CREATIVE RESPONDERS

S4 E1 In Conversation with Anna Kennedy-Borrisow
February 2023
Podcast Transcript

Scotia: Welcome back to Creative Responders in Conversation and our first episode for 2023.

Today I'm speaking with Anna Kennedy-Borissow.

Anna is an arts manager, academic and theatre maker and currently a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne where she is researching the interplay of arts practice, community wellbeing and emergency management.

Through analysis of creative recovery project documentation, interviews with practitioners, and focus groups with community members, Anna is working to present a cohesive picture of creative recovery in Australia.

Her work addresses a gap in what is historically an under-researched area.

A body of research that demonstrates the outcomes of creative recovery programs is really vital to supporting the sector to design policy frameworks and funding opportunities to support these programs.

It's something that we at Creative Recovery Network are always advocating for and contributing to - which is why I was excited to speak to Anna about her process so far.

We caught up in person at her lovely home in Melbourne ahead of our participation in a panel at the Performing Creativity, Culture and Wellbeing Conference which I Chaired and Anna participated in alongside other leading researchers in the field.

I hope you enjoy my conversation with Anna Kennedy-Borrisow

Scotia: Hello Anna and thank you for inviting me into your home on such a beautiful, warm day here in Victoria.

Anna: It's lovely to have you here. Scotia.

Scotia: Can you tell us something about the country that we're on today?

Anna: Sure. We're on Wirundgeri Wurrung lands in Melbourne. I'm in Brunswick East, not far from the Mary Creek Trail. So it's mostly an urban area, but I'm very fortunate to be quite close to a creek and a nature trail, so I really enjoy living here.

Scotia: Beautiful. So we've known each other on and off for a few years now, haven't we? First meeting through Regional Arts Victoria where you worked for a while, but you're

currently completing a doctorate of philosophy at the University of Melbourne that looks at how arts and culture contributes to recovery and resilience in disaster affected communities. And we'd love to hear how you came to be focussed in this area, particularly of research. And what's the specific focus that you're trying to build through your particular PHD?

Anna: Yes, so so I'll try to do a little potted history for context first. I trained as a theatre maker and performer here in Melbourne at the VCA and then moved into producing and arts management, particularly at Regional Arts Victoria, which is a peak not for profit organisation in the state of Victoria. And while I was at RAV Bruce Esplin, who was the former Emergency Services Commissioner during the Black Saturday bushfires, was the chair of the board. So I was in the very fortunate position of getting to know Bruce through my roles at RAV, but also becoming aware of some of the projects that Regional Arts Victoria had administered funding for throughout Black Saturday, but then also for the ten year anniversary projects and and other disasters such as COVID and the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires as well. At the same time, I was completing my Master's of arts and cultural management and wrote a minor thesis on the role of the arts in emergency management, because I was really interested in understanding more about how these creative recovery projects came into existence and what some of the barriers might be to supporting them more effectively. And through that I realised there was actually very, very little research on creative recovery in the first instance, which then inspired me to want to go on and do a PhD looking at that in more depth.

Scotia: Yeah, well, it's one of the key areas of interest for the Creative Recovery Network because it's very hard for us to argue a position for investment if you don't have a kind of context or framework to prove the value of your position. It's challenging, isn't it? So your work is really important in filling that very strong gap. And it's not to say there isn't anecdotal stories or case studies that are just not necessarily contextualised within what you might call peer reviewed or tested methodologies. I was wondering if you could speak to some of the challenges around research and in what is what you're saying is an emerging field and does it come with challenges around definitions and terminology or even ideas of how or what discipline this work fits in? Because I think that's also an interesting common challenge within arts research anyway.

Anna: That's exactly right. And creative recovery as a term has been used in Australia to describe arts projects following disasters that help with community recovery. But more recently, it's become a term that's used to describe the recovery of the creative sector from COVID or the recovery of creative communities that have been affected by recent flooding events, for example. And internationally, it's been used to describe recovery from addiction. So creative programs that act as arts therapy programs. And it's also been used to describe the recovery of the creative sector in the US as well. So there are definitely some definitional differences in how it's being used. And one of the benefits of academic research is that it can really firstly identify those differences and also justify why certain terminology is being used and how it helps people understand the particular phenomenon being studied.

In terms of challenges conducting research in an emerging field, particularly as a PhD candidate, because that essentially means that I'm still developing my research practice, the first thing is that you want to make sure that you're locating your research within the right disciplinary frameworks. And what I mean by that is so my professional background and discipline is arts and cultural management. However, there is disaster research, and disaster research itself fits into many different, different disciplines. It might be community

health, it could be about urban resilience and planning. And then of course there's a wellbeing component as well. So that's when you can look at disciplines like psychology and all of the subdisciplines within fields, within psychology. So already just through listing a few of those examples of where my research sits, there's a lot of different ways of looking at research in each of those different disciplines, which can then make it difficult to decide on one how you're going to approach answering your research question. But then also what frameworks, as you mentioned, are you going to draw on to support any conclusions that you reach through your research? And essentially, research practice is about building on existing knowledge. And one of the challenges of new fields of research is that you also need to identify which fields of knowledge you're building on.

Scotia: Hmm. So you say one of the key challenges is that the fields of knowledge are, in some ways a little transparent because we don't have a collection of documentation or a strong collection of investigation to date.

Anna: In creative recovery, the the strongest collection of research is in project evaluations and one of the challenges of using those as the evidence base is that you really have to be aware of what may have motivated the development of that evidence in the first place. So, for example, a project evaluation that is funded by government and may form an acquittal for an arts project or something like that, is trying to reach a certain aim. So their aim is to show government that they've used the money effectively, for example. So that raises questions about whose interests it's serving. And in sometimes it's also about the rigour of the the way that that data is being collected or the way the arguments have been presented in that. Whereas research really takes a very rigorous approach to, to justifying any conclusions that are reached.

Scotia: Yeah, I think, you know, it does open the question to me, someone who is trying to work to advocate for this work and to grow the capacity on a local level, what you know, what is the use or how do we start to use these research frameworks? Because you're talking about rigour of investigation and framing within the broad context. And obviously that context for creatives on the ground or community leaders trying to look at creative recovery work, it's about the context of their their particular creative recovery needs or their community needs or the impacts that are very specific to them and their community needs. Where do you think where is the bridge between the kind of work that you're doing or this beautiful curiosity that comes through sort of a research lens? How does that get applied or how do you see it being something that is generative to see further investigation or what actually helps people doing the work on the ground?

Anna: I think part of research, one of the purposes of research, is serving communities and having research on creative recovery can help identify trends that are happening across different communities within the same field. So the field being creative recovery.

Scotia: So going back to definitions, how are you framing that for yourself?

Anna: I'm framing it as simply as possible - as arts projects following disasters that help with community recovery. That's how I'm framing it in my research as a definition and in conversations with the people that I'm interviewing and conducting focus groups with. The purpose of that is because I need to make sure I limit my scope or I guess the the breadth of what I'm looking at so that I can basically make my research manageable. So although I recognise that within the field of creative recovery, there are considerations that come in at the preparation and planning stages and longer term implications post recovery that then feed into planning and preparation. I'm very, very specifically looking at that narrow

definition of recovery, sort of, you know, from post disaster up to maybe five years is what I'm deeming the recovery phase for my research. But there's lots of different definitions about

Scotia: And and there's lots of different realities in terms of the lived experience to it. But you have to draw a line somewhere.

Anna: That's exactly right. And that's why drawing on different disciplines in my research can really help me frame some of those problems or explain why I've chosen to take a certain approach.So, for example, one of the things that I'm being very cautious about is not conducting focus groups in communities that have been affected by disasters that have happened too recently. And part of that is about recognising that in the very early stages of recovery, communities are really focussed on meeting their immediate needs and the presence of a researcher is not necessarily going to be a beneficial thing. But so two or more years onwards it might actually be really useful things for communities to reflect on how creative recovery projects have benefited them in their overall recovery experience. And so my intention as a researcher is to contribute positively to the experiences of participants as well as more broadly contribute to the development and sharing of knowledge. Mm hmm.

Scotia: Yeah, it's kind of interesting, isn't it? That and the timeframes that we put around things, particularly within the disaster context, I think are really challenging. And it's always seen as a really complex area of within the ecology, really. Like, what does what is five years in the reality of someone's life or lived experience? And I think, you know, we've been working with communities after the 2009 bushfires who's still working through what you might call immediate recovery or still getting into their homes. And, you know, it's a kind of interesting challenge. And I think the overlay challenge of research is that we don't often have longevity in research, so we're looking at either retrospective knowledge or or short term knowledge. So how are you kind of contextualising that in your work?

Anna: One of the challenges of research generally is that it takes a really long time to conduct a rigorous investigation. And so often what can happen is by the time research is published, that can be, you know, two or three years after an academic finishes writing that piece of research, which could have been they could have been conducting that research for three years at that point of completing the writing. So we're looking at a process where it could be maybe five or six years from when a research project starts until work is published and sometimes longer. And that's one of the challenges for implementing learnings from research into policies and planning, because if we look at the example of post-disaster contexts now with the layer of COVID research that was conducted prior to COVID may not acknowledge some relevant factors to disaster impacts and creative recovery projects post-COVID. So that's, I think, maybe a good example that helps clarify why it might be challenging to use findings from earlier research now. But it's a really essential process because a lot of the rhetoric we'll hear politically is that we need a strong evidence base for any funding decisions that might be made and therefore any resourcing that happens on the ground for these sorts of projects. So it's not to say that research can't be valuable because it contributes to that evidence base and influences top down decision making. But it's also important to acknowledge that there are a lot of realities that are shifting constantly on the ground and evolving quite rapidly in response to any given situation that can't always be adequately reflected in research. So that's definitely a challenge.

Scotia: Yes, particularly because the world is changing. Climate emergency means continuing cascading impacts and our reality of how we manage or hold together in those continuing sensibilities of living in this world. Now changing it is dynamic and it is iterative in terms of how we respond. So how do you see you know, I think that is, as you note, a really huge challenge for the value of research. So how do you how do you think through in setting up the kind of container of your investigation to be future thinking in that way? Like, what's where's the tension for you in how you're addressing? You know, if you want your research to be useful, you have to address that, don't you?

Anna: That's right. And for my particular research design. That's that knowledge of what is contemporary creative practice, recovery practice and what is kind of the legacy of creative recovery practice and what learnings are there from disasters like 29 Black Saturday bushfires that are relevant today is something I've really considered in my research design. So I am approaching that by interviewing practitioners from projects as far back as 2009 and as recent as now. And I'm also conducting focus groups in communities that have been affected by disasters within the last kind of 2 to 5 years. And I'm also observing projects as they happen on the ground, and that research design enables me to make connections between what I'm witnessing happening in contemporary practice. Now, what people are saying about what the benefits have been and what practitioners are saying their intentions are in the way they've crafted projects. So ideally there is an opportunity there for me as a researcher to marry some of those learnings and say, you know, for example, things that practitioners from 2009 projects saying the same things or have added additional elements to what practitioners from the 2019 Black Summer bushfires are saying, for example. Hmm.

Scotia: So something that we advocate for at the Creative Recovery Network is that creative recovery programs should be embedded in disaster management planning, we talked about that earlier, at every stage. So that's not meant to be just bought in as an aftermath or an afterthought or something that's warm and fuzzy at the end, but planned for and funded and included in that whole trajectory of thinking, the cycle of disaster management, preparedness, response and recovery. So from those case studies that you're talking about and that you're looking at, what are you seeing as the, you know, the usual stage or how are you seeing if there's any shift in how that's being thought about in the context of those particular case studies or the projections of what you're seeing?

Anna: In in project evaluations from as early as 2009, researchers who have conducted those project specific evaluations have commented on the need for pre-planning to increase the efficacy of creative recovery projects on the ground.

Anna: Some of the comments I've made around that are to do with the timing of funding being administered to communities or to arts organisations that are then administering that funding to communities from there. And funding can reach communities from sometimes as early as six months, which is still relatively late in the recovery phase.

And a lot of projects at that point have already been initiated by community members and in some cases they may not be eligible for funding because some funding programs have requirements that projects mustn't have commenced before they receive funding. So there are those limitations. And some I've also heard of examples where funding has been offered for creative recovery projects as late as three years after the disaster. And in those examples that I've heard, there have been comments from people feeling that they can no longer accept that funding because they are aware of other communities that are suffering

and feel that their need is greater or that it wouldn't be sensitive to accept that funding at such a late stage.

And often the community may be at a stage where it's no longer as relevant to them or the types of projects that they would like to do might not fit into the kinds of eligibility criteria that a particular funding program might have. So timing is a particular challenge, but it's also partly about having skilled people on the ground who can support communities through the development of projects. And what I've heard from interview participants around this is that generally the skills that they want in their communities are administrative support with paperwork and the bureaucratic processes that sit around arts funding particularly, but a lot of different funding types.

Scotia: Well, the disaster management context is rife with that. And interestingly, one of the communities working at the moment, they talk about their volunteer committees having to have like 40 hour week to manage that process without really any necessary understanding of the background or skills to be able to do it.

Anna: That's right. And sometimes it's not only about the lack of skills within that community, it can sometimes be that the skills are there within that community, but the individuals who possess them don't have capacity to lead those aspects of a project. So so in terms of, I guess, planning or the consideration of arts projects prior to disasters so that they can be activated more quickly, that's about making sure the resources are there and also the skills are available to communities. And also there is an element of trust and rapport building because there are significant challenges with projects that are kind of offered to communities without consultation with communities. And typically it doesn't work very effectively. If someone comes in with a great idea from outside the community because it might not represent their experience or it might not be meaningful to that community that they're trying to make this, you know, usually very goodwill and kind offering to. So having that trust and rapport built with, you know, the kinds of arts organisations or practitioners or skilled people in the wider community can really help at those stages because there's already a knowledge of what might this community need, who are the key leaders in this community? Who might I chat to about how I can offer and support what their needs might be? So yeah, that's the kind of the major challenges with not incorporating this thinking in planning is that post-disaster. There's so many other things going on, that building rapport, making sure resources and funding get out at the right times and that people are supported when they need the support becomes really difficult.

Scotia: Yeah. It's, it's the added complexities isn't it, that we always talk about in the disaster space. Understand the complexities. You're already sort of halfway there but without that you're struggling to catch up.

Anna: I would add that one of the additional challenges with arts projects specifically is that for non artists and non creatives, depending on what time a creative project is introduced, it may seem frivolous to some individuals with the community and maybe may be met with resistance, and that's a completely understandable experience. Not everybody thinks of themselves as someone who would benefit from participating in creative activities, but the timing. If the timing is poor, it can not just be that they're not interested. It can come across as really insensitive when their other needs aren't being met. And so that's a really important consideration. And why trust building and planning and timing is so, so important.

Scotia: Well, it also feeds into that bigger education about the role of culture in the arts in our lives, doesn't it?

Anna: That's exactly right. And there is yeah, there are sectors of the community that think that the arts, arts practice can't necessarily address some of the that don't necessarily address more important issues. But what research tells us is that the arts can be really beneficial to supporting connections between people. It provides opportunities for gatherings, it can help with individual mental health, and that can be through, you know, creative expression as a form of catharsis. It can be through gathering, as I mentioned, it can be through just an opportunity for respite, pleasure and play. And then all the things that I think creative recovery in a post-disaster context can offer. But there's so much else going on that that sensitivity and timing and resourcing is really, really important.

Scotia: There are many different ways to look at that impact and legacy of credit for covered projects, with some outcomes being more tangible than others. And that's often the challenge in this space of community led or community participatory engagement. And it's a bit why potentially it's been under-documented in the past because it's not a tangible tick or it's not a product outcome it's about process and engagement. Can you share what your approach is to investigating this and what type of research framework you're using to measure or document or understand what you see as being impacted by legacy?

Anna: This is challenging because I would describe myself as a qualitative researcher, and that means that I am interested in stories as data. So qualitative researchers believe that stories can tell us information about the world around us. But sometimes, even within the research community or in the way that people outside of the research community perceive research, there's this interest in numbers. So more quantitative research. So, you know, the economic value of the arts, for example, would be something that we hear a lot of rhetoric around, you know, what's the social value and what's the economic value and so on. I'm really interested in what's the social value or the psychosocial components of creative recovery. And that means that a qualitative research methodology is the most appropriate tool to use to help me answer my research questions. So that means that I am gathering stories from as many relevant people as possible or as needed to show me what trends exist. So yeah, one of the challenges of measuring impact in that way is that sometimes you can understand things socially, like about what's happening in our social world, but you can't necessarily argue that there you can replicate them under other circumstances.

Anna: In my research I'm not necessarily seeking to measure the impact of creative recovery. What I'm seeking to do is to show that it's beneficial to communities and to do that, it's about hearing from communities and observing the trends across those different communities that might then be relevant to other disaster affected communities in the future who would engage in creative recovery practice and processes. As you pointed out, one of the challenges with creative recovery as a process is that it's not necessarily designed to facilitate evaluation or researcher participation. It's designed to support communities on the ground. So a lot of the time the documentation from those projects is very piecemeal. And that makes sense because [00:29:41]those facilitators on the ground, their intention is not to make sure I successfully document a project for the purpose of research. Their intention is to as best as they possibly can and support their communities through a really challenging time. So that's where I think that relationships, you know, between industries in and including academia are really important because then people like myself and other researchers can either support communities who are interested in contributing to that knowledge exchange or can be present and supported to be present in

those communities so that they can play that role of capturing that knowledge and value [42.1s] and then moving and then applying. That in industry and industry and government tend to be more interested in what are then the frameworks we use to say this was successful or wasn't successful. So research, my research isn't necessarily aimed to establish those frameworks of measuring or judging the value, but it can inform what people do in industry, in how they measure what's valuable. So an example might be that if in my research I find enough evidence to support the argument that communities benefit from creative expression and experience catharsis through creative expression, that might then feed into policy or into a framework that sit that asks, you know, in what ways were participants supported to experience creative expression, for example? So that's how it might feed in. But my research isn't saying, how do we measure this? My research is saying, what are the benefits and how do I know what those benefits are.

Scotia: And and whether there is. In a context of growth or legacy or evolution or resilience mitigation for future engagement in disaster.

Anna: Yeah, that's right. And research, ideally in my research in particular, I hope will be part of a broader conversation, which is why it's important to connect to different disciplines, to understand what they know about what is effective in post-disaster contexts. For example, there's plenty of research in that field that talks about the importance of social connections for example. What do we know from community and cultural development, community arts and cultural development? Similar things but there hasn't yet been that research that kind of draws all those different fields of literature together, and also not only literature, but fields of practice together to go, you know, how does this function on the ground? What are the key elements that are really beneficial for those who are participating?

Scotia: So in some ways, maybe what is it that you are specifically looking for to influence or, you know, as you said it's a growing field of practice. You're contributing to it at this point in your own research career or your own practice career. What do you want to achieve from it? Like how do you see it, your work influencing that shift or that systems change that we're looking for?

Anna: My hope is that the research that I produce helps with advocacy in to policymakers and to industry for the inclusion of the arts in disaster recovery. And the reason I hope slash think it will do that is because I'm using a rigorous process to prove some of the things we already know, but also maybe uncover some of the things we don't know. And my research is interested in both what are the key aspects of arts and cultural participation that contribute to recovery and resilience for these communities? But also when might it not work? What are the things that are ineffective or what are some of the challenges or barriers for including these sorts of projects in the recovery process? So yeah, it's that's my kind of hope, but it's an ongoing process.

Scotia: So where are you also situating yourself as an artist? And it, you know, it's interesting, an ongoing conversation around all this research happening, particularly in the disaster context and how it gets translated or how it's languaged or how it's shared with community members so that they can use it. Where what are you thinking around that in terms of your research outcome?

Anna: I think… researcher positionality is a really tricky one. So as a researcher, my background is as a theatre maker but also as an arts manager. And also I acknowledge that I believe that creative recovery is beneficial to communities. There is sometimes an

expectation that researchers are going to say that they're neutral on the issues that they researching, but that's actually not realistic in a lot of cases and by acknowledging your own position, you're also able to, I think, better identify some of the biases you might bring to your research. So as someone who has benefited from participating in creative practice, I have an embodied experience of benefiting from that participation. But I also, as a researcher, have that awareness that I might be sort of unconsciously, subconsciously thinking everyone will benefit from this. And so being aware of just that background of my own as something that influences how I'm viewing things is really, really important.

Scotia: But then once you've done your research and you have your outcomes or your recommendations that come from that, how is that shared so that community members or the people that you've interviewed or those communities that are beginning this journey of recovery, how might you how might they be able to access and use it? Or how do you see that translation occurring? And is that part of your creative process?

Anna: Mmm I wouldn't describe it as necessarily part of my creative process, although I would describe it as part of my overall kind of philosophy and being I feel like I can't really separate my creative self and my academic self and my sort of interpersonal self. What I would say is that I hope my intention with the research is, and one of the kind of most obvious ways in which the knowledge gets shared is through publication. Although, academic publications are not always accessible to non academics, and that is a serious problem to be addressed. Part of how that's addressed is by sharing it with peak organisations such as Creative Recovery Network and other advocacy bodies, to then use that research that rigorously peer reviewed research to support their arguments and say, you know, there's been some research conducted that shows this, this and this and that. That's the work of industry. So part of my approach is making sure that I establish really good relationships with those networks that I am really thinking about when I have publications that are available, that I'm sharing them with people who participated in my research, and that I'm also then summarising the key findings in plain language for people so that they can apply them. And there's a lot of, I guess, possibilities in terms of where my career goes post finishing the thesis. But one of them would be consultation. There's a range of different ways that academics and scholars can share their knowledge, although not every researcher places importance on sharing that knowledge and accessible ways. But I do.

Scotia: Well, it's also one of the big challenges in the disaster management space is that people, community members, people with lived experience are often and constantly approached by researchers, but then don't get to see how they can apply a factual use of it at that community level level, and, you know, rightly so, pushing back to say, well, you know, what's what's the point of participation because we can't apply it or we can't use it to benefit ourselves. So it's kind of in the translation. You talk, you talk about the translation, plain language ways of looking at in contextualising it for local governments or whatever. But it's an interesting. You know, it's interesting that that educative process of of community conversations so that they from the from the base of experience can be the influencers or the drivers for these kind of programs.

Anna: That's right and one of the things that I was really mindful of when I started approaching individuals and community members for these kinds of conversations was that I wasn't going to I didn't want to be exploitative or try to extract information from those communities without any sensitivity toward what that experience might be like for them, but also what they get for their time in. And I'm being pleasantly surprised by feedback from facilitators in particular saying, Oh, we've really been wanting to share these learnings and

capture these learnings in some way, but we haven't known how to do that or where to do that. So we're actually really looking forward to having a facilitated conversation to be able to reflect on these things. And if the timing is right, then that's something that can be really useful in and of itself to just facilitate a conversation. But I'm not naive enough to think that that's the only purpose of my research is to facilitate the occasional conversation. And so I'm really mindful of being completely transparent with communities that my genuine hope is that my research influences policy. But I can't promise anyone that it's going to change the world or it's going to change the way every community is supported to to do creative recovery projects. So it's about being really for me, it's about being really humble about what the potential of the research is and being really aware of the generosity of other people in agreeing to participate, and then also just making sure that I'm as a researcher, really skilled up in my awareness of mental health, first aid, psychological first aid, and that I have the capacity to hold space for those conversations and avoid retraumatizing anyone who participates.

Scotia: And seeing it in the context of a collective conversation. And you know, the world does change by conversations, doesn't it? So we look forward to continuing the conversation with you Anna and look forward to hearing your outcomes and seeing how we can help you build them and use them as an influencing tool for the future. And the continued sustainability of our community's strength and resilience.

Anna: Thanks, Scotia. Thanks so much for a lovely conversation.

Scotia: Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders in Conversation and special thanks to Anna for her time and sharing this important work.

If you're interested in accessing resources about creative recovery, keep an eye out for our brand new website launching in March where you'll be able to access research developed in partnership with Creative Recovery Network as well as an extensive library of case studies of creative recovery projects.

It's also where you can access all of the past episodes of our podcast as well as transcripts and related resources for each episode.

Find us on twitter, instagram and Facebook at creative recovery network for further updates.

Thanks for listening.