NAVA: in conversation, Episode 21

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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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Laura Pike: For this episode we are at MAAS, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences speaking about the upcoming Sydney Design Festival. Running from the 2ⁿᵈ to 11ᵗʰ March the festival hosts over 100 exhibitions, events, workshops and talks both in the Museum and through the program partners in and around Sydney including industry, universities, studios and institutions. The theme for this year's festival is Call to Action, and the events focus around the role and responsibility of design in our world and the potential for design to solve complex global problems. International keynote speakers, alongside local makers and practitioners, contribute to the dialogue of what design can offer our contemporary society. We speak with the producer of the festival about the curatorial approach, the key events and why the festival is important in challenging, provoking and inspiring creative practitioners in Australia. Information, ticketing and news about the festival can be found on the website sydneydesignfestival.com.au

Anne-Louise Dadak: My name is Anne-Louise Dadak and I work as the Program Producer for Applied Arts at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, and I am currently producing the Sydney Design Festival which kicks off on March 2ⁿᵈ.

Laura Pike: What is the Sydney Design Festival?

Anne-Louise Dadak: So there is a lot going on, there's over 120 events this year and that means, because it is an umbrella festival, that we are producing events here at the Museum but we are also helping to facilitate and kind of encompass other events that have been taking shape as part of our EOI process. So essentially, it's a festival that's both public as well as curated, and the focus this year had a very specific theme which was Call to Action, and that's kind of underpinned a lot of the programming and our approach to how we've actually taken everybody on board as part of the festival.

Laura Pike: So can you just talk a little bit about what is Call to Action? What's the kind of curatorial premise?

Anne-Louise Dadak: So Call to Action, this theme was developed last year and its sort of came directly from feedback from the public as well as from our advisors in the industry, and what we are really asking people to do is actually think about the role of design in contemporary society. So it's really not just supposed to be a festival that celebrates design, it's supposed to be one that critiques design, and very much looks at what does it mean to be working in a creative capacity and what does it mean to be a designer in a society where we are also facing a lot of pretty complex issues, and what does that mean to be putting things into the world at this time. So for us the festival's really a lot about, yeah that critical dialogue as well as celebrating great design, but the two should not exist in isolation and essentially they should always be partnering really, whether that's through talks or exhibitions, that should kind of inherent.

Laura Pike: In the festival specifically, what do you mean when you say design? Is that textile design, industrial design, what kind of design?

Anne-Louise Dadak: Which I think is a great question. I think for me generally, it's probably a terrible answer, but I think design itself, like how do you define design and is it already a complex question? So for us from a programming position we've really tried to look at variety, so that yes we do have a full spectrum, so there is a lot of focus across the board. We have a strong architectural focus this year which has linked directly to our feature exhibition 'Common Good', as is an exploration of materiality. So there is a really exciting new way of looking at textiles, looking at object design, but in a much more contemporary approach, so not just what is a beautiful object, but what does it take to go into making a beautiful object that actually sits within sustainable practices, or is looking to the future and trying to exist in an ethical framework. So that's been something that's been really exciting and I think that stretches across to even hands on programs that might be quite straightforward when you first read them, but when you actually if you look at it it's celebrating the handmade or looking at slow processes or bringing things back to the communal approaches of design, and they're the things we were really interested in showcasing and celebrating. Having that dialogue is of course a big part of it and I know that's something that is probably being pushed through a lot of festivals because it is this idea of how do you get to the core of what does it mean to actually be a creative practitioner in this social climate, so that's something that we've also been really interested in, that design is you know it can be a way of thinking, it can be applied for good or bad, it's not always a positive thing and how do we unpack that, what does that mean if you're looking a very commercial output, what does that mean if you're looking at really slow production, and also what does it mean if you are also an enthusiast or if you are an industry professional, so were trying to cover that whole spectrum and we've also been really lucky to partner with really exciting programs throughout.

Laura Pike: Yeah I mean I guess that you said it's not always good, but I guess a lot of this theme is celebrating some of the good things particularly socially engaged design.

Anne-Louise Dadak: Yeah absolutely, and I think that is what is interesting that if you're looking at socially engaged practice it's also in its own way critiquing, so you're celebrating a notion that things should be thoughtful and unpacked and not just pushed out into the world, and also that those basic ideas of, you know, looking at collaboration and community, what does it actually mean, like what does that look like in a framework where we're not just putting out those words and attaching them to projects, but how does that actually work and exploring that further

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Laura Pike: Can you talk a little bit about some of the key exhibitions or events that are happening as part of the festival?

Anne-Louise Dadak: Yeah, so probably our focus exhibition at the Museum to sort of underpin a lot of the thematics of Call to Action is Common Good, and that curated by Keinton Butler who is our Senior Curator here, and its being installed at the moment so I'm sort of speaking of it in its complexity in its conceptual point of view, but it's a really interesting exhibition that explores traditional formats of product as well as architectural ideas and moving into textiles, but again from a point of view of what is ethical, sustainable, future focused design and particular what does that mean within the Asia Pacific, so it's looking at a broader region and trying to also anchor ourselves within that rather than only looking to Europe for high design, or what we should be aspiring to, and there's some really exiting experimental work and a very strong focus on materiality, which is also been a theme which has sort of entered throughout the festival. So that exhibition has really underpinned a lot of the thinking and framework which has been great, and we found that our program

partners from the public have really jumped on board and embraced that. The one thing I think we're really excited about is that some of our keynotes link to this exhibition but their practice is incredibly diverse, so we have a whole range of keynotes and they have an architectural focus, social design for crisis, and then there's an App designs, who are very digital focused, as well as more traditional architectural merging into community and social planning. So there's a bit of a range there in terms of our keynotes, but for our partner programs there's so much diversity and it's been really exciting how people have taken the theme and run with it.

Laura Pike: I mean I guess having a look at the website there is a kind of key exhibitions and then the keynote speakers and presentations, but there's also feels like there's hundreds of other events and talks and workshops and kind of activity based programming that's part of the festival.

Anne-Louise Dadak: I guess I also should clarify that when I say our partner programs and talking about our public partner programs, they are basically an incredible range of practitioners who range from emerging through to industry professionals as well as all our tertiary partners, so there's some really I think exciting programming that's coming at all different levels, and it means that there is a real variety for people to get involved with and some of it is quite intimate so you are visiting peoples studio spaces, but a lot of it is also finding out more about how people practice and their ways of working, but also how they collaborate. So there are some really great talks, a lot of that is happening again through universities but a lot of it has been driven by industry leaders which we are really excited about, that's been a big part of planning the festival, that we have an advisory team, so the SDF advisors board, and essentially it is 20 leading Sydney design practitioners across the spectrum.

Laura Pike: I think what's really exciting looking through the program is that there are lots of more hands-on workshop based programming which means that you're not, audiences aren't necessarily having, you know they can participate actively in the dialogue and the conversation and in the making, and that seems to be kind of a new direction and a very exciting one.

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Laura Pike: This is a question more broadly about why festivals like this are important, specifically design festivals and thinking about the role of design or in fact critiquing design, why is that important broadly and I guess more specifically within Sydney?

Anne-Louise Dadak: It is a really great question because it also takes a lot of effort to produce these things, so that in itself is a question of why are we doing this. But I think from our point of view it's audience driven but it's also industry driven. So that you are creating experiences for our audience who again is a very very broad public, so we are not looking just at people who come to the museum but were looking at Sydney as a greater dynamic. But in terms of industry I think it is incredibly important that we are always questioning ourselves and what we are doing and especially you know, it's a hard industry to exist in and creative practice is challenging, and there's a lot of ethical decisions that come with that and I think to explore those, and sometimes also as part of your practice you don't always have the that opportunity to take stock and to unpack and to also push ideas that maybe you don't have that, I guess momentum or opportunity because you having to align with certain protocol or deliver listing briefs, that you know, this gives a little bit of freedom to explore some of those more experimental ideas, but again as you mentioned there's that room for critique that may not happen as part of your everyday practice.

Laura Pike: Great. I guess it's also, I don't want to say the word networking, so I'm going to say community building…

Anne-Louise Dadak: Community building, nice.

Laura Pike: …event which kind of brings people together and allows the sector to kind of celebrate some of the strengths and build on some of the weaknesses I guess, through the keynotes but also through lots of the events, there's a late night series isn't there?

Anne-Louise Dadak: Yes, so we're actually opening up the festival, in the Museum we start from six 'til nine, just creating a space that can anchor people, but we are absolutely not meaning for that to be the only place, it's kind of a point of call where people can join, there's a place to have a drink, you can go off into paid talks or you can see some of the exhibitions for free. But it's also a jumping off point so you move out into the world and go and see some of the other great events and for us it's about having that place to anchor you, but you're not necessarily driven entirely by this one space, but it is a way to kind of locate yourself because it is a big festival.

Laura Pike: I know I think it could be quite overwhelming, otherwise you look at the website…

Anne-Louise Dadak: There's a lot and I think that's the nature with a lot of festivals is that where do you start, how do you find the time, it happens quickly, so it's that intense short amount of time, and I think giving sort of a base is useful and that you can then branch out from there as well.

Laura Pike: It feels like this museum, the new Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences is the perfect location for a festival like this because we are kind of talking about boundaries, science, art, design, applied arts, the object, kind of digital, I mean there's a lot of stuff in there that the Museum now very future driven and technology based, right alongside kind of historical artefacts and things like that, so has that been important in the programming of the festival?

Anne-Louise Dadak: Yeah I mean I think the museum definitely feeds into our thinking, and it is like you're saying, it's kind of a weird paradox being here sometimes because we have this really incredibly strong heritage collection and then we're also looking at bring in contemporary work into the space, but also not just, yeah in an object basis like you are saying, it's looking at practices and ways of working, and like the exhibition Future Park on at the moment, it's more about the process of engagement as opposed to the absolute outcome, and they're things that I think working in a museum space, working in any cultural institution, are really important to explore and because we are quite, we're an older institution in terms of what our collection started as and what we are looking to in the future, there's a real sort of breadth there that we are also trying to narrow down because I think positioning is really crucial, but where this museum should be focusing and looking towards and what does that mean when you are engaging with an broader community, that's what were really interested in approaching. Feedback as well is crucial from both design and industry, but yeah looking at where we're placed and what we should be kind of doing in the future is a massive part of it.

Laura Pike: I mean I think it is an interesting conversation and an interesting dialogue that the museum holds about old and new, past and future, design and art, science and design, technology, all of those things and maybe those boundaries are unclear or are constantly changing, but that that dialogue exists in kind of integral to interesting conversation and engagements with audiences. Sounds like this festival, you know, will provoke and facilitate some of those conversations.

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Laura Pike: As Producer of the festival what are some hot tips for what's on that we should be looking at?

Anne-Louise Dadak: Well, I mean Common Good is a great one to come and check out and again when we have the Museum open like in the evenings six to nine you can pop in and view that for free which is really nice, you can come in after work. But I do think some of the keynotes are really worthwhile because they aren't necessarily household names especially some of the ones that do link to Common Good. Friday night we have, which is sort of the first night of the festival, we have Joshua Bolchover and Pamm Hong they are both featured in the exhibition but in such different ways. So Joshua's created a, it's a Ger which is essentially a Mongolia yurt, but it's coming from an architectural focus on how you create community through spaces, and his whole practice, it's called Rural Urban Framework, and it's about actually looking at what does that really mean creating community, like what does that actually look like and his specific work is focused within the Chinese countryside so his practice is really interesting. And Pam on the absolute opposite scale her project is Watermelon Sugar Wellness Lab, which is a whacky title, but basically she looks at how do you create visual data from your browser history, so she's creating these really complex beautiful animations that are coming directly from your browser history and also showing where there's patterns of behaviour and potentially where you may have, I wouldn't say issues, but maybe like focus points of how you use the internet and in a way she is looking at creating a remedy for them. So it's quite a beautiful mix of art, design and science and again that like a really interesting point for us to look at where that cross over is. I mean there's a lot, and again on Monday night we have a talk by Eisuke Tachikawa and he, his whole practice is about social design but he's a Japanese designer and one of his major projects was basically designing for crisis, so he designed for the aftermath of the Japanese earthquake and there's some really beautiful work that he did with crowd sourcing to create the information that was needed to respond to a disaster. So he basically pulled in what people were needing as information and then responded with the relief package. So there's some really interesting work there that I think is not necessarily large household names for design, but then just moving out into the world, like I think looking at what all the tertiary institutions are offering, but what all local designers are doing and there's so much great dialogue happening and I think it's really exciting when you have the opportunity to meet in a casual forum, whether that is at their studio or some events are happening at bars, you know there like a very broad mix and I think tapping in to those conversations in a different and relaxed setting is a really beautiful opportunity that doesn't happen very often.

Laura Pike: Is the idea that the audience are designers, or emerging designers, or students or, you know, industry leaders, what's the programming kind of directed towards or is it kind of broad?

Anne-Louise Dadak: So I mean I know this sounds like a cop out, but I would say all of the above. I do think that's specific also to which event and the context. Our aim would be to have that broad approach, but we are also looking also to really engage industry because we want to take that relationship seriously, that it's not just about sort of looking at beautiful things, but it about discussing them and unpacking them. But our main aim is that things are accessible, and they don't feel like highbrow, alienating because I think that can sometimes be part of design, that it feels like it exists in a separate context and were trying to break that down whilst still elevating what the practice really means as well.

Laura Pike: And I guess thinking more broadly, again this is not a small question, but considering the theme of this year's festival Call to Action, it's kind of socially engaged practice and socially engaged design, what is the role of design, I guess in isolation and alongside other sectors, to that kind of ethical responsibly and social responsibility and change and, you know progress?

Anne-Louise Dadak: I mean not a light question, I love it. Yeah its massive and I think, again you know obviously I just have my own personal opinions and so does everyone on the festival team, and so we're driving that and it also comes through curatorial approaches, but

that's also meant we have connected with likeminded people and people have put in programs, but I think you know, design in itself is very hard thing to actually define, but I think ultimately it is working towards problem solving. It's not necessarily preventing them, and I think that's something that if we are looking at social complexities and particularly certain, like if we are looking at environmental crises or anything that is moving forward as we kind of exist, it's not saying that we will necessarily prevent, but how do we approach and how do we work in this climate and what can we do, not necessarily even to always resolve, but to I think unpack some of that like the challenges. And so I think that's what I found interesting with some of the some of the speakers, is that they aren't claiming to resolve any of these complex issues, but they're working within and alongside them and doing, I guess it's a really tricky thing to say, "good design" but is this, I guess, way of understanding that what you do matters, and even though, yes, like there are complex situations that we exist in, that you can either add to that complexity.

Laura Pike: The choices that you make.

Anne-Louise Dadak: Yeah, or you can start to I think really address, like, what your practice is positioning and like, I think it's a really challenging question because it is something that I've mentioned often is it is about putting things into the world, and that is in itself quite complex, so I think particularly with looking at, you know, architectural product design or textiles and fashion, how do you create and also do that with an ethical framework is really challenging, but there's really beautiful explorations and for me I think it's like it's not about always having the answer is about trying to unpack that process and question what you are doing.

Laura Pike: And perhaps maybe not always coming up with something brand new but rethinking something that you've been doing in a different or new way, or possibly, and what I think is really interesting, is collaborating outside of the design bubble with technology.

Anne-Louise Dadak: Absolutely, and I think that is where the exciting work happens and, again that I think focusing on collaboration, also this idea of like experimental, even materiality, about how that can actually be a huge shift in what something becomes, so that just having that actual discussion and thoughtful process, it is I think something that anyone who is putting things into the world should be looking at. And I know there's no like fast and easy solutions and having worked in industry it is complicated and you're also trying to make a living, but your decisions have implications and looking at that in a broader scope I think is what we're kind of really trying to drive.

Laura Pike: And that we potentially all have a responsibility.

Anne-Louise Dadak: Absolutely and I mean of course everyone does, but I think that if were saying design is about problem solving then it should also be looking at what that really means, without necessarily always having the answer. And I know that sounds really ambiguous, but you actually have to dig a bit deeper.

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Laura Pike: So if people want to find out more information about the festival or about what's on or how to get involved.

Anne-Louise Dadak: I think website is the definitely is kind of like the holy grail, it's got all the information and we have the printed program which assists and kind of delivers across the spectrum all the programming with making note of you know features here and there. But the website is definitely the best point of call but I would say also just really taking a risk and booking some tickets, there's a lot of free, like a lot of free programs across Sydney, and I think just taking a bit of a risk because it's an exciting time that happens for a very short, it's only from the 2nd to the 11th March and I think its really just time to explore things, that yeah if

you are interested, amazing, but if it's something that's a bit left of field for you this is a good time to do it. But really, it's a short and sweet festival and I think just getting involved and there's so much going on that I really do think there is something for everyone, but there is a lot and it's like getting in and seeing what's out there and checking the website and going for it is the best way forward.

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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.