

NAVA: in conversation, Episode 28

Gosia Wlodarczak in conversation with Esther Anatolitis

[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: It is the first day of winter here in Sydney and I have just taken off my raincoat and come to the Australia Council where Gosia Wlodarczak is here in the front window, she has had a couple of weeks of a drawing residency, and if you know Gosia's work then you will know that it is intricate, it kind of, I don't know, I feel like it for me it articulates in a sense, it is about thinking, it's very much about thinking, and it's a kind of thinking, but first of all thank you Gosia thank you for letting me come and trouble you while you are actually working.

GW: Oh, pleasure Esther, this is always what's happening. I like working and drawing in the same time because I believe that everything what's happening during the drawing process is archived within the drawing. That's the purpose of the drawing is to archive the moment which is the actual moment, um without thinking about past, about memory, about future, thinking about now. So trying to find yourself within actuality of time space.

EA: Oh, now that's incredibly important. I mean, there's, OK there is the notion of the archive, which I would love to ask you about, but then there's the now, and there's what is current and what's immediate and essential about now that we just, we are sitting here in the front window, people are walking past, a lady is struggling with her umbrella, it looks like it's broken.

GW: It looks like it is already broken, yes.

EA: Oh, that poor lady, umbrellas in the wind. But we go past, and we do the things that we do, and we don't take that time to focus on the now.

GW: Yes, we don't focus. The purpose of my drawing actually is to keep focus. To try to reside in the actual moment, consciously, without drifting somewhere else. It is quite laborious for the brain, it is tiring, but it is my little mission in life, trying to acknowledge now, and its importance. And maybe understand it better. Maybe understand my existence within the time space better, and that's why even some people try to force me to believe that I meditate, but I don't.

EA: Ahhhhhh

GW: The notion of meditation is alien to me. I never tried to do it. Even though people talk about this type of mediation which is about the actual moment, but probably but if you don't do it consciously, I mean if you don't mediate, if you don't say to yourself 'now I am meditating' you don't meditate. So that's what I believe is important, and I just never do it. I try to go to the painful realisation of being in this moment and whatever happens, and that's why I don't listen to the music while I draw, I don't distract myself with other things, I try to bring my brain and senses backwards, and focus, and focus all the time, focus on what's happening in front of my eyes, and listening to the natural sound of the space. I don't believe that I interpret listening, but I am definitely trying to materialise the process of looking, not seeing, because I believe seeing involves memory and knowledge, and looking is something that happens before seeing.

EA: Yes, looking directs the gaze and makes the focus.

GW: Yes, and looking actually is the mechanical process of the sense of sight reacting to the visual experience, I mean to the reality of sight, and then transporting the inputs to the brain. And then the brain, you know, the image is formed. But before we recognise it, it's just an image. That's another part of my rules, and conditions and my practice that I actually try to document this particular process and shape that my eye notates in every, through the every gaze, shape after shape. Without naming it, without structure or categorisation, without imposing the value to the shapes seen, because I believe that really, in reality around us, everything has the same importance, they are just objects and shapes actually. No matter if it is a human shape, if it's a tree, if it's a stone, they are all shapes, material things, which form the universe.

EA: And we, ourselves become those shapes, part of that landscape

GW: Yes, yes, an ecosystem of shapes.

EA: Oh, I like that, I mean there's, and then you create this overlapping ecosystem but also an archive, because an archive as you say, makes a record of the now. But we also think of an archive as something that we can access, something that we can, um something that would have perhaps a structure, a mode of retrieval, or a way of re-accessing or re-experiencing, um, and so, as a record, do you find that you look back on past works and have a sense of the 'now' that was recorded then?

GW: But rather, as an overall pool of material.

EA: A cumulative archive?

GW: Yes, material um particles, not necessarily readable in a sense that we want to read history, rather like a pool of particles that you can assemble, and reassemble, not necessarily in any particular order, not necessarily with the understanding of what is there, it's just with the knowledge that this is this time, there. So the time which was between the beginning of this particular work and the end of it, no material what happens after and before what happened, and no matter how actually it looks physically. We like to actually impose the category, this is good, this is bad, this is this, this is that, but I'm not, even though it's human nature to do this, and of course

EA: Yes, yes we can't help it

GW: Yes, you can't help it, you can't help it to say oh I like it, oh I don't like it. But I'm not trying to pool that kind of feeling, I'm just trying to acknowledge. Pure and simple. Acknowledgement.

EA: I think that also goes to what you were saying about the difference between meditation and a drawing practice, because meditation is in a sense an abstraction, a separation of the body and the mind from the immediate. It can certainly be thoughtful and critical, but it's very much not responding to what's in front of us and not taking that as I guess the form, the framework, the environment.

GW: Yes, I think the process, the long process of something happening implies for people to put it into the draw as such, like meditation, because something is prolonged, and just there, and you draw and draw and draw means you have to put yourself into some kind of state, to be able to do it, but no.

EA: Yes and that's the thing I can see, because we are here at a window and people are passing by, and there's always a focus that, there is a meditative quality that the focused face, the facial expression can have, and because we don't tend to see that in a public space, that tends to be the facial expression that people would see of us if we were at our desk, if we were at our home, but we don't tend to see as we walk past in a street someone's focused expression and perhaps we make that association that it is meditative, instead well no this is the artist at work [laughs]

GW: Yes, exactly [laughs]

EA: Or, as I have been enjoying on Instagram your other current series, 'the artist not at work'! [laughs]

GW: The artist not at work, yes exactly! [laughs]

EA: Which I love that, because it sort of, yes, as you were saying, I also have a body, a physical presence, and other things, housework and things that need to be done.

GW: Yes, and also, I have this kind of critical mind, like everyone else, and I analyse the situation in which I am, so the current affairs, let's say like that, and the position in which I reside in a structure of our social and political life, and that's why I decided to the Instagram Facebook project because it is my humorous response to what does it mean to be a female artist in the twentieth century and slowly slowly leaning towards the seniority in that, and that's what occupies my mind, and probably needed to be formalised that's why I decided to do it, and in the beginning it was very simple one month project, but then it started to grow and I realise it becomes more than that, a kind of calendar in which I can actually visually present elements of my thinking, my desires, my opinions and my dreams and then reality.

EA: Hmm, I think it's a really important project to have undertaken, and especially in that context, in Instagram, which is a little bit lighter and as you say you can be humorous, but they are really serious things you are grappling with.

Yes yes.

EA: And how you were speaking earlier about this work, this practice, this engagement with the now, then it's absolutely a political engagement to consider the now, because it's something that we don't necessarily, again we can walk past as people and walking past and not see the detail and focus of what you are drawing, but there is so much that we walk past everyday as citizens, as critical people and sometimes we need the opportunity to reflect on those, not in a formalistic way, but in a way that as you say with that humour, with that disjunction that makes you think, stop and think.

GW: Yes, I think that if you want to say something about important issues and don't want to sound pompous and trivial, humour is the best way to go. No one wants to, not no one, I wouldn't like to pretend that I am philosopher because I am not, but I think about things, which is important that the issues which are concerning the human beings are actually presented. And I think we artists, we have the best equipment in our mind and abilities to do that.

EA: I think that is exactly right, and it's not about you know questioning or not being a philosopher. I think the philosophers in this day and age are so cut off from the contemporary and fast moving political reality as to be of less use to us in asking those critical questions. Whereas the artist by having chosen a practice, a profession, a career, an approach to life which is antithetical to all of the structures that are about supporting the status quo, earning an income in a conventional way, um, accepting values as readymade. This is the work of the artist becomes the philosopher and the activist and the mirror and all of those things.

GW: Yes I think it is such an amazing profession which can be stretched, and pulled and pushed in so many directions. And in directions that you can't even think about. And that's what I love about art, it's so unpredictable and so powerfully able to do things which you even don't imagine. I mean, yourself, you can find ways to vocalise, or to portray things or to answer questions, but also looking at others you are always surprised by the way how people can pull the issue, can invent the way how to speak or the new language so this is absolutely amazing. One would think there must be some kind of end to it, but it's not, it's just the creatively in human beings, it's endless and mutates constantly, like nature actually.

EA: Yes, it's endlessly fascinating

GW: And mutates, and mutates just because it survives

EA: Now, your work is also just endless, I'm looking up and down this wall here, and also, there's the work, and I have had the great joy of seeing Gosia's work in a number of different places including places where you have had a fixed space, a single, almost windowless room that you have filled entirely in a certain time, or you know, big glass walls at turrawurra. And then here as we sit at the Australia Council, you are also wearing a garment, which you have drawn into being, in a very very striking way. Is it, Do you see? Do you, As your working, do you conceive a difference between working on the body, or on a garment intended for the body or working spatially in a more abstract, single plane, like on a wall, does that change the way that you draw?

GW: No, I don't think so, I mean it changes, it could change the way how I draw, if the position in which my body is drawing is more or less comfortable, so the line would change in this regard but not my approach to drawing. Because this is one of the rules and conditions which govern my practice is that I always draw what I see. I never draw from imagination, it's all observation, gaze after gaze, so this never changes but sometimes my drawing looks

very very abstract which comes either from the fastness of the situation which is happening in front of my eyes, or uncomfortable vs comfortable position of the body when I'm drawing, so the position of the hand really, so if I'm drawing bending forwards because I have to draw somewhere there and I'm standing of course it's much less comfortable position so the hand is never so precise and then if I'm drawing sitting, like now, it will be the shapes which means the drawing will be much more precise and recognisable shape after shape, so that is what happens but there is no actual difference between my approach to drawing on glass as a membrane between things or the skin or the fabric which covers the body, or the fabric which will be placed on the object. They have a little bit different idea behind why it is happening on the object covered with some kind of paper or fabric or the body, so it's a little bit difference but not that much. It's all about energy and time which actually imprints itself on the object, so here the body is another object, the couch would be an object the table would be an object, the body would be an object, and it can be covered, it can have the skin, or additional skin or the membrane of the wall, or the glass, which is a translucent membrane but not in the sense that it is a different approach.

EA: No no, now this is intriguing, as you are saying about time imprinting itself. And this sense of the archive and the recording of what you are seeing, you know, the recognisable and everyday things in the worlds that we interpret as those lines, as what is immediate at the right time, and then the glass as a membrane, because of course its between us, it's the thing between us and the people passing by, and sometimes you can stop at a glass and see your reflection, and sometimes you will you know look inside and try and imagine what's here. But then reflections pass, and people pass by, but that notion of time imprinting, again it's that sense of fleeting permanence, you know as the difference between the temporary. When I think of temporary, I think of something of something that we pass by but pay less attention to, but perhaps even permanence can be something that we experience that also passes by.

GW: Yes, because nothing actually, really, when you think about it, nothing is archival, everything is subject to entropy and change, constantly, so what does it mean archive, it's just another word we invented as humans, we had to invent language to communicate and many of the words which were invented in the past, and we still use them, even though they have different meaning now because the time is different. So, I really like that little bit of theory which was the work by Derrida, about difference. The word, which is the same word but is actually vocalised twice, is a different word because time changes it, and everything is changeable really. And so unstable, maybe what I draw is a way to find a little bit of reassurance in a constantly changeable and very liquid state of being.

EA: Hmm oh I like that, and I can draw on those French philosophers who I still love. As you say Derrida and that notion of difference but also 'difference', that the sense of deferral of meaning, that we try to define something, that we try to, and I see you also have some letterforms, here as well as you have seen signage and other things that have passed by and so when we try to define something linguistic, we only have other words they point to other words, the endless deferral of meaning. And here, I imagine, if you know we tried to look for recognisable elements they would refer to other things, but there are also I can see there is a , as you draw, there is a mark, and then the hand shifts, and then there is often that repetitions, but they are not the same, so then it is what Deleuze would discuss in that notion of difference and repetition, that in fact in identity, and if we tried to define identity, it is only ever defined as difference, repetition because there are no two objects that are the same we recognise identity because of the difference between two things that we can relate to each

other. And there's so much, it's very much your centre of focus is constantly shifting, but the archive keeps growing.

GW: Exactly, time keeps imprinting.

EA: Yes, time keeps imprinting. So, tell me, this would be the development, the continued imprinting, the evolution of your own practice. How, from the time when you were trained, and the focus that you had in your studies, did you, from an early stage as an artist, did you have a practice that was about this critical drawing, was it something that evolved?

GW: It evolved actually

EA: Ohhh tell me how

GW: I studied academia fine arts in Poland, and actually my major was printmaking

EA: Oh indeed

GW: Oh traditionally, metal techniques and lino cut, so really very traditional. I choose that because I really want to use the school to the limits. I knew that if would start painting, I'm not a painter really, so if I started painting it would be able really the paint as matter, the formal qualities of painting, and whatever you do with it that's you. But if it comes to printmaking, it is a lot of technical knowledge, and I thought 'oh that's fantastic', five years of study I can really use the school, I can use the different tools and really go through the technology which I always like technology, engineering, how things are built, the biology, the chemistry, the sciences in the position to the humanistic, purely humanistic approach to things. So I decided to study the printmaking. Also through that I also had to study, because that was the program, I had to study one year of the graphic design, designing the books and the posters and things like that, and then I had three years purely of printmaking plus drawing, drawing was always there, because that is how the school is structured, that you have to draw all the way through, no matter what you study. So the drawing was there, the drawing was second, but then I had this printmaking. Then I finished printmaking with my masters degree with second drawing. But then, after few years in Poland, it was still communist time, and communist collapse, and I was travelling, and I met Logan and we realised because we were a generation of people that actually studied and were in our twenties when communism and the change of politics in this part of Europe and really fighting with communists was really really depressing. People were depressed, people were drinking, people were really in constant traumatic state. And after that, I stayed, in 1991, when people, it was the biggest wave of immigration from Poland, political, you could just go. I decided to stay because I was in my second year, and I thought if I move now, I may never be able to study in a school like this one, which was quite actually, because my academia of fine arts was quite conceptual compared to Warsaw or Krakow which was quite traditional system of study. So I stayed, and I went through all this traumatic drinking time, and Logan on the other hand my husband he was in the south, and he was very active in solidarity and he was expelled from university and he couldn't finish studying. We actually didn't meet at the time, we didn't meet till many years later in Singapore as travelling people.

EA: Oh my how extraordinary

GW: Yes, so when I finished I was working as a book designer and illustrator for a few publishing houses in Poland, and because of that I was earning quite well and I could travel,

so I travelled to Asia and different countries and that's where I met Logan, but when communism collapsed Logan really wanted to go back, because at that time he was in Singapore and he wanted to go back because Poland changed. And we went back and after two years we realised actually we can't, because the residue was in us, and in our generation. And it was always this pulling out this past, and we didn't want that, I wanted to do something else, really, to talk about life, not about history of Poland only.

EA: I can completely understand that

GW: And at the time, there were only three countries that would accept permanent residence from application by Poles, which was South Africa, Canada and Australia. We visited Australia in 1992 and we really like it, and we went to Australian embassy in Warsaw and put application for permanent residency and we got it after two years without any problems actually

EA: Great

GW: We were very surprised actually that Australia gives two artists permanent residency based on my experience, as I was younger, so I was the main person who applied, we could get one point for the age, we were over thirty, both of us, can you imagine, it was very late for immigration, no one does it in this age bracket. And the next, actually, Australia changed my practice a lot, because it was this completely different, the difference that is happening here in this country. The variety of people, the variety of languages, not only verbal but approaches to life.

EA: Yes

GW: And the fleeting nature of everything, all this you know, constant disconnection and deconstruction and that was actually what was building up in the me and was evolving and changing the way how I was working and drawing. Though I had this kind of drawing without overlapping shapes system, but it was more connected, in the beginning, it was more connected to my disbelief in the renaissance perspective, because in the renaissance, the perspective is a traditional way of drawing, and you can see them look from one vantage point and there are planes, but you can't see behind this and behind that, but things actually have other sides. So I actually dropped that system I started to overlap shapes and more no structures with the architectural drawing. And then this, I think developed into this engagement and the construction of the the logical structure and the beginning of shape as a main first and way how I try to create real reality.

[laughs]

GW: If something like that construct can exist at all

EA: I think that's so important to hear, to hear that sense of those past decades but also that experience of being in Poland at that time. And, you know, that part of Europe, my family is if from not too far from there, and the periods that follow

GW: Yes, your name tells that, I love that

EA: [laughs] You know, that affects you and future generations and its something that absolutely can't be forgotten.

GW: No matter what you try to do with that, you just can't. It's just the building blocks of your body and somehow the cultural structure which you intake with your food, and where are they? Marker is gone.

EA: No marker for Gosia

GW: No markers for me, where are they?

EA: We have had a pen run out, and we just are seeing where the other markers are, because while we have been cahtting Gosia has been non stop

GW: Oh there they are [laughs]

EA: And in fact, I have just noticed there are shapes of me [laughs]

GW: But can you see actually how different this and that, and so that's what I was talking, Because our conversation was quite intense, and I am looking but the drawing is fragmented, extremely fragmented actually because the shapes are never finished and that is what happens when I change the direction of looking, and everything is fragmented, and then people say this is abstract expressionism, and maybe even sometimes they accuse me of that, which makes me very mad, but never mind.

EA: Oh yes, of course! Let's talk about that, because abstract expressionism is of course, an abstraction

GW: Exactly

EA: But what you are creating is a clear account, it is a recording, it's a, you know these are the lines, the shapes that are actually here in front of us.

GW: Exactly, but anyway, things can be interpreted in human eyes so maybe through human experience and knowledge in very different ways

EA: And yes, we do look for that, as we were saying before, there are certain aspects of that human nature, wanting to perhaps, interpret things as meditative, wanting to respond or not respond to political

GW: Yes, I think wanting to name things using the persons own vocabulary to feel less threatened with what is around. If you, maybe when we meet new things that we don't know yet, we try to put them into know, familiar draw because otherwise it's so unstable and it can be frightening.

EA: I think that is really interesting when we think about what's happened in Australian culture and Australian politics now because at least a couple of decades ago there had been more of a welcoming and comfortable multiculturalism, and now the unknown and the diverse seems to be something that scares certain people

GW: Yes

EA: And that instead of being comfortable with complexity and change there is a sort of a shrinking away

GW: And not only the aspect the multiculturalism in our society but also the issues with feminism and with different groups within the society not by birth, but by nature. And things which, and societies which used to be open and really, normal, they become driven by fear and drift to, if I can say in my opinion, abnormal. If anything like normal exists at all, because actually we are applying this structure here, but I just don't feel that following my own thinking everything has the same importance and I don't see why one would be more right and perfect than the other, it depends on the context really.

EA: Precisely, it is also a resourcefulness, when I think about what you were saying about wanting to stay and complete your studies there and making the best use of the scholl because you knew you weren't in a place like Warsaw or Krakow and you had a sense of the milieu which was generative and other things that could be learnt and other people that could be engaged with. And I think that, that's also what I see here, it is a real resourcefulness of quite literally drawing on what you see.

GW: Yes, I think that life how it is, it is extremely rich in resources

EA: Yes

GW: It is to be very use endlessly, it is nothing like the end, or the empty container, the empty container is always full

EA: Yes, yes, well I think that's a perfect place to end. I was worried about distracting Gosia and now I can see that my form, and my shape has of course become part of the immediate that has become worked in, and I'm just utterly fascinated because this is how we see, we look here and we look there,

GW: Yes I believe very strongly that this is how we see.

EA: Yes

GW: Even though we don't want to, we probably don't want that because it feels a little bit unstable, yes unstable, but that is how we see that, that's how it is.

EA: Thank you very much

GW: Thank you very much, that was so enjoyable. And we went through our conversation with the waves of rain and sun, and that's how it is, very unstable.

EA: That's how it is.

[Music]

Voice over: Head to our website visualarts.net.au for more information on NAVA's advocacy and campaigns for improving the working environment for Australian artists and arts organisations.