

NAVA: in conversation, Episode 22

[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: Hi I'm Esther Anatolitis I'm the Executive Director at NAVA and I'm here with Mami Kataoka she is the Artistic Director of Sydney Biennale and we're sitting in Gallery 4A and you're going to hear some sounds maybe of installing, maybe of painting. Mami, tell us what's happening here?

Mami Kataoka: Yes, 4A is one of the seven venues for 21st Biennale of Sydney and 4A became a partner venue for the first time in its history.

Esther Anatolitis: Oh, that's great.

Mami Kataoka: And so, we are showing two artists, Akira Takayama and Jun Yang and both are investigating the idea of migration, refugee and how culture has sort of come together with the people and so it's about something in common, but two different projects.

Esther Anatolitis: And that really central to what you're doing with *Superposition*, that there might be something in common but there's a contrast and a tension. Let's talk about that because I have long been fascinated with the concept of thermodynamic equilibrium, I'm fascinated by this idea that when see some kind of system, a chemical system, a weather system, a complex system, when we assume it's at equilibrium that is perhaps how it seems from a distance, but if we come up close then we're seeing the greatest movement and the greatest exchange, the greatest generative tension. Tell me about how you arrived at this, for the framing for the Sydney Biennale.

Mami Kataoka: Yes, the idea of superposition, which I'm borrowing from quantum physics, but before that I have been interested in this idea called *USHIN* it's from Chinese ancient natural philosophy, but sort of imbedded in basically all East Asian cultures, Japan, Korea and Taiwan and how different elements like fire, wood, water, metal, earth, these five fundamental elements of the universe is sitting in our reciprocal relationship so that no one is stronger than the other, one cannot kill or be killed by the others. But that's the way how all the universe is continually changing and keeping that good balance of everything. So that's quite an Asian perspective to have no hierarchical relationship and more sort of a horizontal, flat relationship, and I had been interested in how that could be applied to social systems in our daily lives. And then I started to encounter this physician from Denmark called Niels Bohr and he was one of the important figures for quantum physics in the 20th century but I learnt he was interested in eastern philosophy like Yin and Yang because it's reciprocal, interdependent relationship. That is exactly what he was talking about, what quantum physics was talking about in terms of smaller worlds, as you said, in a big picture you don't

see it but if you go into micro worlds, all the tiny matter like electrons and atoms, you cannot really define whether they are particles or waves, so they changed their status or you cannot really observe visually as a human being. So that's something I was super interested in how the whole world of physics, something quite philosophical and something that is mostly a balance of the scientific and physical world was connected with the idea of an Asian perspective. So that's how everything came about, and I think this idea of somehow colliding or contradicting the multiple values of core existence, could be applied at any level. Like your relationship with a boss or a relationship between a country or even the idea of land ownership particularly in this country, land ownership by the Aboriginal people of this country, but also covered by this western, modern idea of governing the whole land. But a similar set of relationships you can find all around the world.

Esther Anatolitis: This idea I think is terribly important and I think in a range of different realms in the arts, in politics but certainly in the media there is such a tendency to want to simplify down and abstract away those mutual interdependencies that you talk about, that reciprocal relation. I think that's one of the really powerful roles of art in itself isn't it, just to be able to expose that there is a live set of relations.

Mami Kataoka: Yes, I think events like this, this huge scale biennale is not only just bringing art and artists from around the world and juxtaposed with the Australian art scene but more importantly, particularly probably after globalisation after the '90s that so much art was being produced in different parts of the world so by collecting them into one place, suddenly the Biennale becomes a microcosmic place of the whole world or maybe the whole universe and then you see how different people are and how different their context is. So, by reading the works and also the context then you start to continuously force yourself to rethink, reassess your way of thinking. So, by encountering all these differences and multiple layers of understanding of the whole world then I think it's a really important sort of psychological training in a way to think you are part of the whole thing and you are not in the centre of anything, and no body's the centre. Everyone has their own centre but in relationship with others. So, I go through these often-asked questions, "So Mami, what are the best 10 artists in the Biennale?" or "Can you choose one best artist from each venue?" So I said no to those questions because they all exist in reciprocal relationship with other works, so it makes sense by having them all together. And they can exist, as an independent artwork but it gives you more meaning and more joy of understanding and different thinking by putting them together.

Esther Anatolitis: That more meaning and more joy I think is absolutely crucial because in the way you describe those relationships, the seven venues and then the person, the audience member, by themselves or perhaps with a group, moving between those they of course become a part of that system. And one of the things that has always fascinated me, if we think about the differences between say a festival and a Biennale, a festival in a sense, makes art public, it creates a program and then it offers that program and invites someone to look at. What was the framework behind this program? What's the curatorial principle? And in the sense of venues being brought together, outdoor spaces, different experiences, for this particular duration there's a sense in which that entire program is now public. But Biennale in a sense makes art political because in exactly the way you described, it brings together artists from around the world, artists who are grappling with some very pressing and open ended, irresolvable, great, big questions. And so, the program of a Biennale I think makes a political contribution, if we understand political not as to do with political parties but as the public as the civic. So how you see your role in I guess in framing what is political or civically engaged about the entire program as such?

Mami Kataoka: I think it's a very interesting question particularly with your position at NAVA because I'm actually showing quite a lot of archives from 45 years past.

Esther Anatolitis: Which is so important for long term, for the work to be protected.

Mami Kataoka: Particularly in 1970s and '80s when the status of the Biennale wasn't established. So we're particular focusing on that time and trying to show works from 1979 which was the first time Aboriginal artists were shown from Arnhem Land. Then the whole feminism movement and also particularly between 1976 and 1979 the second and third Biennale they were discussing a lot including local arts communities and artists and all these groups of people who gathered in the city and invited Franco Belgiorno-Nettis who was the founder of the Biennale and all the artistic directors, asking, what is the role of a Biennale? And what does it bring to the city? And what is the balance between men and women artists? And that is a question we are still asking and so that was a very important time for the city but also for the Biennale itself. And I think having the Biennale now is a completely different environment because they didn't have a MCA, no Artspace, no 4A, no Carriageworks, so it was a super important opportunity for the local arts community to have artists from around the world. And now, Sydney is I think, has quite a fruitful infrastructure for contemporary art, to show international art. So I thought it was important to look back on how it has developed together with the development of the institutions. But at the same time, now it's more like a festival so that everyone has to come in as an institution but they cannot only think about their institution they have to think bigger to have this holistic view and a balance between different institutions because if an institution has a different role in the city and what they bring, I think it's a sensitive balance amongst them, so they don't really overlap but that they have a particular role. But also using a venue like Cockatoo Island which is very important for the local people, especially for the people that hadn't gone Cockatoo Island, as I asked around if they had been and quite a few people said no I've never been.

Esther Anatolitis: Often people don't know what it is, or that it exists.

Mami Kataoka: Yes, so it's important to give that awareness but also to give a completely different experience from what they have in a museum space.

Esther Anatolitis: I think that's vital, especially in the way you describe that, my mind is just reeling with all the differences between the conversations that would have been had in the '70s and '80s and the conversations that are being had now and in some ways for example our conversation around feminism has moved and swung and come back and is extremely pressing at the moment. And then also the conversation around the way that venues and institutions, what their influences is on the city and how that is either disrupted or enhanced, brought together in different ways by the Biennale. I imagine there are conversations that you foster that it's just not possible or practical for many of those institutions to have with each other year round

Mami Kataoka: Actually, this evening, all the directors from MCA, Carriageworks and Artspace are coming together to discuss. So even that kind of occasion is quite rare, but they don't normally get together in the public to talk about the importance or their own personal experience of the Biennale.

Esther Anatolitis: And that's going to be great, because any kind of situation where we can critically reflect I think is very valuable but one that then casts that reflection out into what

continues to make a city is terribly important. Another thing that shifted for Sydney in that time has been that sense of, what makes a city in terms of its smaller and vibrant spaces, there's a lot of conversation around the night time economy, fears around violence and a very heavy-handed approach that is closing down certain local places. How is your experience of, I guess, Sydney being a place that is open to cultural experiences, how does that relate to other places where you've worked around the world?

Mami Kataoka: I think, there's something I felt very different is the history of the city and the history of the country. Because I come from a country with a long history, sort of a continuous history, so to really think how people from Europe first came, it must have been an amazing experience and how could human beings build a whole city in 230 years, which is quite amazing. But now I think the city has been doing quite a lot of cultural events, not only visual arts, but I was talking with Wesley Enoch from Sydney Festival and what he is doing again in terms of the media, making performances somehow overlap with the visual arts and incorporating spaces like Carriageworks, for example Katharina Grosse is having a great installation at Carriageworks and all these things. So, we were saying yesterday that not only the museums, but also Sydney Festival and other interdisciplinary relationships could be enhanced so that we can look at arts and culture in Sydney with a much wider lens. I also know City of Sydney are doing quite a lot for architecture, design by also inviting a few Japanese architects and artists to do something in the city as a public art project. So, I feel like a lot of things are going on, but I think it's a great opportunity to see it as a holistic view for the general public because everything comes one after the other. So, it's all bit by bit but you don't see it as a whole.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah it can be, any city it can be a quick succession of things, though as you say of course it's that relation, I'm stuck on this phrase now that reciprocal interdependency I think is vital. And just thinking about this new city as you say, the certain European layer that's been added and then of course a history that is older than we can possibly imagine, the longest continuing cultures. You mentioned earlier just how important First Nation artists have been to your program. How have you valued I guess, having those conversations and working with First Nation artists and framing your thinking?

Mami Kataoka: Actually I was already interested in Indigenous artists in terms of the way that they appreciate nature, because I have been interested in the perceptions of nature in different cultures and this realisation. And the ways in which they depict indivisible spirits and ancestors but also water lines and the energy of the land transforming into the painting, it's just fascinating. It wasn't very comfortable for me to divide Indigenous artists and non-Indigenous artists, I just dealt them as an artist, as I do for any artist, I just approached an artist who I think would be interesting. But I also valued a lot of institutional collections because I work with the MCA and the Art Gallery, they have a specialist and a collection over the course of many years. So, I thought it would be simply silly to come in as a foreign Artistic Director, not knowing anything and then trying to do something from scratch, so I looked at the website and also I discussed with some people, and found some marvellous pieces in the collection. But not only Indigenous works but also non-Indigenous works I pulled out from the collection so that the Biennale doesn't become a visiting show, but finding reciprocal and connected works in the collection and the Biennale.

Esther Anatolitis: This also makes me think of, when you're talking about digging into those collections, understanding the history and it's terribly important for any festival, the Biennale in particular, to really draw on the history of its place but of its own history as a Biennale and look at the conversations that have been fostered. Because as you say it doesn't exist just as

an inert, it doesn't just fly in, it come to a space with histories and song lines and then it contributes, and something changes us all. Something that is recent in people's memory in thinking about the political impacts of the previous Sydney Biennale is of course the action that was taken by artists in protesting against the Transfield relationship with the Biennale which had all sorts of results including changes in Board Members and Chairs, but also in Australia this had quite an extraordinary and very unexpected impact in changes to arts funding and policy. I guess we like to think it's not so straight forward, but it's been interpreted by many commentators that the Minister's response was perhaps vindictive or was a response to even being a bit outraged that artists could have that much power as to express values that are shared by so many people. There's so much about that I'd like to ask you about that because it's something that, in terms of the political impact that an artist can have, it has been really big for the way cultural policy exists in Australia. But for you coming in as the Artistic Director following this how conscious of this have you been of finding those clear ways to foster the voice of the artist as well as balancing your other relationships and what the Biennale means for the public and for the culture?

Mami Kataoka: I think I have to say that I'm not 100% supportive for any artist, because they're an artist, I don't support any art because it's art, it has to be meaningful, so you can't just say you're an artist and have power to change society. I'm so sceptical about 'art and change the world' so I'm always looking at how and you have to do it really cleverly. So that incident with Transfield had again two sides, it's superpositioned. If you have a different position and then you see a different landscape, you see the different story. But I had been questioning what had actually changed and artists could make, or anyone at the moment with social media, they can make fast rounds against something but as a result, what do you get? And what is your achievement? I had big questions on that. So, one thing I wanted to do was to look at its own long history and contribution from the Belgiorino-Nettis family, it's an enormous contribution it should not just be deleted in one incident which I thought was quite unfair in terms of the weight of the engagement and commitment. But also, I totally agree with the difficulties and problems of how asylum seekers were being dealt in terms of human conditions in general. So, I completely support the idea as a whole, not as a nation, but as a human being you need to do something about this human crisis. So that theme came as one of the major issues in this Biennale. Having Ai Weiwei, Tiffany Chung and displaced artists Akira Takayama and Jun Yang all of them are dealing with this issue partly from their own life experience, Jun immigrated from China to Austria in the 1970s and Weiwei also as a family was exiled to the Xinjiang district in the 1950s, so it's not only about Australia and the now, as the same set of irrational events happen in any part of the world in any time in history so it's important to think about, not just looking at one point, and you don't only look at the connection between Transfield and Manus Island, but it's a much bigger issue and how can we solve the bigger entanglement? And I think artists or art have to be wise rather than just being reactionary to that.

Esther Anatolitis: That's so intricate how you've put that, the set of relationships are really complex and sometimes when you feel disempowered you can point to one thing or one relation. We know from the consequences that the company and the family gave a lot of thought to all of their investments and the range of things they're involved in. But of course, the Australian Government to seems to have just taken an even harsher approach and so this is one of those things where it is absolutely essential that artists but also everyone continues to investigate what it is we value and what it is we abhor. But I also want to get back to what you said, because I'm intrigued by this because I agree, but want to think about it some more, is the notion that art isn't going to change the world by just being art and sometimes we have this notion, a state of exception around the artist or around the figure of the artist

and perhaps that's because we admire the audacity that someone can commit to the rigorous development of a practice. Sometimes it's because we create an environment, a gallery, a platform of a festival around the artist but of course the work must still be compelling. Tell me more about that, the difference between just being an artist and creating a work?

Mami Kataoka: It's a subjective judgement but I'm simply just not a pure believer of art for art's sake and it just has to be compelling. It has to have a power to change something, our recognition, society or anything but good art has that power, but not everything does. So, I'm not an innocent believer in art but I'm probably pretty critical and sceptical about those questions. That's why continue to seeking works that will convince me and will change my way at looking at the world and my way of thinking, and if I can learn something from that art, those are the ones that I collected for the Biennale.

Esther Anatolitis: It's a really high bar to set for ourselves isn't it, that's to see a work that is going to change the way that we view the world, I think that in itself, is a generative and transformative experience. Is that what drives you in term of thinking about audiences for the Biennale?

Mami Kataoka: Yes, they can all have a similar experience coming from different backgrounds, so again it's a reciprocal relationship between what you have already and what you see in front of you. That kind of chemical transformation but it's all different from you to other people. So, you can just come and experience but see how you could go around different spaces or spaces with two works, you can compare them, and then going through other venues and you start thinking or realising some connection between this work and then another in another space. So, you start seeing how things are connected. It's a microcosm of the whole world, then you start seeing how the world is all related, time-wise and historically, but also a spatial relationship like geography is all related. But one thing I can tell you about this is Akira Takayama's project is called Our Songs - Sydney Kabuki Project. On the 28th January we hired Sydney Town Hall where the public could make a declaration of being Australian citizen and sing the Australian anthem, we invited nearly 70 people who had different backgrounds or an indigenous background to be able to sing their song carried from ancestors and family and sing a cappella alone in the empty hall. They were singing to the dead and the ancestors soul and it was quite impressive to see out of 70 people there were more than 30 different languages. That's the beauty of this city and how much of this overlapping diversity has embedded in this city and once you see people singing with love and integrity that's quite a powerful message that could change something and the way of thinking and the way you see the city. Because when you're in the CBD you don't see much of that diversity because a lot of people live in the western suburbs or other suburbs so as a visitor to the Biennale, it's a very interesting of understanding an entry point to understand the whole demographic of the city and it's going to be a really beautiful piece.

Esther Anatolitis: I cannot wait to experience it, we've just walked through there earlier and I'm sure everyone that's been listening has heard that calmers of sound and painting going on and things being shifted. We're very grateful to Gallery 4A to let us sit here for a little while, tell me Mami, I've been thinking a lot about, not just the kind of artistic and political aspects of Biennales but also what focuses our attention as audience members and something you just described about being in a group with that many different languages also makes me think of course you can be two people together at a venue and have two very different experiences of the same work but then you can also leave and come back and you yourself have two very different experiences of the one work. Earlier you talked about art and a Biennale framework makes meaning as well making that sense of negation about values,

how important is it to you to create a sense of I guess, openness or even confusion to really open up an audience members eyes and heart?

Mami Kataoka: I think it's probably all up to them, but this is a unique opportunity to be able to see work of up to 69 works by 69 artists all at once, it's a lot of effort to go through so something good for the locals is that you can come back but as a visitor you have to do everything within 3 days, so intense. I think you're overwhelmed with too much information, visual and also contextual information, so at least you can enjoy it come back and enjoy the show because it's a free event except a couple of the performances at the Opera House. I think it will be interesting to see how you see 4A and then go to Carriageworks, and come back at a later time, you have a different set of experiences, and Cockatoo Island is a completely different experience in terms of scale, but also Carriageworks has massive works that can only happen in that space. It's again an interesting contrast between a new experience in a museum, you're supposed to be in an art space, but Cockatoo Island is a non-art space, non-art institution but has a heavy history of the land itself. So, you can start connecting with the history of that island and the actual works in the place. Like Ai Weiwei's big boat, a six-metre-long rubber boat is inside this industrial building where they used to make boats. Those kinds of connections I have sort of prepared, I don't think it's difficult for audiences to make those kinds of connections.

Esther Anatolitis: I think so too, and that sense of finding those connections can be artistic and aesthetic, it can be political or historical. And I like this sense that of course the Biennale because of that length of time is something that inhabits the city, that you can inhabit and keep coming back to and also makes me think of what is the sense of a work and of numerous works that you have seen and experienced over time that inhabit and have become part of you, because the eye of the curator and director in this context is so complex for all the reasons you've just described, there is so much going on in your choices and your determinations than what is compelling. There are such subtle negotiations and distinctions, tell me about a time maybe, a long time ago, five, ten, 15 years ago, when you were just starting to have a sense of your own scope broadening for what you wanted to present, the juxtapositions you wanted to make, and the tensions you wanted to animate for people. Is there a particular project or turning point where you began to think on a global scale about what you could present as a curator or as an artistic director? Was it a political motivation? Ethical motivation? What started that shift in perspective for you that has now become so holistic and so complex?

Mami Kataoka: There wasn't one specific project or moment, it's more of accumulated experiences. Particularly, from the artist because I always work with the artists in conversation, so I think all the artists I had worked with had been my mentors or had been teaching me a lot so that it accumulated my way of thinking and broadening my perspectives. And then also I visited many places to meet those artists and for this biennale, I decided at the very first initial stage that I should meet at the artists at the place that they work. Now it's possible to just email and never meet the artists until opening, or even after the opening, but for me it's important for me to understand why this person is making this work? Now? Why? From where? So, for instance where I do a solo exhibition I even visit the artist and the artist's parents and family and ask lots of questions.

Esther Anatolitis: Oh that's intriguing.

Mami Kataoka: I visited India four times to do the N. S. Harsha show and also to do a South East Asian show last week, I travelled through ten ASEAN countries and sixteen cities over

two and a half years. This is necessary to really understand the climate, the history and the economy, until I am able to feel a little more confident to be able to talk on their behalf to the public. I think this physical experience and also analogue relationship, old fashioned relationship with the artists is so important. Because what I can do is really limited, so just wanted to be honest about what I know, but also how I can be the best vehicle to bring something that is from one third party to another third party, which is the curator and also the exhibition, is again this connecting point and platform. So that you have to understand both in a good way so that you can find good joins in this system.

Esther Anatolitis: This intrigues me, so this is your approach and your role as an element in that that thermodynamics, perhaps also the container, the condition, and in particular that honesty and that right to speak on another's behalf is of course only something we can negotiate with really great care, I think that's a really important insight to your approach.

Mami Kataoka: And I think it's important to know that there is a limitation, as one human being you just cannot go to all the five continents and cannot sort of conquer the world, but you don't have to. So, my approach was an intuitive way of how everything moves around, so my curatorial approach is not to start with myself, I'm more inspired by chemical reactions with one artist and another artist. So, a third artist can start to think "these artists are so interesting together". Then, I start to have a conceptual background and when it starts becoming solid I can start adding other artists. It's very organic, and very analogue, and I have to write things down on piece of paper, so I have to the doodle of the floor planning and that's the best way for me to work.

Esther Anatolitis: Now I'm just intrigued imagining all the doodling and the writing that everyone that comes to Sydney Biennale will have as they respond. It has been really fantastic to get to talk to you, especially knowing they're installing in the next room, that the Biennale opens very, very soon and we'll have a good few months to enjoy it.

Mami Kataoka: I just wanted to add one last sentence about the role and power of the artist, I'm not denying what they do, I think their intention is very important and an intention to try and change the world is extremely important. But I just wanted to say, I simply don't believe everything is fine.

Esther Anatolitis: I think that's important but it's also the intention to try and change the world is one of the most powerful drives we have as human beings and sometimes we feel it as children and then it vanishes. And sometimes we feel it in our particular roles in our jobs whatever they might be and then it vanishes, and I think something we admire so much in artists is that tenacity and that perseverance that's just a drive to change the world but is also about spending two or three months, or ten or 20 years focused on the rigour of one set of techniques or a tradition. And that is I think, if I was to make a case for the exceptionalism of the artist, it would be about that tenacity and that rigour. But at the same time, I also want to know that a work in particular has got it's situatedness, that it is compelling us I guess to consider not only the conditions of its creation, but our own constitution and identity. And I think that's what fascinates me particularly about the way you describe those interdependencies, the chemical reactions, that there's something that happens to you physically when you engage with a work that we are not inert to the power of the artist.

Mami Kataoka: Right. I could probably add to that, the few artists who are over 70 years old on my list, they are so impressive. The things that they have been continuously doing for 30-40 years is just compelling. And I think a Biennale used to be something for young and up-

and-coming artists, who are the newest from around the world, but now if you compare a young, short career artist, with a 70-year-old artist, with a 30-40-year career that is determined, continuous and consistent, it's just so impressive. So, I am bringing back a few artists from former Biennales such as Lili Dujourie who is 76 years old from Belgium and she was in the Biennale in the 1980s and this is her second visit, she just arrived yesterday, and she'll be doing a work from 1972 and also 1997. The other artist Miriam Cahn, was in the 1986 Biennale, her work at the time was acquired by the Art Gallery of NSW, she's showing ten new bodies of paintings, together with four drawings from the 1980s in the collection. That sort of conversation within ourselves, you can see that consistency but also some dynamic changes at the same time.

Esther Anatolitis: I have to say this is one of the main things I'm most excited about, often, particularly for festivals, less so for Biennales, there is too often this sense of just synchronic time, as opposed to the long term, and the diachronic, that the Biennale will be here for a good couple of months. But if we only reflect on the here and now, then we're sort of perpetuating I guess some of that risk of the shallowness of critique that we see in, for example, the daily media or the rapidly disposable responses in social media and in the contemporary political times where the media landscape is shifting. We desperately need those opportunities, push and compulsion to look back and engage with deep time, to listen and hear from our elders, and then have that experience, that chemical reaction, we leave and so we're not just a body in space and time, we're part of a complex system that is old as the time we could imagine. Mami, thank you, you've given me a lot to think about as will the Biennale.

[Music]

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