

NAVA: in conversation, Episode Nine

[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.

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Lucy McIntosh: My name's Lucy McIntosh and I'm the Vice Chair of Blindside which is an artist run space in Melbourne. I'm also a practicing artist and I'm also a gallery assistant at Alcaston Gallery.

Channon Goodwin: I'm Channon Goodwin, I'm an artist but also the Director of Bus Projects, an artist run organisation based in Collingwood here in Victoria.

Rosemary Ford: I'm Rosemary Ford, I'm the Chair of Un Projects, which is an organisation publishing Un Magazine and other projects. Apart from that I'm also currently doing a PhD in curatorial practice, so primarily a curator.

Georgia Hutchison: My name is Georgia Hutchison, I work as the General Manager for Liquid Architecture, an organisation working with sound and listening, based in Melbourne but working nationally. I also work as a researcher with ALL Conference, I'm a creative producer working with artists around Melbourne and Australia and I'm a practicing artist myself.

Brianna Munting: Why did you decide to get involved with these spaces and with these organisations?

Lucy McIntosh: I guess I, romantically, think collective action is really important and the idea of being a singular entity kind of flinging through seems quite lonely and seems quite scary. Especially as, funding gets whittled away piece by piece it's actually quite hard to exist. And so, ALL Conference has been a very exciting but also a good support network and it's just really great for it all to come together and to realise you're not struggling alone. And I think it's that collective action is quite urgent right now, and so, I think we're at a good starting point right now.

Brianna Munting: How would you describe Blindside?

Lucy McIntosh: Blindside is coming into I think our 15th year of operation, and I guess Blindside was established to, similarly to lots of ARI's in Australia, to kind of create space for new arts graduates and emerging artist but has also become a space for mid-career artists as well. We've also become this kind of education platform I guess, I'm not sure if it's because of funding but we've developed an education program, which is really wonderful. It started for secondary students at high school and has now moved into the university space as well. And I guess it's a testing space, it's a space that's safe for people to fail, which is really important, it's not very glamorous, people don't really talk about that very often. But it's a space that

artists can test new ideas and not have any pressure of the commercial implications of their work which a lot of ARI's are that, I think.

Brianna Munting: And with Bus Projects do you think there's a similar vision between or across the ARI's in terms of the space to fail or are there also points of difference? And what would they be?

Channon Goodwin: Well I think it's certainly true those spaces do provide that opportunity to artists, I certainly also think we have our own particular approaches to programming that mean that the characteristics of people's programs have difference within them which I think all enjoy. I think there's also generations of organisations having differences within them as well. There's waves that you can identify in terms of Blindside and Bus and a range of others that came out maybe in the early 2000s, a wave of collective setting up of spaces and then there's a subsequent previous generation which, you know, there are still spaces setup and are around that matter. Slightly before that there was West Space and obviously even before that, earlier, there was Firstdraft. So, I think within them, they have their own roots in history that has lead them to the reason why they program the way they do and it's responsive to the current situation. So, in that case, I think it also has to cater to how people are making and the societal pressures on space to be places that are relevant to artists and communities of practitioners around them. I think all of those things go into questions around artist spaces that are useful for people to test and fail or are they space for people to really have agency and build their careers within, so if that's the primary purpose. It really does adapt the needs.

Brianna Munting: And what's the primary purpose of Liquid Architecture? And do you think there is a space for failure or testing within that?

Georgia Hutchison: Absolutely, so Liquid Architecture's premise is to support artists working with sound and investigate the act of listening and the sounds themselves through that. It might not always be with musicians, often it is, but any artist dealing with the sonic. So, this medium, this art form, is a slippery one, and one a lot of artist use and curatorially use, to enquire into political ideas or social contexts. This artform allows room to move and certainly to fail and decoys in the presentations of the works. We also, work in quite a slippery way as an organisation having no sight having no bricks and mortar, we work in partnerships with hundreds of organisations and artists and collaborators across the country and internationally. And that diversity really means that the evaluation of success and failure are completely different in every context we work in.

Brianna Munting: And I think that kind of concept of what does success mean or what does failure mean, is really important within the artist run spaces as well, because that question of how do you measure success, is it in bricks and mortar or is it serving this many artists per year, but you guys gets to define that for your organisations, so maybe that's a question I would like to ask you.

Georgia Hutchison: Can I just say something in response to your statement about the relevance of artist run spaces and communities, I can say that as someone who is working in the community that I exist within myself, it will always be relevant. As an artist and as a Director of Bus Projects Channon, you know your community, you are that, there's a very slim difference between what you're providing and what the people you're working with need.

Channon Goodwin: I think that need somewhat reflects the current labelling of tier of spaces. 'artist run' talks about agency, it talks about a certain control being placed within the hands

of artists, them being at the core of the output and the control of how they make it and how they show it. In previous generations there was always sort of saying an alternative or independent and that was obviously independent of something or an alternative to something. And think these independent titles for practitioners are important parts of this calibration in terms of the sites they work in, what they call them, all are conscious choices at one time or another.

Georgia Hutchison: And these radical spaces really become experts in their own field, so you know in the evaluation of success, of course they're successful because they're working in the way that they want to be and the way we want to be working in right now, we're not talking about anyone else actually, I don't know why I'm externalising that. But if we're able to be active and be working in the communities we want, on the ideas we're interested in then that's a term of success.

Channon Goodwin: And the layering of the different types of organisations that exist within the Australian ecology, I mean we're talking off a little bit off the point of artist run spaces but really the, especially one of the aims of the membership of ALL Conference was to have a diversity of organisations that really didn't necessarily sit in one place. The way that somewhere like Un Projects is sort of diversifying by what it does rather than just an outfit of a printing publication is something I've watched ever since I was at university and used to pick up a copy from the IMA which I guess is the only site to access an active digital entity as well. which has been really quite exciting. Which means that I continually can't place where and what something like Un Project is, which is nice.

Brianna Munting: And maybe that's the moment to ask, were they conscious decisions in how Un has changed over time and where is it kind of sitting now and what are you guys kind of hoping for it?

Rosemary Ford: Yeah, I think it's a fairly ephemeral organisation in some ways, we don't have a space and are not visible in that way, we have until recently, not really had any ongoing staff members, it's really a quite dispersed collective and our output historically has been the magazine which began in 2004. With all the problems with print distribution that come with that. So, I guess the conversation over recent years, is always, around what happens when we don't get funding. Printing, producing a magazine, is not cheap and distribution is a real challenge. We've always had a commitment to paying writers and artist fees also. So, we've been very lucky in terms of project funding from year-to-year and issue-to-issue, but we did, a few years ago, kind of take a moment to really reassess, is this really feasible to keep going? You never know when that funding is going to run out. We looked at perhaps moving the entire thing online or different models of should the magazine move to partner with an institution for some stability? But we decided that came with way too many risks and compromised payoffs. We did an audience survey to kind of help think through these issues, and the feedback was over whelming, that the print aspect was really valued, so in terms of our readership it didn't seem like a good idea to stop that. So, in terms of shifting our editorial strategies a little bit as well, we've found the online space is a way to do that more directly, as a collective. So, Un Magazine basically comes out in two editions a year and we have a guest editor that changes every year. So, that allows the guest editor to really have some direction and creative control over the thematics, the networks, the ideas, the kind of artists and writers they want to work with, which has a great creative outcome. But it does mean the payoff in that is that we're not always targeting a broad regional representation, things that are important to us in terms of diversity and sustaining a more ongoing relationship with different aspects of communities. So, we've been more direct and responsive with a faster

turnover of reviews and things like that if we moved into the online space as well as a kind of parallel to the magazine. I think there were also questions around how the magazine was sort of drifting away from its early beginnings, as a very quick responsive, review based magazine, it become more and more through these guest editorships, I guess, but also through other changes in the sector, people, artists and writers more so moving into the academy and so much research into contemporary practice and Australia was driving a lot of the thematics into a pseudo academic journal kind of space, that is great in some ways, but we were also loosing that faster, looser, responsive grassroots review aspects of the magazine's earlier incarnations. So, there was a little bit of thought around that, as well and we edited an anthology of the first ten years of the magazine in 2014 and that gave us the chance to really look back and think through, what has been valuable in the content. What remains valuable over time? What's missing and what do we want to pick up over time? And what do we let go? That ongoing self-assessment and reflexivity, as well as listening to our readers and contributors and community is really what shapes any new direction.

Brianna Munting: And what do you think is the role that Un plays now for the community and the broader arts ecology?

Rosemary Ford: I think, remarkably the very core, fundamental ideas and aims are still the same as they were really in 2004. The magazine started in Melbourne with a focus on reflecting and picking up the conversation that was going on in the artist run or independent, whatever term you want to use, sector or community, so it was really started by artists and writers to gather, document, discuss, debate and review and generate that discourse that was kind of missing. It was a very active sector, it has been for a very long time but often goes unreviewed or undocumented at that time of the major media or newspapers and things like that. And I guess now, there are still so few outlets for art criticism in comparison to the quantity and quality of shows and projects and artists and practices that are going on. So, Un had that really basic aim of generating, providing space for that kind of discourse to happen and that's still our role and I think we're still really sitting within that same community in a way. The other aspect was always about mentoring and giving opportunity to emerging writers as well, so that's remained a really important part of what we do. So, it's often the first place people get published or have a review of their work and I think that's pretty important.

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Brianna Munting: What exactly is ALL Conference and why as organisations and individuals, you wanted to be a part of this collective, so maybe Channon.

Channon: I can start in terms of some of the impulses that drove me into bring up the conversation with a group of organisations. ALL Conference is fifteen artist lead and experimental and cross disciplinary arts organisations that tend to be small scale but that's obviously dependant on when you have something like Liquid Architecture, that's a sprawling entity, much bigger than its kitchen table. But some of my interest in ALL Conference as an advocacy group, as a knowledge sharing group, as a response to both an interest in things that had happened previously, my experience growing up in Queensland as an artist and seeing how the scenes were very fragile and that it would evaporate each other year, each other year, and almost have to find another scene. And then an interest in things that were around the art scene, community radio, ZZZ, events and the communities that would exist around those, organised labour that would exist around entities like that and the people organising in their communities was very influential in Queensland I guess, and the shadow of conservative governments still kind of influencing the way people thought about

their places of culture and out post and one had to be very hesitant about setting down deep roots there because of the liability of basing your art career or your art life in Queensland, always seemed to be temporary. So, some of those things will influence why and when I moved to Melbourne and to work at Bus and realise that really there was a moment at Bus when I had the time and resources to bring up some conversations that may make the sector connect more and be more resilient. And I think, some of that came around the time when there were reallocations of funding away from the Australian Council and it felt a bit lonely around that time. There was low morale and for organisations that were hurt by that and not, it still felt that there was an informality around the conversations that were happening that maybe a network could grow within. Previously, you could look at networks in Victoria particularly, the Victorian initiatives of Artist Network, that Brett Jones and Warren Taylor founded, you can look at the long list of organisations and see so many spaces that have closed, so it felt to me also that there was an urgency to bring together spaces that did have a history and did want longevity to perhaps be talking a little more, in a more formal way to both amplify their voices but perhaps to deal with some of the issues we've talked about today. In terms of, how to address the problems that have arrived in the program, how to bring up issues that naturally arise in programs and also just to learn from each other I think, to break out of always an artist's question of 'how am I going to pay my rent?' discussion, to one that was talking with Liquid Architecture, Un and Runway and also in different localities as well to link what's happening in Tasmania to what's happen here, to Western Australia. we're still missing what's happening in the Northern Territory in a way which we are trying to solve that problem through our network as well, how to make it diverse but those were the impulses drove me to bring up a conversation of the group organisations and it kind of developed from there.

Lucy McIntosh: I guess the fragility of the sector was the driving force for me, and I guess the idea of solidarity, what joins us before what divides us, in a sense. And a real sharing of knowledge, I think because I think it gets quick lonely sometimes, and there's a lot of anxiety especially when there's low moral when funding is taken away, when you're not sure, you didn't start your organisation and it's been going for 15 years and you don't want to be the one that closes it either, the need for longevity. And I think Australia needs us, I think we're important and joining together means we're able to continue to unpick those problems then that's why it's so important, that's why I think ALL Conference is important.

Georgia Hutchison: All of that. I'm not sure what further I can add there other than discuss the ability this collectivism has to leverage a little bit more thinking space amongst everyone being able to have a little bit of feedback around benchmarking and more profound ideas about what we're doing and whether we're actually serving the artists we work with in the best way, through to very practical stuff like 'hey, do you have a good accountant that's cheap?' that feedback on an everyday level is increasingly becoming so useful in the role I do at Liquid Architecture, also behind the scenes working with ALL Conference and it's research, I can see those kinds of research and connections and conversations are increasing locally in Melbourne, but certainly across the country as well, already there are great conversations happening between Firstdraft and Liquid Architecture, we work with each other already but this feedback throughout ALL Conference network is really starting to resonate across the country.

Lucy McIntosh: I think it enables a higher level of productivity as well, you know, rather than spending a week trying to find a cheap accountant.

Georgia Hutchison: And there a whole lot of different scales and paced organisations within ALL Conference at the moment and some of them have funding for staff to elevate a little bit of brain space, others don't so much. So, I think that kind of pooling of energy across the group is something that's starting to emerge already, a sort of peer support in a way.

Rosemary Ford: I think it was that moment of precarity around funding and organisational stability so coming together in any potential way that could perhaps be a lobbying kind of agent at some point was appealing to us. And also, we felt it was important we could bring the voice of writer and criticism and publishing to this network as well. And also, as a way for us to connect nationally, we're kind of a national organisation although it started in Melbourne and lots of us are based here, our editorship has held off a site in Sydney, Perth and elsewhere, but I think we're still kind of perceived as a Melbourne organisation and somehow perceived also as sort an established institution in some ways, even though it feels like we run almost invisibly in this really kind of grant-to-grant way. But yeah, connecting on those terms is an important point in that way.

Channon Goodwin: I think what also to add to that, some of the story of my experience at Bus informed this network in terms of how Bus was able to through hard work and some chance developments progressed quite quickly, in a relatively traditional way, to the point of multi-year funding from a multiple number of sources and has staff now as well. That may not last, that comes from an ability to write grants of course but there's also a momentary positive perception of what Bus doing, the people it has relationships with, the building it has, the way it kind of articulates itself but that is something that may not last and it's also very different for every organisation, that may even be similar to us. So, it felt like there was a moment to use some of that time and resourcing to better our part or our tier of the ecology in some way quite directly

Georgia Hutchison: So we can understand ALL Conference as an endearing framework around all the ARI's, and you mentioned most of this group do have longevity or desire for longevity, but I feel ALL Conference is also existing to support those who don't seek out that longevity but still can find value in what we're doing.

Channon Goodwin: And also way to put a voice to say that, the pathways that we have been invited to pursue and have done so, are pretty conventional models of development, you know, Director, Curator, Program Manager, State Government, and that might not be the pathway that everyone wants to go down, but should be defended in making those choices as well. So some of the diversity of membership of ALL Conference to try to have those conversations that say well look, managements structures like, what has been suggested and what people have confidence in may not be the only way, and may, through some of the research that Georgia is overseeing, it may come that there may be a strong case put that diversely make up groups that are constituted and managed, organisations can and do, a huge amount and there shouldn't necessarily be only one way.

Lucy McIntosh: And it's those management structures I guess that are funded.

Channon Goodwin: They can't necessarily be blamed for that, given, where's the alternative argument being put? And I don't think it's any accident, everyone in different parts of industry, whether it's business or you know through collective action to some degree, you know business pretends it doesn't but then it has 100 lobby groups and business councils that do this for them and do their research and do their papers. For us, it may be more reserved and we not wish to kind of be very overt about this but, we can think, definitely, we

can write, we can critique and put forward our case and argue that the models we peruse are really fundamental to the arts ecology and when people talk about us, especially the smaller gallery arts based organisations, is feeding into the sector but that's really not being accentuated how fundamentally awful it would be if we evaporated. It would be the same for Runway, and Un of course as well, and just that idea that they fulfil such a huge amount in generating content and the same for the galleries if they were to evaporate the programs that would go with them would leave the sector breathed. So, for me it's about an opportunity to put forward some of that case in a way that had some weight behind it.

Rosemary Ford: On the point of volunteerism, it's the elephant in the room, it is such a big part of how these organisations survive and continue, and they're just massive compromises that we all make and a day-today basis to you know, there's this vocational aspect to a lot of what we do. And while Un always pays fees it's nowhere near guidelines or best practice standards. So, I know the NAVA guidelines are for writers are a dollar per word, if we were to do that, one issue of the magazine would cost about \$40,000-\$50,000 just in writer's fees let alone printing and production. So, that's an impossibility so there's a question around when we're setting standards and guidelines, are they realistic and are we going to or how are we going to compromise to put the product out versus it just being impossible and invisible, I don't know.

Brianna Munting: I think that's definitely something we've been looking at because our last fees and wages update we surveyed the entire sector because we wanted to know what was actually being paid so that we could put something that was, not enforceable, but that feasible for a range of organisations. We've also recognised that artist lead organisations or independent organisations are different and there's a different scale set for all of them as well. What's really interesting with the volunteerism as well is this question of expectation because there's an expectation that, not just by say government or funding agencies, that these will continue on a voluntary basis, but also expectations by the sector and I was in another state recently and I can't remember, and they were saying they were trying to get their next set of ARI directors is choosing next to impossible because just no one is applying. And so, I think it's also how to manage the human resources of organisations and manage them ethically is probably the best way to describe the situation

Lucy McIntosh: Yeah it's pretty hard, we have a pretty traditional board structure but it's very hands on board and you know it's always uneven, there's always a two people doing more than the other ten and that's always the way and it's that way in ARI's and it's probably that way in group work at university, it's just how things happen naturally. But there is a really big pressure and it is really hard to find time to even think about replacing or finding someone to come in because it's so consuming anyway.

Channon Goodwin: I would also say that volunteer aspect, some people link it to an ethical standpoint which is great, that there is that symbol or a stance around why that shouldn't be a way, and this relates to what that implies a traditional creep towards institutional bureaucracy which can be counted, it doesn't always have to be that way, but at the moment it kind of is, but it's kind of compounded by other societal factors. Volunteerism is also a lot easier to do if you have a stable university job, that brings in \$40,000-\$50,000 a year and gives you great holidays and gives you great time off and some of the work you can get in a gallery, it counts as research it's great. But university work can become continuous, people's contracts are so short, you know this constant pressure around low wages just outside of that people talk about portfolio careers often when people sit around a table but in reality, portfolio careers, that's not a consultancy here or a paid ball position, it's not like a café job or

additional install work maybe, if you try and do a photo documentation business, these things don't necessarily give you a lot of mental space, it puts people at mental risk, to do a lot of different stuff, and maybe this more a question because we've more of a longevity mindset. And often these things from Bus's point of view and others, Kings and Seventh and Blindside who manage spaces, Moana, Box Copy, these are physical exhausting things to do, you have to be there, you have to open them, you put yourself at risk for legal reasons if you go into debt. So, some of these things are the reasons why it's not a frivolous thing to talk about. But looking at it from a Queensland standpoint, it does perpetuate a habit of burn out and complete divorcing from an art scene, you have people kind of hating what they did and hating the scene at the time, so you go back to people to talk about these things and it wasn't a good experience, it doesn't have to be that way.

Lucy McIntosh: I guess too, something that is constantly on our minds at Blindside is kind of creating situations where, obviously it's a volunteer lead space, but how can we create situations where people can also get something that's not just a line on their CV. How can we create projects that are fun for people to be a part of? That are engaging? And how can we create different areas across our organisation that are diverse enough to allow a number of different people to come in and that's kind of I guess maybe a strategy that we've implemented to recruit new people that are enthusiastic and excited, because you really need that enthusiasm otherwise it doesn't work.

Georgia Hutchinson: We have a very fortunate position where Liquid Architecture can afford to pay, not very much or many hours but we do have a commitment to pay staff, to pay production specialists and to pay artists always, but nobody's paid particularly well. So what we do is to ensure that everyone who's contributing has that agency, that word we're all using, but has creative responsibilities, can lead their particular field of work and contribution to the organisation and activities. Particularly, when we have associate curators and writers and emerging artists working with us, giving them autonomy in the projects their working with instead of coming in as a volunteer and being told to sit there and do this and do this. Starting a new archiving project and the ideas around that are really coming from the young artists that we're working with, and their particular tastes are contributing to what we're doing. And so, I'm very aware of asking too much from people but if there's this agency and creative authorship that's something there at least.

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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.