

West Space Podcast: Artist Walks
Arini Byng and Amelia Wallin

TRANSCRIPT

Amelia Wallin: [pre-recorded] This conversation was recorded on the sovereign lands of the Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin Nation. I pay my deepest respects to the elders and ancestors of the Kulin Nation as well as 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.

Arini: Like a natural thing to start, yeah, working with bodies again and, yeah, back into sort of utilizing, yeah, that dance background.

Amelia: Yeah...

Arini: I mean I think having this extended time to be able to focus on making work has been good, so it's really prepared me for the year to come.

Amelia: [pre-recorded] This is a walking conversation between Arini Byng and Amelia Wallin recorded for West Space's podcast Artist Walks. West Space is grateful to the City of Yarra for their support of this podcast through the City of Yarra Annual Grants Program. Thank you also to Bonnie Cummings for audio mastering and Justin Balmain for audio editing.

Amelia: So let's... we're sort of beginning with, um, a question that's asking all the participants to reflect on the last few months you know what has it been like for you, and has it been important to maintain a creative practice?

Arini: It has been, yeah, very important for me to maintain my creative practice as... It's been a really challenging time and I had lost work, because a lot of people did... I really needed that structure in my week of going to the studio and slowly working on... I mean thankfully I had a few exhibitions scheduled that weren't cancelled but pushed back. Um, and so i've been just really slowly working away at developing those works and just taking... taking time I suppose. You know I'm 33 and in my working life I've never really had a break more than a few weeks, so I was lucky enough to be in a position where, um, I could take time just for myself to read books or... I mean I live on the Merri Creek so I walked every day, and yeah, really just had a little pause, which was... which was really nice. Definitely making work has really... I guess, sort of kept me going throughout this period. I think without that I would have struggled, and I mean yeah, I definitely have had times of struggle and trying to navigate this new experience that we all had. Yeah, making work and researching or taking photographs has really kept the pace of things going. And besides that [I'm] in the process of making a website. My archiving isn't the best, so I spent a lot of time unearthing old works and sort of going through my documentation and finding what I wanted to put online. Websites I find are tricky spaces, so I think it was important to take the time to really think about what I wanted to present.

Amelia: More planning than ever before has been possible... has taken place, yeah, in the last few months.

Arini: Yes definitely.

Amelia: I don't know... I feel like works are taking on a deeper register and more... have you found that you're... yeah, what are some of the subtle shifts you've noticed in your... in your practice?

Arini: Yeah, I think there's been a lot of time for reflection which I think, um, can often be skipped over because we do often go from one thing to the next without allowing ourselves that time to really reflect on previous work. And I think through making the website as well, it allowed me to reflect on much much older work. Just having the time to really sit with an idea and sort of, yeah, have it developed slower than ever before, has been really fantastic. It'll be interesting to see... and to see works really change. Sort of, you start with something... a very, you know, small seed of an idea and then seeing the steps of how it really really changes throughout the time has been really nice.

Amelia: That's great because you can apply that to one work, but then you can also apply that to a practice, and if you're, you know, working on your archive and you're looking back over your past works you can also follow that trajectory as well.

Arini: Yes.

Amelia: And I mean I've only encountered your performance through the screen, that's because we haven't lived in the same city for a long time, and now we live in the same city we've been in lockdown for nine months. But I also know that that mediation is a big part of your practice... um, or a big interest of yours, how, um, live works, bodies in space, are encountered or mediated through the screen. Of course at the moment that's how we're experiencing all performance, and there's a real call, and a real need for, kind of, expertise in that way. Whether it's curatorial expertise or expertise from a practitioner, knowing how to create performance for the digital space.

Arini: Yes, yes.

Amelia: Do you have any thoughts about that... that you wanna share?

Arini: Yeah, yeah, well for me I think, um... yeah they're quite different, uh, separate things. Sort of, having a performance that exists solely on a screen or a digital platform, um, I would treat very differently to a live work. I think, sort of, trying to translate a live work to the screen... I think is quite hard. I think they've both got, sort of, their own set of strengths and... I don't know, I just, yeah, for me they're very very separate. And I think often when I create a live work I don't... I'll document it in film and stills but I won't ever sort of... say, put on the website the film documentation of the performance, because they're just so different, it's like two completely different works. It doesn't capture the liveness at all in my opinion. But then in, yeah, the screen is important in my... I've got two collaborative works that are sort of ongoing projects. One with Aaron Christopher Rees, called *Live Work*, where Aaron and I... in the gallery space, are live filming dancer Megan Payne, um, and that's live. And it's quite, yeah, it's quite beautiful almost. What's projected on... onto the screen, and seeing yeah, the slippage between live and recording.

Amelia: Yeah, so the dancers in the space...

Arini: ...in the space...

Amelia: ...and there's a live feed as well?

Arini: Yeah, and then we're sort of... yeah, sort of acting as camera people recording...

Amelia: Oh that's so nice because it makes you aware of just how constructed those... that documentation is. You know that it's not... it's completely different. It's all fabricated by the lighting, the positioning, and the story you want to tell. Where in live performances you're relying on a... the, the audience, the duration, the feeling of the space, the physical... I dunno, pricklings? Of bodies coming together and that's what you can't translate to the screen...

Arini: ...mmm, yep, yeah, yep...

Amelia: ...but you can do so many other things.

Arini: ...yes definitely... yeah.

Amelia: What's the other collaboration where screens are involved?

Arini: The other collaboration is... um, a work called *Sinkhole*, which is an ongoing project with dancer Rebecca Jensen and artist Jess Gall. *Sinkhole* deals with the improvised scenarios and the agency of performing bodies reacting to a... a written score. And so it's often quite a really sprawling... um... like a large group of people performing together... it's quite a messy kind of work. My role in it is to record each... so there's been quite a few iterations now. Um and I, I yeah, record each performance and rehearsal.

Amelia: And have some of your invitations for next year been to create performance for the screen?

Arini: One work is, yes, creating... it didn't necessarily need to be a performance, but an online... online presentation...

Amelia: ...yeah...

Arini: ...so that will be I think early next year. There's sort of a group of artists all using, sort of, this new online, uh, platform, like a tool for artists to then use. Um so yeah it's still in the early, early sort of stages but I'm working with dancer Lillian Steiner, and making essentially a solo dance piece, which I've always been really wanting to make a... just a dance work, for a long time. And I guess with... with sort of restrictions and things it's ended up being a solo work. So yeah we'll see. It's sort of looking at the relationship between the body and language, and how things are translated and described or... transcribed, yeah, through... through language. So there'll be sort of an annotator describing... a narrator describing what is happening on the screen, physically, and then also trying or attempting to describe what's happening internally, as well, for the dancer.

Amelia: Thinking like... so if you were to make the same work in a gallery, verse a work to be broadcast digitally online...

Arini: ...yeah...

Amelia: ...what's shifting for you?

Arini: yeah, yeah, well I guess, um, online and on a screen you've got the parameter of... of the space you're filming in, and you are in control of how someone is viewing it. So I guess the biggest sort of change between the two will be, yeah, you can um, frame things. Which in a live

performance you can't really frame things. The audience is, you know, looking wherever they want to be looking. Um... so I think I do kind of like the control of being able to show exactly what I want to show? But then there's almost... the live... the sort of freedom that comes with that is also enticing.

Amelia: The distinction you pulled out between documenting a work versus making a work for a digital space, that's that same distinction [indecipherable] just really different works, whether it's going to be encountered in a gallery or encountered digitally. And it's, yeah, not just about putting a camera in place and letting the performance unfold. There's so much more dramaturgy behind the scenes.

Amelia: I also wanted to talk about the work that I encountered on the CCP website that I just learned was first shown at Black Dot. What's the name of that work?

Arini: Yeah, *Indistinct Chatter*...

Amelia: *Indistinct Chatter*. When was it shown at Black Dot?

Arini: Um, it was shown at Black Dot gallery in 2018 as part of a group show there...

Amelia: Okay... on a monitor?

Arini: On a monitor... I built this little scaffolding sort of wall and then yeah... with a monitor sitting on that.

Amelia: I'd just like to understand why, um... you returned to *Indistinct Chatter* in 2020 and... you know you've mentioned that's quite an important work for you...

Arini: Yeah.

Amelia: ...and why out of this kind of archive of body of works, that felt like a good one to show in this space at this time?

Arini: Yeah, yeah it was definitely an important work for me. A very personal work, and a sort of a step towards something new and exciting I think, within my practice. It kind of pushed me to put myself in the work [which] is something I hadn't done before. Um, and working with my Dad... he's very, very lovely and is always quite um, happy, when... [laughing]

Amelia: [laughing]

Arini: ...when I ask him, um, if he would... wouldn't mind being a part...

Amelia: ...so this wasn't the first time?

Arini: No, he sort of had a little... little cameo here and there in... in some... some works [laughing]. Yeah it's very sweet of him. But yes, no, it also, it felt like, um, the right work to present whilst we were all experiencing the effects of social distancing. I guess because it's quite tender and soft and it's... it's really just my limbs and my father's limbs on screen. We're sort of slowly navigating each other, as well as sort of, um, household, kind of building materials, like bricks and planks of wood and things. So I think just that tender, sort of, touch, I think really resonated with people during this

time. Sort of, yeah, it's very... the pace is very slow, in fact it's slowed down quite a lot. So it tends to speak to, um, sort of, the emotional range of familial relationships and histories that are common in our culture, and particularly my history, that of Black America.

Amelia: It really struck a nerve when... touch... so many people were missing touch so desperately...

Arini: Yes.

Amelia: ...and touch between families? Across... when state borders suddenly became a thing that we had to navigate. And I think it led for people to reflect on divisions both in Australia and in the US, and borders in general. You know, the lockdown experience gave pause to that moment of being physically restricted from... from families. And then, for me at least, pulling out empathy to understand... yeah, people who experience that separation to the extreme. Families separate at borders and things like that. So it really was... incredibly tender to witness this touch between father and daughter. At a moment where we're...

Arini: Yeah.

Amelia: ...yeah, we're being asked not to touch.

Amelia: Okay we've spoken a bit about how that work felt really important at a time when touch was not allowed. Do you feel like you're... you know, as someone who works with gestures, and bodies, and the connection between people... do you feel like your relationship to touch has changed? I mean you've spoken about exploring a solo work which is a huge shift.

Arini: Yes, yeah... yeah I think it has changed quite considerably. You know I think we've all... we all have maybe a new appreciation of how important touch is in our lives? I mean I... I live alone, I don't have a partner, uh, at the moment. So I think... yeah it's been... I'm a very tactile, physical kind of person, and so, yeah really adjusting and getting... it's kind of strange that we've had to get used to that? Well some of us I suppose, have had to really adapt and... getting used to not touching people. Yeah, so I think, yeah there's a lot of... I guess there's a lot of touch in my work in general, and people often comment on how soft and tender the works are. I guess if anything has changed it's maybe just become overly apparent how important touch is in my work? And that it's, yeah, a recurring... recurring theme I suppose, or tool, that I guess... yeah, I can... can't see that changing any time soon. If anything it's become more important.

Amelia: A reaffirmation touch...

Arini: Yeah.

Amelia: ...and... you know I'm going to be so excited to watch this solo work, because of course, like, still with a solo dancer, touch and contact is still incredibly important. With the floor, with this... with the air in the space, like that's something that can't be avoided. And, yeah I'm just thinking about, kind of, thresholds of where one body ends and another body begins, and I see that, kind of threaded throughout your work as well, an interest in that.

Arini: Mmm...

Amelia: We're... we're sort of asking as like a final question... about... we're thinking about optimism [laughing] and, you know, is there anything that you feel optimistic about going into a new year? And, you know, also are there any practices from the last few months that you want to continue, and hold on to?

Arini: Mmm, yeah... well I think I'm... you know, I'm excited to see what might, sort of, come out of this collective... uh... chance we've all had to pause and rethink about.... how we live our lives, or how we want to be living our lives. And the changes we might be making, and seeing what positive change might come out of that? I mean it's the first time in my history that anything like this has happened, where we all, as a community, have been given that opportunity... not that everyone has paused. But yes, no I think, really just taking... taking time to reflect has definitely been something that has come out of this period that I would like to continue. Reflect on previous works and even... I mean I did a lot... great amount of reflecting on these... the work presented on CCP's website. So I think, you know, from 2018 to 2020 the context has changed, that it's been presented in. But yes, no I think it's definitely something that I will carry over. Um, and also I guess, thinking about... I do rely heavily on participation, on collaboration, and working with other people, and I really enjoy working with other people. So I think at first I was a bit daunted by the idea of just making a work utilizing only myself. And so I was sort of thinking about how I could... what strategies... how I could change my working method to just involve me. And I've sort of gone back to photography, which I've really enjoyed. I borrowed a friend's camera and just started taking photographs on my walks and, um, for no real reason, just to sort of get familiar with it again. And I've, yeah, forgotten how much I enjoy the process of photographing. And I recently was responding to Olivia at Reading Room, her... she has a project that's sort of an ongoing... um, for the last... or since back in March really... *What's Outside the Window*. And so I made a work in response to that where I photographed my brother and his family in their backyard in... in an embrace, and, just yeah, just to sort of show, I guess how they, as a new family, have been caring and supporting each other during this time. I think everyone is just... I feel, yeah, sort of there for each other in maybe a different way than ever before [fading out]...