

INTEL: PODCAST SERIES

Tune in to INTEL and meet art makers from around the world.

Elena Knox, Beholder, video façade, ICC Hong Kong, 2016



Speaker 1 ([00:12](#)):

You're listening to the Australia Council's INTEL: Podcast Series. In this series we speak to artists and arts organisations working across borders to discuss best practice, tips and their experiences navigating the impacts of COVID-19 on international mobility. We're broadcasting from Gadigal country in Sydney.

Speaker 2 ([00:46](#)):

The one thing I believe that we could be doing a lot more of is engaging with senior artists, practitioners, cultural authorities, to look at what our practice and you know, what we now call our sector, how we were practicing. I think there's a lot here in Australia that we can all be looking to in terms of how we build a more sustainable arts community and society. If we only look to some of those old men and women out in communities that are carrying knowledge, that are carrying culture, that are carrying songlines and are protecting social fabric through that practice. I believe here in Australia if we were to more broadly start to collaborate with that kind of artist, like those old songmen and those old songwomen, I think the opportunity there is that we end up creating a new Australian theatre, and one that is a bit more relevant to more members of our community rather than only those that can afford tickets to mainstage theatre.

Speaker 2 ([02:07](#)):

My name is Jacob Boehme. I am a Narrunga and Kurna man. Narrunga from Yorke Peninsula and Kurna from Adelaide Plains in South Australia, born and raised in Fitzroy and Newport, Melbourne, Victoria; with Finnish, Irish and English heritage as well. I'm an artist, an artistic director, a choreographer and writer of theatre, dance and ceremony, both for stage, for screen and large-scale public events. As an artist I've worked across all of the Australia Council's priority regions internationally. In terms of disruption to my practice or to international exchange, I can't say that there really has been. I think in terms of physical contact, in terms of being able to travel to each other, to be in each other's spaces physically, I mean that's really the only disruption. We're adaptive and we're resilient and we manage our way around all kinds of curve balls. What I think this has done instead, is rather than be a disruption has actually provided opportunity. The conversations that I've been able to have, yes, endless zoom meetings, but WhatsApp for just a phone call is also good. But the conversations that I'm having more so with my international counterparts and collaborators than I am having here at home is about the function of art and its relevance in society right now and into the future. Right around here in Australia we seem to be caught on this loop of what its economic benefits are to a society, we haven't really shifted a discussion, even though there's been many an opinion piece about it. We haven't really shifted the discussion into the cultural benefits, social benefits and relevancy to our broadest community right here. We seem to be stuck in the whole "we contribute one point, you know, 111 billion", whereas when I'm talking to people in Southeast Asia for example, there's not a funding regime

or a system that they can rely on. The conversations there are about relevance of an artistic practice to an already decimated arts community and then also looking broader out into the community that is really struggling with trying to stick to standards of public health, where in those communities in those regions really don't make sense. So the conversation is very different. I wish we would engage more here with our Southeast Asian counterparts in terms of looking at the relevancy of arts community, community health, community wellbeing and cohesion, rather than "When the hell am I going to get my theatre performance up on a stage again?". I'm tired of that.

Speaker 2 (06:09):

Some of the conversations that I've been a part of, the tri-nation's conversations, conversations with our First Nations artists and communities around the Asia, Southeast Asia region, up into Scandinavia also, the conversations that we've been having really tend to focus on a couple of key points. One being the health and well being of our elders, because for a lot of Indigenous communities around the world, elders are paramount. If we lose our elders it's like losing a whole library of information and knowledge. So a lot of the conversation is really around how do we protect elders, therefore how do we protect knowledge. How do we protect the ongoing transferal of that knowledge, therefore hence keeping our cultures alive. That's really where some of those conversations are different to a lot of the broader conversations here in Australia. I think there is a real split in the camp, we have what we would call quote end quote, the professional Indigenous theatre end of town, small to medium companies, independent artists of varying levels in their practice who do the rounds within non-Indigenous organisations. There is that side of the camp that is very much about how do we protect that legacy, that 40 to 50 year old legacy of an Indigenous theatre and dance contemporary practice in mainstage theatres. That's a very real worry. There's a part of our community that rightfully so have made good leeway for artists to look at that as a viable career option. However, there is also a real grassroots and community movement happening, more about how do we reframe this or how do we start to protect community practices that also are seen as just as valid, just as viable, if not more so now.

New Speaker (08:34):

I think what we find ourselves in at the moment in terms of a global pandemic, a public health crisis, as well as a cultural revolution stemming from Black Lives Matter protests in the US which have now filtered through to every corner of the world; what I think we're seeing here particularly in Australia is once again, a whole lot of organisations, mostly mainstream non-Indigenous controlled organisations that are looking to suddenly become relevant, suddenly become inclusive and equitable making really grand mothership statements, but again, no follow through. I was asked yesterday actually in a conversation, "What's happened? What have you seen happen since the APAM (Australian Performing Arts Market) speech you gave?", and all I could pretty much answer was "Nothing, nothing's happened". There's been a few job openings for emerging producers and practitioners in some of our mainstream organisations, but what's the point of getting an emerging producer into a mainstream organisation when there's senior artists and practitioners that should be going into those organisations. Not someone who's green who really has no agency or voice because they're an apprentice, it just makes no sense. So there's this constant practice, and then all the virtue signaling, all the kind of co-opting of a cultural movement and momentum by white and non-Indigenous organisations right now without any significant action or commitment is quite frankly again, just frustrating to a lot of us, and you know, just makes us even, I don't know, we're already tired. We're already tired. So here in Melbourne, this is day one of round two of lockdown. We were just starting to think that we were emerging out of our first round of lockdown and even coming out of that, I was starting to feel angsty and antsy and well, a little bit frustrated with lack of movement. It does put really hard into your face, all of this, the amount of

privileges that we do have and that we do take for granted. I've been doing a project online and over the phone now all through lockdown, which is a significant songline project reconnecting dingo dreaming stories from our community in Narrunga country and Kurna country all the way through the north of South Australia, Northern Territory, over into far North Queensland. I've had uncles saying to me for months now, "You need to come over here, you need to walk country so that you can know those stories". It has been a real battle to overcome the frustration, to know that I can't get over there to my community, I can't get over there to walk country with my family. Now as we go into lockdown I am feeling internally, for the first time I think the frustration has now turned into a slight, oh I don't know, it's delicate, my psychology is delicate right at this point in time.

New Speaker ([13:10](#)):

I was fortunate enough to be invited into an online group of Southeast Asian artists called The Homework Club. The guest speaker for that session that I was in was a wonderful artist, Amitesh Grover, who's also the director of the International Theatre Festival of Kerala whom I met earlier in the year when I was in India on an Australia Council initiative called Exchanging Expertise. It's the first time I'd come across Amitesh's work, and that's who I've remained in contact with because I believe that there's something within his work, and there are other artists like him, but there's something in Amitesh's work which I think has kind of cracked the code in terms of digital and live engagement, as well as participation. There was also a wonderful article by Tim Crouch over in the UK I think, who's looking at how he digitises his solo performance/one man shows of adaptations of Shakespeare plays. There's also people, the gamers like Robert Reid, who writes for Witness Performance and who also has this practice of theatre and gaming, there's all these things that are out there already that my attention has been drawn back to. I think that's probably going to be relevant to us over the next couple of years. Right at the moment I've got a couple of things cooking. I talked previously about the wild dog dingo dreaming project, now that project goes straight up into Asia and Southeast Asia because of the lineage and the DNA connections of the dingo. We inherited the Dingo through seafaring traders thousands of years ago. The dingo dreaming has become an important songline for us, but originally the dingo has its origins up into Southeast Asia, so that's where our international collaborations and conversations are heading. I've also started work on a couple of new plays that I'm writing, which again, this is the perfect time to be solitary and to enjoy solitude and to turn it into something. I've looked at the beginnings of new work that will feed into the Blood Trilogy, the first show of that was Blood on the Dance Floor, so I'm continuing that work and looking into performances that showcase and bring to the fore, heterosexual CIS Aboriginal women and CIS Aboriginal men's experience, heterosexual men's experience of HIV in Australia and in Aboriginal communities. Yeah, there's a bit going on.

Speaker 2 ([16:45](#)):

I was fortunate enough earlier in the year to be given the opportunity to spend time in India on a new Australia Council initiative called Exchanging Expertise where I was able to meet and experience the work of artists across mostly Southern India: Kerala, Bangalore, Chennai, and then up into Delhi. There are a lot of different conversations that are continued on from that one. I can just say yesterday where I received a WhatsApp call from a new friend in India, Akila, she's in Chennai at the moment where the daily rate of infection in Chennai is something incredible, it's up 5,000 a day or something compared to Victoria, we have 134. The pressure to be in lockdown in a place like Chennai is building quite significantly, and so Akila had created a song, she's a songwriter, she's a singer. So she's created a song and she wanted to know whether I would be interested in doing something silly and just for fun, and I went "right now? Yes!" and she's like "this is no means high art", I went "nah, I don't think at the moment we need high art, we actually do need fun and silliness", so there's those conversations going

on. There are other conversations which are more long-term strategic plans that are looking at bringing First Nations artists and Southeast Asian First Nations artists together. Particularly one, a conversation with the artistic director of Attakkalari, which is a dance house in Bangalore and looking at building opportunities between Attakkalari and First Nations artists here to be part of their annual biennale dance festival, as well as other building opportunities there with First Nations artists in India. Those are longer term conversations, long, slow burn conversations.

Speaker 2 ([19:25](#)):

The best piece of advice that I've received from an elder. There's two that come to mind right now. The first one would be from an elder up in Mornington Island who once said to me, "If you don't have your story, you don't have your debts". I think that is true for any art form. If you don't have a strong narrative, one that pulls at the heartstrings of the people that you want to be in conversation with, one that speaks to directly to your times, or directly to a community, then it is just experiment and privilege and frivolous play. That's number one. Number two, and she probably would hate me calling her an elder because she's still a young woman; but when I was early thirties I'd just come back from working in central desert for quite some time and I was finding my feet back in Melbourne. I was living in a granny flat out the back of Donna Jackson's house and I used to have to walk past her kitchen where she would be having her breakfast every morning. Every morning for the first couple of months I lived there, she would say to me as I walked out the gate, she would yell through the window, "Triple your fee!" And that triple, triple your fee, triple your fee, triple your fee, that was almost like this kind of, yeah it was just drumming something into me until the first time that somebody asked me to quote, and I added another zero onto it and I pressed send, I almost like sank into the couch in complete fright going, "I'll never work in this town again now, oh my God". But then within five minutes they went, "Yes, okay. Please send your invoice through", and I went, "Oh wow, I've just named my price and I've just created value for myself. I know what I'm worth." That was really good advice.

Speaker 2 ([21:35](#)):

One piece of advice that I was given where in 2014, when I was on the Australia Council - British Council ACCELERATE program, I'd met with a wonderful woman by the name of Nike Jonah. Some people might recognise that name, and I was having a whinge and a bitch over a coffee about how I was sick and tired of having non-Indigenous reviewers come and see my work and totally butcher any understanding or any meaning about what they might have garnered from my work, because they just didn't have the cultural references to be able to intelligently respond to it. So she said, "Well, make them irrelevant", which then led to when I got the job at City of Melbourne and I founded YIRRAMBOI one of the first things I had to fight for, I fought for almost 12 months because nobody could see the benefit of contributing quite a sizable chunk of money to development of artists to create Blak Critics. That "make them irrelevant" comment was the drive for me to fight to get a Blak Critics program, and this is where I kind of look at today and where I say, I hope that we take this time to re-look and re-shift a sector, but I fear that we won't. I also would say to our family of First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and artists of color, make them irrelevant. Yeah you might want to aim for the big houses in town, but if they are continually only offering you scraps, make them irrelevant. There is enough talent amongst us to create a new sector. May not be money, but you have a look at the beginnings of some of the Indigenous theatre and the contemporary performing arts sector here, if we go back into the fifties, even the forties and thirties when they were aligned, when the Indigenous artists were aligned with the communist party. Back in the thirties and forties to the fifties, and then through to the Bla(c)k Power movement of the sixties and seventies, there was no money then, but people got shit done.