**BLAIR FRENCH**

Welcome, everybody to the Art of influence – a conversation with Shaun Gladwell. My name is Blair French. I am the CEO of Carriageworks here in Sydney.

And it's my pleasure to welcome you all here and to introduce Shaun. But first I’d just like to acknowledge that I am speaking from, from Carriageworks in Eveleigh/Redfern in Sydney, on the lands of the Gadigal of the Eora nation.

I'd like to acknowledge elders past present and indeed those emerging. And pay respects and acknowledge also the strength of knowledge and continuous ownership and sovereignty over the lands of which I work and the importance of that to the work in which the organisation I'm a part of tries to undertake; and undertake with artists and with creative endeavour at the heart of everything we do.

Shaun, welcome. Shaun is in Naam on the lands of the Kulin nation, experiencing the long lockdown period. And we might talk about that a little bit about what it is to be an artist in this moment.

So first of all, just I think we're going to have a conversation for sort of roughly 45 minutes and then have some questions at the end. But also feel free to type in questions as we go. And I'll pick some of those up on the screen.

And I think these sort of conversations are really best if we’re responsive to our audience and to the sorts of things you'd really like to hear Shaun talking about. We've talked a little bit about how difficult it is to talk from an artist perspective, and also from myself as a curator/writer to talk about artists not work without the artwork in front of us or sort of around us in some way.

And we've done these types of conversations in exhibitions and other contexts in the past. So we may be a little abstract in this regard, or we might talk about things other than specifically Shaun's own work. I’d just like to start by saying that Shaun and I go back a long time.

I was noting down last night, the sort of projects that we've worked on down the years and how that might influence the type of things we've talked about.

And I think we've done really sort of six key things together, I've had six kind of key encounters with Shaun's practice down the years. First as an examiner of his master's thesis, which I don’t think he likes me bringing up but I refer to it all the time.

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Yeah. Wow, the first one's got me really terrified. So where are we heading here?

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Yeah, and you know we've worked together on shows at Performance Space, his first survey show at Artspace, here in Sydney; his Venice Biennale project in terms of my writing with him for that book, a project in Christchurch that people are probably over here in Australia less familiar with and we might talk about that a little minute, because sort of Shaun's one of his forays into public space and sculpture.

And most recently, and I realised last night that 12 months ago, this to the day, the show was still actually on and available to the public in what seemed like a whole other reality, Shaun’s survey show *Pacific Undertow* at the MCA here in Sydney.

So we might talk through some of those things. But I'd really like to talk a little bit more, or ask Shaun to talk about, you know, perspectives from his career as an artist to date.

And it's worth noting,

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Before we do Blair, can I also just mention that my engagement with your work was actually before you were examining my if you could call it themes, I'm not sure let's not go there in terms of trying to… it was, it was a really great response, but I'm not so sure about my writing capacity, but it was your shows that the ACP and your local writing.

So that's just where we're at in terms of that history. But also, I think, now doing this, this is really quite exciting. Sorry I just wanted to just mention that, before we proceed,

**BLAIR FRENCH**

All good, so I mean, I was also looking at Shaun’s CV last night, and noticed that he also, which I did know, but hadn't really thought about; that he finished at SCA Sydney University 1996. With his honours degree, and actually in painting, and that was actually the year I also graduated from the University of Sydney.

So we’re both alumni, and that is now a long time ago. Yeah. Shaun looked a lot more fresh-faced. That's just because he’d shaved at that point.

So Shaun, I wanted I want to talk a little bit about, well ask you to talk a little bit about your changing perspective from being an art student into moving into professional art well, but rather than start at the beginning, lets sort of start at the present and kind of just ask you, you know, how you are going during lockdown, and particularly as an artist who does a lot of work out in public space, you know, filming, shooting, performing, how are you going being in the studio?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Well I think it's, it's more like a sort of challenge rather than a problem to sort of work in domestic spaces. But that's always been an interesting kind of idea anyway, you know, within the kind of bashful idea of poetics of space, you could kind of try and work within the house or a studio or say, exercise is happening within a five-kilometre radius of one's residence, and they just become these challenges.

So yeah, I mean, I don't know, I think it'd probably take some time to process the work that's being produced now.

Actually, you know, like, I think that there, if there's, if there's a future sort of category in film festivals for work that was produced during home-schooling, for instance, you know, like,

that would be really interesting to see what say, filmmakers, or artists, or performance artists or people who work in a kind of, or whoever just, you know, people who are working in traditional media,

how they're dealing with being restricted, for a better good, like a kind of a civic sort of obedience, you know, and then production within that. And that's an interest, I mean, but I'm not sure how mine's going. It's a bit too early to say, because I'm kind of in the middle of it. So I'm not sure if I'm getting out of that one. But,

**BLAIR FRENCH**

well, we're looking at a very clean space behind you. So we're not looking at lots of canvases and lots of drawing and lots of printmaking sort of taking place at home, we were looking at your hard drives, and see what looks like a virtual reality sensor behind you.

So I presume that that's the space in which you're working materially, that it is about film and moving image still.

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

But it could also be saying too much gaming and VR. And the computer doesn't currently work at the moment because it needs a new graphics card. So it's pretty deceiving.

It's the evil of images, I think, no, I mean, that's kind of really screen space has become something so valuable, you know, where it was this kind of, I mean, I guess the shift is, wild

but also VR, and the idea of like, say, social events taking place in in platforms like Fortnite, or, you know, concerts happening in there and big multiuser domains, that's, that's full, we saved a lot of people from lockdown.

But I've, you know, I've got too many commitments to do any frontline research in that area, it's been really tough to find the time for screen space. But this is, this is the kind of screen space I want to see.

Misjudged your palette, your colour, as you know, is I thought you might have got a bit of sun, but we're not getting much sun down here except for today. Anyway

**BLAIR FRENCH**

I'm gonna ask you a couple more things about, you know, inevitably ask you about the sort of impact on work and thinking and being as an artist of this of this current moment. So we'll probably come back to this a little bit in another form later on.

But now as an artist, you're somebody who I've associated a lot with, with movement. Now, there's the obvious thing about movement in your work, you study movement, to a certain extent in your work.

But you're also a very mobile person, as an artist. And it's a little bit emblematic of a generation, but I think, you know, a particular epitome of this, you have travelled enormously to make, and to show, and indeed to research.

You know, for someone who lived in the UK for a long time, I seemed to see you as much as when you live in Sydney, because you seem to be back here constantly moving back and forth between places, your work involves you often going out into environments, whether they be outback, urban, whatever.

So again, it's this idea of you’ve just talked about the constriction, you're making almost a new conceptual frame out of constriction.

But I also want to ask him, what is it to be an artist, you know, in a sense, an international artist, or a global artist, or a mobile artist in the age of immobility, and being restricted to the local? And do you think that’ll have a lasting effect on the way in which you approach being an artist?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**  
Yeah, I mean, I think it'll I mean, it will certainly influence um, current work, you know, I mean, like, I mean, the last project I did was really just having a cinematographer friend come over, and her husband, who works on grips in a professional way;

and making a work that was really within the domestic but then trying to sort of almost like project what you would like to be doing within say urban space or how you would like to read or think about more space, but you just have to kind of restrict it to the studio or the domestic

but then in a conceptual way you have people like sort of, you know, Bruce Nauman saying, well, anything that happens in the studio can be art, you know, and that was a debate going on since art school.

Like we knew about that through SCA because it was the more theoretical - Is this where the little pitch comes in from my experience at SCA as being more theoretically sort of angled?

We found that out at art school that Naumann would say that you knew, you could try and invent your job every day, if you wished.

Or you could attach yourself to a medium if you wish, or add a spur, you know, talking about dismantling signature styles, and all sorts of stuff. So it was, it was a really exciting environment, but I think it also was this idea of problem solving.

Or, you, if you do something, you have to justify it, theoretically, you have to understand why you're heading into maybe not an understanding of the medium or the subject, but into those kinds of problems, and they could play you for the rest of your life.

Like how to work this space, and your body, you know, just like a really simple equation can be reduced to this kind of, you know, this kind of playing out through different processes and whatever. So I'm just in one now.

And, you know, the Andrews government has me at the house in the studio, and I do two hours of exercise, which is, everyone just has to calibrate their world to do that accordingly. I really like running at the moment, just in terms of the physical, and I make work about running at the moment.

Because I'm so kind of enamoured by it. But that just means instead of running for longer periods, you have to try and run for a shorter, faster period, which is for me, a really terrifying thing do in public.

You have to try and go to a sports field at night to do that. It looks horrible, there's profuse perspiration, I probably need to change the subject. (laughs)

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Okay. Okay, the subject that you've led me to where I kind of wanted to go, which was actually to go now we've talked a little bit about the current. Let's go right back to art school. And my first question really is what drew you to going art school in the first place?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

I think it was because I wasn't sure what to do. And I loved drawing. And I loved thinking about the world visually.

And I loved visual culture. I loved, I just loved I just loved this idea of maybe trying it, seeing what it would be like to go to art school.

I think art school was a real romantic idea for me, beyond being a professional artist, which you apparently learnt how to do at art school. So I sort of was excited.

But I was the first person in my family to kind of sign up for tertiary education, I had relatives that had that experience.

But if I didn't have like a sort of roadmap from family history, which was interesting, because I sort of used my parents support, but they were athletes. So I didn't have that purification between, say, the athletic and the aesthetic.

And at art school, it was an interesting thing to try and, you know, stitch up my experience and then see if I could justify artworks through thinking about what art school was going to teach me. And I'm not sure how to have that's a big [unintelligible]

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Well, rather than what our school taught you. And you've actually already touched on this a little bit, what did art school prepare you for? And what tools that give you?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

I think I was really lucky that we were all helping each other as a group of students, you know, and the and the faculty were incredible at sort of cultivating that, but also there was a lot of, you know, um, there was a really, it was a great dynamic, but I'm probably romanticising it now because it's been so long, I'm not, but I have to check with my colleagues.

And, you know, there was other people who became professional artists after that experience. And um, yeah, I think it's different for different times in your life, why you want to try and keep producing work professionally, it's just incredibly satisfying.

And I don't think I was prepared for art school. And you know, it was a very personal journey in some ways, but I'm glad I went to SCA and but I also am glad I did post graduate work because I wasn't ready to go out and do field work without really trying to work out what I wanted to do.

And that took a lot of tertiary education. In my case, I just needed to be institutionalised for a long time because I did a Master's and then a kind of a year after Master's. So it was quite, it was actually I sort of fell in love with research, I guess, at SCA.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

I was gonna ask you, but in a funny way you deflected this question already; often the really challenging, difficult but exciting moments in one's life are when you finish something, and you're not quite sure what's next.

And so I just wondered, and particularly since I'm sure we have probably a number of students on this conversation, you know, what, what the Australian art world or maybe the maybe the broader art world internationally looked like to you

standing at the edge after you've just finished that SCA degree? And did you have any understanding or concept or ideas about how to kind of take a step into it?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Not really, I think I think the world was kind of within my experience at SCA, you know, because it was like a really mature age, sort of student population.

It was various, um, I had, we had Matthias Gerber, who was very proud of his Dutch origin, but had this incredible technical faculty and way of reading his kind of Australianness and kind of incredible transitional and seminal figure, you know, John Nixon was kind of visiting, I missed John at that point.

And his passing is very sad of recent; but there was he was, he came and visited the painting department and would talk to students, we would have A.D.S Donaldson; we'd have lots of people were visiting interstate, but it felt like the experience was international just through, you know,

John Young was there, we had Sue Baker, we always a great, it just seemed like I was surrounded by these people who were giving me so much information that, I don't know how to explain it, other than through the experience of being with those people, which was very valuable.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

So you just made a comment about being, you know, institutionalised; the support structure of being an institution, but you just then referred to it also in terms of people, which I think is really critical. Yeah.

So you finished, you finished that school and so, you moved on to the other art school, don’t know if we’re allowed to talk about on this call, to do a Master's; and I was seeing your work and popping up in you know, the travelling art scholarship and other shows, primarily in painting.

And then around that sort of 2000 mark, they're starting to see those early video works. And, you know, again, what was critical is in many ways, as an outsider looking in, from my point of view, as a critical curator, there seemed to be that work was emerging both as incredibly strong individual sensibility, but actually also from within the community.

So you've just mentioned people, so in this case, the Imperial Slacks group, for example, amongst other sort of groups of colleagues, and peers and friends that you worked with, at that time.

Do you want to talk a little bit about the importance of that sort of sense of community, that practice, and also maybe, both in terms of giving reflective criticism like, you know, pushing you along, challenging what you're doing as, at the same time supporting and extending it?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Yeah, I think it was a powerful experience, just through finding people that wanted to try a project like that to try and live together and, and curate each other's and other works into a space.

And you know, and, you know, for me, even the way that the Slacks kind of operated was through this kind of classical Greek spatial logic of having a kind of an agora, which was the exhibition space and then you had this the store, you know,

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Do you want to describe Imperial Slacks a little bit. For those that may not be familiar,

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

It was just a collective, that that grew out of a few graduate students at the College of Fine Arts, which is, of course, the University of New South Wales art and design now.

And I think, formerly, the City Art Institute, so it had this kind of transformation. And it's interesting, because that group of students just wanting to live together, and I wasn't actually officially living there, I was partnered to a slacker.

And so my official status was a strap on apparently, in terms of the that's the, sorry, I'm just using the slanguage.

But the experience was powerful, but I think that I already felt a kind of, a sense of community from my experience at SCA because it was a group of people who decided to do honours after their degree.

And there was this kind of, it was competitive, but there was a lot of kind of collegial activity going on that I hadn’t experienced at high school, you know, because I was like alone, off with these skateboarders in car parks and you know, reading with my brothers or whatever I was doing, but it was it was different.

And then there was this other experience of being at university and living with some of the university extending the university into your life 24 hours, which has its problems as well I'm not going to romanticise it.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

I’m interested in the sense of possibility that emerged out of that group because so many of you have gone on to have really significant solo careers in various fields, but primarily as artists, and very internationally focused in many ways.

When you look back at that moment, what was there any that that you could have foresaw? Or you actually talked about or thought you were, collectively or individually heading somewhere?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Not really, I mean, I felt like again, there was so much a kind of an international experience within the community of the slackers, for example, you know, like I because I was a kid from the suburbs, and I hadn't travelled internationally until I promised myself I'd finished duelling with sort of tertiary education.

And then, you know, so I hadn't been anywhere, but then we had Monica Tichacek, or, you know, Sean Cordeiro’s experience, and, and people from different parts of Sydney, and you know, it was a different socio-economic mix of people as well.

And that was, it was exciting to just not switch that experience of exchange off, in a way it was, really quite an experience, but I wasn't expecting anything,

it was quite weird, I didn't think that one experience would lead on to another in a kind of teleological way, even at that stage, it was a really organic thing that just sort of started to grow.

And then it, it had a name. And then, you know, like, I was interested in the history of collectives within Sydney, like, you know, Art Empire Industry, for example. And that was also international. And, you know, Jeff Gibson then with it.

So it seems like it was, when we looked around, it was just one moment where we were lucky enough to get a warehouse. To be honest, it was about real estate. That didn't last very long.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Yeah. Talk a little bit about your work at the time, because this is when you start making video and a part of it, thinking back now it's so much around the technological opportunity of that moment, you know, basically the handycam the digital camera, all of a sudden, being accessible, portable, carry it round on your skateboard, your bike, whatever start shooting in the street.

Did you have sort of models for that? Or was it just sort of freeform play a little bit to begin with?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

I mean, I was aware of other artists bringing in their sort of experience, like very early into their work and claiming that they had some sort of, maybe experience over the materials or the conditions, you know,

I think I'm, like someone, like, even, I guess someone saying that they had that over their, their bodies, I guess they could say through performance, you know, the history of performance art, in terms of endurance or stamina,

But I was I was kind of maybe more interested in what I was seeing in the lounge room, you know, like sports Action Replay, or whatever that is, this experience of what I was experiencing out of a formal art sort of experience or an art historically defined experience was as interesting and it took me time at art school, just kind of maybe work out how to put that together, if at all, it would kind of be in a an abrupt kind of jewel, somehow, I'm not sure I've got off track there dude, sorry

**BLAIR FRENCH**

I find that quite interesting, actually. But we will shift and we'll come back to the practice because you just mentioned a little moment ago that, you know, you kind of hadn't really done the travel, hadn't been overseas in an extensive way.

And you put yourself through that tertiary experience first. So you kind of did the two things together, that you slam them together, but by going overseas early on, to actually study at Goldsmith's, and I'm just kind of interested in the impact at Goldsmiths, and, its name, its reputation within the contemporary art world as a as a tertiary institution.

What that did for your practice and what new challenges maybe it threw up for you.

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

I think it was interesting because I wasn't sure what to expect. I mean, I knew that it was, going to be an experience where they try and challenge on some level, but it was probably good to have an experience at SCA where I was really interested in theory; I was misreading and, you know, Mark Jackson was horrified.

And you know, there was some, there was some pretty bad essays that were turned in. And I, you know, I'm not saying that I had any handle on it, but I was interested in that aspect of SCA.

And there was no life drawing and whatever that sort of maybe led me to, you know, I was still fuelled by those ideas at COFA.

And that was another experience. I can't Sorry, I've mentioned the damn, can you edit that out? Oh, it’s live, damn, whatever.

And then, but Goldsmith’s, was supposed to be tough, but it was just a different kind of interesting in terms of the experience educationally. But they didn't want to talk about, say, post modernism anymore.

You know, Australia had its own conversation within certain theoretical debates, and they were sort of interested in an ultra-modernism more - there was, you know, sort of stuff that was happening, that I was just getting up to speed with, like, say, relational practice, you know, all seeing that stuff actually taking place in the social

rather than what I what I was experiencing, which was fine, because it was, you know, it was like a kind of report.

And then there was an actual exchange with say people from overseas who are working in in my community or whatever.

So it was it was it was a kind of, you know, Goldsmith's was, was the crying artists seminars were tough, though. They make they try and talk about your work, but no one knows whose work it is. And then by the end of the seminar, you're crying.

No one really cried, though, that was just the rep that I think there was a part of the perspectives at one stage that you're supposed to cry after, though.

There was there was this romance about being broken down as an artist and turn into a ghost. It was horrible. I mean, that was the discussion.

And that was, that was new to me, because that wasn't a part of why I went to SCA just it was that, you know, they were, I think at the time though advertising bigger studio spaces for undergraduate artists (laughs), no, I'm not I was it was really a great space.

And also the institution transformed during my experience. It was amazing. It was it went from say it was great to hear Marc Newson talk about Balmain but I sort of started off in Balmain and then by my honours year, we had moved to Kirkbride so it was this kind of; the actual bricks and mortar of the institution was in transition during my experience of SCA and that, and that was a huge part of the, whole experience of really, for a lot of us.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Yeah. So from the perspective of, you know, say being Goldsmith or just being away, you know, how did how did the Australian art world appear to you at distance compared to what it appeared you emerging into it? Just a year or two earlier?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

I mean, pretty, pretty amazing. Really, I mean, like, I guess, I didn't feel like I was in better or clear or deeper water at all. I mean, I would look at say what Jeff Gibson was writing about in art and text and go, wow, we were onto this grunge already, guys. It's cool.

You know, we've sort of like, you know, it wasn't like it was there was a there was already so much exchange that there was no say, you know, a kind of Smith like provincialism, it was all it was all cool. It was like everyone was kind of in exchange.

You know, not like saying, say, Nikos Papastergiadis going to Cambridge and don't try to work out what the hell post modernism is - this a feedback loop from France to the US and then Australia.

And then there was this for me to be there. It was great to not know who was working there at the time. Other than the staff, you know, that was right to line up with the students, I guess and try and work out what to do.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

So we're gonna come back and we're sort of we're not gonna do this entirely chronologically, but one more thing, a couple more things chronologically, I guess I'm interested in one is you can you come back and Goldsmith's you here in the mid noughties

I think that's when you and I start doing some shows together. You're spending a lot of time working in Asia, Japan, Korea in particular.

I'm kind of interested in that, that being a really exciting cultural space and professional space for younger artists from Australia at that moment, and what created that and what you know, what that experience was for you?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Yeah, I think I think it was, um, It was always a part of going anywhere, it wasn't always having to be in Europe or, you know, it was like, um, but then I guess I remember being an SCA, going to Perth was a real issue because I remember going to the travel agent.

It's all anonymous, but the travel agent reported that the cost of the flight to Perth to attend the show, which I was excited about, because it was my first show out of out of the state, really this hatched show. But, then it was the same price to get to Southeast Asia.

So already I knew that there was this exciting option. And then the domestic travel was exciting, any travel was exciting, but it that Asia, culturally was already a part of my life, you know what I mean? Like, from, from the cultural in terms of the landscape and the suburb that I lived in, right through to the visual and, you know, SBS or ABC programming.

And, you know, Japanimation and manga, whatever, whatever level, you know, it was quite a thrill to be able to work over there - it was an honour, but I was quite lost.

You know, I needed a lot of help to organise anything than my own handycam. So it was, it was really, it was kind of humbling as well, to get those experiences from, I guess, thinking that the invitation was to, was to kind of work in a way that I knew, or, or understood, and then get a chance to maybe make a work for an exhibition that would probably have been the most terrifying and exciting, I think of all.

But that any chance to exhibit is an honour. So I would always, you know, I'm always interested in exhibiting in whatever form.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

I mean, at that time, I think we did the show in that space in 2007. And it didn't start as an organising principle.

But basically, that show was almost entirely made up of work that you had made in Korea or Japan over the preceding couple of years that hadn't been shown in Australia. And I think it was quite revealing to me and to a lot of people that that there was this body of accumulating work.

And I don’t that you were the only artist of your generation who is experiencing this; being invited these places into the shows like Yokohama, and Busan Biennale and others; to make new work that we weren't necessarily seeing back here, there was a whole sort of other arm of people's careers that were taking place.

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

We're just talking about other arms, I'm not as bad as some or as sort of committed as say Stelarc who went over there and came back 18 years later, do you know what I mean, Japanese robotics, and he just fell in love in such a, it wasn't Southeast Asia, he just got completely, you know, this whole, it was an incredible experience.

But I feel like I was always having to kind of sort of work in a way that there was so many restrictions. That that was interesting, you know, like, given the parameters or there was a timeframe or whatever. But then what happened in *Scape* was interesting, because there was also a kind of, you know, it was a kind of a rupturing or a crisis that it was almost, you know, it was a kind of terrain that required a really delicate or a particular way of working. So I don't know, if I'm sort of throwing you under the bus there man with that one. As a segue.

**BLAIR FRENCH**Well we'll have to talk about it now.

So the project that Shaun's referring to is a biennial that I curated, of public art, or art as projects in the public space conceived for the city of Christchurch, and I initially began that project, that biennial, prior to the Christchurch earthquakes and the Christchurch earthquakes sort of disrupted its realisation.

And I stayed on to continue working on that and created a second, for me, I think it was the sixth or seventh iteration of the biennial project.

And Shaun was one of the artists I invited into that project and going way, way back in our conversations and in some of Shaun's writings, and artist statements around referring to him, his interest in public sculpture being determined by you know, his working out of ways in which to skate objects in space.

So you know, a whole different framework for thinking about the use value and the aesthetic value of an object in public space.

But also after the second really devastating major earthquake in 2011, in Christchurch, there was a series of videos that were produced, or particularly one main video by a bunch of young skateboarders and put up on YouTube that became quite famous; you know, collected into museums now.

But Shaun was the first person to send me the link and say, what's going on here, have a look at this, actually [Shaun] you might have been in Europe at the time.

And they were images of, videos of young people getting out on their boards into the red zone. So getting in behind the army lines, because the army had cordoned off the city.

And reclaiming in the sense or rearticulating a relationship with this incredibly devastated and broken space. So that started the conversation, I'm going to pass over to Shaun now to sort of talk a little bit about that work.

And I think, you know, specifically since we haven't been talking about a lot of work, both describe it, but also, just those motivations in terms of thinking about art's place stroke purpose, stroke value, I guess, in a sense within a public realm, because I think this does inform a lot of your work.

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Yeah, sure. And also, I was honoured to be able to work in Christchurch, even though that it was a really tough environment.

I remember thinking that that video that came through was kind of almost an indication of what I was hoping to do with my practice, which was to try and remember or to cultivate that, that thing that happens with skateboarding and other urban activity, which is to try and you know, sort of work out a sort of different function to whatever the prescribed or designed function of objects or civic space might offer.

So that, when I see examples of say, in this case, street skateboarding, being performed at such a level, and in such a way that it sort of brings a different reading to what say, you know, liquefaction might do to a kind of tarred surface, or, you know, the idea that, like a skateboarder can see a fallen monument as a kind of, you know, grind box or a ledge,

you know, that's, it's almost like, you know, I don't know. It was such a shock to me to think of the speed at which they reported their activities.

Well, it was as much the speed of the editing and it was the, the world of skateboarding was finding out a different side of the crisis, but also knowing that we were still seeing what was happening through other channels and media.

So it was a kind of a different channel just popped up in skateboarding. Which is the same as what happened say LA skateboarders, skateboarding and skateboarders from South America in plazas, you know, Sao Paolo, they’re in there recording tricks that they haven't been able to do at that hour of the day, or sometimes never, because the terrain has been too populated.

So, you know, we're talking about lockdown, but actually, in some practices, and we, I have to recognise this, because I'm indebted to them in some way or, or still trying to learn what they what they are in themselves.

And what they mean to me is, you know, street BMX and skateboarding and, you know, graffiti, like, that's all having a Renaissance, right. It's like, there's terrifying economics behind why that happens. But that seems to be what was happening in that video.

And the experience afterwards was maybe producing a sculpture that related and honoured the video.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Yeah, I mean, one of the most compelling things about that video was looking at all the all the footage of damage, it's very hard to get a sort of sense of scale and impact, really, if you're looking at it on a screen, on a news feed, on social media, etc.

But the point in that video where there's one skateboarder, following another filming, or person in front; and the person in front literally disappears down a crack in the road. I think this is a good moment to ask one that did pop up, which was about risk.

Because I guess in some senses, your practice has engaged with the extremities of physical activity, and risk, but maybe there are risks in other senses. So one of the questions is simply, through your career, how's your relationship to risk evolved?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Yeah, I mean, I think that's a great question, because I'm not sure. I think maybe the risk somehow becomes a sort of a different kind somehow.

And I think maybe it's dependent on my body and my age, you know, like, this is what I'm having to try and understand.

Cos is it's like the same old thing you hear from, you know, middle aged men in lycra MAMILs, you know, that we're suffering these injuries that are not going away and it's horrific.

So I think that risk has to be something that I'm having to manage, like, almost like trying to calculate the risk of injury, but then it's also why, again, from, you know, an early questioning, why would I be wanting to risk that.

You know, like, I looked to other Australian artists like Mike Parr, who seems to do this in a way that is so kind of humbling, like he just his relationship to risk is always so high. You know, even though he's, he's not getting; we could just talk about Mike Parr for the rest of the

**BLAIR FRENCH**

No, no. That's probably another session

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

But he's like, Yeah, that's a deeply kind of, you know, humbling thing, because it's like, I'm interested in maybe a different kind of risk to that, but then there's also the fact that there's there is a sort of masochism involved in or kind of,

just an endurance or a stamina or, but my, my timeframe is, is kind of compressed, rather than say, there's a lot of training involved, I guess, I don't know, I'm not sure if I'm answering that we should

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Well, I'm going to shift your focus a little bit when thinking about risk. One of the questions that popped up my screen is asking you to talk about how you became a war artist, or how you took on that commission.

So that would be interesting to hear about; but also in that framework of risk, because your work as a war artist is both a study of people under pressure; people, in a sense, taking on risk.

And I guess as a, you've talked a little bit about various forms in the past, I mean, it's also placing yourself in a certain type of risk.

You want to talk a little bit about how that came about. And then what that experience was?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Yeah, I think, maybe if I go to the war artists thing, it was I guess it's a thing that I've sort of, it's a kind of, again, a family drama, and family issues, and I'm looking at this now;

just that risk was always involved in dinner table conversation, because my parents were involved in sort of sport or ultra-marathon running at one point; my mother came from athletics, my father was a professional soldier. So and then my mother's family had this kind of this history, as well.

So I felt like I came from a military. family in some sense, but then I rejected that and eventually let the war memorial know through a friend that I had that interest in, again, empirically observing something so that I feel like I know the space rather than just purely or not, I'm not sure.

I'm just maybe a different misunderstanding of the space through being there with my body. Maybe that's a better way of saying it without trying to say, say anything, given the time.

But it was it was, yeah, again, it was risky, but then I felt like it was mediated a lot by technology and politics. And, you know, it was a very different understanding of risk.

But then I still think that we could talk about say, what Dick Hebdige would say about risk, which was that the punk would sort of take a safety pin, which is designed for a baby's nappy, and by putting it through their nose, they're sort of risking a symbolic inversion of something through that gesture, you know what I mean?

And so, risk can also be talking about how I like using nasal dilators now and the Andrews government because we should be wearing mandatory facemasks.

But if you can run in a park and sort of in a sort of wooded area, you can probably whip out a nasal dilator and feel like you're a teenager getting an exhaust sort of soup up with the car and, you know, wearing what is essentially the opposite of a mask. So I'm not sure we could like...

**BLAIR FRENCH**

I don' t know where that one went Shaun, but (laughs)

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Well they always talk about risking, I guess risk can be something, can be something as minute as a mask to a nasal dilator or yeah, sorry, I know.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Well actually you make a point because, in a sense, we're all obsessed now with risk mitigation or our personal and collective trade-offs between risk and pleasure.

Risk in living our lives the way we want to live them. So there's a couple of questions that have popped up that kind of look at and ask a little bit of you, in terms of responding to your own work; in terms of looking back through the lens of our current moment.

So one is around the inversion in *Pacific Undertow* sequence. But actually, there's inversion, of course, in a number of your works. And this person's asking you and sort of making the comment that it feels like it's something of a metaphor for our current sort of sense of disorientation.

We're being overwhelmed by external forces. I'm just wondering how you think about inversion in your work; whether, what the sort of sense that you're trying to convey in that in the work in that regard?

And how you do things? Do you think it takes on amplified meaning or amplified impression? In the current moment?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Well, I guess I just have to kind of open it to that reading. Like, I can't lock it off and say that I've always loved disorientation and being overwhelmed by forces of nature.

But you know, what I mean, like, it's, if that's how people feel, and then they're reading the work through their own experience, then sure their reading is, you know, more important than my intention. And there was no intention.

I guess, other than that, yeah, being inverted is really interesting for a moment, and then it can be sort of a torturous experience, actually, and actually a form of torture, inversion.

But then, you know, say, there's small tricks to make it easier that, you know, other practices have, you know, like, I, I guess I'm interested in a work like *Pacific Undertow*, being an experience that a lot of surfers have.

It's not unusual to be inverted, under a crashing wave, you know, so that's almost a kind of a risk that lots of people take. And they identify with their sport, or as a huge cultural sort of field right there, you know, like, so I'm sort of always thinking about how to think of those experiences that a lot of people have, or they risk in their activity, because of the, whatever: the pleasure, pain equation or whatever.

But in a way, that sort of, somehow, I don't know, even just by inverting it, on this, to end this is, is to maybe look at it differently for a second, but it's really great to be upside down. You know, it's Yeah, like, when I think I saw Richard Gere in *American Gigolo* when he had the gravity boots, and I thought, Oh, wow. But I can only had like a beam out in the garage, and you just put a mattress down and pretend you're a bat. It's fantastic.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

So, on that note, I want to talk a little bit about your move into, not your move into but your exploration of Virtual Reality, and those sort of expanded fields of apprehension and perception.

Because I think that does impart that sort of idea of inversion and spatial disorientation, you really start to push in the work for the last four or five years using virtual reality, in particular.

Do you want to talk a little bit about what has drawn you into that space? And what, in a sense, what you're hoping that space will offer as an artist?

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Well, I think, I think was just another opportunity that I was lucky enough to have a few friends who had already sort of done some research, you know, like Leo Faber had already worked with the commercial side of VR and production and stuff.

So that was interesting, because people were getting back to me saying that it was getting to that stage where it was out of the lab.

And you know, SIGGRAPH and different organisations within Australia would have already demonstrated it as with, you know, shopping centres doing different versions of it in its early kind of iterations. But then, for it to be mobile, you know, like, we were sort of having that conversation about the mobilisation of certain technology through miniaturisation and you know, battery power and all those design elements that go into sort of shaping technology, that that was happening with VR.

And once something becomes mobile and sort of consumable, you know, it's like my fascination with say, Imants Tillers and the Fredricks canvas boards or something.

It was like, wow, you know, it all of a sudden, huge paintings became composite and you know, they can travel in stacks or you can just see picture plans as being these, you know, it was just an exciting time to be to be thinking about a medium that was kind of going through; that technology was going through that transition and becoming, you know, maybe a bit too accessible.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

When we were working on the show last year, and leading up to it, and you are making a new VR work, you're also sort of painting.

And in a sense there's this conversation and, that keeps going back, but you were also making a suite of prints at the time in Australian print workshop that were actually, in a sense drawing from some of the spatial expansion that you were experiencing in VR.

So it might be interesting for people to hear a little bit about your thinking about working back and forth across media. I mean, I think one of the things we tried during the show last year or so, so it wasn't didn't sort of start with painting, move to video and go to VR, that these things are in a constant conversation in your practice.

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Oh, yeah, I think I think that idea that, um, that you don't have to be sort of, or you think of an idea, perhaps and then the medium, or would then be that, you could select somehow, as the most kind of appropriate way to deliver the idea; rather than having to kind of process all the ideas through a medium, although that's not a problem.

Because if anyone's committed to a particular, you know, practice, then that's a specialisation. And I'm really terrible jack of all trades, you know, but I just like that idea of giving it a go, you know.

Also it happens in sport or in athletics, you know, just sort of, you know, I remember being interested in sort of cross country running in a certain level, you just have to do some extra training, and then, and then watching it is fine as well.

You know, it's like, my relationship to mediums at a certain point, I have to, I have to defer to specialist because mine, mine is really, about trying to work out how far I can go.

And, you know, there's so many problems with say, going back to VR, or even handycams, you know like, the work would be limited by the memory of the camera, you know.

Or the work would end at one point; in the early student works, some of which were checked out by University equipment department, you know, it was because they got so waterlogged they’d stopped working or something. And then you'd have to try and thaw them out. And those kind of, there was a lot of restrictions mechanically, but I, anyway, I just,

**BLAIR FRENCH**

We're almost at the end. I haven't got through everyone's questions that have come up on screens so I'm sorry about that.

I want to end from my point of view, with sort of one question, which is, you know, you've had a very significant career to date, and there's gonna be a lot more to come.

But it's actually quite, you're quite a public figure as an artist. And you're probably one of those people that you know, you ask people to name Australian artists, you would be top of one of the first names that come to mind, it's been quite a prominent career.

Now you can shake your head and whatever. You know, there are a number but to have that degree of public, being in the public consciousness, is not that common experience for an artist in any art form in this country.

So I'm wondering, to what extent you're kind of conscious of that, and whether that in any way, sort of impinges upon the way in which you approach your work, or do you bear it in mind at all?

Or whether you're able to just leave that to one side? And then since it's a question of what is it to be an artist in Australia over the last 20 years?

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Yeah, I guess it changes so much. Because, you know, like, we were, we sort of, there's a lot that doesn't change, you know, like, I'm still helping my friends out with work. And they're still helping me out.

You know, I mean, it's still I think it's almost like the, I have to recognise the relationships and the friendships that I formed in as far back as art school and before, but art school most definitely still.

You know, Greg Ferris and Kazumichi Grime, you know, in, you know, Técha Noble. All these people that were that were helping, we were all helping each other make work.

And that was exciting, as exciting as them all teaming up and that; but then those, there's still there's still echoes and reverberations that I don't know if I could explain right now given you know, it's just it's just that um, yeah, but working now.

Well, it's been great working at home. I'm not sure if I'm answering the question in any kind of coherent way but anyway, it's Yeah. Yeah. I don't know what like public life is something I'd love to just, I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I mean, I just feel like there's a I've got a local public life where they just think I'm just some weird Forrest Gump guy, you know, I'm the Forrest Gump dude. And that's cool.

As I am, I do a lot of sort of very slow running in bike lanes in my suburb of Melbourne and I'm probably pissing a lot of people off. So I think my public life is probably, maybe I should be doing more VR. I'm not sure. But that's a public space as well. Yeah, digital. So that's an agora, just as valid as the physical.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Okay, I think we're running out of time, Shaun, as ever so much more we could talk about it's been a real pleasure talking with you. Thanks, everyone, for joining us online. Thanks to the University of Sydney for hosting this. Look forward to talking in person very soon.

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

Hey, thanks so much Blair for also, spending some time out of your schedule for this one, man. Thank you.

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Always a pleasure.

**SHAUN GLADWELL**

We're coming in right on time, man. I'm looking is this

**BLAIR FRENCH**

Yep, absolutely. Okay, thank you, everyone.

**ANNA BURNS**

Thanks for listening to the Sydney Ideas podcast. For more information head to sydney.edu.au/Sydney - ideas.

It's where you'll find the transcript for this podcast and our contact details if you'd like to get in touch with a question or feedback.

If you haven't already, subscribe to our podcast so you never miss a new episode, such as Sydney Ideas on Apple podcasts or SoundCloud.

Finally, we want to acknowledge that this podcast was made in Sydney which sits in the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. It is upon their ancestral lands at the University of Sydney is built