

NAVA: in conversation, Episode Four

[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]

Honor Eastly: I don't think as brutal honesty, I think of it as desperate curiosity. The large theme of stuff is, I'm interested in the stuff that plagues me and to trying to find some sort of answer to those things. [Laughs] My psychologist is still curious about why I do that. Like for instance, the project I'm working on at the moment is another podcast called 'Starving Artist' and it's about art and money and it's interviews with creatives, looking at how to they work out that art/money equation in a bunch of different ways. So, you know, there are interviews with people like Frances Cannon talking about how she makes a living off Instagram and then there's interviews with Wendy Syfret talking about how to negotiate a raise, and then there are other interviews about art and class and money and how we develop our ideas around money. And so, it's kind of trying to be this sort of, well for me because I went to art school, the money/art education I didn't get in art school, well at least that's what it says on my press release. [Laughs] But it's really looking at practical shit like how to do your tax with compound interest, what the hell is that? And then also, questions that are much harder to answer which is like, how do I still like myself and value my work when no one wants to pay me to do it. Or much do I use my face or my beauty, if you have it, as a tool to promote my work and where do I sit in terms of that. I don't have the answers! But what I'm saying is, this project is because I have this thing of 'how do I do the art/money equation?' is probably one of the things that have scared me the most. So, I talk a lot online and stuff about, people know me as a mental health advocate, I talk a lot about dark shit, but a lot of really my major crises in my life so far has been a kind of spiral that at its essence is focused on 'FUCK how do I make any money and survive?' And it's usually, you know this, I feel it's weird because you've heard me hear all this shit before, but like when I get to that place is usually the same time when I'm like fuck, should I go study medicine? I don't know, which is kind of the most opposite thing to my mind, and it's also that idea is coming from that fact I come from a middle-class background, it's the kind of thing where a lot of the people I went to high school with did, it's a respectable career, but that's a cultural idea as to why you would go and do that. But I was like, far out how do I make this work? I wish there was an entry point in these kinds of conversations because I feel really awkward and weird and shit about them and then I was like 'I know I'll make it' I say just because I was like 'oh, I'll just make it' and then a year later, I was like 'oh my god, this is the biggest thing I've ever done' but I think that those kinds of conversations are really hard to have, so I suppose that's what I mean when I say desperate curiosity. The thing I'm really realising particularly with Starving Artist, and looking at people who do freelance, is that often times, fucking hell, you have to be very skilful. Like you have to be skilful at a fuck tonne of things, like so many things. Sometimes I feel conflicted because people will send me messages after I've done the podcast saying you know, I feel bad saying this, that the podcast has made them feel like their dreams are possible. And I find that interesting...

Audrey Hulm: 'I feel bad saying this', not a good sign.

Honor Eastly: I feel bad saying this because I think that's really lovely, that's what people think, but at the same time I don't completely think that's what I'm finding or saying with the podcast. I'm saying a bunch of different things one of them is that success is a spectrum, but also fuck it's hard.

Audrey Hulm: Yeah it's funny how even if verbally that's what you're saying, if you appear to be having success people won't hear that as much, they will just see the success, and maybe that other stuff isn't so bad, like obviously Honor has a number one podcast, that must fulfil some hole in your heart that's like compelling you forwards all the time, that thing we're always striving for this magical time when we'll be successful but we don't often actually define what that is. But it's much easier to look at someone else and just be like, 'wow, on social media they're having a blast! They've made it!'

Honor Eastly: Well first of all, I think that my social media does not say that.

Audrey Hulm: Ok caveat, Honor's definitely does not say that, there's a lot of 'I cried today' going on.

Honor Eastly: I mean before I launched Starving Artist there was about a month of me going loopy, I was quite self-conscious at the begging but then people seemed to really want to hear about me losing my shit, trying to do this project so I was like, give the people what they want!

Audrey Hulm: So on that note that's something I've thought about a lot when I've looked at your social media, I think that it's interesting because I feel quite oppressed sometimes by how happy everyone seems on social media, and I know it actually has a measurable detrimental impact on my life. Particularly, if I'm in quite a depressed period.

Honor Eastly: Yeah well that all comes down to like that's a complicated look at how you used social media. Because if friends of mine, when they post stuff, I want to see them happy, but people I don't know and potentially I'm jealous of, one things that's been really helpful for me in terms of giving way less shits about who follows me or unfollows me or whatever, I don't really keep a track or whatever, is realising that I unfollow people for all kinds of reasons, like, you are too good at whatever doing what you're doing, it makes me feel sad. I don't want to look at it.

Audrey Hulm: Get out of my face with your success. [Laughs]

Honor Eastly: Get out of my Instagram feed! No I've done that so many times. [Laughs]

Audrey Hulm: I have also done that. [Laughs]

Honor Eastly: Yeah I've done it heaps.

Audrey Hulm: Sometimes I wonder if I worry about that because of this historical idea that artists should be tortured, so it's okay to show yourself being tortured because you're an artist so it's a little bit of a free pass to be a bit more honest, or is that a chicken and egg thing to you?

Honor Eastly: Well I think that I generally have always found life to be reasonably difficult, and my life on paper is not difficult, I just mean in my experience of life is like 'Woah how to people do this?' [Laughs] So I don't know, free pass, I haven't always used social media, I only really started using it a few years ago and that was just me personal Facebook and I never used to post stuff on Facebook or anything and every now and again I'd write something when I felt like it and I'd post it and I got a lot of great responses, and people really liked that I was being somehow at that point, whatever was going on, pushing the envelope in terms of being honest or authentic or whatever. So that's what I really like doing, so I just kind of kept doing that, but the trick is staying authentic in that process, and the thing is when I post stuff that is really heartfelt stuff or whatever, usually because I'm struggling with something, so for me writing stuff and posting it online is a mechanism for coping because I feel like that for me, if I haven't built anything else, that is an amazing I feel very privileged to have. So I have this thing where I can take whatever shit experience it is that is a way of turning

something difficult, and for me, sort of personal insight into that experience and then writing it down in a way that feel cathartic and pleasurable, putting it online and then other people online being like 'I needed this today' or some other insight or being like 'yeah this thing' or whatever response it is, I'm like holy shit! That's amazing! Woah! I am so glad and feel so lucky that is a part of my life.

[Music]

Audrey Hulm: Do you think about how success will change people's reactions or their reception to you expressing this harder stuff? Like say because Starving Artist is so successful if you are then 'I had the worse day' do you think people will be like 'unfollow bitch', 'shut up', 'how can you complain'. Even though that still you're expressing the same experiences, it's not like you become successful in one aspect of life and then everything else is a breeze, but it does change how people look at your experience and how you're describing it to them.

Honor Eastly: Oh, yeah totally, definitely, I mean I don't expect people to stick around I suppose. And I say that because I know I have relationships with other artists work that goes through a life cycle whatever, and so you know I can't make work that will speak to everybody and I just cannot do that. So I launched Starving Artist and it was like number one podcast on iTunes Arts, number ten on iTunes overall, 10,000 downloads in the first week, that's pretty ridiculous for someone who's making a podcast in their bedroom with backing of no major organisation [Laughs] I was really blown away by that. At the time though, I talked online about what the experience was like, which was, it wasn't what I would have expected. If you had asked me that three years ago I would have been like, 'oh my god!' But the experience was actually quite weird I felt very on edge and strange and also the moment you get something you're like 'yes! Ok I want more!' or you're like 'fuck! I'm going loose it!' or something is going to happen.

Audrey Hulm: Just allow yourself to feel success, please just don't try to beat Russell Brand you've already done a massive thing which we've already talked about beforehand.

Honor Eastly: But it's really weird when something say goes really big or it gets attention in some way and you think it will change you but it actually weirdly, impacts you way less than failing. Like, it just washes over you and then you're on to the next thing. That's what you're always striving for, but you never, ever get there.

[Music]

Honor Eastly: So, the next project I'm working on is called 'Big Feels Club' and it's still sort of taking shape as to what it is but haven't really talked about it public yet around what it is. But it's more about community building than it is about me making an artwork if that makes sense. So, I work in a mental health space and I'm really interested in how we can unpack ideas around what is mental health and look critically at our experiences and have options in how we make sense of them, basically. So that's taking form at the moment where I'm starting, we've just doing these private book club discussion group things. The last one we talked about Buddhist philosophy, we talked about if there is value in crisis and distress. And that stuff is really exciting to me because it's not about me actually. It's exciting to me in the same way Starving Artist is exciting to me because I get to put together these ideas and put them out into the world for people to think about them. That is the same kind of thing but a different topic and its more face-to-face, more personable, more about community building. And more I supposed maybe direct, that's part of why thinking less of stuff as 'I'm an artist' I suppose I create stuff, I make stuff, but I definitely don't like making physical things. So, I think that actually when I'm, this is an idea I find kind of interesting, I think when I'm in

crisis, and having a really shit time, in some ways that is a different kind of wisdom. That might sound really airy fairy, 'oh you know hard times are great' I just mean, I think about things very differently when I'm in that space, and sometimes that thinking is useful because it makes me do different types of shit.

Audrey Hulm: What do you think is different? I mean I relate to what you're saying, but for the benefit of people who haven't had the hours of chats I've had with you, is that a fight or flight response? What do you think is driving that way of thinking? And so, is there other value beyond the fact you ask other people lots of questions?

Honor Eastly: I think that's a good question. I think desperation, when you're stuck in between a rock and a hard place, you become resourceful in a different way and you think about things in a different way and you go about things in a different way.

Audrey Hulm: Because when it feels like life or death, that tends to be what happens.

Honor Eastly: Yeah, if it feels like that you're going to go about things differently.

Audrey Hulm: So how is that, so say maybe when you started Starving Artist it might have felt like that, but you seem to be in a pretty good place at the moment, and planning more interviews and that's become a sustained inquiry for you how is that mental space shift to make way for art.

Honor Eastly: So one thing that I want to say on this is like, just because we've talked before about the tortured artist idea, I also think that for me having good, not having good but, being in a place where I feel more just kind of even keeled, like I wouldn't even say good, even just able to, sort of deal, and I don't say that in a negative way like 'deal', everything's hard, I don't know, I don't like this idea or identifying with suffering,

Audrey Hulm: So to contextualise, Honor and I have kind of, often talk about shared difficult experiences with mental health and with the mental health system, so when you're saying even keel, and if I talk about that as well it's really, trying to be at a level of functioning that is expectable in a nine to five, hyper ambitious, upwardly mobile society [Laughs]. Where you're pressured to feel like you must always be achieving, always getting to that for some people where you aren't happy but you are just coping with that, that is quite hard for a lot of people.

Honor Eastly: Well I mean, I just do not relate to the main stream idea that happiness is the ideal.

Audrey Hulm: It's a lie people, it's a lie.

Honor Eastly: I mean that's my own experience, and the reason why that comes from there is if I try and live my life where I fixate on that as the ultimate goal it makes my life shit. So, when I say even keel I just mean like, feeling comfortable with my life, feeling like I have a good community of friends, that I can deal with stuff that's coming up in whatever way that's happening and feeling like I can look after myself and know what I need. You know, it's pretty holistic sort of feel like everything is in its place and also absolutely not at the same time. Yes, I learn things in crisis, but I make a lot better work when I'm not in crisis. So, the tortured artist thing, that does not work for me, I don't need to move towards that at all. I'm alright. I actually make better work when I feel safe and when I feel confident and when I feel supported. So yeah, I just wanted to make that point.

Audrey Hulm: On what you just said though, most artists I have seen do talk about this mystified idea that experiencing high drama or intensity, or having mental health issues is part of being an artist, almost every artist I've ever seen or read an interview with has said that that is bullshit and they make way better work in those conditions where they feel stable, where they feel cared for, where they feel comfortable.

[Music]

Audrey Hulm: Explain this buzz word 'authentic' and what it means to you, it gets you so much lately, it's become one of those words that's become meaningless, like hipster, because it's constantly around and everyone's just saying it, but what is being authentic?

Honor Eastly: Yeah, being authentic to me is not what those online courses say about being authentic, I have a different breed of authentic, I don't think anything is completely authentic. The idea of pure authenticity is in my mind bogus, so there's the starting point. But, I feel in some ways I'm kind of lucky, because for me if I strategise too much and if I game too much I feel disgusting. So for instance, 'that person, I want to be friends with them because they have a million followers'.

Audrey Hulm: Can I just say I love your sleazy art person voice, it's really good.

Honor Eastly: Yeah you like this voice? So if I'm like "Hey, that person sounds like they're going to be really useful to me" I really don't like that. If you're someone who's analytical like me, and making projects, it's very difficult to not have those thoughts.

Audrey Hulm: I feel like it's impossible and it's really hard when you don't want to be that way to feel pressured, that's a massive issue I have with my own practice and having to promote myself online. It's not really how I envisage wanting to be in the world, but I also have the very legitimate fear that if I don't do that I will melt away into obscurity, which is just a fact. So, how do you counterbalance those things with each other? Which we were going to talk about, but you brought up earlier, how you use your face to sell your work.

Honor Eastly: We don't have to talk about that.

Audrey Hulm: No, but I wanted to because I think it relates to what we're talking about, this idea about performing or success and how, because of social media, that is so intimately tied to who you are in the most intimate way, now with down to what you look like, what you wear, what you eat, it's just a 24/7 thing and if you are an analytical person it can drive to you a point of feeling quite crazed because you have to think about it so much, and if you don't want to, so many of these unwanted thoughts are popping into your head. It can be really intense.

Honor Eastly: Yeah...

Audrey Hulm: [Laughs] Excellent response, that's exactly how I feel.

Honor Eastly: Yeah, I find I'm very attentive to what makes me feel gross, so I suppose I do think about that a lot. The other thing that really helps is, you can network all you want but, this is basically a quote from Bo Burnham when he did a Reddit AMA, he's like 'people's attention is volatile and flaky' which is also why I'm very grateful for people attention I think people's attention in this day and era is a precious gift and one that should be appreciated but he says 'people's attention is volatile and flaky so you can't put all your coins into it, the only thing you can control is your work' and so I've thought about that a lot and found it actually quite difficult because often, I don't have confidence in my work, so it can be difficult to say because I can get quite caught up in the social media game sometimes and that's a lot easier to play than the game of 'make your work good' which is a lot scarier because I thought you had to make it big or fucking go home right? So, there's only two options, make it big, go home. And so, with Starving Artist I was thinking maybe there are other options, I don't know, I didn't know the answer.

Audrey Hulm: Well you are not an exception to this rule considering it made it really big, [Laughs]

Honor Eastly: But that's why I interview people who are in unique situations or who were doing it differently, and trying to work out what the hell is their life actually like. Because there's this thing you have to front to the world as an artist as someone who is definitely making it. So it's very hard as someone looking on and looking up to people and thinking 'I'll do that', to know what it is you're moving towards. Because it's very hard to know what someone's life is like from their Instagram and it makes it more complicated if their social media is about trying to show their art as an artist, not because they're lying, but because

you know we have to present our work in a particular way. Even I get this, it's been interesting getting more success and stuff and realising maybe I want to try and get sponsorship for my podcast, does it matter if my Instagram feed says, 'I have no fucking idea what I'm doing'? [Laughs]

Audrey Hulm: Oh yes, I think about that all the time because you know I put up heaps of whacky weird anxiety filled things, that to me is my work, but at other times I don't want that to be my work, I want to show the really sweet giant, very, very successful things that I've done and that would be what I'd put on my resume. But once you've put it out there you can't really take it back, so you are kind of taking a gamble to be really emotionally open and say 'hey, I don't really have everything together' in the public eye. Because it is naive to think that doesn't impact on other area of your life such as your career these day. When even for pretty minor jobs people tend to Google or Facebook you.

Honor Eastly: Yeah I mean this is why I have two names.

[Laughs]

Audrey Hulm: Yes, me too. Well thank you Honor for chatting with me.

Honor Eastly: Thank you for having me, that was really fun, but also scary.

[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.