LWAG TALKS

A podcast by Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

Ep 12: David Bielander and Helen Britton from *MAKING: A living?*

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Transcript of a public talk with Munich-based artists David Bielander and Helen Britton on their practice as artists from the 2019 symposium *MAKING: A living?*

**NARRATOR:**

LWAG talks is Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery’s new podcast, bringing you insights and ideas with artists, curators, educators, writers, and more. For this episode of LWAG talks, we're going into the archives and sharing a recording from our 2019 “Making: A living?” symposium, held in partnership with Artsource and the 2019 Fremantle Biennale. A dedicated visual arts symposium, “Making: a living?” explored the ways that artists are adapting digital technologies for new and innovative means in their practices. This episode features a talk by Munich based artists and designers David Bielander and Helen Britton. They discuss how the creation and connection of culture can make a life, as well as a living in terms of rapid change and technological upheaval. They are introduced by Professor Ted Snell, board member of the Fremantle Biennale and Director of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery.

**TED SNELL:**

Two other artists who have created the most extraordinary practice are Helen Britton and David Bielander. They currently have a wonderful exhibition that you must see at Turner galleries. They are based in Munich, but come to Western Australia very frequently. Helen, of course we own even though she wasn't born here, but you know what it's like in Western Australia. Five minutes here and you’re Western Australian. Dan, reminder, we'll be, we'll be adopting you very soon. So please welcome Helen and David.

**DAVID BIELANDER:**

That's wonderful. Thank you very much for, to the organisers, of course, of this symposium, and to Ted, especially for the invitation, and, and also to Daan for that beautiful presentation and the ideas and the idea of the power of community and communication, that was very wonderful. And, and I think it's now also time to downsize a bit. (Laughs)

So making a living as an artist has been widely accepted to be a bit of a challenge.

But newly we are on top of that, suddenly confronted with the question, why even making art at all? How appropriate is it that we are commenting or reacting on or even seemingly ignoring that overwhelming current world crisis by creating objects, installations, by painting, or making pieces of music, by wasting even more resources, and adding even more clutter to our already filled up world?

Facing these questions, it seems to be even more crucial to understand what kind of discourse we as artists can offer to our society, actually must offer, and to be very conscious and concise about what we contribute to this discourse and how. Making a living as an artist starts with simply making my work. I may strive for eccentricity because I believe that this will make me visible, outstanding, special and therefore successful. But actually required is incentricity. To get as close to my core as possible, finding out what truly interests me. Verify that I am not actually just follow trends instead of, or mimic peers. Only there, in my idiosyncratic centre, I have at least the slightest chance to having something of relevance to say.

Therefore, this is of course, about Pinocchio, the archetypical liar, the liar in us. It is of course, about the consciousness of the wearer, that the wooden nose is actually carved from a confessional. How beautiful to have this cross. (Laughs)

It is of course, about my role as a old white masculine self. But it is also about how does the image of a rubber gag nose have to be materialised, that I can seduce a 21st century contemporary urban living person to be prepared to adorn her or himself with a shared (indecipherable)with that slight resemblance of something else. Walk into a public situation without being a freak, but being beautiful. It is about identity, affiliation, judgement and perception, how it is steered and how one can shift it. Because we human beings perceive things solely in relationship to something else. As soon as a tiny shift in the context occurs, it is enough to make us perceive a thing differently and in a way that we have never seen it before. Things do not stay, as we perceive, at first glance, it is the ambiguity, the multifaceted-ness of the nature of things. It is part of the conditions of our existence, that it is an impossibility for a human being to arrive to definite truth because truth is dependent on perspective. In that I materialise the ambiguity, the multifaceted-ness of a presence. I want my work to show me something that is the truth, almost in a transcentional way. It does not mean that I am capable. Of course, I will fail in the end. But I flirt with the potency to make tangible, something that is true.

I suspect this is roughly the area I must and can make my contribution, working and living side by side with Helen for twenty years now. I am on a daily base again and again flabbergasted and thrilled how very differently two individuals digest filter and materialise the very same and shared experience, news, spaces and concerns.

**HELEN BRITTON:**

So I, I come from also a very different kind of practice. I'm a fairly introverted person, but I've always been very interested in making, recycling, recovering things. I spent a lot of my youth rebuilding cars as you can see here. I've dedicated my practice to building a space where I can be fairly free of external influence. It was never my intention to, or I never had a fantasy that I would be able to. It was never the impetus to make a living from my art.

I did everything I possibly could to keep that, my practice free of that. And it was only by that dedication, when the works went out into the world, and had their various levels of success. That they started to direct the life, the life, they made my life, they made my living so to say. Because of that, the freedom that I'd given them, I hadn't put them under the pressure to, that I had to communicate and respond in a way that I would be able to survive financially from that practice. That was the beginning of my practice and remains so, and it was simply the work itself and how it functioned that went out and did what it's done.

I just this week, just to fill you in, we David and I, have a studio in Munich, which we've established in 2002. And that's the kind of epicentre of the things we do. To give you insight into the, how my practice functions what I, within that kind of studio sanctuary, I want to, I also write so I write. I try and write texts to create a doorway into my practice and trace that very intensive activity of creative practice within the studio.

So this is where, I show you some images of, of recent work and read you the text that accompanies them to give you that insight. “I hold a handful of stones. I've carried them around since I was a kid. Then, they were treasures. Now they are cargo. Sentimentality is not always my friend. Matter is weighty, slow and deliberate. The imagination mercilessly nimble and light. I sought the stones. They become instinctively a horse. A horse of stone, a bridge between the mineral and the animal world. The imagination promotes unity. The horse is alive and fits me perfectly without having anticipated this. The animate and the inanimate connect. There is no hierarchy. The horse an emblem of the mind untamed.

Of imaginative nimbleness, of that which conquers intellectually the weight of knowledge of the outside world. The imagination strives for freedom. The unfettered mind a form of human resistance, the foundation of our dreams, at best utopian, naive and optimistic. And the imagination exerts constant pressure, it batters and rants and there is no off switch, only discipline, distance. The flood of ideas must be channelled, structured, sorted. I watched them like this film, it jitters and chance is wishes from a place. That is perhaps how the conception of eternity came to us. Is this tool of knowledge, the imagination, trying to connect us to the truth? This process is beyond our control.

We choose however what we pull from its realm. Pay attention, the choice is yours. I see thousands of glittering treasures in the waves, knowing I will only focus and scoop out a few, before the rest of was washed away, and the next wave pours down. I reach in and draw from the depths a horse of rain, still dripping and heavy. Both words and works are evidence of understanding, of different kinds of knowledge, of reflection and action without hierarchy. Material processes guard the doorway between untamed thought and what is there on the table at the end of the day, mapping our capacity to seamlessly connect these worlds.”

So engaging in that kind of process on a daily basis, we've established a sanctuary in Munich, our studio, which is a wonderful environment, which we share with our dear colleague, Yutaka Minegishi from Tokyo. And we, it's also an environment that's incredibly important. Considering our lives in the world is international practitioners, practitioners, we do need a place to retreat to, and take care of that practice and not so that it

retains its freedom, its focus without being influenced by all of the external pressures and desires that are constantly coming, trying to come into our door. It's very, very important for me to also fill that space with wonderful practitioners, one of whom is here in the audience this evening, Justine, today, feels like evening, Justine McKnight, my collaborator, a West Australian artist and head of textiles and fashion at Edith Cowan University, where I originally studied. Justine and I collaborate and have been doing so for over, you know, since about 2007, so well over 10 years. And our studio environment does provide a space for those kinds of experiments which are very free, open ended and not- it's a space for the imagination, for free creativity, which is something that we both share.

This is a recent work that Justine and I have just completed. Justine comes and spends time in the studio and that's often the impetus of me coming back to Western Australia to work with Justine McKnight, among other things.

**DAVID:**

And so these are all our intentions, our thoughts, and maybe we even succeed.

And I set the sausages free from these chairs. (AUDIENCE laughs)

And I do release the work.

And then what happens? I lose control about my piece. I have no idea what the viewer experiences with this, associates, what it means to her or him. The work gains an autonomy. And we have in the end, no control how our work is going to be perceived.

Our work gets charged, possibly shelved wrongly or correctly, categorised, understood, misunderstood, when this is crazily exciting. In my beginnings, I used to publish a work within my own cultural cultural context. A local exhibition space in the streets of my city, a gallery in the neighbourhood. I could obviously not control the individual headspace of the viewer. But at least I could count on the common sense, on the collective reading and understanding of my own tribe, because we are socialised and cultivated together.

When we started to exhibit internationally and in different cultural places, we got this beautiful sense of the unintentional complexity.

What a joy to learn how certain works, would be completely ignored in one country and embraced in another. What would be read in them?

How we enjoyed the proof of certain stereotypes. We would finish a piece and say to each other, ‘this is really awkward, this is a really awkward piece. I really don’t get it, I’ll send it

to Belgium, they are quirky’. (AUDIENCE laughs)

Or, ‘my goodness what a kitsch I have just produced, this should go to America’. (AUDIENCE laughs)

And now, this happens more or less automatically. Because of the connective nature of our contemporary life, your work will be recognised by basically every single one interested in the niche you are working in. And you have an access to each of them like never before. (AUDIENCE laughs)

This is Princess in Caroline for Monaco. It might be quite a hard time for mainstream. But at least in that respect it’s primetime for being in a niche.

**HELEN:**

And to follow on from that, we did start with the collective experiences, David explained. Again, Yutaka, myself and David we've worked in, we've been locked in one room in an industrial building in Munich for 20 years together, so that may also assist in explaining certain idiosyncrasies. It started with a very collective experience. We come from the niche of art, jewellery. And that has expanded out exponentially, our experience was a collective experience. And now of course, that is a connective experience. It's no longer

interesting or appropriate to think about being connected in a small space as an artist in these kinds of niches geographically. Our experience is one of being connected to a worldwide community of people through social media, through the internet. And then of course, and once again, I'll reiterate, it's the work from both of us that's gone out into the world to create the kinds of experiences we're having now, and also the reason that we're standing here.

What we have experienced in terms of our major exhibitions, and I'll just show you a couple of examples of my, the exhibitions in Germany in the new museum in Nuremberg. And of course, as many of you here would have experienced the exhibition of 30 years of my work at Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery for the Festival of Perth. These kinds of things have come about through a change, the change, that we've, through this connectedness that I'm trying to describe, through a broader perspective and through, yeah, the work going out into the world and functioning like it does. Having come from that position that I described of being extremely incentric, focused and trying to find out what it is that I really want to say with my work. That story, telling that story has resonated throughout the world and made it possible for me to have a practice as an artist that’s sustainable and that I can survive from. That being said, it is always, again, and again quite challenging. And that’s yeah, as we all know.

So I don't necessarily see it as making a living, in that traditional sense. I do see it very much as making a life. It's creating a cultural life for ourselves. And I think this is incredibly important. It's about creating a cultural life and interesting life for others, to contribute to the cultural fabric, to encounter and share. The story that I need to tell through my work comes from lived experience. It is fundamental, it is a fundamental impulse to communicate. And as the world changes, it becomes more critical and more political.

So in creating a life, making a life, participating in the ongoing creation of culture, offering alternative narratives to convention, this production is not necessarily easy to consume. It

is certainly not cheap. But exactly this, that is absolutely essential to this part of the human journey.

This, this narrative, this dialogue is a platform in space, but also, it's very, very essential to what it means to be human. Poetry, humour, beauty, are essential for our psychological health in these very sick times. And each and every one of us needs, sorry, to participate in every way we can in this alternative at this point in history. Thank you.

**TED:**

Wonderful, thank you Helen and David. Are there any absolutely pressing questions? You will get a chance to talk to Helen and David particularly at the lunch breaks and things and you must seek them out. Does anybody have a quick and important question to ask? Yes.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:**

Did you feel the need to go outside Australia to start your practice (indecipherable)?

**HELEN:**

No, no, that was that was quite organic. I didn't, I do think I do have great respect for the difficulties of working as an artist in geographically isolated places, such as Perth, but I don't, I do not believe that's relevant anymore. I think travelling and experiencing other cultures does give you a really deep understanding of your own culture. And it certainly promotes empathy. But I think, certainly earlier, it was very good to go away and see the world and see, to experience life. I would no longer say that that's absolutely as necessary as it used to be. I think we, as I tried to explain, through this idea of connectedness, we are now are so connected to people. We can connect so much more easily and the kinds of niches that our practice has come from are international online communities. And this is this is a very, very valuable and positive aspect of social media.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:**

Thank you.

**HELEN:**

I think we've got a bit of a time issue, Ted, is that correct?

**TED:**

We do.

**HELEN:**

 So let's- we're here, we're actually here for two weeks! So, you know… (AUDIENCE laughs)

**TED:**

So that there's lots of opportunity to talk with them both. Wonderful, Thank you. And don't forget the exhibition at Turner.