

West Space Artist Walks Podcast
Amelia Wallin & Abbra Kotlarczyk

TRANSCRIPT

Amelia: [pre-recorded] This conversation was recorded on the sovereign lands of the Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin nation. I pay my deepest respect to the Elders and ancestors of the Kulin nation, as well the custodians of the other lands that this conversation reaches. I acknowledge the continuing culture of First Nations People and their profound contribution to art and culture in so-called Australia.

[walking sounds, birds chirping, wind]

Abbra: For me, I mean I grew up in the rainforest up in Northern NSW, sort of Gondwana area, and for me I think missing that space has been [inaudible] because of family. So I think coming here, on this site that where we are now, along Edgars creek, on Woiwurrung Country has been... really... really incredible as far as fostering a routine. It has really provided some immersion in nature that I otherwise haven't been obviously getting, along with a lot of people, but also in face of that lack of return, to a space that I've been really really needing I think.

Amelia: This modality of walking as well is unique, things kind of percolate at a different pace when you're [Abbra: yeah, yep] walking, there's so much around us too.

Abbra: Yeah, I was a bit, I think I was a bit reticent to embrace a walking practice prior, to maybe even to having Kitaj here sort of sleeping, and having that sort of enforce that practice.

[walking sounds, baby crying in background]

Amelia: Now that we're returning to, you know, the same place where you have undertaken a lot of this research and thinking, and where we're kind of thinking through this practice, you know this is the first time we've met, we're thinking through, kind of, connections and meeting each other while walking and it's really special.

Abbra: It is, yeah, and there's a different sort of, um, conversational mode obviously that happens when you're walking.

Amelia: I'd love to hear generally what the last few months have been like for you, in regards to parenthood and creative work, and different levels of isolation, or not.

Abbra: Yeah, it's interesting, I was sort of hearing lots of other people reflect on this time and obviously there's such a broad experience of the restrictions and, um, implications of it. I was thinking about if this had happened before I was a parent I would have almost taken to it, despite all the paranoi- this anxiety and fear, but, um, I'm very much an introvert and a homebody, so for me I think it would have been this like really relishing in the time, in a very different way than what the experience has been? Which has been, you know, welcoming a new baby in, ah in May, sort of the downside of the first wave, you know, created this very new dynamic on top of the pandemic. It was this strange sort of combination of obviously so much oxytocin and um, buoyancy, I think with him being around, combined with, just really survival mode, having two children at home during that two month stage four sort of period, that we were just really thrown in the deep end in learning that dynamic. Having the children's dynamic and, um, we were really fortunate actually to have,

when he was born we had a period of about three weeks where we were able to have visitors over. Which was really quite incredible because then we went into obviously really severe isolation, I think that was a bit of a saving grace? As far as having that bit of normality, catching up with lots of friends in quite an intensive way, but then sort of relishing in that once the dynamic really dramatically shifted.

Amelia: And I imagine it's hard enough to maintain creative work and parenthood under normal circumstances [**Abbra:** Ah, absolutely], so under circumstances of extreme stage four lockdown and stay at home orders, have you had to adapt your practice, have you had to change your working methodology in order to keep working, or have you carved out space for creative work? [baby moaning]

Abbra: I haven't really managed to, the only sort of work in a sort of outcome based sort of way that I've managed to engage with was the Lieu Journal piece, but I was actually quite sick at the time of creating that as well, which was with a chest infection which was kind of interesting in terms of what I was looking to get out of that piece.

Amelia: Oh, really interesting, actually I loved listening to that piece and almost half way through you do... it does become quite difficult for you to maintain your whisper, there's a moment when...

Abbra: Yeah, my voice cracks and...

Amelia: And you can hear, it becomes really durational and really embodied, and yeah you can hear the struggle.

Abbra: I think, yeah, the breathing, the decision to record that with the voice kind of put to the side was really practical, as far as where I was at, but it obviously had such a resonance with the work. Um, but yeah that work was quite intensive to make, but it was really... it was really important for me to have that process embedded in that time. Where it felt like everything else had sort of been pushed to the side, out of necessity of not having time and space. And it was, you know, it's a very sort of dense work, I think there was a lot of parts to sort of try and bring into a cohesive sort of narrative.

[walking sounds fading]

Abbra: [whispered and pre-recorded] Inhale, and raise your arms, above your head. Apply a small amount of tea tree oil to the tip of a cotton ball. All arrangements require pain. Hold the cotton ball up to the opening of your mouth so that your breath might catch its oil and become dry, brittle, might shrink. Is not the acquisition of speech based on the ability to fit the words in one's mouth, to push the lips this way and that, shaping breath into particular forms. Slowly, peel your breathing away from its body, so that it becomes a tender outlier draped on the floor. Look over at your sculpted breath skin, attend to it daily. Think about what it means to de-nature, to render something so alive. Antibacterial, antifungal. Are you now, analgesic? Antiviral?

Amelia: [baby moaning throughout] Two things I want to bring up about that work, one is this kind of idea of collage, of borrowed words. It made me think of another metaphor that I've read in your writing about composting, and this reusing, recycling, layering, gestating. What drew you to using other people's words in that piece?

[baby moaning]

Abbra: I've began thinking about relationality to others, through, sort of, I think it was really cemented in having children, that I'm not biologically connected to. And I've started thinking a lot about affinity, as opposed to genealogy, in the case of my sort of, kinship structures. But that kind of bringing in, of so many other voices at the time of what we were dealing with, where you know it was [inaudible] movement, compounded with Covid, and this sort of endemic breathlessness that was happening. It just felt like the point of resuscitation for that work needed to be collective. Um, and I think it very much works into the composting, um, frugality, sort of aspect as well?

Amelia: Yeah yeah I loved that.

Abbra: Yeah it was a necessity.

Amelia: And to hear that metaphor extended to writing is really interesting. Is there ways that you think about in terms of your, mm, artistic practice as well as your writing practice? Well I 'spose the Lieu Journal piece really is sitting between the two, is that how you see it?

Abbra: Yeah, I mean that was sort of a new trajectory for me which I think was very much responding to the moment, but I think intuitively it brought in a lot of those methodologies that I feel like have been coming through my writing and engaging with other people's work more so than my own practice, in terms of making. But I think it's very much created this new trajectory as far as future work, I have a couple of shows next year, and it's very much embedded something in, in thinking about those shows from that sort of perspective.

Amelia: Are they using that same methodology of borrowing words, and collective... collective positionality?

Abbra: Yeah, again I think coming back to the affinity, there's one show coming up which will be almost sort of posing a mythopoetic of the family kind of story but very much using sound as a sort of through line for human relations. It's an interesting time but, yeah I've sort of fallen out of a relationship with the ocular, and I think a lot of people have. For me that was obviously something that came out very acutely, with having children and the sort of after effect of that, and in people constantly wanting to create resemblances, and sort of draw on that. Which, you know, I couldn't fit into that equation I suppose. So that sort of, I think that was really the point for me to start tapping into sonic relationality with my child at the time. And so I think that the fact that that Lieu piece was audio, was really sort of cementing that as a path for me to explore, where I haven't previously, sort of explored that mode, but very much in preparation for this show.

Amelia: I'm glad you brought up the audio as opposed to the ocular because I think also what I'm feeling at this moment is a resistance to being in one place, to being seated, to being tied to reading, or tied to watching. So in some ways listening and movement is quite freeing. You know, we're in momentum, the nature of our conversation is going to be entirely different, because we're navigating grass and people and helicopters. In the same way, the way I experienced your Lieu Journal piece was through headphones, late at night, while tidying up my house. It's a really different... listening can afford a really different mode of engagement. But I hadn't considered that pivot that you speak of about how parenthood might privilege the ocular.

Abbra: Sound for me became a really playful mode of engagement around that sort of prelinguistic period. I began to sort of investigate things like asemic writing, as non-syntactical writing, has a really expressive mode that sort of really seemed to connect with where that engagement with my

child was at. And it's really become heightened during Covid, all around us I've seen a real uptake of audio engagement. And as you say it sort of encourages movement and encourages a mobility but also a real embodiment I think.

Amelia: Yeah, yeah.

Abbra: But we've maybe been over... sort of desensitised a little bit with the screen immersion?

Amelia: I like this concept of thick time, because I think what caregivers in particular are experiencing right now is a direct layering, or accumulation, or thickening, of work and responsibility. And the work doesn't shift away it just thickens and deepens, and again I'm just thinking back to kind of the compost metaphor as well, as these layers of vegetation slowly changing, and accumulating, it's a process and I think thick time really describes what these last six months are like for caregivers, and...

Abbra: Absolutely.

Amelia: And particularly trying to maintain a process on top of that, you know, creative process and we were speaking a little bit before about the walking and the routine of early parenthood, and the nap schedules, and how that routine can give a sense of returning to the same point each day. There's moments for reflection and there's moments to recognise points of difference. Are there ways that you're, hmm... that kind of walking, or being present with your son, or encountering the same parts of the walk each day, are these things affecting your practice could you say?

Abbra: Yeah, yeah definitely. And just sort of coming back to what you were saying about composting, I think so much of it has had to occur for me in my head, it's sort of a process, a thinking process, which has been really generative out of necessity, but, really, really incredible as far as fostering a routine. I was a bit, I think I was a bit reticent to embrace a walking practice prior to, maybe even to having [name] here sort of sleeping, and having that sort of enforce that practice. And so I think coming here has really provided some sort of immersion in nature that I otherwise hadn't been obviously getting, along with a lot of people, but, also in place of that lack of return, to a space that I've been really really needing I think.

Amelia: It's also setting a boundary or a restriction or rules, and again I'm thinking back to the Lieu piece, and breath work, and setting yourself a task of reciting the text in a whisper, no matter how difficult or impossible that might become. This is not so different, this is the rule that we're following, speaking and walking.

Abbra: Yeah, it's very... it becomes very intuitive. I mean even just then like in and around that field, there's something very freeing [**Amelia:** Yes!] in that process.

Amelia: Exactly, not being, neither leading nor following, just kind of collectively ambling, is really - really enjoyable. We've spoken about thick time, we've spoken about some things being pushed back to next year, and that creates a drag in the presence as well when there's this continual extension. So, are there things about the future that you feel hopeful about? Are there things that, from this moment, these last months in lockdown, these weeks and months of early parenthood, are there things from this that you want to carry into next year and beyond? Or are you ready to break from one mode to the other?

Abbra: I think, you know it's so hard to know what next year will look like, as far as our particular sort of time and place. But I think a lot of people have been finding this greater attention, you know, a slowing down of obviously all the coming and going, which, with a family actually frees up a lot of attentiveness, even if in the moment that's sort of being scrambled and pulled in so many directions. It takes a lot of complexity out of the day, and for me I think there's a bit of a reluctance to return to work, in that we've, you know obviously a lot of people really, are really craving a normality, um, there's a, quite a reluctance, and I know for a lot of people there's more sensitivity to stimulus and to stressful situations that are, sort of external to what we've been immediately dealing with in our spaces. I think it kind of creates a different sense of embodiment, in being in a more localised environment, and I think that's something that I would really love to retain. Hopefully in balance with whatever the sort of demands are on our movement. So these walks, for example, will be something that I'll really try to retain as part of my practice.

Amelia: It's really beautiful and inspiring that you say that... when you speak of an attentiveness that's come out of this moment, because the dual pressures of caretaking without childcare or school systems or external kinds of support, while also maintaining other kinds of waged work, that can really eliminate an attentiveness, because you can just get so frenzied that you're just going from one kind of work to another, and never quite remembering to pay attention to either of them.

Abbra: Yeah, so many boundaries slipping constantly.

Amelia: Yeah, so I think I'll come away feeling quite inspired by that idea of being able to maintain, or find, an attentiveness. For you does it happen beyond walking, or is that kind of the main mode, when you're able to reflect and research?

Abbra: I think it's central, I mean it's central to my making practice, as well as obviously my writing practice as its own thing, but I think I've really started to think about a lack of hierarchy between these multiple sort of roles, as well as curating and editing. It becomes a methodology I think in terms of breaking down the relations, in terms of being on various sides of those dynamics with others. Like I used to have this tendency of very much separating, but I think... I think because there's so much sort of, um, overlapping in what I'm working with and what I'm concerned with, so I think writing very much, and linguistics, very much sort of informs my work.

Amelia: Reading, from what I can understand, has also been a very big part of your practice. Does that feel like a momentary shift that you'll return to? Or does it feel, mm, like just something in, in... underscoring your work at the moment?

Abbra: I've been thinking a lot about the digestive sort of process that is linked with obviously the throat and the mouth. For me that becomes a sort of a continuum, as far as thinking about positioning reading and writing, in language, which is devolving, it's sort of moving to that next level of investigation.

Amelia: Completely. Sorry I'm disorientated from all our ambling!

Abbra: This is amazing, I don't often walk through there, it's what's so amazing about this process is you really lose... yeah.

Amelia: Yeah.

Abbra: Sorry.

Amelia: No, no no, I'm...

Abbra: Just pausing on that thought.

Amelia: I think it's... I'm the same, I'm kind of taking some time to process all of the things we're saying, because I think it's really rich, and I think, yeah, also this modality of walking as well is unique, things kind of percolate at a different pace when you're...

Abbra: Yeah, yep.

Amelia: ...walking, and there's so much around us too.

[inaudible talking, birds chirping, fades into a whispered voice]

Abbra: [whispered and pre-recorded] [inaudible] ... three times between your left thumb and index finger. Pull down your mask, lean over and take a deep breath of the bud. Pull your mask back up. Exhale. It was ecstasy it was sweet air sowing in and all my little alveoli singing away with joy, and oxygen energy coursing through every space and particle of me. A desire for otherwise air than what is and has been given. The annunciation, the breathing out, the strange utterance of otherwise possibility. Caress your breath. Remember, each breath we take is a reciprocal exchange with our surroundings. Remember, on occasion, to give it all away.