



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST DEC 2019

Transcript of interviews:

Esther Anatolitis - NAVA

MEAA – Various members

ESTHER ANATOLITIS - NAVA

- Tim Stackpool: Esther Anatolitis is the Executive Director of NAVA, the National Association for the Visual Arts, which leads the discussion and advocates the policies that strengthen Australia's contemporary art. She has appeared on the podcast before. Esther, welcome back and thanks for your time once again.
- Esther A: Wonderful to be with you.
- Tim Stackpool: Esther I'm guessing this is not the type of end to 2019 that you had hoped for.
- Esther A: No. And I think in the arts and for artists in particular the kind of end or start to any year is one where you want to feel valued and appreciated. And I think when the art is visible to the national agenda that is valued and appreciated, and I think it's been fantastic having our minister Paul Fletcher being really, really clear and saying it's just an administrator change, it doesn't affect funding. But it's not a question of the confidence that NAVA is to have, the issue is more broadly around from the prime minister's office down, how do we understand the structure and the purpose of government when we don't have a department that's named the arts, what does that tell us about the government's cultural priorities, it's understanding of the multi billion dollar industry that is the arts, and it's understanding of artists? So not a great way to end the year.
- Tim Stackpool: I wonder if I might just ask you about how this information came to you on the day. There was not a whole lot of information floating around the place about how the portfolios may change. When that information started coming through to you. How did that unfold in your office?
- Esther A: Oh look, we, the National Association for the Visual Arts is not a government body. We're a membership-based organisation. Artists are our members and our bosses and arts workers and arts organisations. So it's not something that a general government restructure is not something that we would have expected to be notified about. However, we would have expected that the Department of Communications and the Arts would have been told. And we certainly would've expected that the secretary of the department also would have been told.
- Esther A: So that's a huge problem that even within government people weren't told. And as the outgoing secretary who of course has been one of the five to lose his job, as Mike Mrdak said in what we've seen quoted as his email to his colleagues, obviously, it would have been great if the restructure had had the opportunity to have the expert input of the public service leaders who actually do the work.
- Esther A: And so I think it was that shock of just an announcement that was a decision made by just a very small handful of people who didn't consult their ministerial colleagues, didn't let the secretaries of departments know. It didn't get the best

range of advice about, well what are the impacts of these kinds of restructures? What happens now for our colleagues who work in communications and the arts when they need to connect across government departments, get a brief up to the treasurer or to the prime minister. In next year's budget, there will be no department with the name of the arts on it. So at that top level of decision making the arts won't be there.

Esther A: So I guess, yeah, our efforts has gone from one of sorry, what? Yeah, just a shock and disappointment and then making some calls and the more calls and questions that we made, the more concerned we were.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. And given that you're far more connected than most of us who are listening to the podcast, do you have any idea why the government went about doing the change in the portfolio, and the announcement that way?

Esther A: Oh look, it's very confusing. It is very confusing. And I think it's a particular style of governing that this prime minister and the former couple of prime ministers sort of this frustrating revolving door of leadership we've had for a while it seems like. People become prime minister and think, quick I've got to change everything or I might not be prime minister tomorrow, instead of thinking about the long term. What does Australia need to prepare us for the future? Who are the practitioners who create that future? How do we make sure that we're supporting and championing them?

Esther A: So it just ... And it's not just in the arts that received this, there just isn't a responsible longterm vision, which is really frustrating. We've got a minister like Fletcher who, he worked with Senator Alston when Alston was arts minister and set up that Visual Arts and Craft Strategy and a whole bunch of other things some time ago. Mr. Fletcher was also parliamentary secretary to Malcolm Turnbull when he was communications minister.

Esther A: So he actually comes to the portfolio with a world of experience as compared to other recent arts ministers. Ready to engage. He's been fantastic getting in there with a broad range of sectors. We would just love to see that same longterm vision from other aspects of the government because it's, yeah, it's really concerning.

Tim Stackpool: And I want to ask you Esther, professionally, you advocate for months and years actually over the previous iteration of the Liberal Government and we spoke to you soon after this government was returned earlier in the year. But looking at the amount of advocacy that you've done, the strategies you've put in place, and yet the government still goes about treating the arts in the way that it has with regard to this art's portfolio. Do you then have to think about NAVA's strategy over the last few months and even longer about how you've touched the government, how you've tried to reach out to the government and yet they've still behaved in this fashion. Is that a failing on the part of NAVA or is it just the way this government behaves?

Esther A: It really does feel like adapting to a new normal. And you know I'm used to in the past working with governments of all parties where I have some great conversations with colleagues. I've got a clear understanding of what the values are of the party and of these term of government and what they'd like to achieve. Some parties like to develop policies that are really strongly principles based. Some like to look at industry strategies that are going to, if we shift this and pull and push this lever it will have this kind of economic benefit.

Esther A: I think the challenge that I'm feeling and that people know well beyond the arts are feeling, is the kind of inconsistency, the lack of just even communicating what those values are. There are so many issues where at other times in history under previous Liberal National coalitions, we've had a pretty clear sense of what comes next. But this current period of just not just short term ism but it's like the time is not being put into thinking about what's your strategy, what are the pitfalls? If you do this, what are the dependencies, what else will happen?

Esther A: And so when you're running an art's organisation or a membership body, and we've got our couple of resources that we try to put together and work from. So you try working a predictable and rational way so that you're understanding the policy agenda, but then random things like this happen, you think, okay, so is randomness the agenda and how does that affect a great big industry?

Esther A: So I think, yeah, the shift in thinking for me is what is this new normal? Let's hope it doesn't belong and remain normal. And how now that we've just, we've lost a departmental secretary with a great deal of experience, how will we make sure that we in the sector are supporting our colleagues in public service to be making the arguments and the cases that they need to?

Tim Stackpool: Esther, throughout this challenge I think we're going to be asking you questions that you never really going to have the answer to, but with regard to how the government has formulated the new portfolio, and the word arts is not even included in the title of the portfolio...

Esther A: Yeah, that's right...

Tim Stackpool: ...do you think this was a deliberate comment or provocation by the government, or is there just ambivalence towards the arts?

Esther A: Look, I don't think it's possible to be ambivalent towards art, towards artists, towards artistic experiences, towards those experiences that we have in our lives that invigorate us and move us and completely shift our perspectives. We couldn't go a day without that...

Tim Stackpool: Esther, sorry to interrupt you, but in terms of the government response though...

Esther A: Yeah. So in answering your question about are they ambivalence or is it a move that is around to try to make a specific point of not valuing, I don't think for any human being ambivalence is possible towards artists and arts experiences that transform our thinking and invigorate us every single day. You can't be ambivalent towards arts and arts experiences.

Esther A: And so then it's a question of are people so frightened about the practitioners in our culture who are taking the most thrilling creative risks, are they resentful towards them? Are they uncomfortable about confident, open, experimental, free expression? Are they concerned about a diversity of voices, about the First Nations' strength of culture that must and will eventually have the voice of parliament that is needed? Are they uncomfortable with the fact that artists ask questions through their work that politicians are too afraid to?

Esther A: So one of these options be it fear, insecurity, concern, but not ambivalence, is what has driven this. And so I would have been fascinated to be a fly on the wall in the conversation between the prime minister, and from what I understand was an extremely small handful of his front bench, who made these decisions. Because the arts does need to be in with other departments and there are great conversations to be had here, art to infrastructure, would be a really very obvious one. Arts in regional development, arts in communication.

Esther A: But the choice to render the arts invisible is no accident. And I'm just really worried that it's going to make the minister's job and the public services job unnecessarily harder. When we think about what a strong economy is for and everything else that the government says that it stands for, surely all of those things are about creating a world where we can be enriched by the most valuable, important things that are created by each other. This is what life's about and so that just makes it even more concerning and mystifying.

Tim Stackpool: So if we now think about the strategy going forward, and a little bit later on in the podcast I'll be talking to members of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance...

Esther A: Oh, brilliant...

Tim Stackpool: ...are you considering more of a collaboration with other groups such as that?

Esther A: We work closely with all the key national organisations, that's essential and yes, we couldn't work otherwise.

Tim Stackpool: You said earlier in this interview that the minister has indicated that it is business as usual, but how much confidence does that really give you?

Esther A: Look, I think, in the current government, I'm super glad to have Paul Fletcher as minister because he gets it and he genuinely cares, and he's bringing an expertise to it. I can completely understand the worries of artists in the whole

sector. I mean on the day this was announced my phone didn't stop ringing all day. And that isn't an exaggeration, people were in a real panic because unfortunately, the pattern that has been established by the minister's predecessors is not a good one.

Esther A: I mean we had a situation just a few years ago where Senator Brandis and Julie Bishop launched the Australia Council's move to Strategic Plan. And they talked about how excellent it was and they spoke at length at that launch about specific aspects of it that they welcomed. And then what was it? Not even six months after that, George Brandis announced those debilitating cuts to the Australia Council. The shockwaves of which are still being felt by the whole sector because that completely derailed the Australia Council Strategic Plan. They had to change all of their major funding programs and if you can imagine just the work involved in that work that would have been the time as Australia Council colleagues supporting artists and doing other great things.

Esther A: And then Mr. Fifield returned some of that money after Senator Brandis moved along, but there was never the return of all of it, of all of the Australia Council's capacity. And the fact that that then happened, but then of course there was an efficiency dividend that was applied, not just to the Australia Council but also to national culture institutions. Some are pulling out buckets when it rains. Like there are serious, serious problems there.

Esther A: We've got Aboriginal art centres in huge challenges. Of course the entire small to medium sector we've seen. We've also seen sector service organisations announce that they are closing. And all of this was precipitated by one action of a former minister which came without warning. And so again, I just mention that you can't make such a significant change and think it doesn't have repercussions.

Esther A: I think as engaged and as expert as the minister has been so far, which has been so welcomed, it's clear that the art's sector really needs to have the confidence of either industry strategy or a shared or a policy that gives everyone the confidence that there is actually an overall plan from the federal perspective, that the industry and its needs are understood, that the sector and its artists and arts workers and organizations are respected and valued. So the enormous value that they bring to Australia, not beyond the \$111.7 billion.

Esther A: We talk about philanthropy and private funds and that is so, so important. The biggest philanthropists in Australia are artists who are investing in their own work, in seeing each other's work. This is the philanthropy in the original sense of the meaning of that word, love for humanity and for each other and what we create. So I think to have the government to understand that this is what enriches Australia, would be incredibly important and that's going to involve making some clear public gestures about that just to really give that confidence.

Tim Stackpool: Now Esther, just to finish off, over the last few weeks, I've been having some quiet conversations with various art institutions who are somewhat reluctant to

speaking out against the government regarding the positioning of the arts within the current portfolio because they rely extensively on government grants in order to exist pretty much. The concern that they would end up biting the hand that feeds them. Is there a way to advocate around that sort of feeling?

Esther A: Yeah, and it's a really hard one. And I think when people aren't used to engaging in public advocacy, they often confuse it with lobbying as though they're just asking publicly for money or elbowing out their fellow organisation. Whereas, advocacy is just a constructive public conversation about what we value. And for those of us who are the heads of organisations who receive public money or who are the heads of nonprofit organisations, the constitution of a nonprofit organisation, says it's there to contribute to the public good. That's why you can apply for and competitively receive taxpayers' funds because what you're doing is for the public good.

Esther A: And that necessitates having a really open civic conversation, one in that public space where decisions are made, where ideas are generated so that everyone is part of that conversation. But also so politicians are hearing about the arts. I mean Arts Day on the Hill, back in the middle of 2019, we discovered in meeting with MPs back to back that they never hear anything about the arts. Nobody invites them to things in their electorate. No one comes to meet with them. So there's public and there's private advocacy, there's third party advocacy. We encourage those influential high profile people to write letters or meet with MPs.

Esther A: But there's also the everyday stuff of just remembering that MPs are also people in our community and that we're paying their salary. So they need to hear from us. Some of the organisations devote lots of money where they can afford it to development managers, to be building those great relationships with business people to encourage their philanthropy. And yet we don't treat MPs as significant partners and stakeholders in their organisations. They need to have that conversation as well.

Esther A: And if more and more of us were comfortable doing that, simply speaking from the heart about the value of what we do and the specifics of what we do, it would be a very different landscape. The prime minister would say, "Hey, let's restructure. This is a new department, we don't need the word arts in there." So you then have a fellow front bencher say, "Oh, but you know, arts are really important in my electorate. Oh come on. I'm involved in this, I've spoken at this place. I went to an opening last week."

Esther A: That's the kind of background Australian conversation we all need to foster so that when something serious happens, everyone is ready to go. And not just us, the stretched and under resourced, but people who care about the arts, and who've got those political relationships come aside and say, "Mate, you might sort this through because this doesn't feel like a very good idea to me."

Tim Stackpool: Well, Esther, yes, I think they're the conversations that perhaps we should have been having a lot earlier on. And they're conversations that we should still have of course, but following your advice going forward.

Tim Stackpool: Esther I do want to say thank you for speaking to us on the podcast once again. It's lovely to hear you actually so buoyant within the current situation because the conversations that I've been having with so many people recently in the visual arts recently have been quite dismal to be honest. But I really appreciate your time on the podcast.

Esther A: Tim, thank you. Just on the dismal, I think what energises me is just the incredible work of arts work and organisations and artists who get to meet every day and who certainly let NAVA know when they feel that we're not on top of something that we should be. And this is why we all do what we do.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah, for sure Esther. So thank you so much once again.

Esther A: Thank you.

Tim Stackpool: That's Esther Anatolitis, Executive Director with the National Association for the Visual Arts.

MEAA – VARIOUS MEMBERS

- Tim Stackpool: But the arts portfolio, of course, extends beyond visual arts. It covers music, film, television and actors, of course, and they've mobilised to make their voices heard and strengthen the approach being made by all the arts sectors. The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance is the umbrella union, which includes Actor's Equity, and a number of members gathered on the front lawn of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney recently to discuss, strategise and make the case for greater arts recognition in government.
- Tim Stackpool: I first spoke with actor Jonathan Biggins and indicated to him that it's hard enough to get the acting gigs to make a living from within the arts, but now, making the arts within its own portfolio somewhat invisible can only make it tougher.
- Jonathan B: Yeah, well, I think it's also a broader question that I think a lot of the population don't realise when they're experiencing the arts that they're actually experiencing them. I mean, the arts runs everything from Real Housewives of Melbourne to the opera and there's no gaps. There's no demarcation points or barriers. It's all the same thing, and nearly all of us engage in some way every day with that.
- Jonathan B: I think what governments need to do, and it's not really a question of money, this is not about funding. It's just about a question of recognition of the importance of that in the daily lives of people in forging the national identity, promoting social cohesion, creativity, mental wellbeing, enjoyment of life, everything. I think this notion that we all have to be quiet is wrong. I think the best way governments can promote the arts is just talk about it. Put it on the national agenda, give it a responsibility of a cabinet portfolio or in ministerial portfolio. Yes, we still have a minister, but this is the thin edge of the wedge.
- Jonathan B: So, I think it's two stages to this campaign and one and an initial response, which is anger at the consolidation of the ministry. And then, the second one is a much longer term thing in trying to put the arts back into the national conversation and remind everybody that we all do it. We all enjoy it. We all benefit from it, so let's give it the importance and the status it deserves.
- Jonathan B: The irony is that the major theatre companies, for example, returned to the government 130% of the money they get from the government in funding through PAYG tax, so the government already is getting a 30% levy on the money it's spent. It gets its money back and then some. That's just from those companies. So, I mean, the economic argument against funding the arts doesn't hold water anyway.
- Jonathan B: But I think we shouldn't necessarily concentrate on it. We've just got to concentrate on the joy it brings people, on the benefits just to life and to being a

citizen. And say that we don't want more money necessarily. We just want you to respect the fact that it's there and engage in the ideas and don't denigrate it and hide it away.

Tim Stackpool: That's actor Jonathan Biggins there. Now I also spoke with performer Camilla Ahkin about whether the joy of entertainment is enough to justify the arts or whether an economic return remains the priority.

Camilla Ahkin: There's always an economic argument to be made and people do have to pay their way and artists need to be paid, of course, and so it is an important aspect of it. But day-to-day, just right down to somebody, you know, a really broad vision of what arts are, it can be anything from going to the library and taking out a book and reading a piece of literature through to not necessarily going to the MCA but going to your local gallery or entering a local art competition. It has such a broad... Watching a show on Netflix. That took a bunch of artists to make the show that you're watching. So, the range of ways that it infiltrates our lives, thank goodness, is really broad, and I don't know if enough of us are aware of that fact.

Tim Stackpool: Camilla Ahkin there. In a bit more of an official capacity now, Andrew Crowley is the Director of the Equity section of the MEAA, and I asked him about the actors coming together to begin creating a unified voice for all the arts.

Andrew Crowley: The point of any campaign that we will look to launch and that we're planning is that it's about grassroots in the community. That the arts is important to everybody, not just the people who work in the arts. It's about it being fundamental and how fundamental it is to all of our lives.

Tim Stackpool: Why do you think an industry which turns over pretty much close to \$112 billion has found itself in this position within a government portfolio, not even mentioned by name, but also being part of a portfolio that is responsible for building roads and railway corridors?

Andrew Crowley: I think it's just a bit of a common narrative with this particular government. They've shown a disdain for other sections of the community. The arts is another one. They are afraid of storytellers. They are trying to shut down whistleblowers and journalists. I think they're scared of the power of the arts and the artists.

Tim Stackpool: Is the arts a danger?

Andrew Crowley: I think it could be. It's there to challenge us and it's always there to hold anybody to account including any government.

Tim Stackpool: That's Andrew Crowley there, the Director of the Equity section of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance. Finally, now to Jonathan Mill. He's the Vice President of Actor's Equity, and his perspective on the campaign to raise

awareness of the arts within the government is to include those who enjoy the arts every day.

Jonathan Mill: Because it's really about ultimately reaching out to our audiences. Now, there are millions and millions of people who come and see us. They go to the galleries, they go to the theatre, they go to these places. It's engaging with them, and putting pressure on them to say, "If you want this stuff that you love, and we know you love it because you keep coming back to it." We sell more tickets than sport. We employ more people than mining. This is a really big important industry which is being neglected by the government. And so it's really up to audiences to start to say, "Look, we need this stuff. It's really important to us. We want it, so why aren't you supporting it? Why aren't you respecting them in the way that we want you to?"

Tim Stackpool: The MEAA is just one union that represents plenty of people who work in the arts. There's the Screen Producers Association as well to consider is the Writers Guild. There's NAVA, the National Association of Visual Artists. There is a requirement to pull all of these associations together in a campaign such as this, right?

Jonathan Mill: Oh look, absolutely. Working in with the other guilds because, again, they're not funded by government. They've got nothing to lose as well. Their members obviously do if funding is cut. But it's really, it's really, I think, identifying which organisations in the sector aren't dependent upon government funding and really allowing them then to be the voice. So, it's certainly us, but we represent not just performers, musicians, technicians, crew, front of house, all of those people that work in the entertainment industry, in the arts industry. And, of course, the Writers Guild is a really important part of the union structure in the industry.

Jonathan Mill: But it's really around that, and I think that some of the producer associations like SPAA and the Live Performance Australia, in some ways they're going to be hamstrung as well, even though they don't get direct funding, they represent people who get funding. So, we'll be working with them, but I think the industry is looking on certainly the unions and the guilds to be the voice of this campaign.

Tim Stackpool: Looking at what started this entire outcry amongst the arts community, we were presented with a portfolio that didn't even mention the arts, but arts found itself within a portfolio that's also responsible for the building of roads, the construction of bridges, nation building in terms of even railways. Is simply giving the arts a more prominent position at the table a solution to this?

Jonathan Mill: Look, I think one of the big issues is it's the reduction of expertise, so by diminishing the department, by moving it, by eliminating the name, by moving it from a standalone department to a super department, it just takes away the expertise that's in that area, and it pushes the emphasis then back on who's

going to make decisions about funding? Well, it's going to be the politicians and that's something that hasn't happened in this country for 50 years.

Jonathan Mill:

We moved away from that model because it's fundamentally flawed. We don't want politicians of any stripe making decisions on what should be funded and which particular company and which artists and which galleries. That's an absolute nightmare. I think they're just setting us up for more of that. That not only will they cut funding, but that they won't have the expertise. They won't have those peers, those artists, who are currently doing the assessing on who should get funding. They'll just remove them. And the politicians will then give the money to... They will do whoever they want and that has a potential to divide the community, divide the arts community, as we start to scrabbling amongst ourselves about who are they going to fund.

Tim Stackpool:

Jonathan Mill from Actors Equity, there, talking about leading a campaign to raise awareness of the arts within the corridors of the federal government.