

# NAVA: in conversation, Episode Two

[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.

Brianna Munting: For this episode, we're onsite with Mark Shorter and Sach Catts at Cementa17. We listen in to their conversation as they discuss a collaborative endurance performance work 'Chip Chop Chanty', the intention of the work and overcoming leaking water pipes. 'Chip Chop Chanty' invited the audience to watch and listen to the rhythms of labour as the artist bodies were put to the test in a paddock on a hill complimenting, intervening and shifting the landscape. This work was undertaken throughout four days of the Cementa17 festival. It involved Mark digging a hole and Sach, firstly felling a tree, then chipping it up for firewood, with both artists working from sunrise to sunset. At the completion of the festival the hole was filled in, the wood distributed and the work finished. In their conversation Mark and Sach explore methods of collaboration and unpack the connections of work and labour both in practice and theory, they discuss and interrogate the concept of purpose, logistics, politics and what it means to dig and occupy a hole. We hope you enjoy their conversation as they grapple with the complexities of the performing body in a paddock in regional NSW.

[Music]

Audience member: So, what's the purpose of digging this hole? I've got to ask.

Mark Shorter: Well I've always been interested in holes I suppose, I find them interesting spaces to kind of contemplate within so I'm digging a hole, in a sense, for that. But my friend Sach here is chopping up the wood, so I suppose working with a different kind of action and form and space. We're trying to see what the conversation is between the two actions. They are similar because we're both kind of carving but one's kind of carving to an endless point and the other has a fixed, kind of, space of reference. And so, in a sense they're kind of a sculptural conversation around sculpture and carving and space.

[Chopping wood and digging sounds in a rhythm]

Audience member: Is it what you expected?

Sach Catts: It's like it's a hole? Yeah? I don't know. I don't know what I was expecting because I wasn't sure whether you were digging and sort of whether it looked like an archaeological excavation or like you were actually digging looking for something in some spot.

Mark Shorter: I think that's the point of it, like when you dig without purpose what is the fucking point? What is the aesthetic of digging without purpose because you're not, I mean you can dig to go through the centre of the earth and there's purpose in that, you might not make it but with the purpose you have like a direction and a form. But if you're digging, I

guess you're right, on that level its more excavation, because it's not digging to go through, its digging to kind of understand, like each layer.

Sach Catts: Yeah and I think yesterday when you really sort of hit the wall. Your morale just dropped and I think part of it is there's no purpose and there's no finitude to it.

Mark Shorter: It's just work.

Sach Catts: It's just you keep working and I think that highlighted the action and what you're doing it's the pointlessness of it. Whereas what I'm doing is pointless but I have small goals. I get through, I cut the log in half, I cut the log in half again.

Mark Shorter: I think it comes back to the formality because it's not that pointless you're able to make these shapes you're able to make these, like this is beautiful!

The hole comes in and out, where as this, like Sach did this yesterday in about an hour and I was jealous straight away because like its beautiful and it has a clear kind of shape, I suppose. So even though you're right it's pointless there are the small goals that sort of makes sense.

Sach Catts: Yeah, I think it's like you break it down. You compartmentalise your work.

Mark Shorter: That's what we're doing, I haven't worked it out yet though. You worked it out earlier on. It took me a day.

Sach Catts: It's kind of, I don't know, you just keep going. What are we talking about again?

Mark Shorter: The lack of form. Nah, I think we're talking about the purpose of the whole thing.

Sach Catts: Yeah and I think, to me, when people were asking me about the work; what's it about? Why are you doing this? We had this premise, we sort of pitched it as this work song, but for me it was kind of the actions. They're sort of abstractions of labour. For me the negative reference of the wood chopping is the chainsaw. No one would actually do this if they wanted firewood or they wanted the wood for something, they needed the end product. They would just use a chainsaw and a hydraulic log splitter. There's much better ways to do this if that's what you're after. So, once the action is kind of rendered redundant it just becomes an abstraction of labour. It's just the site of the labour.

Mark Shorter: I'd bring it back to the song because then that's the whole point. To find the rhythms between the two abstractions of labour like if you had a chainsaw and I had an excavator it wouldn't have the same kind of rhythm.

[Chopping wood and digging sounds in a rhythm]

Mark Shorter: We weren't actually sure what the relationship between the two kinds of ideas was. We talked a lot about working in the landscape, but I had I guess, a particular idea around the hole that was around making an informal sculpture, like an inverted form of sculpture even and we couldn't see the end point of the sculpture that you're looking at or something. Whereas I think Sach had a very different approach in terms of how he was working with the tree.

Sach Catts: Yeah, I sort of just came from the urge to, it started with just felling a tree with an axe. I read this book on the sort of Scandinavian relationship to firewood about a year ago. I became fascinated with axes and felling trees and just had this urge to do that and engage with it and we were talking about these things, like, Mark wanted to dig holes just wanted to dig holes, fascinated with holes and it was almost this preverbal attraction that we both had to these two acts and for me it's always been I've been more interested in the action and I think that the timber cutting and the wood chopping is more about an action. The hole becomes about creating this thing.

Mark Shorter: Yeah, I think I was more interested in meditative properties of looking into my hole so I wanted, I obviously made it to dig and chip away at the hole to get it to that point but I was more interested to what the hole was as a conception. It didn't really have that

same attraction just with the action. I felt that the interesting thing would be to bring the action back into the hole by comparing with your chopping or putting it next to the chopping.

Sach Catts: Yeah and I think meditation is a good concept because I find the act meditative, incredibly meditative. I'm thinking if starting up wood chopping therapy sessions like it's great.

Brianna Munting: But you've also slowed down time, like what you guys were talking about in terms of the action of labour and how if you wanted to do it properly and quickly it could be much easier to get a chainsaw and an excavator and that there's kind of a connection within space as well in slowing down that time to take that meditation element a bit further.

Sach Catts: Yeah, yeah, I think the relationship to time is, time matters less it's kind of a time defined by getting through something.

Mark Shorter: Were a literal clock and minute hands is almost an impediment for me I find that it's kind of a frustration. I'd prefer to go on, I guess, the light of the day and the knowing what kind of can be done in terms of what the physical body is capable of to be the measurement of, I guess, the sort of progression forward as opposed to like minutes and hours.

[Chopping wood and digging sounds in a rhythm]

Mark Shorter: I mean, yeah, look, it's just the politics of the town you know having to get kind of approvals to kind of dig a hole and kind of work out the City planning so that you're not necessarily hitting a waterline which we tried to, kind of, do so that we could focus on the action and not on necessarily on the politics of trying..

Sach Catts: The logistics.

Mark Shorter: Not the politics, of trying to get the hole down so yeah it's been kind of complicated on that level, which understandably because you know there's a lot of, as we've discovered, waterlines and things running underneath on any kind of City planning so you just really don't know what you're going to come up against so you've got to be quite responsive to the site and what's happening.

Sach Catts: But I also, for me, the logistics are kind of really interesting in performances I do that is working out how you're going to do this how you're going to get, you know, a two tonne log into town, sort of, under our own steam as much as possible and for me in all my work that is kind of what I like I'm kind of an amateur engineer.

Mark Shorter: I don't think, I think that is the politics as well I don't think you can have logistics without politics, so I find the logistics interesting like for instance even with the property getting to know the kind of relationships of the town so that someone in the Museum, at Kandos Museum knew someone with a property and then we were able to kind of understand that site through our conversations with Toby and Kate and then they would sympathise with us and sort of get involved, it's kind of a personal politics.

Sach Catts: Yeah, I guess that's I don't think I guess the connotations of politics is what I take, maybe move away from social relationships. They're relationships with the State and the constraints of the natural environment and there just the stuff you have to work with to get anything done. I guess they are really specific to this site, but I guess they also, where would we do this in Sydney? Imagine what you'd have to go through and that's interesting just the freedom you've got to work like this here, the constraints we'd have to do this in Sydney. You'd have to find the land you have to get approvals from, you know, all sorts of different departments, you'd have to get geotechnical surveys.

Mark Shorter: Ah yeah maybe. I mean obviously you have to check where the gas and water lines are on a property before you dig a hole but, I mean, we brought the log in so you could have done that.

Sach Catts: You could have done that yeah, but it's also doing it locally, it's also hauling the log, we could kind of play it a bit faster here. I don't know whether they want us to say that.

Brianna Munting: Did you guys make a conscious effort in terms of getting the log here, that that was something you wanted to arrange and be part of?

Sach Catts: Yeah.

Mark Shorter: It's sort of evolved.

Sach Catts: We wanted to do it under our own steam we didn't want to just get a guy with a truck and a crane in it.

Mark Shorter: Yeah because the original premise of the work was for me to dig next to the tree and for the whole action to sort of take place on the site but it couldn't do that, so we kept the premise of, kind of, taking on the action ourselves but having to then also bring the log to the site which, I thought kind of worked out quite well in the end.

Sach Catts: Yeah.

Mark Shorter: It meant I was kind of more invested on your side.

Sach Catts: Yeah, we both had to work together to do it.

Mark Shorter: Still waiting for you to get invested in my side.

Sach Catts: I helped you with your pipe.

Mark Shorter: You did yeah. And I think at the end you're going to help me fill in the hole.

Sach Catts: Yeah, I realise I've got to help you fill in the hole, I can't just go home.

[Chopping wood and digging sounds in a rhythm]

Mark Shorter: The soil is incredibly durable. In fact some of the more durable we've had to dig and so I'm using a mattock just to get through it in the top but that's normal practice to mattock the beginning. But there's this irrigation like that was running ironically dead through the centre of the hole. It was almost like I'd built the hole deliberately on top of this irrigation pipe, and so I was going at it with my mattock, I hit it right-on, dead-centre and split the whole thing in one hit and the water started just gushing out of my poor hole. It just got destroyed. I mean, it's good to actually water a hole because it loosens up and moistens the soil. I guess that works in some instances but what happened with my hole was the soil was so dense that the water didn't go anywhere, so the more I dug it just got muddier and muddier, until I couldn't even move my boots, so it actually became a bog. And the whole project I lost all vision for, and it became sisyphian and that was pretty awful. I guess that was the point. I've done other holes. Like, a previous hole I did the goal was to dig right through the centre of the earth to Spain and that wasn't the purpose of this hole but with it bogging up it just made it incredibly pointless and so all that was left was, sort of like, the sludging action which isn't like a chop dig sound it's like a chop slush sound. It was quite confronting, I mean, you were ok you just had to look at it. Although you weren't happy with your car getting mud in it I know. I tried to take the mud off.

Brianna Munting: It's interesting the discussions you guys have had with everyone because you've kind of provoked this discussion around the history of the site as well. Bringing an audience here, so many people have told me like the last 40 year history now, of just standing here watching you guys, of what was here and that quite extraordinary I think.

Mark Shorter: I think a hole can do that, by its nature it excavates and removes layers of sediment and layers of history and in a sense even metaphorically that can unearth people's own experiences with the site, like what's been happening here. People have been drawing everyone in and no one really knows why there's an irrigation line running right underneath I mean someone's tomatoes aren't getting watered.

Sach Catts: But I guess it is like it's like archeologic this is actually what archaeology is you know? You're digging down and you're trying to you know, you come across this pipe and

it's a remnant of history and then you work from there to try and work out what it's for, who put it here, is it meant to be here.

Mark Shorter: I suppose I find that frustrating because I'm interested of mythic qualities of the hole and so when you have to deal with the day to day existence of piping and stuff you suddenly get brought back into a more archaeological frame, which is fine. I mean, I kind of embrace it to a degree but I want existential pondering. So, I mean, that's why at the beginning of the day it was so disappointing yesterday because it wasn't looking like I was going to be able to vertically fit in my hole and I wanted to be engulfed by my hole. I wanted the horizon to slowly go down and down until eventually couldn't see across the vista. I think that it's good to have the practical archaeological qualities to be confronted with theme a you dig a hole I think the point is to not forget the mythic excavational sentiments, as well it kind of ponderous nature.

[Chopping wood and digging sounds in a rhythm]

[Fades into 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.