

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.

Audrey Hulm: Hello, I'm Audrey and I work under the pseudonym ADHOC as an artist, producer and writer and behind the scenes as a mentor, media advisor and project manager. I spent many years trying to untangle the subtle complexities around the ways gender has a political, economic and social impact on the arts industry and in Australian society.

One way I've dealt with this is as the founding director of the Found Festival in 2014 and 2015 which was a live arts event that brought together hundreds of female artists, thinkers, performers of all persuasions to present their work in a collective act of what I call positive protest. For this episode of NAVA In Conversation, Gender & Industrial Relations, I've invited Devon Taylor, the Executive Director of the Women's Circus in Melbourne to talk about her experience at the helm of this 26-year-old feminist performing arts organisation, in particular as they navigate the often-divisive space around gender identity politics in the age of social media.

[Music]

Devon Taylor: The arts should sit within the kind of community welfare space because it helps with social cohesion about, you know, abilities for people to feel connected and feel like they have something to say. I'm a big advocate of story and if people can't tell their story, however that looks- and maybe not everyone wants to tell their story through becoming an entrepreneur, then there's a whole swath of the community that isn't heard and doesn't have a space and I feel like the arts can give them space to have their stories be heard

AH: Its preferencing that capitalist model that does privilege aggressors,

DT: Narcissists and,

AH: And people that are more willing to potentially, you know, push others aside so that their organisation will get to the top.

DT: And also, the other part for me though is ultimately I want to get to a point where we are self-sustaining, and we don't have to get funding. You know philanthropic foundations and trusts are, in a way, an interesting space because they're really, like, they don't account to anyone except their--- they have their accountable systems, but it really does become a really- quite a generous space if you give in and you develop a relationship with a philanthropic.

AH: It does feel like, whether it's from social media and the ability for everyone to share what's happening, it's definitely more of a global issue than just an Australian one. Like Donald trump just saying he's going to cut everything so there'll be nothing. For a wealthy western country to say, "We will not support the arts in any way" - that is mind

blowing. So, there is a feeling of artists globally working more towards saying “no, this is not ok”.

DT: Well, I think it’s about- I think the role of the artist is often holding- making sure that people are held accountable. And whether or not that comes from satire or whether or not that come through rigorous discussion, or through collaborative engagement and things like that, I think.

AH: Do you think at the end of the day it can actually...? Can satire compete with the structural inequality that these people who are already in these positions of power have?

DT: Oh well

AH: Like we all have a laugh but then we are just at home like, “Everything’s fucked, that was funny though. Good night.”

DT: Well, I think it’s also kind of disturbing because I look at things and go “Wait is this a satire piece or is this real?!”

AH: Is this The Onion or is this the newspaper?

AH: Which is why “Fake News”, as it’s called, has been able to rise, because I think the world has become a bit absurdist, where there has been points where you’re like, is this actually news that I’m looking at? It seems so unbelievable.

DT: Yeah! I think sometimes, narrowing your scope and bringing it down to the local. I think there is something about connecting with literally your neighbour through some sort of neighbourhood walk or whatever its going to be. Because, I think the thing that’s happening now is people feel exhausted, you have to work constantly, you’re having everything cut, you’re being told all the time about all these horrific things happening in the world, you’re just fucking exhausted and my impression is that humans need sustenance, like literal food in your mouth, but also just like kind of emotional sustenance or a sense of validation in this world like “I am a person who can be here”.

I’ve lived in a regional town that probably had less people than some of the apartment blocks that are coming up in Footscray, right? And the arts and community were vital to that small town.

AH: Organisations coming together to ...

DT: Well, the Arts West stuff that we’ve been part of, it’s been actually really refreshing because not only is it slowly working- so that’s a consort or an alliance or a coalition- whatever we want to call ourselves or seven arts organisations in the west. Loosely it’s because we’re all funded. To be a member of ArtsWest currently we’ve identified the funded arts organisations in the west. Those are the people who are part of it. That’s not to say that at some point it won’t open up, but, I guess, it’s about if you receive funding then you might the capacity to engage with this project because it takes time but I can see the inherent long term benefit from this and it’s been really refreshing, like

I said, we received funding from two philanthropics and they get it, they understand that it's going to be slow moving, that it's going to maybe not tick boxes but it will be this sort of intangible kind of woven threadlike like eventually at the end it will be a nice tapestry.

But, you know what I mean? And now the great thing is, is that there is a sense of loyalty I feel to each other and looking out for each other. But, I think one of the reasons is, because we talk regularly, we can identify what we're programming so we don't clash. Or I can say, "not us, but here; go to these people instead, because they would be better to deliver what you're looking for" and I don't think you can quantify that, I mean you can, but... So, the ArtsWest thing is about resource sharing like now I can just put up on our closed Facebook group "Who's got some chairs?" And if they've got them, they'll lend them to me because we all have a loyalty to each other that has been established through this model, but it takes a lot of time and um...

AH: And you have to reach that level where you can be included in a professional kind of..

DT: Yeah! For example, the arts west stuff, there's not immediate tangible results right, like, we're looking at long term stuff. So, we're in the development of creating like an E-book, that will then be about our learnings that will be leveraged out to the sector so that people don't make the same mistakes that we did, for example. But I think it's important to kind of be pushing against the structures and that can be about knowing you're not alone. You can ask. We're not in competition with each other.

[Music]

DT: I think is important to acknowledge with Women's Circus, and I think, justifiably, they're a 25-year-old feminist organisation and so what they did in 1991 really shaped the pathways of a lot of women. I feel quite confident in saying that we are a feminist organisation. Look, the social media space, I would love to create. One of the things I need to look at is sort of a communication policy because it is a difficult space where you have to try and be-and you want to be- inclusive.

AH: Do you mean around terminology? Or just your approach?

DT: Bit of both I think, I think also Women's Circus is its own organisation, and it can't be defined simply by the person who's behind the computer or who's in the particular role so that when we make decisions so that when we make decisions we know that there's integrity behind it. It's kind of an interesting space right now, I think we've got all these amazing women you know we have members who have been with us for 25 years, been in every show. I've got a staff member whose been with the organisation for 20 years but then we've got women who are coming in who are part of this newer generation of feminists, and acknowledging that we're all kind of working towards the same goal, and that the women who have been here for a long time are just phenomenal people and we should be learning from them.

AH: We talk about that a lot that there does seem to be a feeling some of the time of pushing these women aside because maybe to a millennial that hasn't gone through

this sort of academic gender studies or feminism, they seem outmoded. But they have worked their asses off for this generation to be able to say “Fuck off”

DT: Women’s circus- our diversity is in age, primarily. But I think what we excel at, at the moment, is; you go see our last show, you went and saw 30 women who range in age from like 22 to 68, you know? We have women who are like “I only have a relationship with women that age because she’s my grandmother or she’s my aunt and our focus is definitely going to be on third intergenerational thing, I think a lot of our language at women’s circus has been around acknowledging the legacy, trying to kind of encourage a new generation of women to come in, which is happening. I think this sort of elder-youth space is really a exciting one.

AH: But I think you create that because you go out of your way-

DT: Because I turned 40 this year?!

AH: No, but you always mention, and I think it’s a great term to use, “legacy”. You are always bringing that back in to your discussions about the Women’s Circus. I think when you don’t know your history you’re doomed to repeat it. I think that is a really important thing for bridging these gaps in feminism.

DT: Well, and I think that women get written out of history all the time, I’m not going to do that in a feminist organisation.

AH: I think that is happening in a lot of organisations. It’s a revisionism because some of the political ideals aren’t in mode at the moment so it’s not trying to encourage a dialogue between those spaces, it’s trying to shut it down to avoid conflict.

DT: We asked for the women to pledge at the beginning. There’s a sort of pledge that they create so that there’s an investment. Like kind of a ritualised thing. There’s also a lot of reflection that takes place. How much each woman engages is up to them, but what, more often than not, happens is the women who choose not to engage as much, by the end of that process, are engaging and have more of a, kind of a... kind of think they... have improved their ability to self-articulate a little.

AH: But you’re in a good position to do that in a way that a lot of other organisations aren’t because you have membership and they act as stakeholders and you have to consult them.

DT: Its evolved that as we have become a founded organisation and incorporated, some of those processes have become more bureaucratised or have fallen to the wayside and we’re looking for ways to provide more pathways for our members to feel like they can and are able to help define, that isn’t just a survey. That they act as advocates for us in the broader community. They either work at a school or they work in this area and they tell their friends. But the membership package is “YAY I’M PART OF A COMMUNITY!” “WELCOME! We can’t do this without you!”

AH” Feminism, you know... using that as an umbrella term seems to be shifting away from this argumentative space to being more like “We’re having an awesome time, come and join us its really fun in here!”

[Music]

AH: What advice would you give to women who are just starting their careers in the arts now.

DT: Knowing when to say “No” is really important. And knowing when to say yes, as in like, “I CAN do that” or “That’s me, that’s MY place, I should be there” but knowing when to say “No”, I think, is a big one. I think I suffer from that one. That, yeah, the, again I feel like the legacy, like, there’s a whole group of women who came before you and will come after you and your part of a whole, kind of, narrative and you play a very valid part.

AH: Very good advice

DT: Thank you I am very happy. My battery is two percent.

AH: It is 9 o’clock on a Wednesday night.

DT: Yeah! I am TIRED.

DT: I think the other advice is like.. yeah... don’t give so much, I mean, like kind of learn to moderate a bit, I don’t know.

AH: The emotional labour.

DT: The emotional labour of stuff.

AH: Reign it in or get paid for it.

DT: Or get paid for it! Yeah! And you deserve to get paid for everything, basically. Look after yourself, take a hot bath. Know when to take a break.

AH: Having someone to teach you the business side of things is a major thing, like I did a major, major project with Next Wave when I was 20, and I didn’t realise until I got much older that A. I had a producer

DT: -I was going to say find a producer. Find a good producer

AH: Well they talked me through all of this stuff, so I didn’t feel stupid, but they also pushed me to do something way more ambitious and they enabled that because they did a lot of the brokering with councils and that sort of thing But it also put me in a position where as a very young artist, to me that was normal. So, starting from then, I’ve always written grants, I’ve always done budgets, I’ve always gotten my own permits because I started out thinking “This is what an artist does.”

DT: Like, it doesn't matter how wonderful your artwork is, everyone is time-poor, and everyone is exhausted. If it's an arduous process to engage with you, potentially people won't. And that could come through a partnership-

AH: -but that comes back to the inherent privilege where you say... have mental health problems, or ability issues or in lots of areas if you aren't good at articulating yourself, you are behind the eight ball.

DT: Yeah and I think the onus is on organisations to improve how people access and understanding that everyone's going to have a slightly different approach. That said, the flip side is, tell people, as well because, especially in the arts sector I think people are open. Self-advocacy is exhausting, we've got to work together towards that

AH: To meet in the middle

DT: Yeah, I think it's probably, arts organisations need to move closer to the middle faster

AH: Well I think it's unfair to say that's arts organisations? Well organisations need to really up their game in terms of inclusivity. Especially not the arts organisations, the capitalist organisations that are for profit.

DT: Well I think they're the ones who really need to. I think it's amazing because arts organisations are leading the way in so many ways-

AH: -I know and that's what really frustrates me a lot of the time the shape of the conversation I wanted to have with you was around that because as someone that's done my own activist kind of art stuff and got incredibly burnt out by doing every role because there was no money. I busted my ass to be as inclusive as possible and to go out of my way to find these communities that wouldn't normally feel included and I feel like I was relatively successful at that and it makes you be like "How the fuck are these companies not doing this? I'm one person with no money and I'm doing it" Then you know it's a personal choice for them to not do that.

DT: also, cannot make a choice as well

AH: Yeah! Exactly! But they have made that decision

DT: They're driven by demand, right? They create demand, but they're driven by it

AH: And that's the catch 22 is that they are aware that they create demand so if they want to be lazy in terms of equality, they can.

DT: Absolutely and I guess it's also-by—when they have the bulk of the..

AH: Money!

DT: They have money right? Is that they can draw conversation and they can inform cultural desire

AH: But we see that at the moment with the whole push for- Beyoncé's a feminist at the Superbowl because that was on trend and that is a marketable thing that they can capitalise on its not to say that the individuals within that system aren't wanting to promote these ideals – but will that become not on-trend?

DT: Yeah, it's interesting isn't it? Because will that, I imagine it's that whole idea of mainstream commodification of a word but is it a bad thing now that so many people have that word like "Feminist" as example as a part of their vocabulary? Does it have to be about identity do people have to have a really clear idea around it?

AH; No, it doesn't but when corporations are capitalising on that they should put their money where their mouth is and actually commit to these things long term not just because it is making them money now. You know you see a lot of brands saying, "International Women's Day, hey want 20% off?" But are they actually doing any advocacy the rest of the time? No. They're just wanting to appear like- like you said, they're pinkwashing. That term is so vulgar!

DT: Isn't it?

AH: It's disgusting

DT: Isn't it horrible?

AH: But, that's what it is.

DT: It's interesting because I am defined, sometimes, by either my perceived gender, or my physiology, but I don't want to be defined by either of those and that's the struggle sometimes isn't it? It's like "Don't reduce me to a uterus or a vulva.."

AH: But as we discussed before, we don't live in this utopia and sometimes you have to advocate and bring attention to that stuff. And it is really exhausting when you personally don't care or you're like "Don't define me this way. I'm not bothered by however you present yourself and exist in the world. Just leave me the fuck alone"

AH: I did notice that you have second round applications.

DT: Yes! So, there's probably two. The artist development programs- we've got second round applications for the room of one zone? That close May 1<sup>st</sup>. Which is a supported residency, so basically a free space for two weeks. It's a very simple application process.

DT: We're working currently with an aerialist who is legally blind so she's going through a mentorship with one of our circus artists. She's being sponsored to attend a whole bunch – she's got a scholarship loosely- to attend a bunch of classes, they meet regularly. She identified that her outcome was to develop herself as an artist so we're working towards that goal. She would mostly on tissues, she's like "can I have white tissues because like the black tissues for me just merges and I was like oh yes, and while we're making -so we were also getting trainer singlets made up and I've now

made sure that there are like four singlets that are white. But it was like simple, it was like “oh yeah I’ve never even thought about that but now I’ll always think about that.”

[Music]

DT: We are solidly an organisation that is part of the narrative of the west. The areas that we want to work in, primarily they’re communities in the west. We’ll work with anyone who’s willing to pay us, but you know...

[laughter]

DT: I’m kidding....

AH: Kidding, not kidding.

Cos those are the sort of I see those sort of four defining features of us. We’re a circus organisation, we’re an arts organisation, we’re a community organisation and primarily our community is working with, for and alongside women. But like we’re not asked to go outside our policy when we exclude people we have a VCAT exemption to exclude men, right? So, we’re allowed to discriminate against men.

AH: Ha-ha yes! That’s a great way to put it.

DT: So therefore, I think it’s important for us to define our boundaries. So that’s important from our end, and that’s also important for people in the community to be able to make their decision about whether or not they want to come and train or engage with our organisation.

AH: I think it’s a tricky space at the moment that even individuals as citizens can be very afraid to engage in these dialogues.

DT: Maybe-I’m just saying this, I don’t even know if I believe this- but yeah, in an ideal world there aren’t women’s only spaces you know we’re beyond gender and everyone’s equal and women don’t feel unsafe walking down the street at night.

AH: Do you feel that based on the dialogue that’s happening at the moment that these organisations like the Women’s Circus that have historically had a gendered focus will become redundant?

DT: No, I don’t think so any time soon.

AH: Not anytime soon, but in this utopian future, do you think we will get to that?

DT: I like the concept of beyond gender.

AH: But as a reality?



DT: No, I don't think it is I just don't see it playing out.

[Music]

DT: It is fun hanging out with a bunch of women all the time. Labour is -and I'm talking like manual labour where you get paid, which so much of us are defined by "I go to work, it's my job" but nonetheless I can go there and feel safe about saying I need to go home because I'm not feeling well. And this isn't defined just because we're a women's only space and because this is where I'm existing.

AH: But its ok if it is. And I know other people that work for you that say that it is different from other workplaces because of that and that's ok to say..

DT: And I think I forget until I talk to some of our board members who are women who don't work who work corporate sectors and..

AH: It's interesting you, not you specifically but, you often pull yourself back out of this fear of saying oh it might not be because it's all women, but maybe it is and that's ok to talk about, because you do have a shared experience where you can say "I have my period I feel like I'm dying" and everyone else will be like "No problem, see ya tomorrow or whenever."

DT: I am the boss even though I struggle, still, with my title because it insinuates boss-well executive director sounds way too official.

AH: No, you're saying that because you're a woman.

DT: No its not even just that it's not because I'm a woman it's because I work for what I consider to be a feminist organisation and it is a feminist organisation and I feel like that kind of dismantling of the hierarchy should be taking place within that place. And by having a title that is about directing people, it's in contrast to some of those ideologies for me, but you know.

AH: Being bossy is a really negative term which, apparently, I heard the other day is being banned in some schools. You aren't allowed to use the word bossy because its proven that it's so systemically overly directed at girls. You can say entrepreneurial leadership skills ha ha!

DT: Assertance. Ambitious

[End music]

AH: I really hope we all, including myself, start to emerge from behind our screens a bit more and have these valuable discussions face to face if you'd like to learn more about the fantastic Women's Circus programs such as "A Room of Ones Own" and "Still I Rise" or how to be involved please visit [www.womenscircus.org.au](http://www.womenscircus.org.au)

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.