

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 (00:42):

Art with technology is going to have a lot to bring to that. To connect us in different ways.

Hi, I'm Elena Knox. I'm Australian, but based in Tokyo, I'm a media artist working in installation, video and performance. I like to question why humans aim to replicate ourselves across concepts, objects, biology, technology, algorithms. I think it's basically because humans are super lonely.

I came to Tokyo because I was studying in Sydney at UNSW Art & Design and I was pursuing a feminist project in electronic media and video and performance. My supervisor at the time – I hadn't been involved with robots before – but my supervisor was involved in founding the Creative Robotics Lab at UNSW and as part of sort of her contacts, we had a visit from a Japanese professor, bringing with him an Android robot, and I'd been working for a long time with humans behaving in a mechanical way and also quite a lot with dolls and characters and costumes from my performance background. So, I became very fascinated with this robot that he brought with him and we also became friends. So when actually the robot broke slightly and they couldn't use it for the original purpose, I asked to have access to it for four days and filmed a whole lot of experimental films with it and reprogrammed it slightly and had a lot of fun, and they've been, they're still being shown.

They've been fairly successful for me, so then after my studies I contacted him and we applied for a scholarship together, which was actually a science scholarship from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. I should mention that he's a cognitive scientist, not an artist at all, but likes working with the arts, and in sort of psychological experimental frameworks. And I didn't hold out a lot of hope actually, but I've ended up getting this quite competitive postdoc scholarship for two years, full-time from the Japanese Government and I think that I'm the only artist they've ever given it to. It's actually a science scholarship. And so I came to be in his lab for two years to make some projects that I'd pitched as part of that and we still get on, so he kept me on for the next year. So I've been here three years, and just during that time my work picked up a lot, so I'm still affiliated with that lab, but I'm also

not full time anymore and moved into a freelance work and just joined a commercial gallery here. So, kind of found a home.

[MUSIC: Actual Russian Brides, *This Haus*]

Japan's influence is a difficult question because, as I just said, I pitched some projects in order to get the funding to come here. To get the support to come here. But when I arrived, I kind of realised that I needed to rethink because the image of Japan from outside of Japan is not really the same as the experience living here. I guess that's the same with anywhere but particularly somewhere as, maybe, internationally stereotyped as Japan, maybe. Being here made me really rethink some of those projects and one of them I actually shelved and haven't even done yet because, in order to go deeper, it takes a lot of time to enculturate here. And luckily the people supporting me were supportive of those changes, because I think they come from a good place, and I still want to make the film, the long film work, that I originally pitched, but I realised it was more complicated than I had thought.

I guess like this podcast, career wise people are interested in me being here and that's also a strange position to be in. I'm hesitant to be, to represent myself as part of Japan. I think I'm still an outsider here and that's one of the things you really notice as living in a monoculture when you're an immigrant. I'm no Japan expert even though I'm living here for three years, I'm definitely not an expert yet. I think people are interested in the mediation or the blended perspective that a foreigner brings making work here. I think that's an ongoing process and it's difficult to articulate how... it might be better for other people to judge how it's influenced my work. Yeah, definitely the access to different technologies has been great, so very thankful for that. I've been able to work with some very skillful people. So that's been really cool.

[MUSIC: Actual Russian Brides, *This Haus*]

I've lived the whole time I've been here in one particular suburb, which I really like. It's called Koenji, and it's maybe one of the more hippy areas of Tokyo, if you can imagine. It's considered more 'boho' than some other places and it has some really, like they're amazing artists, like older generation artists, still living around this suburb who were part of Fluxus in New York and doing incredible things. It's also known as a live music hub. So there are, perhaps thousands, of small live music venues, most of them small, small-to-medium, in this area. And I go to them all the time and I'm performing at them. Before the virus, I was performing at a maybe once a week, or more, sometimes. And I found that really inspiring.

Something about the culture is that even when, extremely small shows, extremely small gatherings, extremely small performances, extremely small exhibitions, which happen all the time because of the small-scale of the buildings here and the density and the access to space. So things happen, you live and you work, in very small spaces compared to other places, most other places. So what is super inspiring about those is that everybody... there's no sloppy attitude to a small gig. Everybody will give 110%, and I see that all the time. And it's hard to explain, but the admiration that I have for that is unbounded. Just the commitment and the focus that goes into any scale of work is super inspiring. So long story short, I hang out in a lot of small bars and watch people and participate in experimental music.

Gallery-wise, I go to small ones and big ones like the TOP Museum [Tokyo Photographic Art Museum], is somewhere I'll go to every show and they have a festival every year called *Yebisu*. If I can get it right, it's like international festival for art and ideas, or something like this, and it's mainly moving image and I really love that. Really love that festival. Small, still, small-scale even though in a large museum. ICC is another really good larger one that does a lot of electronics, new media work, always pretty fascinating, and I should maybe say that I just joined a gallery called ANOMALY here as a represented artist. And so of course I go to all their shows and they have a wonderful space in an artist building collective that has a lot of galleries in it, so I hang out there.

[MUSIC: Actual Russian Brides, *This Haus*]

So around Christmas time I travelled up north a bit and fought through almost waist-high snow in a city called Towada, to go to the Towada Art Center to see a solo show by Aki Inomata called *Significant Otherness*. I think her work is very fascinating and very pure in a way. She works with, she does collaborations with, live creatures. I find her work is whimsical, but it's also super, super strong and it's based in research, but yeah, it's just beautiful work. So I'm following everything she does and I made a special effort to go to her show. A couple of other female artists here who I'm interested in are Etsuko Ichihara who does work with robots and also other materials. She's quite funny in her approach. I'm interested in funeral rights. I always have been, and actually the project that I came here to do that I haven't done yet, does involve funeral rights as well. So she's also done a lot around sort of digital death, this sort of area. I'm interested in her work. There's Erina Matsui also very funny, yet deep ideas work. She's part of the ANOMLY gallery that I've just joined, and so are Chim↑Pom who are super important, I think. I hadn't seen so much of their work before I came to Japan, but, they're very influential. As you probably know, they've been around for about 15 years. It's a six-person collective and they're quite radical as far as politics goes, which you don't encounter so much here I guess, being presented on a larger scale or bigger projects. They call them 'strong social messages'... they're quite radical and punk and super great.

I do travel a bit in Japan. Since I've been here. I've travelled more to the rest of Asia, I guess, to show work, rather than traveling around Japan. I've had several shows in Tokyo itself. I've presented work in Okinawa, which was wonderful and I didn't really even know about Okinawa to be honest before I came here. It's the island far off the bottom coast of Japan. I did a group show down there quite soon after I arrived and met a bunch of super interesting people who are still my colleagues. So that was a really... I recommend anybody go to Okinawa. I go to Osaka and Nagoya sometimes, but it's more for my music work then... I haven't had any big shows there or anything yet. Mostly they've been in Tokyo. I guess one interesting city that I'm planning to go to is Idate, which is in the Fukushima Province, and it's right on the edge of the radiation zone. That's a really interesting part of Japan at the moment cause it's, you know, ideologically contested and biologically fraught. So there's an artist called Yoshiaki Kaihatsu who has been staging some performance activism interventions down there, and recently built a sort of a politician's hut. He built a wooden structure, which is something that he often does in his artworks, and inhabits it and lives there and invites people in, often dressed as, in big animal costumes, or as a mole actually, and it's called, the translation is kind of 'politician's house house'. Anyway, he's invited, well his representative, his agent, asked me to go and do a performance down there. So I would like to spend a bit more time in that area.

[MUSIC: Actual Russian Brides, *This Haus*]

I've actually done quite a lot of work in China since I've arrived here and mediating between project managers in China and Japan is hilarious in a way, because the Chinese pace is super fast, more than I'm used to as an Australian, and the Japanese pace is much slower than I'm used to as an Australian, trying to mediate between those two and get a project functional was hilarious in many ways. So that's one of the challenges and, maybe the rest of them are all tied up in that, but the beauty that comes from that is the meticulous nature of the work here and the detail that people go to and the perfection that you see even in architecture or on a day-by-day basis in food or just in wrapping something in the supermarket. The perfection that's aimed at, and the time that is taken to get something done is... you have to adjust to it and it's not, it's not easy for the Western brain, or at least for my brain. I'm still trying to become more patient.

Tokyo is in the state of emergency now. It was declared a few days ago. Highly criticised by many as being a slow decision, in a global context has come slowly and only some of Japan is declared to be at this level of, sort of, alert. Personally, how it affected me as an artist, is it closed the biggest show that I've been in since I arrived here, I was part of a group show at Mori Art Museum, and we opened mid-November. But the show was scheduled to be open all the way through to the end of March and it closed possibly before March. We didn't really get the last half much. So that was sad, but at least we got to open, whereas a lot of shows that were slated are just not going to open. And I really feel for those artists because especially, I mean it is all connected. What I said before, exhibitions here, are planned a long time in advance, more than you would think. So those projects that have been deliberated over for years, some of them may not be able to happen, and that's really devastating. The small galleries, it's, I guess the same as everywhere is, everything's shut. But not everywhere in Japan, so I'm still seeing on my social media invitations to shows, which is weird, but they'll be in another prefecture, so people are still in fact working. Yes, people are live streaming performance art and music. Harder to do for the visual arts. Erina Matsui who I just mentioned earlier has a show open at the moment because it's in Okayama and that is not under the ban.

How are Japanese artists responding? They're doing their bit, they're stopping, they're stopping work and probably we're all just retreating into studios, and spending the time making new work. I guess I wouldn't say it's not so much different for the artist community here as it is everywhere else.

Actually in my next show, which is not cancelled yet, we're working towards opening Yokohama Triennale in July, with any luck. So it's meant to open early July, and I'm part of that. I'm hoping it's not postponed. So I'm doing a kind of, a huge installation for that, that involves lots and lots of different local Japanese artists. So that's been really interesting to work with local Yokohama people. We've shown the show before, once last year and it was really fun and successful. It's about, it's about sex and shrimp, and which in an Australian context we call it 'prawnography'. And we have the Prime Minister in that show and we were actually on TV in Yokohama and the comedy of it went down fine, and when we didn't suffer any consequences. So I'm going to see in July, hopefully, maybe the world's more distracted and when one can get other radical agendas up, I'm not sure.

I guess that's what we're all trying to work out as artists sitting at home at the moment, is what happens to this fantasy of globalism or do you really take it local and how can you be political if you can't travel and therefore don't experience things through other people's eyes, which is so necessary in order to make a comment on a culture or to contribute to a culture.

Even going back to the first thing I said about arriving here with a project that I decided was not ready because it wasn't culturally sensitive enough, I wouldn't have known that if I couldn't have come here. And we're heading into times where travel is not going to be what it was, and maybe the ambitions of artists have to change. I've been supporting myself for the last year by traveling around, doing exhibitions, one after the other in museums in different countries, and that may not be possible, but we might have to reframe how we think about being an artist.

Somehow remain sensitive to the global situation while not being able to be there in person. Art with technology is going to have a lot to bring to that, to connect us in different ways.

Speaker 1 (19:20):

You've been listening to INTEL Podcast Series, produced by the Australia Council for the Arts, May 2020.

On the next Australia Council INTEL podcast *Things will have to wait*, with James Batchelor and Judith Hamann. We connect with two artists who embarked on Australia Council residencies in Europe, at the very moment that everything changed. Reporting live are musician and composer, Judith Hamann at the Helsinki International Artists Programme on a small Island outside of Helsinki, and dancer and choreographer, James Batchelor at the prestigious Cité in Paris.