

# 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: I'm Esther Anatolitis, I'm the Executive Director of NAVA and I'm here in the home, and also, I'm seeing it's kind of the research hub and the studio and the brain centre of Elvis Richardson. Thanks for having me.

Elvis Richardson: Hi! [Laughs] Glad to be here, and that you could find it, yes.

Esther Anatolitis: Oh, you're in a great spot. Oh, and we also have barking and playing and growling in the background, there's Jack, who we're going to try not to mention. But he is super friendly, and he will very likely leap into my lap soon, which will also be very nice. So, when I walked in I saw some big pieces in the hallway..

Elvis Richardson: Oh, yeah.

Esther Anatolitis: Tell me about those.

Elvis Richardson: Um, on the 13th, for two weekends, there's a - Kyneton Contemporary, they're an organisation, they've organised the Kyneton Contemporary Art Triennial (KCAT).

Esther Anatolitis: Love a good acronym!

Elvis Richardson: Yeah! So, they're paintings, they're more paintings on metal, they all say – they're like advertising signs, and they're advertising artists' lifestyle, so I have the words "Artist Lifestyle" on there, there's ten panels and each one has a different anagram of "Artist Lifestyle". So they're kind of a little bit ambiguous or ambivalent about whether they're proposing a solution in terms of artists lifestyle is the solution, or the problem. Yeah, so that's what I'm hoping that they're doing.

Esther Anatolitis: That's, um, they're so bold, for starters, so I would love to see them in situ at Kyneton. But yeah, artists' lifestyle, it's become the, you know, we've kind of in the last decades gone through sort of recognising that gentrification is precipitated by the work of artists, and then been really frustrated, and still now frustrated that artists are locked out of the benefits of gentrification and then sometimes there's even a bringing artists into that whole planning conversation.

Elvis Richardson: Sure.

Esther Anatolitis: But you know, it's still actually not about making the space for artists, really is it?

Elvis Richardson: No. No, it's not. No, not for every artist. I mean like, it's kind of the situation we're in now, where, if you don't buy property you're kind of always going to be in a situation where you're going to be moved on. I guess, yeah, which is what happens to artists, that's one flipside of the coin. And the other is, you know, well, when they renovate warehouses and other things – they don't do that so much anymore, they just pull them down and build lots of apartments, though. Remember that time when they kind of shelled them, and you know, made them into lofts.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah, was that kind of better or cheaper, and then the shelling then means that you're then just completely appropriating that lifestyle because it kind of looks like, you know?

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, and artists can't afford the luxury apartments. I actually noticed that they were being called contemporary apartments now.

Esther Anatolitis: Oh really?

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, luxury seems to have kind of lost popularity.

Esther Anatolitis: Sydney Contemporary, Melbourne Contemporary, Apartment Contemporary.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Esther Anatolitis: So just, there's no limit to what can be appropriated.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah. And what is contemporary, as well. Or like, it makes you think that. When I saw it the other day on Holden Street, yeah, some apartments were being called "contemporary" apartments. Instead of luxury, yeah.

Esther Anatolitis: Which again also is that word "contemporary" and how that's become a sort of, an elite, whereas before contemporary was sort of, I guess, to express that art was of this place, of this moment. But the fact that that word can be co-opted for the advertising and sales of apartments is also a bit alarming.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah and following straight on from luxury I guess it connects the two a bit as well. As if contemporary is luxury, at the same time. Contemporary art is, anyway, in one sense, yeah.

Esther Anatolitis: So how is your art contemporary?

Elvis Richardson: Well, I guess all art's contemporary, at some point. It's just of its time, isn't it, or responding to things of its time. I mean, I'm always thinking of situations that I'm in and what it draws me to look at, and making something out of that.

Esther Anatolitis: And your practice is so strongly about that, whether it's in your own artistic practice, but thinking about the work of the *Countess*, which is about, and has been

about drawing out and making visible, certain aspects of the contemporary times.  
Representation of women and others.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah. I think, you know, you grow up feeling different and then you find out that you're not alone, that everyone else is having those experiences too. I think that's what I got out of *Countess*, you know, doing that. Like, because everyone else was going, "Me too", I guess.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah, that sort of responding to the now but also people going yes, well, me too, that is my experience.

Elvis Richardson: And doing things that come out of your personal experiences, in a way they're kind of part of your story but part of other people's stories too, having those similar experiences tangentially or whatever. But yeah, and it's not to kind of, you know it's to give lots of people voices, rather than to assume like you're representing. Just, that's my position with all of the kind of *Countess* stuff. It's been great to kind of create a platform, and that's why like now *Countess* has been run by a new group of young artists who are, you know – and I'm really excited about that, and they're just off doing their own thing, finding how difficult it is and how much work is involved. So it's moving a lot slower than I think they expected but you know, in terms of what they're – yeah, they're doing great. And we're getting the website very soon.

Esther Anatolitis: I can't wait. I think that's a really important insight, what you've just said about how much work there is involved in *Countess*, and I really like the community counts, and I was at one at ACCA, which was part of Unfinished Business, a few weeks ago. And we talk a lot about how, as well as just sharing that work, so each being given a big spreadsheet and looking at what is the balance and representation of people of various genders in awards, in festivals, in biennials and biennales. But also the sharing of, this is the work that's involved, it takes this much time to go through and do that search and you know, triangulate, not just go from one particular representation of how an artist is talked about.

Elvis Richardson: And to kind of yeah, see it through to the end too. Because yeah you're right, searching and trying to identify artists' gender as well, which kind of came up – you know, that's nice about having a group of people working on *Countess* is that you know, they'll be able to write up the methodologies a little clearer, and do things in ways that where, people's skills can be shared. And create those things. Yeah, I'm really excited about what they're going to achieve. They've got some great things. Because that's the other thing, when you're doing *Countess*, everyone's always telling you the things you could do. "Oh, why don't you do this, or you could do that, or you should talk to these people or those people", and you know, I've got a part time job, a family, and an art practice, and it's kind of, it just piles up, doesn't it?

Esther Anatolitis: I'm so glad you brought that up because this is what happened that day, so, you know, they made a representation on, here's what we do and here's who we are, here's what's involved, and a little bit about your background and approach, and here's what we're going to do today. And then I think people get a bit carried away by the, you know, you know, with the "should happen" and then... and finally I just had to say well look, just explain, that they're just two people doing this part time and obviously we should all be contributing to that kind of count but also to the advocacy, and the ethics that underlie it, and the politics, that will actually change it.

Elvis Richardson: Like, I kept *Countess* simple because of the limited time I could spend on it was just to provide the data, just to put it out there and allow other people to do things with it. I mean I did have some commentary from time to time but often I just went, here look I just counted this, here it is. Yeah, bringing it back to the numbers, so people can do something with that information and it's just out there and yeah we can't ignore it, and it's great, the impact that that had through the *Countess* Report doing that year-long benchmarking one was really significant and we'll actually do something in the future to compare it against and do stuff, yeah.

Esther Anatolitis: That was enormously, enormously valuable.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, because all the museums and stuff did take notice of it and that was, yeah, and I had no idea, and that was actually with the help of NAVA. Because that's the other thing too, you've got so many skills as an artist, but you want to specialise and you want to kind of, do what you want to do. It's like, again and again there's other admin and other weird things you're really doing a lot of, a lot of the time.

Esther Anatolitis: Oh, exactly. And that's the, there's already all of that admin just around, like you say, the getting on top of and staying on top of your own practice, and that resourcefulness to find what you need to sustain that, let alone everything else. So tell us how, I guess, what was that initial spark? How did the counting emerge from your practice?

Elvis Richardson: I think I was always a feminist, I was always critical of – I guess like a lot of people, just hyperaware of power and – I don't know.

Esther Anatolitis: Oh, it's such an important sense, it's one we all need to have and if not we need training in it, absolutely.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, so that was an experience as a young person, when I left, when I was 18, early on, I worked in refuges as a youth worker, with homeless young people, and I did that for about ten years, until you had to get degrees in youth work to be able to work in youth work. And at that point I had started, you know, my training as an artist at art school and it was just too much, you know what I mean? I ended up getting out of that field unfortunately because I actually really enjoyed it, and you felt a sense of purpose and you know, you were connected to lots of interests, you know.

Esther Anatolitis: Oh, of course.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, I just – when I went to – I actually got a scholarship, the Samstag scholarship, and I went to New York. I got into Columbia University which was just so exciting.

Esther Anatolitis: So great!

Elvis Richardson: And then I went there, and it noticed as soon as I got there, that the class – it was forty students – or no, it was 20 students – and half of them were men and half of them were women, there was a lot of men in the class, and I thought, oh that's interesting. And then I noticed they were half, and I was involved in the intake for the second year, and that was, they were, they had a gender quota.

Esther Anatolitis: Oh right!

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, yeah. And that was like, an eye-opener to me like in terms of that other side of that working. But then I noticed as soon as I finished the degree and I stayed in New York for another two years that the men still did a lot better than the women. And I also had this job where I had to work out in Long Island, and I'd catch a train. It took an hour and a half or two hours each way.

Esther Anatolitis: Oh, my goodness.

Elvis Richardson: And I would buy art magazines that were really cheap there, like *Art In America* was like five dollars or something, and I'd really read it from cover to cover on the train, and I just started highlighting boys' and girls' names in the magazine and just liking it aesthetically more than anything, and I never actually you know, compiled what I was doing. *Countess* was just taking that to another level. I did, I did actually have an exhibition, it was Andrew Frost's *Art Life* blog had started and it was initially anonymous and it was a lot of fun, and people were kind of commenting. But it wasn't in the horrible "troll-y" way that people comment and stuff now, do you know what I mean?

Esther Anatolitis: Oh, the trolling going now is toxic, whereas that was...

Elvis Richardson: And that was anonymous! Yet people still had a politeness about it.

Esther Anatolitis: I know, those early days of the blogs, there was some great discussion, people were so hungry for there actually being a forum for that.

Elvis Richardson: It was really, really exciting and I thank Andrew for that, and the team that he worked with. Yeah, and that inspired me to do *Countess* because I could be anonymous too. And you know, that was really good fun. So that's how, why it started really because of blogging and its popularity at the time. I don't even know if Facebook was there then, I guess it was, because yeah that was 2005 or four or something.

Esther Anatolitis: At the very beginning, yeah.

Elvis Richardson: And maybe it was getting shared? Yeah, I don't know. It was just a good time, I think.

Esther Anatolitis: It just made it such an easier way to be able to share that.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, and I guess to have the courage to do it initially, because even though I'd experienced you know, directors of an art gallery asking me about my husband and my son and then a male artist turning up beside me and him, you know, the director going "So what's coming up for you?" And you know, just like, just a little idea of some of the things that stuck out of not being taken that seriously as an artist. Not, yeah, and I think also I was of a particular generation of artists that I finished my BA in 1992 and then the Emerging Artist Grant was invented in '94, so like then the Samstags' and all those kinds of scholarships started at that time too, you know what I mean? And the Masters' program started and became popular and then you know there was a lot for emerging artists, or it felt like it, that the generation before didn't have, I think I was taught by that generation that I had to earn it, and...

Esther Anatolitis: And that notion of, you know, that an artists' work across a lifetime will have different stages and the way that we talk about that, and you know, and there's such discrete chunks of time in Australia. You know in the '80s there had been an interest in youth because there had been the International Year of Youth, and in '83 you had these youth arts organisations that were founded for the very first time. And before that, arts organisations were the major performing arts, and all sort of thing...

Elvis Richardson: And Artspace started.

Esther Anatolitis: I mean like ones that were artist development, there was training for performing artists, for musicians, with the majors, with the ballet school and so on, but in terms of supporting an artist's career, those organisations just didn't really exist, Next Wave was founded in '83, Express Media was founded in '83.

Elvis Richardson: It made me wonder as well, were these things kind of built on the expectations of art careers as well, like, which is, yeah. I never have met a satisfied artist, really. Like I don't mean that in a terrible cynical way but yeah, it's, that's what I kind of thought, that at some point, okay if you want to study art, well no one I would have imagined expected that you were going to have an art career.

Esther Anatolitis: And that word, "art career" which makes it sound like the objective is to spend all of your time on your art such that you make a profit from it, which, you know, would absolutely be the aim of many artists, but then for many others you maintain that practice around other things because it's actually a part of life, as well.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah no that's absolutely true, yeah.

Esther Anatolitis: How has that worked for you? Like, how have you balanced the work that you've done with the income-generating work?

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, I think I've just tried to get work that pays as much as possible, so I can do as little of it as possible.

Esther Anatolitis: This a good plan!

Elvis Richardson: And I guess I'm happy with a medium, an average kind of income, it means that I don't own any property or those kinds of things, like, and that makes me insecure now as I get older, and I'm very concerned about those things and the implications of what that means when you haven't, you know, worked in an industry with a high income. Yeah, and also as artists, those opportunities that you know that you do get, okay like I got a Samstag, go overseas, I'm overseas for four years, I come back, takes me another four years just to be back on, you know, hello...

Esther Anatolitis: Of course! Of course.

Elvis Richardson: So it's very disrupting as well. And also came back, hadn't accumulated any money or a nest egg or anything. Came back destitute in a way and had to kind of just get back on your feet, yeah. So, I think that those kinds of opportunities are like poisoned chalices in a sense. In that yeah you don't realise the kind of implications until later on. Yeah I think it's interesting, I think all artists at some point, they've gone through the university

system and wonder, you know, should I be doing something else or should I have done something else or doubted it, in some way. Yeah, it's almost addictive, or something.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah, that's intriguing, because I think what you're saying about that disruption, and so addiction is also in that sense, you know poker machine logic is talked about where if you're addicted and you go and you're pressing buttons or pulling things and your mind set tells you 'well I haven't won all of this time, therefore, if I press it I'm more likely to win now' it's that reverse kind of thing, whereas in any other situation and you weren't addicted you know from past experience would tell you 'I haven't won anything so far, therefore I'm never going to win anything'. And that trade off of an experience where there might be an exhibition or a grant, you know we talk so much, as you were saying about this notion of artists' careers but what we should be talking about an especially when it comes to younger artist and artists sort of starting out, is about what's disjunctive about it. What disruptive. That's this is not going to be a linear thing from emerging to established to whatever, but anyone of those steps is like a leap over here and a leap over there and that's the sort of resilience.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah I think the bigger picture is coming out for sure. I mean it's funny how all these issues are understood and, on the table, now, it's amazing, I mean if you were whinging about the artists fee we were getting the idea you were being ungrateful like a while ago but there are lots of things that are interesting. Oh, I made a work about that actually because I used to get rung up and get this gambling questionnaire that I agreed to take part of, I kind of like market research.

Esther Anatolitis: It's fascinating.

Elvis Richardson: And it was for the government, it was about problem gambling and they used to ring every six months, but it occurred to me loud and clear when I would get these repeat questions, that had they been asking them about the risks I took as an artist financially, I'd be scoring off the charts. So, I redid the questionnaire asking about art instead of gambling and in a way, I've always thought I little bit about some of the work I make about artists and you could put *Countess* in that category, although *Countess* never started as an artwork it as just an anonymous thing, Grandpa Simpson kind of thing, and I had to work out how to make it an artwork, I don't think I've achieved that or it is an artwork it's just what it is. But yeah, this one I made into an artwork. So yeah, the questionnaire from the gambling.

Esther Anatolitis: That is fascinating to turn that on its head because we're used to being asked all these questions and also used to thinking of art and art practice as just being a wholly other thing, whereas it does also feed us and confuse us and we can be addicted to it and it can be like a relationship or a deep frustration or a betrayal or a joy, it's the way it infuses life.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, it is special thing. You know it's another language that's why we do it. You know, to express ideas in different forms and it doesn't all have to be written or word based, although I do use a lot of words.

[Laughter]

Elvis Richardson: I guess to question them if anything, and like even with the artists lifestyle or questionnaire, the gambling questionnaire, they're kind of questioning the heart, the cell of what being an artist might be.

[Music]

Esther Anatolitis: And of course, you know, numbers themselves are just so powerful, we know for example in what we see in the news, there will be a story about something, but when there's a number of people or a dollar cost of something, something I've been noticing more and more in probably the last ten years when there's a report of a really serious, awful storm that happened or some kind of big natural disaster, a fire, it'll often be...

Elvis Richardson: "It's the worst storm we've had in five years" or something.

Esther Anatolitis: Yes, exactly, we'll be hearing more and more about that, thank you climate change. But the thing that's in the headline will be the estimate of the damage it caused, rather than say how many houses or how many people died, numbers have just become such a, I don't know whether it's just become a short hand for the media or just that's the sort of powerful thing for decision makers which is what makes the work of the *Countess* so important as well, but just numbers.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, and having that as evidence, well people have always said you know, you can always make the numbers different things, but you know some numbers are just pretty simple and it's just a matter of talking them up in a public place really.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah, on the way over I walked past, there's this big billboard just on Sydney Road just north of Brunswick Road and once you cross Brunswick Road and you're into Brunswick here in Melbourne, north of there there is Coburg, there are suburbs where a lot of artists live and have tended to live and of course that's kind of the latest, what do you call it, front of gentrification where artists are being priced out of that area but you know it seems we all at some point have lived in Brunswick and rented a place there but that great big billboard has got this very kind of, you know, aspirational young man that's just a bust of him, and he says "In 2018 I'm going to become an investor!" and so it's that kind of not just that change of gentrification but shifting that language again sort of getting back to that artists' lifestyle to aspire to isn't to enjoy this area or to just live in this area or even to buy a place in this area. But to buy a place so you can actually earn money of someone else's creative lifestyle.

Elvis Richardson: I know it's just sickening all of the stuff isn't it.

Esther Anatolitis: Which made me think what more can we count, and should people be counting. So out of the latest Throsby research which is also really massive and timely and gives us some really chilling insights into how things have declined for women in particular, if you look at all the figures.

Elvis Richardson: And it was good to see them focus on that as they hadn't focused on it as much in prior reports either. So that was really great.

Esther Anatolitis: And you can kind of really get in there and filter through, you can go to the Australia Council's website and just choose art form to filter, you also just read the massive, massive report that is also, you know lots of fun. And we were working with some colleagues at the City of Sydney who were also just trying to crunch the numbers in different ways and one of them put this graph together that was for Sydney, maps the decline in average artists income and on the same graph the median rent in Sydney.



Elvis Richardson: Yeah, well one of them goes up while the other goes down.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah because that's the thing it becomes places that you can no longer afford to live in because in fact the work of artists has transformed them. And then I also think about okay, how are we going to transform that as women, what are we going to, you know what institutions we are going to transform such that they are actually you know better places to work and have got better opportunities for people of all genders simply because we're responding to numbers like yours. So, what are some of the, you know the *Countess* has been quite widely reported, but what are some of the things you hear about, I guess just decisions people making differently or thing that people have now got the insight into.

Elvis Richardson: I think just the general culture, just an awareness of an inequality and how power imbalance works, you know, this group isn't necessarily lazy or work isn't necessarily less valuable or the childcare working march the other day, it's like such a perfectly good example of you know how one job is just considered less important than someone who is an investment banking advisor. I mean really? I don't know, I love Richard Dennis and he gave a talk at a women's thing from the Australian Institute, he said he was talking to a CEO who asked how they acquire good staff and the CEO said, "we offer money and bonuses etc". And then he talked about who looked after the CEO's children and should they be using that same kind of thing and childcare centres too, to acquire good staff and the CEO unbelievably said "Oh no, I don't want someone looking after my children motivated by money". [Laughter]. And then Richard Dennis, he said, "someone like you". Anyway that's someone else's story but it was just a really good one. I don't know I think it's really just all about work and it's all about who gets to work and who gets to influence what those institutions are and unfortunately to allow those things to open up and change some people, different people who used to getting things, people are going to miss out and it's going to be the usual people who have been missing out for decades, years and centuries, unfortunately. Because when all the feminist stuffs going on around *Unfinished Business* I'm seeing a smattering of men but they're not really taking an interest, like they're just hoping it's just something happening over there and not in the main kind of area. I don't know, but it is interesting, yeah but I think it's tipping point at this point, do you feel the same?

Esther Anatolitis: I feel completely the same, and something I found really heartening on exactly what you're describing, is on International Woman's Day this year, I was a part of conference called *Loud and Luminous* about and for photographers and women in photography and there was a closing panel at the end and there were a few of us on that, including, Gerry Orkin and he is from, I'm going to forget the name of the organisation, it's for street photographers, so I guess street photography being that style of practice which is about capturing those you know, unframed, un-composed images, largely of people but also objects on the street and people just going about doing their thing. And there are events and festivals for street photographers just as there are for every other art form and he had spoken early in the day about big gender imbalance. You know we think about the work of people like Deb Verhoeven having called out quite spectacularly just recently, in her excellent speech, *Has anyone seen a woman?*, about this notion of all male panel so starting to see points around that, but a lot of women you know, spoke passionately that day and he also spoke about you know, there isn't a limitless supply of conferences and panels and men are simply going to have to step back and open up opportunities for others. And then we had another photographer on that panel who was also the only other man on that panel who found this genuinely affronting and was very happy to talk publicly about how genuinely affronted he was great because so often that doesn't happen, the conversations don't happen. And he

kept saying “Well obviously I’m only ever going to make decisions that are financially profitable for me” and so he had the chance to be criticised by women and men in the audience and that felt like a small tipping point because those conversations seem to just happen in parallel or just not at all, the decision makers over there and other people over here. And then of course all the global stuff around #MeToo and #TimesUp and the response to the open letter video we made which has been massive. But there just seems to be a fairly clear sense that there are some things behind us and now we’re all committed to making change.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, I know it’s really great.

Esther Anatolitis: It’s so great, but it’s up to all of us to maintain because we can’t just have this sense of “Oh okay we’re talking about it now and that’s great”.

Elvis Richardson: I guess another good thing is that there are women in positions of power that can use the power differently with that kind of support behind them culturally and stuff like that, where perhaps in the past they would have been going out on a limb. Because you know we can’t hold individuals responsible for making the change, like anyone who does anything it’s done with the support of other people whoever it is. You know with myself as an artist with my family, or your gallery, you know everything, it’s not just like that happens magically on its own.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah and you know, like that old adage about how revolution needs to be kind of, evolution, otherwise it is just that big break and it is disruptive like you’re saying about you know, you were overseas for four years and come back and you’re rebuilding four more years and there’s the, how do we make really, really big change, well often by making lots of really small changes and seeing what comes from that and each one being such a strong foundation.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, I think it’s really exciting times I had no idea, it’s just great I’m really loving it. Every time I turn on the news I’m hearing things that I want to be questioned and are getting the public attention that they deserve, not everything across the board but it’s good I think. I hope that, I like the interest of young people in all of that as well, it’s just great.

Esther Anatolitis: Amazing and so important. Earlier I was asking about that early stuff and what lead to the counting and I can so picture you now on the commute with a highlighter and highlighting the names in the magazine and then how that kind of emerged from things you were thinking about in your practice. But have there been then times when the work of *Countess* has then folded back into your practice? Instead of the one having generated the other because as you say it’s not an arts project itself.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, I have tried to, I’ve probably specifically made some works that used some of the looking at magazines, because I guess one of the things I’ve become fascinated with is the idea of the artists’ name and how that is really the brand and the reputation like when you look at art magazines they’re really full of artists’ names rather of images of their works or what have you, so yeah that’s of interest. So, I’ve made some works out of that, I think with art you want to take it somewhere else instead of it being too literal or something, and that’s why *Countess* in a way really literal, you that’s just the way it is, and I’ve never really seen it as an artwork. So yeah I have made some other things, that kind of come out of the ideas of it I guess. In the forms of materials, I’m looking particularly at magazines and you know, developing a fascination and a connoisseurship of them I suppose, visually and all of that kind of thing. So yeah, I think a bit of that.

Esther Anatolitis: You just made me think, the whole kind of, a magazine is its own kind of personality and anthology and it's of its time, like we were saying before about contemporary, and of course magazines and media in general exert a great deal of power across the way we perceive the contemporary, the way that we make decisions and judgements, the way that we know about any kind of political process and so they're a really incredible thing to bring into an artistic practice. And then there's that question of, which I've been asking artists a lot lately, is the difference between a practice that is contemporary in that bold and political style of vein and then art as activism. And they strike me as separate things, they strike me as, there are times when in our practice or in our actions we're explicitly activist which is about bringing about a certain specific kind of change, then there's also the extent to which any work of art is political because it's actually about the current times, it's an expression of certain values, it's going to be perceived and responded to by a public and so it exists in a space, which is never a blank space. But how has that worked for you, do you think? And maybe even at different kinds of times over the last few decades, have you been more artist than activist? Has it been explicit for you?

Elvis Richardson: I guess art is kind of little bit ambivalent about things, do you know what I mean? And it never takes a position, I mean it can, be cut right through and issue or something I thinking of just an obvious example that jumped into my head, I lived in New York when September 11 was on and I can't remember the artist's name, but they put news reporters, reporting that on a number of screens at the Gagosian Gallery, it's all a mush up, but you know when you take something that's from the real world or that's terribly current and bring it into an art context. But generally on the whole, I mean it's hard for art because it's influences are kind of more long-term or something I don't know.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah, that's a good way of putting it because art, whether it's implicit or explicit it draws on a really long tradition and whether it's of technique or of just referring to other art forms or other artists or even it's just for the person appreciating the work, like you walk into a gallery and you've already got a sense of I'm in a gallery, there are walls, there are plinths, I'm participating in something.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, yeah there's also another thing, there's a coolness about art that is, when I say ambivalent, you see it in the worst of art writing, "it's light, yet it's dark, it's transparent, yet opaque" I don't know it's that kind of thing like in a way, I don't know what I'm saying...

Esther Anatolitis: No this is good, because when you started to say that art is ambivalent, that just struck me as just a really quite beautiful and powerful definition. You know, art is ambivalent, I often think of art as something that asks questions, there are objects in our world and our lives that when you think about them functionally they serve these particular purposes.

Elvis Richardson: Because if art had an answer it would be dated, and it wouldn't be timeless, like there's got to be a certain, you know what I mean?

Esther Anatolitis: Yes, well if it had an answer it wouldn't be provoking you as an object, and I guess that's the other thing art does it that it continues to provoke you it's not an inert thing that sits somewhere and performs one function only.

Elvis Richardson: Although it does kind of performs no function as well. It's a funny thing and getting back to the beginning of our conversation, contemporary and luxury in the capitalist system of a market place, I don't know any artist would could afford to buy art.

[Laughter]

Esther Anatolitis: That's the thing, let alone property.

Elvis Richardson: We've got to do more swaps. Have a swap meet.

Esther Anatolitis: God that word contemporary becoming competed like that reminds me I've also started to see the word 'curated'. There was a funny one recently, a 'curated selection of..' I don't know it was definitely something commercial and retail, like curation was also this...

Elvis Richardson: Don't you also curate Instagram or stuff like that?

Esther Anatolitis: Yes, a curated feed, yes you've chosen to follow people so you're curating. On the one hand, yeah, we all can and should control the news that we consume in that context we'd risk calling Facebook and algorithmic curator of things we can and shouldn't be hearing. But there's a difference between exercising choice and working with someone who's profession is not just to bring artists into powerful conversation with each other but also to curate, to look after, like you would curate a garden or something that requires long term, as you were saying, kind of care.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah art thinks about history and the future as a thing doesn't it. Wow, well we've got a long way to go.

Esther Anatolitis: We're got a long way to go and it's going to be all the little things, all the little powerful things that we do together. So we talked about so, so much, we talked about your practice, we talked about politics, we talked about counting, we talked about, I guess, you know, the power of women and people of all genders to really shift the way that art is made and discussed in Australia and in so much of that you have been such an important voice and force, she's shaking her head and laughing but it's true, it's those small things that accumulate and now the fact that other people and other women can come along and do not just the counting but all of us are involved in kind of powering and propelling the work that you are doing and I think is super amazing. So Elvis, thanks for letting me come and chat with you all this time.

Elvis Richardson: Thank you Esther. [Laughs].

Esther Anatolitis: Let's do good things.

Elvis Richardson: Yeah, go future!

[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.