

NAVA: in conversation, Episode 16

[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 of NAVA: in conversation we're in Hobart for the inaugural Hobiennale 17. We speak to the two directors of the festival Grace Herbert and Liam James as well as producer Alex Hullah about why they developed the festival and the role of artist run spaces in Australia. Hobiennale went for ten days in November with 18 ARIs from around Australia and New Zealand presenting and discussing work in unusual and re-contextualised urban spaces. For more information about the festival and the organisations involved head to Hobiennale website and stay tuned for the next biennial festival.

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Grace Herbert: My name's Grace Herbert and I am the co-chair of Constance Artists Initiative alongside Liam James and a board of eight people and I run the space Visual Bulk with Theia Connell as a kind of collaborative project. In my own practice, I studied sculpture and I have a sculpture and installation-based practice with a little bit of video and photography mixed in.

Liam James: Hello my name is Liam James and I'm co-chair of Constance ARI's and one of the directors of the Hobiennale. My arts practice is based within photo media and largely portraiture and staged imagery.

Alex Hullah: Hi my name is Alex Hullah, I am a floating gopher for the Hobiennale, probably lead floating gopher? I don't have an official title for an ARI anymore, but I guess I would say I ran Watch This Space ARI in the Northern Territory for two and a half years where I met Liam and Grace last year and now I live permanently in Hobart and I volunteer and help support Visual Bulk and Constance in their artistic endeavours.

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Grace Herbert: We started to create Hobiennale, we actually went to a conference in Sydney that was part of the VIVID program I think, and it was run by 107 Projects which is actually where we met Alex Hullah as well, she was there. And the conversation was sort of very Sydney-centric, I think the whole conference was introduced to sort of say artist run initiatives emerged in the '70s and '80s in Australia

out of a need for independent critical and political art spaces and that's how they introduced the whole thing but then the conversation became very much about place making policy and development and that kind of thing and whilst that's sort of interesting in an arts context, Liam and I were perhaps a little more interested in the grass roots nature of artist run initiatives and the resourcefulness and actually the really high quality output of ARIs with very few resources and so we sort of went to this conference and out of that we started having these conversations about maybe what we wanted to see represented for ARIs and so, I think we drank a lot a night after the conference and we flew back to Hobart the day after and I think we were still very hungover on the plane on the way back and we kind of cooked up the idea for the Hobiennale.

Liam James: I think part of it as well that came from that conference was that we quite often talk about within these close circles of what artist run initiatives art and we struggle with it and I think we decided that we didn't want to have or go to another one of these close conferences where 30 people talk about the same things over and over again and what actually would be better would be get together and celebrate what we do but also show to other people what we do and really claim that space for the networks.

Alex Hullah: I think that was really something that was felt by those who participated I that particular discussion in Sydney, the *We Run This* conference, those that went back to ARIs felt a little bit deflated by those conversations that were a little bit high jacked by the conversations about loss of funding and the solution was partner with corporate entities, you know, they can help. And we went back with a feeling of, well that's not really an option for us. And I for one was really excited to keep in contact with these guys like I am a lot of different ARIs through the work that we do across Australia and I think they got a lot of interest as well because of that and here we are in Hobart with all these wonderful spaces from across Australia and New Zealand. I think there's a lot of misunderstandings about what ARIs are. The conversations around place making are generally quite misguided because it's not necessarily about the place, I think a lot of people mistake that for an ARI space is the most important thing, like they think it's like a gallery space that what we want, it's not, it's more the opportunity to have access to spaces and show works in different contexts, maybe more experimental contexts you know, everyday activities in the city and in places that are used for work aren't used to thinking like that, of course artists are, so you sort of come up with a lot of resistance and also short term use of places which is a threat to having manage spaces, pay for them and then the threat of being evicted from them once you've set down roots. Constance for example, doesn't have a space at the moment, it's working well but it's a lot of work.

Grace Herbert: It is yeah, but I think, I've been thinking about it since the beginning of the festival as well in the shows that we've seen come through and the common threads in some of the shows and the festival and our inability to define an artist run initiative because they're just so varied. But probably the one thing that really stands out, and is problematic with working for free or the amount of work people do, it is also incredibly impressive because it comes from just a place of people being really passionate. But I think the organisers involved in artist run initiatives, you know you're right it's not the space, it's like the organisation whether it has a space or not is almost

like a buffer, or it's just like what we were talking about before earlier, it's a facilitation of something and maybe a buffer between all these different agendas whether it be council place making agendas or more commercialised idea about professional arts practice and early career artists or mid-career artists can sort of choose whichever way they want with their practice but these spaces can provide this buffer at the start to just experiment and just play around without those expectations, without the need to sell a work, without the need to meet some kind of criteria or agenda or even to get funding really, whether it's just a space or not but perhaps artist run initiatives sort of facilitate this buffer zone for experimentation with contemporary arts practice.

[Music]

Liam James: I think artist run initiatives don't just make spaces that are about experimentation and process, they allow that to happen, but I don't think that's the only thing. I think it's definitely a space where fully resolved and realised work is shown but just allows both of those things to happen and in multi-spaced shows you can go in and see a super lovely finished show next to something that's just an exploratory idea that's kind of just half formed. And I think that's the exciting thing that it can have this hybridity on every level.

Grace Herbert: Yeah there's a really big range of ARIs involved in the festival as well and some of them are more on this end of actually producing incredibly schmick shows in their white walled spaces and that's really valuable in this context. So, I don't know that it's just sort of about experimentation, there is that often really slick kind of clean show that comes out of these spaces as well and impressively so for the amount of resources those spaces might have. But I think maybe it's also not being bogged down by so many bureaucratic and administrative structures that create expectations on artists or on the people involved in the organisations and often when they're really strong those things, the focus shifts to them and not the work.

Liam James: I think on the of the things the festival has done for me personally is just highlighted not only the different models but how each organisation has such a strong identity because everything is based just on core ethics and ideals that the founders and the board have continued shape and I think that's where the strength comes from, from artist run initiatives, it's people deciding what they want to do with an organisation and that's what drives process and decision making.

Alex Hullah: There is a bit of fluidity in that I would say, like, the administrative side of artist runs generally falls to the people who are currently putting their energy into the space and that can vary in different groups. If we talk about boards in artist run initiatives and Grace before was talking about buffers, in an incorporated body you need a board, you need to have administrative officers paying bills, you need to have policies and procedures and that kind of thing. You also need people who are trained in those kinds of administrative tasks and so that they can perform them well so that the thing can function, you know a government who are funding or others who are engaging in that group have trust and they know what's being delivered. But again, most of the time artist run initiatives are run by artists so that's the purpose of them, they might have their own arts practice, they might also have several other jobs that are supporting those activities. You know Liam James and Grace Herbert who are just

always just doing 300% in everything that they do to support these festivals and also these galleries and spaces and projects. So, their responsibilities shift around, so you might have times where an ARI is quite burdened under administration and there are lots of repercussions for that if you've got government funding you've got to submit reports, if you're running a festival you've got to be able to pay bills, but I guess with an ARI and a lot the discussions and conferences we've had, it feels like we're always whinging and complaining about administration but I would say I've some people with very strong administrative skills, it's just that the focus is always on the quality of the work and the opportunity you're providing to artists, so you don't want to let those people down and you don't want the quality of that slip and you want to keep the focus on the art which is actually really hard because there's a lot of tension in trying to make the thing run well and trying to gain trust and do all your administration but then also keeping your relationships up, it's a lot of work. I would say, as someone who has worked in non-artist jobs to support my arts practice, it's more work. When you're an emerging artist or a mid-career artists and you find yourself in ARIs it's interesting the perception that people have of ARIs because I think, a lot of people in the arts in Australia and the art sector and even the independent art sector or the commercial art sector, there's a feeling that an ARI is an entry level space. I would say that's not necessarily true, I would say the freedom that you get in an artist run space kind of allows for more experimental practices, maybe that's why you'd get a lot more emerging arts practices and artists involved in those spaces. I ran Watch This Space for two and a half years and I think because of the community up there, you know we get a range of different artists up there from emerging to very well established to visiting artists, we had Tony Albert exhibiting in there earlier last year and that works in regional places because you're the only one, there's no competition, but still these spaces do allow for lots of different practices.

Liam James: I think with ARIs there is a large level of expectation that comes from the community that you're a part of, and there's a softness and a kindness that a community will bring to you but there's also a high level of criticality, especially when there's been longevity within an organisation. So, people are very supportive of younger artist run initiatives and getting them off the ground but as soon as that artist run initiative has longevity there's an expectation that it'll be at the same kind of level as other institutions who have been round that period of time even though they're functioning within two very different models. And I think the longer you're around, the higher that expectation is, and that's something that's coming out a lot that Jon Butt from C3 was talking about very lovelily, that an ARI doesn't have to progress and doesn't have to step up to these next levels, you should be able to just sit and continually deliver what you deliver and how you want to deliver it and there shouldn't be any greater expectation on you and I think that, that is something that communities need to understand a bit better.

Grace Herbert: I think I can understand why people have expectations of spaces. And interestingly when Constance shut the gallery space, so it was Inflight and there was sort of like this death of Inflight and a rebirth and a rebranding as Constance and the gallery space sort of didn't last that long after that rebranding, do you remember how long it was Liam?

Liam James: I think it was about two years.

Grace Herbert: Yeah, and when the gallery space was closed there was a lot of misunderstandings about why the space was closed and what happened, and we lost a lot of faith with the Hobart community because there weren't that many other spaces or artist run spaces at the time and council gallery space Carnegie Gallery had also closed in a bit of a controversy as well. And I think we'd also lost quite a lot of faith with Arts Tasmania as a funding body in the way we had kind of managed the change from Inflight to Constance and the shift out of the gallery space, and it's taken a lot of work to rebuild that confidence that people have had in Constance in the past and to kind of have people invest in us again, and I actually think it was perfectly reasonable for people to be, or at least maybe on the outside it would look a certain way and to be disappointed perhaps and to have expectations of Constance as a long standing artist run space in Hobart, I can understand why they would have that.

Alex Hullah: I think your community really defines what your space is, like we were talking to people about the board and volunteers their energy defines the functioning of it but the community who go to the openings and the events you know, they have expectations and they create the space for you. I can only talk about my experience up in Alice Springs that is a very tight knit arts community and it's a space that's going to celebrate 25 years of history, so it's one of those long standing spaces, not like Firstdraft, we never really went next level and got more funding I think we were a bit too disorganised. But it's interesting because after running that space for a long time and then stepping down from the role and moving away from the Northern Territory, I still constantly get emails from the local community, especially when I left, when a new Director or a new Coordinator takes the role, brings a totally different energy and also brings their connections. Like that person is calling their networks in Australia to come and visit or they have a different network locally that are approaching them or feeling comfortable putting in proposals. So, when that shifts, it's not like you completely loose ties, like these people are generally your friends you know them in the community as well, and I would get emails and messages saying, 'Oh, what's going on? It's not as local as it used to be'. We have a new coordinator who has come interstate and there's a lot of scepticism about that and I think there's a lot of pressure put on those roles to continue providing what was provided before and a bit of resistance to new energy unless it's a success. I don't know how you guys found that with the change over from Constance .

Grace Herbert: It was just Liam and I on the board for about six months, we didn't have a board we were more just caretakers for a little while and we sort of had to build up again and as we shifted from having a space to this siteless model we had to figure out how that would work and how we could kind of get new board members involved and I guess it takes quite a lot of initiative to think of a space you'd like to have a show in and to think of a way to get that. I think the physical space kind of has this security to operating in it and an initiation period as a board member of Constance was quite a long time before people really putting themselves out there and kind of making these projects happen but it's also really exciting, as the board members have come on have done that and their different takes on things and the different spaces we have occupied and the different organisations we've worked with has been really amazing and we've actually grown our audience I think because of the spaces that we've occupied around the city and the organisations that we've worked with.

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Liam James: When it comes to volunteers within artist run initiatives it is often a difficult thing to get people to be committed to something. Especially, with the Constance model where it's not these constant times and slots and you know sometimes, like now with this festival we need hundreds of people helping and other times we might do a project where, you know, we need no one and we can get it done ourselves. So I think it's hard to create constant commitment but I think the most important thing for volunteers to get them engaged is to show them you're working hard and lead, and people will be inspired and want to help and want to be involved and I think that some models perhaps don't have that, even though the people might be working extremely hard, the volunteers might not be able to see that and so are less likely to become engaged.

Grace Herbert: I think it's common for people to have shows with artist run initiatives and then meet members of the board and then later kind of end up on the board. I think the events, exhibition thing is almost like this mini recruitment process, recruitment isn't a very nice word but you know it's an engagement with them and then you've had the board invested in you for your show and then you sort of see the value of that space and then you want to invest in that. And I think for us that's definitely where a lot of our volunteers have come from is sort of friends but also this sort of wider network of either having shown with Constance or with Visual Bulk. And Visual Bulk is a space that is very much a multiuse space, you know, there are bands that play there, we have exhibitions but then people also use it as rehearsal spaces or places to shoot video works and we run the space from the bar and we sell drinks for \$5.00 and people buy drinks and then they're paying the rent and so, it's become this really local community driven space and that's where most of the volunteers for the festival come via I think. And for the festival at least, it's an enormous amount of volunteers but we've tried to be very clear that this is the first time we've done this and we're kind of figuring it out as we go along and whilst we're sort of holding this thing from the get go, if it is something that we want to continue in the future there's so much opportunity for people to get involved now and carve out a space for themselves within this that suits their interests and their passions, so we're not just asking people to just sort of jump in for a short amount of time but actually get involved in something that hopefully we can carry onto the future that would also have benefits to them and their interests I guess.

Liam James: I got involved with an artist run initiative called Sawtooth up in Launceston where I'm from originally and I started as a volunteer there and then joined the board as a very junior member and I think I joined because someone older from the scene took on a mentoring kind of role with me and it felt like the most natural way for me to learn the most, to get the most out of the spaces, to meet people, and then I guess it started from there but then, as I did more it created a nice way to give back to the community that I felt had always been supportive of me and I think it just kept continuing with the amount of time and effort that I put in to organisations because it feels good to do go things.

Grace Herbert: It's really rewarding and also if you host an artist from interstate for example and you meet them and then they might be Llewellyn Millhouse for example

who's been down showing in the contemporary art Tasmania show, also runs a space in Brisbane and I met him, I had a show in Brisbane and I met him there and then he came here, it's kind of, it's a way of connecting with the national network as well I think. And it's I think that's kind of valuable as well to be part of this community that's a nationwide thing.

Alex Hullah: That networking as well, it sounds very corporate the way we are talking about it but it's not. It's very informal, I think there is something quite genuine at the heart of it I mean as artists I would like to think it is kind of human you make contact and something about sharing your arts practice with artists who are running spaces and everyone is working really hard you sort or draw quite close to people quite quickly so I think the reciprocity when you are interstate when you visit people is quite real and big. I know most in my two years in the Northern Territory most of the resident artists that came to visit, I'm still friends with.

Liam James: We call it networking but it is about just in its basic it is friendship and we are all going through the same things and sharing the same ideas and having discussions and having the ability to have the discussions that sometimes in our wider normal lives we don't get to have

Alex Hullah: It feels important too I think, some of the discussions that have come out of this festival, because I think that what I was trying to say before, what especially what Grace and Liam have done, it's their idea in coming back from that conference in Sydney and just having a convo on the plane and getting really riled up and pissed off about the lack of action or understanding and deciding to do this huge thing and bringing people together, it's historical, it hasn't happened before and that's because these spaces are underfunded, we don't have a lot of resources to reach out more formally through festivals been quite hard, so for this to have happened is pretty incredible and most people have recognised that.

Grace Herbert: I think it also speaks to, you know we could have had this idea and then emailed people and then people would just be really busy running their own programs and just wanting to get on with their. A few which is completely understandable, but generally everyone we emailed back straight away like yes I agree with your sentiment and yes we want to get involved, we would love to do this to come down and I think it maybe illustrates a timeliness in this need banding together which is. I think a part of it might be the results of the cuts to AusCo funding last year as well and then decreasing access to funding for people and then this feeling of increased competition amongst space that run you know kind of parallel to each other or something and I think there is something nice about wanting to come together rather than continue sort of separately and to meet with each other so I would say yeah we did have this initial idea but what has been the most amazing thing about this is especially when we are just communicating with people via distance some people we don't know via email or via phone people just being yes absolutely we want to do this and this is the idea we have and this is how we want to do this and then it has just been us trying to make that happen for them in the best way that we can. And also the organisations in Hobart who have chosen to take that on as well and can see the value in that is so Salamanca Arts Centre, TMAG, those kinds of place have sort of just said yeah that's really important too and we want to make the space for that.

Alex Hullah: I wonder about that. It's called the Hobiennale and its happening in Hobart and I wondered as someone who has come from interstate whether it could have happened anywhere else, I've spent a lot of time in Melbourne. I think it might have been quite hard to orchestrate it in the way that it has happened in Hobart. I think part of that has to do with Grace and Liam and the Constance board and their networks as well down here in Hobart. Maybe if this is a success people will take note and be a bit kind to us if we want to deliver it somewhere else in Australia. I think there has been talks amongst artists about how good it would be if it actually was a biennale and not just a tongue in cheek.

[Music]

Grace Herbert: The New Zealand crews that have come over have been really really great. They've exhibited two Maori artists Christopher Ulutupu and Kauri Hawkins and their shows have been really amazing to see in the spaces, the sites that they've worked in domain house is also an incredible site and there's four shows in there and they are incredible ambitious shows and, I don't know, what are some other highlights? I don't want to favourite anyone.

Liam James: I think all the shows are fantastic in their own way. But I think for me the highlight of the festival has been the kind of secondary purpose of the festival which isn't just the exhibition of art but just the meeting of people and I think the mood and temperament of the festival which I think started at the program launch and I think has continued ever since has been this kind of joyous energy of positivity that everyone's carried through every evening and event and just, cause it is this tiring thing and we can get bogged down seeing everyone so excited and engaged on multiple levels and creating new networks has been really highlight for me. And there was really good musical act that I really liked the other night, that was pretty good.

Alex Hullah: I think in terms of programming I haven't gotten to see a lot of our programs running cause I've just been driving trucks and yeah, frantic phone calls and just running around. But I have gotten to see some things when I had a sec, I managed to get down to GASP Glenorchy Art and Sculpture Park where we had a few great musical acts, the Meanwhile crew from New Zealand had had their works showing, Alaska projects had their work showing, there was a good crew down there that kind of braved the cold and we watched the moon come up and there was just bass throbbing out of the derwents and yeah, I was looking around going this is pretty cool. There's been a lot of back patting about this festival and talk about ARIs and how wonderful artists and that kind of thing are but it's not, I think, I hope, most people would agree with me, I don't think it is very separate from the rest of everyday life, for at least it shouldn't be. I think a lot of the works that are happening now and happening in ARIs will continue happening across the country, those conversations and those works are really important and I think there's a lot to be learnt I think in Australia about embracing those conversations and communications and work as necessary to sort of to understanding how we live, yeah, I think that is a huge motivation for a lot of us as artists.

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Voice over: 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.