which I was imposing on my research, who knows? So, it became this project which was called *Promises to Keep* where it's this idea of the obligations of belonging where you're continuously like fighting with yourself also. So, that text now in 2017 became a curatorial project which I just created this June in New York at Apexart and I showed works of all these Pakistani women doing performance art but it's not strictly performance art because some of these works are text. But it's about how the text performs and how it talks about performing an identity from like the same plane, these roles, so on and so forth. And I that text and throughout this exhibition also, is trying to understand the reason for employing performance as a medium or a form, who know what it is whether it's a medium or a form? There is a reason for doing that and I feel like the simplistic layman language of performance art I relation to the content of the work is what makes these artists use it. And then to understand that better and developing an archive of performance art from Pakistan and the more I am looking, researching, collecting material from all over the country, I am trying to include everything right now, I'm not at a stage where I'm going to say 'I am going to include this and not this' I'm including everything. And one thing is, it's very popular, it's become very, very popular all of a sudden and so everyone wants to board that wagon and some artists who make very conventional work, now at the opening do a performance which is only a demonstration of how they make the work. And then, I'm just like, you're just making my life harder because now I have to go find the documentation and come and talk to you for two hours and include this conversation in the research, so now I think it's time to decide what goes into the archive and what doesn't go into the archive. But then, a lot of these artists who are imploring performance art are interdisciplinary artists who are generally usually performance for certain works. And a lot of these artists, I have notice again, this is something of my interest I may be imposing on my research, but a lot of these artists I've noticed the distinction between their everyday lived life and their artistic practice is blurring, there is that cross over. Which is why performance finds its way in their work, that's probably one reason. But another reason is that in this day and age curatorial programs have become so popular, now there's residencies for curators, I didn't see those ten years ago, every school, every non-profit, everybody is talking about curation and I think that is because our relationship to the art object has changed. So, who wrote that essay *From Object to Relationship*? This architect, Casa wrote *From Object to Relationship* so I think in relation to today that essay is very relevant, even if we are curating an exhibition or looking at a painting we no longer are talking about the object we are talking about our experience of the object, our bodily relationship with the object and curators are the person who creates that experience for you and then now that we've talked so much about the experience I think performance even in Pakistan. So, these are just questions, you're asking very important questions, but yeah I'm still struggling

with them as I am collecting my material, but I am very excited about this research and this archive.

Brianna Munting: And how would you, because part of it I would argue is looking at when you're doing your work to show people the process of doing your work is performative, but then may not necessarily be performance. How would you define performance practice then?

Rabbya Nasser: That's another question I'm struggling with with the research, how does one define performance? And on the surface, it might look like an obsolete question because performance has been around for so long and these questions have probably been answered but really have they been answered? And also, I'm not interested in that set definition of performance art that comes from somewhere, but I can't fight it because the term performance art that I am employing come from somewhere. So, I'm not interested like those historians who are interested in redefining modernism for Pakistan or India and talk about the plurality of modernism in a transnational and global world, I'm not interested in any of that. So, fine, I'll just stick to performance. But then, how is it relevant in this context? So, fine, some people say Jackson Pollock was a predecessor for performance art, am I also going to go look for works in Pakistan which are gestural? Because we did have some gestural painters who did do live performances in galleries where they were just making their painting. But then if intention of the artist makes the work performance then that qualifies. But what is my definition? Because it's certainly no matter how much I say it's objective, it's certainly going to be my definition. And I'm also worried about that because I'm not interested in historicising it or intellectualising it, I'm just interested in it, that's it period, me, I am interested. So, my voice is going to be very present. But then, I'm including also works that may not be considered performance because the artist is not physically present performing live actions, but the work is still experiential or temporal, so those works are also included, so on and so forth. And some stories are included and there's no documentation of those works, the artists are retrospectively calling them performance sometimes, or they're saying they did a performance, but they didn't invite anybody to it, sure.

Brianna Munting: Some audience or witness somewhere even you guys have been able to do it with one witness, but I think that would question that experience there.

Rabbya Nasser: Which is why I'm very interested in the witness's role because if we say performance is experiential, who's experience are we were talking about? We're creating as many experiences as there are witnesses, each one is going to be very different and then when we say document, does a photo do what it's meant to do? Does a video do that? But each one of us has to have portfolios because we have to have documentation even if the performance, the presence of the camera spoils the performance we still have a camera so on and so forth. So, I'm very interested in the witness's role and I'm collecting witness accounts for all the performances in the archive. Yeah it's quite a task, so yeah at least one for each work but more if I can.

Brianna Munting: For your works, because you guys both document and don't document how do you navigate that tension, and make that decision to include a camera to disrupt or...

Hurmat Ul Ain: I think I can safely say this for both of us that, our relationship with the camera is very difficult. It's funny how much work we've had the lens faced medium, we've made so many videos individually that's a medium we are comfortable with and we tend to perform for the camera a lot, and we do it collaboratively. And we also use the camera to make stills to record where we do sometimes these playful interventions in public spaces or these make-believe singers, that you know, are sometimes edited or manipulated. And so, the camera has sort of been a friend to us throughout a very long time throughout our practices and I also feel like it's sort of like a post-print making age where we think about an easy, quick, medium, when I say easy I don't mean like it's easy, and because we think about the camera like that it sort of becomes very, very absent from our personal lives. You know, now it's in a way it's become sacred in a way, like that medium is important for the work that we do and how we think about it and it's very difficult to use it, we don't have any photographs together of ourselves just as two people or just as friends or just you know.

Rabbya Nasser: Because we take photographs of ourselves at places for the work, so we will never have one of the Opera House, us in front of the Opera House.

Hurmat Ul Ain: And that sometimes can be very strange in a way, I'm sure we started to make these decisions unconsciously at some point but right now we are very very conscious about it and to be honest it is very difficult to come back from it. So there is some way distinction between the everyday live experience at least in terms of the tools you use or the way you think about it yourself and if you are the subject and the object of your own work how does that play out. So the decision to document or not to document I will be very honest I feel we will always make the decision not to document and then from the position of that we will think about ok, what is the most crucial one moment that can be recorded and then one thing is enough, so we are not selective in the sense that we make a lot of documentation and then select one, we usually stick to one.

Rabbya Nasser: I would say that all the works except *Dropping Tears Together* which we are performing on Friday the document is not a document of only the performance, the document becomes a work in its own right. So we think document, so for example the tea party that we did in India, the documentation of the live performance was consciously in that moment was meant to be a stop motion animation later on so we were making work through this live performance then there's another work that I do which is a video with a live performance but the video and the live performance are stand alone works they are not documentations of each other, similarly the email, we are very conscious that the documentation should inform the work and the work should inform the documentation, it's never mere documentation.

Hurmat Ul Ain: Can I say that maybe perhaps that we think about it three stages, instead of the work and the documentation being a black and white relationship we have this third degree of grey, so going back to what Rabbya was also just saying I think a lot of our collaborative work and my solo work also, has this idea that if there is a performance that is live work, somehow one of its variations is going to be recorded for a video and its going become a parallel to work, a video work, and then there is documentation of the live work, and there is always this in titling the work I feel like I



am constantly confused how to think about the live work as an event the documentation of it, as the documentation of that work and then the video work being like a complimentary, substitution, or parallel, what role does it play? Because sometimes I feel I also think about video more, and it doesn't need to capture everything that the live performance offers, a hence it is a work on its own.

Rabbya Nasser: Sorry. But I think that has a lot to do with our art scene back home we wouldn't ever imagine, I'm just retrospectively thinking, we wouldn't never image a live performance to just be a live performance because we don't have the infrastructure for doing live art, the gallery would give you the gallery for like one hour, one evening, and the gallery has other works to sustain themselves, but then if a work is just live art and you don't have a video out of it or an art object out of it or a residue that is a stand alone work, it becomes very difficult for you to keep your work up in the space because you can't. and it's very very recent that now there are avenues for performance art, but those are also a lot like carnivals and some artists don't want to perform in those carnivals because, and then what is the difference between an art exhibition and a carnival and so on and so forth. So I think it has a lot do with, the way we think about documentation and performance it has a lot to do with practical reasons also.

Brianna Munting: So its also located in geographies and space as well then. And I would say the way that you just described it, there's a fluidity or slippages between practices and the residues or however they are and some of that may be practical necessities and some of it is conscious or unconscious choices that you are making. What do you think are the responsibilities of the artist in the contemporary world?

[Laughs]

Rabbya Nasser: That's a big question!

[Laughs]

Hurmat Ul Ain: They have big responsibilities.

Rabbya Nasser: A lot of it.

Hurmat Ul Ain: We can end it at that, they have big responsibilities.

[Music]

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.