

# Conversations with Curators: Anna Davis on collaboration and experimentation

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION — PUBLISHED 24 JULY 2019

TIARNEY MIEKUS [INTRODUCTION]

Hello, and welcome to the Art Guide Australia podcast with Tiarney Miekus. This episode marks the beginning of a four-part 'Conversations With Curators' series, where we talk with four curators about the processes, ideas, and stories behind the curatorial work. For this first episode, I spoke with Anna Davis. Anna holds the position of curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia, better known as MCA. During this time she's worked with many prominent Australian and international artists, such as Hayden Fowler Patricia Piccinini and Sun Xun, and recently curated major solo survey exhibitions on Jenny Watson and Louise Hearman alongside Clothilde Bullen, Anna is also the co-curator of MCA'S iteration of 'The National 2019: New Australian Art', which is a three part exhibition showing across MCA, Carriageworks and the Art Gallery of New South Wales until late June. Anna and I talk about what curating means to her, the experience of working with well-known artists who have vast careers, and the importance of risk-taking, conversation and experimentation and curating. Finally, we talked through the collaborative curatorial process behind The National 2019.

TM

Let's perhaps start at a very practical level. You've held the position of curator at MCA since 2009. What does being a curator look like at a day-to-day level?

ANNA DAVIS:

For me being a curator at the MCA, one of the reasons I love it so much is it's so varied. So it is difficult to sort of put it into one box, but, um, I mean, a lot of it is based in an office. Uh, I share an office with Rachel Kent who's the chief curator here, and we sometimes describe it as book jail. There's like a thousand books in here, and there's also, certainly on my side of the office, like heaps and heaps of pictures, of different artist's work and things I've collected that maybe inspire me or just trigger thoughts and memories to do with the things that I'm working on. And I'm always surrounded by my research. So a lot of curating is based on research, whether that's online or, you know, books and all sorts of other things. So I always feel like there's piles of research everywhere.

And a lot of curating is also about collaborating. So I don't think, while, you know, sometimes you'll see me sitting behind my desk, you know, typing away, a lot of it on a day-to-day basis is meeting and working with other people, whether that's artists, of course, who are the key to the whole curating game, or all the teams at the MCA. So, I mean, it's quite a big institution, so there's lots of different people who work in different areas and we're constantly collaborating and working with them on different aspects of any particular show or book or whatever you're working on at the time.

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Did you always, or how did you get on the path to becoming a curator?

AD

Yes, good question. Um, like a number of curators, I think today, I didn't, you know, I didn't go to university to study to be a curator. I have a past life as an artist, so I might describe myself as a lapsed artist or non-practising artist. So I went to art school, and I did a PhD as well in media arts. But all through my, you know, my younger years, my twenties or whatever, making art and traveling and that sort of thing, I was also putting on events and little shows, I guess, of my own and other people's work. So it always felt like that was sort of part of being an artist as well, was this kind of curating out of necessity, I guess, just, you know, as ways to show work. And I think one of the key things that got me into being a curator more specifically was I, I lived in Holland and lived in Amsterdam for about a year and a half in my twenties in the 90s.

And I was right into the video, video art scene at the time, video and media arts, and Amsterdam was the real center of that. And I was wandering around and just trying to get some volunteer work at the, um, worldwide video festival, which is, you

know, partially held at the Stedelijk Museum. It was all around the city. And ended up getting a kind of job there, like as a production assistant, which kind of blew my mind and was quite formative for me in terms of finding out what it was like to actually work in an institution. So that was one thing. And then on the other hand, me and a whole group of artists and friends were putting on these art events or video art events at places like squats, night clubs, that kind of thing. So it was sort of experimental non-museum spaces. So yeah, I guess I come from both those backgrounds, but yeah, predominantly from being an artist.

TM

When you say I guess that, an idea of been elapsed artist. Do you think that that form of life gives you an extra element to your curatorial practice that maybe other curators who don't have an artistic background might miss.

AD

Look I certainly think it does form a big part of my curatorial practice. I certainly know what it feels like to put my art out there or that, that feeling of vulnerability or exposure when you actually show your work. And I think having an understanding of that from an artist's perspective can be just useful on a kind of empathy level in that you kind of understand how difficult it can be. And I think particularly when you're working with artists who are working at a very high professional level, sometimes people forget they're putting themselves out there in this really public way and no matter how sort of famous or, you know, how many exhibitions they've done, it's still an incredibly personal and potentially vulnerable position to find yourself in. So that's something I feel that I can offer, I guess, as a curator is having that empathy and understanding. And, you know, on the other hand, I think it forms a big part of my work in that for me, curating is a really creative process. So it's about working with artists, but working with ideas as well.

TM

I think the idea of being a curator means different things to different curators. How would you define what it means to you?

AD

Yeah, I totally agree. I think being a curator is many different things and it's different things to different people. So for me, it is first and foremost, it's like, as I said, it's about, it's about working with artists and ideas. So I would describe myself as a kind of artist-led curator. I am most interested in working collaboratively and closely with artists to develop their ideas and to give them a platform, I guess, to experiment and create new works or new experiences, um, through their work. So for me, yeah, curating is this collaborative, creative and experimental process. It's a way of testing out ideas. It's a way of allowing artists to create, um, projects that perhaps they wouldn't be able to do without this kind of support. But it's also about, yeah, a deeply kind of experimental research process that actually allows, you know, new ideas to happen through, through the curatorial process. So I don't see it as sort of something that, where you're working with something that's preexisting and you're sort of placing it in a space and that's, that's it. It's an experimental research process that happens with the artists in collaboration.

TM

You've curated some major shows featuring the work of Jenny Watson and Louise Hearman plus also having worked with Sun Xun, and Hayden Fowler and Patricia Piccinni among so many others. But when you're working to produce survey shows with artists like Jenny Watson, for example, who just have such stature and have such careers of such breadth, how do you go about finding the curatorial narrative?

AD

Yeah it's interesting. I think for me, it's about being open and flexible to the actual artist and artwork that you're dealing with. So not coming to a show or an artist with a preconceived idea about their work and like how you're going to structure anything. For me, the best way to approach it, and the way that I approach it, is to start with lots of conversations. So although I'll do a lot of obviously background research and have all these kinds of ideas and images sort of simmering away in the background, the exhibition really starts to take shape in a real sense, once me and the artists are really talking. I think when you get the chance to work with someone like Jenny Watson or Louise Hearman, and it's over a number of years, which is fantastic, you get to develop this kind of relationship with them. And hopefully a level of trust comes through that.

And they're quite good to talk about, I think in relation to each other, they're

very different artists. And so both shows had, I had a totally different approach. So with Jenny that the approach became quite biographical in a sense. So we had these fantastic conversations, you know, we'd sit for hours and talk about her life and you know, her different adventures and travels, but we'd be sitting out on her property, watching the horses run by. And, uh, and she was such a great talker and sort of storyteller. She can weave these wonderful stories about her life and these different experiences. And so for me, that became a way to kind of structure the exhibition was this biographical sense of her life and travels between international places and, and Australia. And then tying that in with these particular key themes or motives in her life that appear across all these different places that she's traveled.

So that's kind of how it developed through these conversations and then teasing out the ideas around punk and feminism and, you know, um, music and all these kind of horses. You know, these sort of key ideas just naturally emerged and fit very well with Jenny's practice, which is quite biographical in nature, or autobiographical. But then someone like Lousie Hearman, working with her, also a fantastic artist to work with. And we would have really long conversations and I mean, hours and hours and hours, and we would just talk about all sorts of things. But in the end, the way I found to deal with her work, and the way that made the most sense to both of us, was to just drop any idea of thematic or history or anything like that, or time-frames chronology, and just work around ideas of mood and atmosphere. And yeah, just that kind of sense of being with the paintings and how they triggered these different emotions or moods. So, yeah, I guess it's about being flexible to the work and to the artist and then developing the structure around that.

TM

It sounds like you've just had such a great relationship with both of them and I'm not to ask you to name names or anything, but I am just curious if you're not totally gelling with an artist, if that's ever happened, how do you get around that?

AD

Yeah. Actually, someone asked me this the other day and I don't think it is essential that you're best friends with an artist when you're doing a show with them. It's definitely helpful if you have some kind of rapport or you can have conversations. And generally I would say 99% of the time the artists I've worked with, I mean, it's fascinating and exciting and I'm so curious and like they're such interesting people, it's just worked out really well and, you know, we just can't stop talking. And every now and again, yeah, for sure. I, you know, haven't, it, hasn't always been easy with every artist that I've worked with and I think that's fine. It's just, it just will necessarily make things more difficult. But also, maybe it means you just have to step back from the self a little bit and just try and work out what that particular artist is talking about and draw ideas and thematics or whatever you're trying to work with with them about their work out from, you know, whatever dialogue you can have.

TM

With Louise and Jenny's shows, did you decide that it was time for them to have these big major solos or there was some other motivation that brought the exhibitions forward?

AD

Yeah, it's an interesting question. I mean, basically, yes, it was something that I felt very passionately about that it was time and that we could do an amazing show. And why, why wouldn't we sort of thing. But again, working in a big institution, you never do anything completely on your own. And that includes getting an exhibition to have a slot in the MCA program, takes a lot of negotiations and you have to do a lot of proposals and get everyone on board and make sure that it fits within the broader program. You know, what other shows are on or what kinds of shows we're doing over these years and making sure there's a good spread and diversity and all these, all these questions that everyone should and does look at that. Yeah. On the other hand, those two particular artists, I mean, Jenny Watson and Louise Hearman, were kind of a no-brainer in a sense. Like it was like, it certainly wasn't like I had to argue my case a lot, but in other occasions it can be more of a uphill struggle.

Particularly people don't have such immediate connection to an artist's work or, you know, you're feeling like you're having to explain things a little more. I mean, both of those artists are painters predominantly. I work across many different types of media and artists, you know, working across media these days, and sometimes in some of the more experimental practices, it has been more of a struggle, I guess, to get the shows up. I've for example, would talk about Joy Hinterding and

David Haines's energy show, which I did in 2015, which was great and a huge success I would say. And people really liked, the general public really loved it, but it took me a while to get people to understand, I think, more broadly what kind of show it would be just because of the kinds of media and the sort of experimental nature of their work.

TM

This is a bit of a silly question I have, but I'm just curious anyway, do you ever get star struck when you're working with really famous or innovative great artists?

AD

For sure! Yeah. I think you can call it like an art crush or, I mean, absolutely. If you love someone's work. I mean, the first time I met Louise Hearman and I was just blown away because I just always loved her work. And, um, I felt like, you know, meeting her and going to her house and being there with all the artworks and stuff. I think I was pretty starstruck. I mean, it's exciting. It's just particularly if it's someone you've loved, you know, since you were young or, you know, um, you've had this kind of relationship with the work, but not necessarily the person. It can be a pretty intense moment to actually see and meet the person in real life.

TM

Changing subjects a little bit. I've heard a few curators and art workers, arts workers, in the last couple of years make the claim that presently art creation and curation is becoming risk adverse because of our current economic and cultural climate. Do you see that happening from a curatorial perspective?

AD

No, I don't really. I mean, I do understand the comment because I think it's a difficult time to certainly to get money, to do things. So, I mean, money is the word, the dirty word or whatever that people don't tend to talk about. But, you know, to put on big exhibitions, you need budgets. And it's just the climate of trying to get money for the arts is difficult for artists, for institutions, for all sorts of people. So, necessarily often that will make a sort of more risk averse climate. But on the other hand, from my perspective and all the curators that I'm sort of working with or know, it doesn't affect. I mean, they're really wanting to push interesting and risky programming. So I don't know. Like I think I get it, but I think certainly from the MCA, I don't, I don't think that's happened. For me it's important. I think there's, there's nothing worse than a show that involves no risk. I think I've said this before, but it's, it's such an important part of, you know, making contemporary art, being experimental, having an aspect of, of risk within either the thinking or the work is kind of crucial. Or, for me it becomes very boring and not relevant or urgent to the world we live in. But yeah, I think it is probably an issue that we all need to keep aware of and to, to realize that that could be something that you get pushed into and, you know, to make sure you stay on top of that.

TM

I feel like I know what you mean. And I definitely understand the sentiment that the arts is risk averse and I sympathize with it. But at the same time, I feel that more and more exhibitions are giving voice to women, gender nonconforming artists, people of color and Aboriginal artists. And while this is now slowly, and hopefully starting to become the standard for art exhibitions, it's almost in a way still at a stage where it's a kind of risk-taking...

AD

I think so. And I mean, that's what I mean. And there is that, that kind of movement going on, which I think is really important and powerful. And I don't think we should forget about that. And I think in the arts, sometimes we can shoot ourselves in the foot and, you know. Cause we're always trying to make sure that we are doing things that are pushing boundaries or overcoming these kinds of colonial structures or prejudices, but I think it's, it's really important to do so, but also to recognise like what is being done as well. So, I sort of at the moment, especially just coming out of The National, I'm feeling quite positive about what's going on. But on the other hand, I guess, you know, museums, you know, speaking from a curator who is working in an institution that there's, they're becoming these sort of centers of entertainment and there's this real focus around numbers, you know, people through the door and then these sort of spectacular blockbuster exhibitions. And for me, I, you know, I really truly hope that I don't ever have to go down that path and that's not something I want to do, but you can see that, that's probably the other end of the scale where that kind of sense of just art as entertainment, which is not so interesting.

TM

So at MCA, there's no one running around making sure that you definitely get those extremely high numbers to shows?

AD

No! I mean, that's the thing, I think the MCA has incredible attendance records, but, um, and I think a lot of that is, is driven by the exhibitions that are here, but it's also, you know, where we're at Circular Quay and there's a lot of people walking around and all that kind of stuff. So, no, I mean, all the curators here are really rigorous and they want to create shows with artists that are important and that reflect the artist's ideas and ideas that are relevant and important in the world now. But yeah, I don't know. It is a question that you do get asked quite a lot, but I don't really think it's the reality for—it's certainly not the reality for me, but for a lot of curators, they're just trying to do the best by the artists that they're working with. So some artists work is necessarily more sort of spectacular and big, but it doesn't mean that you're going to shy away from those, those quieter moments. It just depends, I guess, what the artists are making, what they're doing at this time.

TM

I think a lot of people will be very comforted to hear that answer. I thought we could talk through The National 2019: New Australian Art. You worked with Clothilde Bullen, who's the curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections and exhibitions at MCA. And the two of you worked together to generate a snapshot of the latest in Australian art. And it seems like a really fantastic and also really politically important exhibition. Maybe to start off with, I was hoping you could just briefly summarise the show and how it came together.

AD

I guess I take—I'm a little bit adverse to saying that we're showing the latest in contemporary art. I think, you know, the purview of The National is to show Australian contemporary art, but each iteration and each curators show can never be representative of everything, you know, or the latest or the newest or whatever in Australia, it's got to be something that's more specific. And, um, that was something Clo and I talked about really early on in that our show—the first thing that we, we really had to kind of unpack was okay, we're collaborating. We were basically, you know, put, put together like a double dating thing at the MCA and we didn't know each other that well at the beginning. And it was kind of like, "Okay, so what does this mean?" And these two curators to come together with such different backgrounds and such different experiences, you know, growing up on opposite side of the country, you know. I'm a white woman from Sydney and Clo's an Aboriginal woman from Perth in Western Australia.

And our life experiences and also research backgrounds, everything was so different. It seemed at the beginning. And it was like, we wanted to talk about that and just to kind of unpack those issues around what that means, but also the power hierarchies that are involved and, you know, everyone goes on about collaboration all the time. Like it's this fantastic thing, which it is, but it often is really difficult. And that was our, I guess, the beginning of our conversations. Then the second thing was really okay, this really big desire to not just to go to the usual places, to work with artists or to look for artists. We wanted to have a mixture of looking to our current relationships and research backgrounds to sort of start a dialogue with contemporary art in Australia, but also to put our reach much more broadly than we usually would go.

And a lot of that is really driven by Clo as well. Like in her bringing her experiences and background with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, working in remote communities, which I haven't had nearly as much experience with, and her sort of knowledge and background in these quite remote places and what artists were doing there was a great starting point for us to stretch out that way and look at also regional centers. So yeah, there was a lot of travel, just kind of, lots of talking. And this includes with the other curators at Carriageworks and at the Art Gallery, just talking about artists and what they were doing. And we were really, me and Clo were quite determined that we weren't going to have any kind of theme or any kind of structure. And we just wanted to just be really open at the beginning and to allow, I guess, this notion of what it means for a white curator and Aboriginal curator to come together in this kind of national context to be the kind of driver of the show. So, it was it's on the one hand, it seems like a, quite a strange premise, but then on the other hand, it started to make more and more sense. The more we talked about

it and realised what we could sort of tease out of that our collaboration and what that meant really connected really strongly with a lot of the artists' works that we were seeing and the kind of conversations that we started to have. Yeah, it became this really interesting process, I guess, of developing, uh, being out artist-led. So going and seeing artists being open, not, not being fixed about what kind of work or who, or what age or what, you know, emerging, established all those things we tried to put aside. And then having this kind of idea in the back of our head that we wanted to base it on our collaboration. And then all these artists' works that we were seeing and the artists conversations we're having, sort of coming back to that.

TM

When talking about this idea of nothing being fixed. And you've also talked about it as this sense of disharmony throughout the show and how all the works don't fit perfectly together. And I guess part of what defines your iteration of The National and even the very idea of national identity is that sense of, you know, there's no totality for it. Was that on your mind from the very beginning of the show or that just came about as you began curating?

AD

Yes and no. So it was quite an organic process. So for me, I think I've said to a couple of your questions, that conversation is a really early part of my curatorial process. So my conversations with Clo were really important in sort of driving what the show ended up becoming. And really that issue of things not fitting together or things being slightly uncomfortable, or notions of disharmony, came up really early in our conversation. And we both came at that in different ways. Surprise, surprise. And Clo said to me really early on, she said, "You know, when I was sort of interested in the idea, but then I was like, oh, what's it going to look like?" You know, what, how are we going to physically get this happening in this space? And she was like, you know, there's from her perspective, just like, there's no assimilation here. You know, talking from a political position, she was like, you know, Australia, it's national identity, it's not homogenized, you know, so I don't think the work needs to be either.

AD

And that sort of sparked something in me. And I was like, I hadn't really thought about it in that way. And it allowed me to kind of start thinking about, I guess, how we would physically curate the show through that lens. And then I started talking to Clo about, so often Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander work is kind of fitted into this Western, you know, institutional framework. Would she be interested in switching it around a bit? You know, there's these ideas of exploring men's and women's business and how often shows from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, they may have sections that are, that are like that. What would it mean to sort of use that in our show in a different way, in a kind of experimental way. And Clo was immediately interested in that. And so this conversation started developing and we just started having that in the back of our mind.

It was sort of throughout the process at this time, you know, we're having these conversations, artists were being kind of talked about and selected and, you know, groupings were happening. We sometimes say that, you know, maybe I brought a third of the artists, Clo brought a third of the artists to the table, and then a third we brought together. So it was sort of like, there's all these different types of relationships going on there. And then it all comes together in what we've been talking about as the third space. So if you're, you know, if you're trying to curate from these very different spaces, different cultural backgrounds, what does it mean when those two parts overlap to create a sort of third space. That became very important as well. So, yeah, there's lots of layers and the artists brought so much. So, I mean, as curators, you don't always know, particularly with a show like this, you don't know what it's going to be. You can keep saying that you do in presentations and, um, you know, public speaking engagements, but you really don't until, you know, you, you may, you pick these artists, but they might be making brand new works, which change over the course of time. And so you just don't know until quite late in the piece. And then you kind of are drawing things together.

TM

And I do think it's also important to reiterate, and as we've also been touching upon that, the show does come at a time when institutions and curators and artists are really starting to engage with historical and contemporary colonialisation and racism. And the show really does touch upon that. And I think it also shows that there's a hugely ethical component to being a curator. How do you navigate that when you're curating?

AD

For me, I think it's being really aware of your position and your privileged position and understanding that the histories of what has been before and then acknowledging, and being able to accept that. And then being able to be open enough, to have difficult conversations and to allow other viewpoints in and to hopefully shake things up and get, get it to a better position. So, I mean, it was really important to me to work with Clo and then to allow these Indigenous really powerful works and perspectives to come to the center of the show and to really allow that to be the beginning. And just to be the beginning of the show, that was, it was just really, really important. And the more that me and Clo work together, the more I got a better understanding of that. And I, you know, I don't come at this saying that I had some great knowledge or understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and art practices. It's something that I am, I just want to know more about and I want to allow to come to the center in Australia. So, yeah, look, I think a lot of curators feel a similar way that it is time and it's been time for a long time, but things need to change. And it's part of your job as a curator to make sure that you're not blocking that, and you are actively facilitating new things, like that to happen.

TM

Changing topic and thinking more big picture, you been at MCA for 10 years now, and in the last few years in particular, you've curated, just some really fantastic and tremendous shows. What do you see as being the next curatorial step?

AD

I mean, I've got projects that I'm working on, which I can't really talk about yet, that are coming out, which is exciting. It's always, you know, there's always something exciting on the horizon. Sometimes I guess if I'm in a dream world scenario, I would love to do something that was more like, even like a longer term projects with artists where you're literally working over years and things can develop. I have this kind of fantasy about taking over a high rise building somewhere, you know, some sort of abandoned building and allowing all these artists to just move in and create studios and then over a number of, you know, maybe 10 years or something, having these exhibitions develop out of that. Yeah. I mean, I, I really enjoy working in Asia and I've been working with a number of artists in the last few years and also working on New Romance. So in that sense, working cross-culturally is something that I'm really interested in doing more. So, yeah, we'll just have to wait and see.

TM [Conclusion]: And that was Anna Davis discussing her curatorial practice. We hope you've enjoyed this first episode of Conversations With Curators. Stay tuned for the next conversation with curator and artist, Nici Cumpston who discusses her role as curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art at the Art Gallery of South Australia and talks through how conversation and relationships are central to her work.