



Lisa Liebetrau Artist Talk Transcription
Boorloo Heritage Festival
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In 2021, Lisa Liebetrau undertook an artist residency at PICA where she delved into the PICA archives. During her research, Liebetrau discovered a wealth of information, memories and images of the early activities of artist groups and organisations that helped establish PICA, including Praxis and Artist Regional Exchange (ARX). Liebetrau used these archives to shed light on Perth's art history and how it has shaped and influenced the present day.

Lisa Liebetrau is an artist and Collections Officer with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) from Curtin University. Lisa's practice utilises public and private collections to inform artworks and contextualise the site in which they are exhibited.

Miranda Johnson:

I think we will get started, thank you so much for coming. I'd like to acknowledge that we're meeting today on Whadjuk Noongar Boodja and pay my respects to Elders past and present. So, my name is Miranda, and I am the Public Programs and Studio Manager at PICA. We have artist Lisa Liebetrau here today, and she's done many, many years of research into the PICA archives. And so, she's going to be taking us through some of the kinds of interesting gems that she's found over the years and there'll be a chance to have a look at some of the materials again. Thank you, Lisa.

Lisa Liebetrau:

Thank you, for those who are here. It's 3pm on a Saturday afternoon and thank you so much for being here. And actually, thank you for Hannah, because I was going to say a lot of these materials that were in your office are now compiled beautifully in some nice boxes. So, after my research, I did compile some of those archives chiefly the significant ones, I catalogued them myself, because I figured that going forward, if there was a project that would respond to the archive, it's best if the really crucial material was all together, and then the Judy Wheeler commission began. The archive has been really helpful for artists to see those early documents.

So, a bit about me. Hi, I'm Lisa Liebetrau. I studied at Curtin University and did a Bachelor of Arts and Honours in Fine Art and graduated in 2016. So since then, I've been working, doing few solo exhibitions, few residencies and whatnot. During my studies at Curtin University, I was very interested in institutional critique. And that's kind of where my work began looking into archives, particularly galleries or buildings that house exhibitions. I believe a lot in context, I think if you're going to exhibit in a gallery, particularly this building here, it's very hard to ignore the original purpose of it before it was a gallery. I think, going forward when I was looking at a lot

of institutions, institutional critique artists, like, you know, Michael Asher, or Andrea Fraser, these little periphery connections for something I was really interested in. So, walking in where these pilasters are, you know, you can't deny what was here before. So, it kind of got me interested in understanding the hierarchical structures in galleries and museums. And I was really interested in the behind the scenes of these institutions, and these workings that happen outside of the public's view, but how they all come together to produce these wonderful exhibitions in this gallery. I came to a point where I decided to apply for a residency at PICA in 2021. I had a few people had message me and say, you need to give it a go. I was really keen to, I was wanting to apply for many years, I just wasn't sure yet what my outcomes were. And I felt I needed to, you know, explore a little bit about my practice and everything like that. And it's from that point that archives became a really crucial part of my investigations.

I completed an eight week studio residency here in 2021. During that time, I looked at public and private collections, State Library in Western Australia, I even went to the Welshpool collections facility, part of WA Museum Boola Bardip to see what information they had. And this was actually a good six months before my residency started. I like to have a really good understanding of the site before I begin, so I spoke to a lot of different research collections, the State Library, the Museum of Perth, they had a small publication as well. And from there was where I started my residency. The outcomes for the residency were very much based on producing the archive as accessible for the public for the first time. So, one of the points of reference was a quote by Noel Sheridan, who was the inaugural director of PICA, he had a quote that really stuck with me. He basically said that PICA will not collect things, although what it presents may be collected or refined by others. And it really stuck with me because, as we know, PICA is not a collecting institution. It's always been experimental in its approach. And I kind of wanted to challenge that, from my perspective, is it not a collecting institution because the archive does speak for itself? And in a way that collection has informed a lot of different exhibitions? Yes, so it's not collecting in the traditional sense, but there is a collection that I wanted to show the public.

I looked at a few different artists such as Sarah Rodigari. She had a show at Carriageworks in Sydney in 2021. The work was called 'On Time', and it basically developed through interaction with casual workers at Carriageworks, and within the gallery she had 12 clock hands that were forged from steel placed in an abstract of clock face formation each representing an hour of time. So, when I started, I was really keen to talk to the workers or the gallery attendants at the gallery about the history and one of those was Caroline Forsberg, she's at the front desk right now. She has been working here for almost, I think well over 10 years, and she has always been interested in the history and the heritage and I knew out of everybody, she would have her own understanding and approach. So, I spoke with Caroline during my residency. And then I also looked at an artwork from Documenta 14 in Germany in 2016. And that's by Stefanos Tsivopoulos called 'The Precarious Archive'. So, what he did was he created a long-term project, centred around a collection of 900 images, and the result of 10-year research into public and private archival institutions. And how he presented that was performers had white cotton gloves, oh, here it is, perfect timing, the performance. Basically, they were showing each person that came in this archive, not speaking, just basically providing that knowledge. And that's how I wanted the residency outcome to be.

So, at the end of the residency for the talk, I had Margaret Moore, who was fantastic person to sit next to. And I brought the archive into the studio for people to put some gloves on, get involved, have a look. And it allowed a lot of people who've been interested in the site a chance to look at this because I've had a few messages from people saying I'm so glad this archive has been brought up. So happy to hear the past is coming to the fore. And a lot of this history isn't

known by the current generation, because we're talking a period of 80s and 90s in Perth, a lot of the practitioners and also the critics of that time, have even moved interstate or passed on. So this is bringing this archive to a new generation to also think about, okay, that building over there, that's PICA and that was the voice for it you know, because sometimes people walk through the Cultural Centre, sort of a bit glazed over, not sure of these buildings that were here, but were built a long, long time ago, by the penal colony. So, the history of this building, if you're not aware, was the Perth Central School 1896 was when it was built, it was actually only officially opened in 1897. John Barrett Lennard, who was one of the first curators of some exhibitions here in 1990, post its period as a school, he curated a show called 'A Spacious Central Location'. And it's basically a publication I read a lot, mainly because it was an exciting show for me as a site-specific artist because the artists were asked to respond to the building and the architecture, much like the Judy Wheeler Commission. And he talked about the historical value placed on a former White Cube gallery as a contextual setting for the display of art, which is essentially what I do, the artists were given the opportunity to look at, I guess, the building pre architectural refurbishment.

So, during that period, pre-1991, it was actually refurbished again. Prior to that there had been a few shows such as 'Pilasters', Ted's Snell experimental show based on the pilasters in the building. And then the 'Spacious Central Location' exhibition was an opportunity for artists to sort of get involved take down walls, paint walls, and then they were going to re-do it again. It was closed, actually, for a period of six months after 1990 and was opened officially, in 1991, by honorary Ian Taylor at the time. So, one of the artists in that show and you would have seen that picture there. So, Paul Hay he had an artwork in one of the galleries or studios. And he'd written on the chalkboard. So, these chalkboards were still in the studios upstairs at the time. And he wrote, "This is not a neutral space". He was considering the transition of the building between the two, the jarring sort of juxtaposition between school, and gallery and what comes in between. So, when he wrote this, "this is not a neutral space", it stuck with me for a while, and I wrote it on a whiteboard (bit of a contemporary spin) in my studio as a statement, because no space is ever truly neutral. We know that it doesn't matter if it's a gallery, or if it's a library. Even at someone's home, every kind of building you step into has some sort of history or memory, and even galleries, no matter how commercial they can be. They're not neutral. There's always a history there.

So that's a bit of context into me, and what I was interested in. So, in terms of history, what do we know about this building, so in 1896, and then Tuesday 19th of Jan 1897, Minister of Education, Edward Wittenoom opened a school, the Central Public School. And historically, if you know much about the gold rush or Perth's history, the gold boom caused a massive migration of people to the city centre. They started to discover gold in Coolgardie and also in Marble Bar, that sort of wealth and profit is basically what built a lot of these these heritage buildings and one of which we're sitting in right now. Because if you look at the outside of the building, there's quite a Victoriana approach. There are decorative friezes, a very luxurious kind of architecture. And that was because of the money that was available to spend on such fancy luxurious architecture. However, this building obviously has been purpose built for a school. So even though the Victoriana architecture wraps around the building, the function of it internally was built for classrooms. And that's kind of what PICA had to juggle with, at the end of the day, you're dealing with the school building, but it's also got to function as a gallery. So, it was opened in 1897. And then it was basically a school from 1897 to 1988. So, it was a Central School, a Boys High School, and then a technical college, which was absorbed into WAIT Curtin University at the time, and then it was closed officially after that period. It sat abandoned for a while. In 1975 artists groups such as Praxis, which was a kind of a boys club, as some of the female artists in Perth used to say at the time, Praxis met and you might know Guy Grey Smith,

the famous artist, they met at his residence in Quinns Rocks in 1975, and had talks about the need for an institution that could house or present contemporary art to the Perth audience. Media Space was a huge part of that as well. Media Space, came together with Praxis, a lot of these guys were all together practising art. And they decided they needed to go forward to the government and put a proposal forward in 1985. That was to Mr. Ron Davies at the time, the Minister of the Arts. So, our Templeman back then. And Bob Poolman, Janet Holmes a Court and Brian McKay, again, famous, famous people that we know of comprised its original foundational membership. So, a lot of these key players are still alive today. Brian McKay has since passed. But the important thing and connection for me was Margaret Moore, who wrote his obituary. When I had the studio residency, she helped with the talk, she actually read that out at the end of the talk at my request, because it kind of shows you how these people are still working and doing great things. But their history shouldn't be forgotten, and what they worked on.

So, in 1988 to 1991, it was opened then by the Deputy Premier, which was Ian Taylor. And Noel Sheridan was appointed in 1989. He unfortunately was only in the role from 1989 to 2006. He passed away suddenly from cancer. And they had to find a new director, which happened later, Sarah Miller. The one thing I want to note here, is that PICA has always focused on having an open access policy, hence why I gave the public access to the archive. Before the building was finished, prior to 1991, the first director, Noel Sheridan promoted works in progress, as opposed to finished works, hence 'Pilasters' and a 'Spacious Central Location'. And I found that really exciting because we don't always have that in Perth, I think art has changed a lot post-2000s, art is a lot more resolved these days. But PICA has always fostered a really experimental works in progress process, which I really appreciate. And I think it's still very, very evident today.

So, during that time, when Noel Sheridan was in charge, he basically was very much interested in fleshing out ideas and experimenting and having a space where that could happen. So, he says, he stressed the relationship between the arts, culture and societies in which they are situated. PICA should be about the ideas of freedom, risk and disclosure. And he really stressed that the Cultural Centre is not just a complex but a space designed for accessibility. Contemporary art in WA prior to PICA was on the margins of the cultural sphere. Not a lot of people were engaged with it and a lot of people were aware AGWA was showing a lot of old masters like Van Gogh's *Waterlilies*. It was almost impenetrable for contemporary artists at the time. Hence why Praxis, Media Space and also the women's art group Artemis were created, because they were the progressive force coming forward to basically say, we need to start embracing local contemporary art in Perth. And that's crazy how that was only the 80s. So, in that period of time, that need for an institute of contemporary art was very evident. And Sheridan actually spent a lot of money in 1990, creating an extensive advertising programme, and paid for materials such as artists, books, magazines, audio and video that would plan the institute's future direction. And that's why on these tables, there's so much paper and public materials, because during that period, there's a lot of books written, there was a lot of publications, he made it really evident in that six months that PICA wouldn't be forgotten.

So, these pictures here relate to a second segue to my practice here. And that was when I worked with two PhD candidates in 2022. Because I'd done my residency and was obviously interested in the archive, I was approached to be a research assistant for two Monash candidates who wanted to look into the archive for Artists Regional Exchange, and no one will know what that is or remember it and that's a real shame, because it was something that had so much promise and potential but unfortunately, funding did not allow it to continue. I worked with Anca Rujoiu, who is a curator in Singapore, and Bianca Winataputri, who just finished her

PhD; Anca is still working on hers. ARX occurred from 1997 to 1999 and was a massive undertaking that created an opportunity for cultural exchange between Southeast Asian, Australian and New Zealand artists. This was coordinated by Adrian Jones, offering a chance for different communities to come together, collaborate and create new ways of artmaking. There were five incarnations of this exchange. And through it there were successes and failures.

The funding was the biggest problem. In the beginning, it began with a massive group of artists, and you might have seen the dingo on the roof picture. So that was one of the first iterations of ARX by an artist Adam Boyd. He basically painted a big red Dingo on the roof of PICA, which actually was there for 10 years. It just faded away. But it was in relation to Bond Towers at the time. And it was interesting because this was a period where Alan Bond was under scrutiny. And we know the history of Alan Bond. And in the background of that picture, you might say the two Bond Towers is there. So, the work sits in conversation, and where PICA sits you get the skyline behind you, so he picked a perfect public artwork. This was one of the successes of ARX and it is certainly something that a lot of people don't know about.

But through this research that I did for six months, I've been able to digitise that whole archive for researchers and actually still to this day, we have academics that want to look into that archive, particularly because there's been Biennales and there's also the APT which is the Asia Pacific Triennial that happens over East and it's basically what ARX was trying to achieve but didn't get there in the end. And some of the people who worked on that was Margaret Moore, Ted Snell, John Teschendorff and many names that we would have seen in our state collections. All of these people were a part of organising that. And it was decided in 2001, that ARX could no longer continue. And in the committee minutes, a lot of the problems were the size of it. It started big and then slowly but surely starting to peter out and become smaller in terms of the amount of participating artists. A consistent problem too was that a lot of the Southeast Asian artists were established, and a lot of the Perth artists were emerging. And there was often this juxtaposition, but they learned a lot from each other. So to sum up ARX just as a point of history, I've got a quote here by Allison Carroll who wrote an essay on the problems with ARX and she says in 1999 "cultural exchange is tricky and individual and loaded. One person's idea of cultural exchange isn't another's even within one culture. Multiply that for cultures other than one side." So, this hidden history is something that I wanted to bring up today, but I still consider it something that can be looked at a bit further.

To finalise this little chat, before we look at the archives I just wanted to say that it's important to recognise how much PICA has achieved since opening in the 90s, particularly sustaining these original objectives of presenting progressive, experimental and refreshing exhibitions every year. Through my research, that's one thing that I have taken away. I feel like PICA's past has now come back to the present in such a great way. I mean, we're sitting in fantastic installation by Agatha Gothe-Snape, who I'm also a big fan of. And actually, it was a real treat when she came to Perth, and she knew my name. And I was like, well, I've been following your work for years. So, she knew my name because of the archive research I've done. But it was really nice to see her respond to a Spacious Central Location again. So, my research has kind of come full circle in a really nice way.

And I think before we finish today, I just want to read a little quote from Caroline Forsberg, who's at the front desk, from the interview I did with her. So, we had a little chat about the history, right. And some of the history we talked about is on those tables there. And so, I was asking her about her Open House Tours which she used to do a few years back. And this is from Caroline, "yeah, they found two rulers. I just wish I knew where they all are, because I only know about the shoes". So the shoes on the desk there that was from one of the school children, it

was found in the wall cavity in 2003. 100% we're talking 1890s that shoe was made. The size is definitely a child and I also talked to a conservator about what can be done. Basically, it's too far gone. But I made a little case for it so that it can be protected for future. And there used to be a shoe company called Parker and Co, which Caroline told me that a lot of the school children got their shoes from.

So, Caroline continues “someone from 1956 in red ink wrote, and this was a letter found in a wall cavity. ‘Should I say, though you are gone, I dream a little’ and it was stuck in the floorboards. It just really kind of humanises this whole space for me because it was gutted. But there were children that came through, and even looking at Trove in the State Library, I found a Perth Boys’ School newsletter. They used to have a magazine and they talk about where you would buy your shoes. It was Parker and Co, which opened up around the same time as the school. It also talks about cough medicine and things like that, which looked like they had some pretty intense ingredients in them. And then she says, “they talked about art exhibitions that they would host downstairs and what's now the main gallery. And the girls would go on trips up to Kings Park and they would make wreaths out of Geraldton wax and then the boys would go for runs up and down in front of where the Horseshoe Bridge is, they do their physical activity over there. The boys who were considered deficient would have to wrestle each other on lunch breaks. PICABar actually some of those photos on the wall of the boys wrestling at lunchtime. There's so much history, I just love reading about it” and we will finish there. Thank you so much.