



Articulate: Talking art and ideas

Episode 2: Unfolding the archive with Bridget Currie and Sasha Grbich
Recorded live at Flinders University Museum of Art, Bedford Park Campus
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[*Anarchive: knowledge follows form*](#) brings together archival materials from FUMA's Post-object and Documentation collection—one of Australia's most comprehensive records of conceptual art from the 1960s and 1970s—alongside new, interpretative works by South Australian artist Bridget Currie.

In this episode, Bridget and *Anarchive* curator Sasha Grbich delve into the making of the exhibition, inviting audiences to engage with works by artists Bonita Ely, Alison Goodwin, Poppy Johnson, Dorothy Thompson and Eva Yuen Man-Wah.

FUMA: Welcome to the podcast *Articulate: talking art and ideas* with FUMA. Flinders University Museum of Art acknowledges the Kurna people as the traditional custodians of the land on which we stand, work and share knowledge. We pay our respects to Kurna elders past and present and extend this respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples listening in from all nations of Australia.

Sasha Grbich: So, we might jump into talking a little bit about how this project unfolded. I think we might be using the word unfold quite a lot in this talk.

Bridget Currie: Yeah, so I think maybe to begin with, to talk about the process of making this exhibition and for me, working with the archive brought up ideas of kind of intimacy and unfolding and tactility and also the humble nature of the things we were looking at within this archive. And I've wanted to build the show around that. So, all of the things that I've made, you're very welcome to touch and try on and unfold on this table. And obviously all of the things in the cabinets we're not able to look at with our hands.

So I think that was really the central starting point for building this exhibition was, I don't know, ways of circumventing the kind of institutional problems of the archive and showing this kind of work so throughout the interpretive videos that Sasha and I have made if you listen to those we're leafing through items and we're talking about our reactions to them and that's another way of unpacking these things.

Sasha: Perhaps I should give a little bit of context to the collection that you're that we were looking at that we're unfolding as well. As Fiona mentioned, this is the Post-object and Documentation collection, which sits really beautifully alongside the forming of the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide, which was formed from 1974 onwards. And of course, Donald Brook was a key person in the forming of the Experimental Art Foundation, but also in the formation of the Post-object collection. And he was, of course, working here at Flinders [University].

The collection pulls together all sorts of really wonderfully counter-institutional things. You know, in vitrines is very much against the spirit in which these things were made. They were made to slip a bit outside of the gallery system, to be accessible to many people. They were art projects that often took part in politics, or they were performances or events. All these things are hard to hold. They were, you know, wonderfully uncomfortable in galleries at their time. They pushed outside of it. They found different places for art, different ways for it to move around. And even within the archives, they're still very hard things to work with and hard to hold. [It is] a beautiful challenge of unpacking some of these ephemeral practices with Bridget. And I think also because perhaps your practice has some kind of quietude and ephemerality as well. So, I feel like that's something that you brought to the unpacking.

Bridget: Yeah, absolutely. And I really love the kind of unmonumental nature of most of the works that are here. And also, to say that these are works that, in many ways, have kind of been excluded from official histories. So, for me, that was very important to my understanding of what I wanted to achieve with the show. So, we've had some money to reprint some images, particularly Dot's (Thompson), images that have never been printed. There's a performance here from the Experimental Art Foundation archive and we just had the negatives, but they've never been printed and they've never been exhibited.

And her practice is just such a thing of beauty and joy and humour. And so, in response to that I wanted to use some strategies of remaking, and I've made these budgie masks. So, you're very welcome to put them on and experience being a budgie. They are, yeah, you can't really wear them without laughing or smiling and I think that that's a really beautiful thing as well.

So, in many ways, you know, this remaking, I have extended to remaking a book of mine that's in a vitrine. So, this work is kind of a remaking in a different way of that. Maybe we can demonstrate some of these works.

Sasha: These are all to be touched and unfolded and opened. And because we're recording this for a podcast, I'm going to narrate it. So, Bridget's unfolding a... paper

map-like form and sort of in three panels and on each of the panel in some place or other there's an image of a truncated tree. You perhaps can tell us a little bit about that.

Bridget: Yeah, so this is the latest thing I've made in a long series of work called *Trees among people* [2013-ongoing] which I've been taking these images for about 20 years and they're literally trees that have been perhaps adversely affected by people. And yeah, I've used sort of the latest images that I've taken in this map-like – I wanted to make a kind of map-like thing that invites people to really hold it and be quite tactile with it. So you're very, very welcome to come and take these out and examine it closely later on.

Sasha: And perhaps if you'd like to unfold a little bit more context about the gendered nature of some of the decisions in this room, that just adds a little more context. While there were...the Post-object collection was and is incredibly important for collecting these, sort of, hard-to-hold works and, you know, Flinders (University Museum of Art) being a very brave collecting institution for doing that. When we look at the collection, there are many, many more men represented in it than women. Alison Goodwin as well as Dot Thompson are actually the two South Australian women who are represented in their own right in that collection and, you know, amongst about 200 men in the same category, for example. It really kind of shows up.

We're talking about a time when women were very actively involved in experimental art, but collecting hadn't really caught up. And so, this project was also about looking into that archive in a way that paid attention to what was there, in terms of the practices of women who are involved—like Alison and Dot—as well as invited in other works. Bonita Ely had recently donated her book, *Murray/Murundi*, made in Adelaide in 1980. And so, we followed up with a conversation around loaning some further works of hers to bring in. And there's a lot of stories around how these other works kind of came in into the collection, but also into this room. So, there's an additional layer of kind of disappearance and difficulty when working with women's work from this time.

Bridget: And should we mention Jenny Boulton?

Sasha: Yeah, that's a nice segue into this work here, perhaps.

Bridget: So, one of the books in the vitrines is a play by Jenny Boulton and it's actually in the library here at Flinders. It's not in the archive. So, it's borrowed by Sasha.

Sasha: Well, now by the Flinders Art Museum, thankfully. Shifted across the library. It's not chasing me up anymore.

Bridget: And, you know, sort of presented in this very different context. But it's a strongly feminist work and it's typewritten and then there's handwriting on top of the text and it's quite raw and emotional. And we were really wanting to work with it and trying out ideas about reading it or performing it or maybe workshopping it and in the end my response was to make this work which comes from a really longer extended piece of writing.

Sasha: Shall I hold the microphone while you unpack this? So, Bridget's unfolding a large piece of fabric.

Bridget: And I made this through a method of collage of photographs I've taken of arborglyphs, so letters that have been scarified into trees and to bamboo as well. And then it's a digital print on fabric. But I sort of took sentences from a longer piece of writing that I had made that I think relates to Jenny Boulton's text. So, I'm not going to read it to you, but it takes time to decipher this and please come and experience it and fold it up and do whatever you want with it really.

Sasha: Apart from there being a lovely process of sort of finding and unfolding in this work, it is a slow thing to read. And I'm also very conscious of when I look at it, of you looking around the world to find these letters scratched into trees so that you could even find the way of articulating this through language. So, I think it's a very complex document and it's a beautiful thing to sort of slowly unfold and follow the words. But it also brings me to the relationship to the more than human world that runs through your practice. Perhaps something. That's something you could tell us a little bit more about.

Bridget: Yeah, I think this is really strongly present in these two groups of prints as well, which is they're both kind of collaborations with natural processes through grass and through the river and the water, and they kind of contain this idea of containing or sampling something that's... ongoing and uncontainable. And also collaborating with a natural process or another type of organism, like grass, and my film [*Soft Insides*, 2018-21] that I made several years ago where there's slugs involved.

So, I wanted to collaborate with either slugs or snails again and unfortunately, we were experiencing a drought last year.

Sasha: It was a bad year for snails.

Bridget: It was a very bad year for snails and it's quite a funny story. So maybe I'll...

Sasha: Bridget's picking up, let's say, roughly A3 book as it opens out, reveals a pop-up. Perhaps you can tell us a little more about it.

Bridget: Thank you. So, this is paper that's been eaten by snails. And, you know, Sasha's had some paper underneath her house. I had rolls of paper in my garden. I sent some to Melbourne to my friend. Another friend in another part of Adelaide had this in her garden and no snails were attracted to the paper. And so, in the end, I ended up purchasing snails from the internet... which I think is a beautiful metaphor for our time, really. And these snails came. They had a very, very comfortable life and were loved a lot by my children as well. And, yeah, they ate this paper for me and then they got released into my garden. Yeah, so this work is sort of, that's its story.

Sasha: Beautiful. You know, when I look at it as well, it brings me to these questions of, trace as well as absence, you know, in a most beautiful and playful sort of way. It also reminds me of some of the other works that we looked at in the collection. So, yeah, we could perhaps say a little bit about where that came from.

So, the process that Bridget and I went through as well was one of unpacking this collection together and having a conversation around it. Quite a long conversation and unpacking over a number of visits and then kind of finding books that we kept returning to and spending time with and the sort of lovely threads in the works that you've made that kind of lead back out to these books, from the Jenny Boulton text, which is just over there that you just talked about. And in this one, that perhaps relates a little bit more to the assemblage book here.

Bridget: Yeah, there's this wonderful book over here, which there's a great interpretive kind of video showing you through it. It's a collaborative book. I think there's how many artists?

Sasha: Oh, I can't hear from the top of my head. I'm sorry.

Bridget: Lots.

Sasha: A lot.

Bridget: Maybe 50? Something like that. Anyway, the project was anyone could be in this book. You just had to supply a thousand foolscap pages and then they were bound. And it's a really amazing document of the time. There's poetry. There is photography. There's conceptual art processes. There is a fantastic work by Ted [Edward] Colless that, I don't know, we had lots to talk about with, which is the book is open to it, so you can go and check it out.

Sasha: Yeah, we might let you discover that one. But I might say a couple of things about this book while we're there.

You know, when we talk about the ways in which women are represented in the Post-object collection, it is often in these collected works. As Bridget mentioned, that was an open access project, which meant that anyone could take part. And, you know, that says a lot about the time as well as, you know, in a kind of non-hierarchical approach. But it also means that a lot more women's work was sort of slipped into these open access projects than is represented across the collection as a whole. So, it gives us a sort of indicator of what was going on. And so that's sort of one of the reasons why it's quite important to include kind of collected works like that in the room where we might not have so many individual representations as we might have liked to see.

Bridget: Yeah, it's really interesting that even within the women that are inside that, included in that book, there's people really relevant to queer history as well. And you know it seems like it became quite a focus of our chats and our research just because it seemed like such a radical thing who was there and the types of work that was included. But also, the kind of openness of its narrative. There wasn't, it's not one kind of work at all it's so open. And that pluralism just seemed really important to me as well.

Sasha: And, I mean, apart from that acting as a sort of indicator to the breadth of practices that was going on, you know, to get a sense of the breadth of women's engagement in experimental art, we can go to Alison Goodwin's book as well. As I mentioned, that's one of the couple that were purchased in and it was purchased from *The Women's Show* in 1977 and there'll be some folks here that have a lot of knowledge about that. And that was a moment where there was 300 plus women showing and sort of following, you know, fairly soon after the formation of the Women's Art Movement in Adelaide. There was a note, and you can see it scanned on the screen there as well, which was a note in the back of it that Donald Brook had written when he brought that into the collection. So that is the only work that he purchased from that women's show.

Bridget: ...which is one in 2- 300.

Sasha: Over 300, yeah. Well, that's right. In *The Women's Show* alone, there was over 300. And it was, you know, it had some really nice comments in there about, you know, this is important work and we need to display it in this way and keep it in this way. So it was a deliberate collection. He thought it was important to the story of Post-object art.

But, you know, when I met Alison and we started talking about that work, this is a very important work to me because it prompted me to go and follow the story of where the women were then, if not in this collection, how can we access their practices? And speaking to Alison about it, she let me know that she didn't even realise it had been collected. She put it in a bookshop and thought it had been nicked because she didn't

get any money back from it. Which goes to a whole lot of other kind of problems of sort of disappearance around these kinds of works. They are hard to talk about in collecting and then hard for artists to talk about as well if they don't even know they've been kind of collected because they're so... available on every day.

Bridget: Yeah and maybe, we can talk about *All in The Silence* [1979] as well and Sasha's ongoing search for this artist who we can't find.

Sasha: So, there's a beautiful work that's been with the pages being turned over by Eva Yuen Man-Wah. And this is an artist who travelled through Adelaide and through Aotearoa / New Zealand as well, through the late 1970s and into the 80s. She did a residency at the Experimental Art Foundation, made some significant work here and work that we might think of as kind of participatory cultural exchange work where she was cooking in the gallery, growing plants in the gallery. And also, made this book, which she may have actually photographed in Auckland or in Wellington, we're not sure, but it is a...

Bridget: ...published by EAF [Experimental Art Foundation] though.

Sasha: It was published at her time here. It tells the story of a day in the life of Michael Chan, who's a fry cook in a Chinese restaurant.

Bridget: He's very handsome.

Sasha: He's very handsome. The images are also very, very beautiful, you know, very kind of shaking black and white images and there's very little text. And if you listen on the headphones, you can hear Shenshen Zheng looking through that book with us and having a conversation about it and sort of unpacking some of that through her own practice as well.

Bridget: So, Eva then moved back to Hong Kong and we're not really certain where she is. And that is a problem because it makes it really difficult to show these things. So, it's almost like a double erasure when you can't ask for permission to show something or allocate copyright to that person, then it's really hard to show it. It's harder and harder to show it.

Sasha: And hard to find the information. I travelled to Auckland to look in the archives of the Auckland City Gallery to learn a bit more about her time in this part of the world. So, without walking directly into archives and then kind of looking through traces like this, which are, you know, very much incomplete. You know, it's hard to be able to carry these works forward and have a conversation with them.

I might just also say something about how that came into the archive because it might mean I can acknowledge someone else here today. So, as I mentioned before, you know, there's been a bit of a move of bringing works into this archive, which is a really, you know, a beautiful movement and change. So, I mentioned Bonita Ely's book was sort of a donation that came about through my beginning to interview women who were taking part in experimental art. This book actually came in before I started working with the collection. And it came in via a donation by Christine Goodwin, who was the first female director of the Experimental Art Foundation and I believe is in here somewhere today. I'm sorry if I can't eyeball you right now. Ah, there you are!

So, I'd like to acknowledge and...Christine donated this alongside of, along with some of her work as well, which is fantastic work, which is actually as part of the exhibition that we'll be opening at ACE Gallery on Friday next week. So, we can kind of already see the ways that work is starting to kind of fill back into those gaps. But it's through the hands and work of many women, I would say, and many people. And hopefully we'll see many more.

So, some further donations to this collection that have also happened in recent years include a large donation of works by Sandra Greentree Nicolaidis, which are also on display at the companion show at ACE, formerly the Experimental Art Foundation for those who didn't realise.

Bridget: Which opens...

Sasha: ...Friday next week. Just one last thing I'd like to say is there is a beautiful portrait of the snails.

Bridget: Oh, yeah.

Sasha: Those are the actual snails that made that work. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you, Bridget.

Bridget: Thank you, Sasha. I also wanted to thank Jen Mathews who fabricated this amazing table for me and brought my drawing to life. So, thank you, Jen.

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