

NAVA: in conversation, Episode 13

[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: This week we speak to Georgie Meagher the CEO and Artistic Director of Next Wave Festival a biennial arts festival based in Melbourne. Georgie chats with us about what good leadership means, the role of directors to organisations and the responsibility of curators to artists. We get an insight into Next Wave's experimental new model of artistic development in Australia.

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Georgie Meagher: I'm Georgie Meagher I'm the Artistic Director and CEO of Next Wave. Next Wave's an organisation that exists to support existing artists and we do that through a range of different learning programs and professional development programs and a biennial festival we've also just recently taken over the management of a venue for the first time, the Brunswick Mechanics Institute.

Brianna Munting: And how did you come to be Director of Next Wave?

Georgie Meagher: I was hired as Artistic Director in late 2014, and for the 2014 festival I lead the artistic program and then we restructured the organisation after that festival and brought in a creative producer and then I sat as Director and CEO and the Creative Producer came in to bring in another artistic voice into the organisation. I came here from the MCA in Sydney where I was managing public engagement and then prior to that I was involved in Performance Space and other artist run initiative such as Firstdraft. I'm really interested in the contexts for art and how that affects what art gets made. So, working in artists run spaces small to medium orgs, a museum now a festival has given me quite a wide range of experiences and insights into the way that artists work.

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Georgie Meagher: So Next Wave happens every two years, it takes a different shape and a different form every time because it's really determined by the artists that we're working with and all the work is new and because it's all new we work on a two-year cycle of development and so we work with artists for quite a long timeframe to support their creative development as well as their professional development through some

formal programs. And the festival itself, we talk about seeking project that are really ambitious, that are taking risks, that challenge idea about what art can be and where it takes place and who will be watching. And so, that filters down into thinking about different types of audience development, different types of access to works and ensuring diversity in our programs as well, so cultural diversity, as well as inclusion of people with disability, as well as all sorts of gender diversity and as broad as we can get because we believe a diverse conversation is the only conversation worth having, and that's sort of become the mantra or the thing that under pins our artistic programs.

Brianna Munting: How important is it do you think is the long development process for the artists that you work with?

Georgie Meagher: I think it's completely integral because we're asking young artists or artists at the beginnings of their careers to do things that they've never done before. It often takes a longer run-up time. So, the 18-month period that we have to support those artists with a producer and kind of throw our organisational weight behind those projects is necessary in a lot of instances to form partnerships, get the gun of support in different ways whether that's funding or whether that's other types of partnerships and other support, as well as figuring how to actually do the big idea and make it happen. And there's also a community that forms around the festival every two years of artists that are connecting across the country. So we work with artists nationally, but we bring them together at certain points throughout the year and those connections that are formed throughout that period then also lead to all sorts of other kinds projects, collaborations and just sharing of connections between communities I suppose. So, it might not be specifically that project, but it might be a kind of broader network that people then coming linked into.

Brianna Munting: And is there a longevity to those networks that you think Next Wave kind of starts that process?

Georgie Meagher: When I speak to artists that are four or six or ten years out of Next Wave, I think that might be the thing that comes up the most as the important thing that they got out of the festival. The connections that people make whether they're professional or personal are probably the thing that people value the most when those years go by. As well as the professional leaps and bounds that people are able to make after they show their work at Next Wave. It's really that community and that network that is that less tangible but really important long term out put that we see.

Brianna Munting: Next Wave has a commitment to professional development as part of your program and you just launched the Next X Program.

Georgie Meagher: So yeah, we have selected all the projects for Next Wave X which is our new co-commissioning program. Commissioning is something we have wanted to do for a long time, and it means artists know the resources that they're working with when they get an opportunity and are able to focus their time on making the work and not raising the money, and so that was really our impetus behind Next Wave X. Our other main development program is Kickstart Helix and that includes much more of the formal professional development over that longer period of time, whereas Next Wave X is that are for people who are slightly a little further ahead in their careers that need less

of a lead time but really just need that organisational support and the budget behind them to do that next big thing. And what we found is, we have basically so many great relationships with organisations around the country that have been informal up until now. And this was a really amazing way for us to be able to formalise and make public some of those relationships with organisations, like PICA that we've worked with for so long in Perth. As well as, new organisations like ACE Open that have staff members we've been working with in various different ways for quite a few years. And also really artistically aligned organisations like Metro Arts in Brisbane, like Vitals in Adelaide as well. So, we're able to make public those relationships but also say we're both really interested in the same thing, we'd like to work together and let's try and make the support we can offer bigger than what either of us could offer alone. So, it's doing a lot of things which is why we're really, really excited about it. And it means that the festival, the number of projects in the festival will actually be a little bit smaller this year, but we think that's really important especially in this climate where it's so hard for independent artists to be finding money to make their work. To be committing the importance of artists getting paid and artists having the right amount of resources for the scale of work that they want to present is part of our thinking behind, sort of, taking a new approach in the new climate.

Brianna Munting: That's amazingly commendable because you guys have launched this amazingly ambitious program also with the new space with all these new things and I know you didn't get AusCo funding, so I think it's really important to kind of celebrate that growth of Next Wave as well, so big congrats on that one.

Georgie Meagher: Thanks.

Brianna Munting: Is it good for Next Wave to feel like an independent organisation and festival and to have that autonomy and support projects?

Georgie Meagher: The idea of independence is really exciting when we're thinking about the Mechanics Institute, our new project, because that is something where we feel we're in a really mutual beneficial relationship and partnership with our main stakeholder which is Melbourne City Council, they are really excited about us being in the space and they know we're bringing a lot of value to that space but we're also able to use that in whatever way that we see fit through our strategic plan and of course supporting artists is a huge part of that but we're also thinking about a whole range of different ways for New Wave to be developing income streams to support that artistic process. So, being able to think about smaller, self-sustaining models within our broader organisation is actually really exciting to me. I've got to say it probably wouldn't have said that when I started this job [laughs] two years ago, three years ago in 2014 that whole landscape was really different, especially for young artists. So now more than ever, thinking about ways that we can think about the value we bring to all sorts of different contexts and stakeholders is something that I'm really trying to work through and trying to think about, how we can best utilise and leverage that to get more support to artists, and to get more space for artists, and to get more art in the world.

Brianna Munting: Absolutely, and what can we expect to happen in the new space?

Georgie Meagher: All sorts of things, we've got some fringe shows in at the moment so we're using the theatre as well as the black box space, so we've got a really intimate 20 seat space and then a 100 seat theatre. And that's for the next couple of weeks and then we go straight into a really amazing film program that we're doing in partnership with Cults Cinema, they do special events where they use films with live music sound tracks, but they also do different themed nights and do food and drinks and do films. And that's really exciting because that's really outside of what Next Wave would normally do and that's kind of looking into the broader creative industries, engaging in the cultural landscape of Melbourne in a broader way than what we would be able to do through Next Wave Festival. We also have Ilbijerri Theatre Company making their new work for the Major Festivals Initiative in the space. We've got artists that are making their work for Next Wave next year in there, doing a regular weekly rehearsal, and we're going to have an international resident artist next year through a partnership with Asialink Arts as well and their new Global Project Space Program. So, it's really busy we're integrating our usual programs and artists development into this new model and this new space as well as reaching out and being able to work with a range of whole different companies and interesting people as well.

Brianna Munting: How integral then would you say then are partnerships as part of Next Wave's programming and ethos?

Georgie Meagher: Partnerships are important in the arts and creative sectors in order to get interesting things done and do what we do in new contexts and interesting ways is always what we're striving for. But for me personally, I just prefer to work like that, it's more interesting, it's more fun, you get more out of it, when you're co-investing in things and you have this sort of shared investment and this shared returns, which is all sort of business-y language, but it's really true because you are putting in these things and you're planting seeds together and then you're watching them grow and you're making this thing that's bigger than the sum of its parts, and I think that's what we through Next Wave X for instance, have been able to do with a range of partnerships that discreetly would be great but together are a new national program of significance.

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Brianna Munting: What do you think some of those changes that artists have experienced over the last couple of years?

Georgie Meagher: I think that I can only speak about that from my own personal experience and I studied as an artist and started my practice making working and helping other people make their work. And I was lucky to emerge out of Uni into a policy environment where young and emerging artists and practice was the priority and that enabled me to present my work internationally, to build international networks, to build my own confidence and to build a sense of myself as a leader, an idea of myself as a leader that I probably wouldn't have ever considered otherwise. And that has afforded me the experience and the training opportunities and the networks to get me where I am at the moment. And now I'm working with artists that are at that point, that I was, it's not even that long ago, it's maybe eight or nine years ago and it's really, really different, the priority on the young and emerging artists has well and truly gone away in terms of funding, for better or for worse, and it means artists at the

beginnings of their careers are not getting those confidence boosts, those important little pushes along that say, 'yes, keep going! You're making good work! You've got good ideas! You're doing interesting things!' and it means long term, the thing that gets me really worried, the thing that upsets me the most about the whole situation is, the great risk of only artists that can afford to make art with parental support, whatever kind of back up that they might have, them becoming the new generation in art because others can't afford to.

Brianna Munting: What is the responsibility then of organisations to work towards emerging artists to be able to bridge that space?

Georgie Meagher: The responsibility of organisations to any artist, is to do everything they can to make sure that they get paid, to value their labour is at the core of what you need to do to ensure that young artists of all variety of socio-economic background are able to participate equally. And sometimes that also means, I find it useful to think about the phrase 'fair isn't always equal' so ensuring that levelling of the playing field means some artists will need more support. It may be difficult to find an Indigenous artist for your program, maybe no one applies. That doesn't mean there is no one that would be someone who would be amazing for your program that is Indigenous, it just means that they did see it and don't think it's for them. Because no one's told them it's for them and it might just take a phone call or a couple of phone calls to that person or maybe to their friend or maybe other people in the community to then make sure that it's understood that they are welcome, and they are wanted. So those sorts of things are what you need to keep in mind and be aware of that shift and that it isn't about giving more to a certain group, it's about equalising what has been unequal an inequitable for a really long time. So, it's tricky sometimes for, particularly large organisations to get their heads around that, or to do it in a way that isn't tokenistic, that isn't about ticking boxes, and isn't about particular funding or pops of money they might be able to access. It takes a much longer term approach to actually imbed that in how an organisation works and functions and it takes vigilance and it takes putting your money where your mouth is and actually spending money on things that level the playing field like, not penalising a deaf artist for having an Auslan interpreter at professional development sessions, and not taking that out of their budget but making a new budget for it. And we are a very small, very lean organisation and we're able to do that because that's what we've prioritised and that's what we say is important and us living by our values and that's something that we pride ourselves on, walking the talk.

Brianna Munting: And that's also good leadership because it understands positions of privileges and it counters those which is essential in contemporary society

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Brianna Munting: What is leadership to you and how have you done that over the course of your working career?

Georgie Meagher: I was forced to think about leadership quite early on when I was applying for a grant that had something to do leadership, and I had to position myself in that way and you know, found it quite uncomfortable. But there was a moment there

when a lot of people were talking about it and thinking about it and I had some really formative conversations with an artist Joshua Sofaer from the U.K. who was doing a research project around the artist as leader. And through conversations with him and my own reflection it began to sit more comfortably because if artists or people working closely with artists and have artists at the centre of what we do, which is what I consider my job to be, if we don't take up the mantle then who will? We have to. If there are things we believe in there's a way that we want to see the future of art then, you have to be a part of it, otherwise, what's the point? What are you even doing? So, for me that has been a journey of figuring out how to maintain roles where I do act as a gate keeper and act as a, in kind of a management role you know, on the side of things that some people say soak up too much money from actual artists, and sometimes I agree with them, but for me it's about listening so with all those things in mind I just try to listen to what artists are making, listen to what they're saying, thinking, feeling and leading and being driven by that. Small ways I've enacted that is by taking a theme away from the festival. Now that's my own curatorial choice but also part of my philosophy around artist centred, artist driven programming and curating that is about working with artists and listening to what is urgent and important to them, what they're making work about rather than enforcing frames for them to work within. And that's something that's developed over time as well, I didn't always feel like that and I definitely don't have anything against people that work in different ways, but for me being able to really try to understand the connections between the ideas that artists are fixated by, what are the ideas that keep repeating? What are the questions that keep repeating? But that is the really interesting thing for me and so drawing that out is kind of what I see my role as, which then is about creating a context and creating a sort of framework then for audiences or for the broader public to engage and connect with the ideas artists are working with. Also to some extent, it means trying to just take on the burden of raising the money and letting the artists make the work, and I wish we could do that better than what we do at the moment, but things like that, to just really make it as frictionless as possible for artists to be able to do what they are best at doing which is making things and experiences that help people see the world in different ways at the very least.

Brianna Munting: Thinking about then artists as leaders or as the key drivers of some issues what are some of the works that will be coming up in the festival, what are some of the issues in the works that artists will be dealing with?

Georgie Meagher: So, the idea about thinking about how we could possibly begin to imagine and comprehend climate change. This is something that is very difficult to understand or see or touch at a material level. It's something that is so spread out in time that there isn't a sense of immediacy and it's so absurdly argued that the narrative of climate change is unclear, it's confused, it's difficult and complicated, and it shouldn't be. So, there are artists that are really looking at that in very urgent ways but also thinking about it laterally and thinking about it, for instance, in the last festival our eco-sexual bathhouse which was probably our hottest publicity item, it ended up everywhere from the Herald Sun, BuzzFeed, Daily Mail all that kind of thing but it's great that it did! Because it's sparking a conversation about climate change and around the way that we co-habit the earth in spaces and in ways that would never of had that conversation brought up, or would never have, sparking a conversation with people that normally wouldn't be a part of it. Of course, it's not all positive but it is

making people flip or rethink or take a moment to think about things in way that maybe counter to what they previously thought. And so, one difference I suppose to looking at the applications and all of the conversations we have with artists in the lead up to the 2016 festival versus the ones for this festival the applications for Kickstart for instance, closed a few days after Trump got elected so it was around that time and the switch from thinking about speculation and thinking about speculative futures in 2016 to thinking about incredibly urgent, grab you by the collar and shake you to make you realise what is actually happening right now. That shift has been really, really marked and both reflects the mood of the times, but I think also draws people into a conversation about it in a way that hopefully might be accessible in different ways.

Brianna Munting: Yeah, it's not like it's less confrontational but it's that it gives people that opportunity to have a conversation even if it is, because that's what I love about art it comes about in such a way that yes, some people can get angry, but they have to think in order to get angry, you know what I mean?

Georgie Meagher: Yep, yep.

Brianna Munting: And that's really important, this critical thinking is something I kind of feel like we're losing and the fact that we're losing that is horrifying and art has that role then.

Georgie Meagher: Totally, and I think that festivals specifically have this proximity of works, a proximity of people and the energy of the short time frame that is a festival is a real opportunity for bouncing some of those different ideas around and for finding that dissonance and finding that friction and unravelling some the complexity but acknowledging that it is complex and not letting it be flattened by a headline, or whatever gets promoted on your social feeds. And the fact that you actually have to be there with other people, other humans and have a conversation in the foyer afterwards, walk down the street with someone to the next show, have a conversation with a volunteer or with an artist and get face to face, you know, with the people who are actually making those things. That's the rare proximity of a festival, especially a festival like Next Wave where all of the artists are participating in everyone else's works and it does feel like a temporary mini community that forms around it. And that's what you can't get when you're in these mediated spaces.

Brianna Munting: Yeah because with that you need the positions of festivals, because the works that you guys get to put on are so strong because the ability for more solid bricks and more planned programs don't usually have that opportunity to intervene as much or take as many risks and I think that's what's unique to you guys.

Georgie Meagher: Being able to put on a work in a space that we think best fits to find partners that most makes sense to support works is a really lucky thing for us rather than being forced to program works to fit in to certain spaces, and being able to move and change and shift across the city, shift to different suburbs, to different art and non-art spaces, inside, outside, all of those elements come together for the experience of the festival which is kind of the unique thing about the festival that allows us to be responsive and to really think really specifically and precisely about where works should be.

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Voiceover: head to our website visualarts.net.au for more information on NAVA's advocacy and campaigns for improving the working environment for Australian artists and arts organisations.