

Episode 32: Jeff Khan in conversation with Penelope Benton

Intro: 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.

Penelope Benton I'd like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. We are broadcasting from Gadigal land. I pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging. And acknowledge all first nations peoples listening to this podcast. I'd also like to acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. My name is Penelope Benton, I'm the general manager of the National Association for the Visual Arts. Our usual host of NAVA in Conversation, Esther Anatolitis, our executive director, is currently traveling Canada and the U.S. meeting with our counterpart organizations, artists, and advocates to investigate world's best practice models for Australian artists.

Jeff Khan: Whoo! Go Esther.

Penelope Benton: Yeah. I'm here with Jeff Khan!

Jeff Khan: Hi Penelope!

Penelope Benton: Hello!

Jeff Khan: Hi.

Penelope Benton: Jeff is a curator and writer working across performance, dance, and the visual arts. He is the co-curator of Performance Contemporary, which is opening as part of Sydney Contemporary, the 13th through the 16th of September. He's also the artistic director and CEO of Performance Space Sydney, who are launching their annual Liveworks festival of experimental art from the 18th to the 28th of October!

Jeff Khan: Very soon. Frighteningly soon.

Penelope Benton: Yay!

Jeff Khan: All of it. (laughs)

Penelope Benton: (laughs) so Jeff, you've just been in Taipei.

Jeff Khan: Yeah, I've-

Penelope Benton: Tell me about ADAM.

Jeff Khan: Literally I returned yesterday. I was in Taipei because Performance Space has become an international partner in this new initiative out of Taiwan called ADAM. Adam stands for Asia Discovers Asia Meeting. And it was initiated last year by the Taipei, uh, Performing Arts Centre, which is a brand new institution in Taiwan. Um, kind of in response to the fact that the landscape in

Asia is changing extremely rapidly at the moment. There's a whole lot of new institutions all across the Asia Pacific that are currently sort of being built or in the process of opening or radically transforming themselves. And what we're seeing is this proliferation of, um, networks. New networks, um, whether they're arts markets or curatorial networks in the region. Uh, and what TPAC is trying to do is start a, a network that's artist focused in the midst of all of this institutional collaboration and exchange to make sure there is a sort of network or a platform that is centered on artists and letting artists lead that conversation.

Penelope Benton: Great.

Jeff Khan: Yeah! So it's pretty, it's pretty exciting. It's pretty ambitious. Um, it's sort of takes a couple of different forms. Um, mainly ADAM is an artist lab that gathers 16 artists from all over the Asia Pacific, including Australia. Um, and they do a very intensive kind of two week exchange program that's, um, facilitated by, um, senior artists or curators. Um, and at the end of that two week artist lab, uh, there's a four day exchange platform where this year over 200 delegates from institutions around the region-

Penelope Benton: Wow.

Jeff Khan: Came to meet the artists, share information, um, engage in critical dialogue and view works in progress. So it, um, it's pretty ambitious in, in the scale of it. Uh, last year I went and, you know, there were few teething problems with it. But, um, they were very generous in sort of inviting and accepting feedback. So this year, um, ADAM involved four international partners to help them sort of shape the lab. And I guess connect with different parts of the Asia Pacific region. So, um, that was Performance Space, West Kowloon Cultural District in Hong Kong, the Esplanade in Singapore, and Creative New Zealand.

Penelope Benton: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jeff Khan: Um, so we were sort of much more involved in the shaping of ADAM this year. Um, we sent Justin Shoulder, an Australian artist, to participate in the lab. And I went over to facilitate one of the discussions in the platform.

Penelope Benton: Yeah, great. I, I read that you hosted a round table on feminist and queer conversations in contemporary Asia Pacific performance.

Jeff Khan: Yes.

Penelope Benton: Yeah, tell us what were the key findings out of that round table.

Jeff Khan: It's pretty interesting 'cause, um, you know, that is obviously a, a kind of area of practice that's dear to heart at Performance Space. Um, but I think, you know, ideas of feminism and queer culture vary so much, even in terms of whether or not there's an uptake on, on those terms. Whether they're, you know, western or eastern centric. So that for me was just a bit of an opportunity to gather some artists around the table from across the region to sort of just test how people thought about queer and feminist ideas in relation to their artistic practice. So we had Justin Shoulder on that panel, uh, Daniel Kok, who's this choreographer from Singapore. Uh, and Kim Chen and Betsy Lan who are two performance artists from Taiwan.

Um, it was pretty interesting to find that people did really, um, feel like queer ideas, there were urgent queer conversations to be had in all of those different contexts. And also as sort of, bit of a universal acknowledgement of the importance of feminism as a sort of, you know, area of discourse that really has made queer possible. Um, I think, you know, we're at a really interesting moment in Taiwan where they have moved ahead of Australia to, to legalize gay marriage. Um, but, you know, equally Taiwan is an extremely patriarchal kind of society. Um, so what we found was that, you know, those terms were absolutely relevant, and people were sort of considered themselves to have feminist and queer practices. But sort of what the issues are when you drug down into those practices really vary from country to country.

Penelope Benton: Yeah, for sure.

Jeff Khan: Um, for example, you know, Singapore has, you know, so many legal restrictions on, on queer and gay and lesbian, um, cultures at the moment. So there's a sort of basic fight for civil rights that underpins some of those practices. Whereas, I guess here in Australia, in Sydney particularly, we have such a rich history of queer practice that, you know, it's a much more nuanced debate. And you see all sorts of, you know, from every letter in the LGBTQA+ spectrum sort of addressed at, at multiple letters.

Penelope Benton: Mm. Amazing. Was it just a round table to just discuss the, the various, I guess issues and, um, topics of, that things, that people are identifying or did you, did you make some, I guess action points and recommendations?

Jeff Khan: It was much more discussion, um, based. And I think because ADAM's in its second year. And sort of such a gathering of, of artists and practitioners from across the region in a way is sort of unprecedented.

Penelope Benton: Mm.

Jeff Khan: I think really the focus at the moment is, um, getting a little bit of consensus. And sort of learning about each other's contexts, you know, to lay the foundations of future collaborations and future, um, directions both kind of curatorially and artistically. So, um, it was very discussion based for now. I think, you know, the artists were all very inspired by each other. And I think there's a lot of conversations that are gonna be taken and sort of continued in, in the intervening years. So it was less about setting a direction than about listening, I guess. Given that the region is so diverse and so culturally diverse from country to country. Um, it's really more about sort of, um, having a sort of deep understanding of each other's contexts in order, order to inform those future con-conversations.

Penelope Benton: Wow, so important.

Jeff Khan: Mm.

Penelope Benton: Wow, watch this space.

Jeff Khan: Yes, absolutely! And definitely, you know, um, Australia is well and truly on the map of ADAM now. And as well as Performance Space's participation, they really have their eyes on Australia. So I'd encourage artists or, or curators, anybody who's interested to have a look. They do open calls every year now. They usually go out about sort of March, April every year. So it's something

that, um, is very open and very generous for people to participate in if they can find their way there.

Penelope Benton: Wow. That's fantastic. Um, so let's talk now about Performance Contemporary. You and Performance Space program manager Tulleah Pearce have co-curated this year's performance contemporary, which happens among the art fair. What's been your approach to presenting live work among the pow wow of dealers and collectors?

Jeff Khan: Yeah, Sydney Contemporary is quite the intense environment. Um, Tulleah and I have co-curated a few performance programs, um, in visual arts institutions over the last few years. Um, most recently at the MCA. And so we're always curious about the kind of environment that we're working in and obviously, um, Sydney Contemporary is just so packed full of people most of the time. Uh, and it's such a particular environment about experiencing art in a certain kind of way. Really that sort of environment was the first thing that informed our curatorial approach. Not only in terms of, um, what kind of work would actually make an impact in this incredibly kind of frenetic environment. But who are the artists who would potentially feed off that energy?

Penelope Benton: Yup.

Jeff Khan: That very social, very fast, um, very, um, you know, I think really curious and open, um, the Sydney Contemporary crowd. But also, um, sort of maybe attention poor. (laughs)

Penelope Benton: Mm.

Jeff Khan: So we were thinking about, um, works that not only capitalized on that atmosphere in terms of spectacle, but maybe some other works that slipped under the radar quietly, and almost took advantage of that sort of storm of activity to enact a, a quieter kind of intervention.

Penelope Benton: Mm, that sounds beautiful. I, I really got a sense of that from reading who, what you selected and who you selected.

Jeff Khan: Mm.

Penelope Benton: It's sort of, it's got a vibe of ephemeral on ephemeral.

Jeff Khan: Mm.

Penelope Benton: There's science, there's vanishing art, there's, you know, body tremors, sonic percussion, it's a bit of cleaning and cleansing.

Jeff Khan: Yes.

Penelope Benton: Um, talk me, talk us through some of the works that will be happening.

Jeff Khan: Sure. So I guess, um, at the more spectacular end in talking to that spectacle that is Sydney Contemporary, we've commissioned Emily Parsons Lord to create a sort of new performance. She's been experimenting a lot with pyrotechnics and flammable materials to create these extremely sort of ephemeral diagrams of the universe and of natural systems. So they're very spectacular work, but like a lot of Emily's work, they speak to this kind of

melancholy of our relationship to the environment, and this kind of fleeting, almost disappearing, um, character of nature as we know it. So they're works that do work in that sort of very visually spectacular, kind of gobsmacking way, but they also are quite powerfully melancholic I think as well. So-

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Jeff Khan: That, that's a beautiful kind of large scale work that, that will happen on the opening night of Sydney Contemporary.

Penelope Benton: Wow.

Jeff Khan: Um, at the other end of the spectrum, um, Julieanne Long has a, a performance called Val the Invisible, which we actually curated into our sonic, uh, into our local positioning systems at the MCA a few years ago. Um, Val is essentially a kind of cleaning lady persona who, um, uh, ironically is quite invisible while wearing high vis. And she just slips through the space, kind of as a cleaner, but also performing a kind of microchoreography, which is a sort of, a daydream or reverie kind of state that she's in. Uh, and Julieanne has this ongoing project called the Invisibility Project, which essentially is about the invisibility of middle aged women in kind of contemporary cultural life.

Penelope Benton: Wow.

Jeff Khan: Um, so you know, there's all these layers of this work. Um, where you may or may not notice this performer and that's, that's the point essentially.

Penelope Benton: Yup, yup. Wow, that's super important. It'd be interesting, um, I guess in dialogue with the Countess, um, panel discussion that they're hosting at the VIP opening night, uh, about I guess the lack of representation of women at the art fair.

Jeff Khan: Yeah.

Penelope Benton: Uh, and I think even more mid, mid-career, mid-age women.

Jeff Khan: Yes. Yeah, it's interesting in a way, you know, yes, Sydney Contemporary is a sort of big spectacle. And it's, it's a commercial event by its nature, but that it's inviting those conversations I think is really, is really fantastic. And sort of actually not shying away from those issues, but embracing them. And I certainly think, you know, with some of the, the performances that we've presented, they've been very open to them as well. Even if they're sort of, they're critical, um, works.

Penelope Benton: Mm. It's really important, I mean, I have just spoken to Miranda recently last year as part of a panel discussion that I facilitated. She did a, a gender count of who was showing at the art fair, and, um, the numbers were quite bad. We just published them-

Jeff Khan: Wow.

Penelope Benton: On our website. But she's done a gender count again this year, and it's actually worse.

Jeff Khan: Oh, wow!

Penelope Benton: Um, yeah. There's less women showing this year than there were last year. And last year was already pretty bad.

Jeff Khan: Which it just goes to show the importance of those projects and, and especially countless in providing year on year assessment. And you know, not just assuming that an upward trend one year means that it's gonna continue in that way that unfortunately, you know, that struggle is very real and ongoing. And I think, you know, one thing Tulleah and I are really proud of in the Sydney Contemporary Program is, um, it's, it's five female artists and one male artist. And, um, it's these incredible women who are making incredibly sort of strong, powerful, kind of impactful work. Um, which I think really comes naturally to us at Performance Space. In a way it's kind of the way that we always curate. But, um, an environment like that where the numbers and the representations are low, it becomes even more important.

Penelope Benton: Absolutely. Um, because we are talking about an art fair, are any of the works, the live works for sale? Or what are your thoughts on collecting and conserving performance art?

Jeff Khan: Yeah, it's very live problem at the moment. And, um, and much talked about. I think, um, people are finding ways now. And I would point to sort of Lauren Brincat who's also one of our artists participating in, uh, Sydney Contemporary as somebody who has a performance practice. Um, is commercially represented by Anna Schwartz. Also has a sort of video and sculptural practice and has been really actively thinking through that problem. I think, um, the idea of editioned performances is a really interesting, um, phenomenon. And I know also that with one of our programs at the MCA, um, we commissioned a project by super critical mass. Um, which the MCA then acquired.

Penelope Benton: Mm.

Jeff Khan: Um, and I think it was the first ever performance acquisition by the MCA. Um, they acquired, essentially a very detailed set of instructions to mount that work under certain conditions.

Penelope Benton: Great.

Jeff Khan: And then collected a hold series of ephemera, um, that was produced by the work. And I think that went hand in hand with an agreement that while the artists were capable of leading the restaging of that work, it would go to them first. So, um, you know, I think that's a bit of a landmark, and I think our institutions have been a little bit slow off the mark, compared to sort of where things are at internationally with collecting performance. But we are starting to see some of these examples now, which I think is quite encouraging.

Penelope Benton: Mm.

Jeff Khan: Um, I think it's probably a more challenging prospect still for private collectors. But I do know, you know, that some have started, you know, collecting one off or auditioned performances, or even sort of commissioning performances for private events is another really interesting sort of, um, uh, sort of new trend to emerge that I definitely encourage. I know that, um, Amanda Love, um, who, uh, curates the collection for the QT Hotel chain, um, ran a performance program at the opening of the QT in Melbourne a couple of years ago.

So, um, kudos to these brave individuals who are breaking that ground. And I think, you know, it's, it's a tricky proposition when you think about traditional ways of collecting, um, more sort of materials and object based artwork. But, you know, at the same time we are seeing examples of performance artist work being commissioned and acquired for collections, so I think, you know, it's an exciting time and, and I'd encourage more people to think about it, of course.

Penelope Benton: Absolutely. Um, amazing. Let's talk Liveworks.

Jeff Khan: Mm.

Penelope Benton: So big!

Jeff Khan: Liveworks, correct.

Penelope Benton: And so different!

Jeff Khan: Oh. Occupying all of our minds, 24 hours a day right now.

Penelope Benton: So big, so big. And it's such, yeah, it's such a different vibe to what you've put together for Performance Contemporary.

Jeff Khan: Mm.

Penelope Benton: It's a real mix of local and international artists.

Jeff Khan: Mm.

Penelope Benton: Um, sort of the vibes that queer, confronting, destabilizing, experimental, it's a bit of party vibes in there.

Jeff Khan: Yes!

Penelope Benton: Um, and then a bit of pain.

Jeff Khan: Yeah.

Penelope Benton: And comfort.

Jeff Khan: Yeah.

Penelope Benton: Talk us through some of the works.

Jeff Khan: Well, I think, um, you know, every year, Liveworks gets a little bit more complex. And we, we sort of can push the boundaries a little bit further with it. And I definitely think this, this year there's more experimentation and more work that happens sort of at the edges of what we know as practice.

Penelope Benton: Mm.

Jeff Khan: So yeah, there's the biggest series of international works we've ever presented. And this year we've commissioned work internationally for the first time-

Penelope Benton: Great.

Jeff Khan: With a few of our international colleagues. That's a really exciting development for us.

Penelope Benton: Mm.

Jeff Khan: And, um, at the same time, you know, there are some darker, more intimate, sort of, yeah, more confronting works that we have sort of curated in that really, I think speak to the current times that we live in and the anxieties that we have.

Penelope Benton: Yup, yup. Absolutely. Um, let, let's talk about some of the work in detail. I, I'm intrigued to hear a little bit about John A. Douglas's Circle of Fire.

Jeff Khan: Mm. John is an amazing local hero in Sydney.

Penelope Benton: Yes.

Jeff Khan: Um, uh, he has lived with chronic illness for over 20 years. Um, and particularly kidney failure. And the last work that we presented at Performance Space, curated by Beck Dean, he actually performed while attached to his dialysis machine for the full cycle of his dialysis. Um, in the interview-

Penelope Benton: Which is like 10 hours.

Jeff Khan: 10 hours.

Penelope Benton: Yeah, yeah.

Jeff Khan: So not only sort of is an epic feat of life, it's an epic feat of art and performance and endurance, which I think was, was part of the point for that work. Um, in the intervening years, John's had a kidney transplant. And had this sort of uncanny and miraculous experience of, of resurrection in a way. So this new work Circles of Fire, um, kind of works off that experience of the kidney transplant. Of coming back to life, but also the new cycle of incredibly, sort of invasive medical surveillance and treatment that comes alongside a procedure like that. So this kind of cycle of, of wellness and treatment and medical surveillance becomes the score for this new performance work.

Um, which sort of unfolds in four parts. There's a video installation, um, you can actually step inside the video installation via virtual reality. Um, then every night there's a two hour performance that John undertakes while he's cannulated to a drip. Um, by a registered nurse, Dela Topaz, who's also a performance artist. Um, she, um, sees to John and then begins to take the audience's medical obs. And then it culminated in a, in a quite spectacular kind of movement performance, um, by John, choreographed by Sue Healey, um, that really kind of goes much deeper into, um, his embodied experience of that transplant, and, and the recovery. So it's very, um, it's very much a step inside, um, not only his experience, but his body.

Penelope Benton: Mm.

Jeff Khan: And experiencing those extremes. Um, and just done in such a beautifully, um, generous and kind of spectacular way. I really feel like this is gonna be one of the highlight works of the festival.

Penelope Benton: I think so too. I, I was reading somewhere recently that kidney failure is, is extremely high.

Jeff Khan: Mm.

Penelope Benton: And increasingly so. I think that this work will, will speak to, to lots of people. It's really important. Um, there's also a couple of parties. Tell us about how the, Hannah Bronte's [inaudible 00:22:40], and I also noticed that you've moved Day for Night into be part of Lifeworks.

Jeff Khan: Yeah. So Day for Night, this is now the, uh, fifth edition of Day for Night. And so we moved it into Liveworks so that it could really, sort of capitalize on the momentum and the resources that the festival kind of generates. And also that, um, nobody brings a big, sort of party moment to the closing weekend of the festival, but brings that queer community right to the center of Liveworks as well in terms of visibility and, and sort of welcoming. Um, and so Day for Night this year is a 12 hour experience that literally moves from a series of kind of performance artworks during the day into a live scale dance party at night. Uh, inviting contemporary artists to intervene into, into both of those environments. Um, so this year Day for Night will be opened by William Yang, who is, you know, an absolute living treasure of the Australian art world.

Penelope Benton: He is.

Jeff Khan: Um, we've commissioned William to, um, pull out a whole lot of never before seen images from his archive that document the development of Sydney's underground queer party culture.

Penelope Benton: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jeff Khan: Through the 80s and 90s. Um, really looking at sort of who the trailblazing party starters were, who the artists were. Um, what they did at that time that was sort of so groundbreaking. Uh, and the beautiful thing about is that you look at those images and you see the queer scene now. You see, you know, you see the Justin Shoulders and, and you see the Benji Ross, and the Coco Curries. And you realize that sort of what's happening now has been made possible by this amazing successive generations-

Penelope Benton: Legacy.

Jeff Khan: Yeah, it's, it's amazing. So Day for Night has really this theme of the intergenerational richness of queer culture. And the kind of groundbreaking work, um, that has made all of that possible. So William does the opening performance. And the closing performance will be by Glitter Supernova.

Penelope Benton: Mm.

Jeff Khan: Who's another sort of pioneering senior queer artist who's done so much important work. And in between you have a lot of, like, you know, trailblazing new troublemakers like Coco Curry and Shaman Suku. Um, to, you know, meet career artists like [inaudible 00:25:01]. So it's a real tribute to that intergenerational richness of the queer community. And Hannah Bronte, because we, you know, we know through Day through Night that we love and art party. And our audiences love an art party.

Penelope Benton: Yeah we do!

Jeff Khan: Um, we sure do. And also, you know, for us it's such an interesting, um, platform for contemporary art. There's such a different way to experience work. And I think for artists, as you would know, being one of the founding Day for Night artists, um, it's such an interesting context to make work for.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Jeff Khan: Um, and so Hannah has been running these fempress parties for a number of years now. Um, and they are a series of queer, hip hop parties that foreground indigenous and black women as the primary, sort of creators, makers, audience. Uh, Hannah is an amazing artist herself. And we thought for Liveworks we would commission her to really up the scale and the ante of the fempress parties.

Penelope Benton: So great.

Jeff Khan: So this, wish which specifically looks at indigenous and first nations practices of empowerment and trance. And brings those into a party context. So the DJs and the musicians are making work along those themes. And then there's a series with performance and video artworks by, um, first nations artists from new video work by Hannah herself. Um, to Amrita Hepi and all of these amazing, strong black women who are, you know, leading in a way the future of, of the contemporary art scene. So, um, you know, I think it's like, a vision into our black matriarchal future, which I feel like is more necessary than ever.

Penelope Benton: It sure is. Wow. Wow! Um, there are so many works we're not gonna have time to talk about.

Jeff Khan: (laughs)

Penelope Benton: I also, um, I guess, I guess let's wrap up, and um, but I'm inter- I was also interested that to see that you are hosting, um, a series of conversations and workshops and particularly Real Time in Real Time.

Jeff Khan: Mm.

Penelope Benton: Tell us about that.

Jeff Khan: Real Time has been the most amazing, uh, document of Australia's experimental art scene. And I think everybody was really shocked and, um, saddened when they'd announced that they'd published their last edition last year.

Penelope Benton: Sure.

Jeff Khan: Um, nobody stepped into the breach to replace them yet, but they are doing a series of sort of wrap up, um, activities. And when they came to us with this idea of a sort of five hour long discussion and performance event that looked back on, on their archive. And, and traced the history of, you know, experimental practice through the history of Real Time, it was just a bit of a no brain, we said, "Of course. We want to do this."

Penelope Benton: Wow.

Jeff Khan: Um, so it's, yeah, it's five hours long. Each hour there's a different sort of topic about sort of contemporary practice that they address from, um, you know, from the perspective of the writers who've contributed to the magazine. From the perspective of the artists. There's a section on the relationship between Performance Space and Real Time because our histories have been very intertwined. And the final section will look to the future. And it's both a discussion, um, event, but there'll be performance incursions into that event by the artists that they've documented over the 25 years. It's gonna be really, really special.

Penelope Benton: It sounds so special. Is there anyway that people outside of Sydney can, um, view this or experience that, at least that conversation in any way?

Jeff Khan: Yeah. We're looking at options to live stream it.

Penelope Benton: Good.

Jeff Khan: At the time on the day. It's definitely going to be documented. Um, absolutely rigorously through video and sound. So I'll be very surprised if Keith and Virginia don't produce some kind of, um, audio visual document. But I do think there'll be an opportunity to live stream. And we'll keep, um, keep that updated on our website. Um, exactly how to engage with that.

Penelope Benton: Excellent.

Jeff Khan: Mm.

Penelope Benton: And you were also mentioning before, which I think we'll put on our website together with this podcast some links for people wanting to find out more about Liveworks and how to get tickets.

Jeff Khan: Yes. So, um, we really know that our sort of most precious audience at Performance Space is artists. Um, and, uh, we really want to make the festival as accessible to artists as we can. So we have an artist discount code, which gives you access to the cheapest tickets in the festival. Um, just on our website under the ticketing section there's a page, artist discount code. Um, essentially if you send us your artist CV we'll send you the code. Um, and you can have, um, access to the, all these cheap tickets. Uh, and for industry as well to get in touch with us there's an industry discount code for our, for our colleagues and peers.

Penelope Benton: Amazing! Wonderful! Um, thanks so much for making time to talk to us today amongst all this hectic, busy, awesome, important programming.

Jeff Khan: Oh, thank you for having me! We do it because we love it. And so talking about it is always a pleasure.

Penelope Benton: So good. Well, good luck with it all, Jeff.

Jeff Khan: Thank you, thanks Penelope.

Penelope Benton: And thanks again. 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 organizations.

