

NAVA: in conversation, Episode 18

[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.

[Music]

Esther Anatolitis: Hello I'm Esther Anatolitis the Director of NAVA and I am chatting this morning with Kamilaroi man, artist, political activist Richard Bell. He's here from Brisbane for a few different projects. What brings you down today Richard?

Richard Bell: I'm taking part in a project at Artspace called *52 Artist 52 Actions* and it's basically artists curating online shows, on Instagram and on the Artspace website. They developed a website for this project.

Esther Anatolitis: So, the number *52 Artists 52 Actions*, I think, it might be. But it's artists from across Asia and the website looks like this news ticker, like something is about to happen, like an artist is about to create an action that is going to have an impact. It's kind of like CNN, it's really cool.

Richard Bell: Yeah, I don't know much about it. I just had a look at the Instagram briefly last night, while I was drunk.

[Laughter]

Esther Anatolitis: And speaking of last night, we managed to get to three openings. We were at UNSW Galleries for *Tell* and *In Your Dreams* which was opened by Wesley Enoch. We were here at Artspace for Helen Johnson's show and then also at Carriageworks for the great big Katharina Grosse show which is just enormous. And speaking of Instagram, it's funny isn't it, the more openings we go to, we tend to find that people and the artists want to photograph themselves with the work in a space. What do you think about the Instagrammification, I guess, of people's work?

Richard Bell: It's fine, it's the way the world is. We now have these things in our hands, basically little computers, hundreds of times more powerful than the computer that landed the man on the moon. Those things are amazing and we look at them more than two and a half thousand times a day. We touch them.

Esther Anatolitis: Two and a half thousand times?! Oh my goodness.

Richard Bell: Look, a lot of galleries will be taking notice of this and gauging it and I think it's a sensible approach to engage. There will always be a need for spaces like Artspace,

like Carriageworks, like the Art Gallery of New South Wales. I don't see them disappearing. I don't see commercial galleries disappearing any more than what they have now, I think they have probably stabilised now, the top operators who own their space seem to be doing alright. I think, we need to do a lot more ourselves. We're basically in a war against neoliberals. It's at that stage, I think, where we need to go door to door.

Esther Anatolitis: That's one thing that social media does, doesn't it? That having it in our hands.

Richard Bell: Yes it does but I'm talking literally. We need to be knocking on doors, we need to develop little spiels to go to talk to the people more. We need a two minute thirty second version, a one minute thirty second version, then a thirty second version of why artists are great. Here's a little one: The arts and creative industries employ 7.2% of Australia's workforce.

Esther Anatolitis: That's enormous.

Richard Bell: It's enormous. Mining during the boom was 7.1% and we pay more tax than the mining companies, okay? Lots more tax.

Esther Anatolitis: I think that's such an important point which is often forgotten.

Richard Bell: Yes it is. We contribute more to this country than mining. These are indisputable facts. We need to go through research, economics and financial circumstances. We need to come there and talk to them in their language. But first we need to go to the people and convince them that we need art. My mates can say to me 'what's this thing with artists?' and I say, 'Look, I can live without sport, and I can live without lots of other things, but I can't live without art.' And they say 'Bullshit.' So then, 'Ok, what about music? Singing? Dancing? What about storytelling? What about films? Television? You can live without all that?' Of course, then, I win. You can go find something else to discuss.

Esther Anatolitis: It's funny isn't it? We've all been in those conversations. Maybe it's the word art being perceived in a certain way that people think it's for someone else? What is that do you think?

Richard Bell: Well, John Howard, he criticised Aboriginal people for using symbolism, but he used symbolism more often than any other Prime Minister that we've ever had. Before he became Prime Minister, nobody gave a fuck about Gallipoli. He went over there and laid this thing down there, put these flags, talked about how important Gallipoli was to our culture. Next minute, there's ten thousand hipsters over there the following year and shit like that. Anzac Day was a day where we went down to the RSL and played two up. That was the most exciting part of the day. Now, you have some really sad horn playing and stuff like that. But that was a prelude to you getting to your game or just hanging out with your friends or having a barbie. And Australia Day was the same. It was just a day where people had a barbie. All of a sudden there's all this flag waving and shit.

Esther Anatolitis: Completely. We got up to a point. We think about the last twenty or thirty years and Australia and what symbolism has meant and hasn't meant. And the way we were getting to the point of just cultural diversity being normal and acceptable. And getting to the point, particularly in the decade after 1988, the appalling way the

bicentennial was commemorated as 'Yay' to British colonialism. That whole process from the Redfern speech to Corroboree 2000 was supposed to be, not a symbolic gesture, it was meant to be a practical kind of meaningful relationship building a healing, a reconciliation and that moment when you say John Howard, one of the first things I think of is that event in the Opera House where a treaty was presented to him and he started just fobbing it off, disrespecting. And then person after person got up and turned their back on him, and turned their back on him, and turned their back on him. And then, as they did that he got angrier and he started thumping on the lectern and becoming more and more shrill. What we've seen now in the Uluru Statement and now today's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull dismissing it without even attempting any of that kind of, what John Howard, would call symbolism. For me, this is now the moment where, when I look at your work and the power of not just your pieces, but also the text and how you present that, but also who you choose to collaborate with, this for me is something that, like you say, we have to reframe and rethink the way that we're having those conversations publicly. And people talk about symbolism. You can't say we don't want things to be symbolic but at the same time, you're substituting a whole other level, which is irrelevant.

Richard Bell: The way that politics has played out in Australia since the '80s when neoliberalism introduced here by the Hawke-Keating government, selling Commonwealth Bank, going right through to the Howard era. The right-wing started creating divisions within the community so that they could get people to vote for them. Like, their job is to look after the rich. But poor people will vote for them if they've got an enemy. And these people create an enemy. The right-wing created enemies of Aborigines, of migrants, of refugees, of women, of artists, of intellectuals.

Esther Anatolitis: Has it become all too easy to make those enemies do you think? It just becomes easier for them to play the media, to play the people.

Richard Bell: Yes, it is. But you know like this is all been made possible by the leadership. Leadership in particular with symbolism, they can change a nation's thought overnight. And that's basically what happened with being an egalitarian society to being this individualistic and mean-spirited people who I don't recognise from my childhood. Fortunately, what we need is a strong leader to give the opposite message and it will flip.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah and wouldn't that be amazing. Like you say, we've seen these examples where the nation's thought has been changed pretty much overnight and that mean spiritedness and that's the really heart-breaking thing you hear people talking about.

Richard Bell: Look at Nazi Germany and what happened there.

Esther Anatolitis: And how short are people's memories about what happens when that experience takes hold.

Richard Bell: We don't even have to look back that far. Just look at John Howard and what he did. Bill Shorten, he ain't the dude to do it – he hasn't got it. Nor has Anthony Albanese, nor has Penny Wong, nor has Tanya Plibersek, I'm don't know where this person's going to come from, there might be somebody on the backbenches who has been there, someone similar to Jeremy Corbyn who's been solid all throughout their political careers. That's who we should be looking for, we should be looking at how people are voting.

Esther Anatolitis: And maybe, I mean who knows, maybe some of these political leaders and future political leaders are also looking out at the community and at the creative people and hoping to get some sort of sense and signal from all of us, that we expect something different and we want some change.

Richard Bell: Oh, that's such a nice thought.

[Laughter]

Esther Anatolitis: Don't you think it's the role of artists though, to be that loud and passionate.

Richard Bell: No, I don't. If we want change, we're going to have to make it.

Esther Anatolitis: Tell us how.

Richard Bell: Ok. Well, we have got to participate in the process. We have got to go and join the labour party and the liberal party, join both and argue with people and get change and change the policies. That's the only way we can do it. It's not going to happen unless we do that.

Esther Anatolitis: And of course, a lot of artists, and a lot of people don't want to join political parties because they feel really cynical about what they do and what they don't do. I guess art has that power to make people think differently, to animate our minds, to stimulate something in us that moves us.

Richard Bell: I think art is more of an antidote to politics.

[laughter]

Esther Anatolitis: But it's political.

Richard Bell: Absolutely. Well, it's our job to convey complex issues in a simple way.

Esther Anatolitis: How does your work do that? How do you strive to do that through your work?

Richard Bell: I use colour. All my paintings are attention seeking.

[Laughter]

Esther Anatolitis: They're fabulously attention seeking. I love that.

Richard Bell: Attention seeking. I'm just going by looking at human nature and we see something, like a flutter in the trees when we're walking through the jungle but you gotta look. If you don't look that could be dangerous and you could die.

[Laughter]

Richard Bell: I'm using that to grab their attention and they read these things. Then there's other stuff underneath and if you write something people will read it. Eventually they will

read everything. If you lock somebody in a room with one of my paintings they will read every fucking thing.

Esther Anatolitis: It's true. We look for patterns and we look for meaning and when we see things in the space we want to read it and we want to interpret it and we want to make that connection. Like you say, we're distracted and you see something but then you also go 'Alright, what does that mean? What does it mean for me?'

Richard Bell: Yeah, well, hopefully. One of the problems that we have in this life despite all the time-saving devices that have been invented we are more and more pressed for time. Everything should rush and rush - somebody sends you an email, they fucking want an answer. In the next five minutes or so. There's so much pressure to have an immediate response, takes up so much of your time. People don't have enough time to think about the really important things in our lives. They don't set aside contemplative space for themselves. They don't look at what is really important. They only need to do it two hours a week or something, they can't even find that. They can't find themselves, they're so stressed by life. Especially people on the dole, they have it so bad because they're living below the poverty line, they're under pressure. Any sort of financial shock to them, parking fine or a high unexpected electricity bill, creates havoc in their lives. They are constantly under pressure, it's just about survival. They haven't got time to come to art galleries and shit like that, even if they are free. What the government is doing to people on Centrelink payment is criminal. What they're doing is an abuse of human rights and setting tasks that they can never fulfil. To me, I think that's mental torture. These politicians should be in jail for doing this. Every politician who voted for this legislation should be in jail.

Esther Anatolitis: Well, I completely agree.

Richard Bell: There has to be responsibility. Somewhere along the lines, they can't just keep making these laws, laws, laws, laws, just to oppress people and not have any responsibility for that? That's just not how life works.

Esther Anatolitis: Well that's right. That sense of there are consequences for your actions seems to be something that people with a certain kind of power want to visit onto others instead of thinking about it themselves. And that's what's really shocking around the robo-debt stuff. The fact that, like we were saying earlier, when we think about what the arts contributes to society, the fact that it's more than mining and yet we've got an issue in this country around the tax burden of big companies and no one's pursuing them.

Richard Bell: No. There was something on Facebook comparing the number of dole budget weeks and it was something like 137 years.

Esther Anatolitis: Oh how many weeks of the dole you'd have to get to be paid back in tax?

Richard Bell: No, just the rebates that they get. Not the tax that they're dodging.

Esther Anatolitis: Oh right. And there's always outcry about small millions of dollars or hundreds of thousands of dollars that go to the arts or don't go to the arts. So we had another cut.

Richard Bell: This is why we have to get involved in the political process. We have to be on all the parties. Get in there and push for an Arts policy. Each one of them has an Arts

policy. Just go there and annoy the fuck out of them until they give it. That's how you win shit. You don't go away.

Esther Anatolitis: Exactly. And it's all part of the same thing, you know. A government that has an Arts and Cultural policy would also be ethical towards people in need. Would also be ethical towards companies that make a contribution or don't make a contribution to society.

Richard Bell: Ah, that's so nice.

Esther Anatolitis: I don't say it to be nice, I kind of say it to raise the bar.

Richard Bell: If there's a bar to raise, we have to raise it.

Esther Anatolitis: Exactly.

Richard Bell: Making sure they have a decent policy. That's what we need to do.

Esther Anatolitis: Together through the work that we make but also through the way we express our voices.

Richard Bell: There is a democratic process here but it's a very dangerous process too. Talking about political parties and that sort of thing. Like how many members does GetUp have?

Esther Anatolitis: 30,000? Actually I can't remember. It has more members than all the political parties in Australia put together.

Richard Bell: By many many times. Then they've got more than a million. The Labor Party has got like 55,000 or whatever. The Liberal Party have like 45,000, Jesus. Turnbull talks about them being unelected swill.

Esther Anatolitis: Which is hilarious because quoting Keating. When Turnbull mentioned that in the Parliament last year that there should be a crack down...

Richard Bell: He said it was an attack on Australia's democracy.

Esther Anatolitis: That's right. But also saying there should be a crackdown on charities and their DGR status, the status that gives them tax reduction services.

Richard Bell: Then why don't they do that to churches?

Esther Anatolitis: Exactly. We think about the dangerous impact. But GetUp isn't a charity. It doesn't accept any money from government, it's just done exactly what you've been describing: lets harness our voice and be stronger together.

Richard Bell: I think a lot of people are afraid of the violence that would likely come from involvement and joining the parties and turning up at branch meetings. That's a very underreported thing.

Esther Anatolitis: Do you think people are afraid of the violence and risk of joining in that way? Or do you think, and this is something that has been in the media in the last couple of days while we're having this conversation, around Peter Dutton has said that people in Victoria are too scared to go out at night because of gangs. When in fact the crime rate in Victoria has been dropping every year for the last several decades and youth crime is the lowest on record.

[Laughter]

Do you think and going back to what you were saying about neo-liberalism, do you think that it's those people in the privileged group who are scared of the violence of losing that privilege?

Richard Bell: I think you should talk to Scott Redfern about that sort of shit.

Esther Anatolitis: Well sometimes I just wonder why do they keep going after people on the dole, people with disability, people who are underprivileged, people who are silent.

Richard Bell: Because of the Australian dream. Everybody who buys into the Australian dream is going to look down on somebody who is not.

Esther Anatolitis: It's awful isn't it.

Richard Bell: Capitalism is awful. That's the core of the problem.

Esther Anatolitis: How does art counter capitalism?

Richard Bell: It's very difficult because art always follows money.

[Laughter]

Esther Anatolitis: And money sometimes follows art. Maybe it wants to co-opt what is exciting and risky about art. But art has to unsettle.

Richard Bell: They have to package it to fit the neo-liberal model. Take the content out and strip it of the content and just leave it, leave the shiny bits.

Esther Anatolitis: You don't want to be packaged. Maybe sometimes you do want to be packaged.

Richard Bell: I'll package myself thank you.

[Laughter]

Esther Anatolitis: You were saying earlier your work is attention seeking and you use colour and you use text. Was it always like that when you were first thinking about how you wanted, you always went for that?

Richard Bell: I went for that approach and I went the direct approach simply because no one else was doing it. I studied marketing, I am my own segment.

Esther Anatolitis: A segment of one. I like that. So then, over years we talked about politically what's changed in Australia, the '80s and '90s, the last couple of decades. But in all that time, what do you think has changed for you and your practice?

Richard Bell: I think my projects have become bigger and more ambitious. Essentially artists are gamblers. We make a bet that if we spend our money in a particular way we will get our money back and make a profit. I've been doing that and as my profile has gotten bigger, my projects have gotten bigger. I'm spending more money on these projects as well.

Esther Anatolitis: Because you can and it's possible.

Richard Bell: I can't compete with the rich white boys or the rich white girls or the rich black boys. But I do spend quite a lot of money on my projects nowadays. Quite a bit of AusCo money too.

[Laughter]

Esther Anatolitis: Thank you to the Australia Council and thank you Arts Queensland. As you should.

Richard Bell: Why thank you very much.

Esther Anatolitis: It's often when I'm in conversations around arts funding and philanthropists that people say to me, 'How do you feel about the philanthropic culture in Australia?' and the first thing I always say is, First of all we have to keep in mind that the biggest philanthropists in Australia are artists. That it's artists that are predominantly funding their own work. It's artists who are tax payers and putting money into things like public funding and the Australia Council as with all the other tax-payers but it's out of the artists pocket that art is predominantly made.

Richard Bell: Well the United States has a tradition of philanthropy. But that didn't come by accident, that came because of legislation. There's legislation that requires that everybody, every corporation in America to pay 10% of their profits to philanthropy. And if you don't pay it, the IRS gets on your case and they fuck you up. Nobody gets fucked up by us. They all just give their 10%. But the bigger companies they actually set up their own foundations, they get their conservative artists most popular because they are buying that shit.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah. The market and who buys what and what shifted when a certain kind of buyer is buying a certain kind of thing.

Richard Bell: There's a certain show that toured the world. An American show that toured the world that was funded entirely by the CIA.

Esther Anatolitis: Which one was that?

Richard Bell: It's a really famous one, you find out.

Esther: There you go, bit of homework for us all.

[Laughter]

Richard: It's about American art and it was funded by the CIA. Part of the global... the Cold War. Propaganda. Freedom with the art, blah blah blah, they let their artists say this and say that, bullshit bullshit.

[Laughter]

Esther Anatolitis: This is why I like the *52 Artists, 52 Actions* thing, the idea of an artist, I was having a look at it last night again with that website which is super lots of fun and looks very much like CNN with the ticker and what's going to happen next, but it is sort of like, its not 52 artists, 52 works, it is 52 artists, 52 actions so the nature of what an artwork is...

Richard Bell: I think we post ten images a day for a week. And then there are other links we can add to the photos. Like my project was about the dangers of nuclear weapons and reactors because there is not really nowhere near enough thought gone in to what can go wrong with these things. And consequently, there is no engineering in place to deal with any contingency.

Esther Anatolitis: It is just frightening really.

Richard Bell: Look at Fukushima they haven't got a solution. And the older ones of these are like 50 years old now. The technology is starting to crumble.

Esther Anatolitis: After Chernobyl, this wasn't widely reported in Australia or elsewhere in the world, but friends of mine in Wales, as far away as Wales, were not allowed to go to school for a week they just shut the country, a lot of things shut down, my grandfather's goats were sick and confused, he used to call it the cloud came over the country, it took many many many months for everything to settle. And yet as informs your work we have go this situation where a Australian led/based organisation has just won a Noble Prize.

Richard Bell: I'm interviewing them as part of this project.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah I'm excited about this. What's it been like getting in touch with them?

Richard Bell: It has been amazing, we've got a lot of questions for them. Who the fuck are you? Where the fuck did you come from? What have you been doing? How the fuck did you do this? How did you get these 27 countries to agree to this treaty? And then there's a link to a page on the net that tells you the responses of every nation in the United Nations in response to this treaty

Esther Anatolitis: Oh that's extraordinary.

Richard Bell: It's really interesting reading the stuff that each nation says, it's fucking amazing.

Esther Anatolitis: Wow that's fantastic that that is up and able to be shared and obviously that's an important and constructive thing for everyone collaborating, but you would think

something that would also shame countries into some kind of action or change, isn't it appalling that our Prime Minister can just fob that off.

Richard Bell: This is one of the reasons why I'm doing this, so it puts this out there, the dangers of these things, gee just have a look at the Twitter war between...

Esther Anatolitis: Trump and Kim Jong-un.

Richard Bell: Yes, who has got the bigger button, fuck me! How dangerous is the world right at the moment? Long before climate change has a change to get to us, they could end it any time. We need to get rid of all these nuclear weapons, we need to get rid of these reactors, just stop this shit, it's just too dangerous, we can't deal with it. The China syndrome there is no solid evidence against it they just said if reactor breaks down and overheats and it explodes it will just seep through and just bore through the earth go one side of the world to the other. And then what? We don't know.

Esther Anatolitis: And that's the thing, we already know stuff that's terrifying about it but then there's all the terrifying things that we don't know.

Richard Bell: They keep us distracted. God forbid identity politics. They Harvey Weinstein thing that came along just before they made a decision on neutrality which is really important, if they can't get that reversed, everyone better remember where the fuck they were when neutrality went out the window, because that's how big it is.

Esther Anatolitis: Talk about fake news as some kind of distraction, the changes to neutrality mean that what we think we are reading is already filtered.

Richard Bell: Yes. Peter Dutton talking about gangs, that's just a distraction from the real game.

Esther Anatolitis: Massive distraction.

Richard Bell: They are robbing us blind and they are putting all these other stories about Aborigines and Sudanese and fucking shit. In the papers they are robbing us, again this year there are 600 of the biggest companies in the country didn't pay a cent in tax.

Esther Anatolitis: And yet we are supposed to wear that. There is something that Wesley Enoch said last night in opening *Tell and In Your Dreams* over at UNSW Galleries he was saying we're in the situation where if we don't make our own work and tell our own stories then what we are doing is accepting the stories that a readymade, we are just accepting what we are being told and that's dangerous.

Richard Bell: Yeah well I started out I seem to when somebody convinced me to make art, they thought it was a good idea to do that, I decided that I would try to record some of the historical events in my time and hopefully some of those stories would find their way overseas so they wouldn't just be buried here and along with that was to challenge stereotypes, negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people.

Esther Anatolitis: I think that's one way your work has been attention seeking and has, the way that people are attracted to seeing and reading your work, it does make you stop and think.

Richard Bell: I hope so.

Esther Anatolitis: I think it is enormously important.

Richard Bell: I gotta go.

Esther Anatolitis: So we've got *52 Artists, 52 Actions* and the website is pretty much just like that but 5 2 not fifty two so 52artists52actions.com and Richard's also involved in a few other things at the moment, what else is going on for you right now? Got to get upstairs to the studio again, the most important thing

Richard Bell: I've got, I'm co-producing a play that was written by Gary Foley and fellow cast members in 1972, a play that played to sell out audiences in the Nimrod Theatre which is now Stables, the Nimrod turned into Belvoir Street and the last director of the Nimrod was Neil Armfield and he was at Belvoir for 30,000 years or something.

Esther Anatolitis: What's the play called?

Richard Bell: Basically Black.

Esther Anatolitis: And when will it be performed?

Richard Bell: It will open at Carriageworks as part of Sydney Festival 2019.

Esther Anatolitis: Brilliant. And of course, Sydney Festival 2018 is on right now which gives us lots of shows to go and see but that makes us especially grateful having had the chance to chat with you for so long this morning. Thanks so much Richard.

Richard Bell: No worries.

[Music]

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.