

**Raquel Meseguer Zafe**

How to begin? Well, I feel like we have begun actually - seeing you outside and sharing how I was a bit worried about not feeling prepared or for this conversation. And then remembering that the work that we're doing at the moment is about not knowing. And so the invitation being to spend some time not quite knowing where we're going, or what we're going to talk about.

**Anna Starkey**

Yeah. And I felt similarly, and also had to remind myself. It's funny, isn't it, if you say you haven't prepared for something it feels like you've sort of not done it a full service or not paid proper attention. But I think sometimes it leaves a bit of space for things to arise. You know, if I'd prepared, then I'd have of thought about all the obvious things maybe. Don't know, I guess we'll see.

**Raquel Meseguer Zafe**

I did spend some time yesterday with your blogs and talks. So I kind of did prepare, but I suppose what I noticed was that I'm quite resistant to not knowing. And so I was noticing that and thinking, "okay, what are the conditions for not knowing" for myself. One of them, I guess, being permission. That this doesn't have to be a polished thing. It's just a meeting of two bodies in not knowing. And that kind mirrors this space that you're imagining in "The Imaginary Museum", about how a space can meet the person who comes through the door, the audience member, in not knowing.

**Anna Starkey**

Yeah, I think we're so conditioned to know something, that there's a sort of value exchange, if you like, particularly as an audience member, whatever that might mean. But that we're expected to go to a place and if we don't already know something, then to find something out, to know more, like you've gone to a museum and you've learnt some stuff, or you've been to a show, and it's sort of revealed something...and we spent so much of our time in school, where the entire time is an expectation of knowing. In school, we get so conditioned that you really only put your hand up when you've got an answer. And that just really strikes me that that's been part of ourselves since we've been really young. And so, of course, as adults, we feel like we want to have the answers when we're in a conversation or something at work or something. And our brains have evolved to not want to be in a state of uncertainty for too long.

So I spent a really brilliant couple of years working with a neuroscientist, a guy called Beau Lotto who was particularly interested in uncertainty, still is, you can look him up online -

This idea that, as an early human to be uncertain might mean that you've spent too long wondering what something is, and that's the end of your life, because it's a lion in the bush waiting to get you. So your brain wants to get out of that pattern really quickly. And it makes patterns from all of our previous experiences in order to know. But sometimes, that means the brain is actually trying to find meaning and patterns, which aren't there at all. And it also means we've got a tendency to go to the surface answer... there's a really nice quote - which I'm going to misquote terribly I know - by Rebecca Solnit, which is something about hope and that in the state of uncertainty, there's a spaciousness. And so I'm fascinated by can we retrain ourselves, and reposition almost the whole of society, how we learn, how we grow up, how we interact with each other, to remove the discomfort from not knowing and from uncertainty and for that to become a generative space. Because actually, when you think about it, all have people in the history of humans that have come up with interesting ideas or innovation that's like, made our lives better, those are the people who are operating at the edge of the known constantly. And they have like methods - artists, and scientists have different methods for kind of navigating the unknown. And I think there's a privilege to that, there's a privilege to being comfortable with uncertainty. Or you train yourself to be able to be in it, I suppose.

### **Raquel**

Yeah, I've noticed that. If I'm making work the containers of having Research & Development time or having time in the studio, those kinds of things make it feel safer to be in the unknown, because you're not expected to have an answer. But sometimes in like production meetings or things like that, I can sometimes I skip - I suggest a solution that isn't really a very good solution, just to get out of the discomfort. And then when we get there, we realise that it wasn't a good solution and we needed to spend more time in the unknown and the discomfort of of that, trying to make sense of that as a team.

When you talk about this space of not knowing it feels like it has a particular quality. Like an expensiveness, and I think you wrote somewhere "a generousness" -

### **Anna**

I think the generousness comes from - because I've been thinking about this in the context of where a lot of my work has been in the last few years, which has been in the museum space, or cultural space. And there's a history of those types of institutions quite literally collecting knowledge and putting it on a pedestal and building a glass case around it. There's a generosity actually, in inviting people in and saying, "we don't know everything about this object or this is a thing that represents a kind of space in human inquiry where we don't know all the answers". Because it also strikes me - particularly in science - people are doing incredible work, and yet you only get to hear about it when there's a result, or a breakthrough or a cure, or whatever it is. And you don't get invited into the process in motion, because there's a vulnerability to that. So I think there's a generosity to audiences to say, "we're sharing this whilst we don't know everything about it, and actually you have agency and value and lived experience and expertise that also might reveal something about this thing". And it treats people as active agents in the process of what becomes knowing. So it's about different types of knowing and different types of finding out. And it's getting away from that conditioning of us all sort of being passive fact receivers -

### **Raquel**

It reminds me of that Mary Oliver poem where she talks about "being in full attendance of herself", a state she can't really call being alive. And there's not a lot of aliveness to just receiving facts -

### **Anna**

A friend of mine introduced me to Mary Oliver, not in person, obviously, sadly, she's somewhere in the universe now. I have never experienced words generating such a depth of feeling inside me, this is a complete aside, but I just think language is so important. Like we can understand something when we have a name for it. And a lot of this space is about things that we don't really have names for yet. And in thinking about not knowing rest comes up for me. Rest is one of those words that, you know how different cultures have 25 different words for a type of rain or a type of snow or a quality in the air? I think rest is one of those words, that surely has about 100 different types of rest that you could unpack out of it. And I feel like I haven't got the word for it, but one of those rest words is what it is to be in an open state of not knowing, but also being sort of active in that and comfortable about it, and not pressing for any one particular thing.

You know, we talk about creativity, getting into that state of flow where you lose six hours doing whatever the thing you practised, but that is about really producing something. Like you're in a flow and you've written 10,000 words without noticing - if only. But I'm interested in that state of flow where maybe you're not immediately producing something because you're in that not knowing state, loads of things are kind of like flowing in and out and it's later that that will condense into something. And not feeling uncomfortable about that - that's where the conditioning comes in.

I don't I don't have the language [for that], in the same way that I had to call this sort of thought experiment that I did online The Imaginary Museum because I didn't have a better word for it. And it's not really a museum in the perception that we have of what a museum is, but in a way, a museum is a useful thing to hang it close to. And sort of know what it might be to subvert a museum. But there will be a new name for that when that happens.

### **Raquel**

Yeah, I can see that the museum is a useful thing to hang it next to. Partly because by making a space of not knowing, you dissolve some of the problematic things about a museum, about a kind of knowledge and whose story is it. And by calling it a museum, you're flagging that for me as somebody who comes into that space -

Within the online thought experiment that is the imaginary Museum, there were two spaces that I felt like I knew a bit more about, and they were the Long Time Lounge and the Almost Impossible Corner. The almost impossible corner, which I think you described as the space that you probably walk past normally, and where rubbish kind of gathers in the wind, and then suddenly has changed into a pop up space with a with a sign and some sofas, and maybe a provocation or a task. And I felt like the potential of those spaces and how beautiful that would be, to come across something like that. And then, the Long Time Lounge, that is a space that I'm longing for in the world, and maybe a space that I feel I would know how to be in. And I love the proposition of experiments or artists who are thinking about Long Time. And I wonder how I wonder how you're thinking about Long Time?

### **Anna**

Yeah, so really good question. Because I think everything we've talked about, is also about the temporalities that we are forced or conditioned to live with, within contemporary society. And the Long Time Lounge is - I mean massively informed by all sorts of other brilliant work going on out there like the Long Now Foundation. Now, here's where I won't have all the facts, but it's based out of America. And it was set up to think about the fact that we're very short-termist as humans, and there is a great need in society to think about the long now. So people from all sorts of different disciplines got together around this idea of the Long Now Foundation, and there's a clock they've designed that ticks like once every 1000 years or something [that they are building in the desert in Texas]. So it's this thing that causes us to think about not just our own lifespans, not even the next generation, but the proper sort of geologic epochs of time. And that we really need that.

So again, I find it strange how we've all accepted the kind of industrial revolution driven Victorian factory system clock of the day, in terms of the times in which we're expected to be productive, times in which we're allowed to rest. And so the idea of a Long time Lounge - because also, as someone who's navigated energy impairment and chronic pain in the world, I go into museums, but it's so exhausting, they're so enormous! And they're so hard, like, all the surfaces are so hard. And I'm so excited for all of it and so curious, and I desperately need to find somewhere soft to lie down for a bit. And the only place that you can do that, generally, is to either find a space on the floor and you just do it, or you have to buy time in the cafe to sit on a chair. So why should rest cost me something in this space that is supposed to be open and explorative? That's a really long way of me saying that the Long Time Lounge is about a space you don't have to spend money to be in it. It is a public space, you can go in and out, and at the same time while in there, if you want to, you can sort of rest your mind on, or attend to this notion of time.

And time, I mean, I could go on for hours about time - I mean it's a thing, it's extraordinary. And it's not a thing! But different people coming at it from different ways, like scientists, psychologists, artists - it's one of those topics that you can't not look at it in a 360 perspective, because it would diminish it. So yeah, this idea of of a lounge where I don't have to worry about whether someone's gonna come over and ask if I'm gonna buy another coffee, because I've been in there for three hours already. And it's a space to sort of think about what? I suppose existence really. To have a permission for different temporality that is about rest and it's also about not knowing - it's back to that not

knowing thing because we don't want to not know for very long whereas this Long Time Lounge will be like “you can be in here and not know about stuff for as long as you like. And you know what? a load of other people don't know stuff either. And let's not know together.” And then something interesting might happen.

### **Raquel**

Hearing about different people's experiences or understanding of time is so fascinating and questioning why I accept certain things. And the idea of having this, space where I could be for as long as I needed to be in public, but also touching on this topic of different temporalities. Because I think that's where different bodies rub up against normative culture. Often it's in the temporalities, that we navigate and exist in, that don't seem like they can be coexist (although I'm sure they can).

I'm also super interested in different ways of being together in public. And I think that rest and Long Time can be strategies for that, for being together differently in public and hearing one another differently, and coming towards mutuality -

### **Anna**

How we meet each other in public space? Because again, I think everything in public space is designed for quite a short timeframe with each other. There's an expected amount of time that you know, the user design of a cafe is around an expected amount of time that someone's going to spend at a table -

And, it's so strange that we have to be even in a certain body position to interact with each other in a public space. So yeah, there's something really beautiful about the idea of just sort of extending time or just blowing that notion of time up altogether, really.

### **Raquel**

Dismantling it for a while.

### **Anna**

Yeah, exactly. Because we're always checking our watches and thinking about, you know, where we need to be next. And I don't know about you, but what surprised me about having a more enforced period of rest over the last year, how quickly (maybe quickly is not even the right word), but actually, time suddenly becomes a bit immaterial. And again,

that's a real privilege if you haven't got pressures on your time and different responsibilities. But once you take all of that away I think people might be surprised at how long you could spend looking at a tree - someone asked me the other day "what have you been up to?" And I haven't been up too much in the sort of conventional notion of productivity, and work and time. And I sort of said, "Oh, well, I spent about three hours like being really pleased with how green a tree was". And they were sort of waiting for me to deliver the punch line. I was like, No, that is what I did. And it didn't feel like three hours when I was doing it. But I realised afterwards, it was three hours. Anyway, what's my point? The point is, I think that time is sort of imposed on us in public spaces, and controlled.

### **Raquel**

One of the things that happens to me in a flare up, is that when time falls away, other things become much more tangible. So the idea of the day being ruled by time, and particular appointments or deadlines or things. When all that falls away, my attention goes to more of a kind of felt sense of other things. Like what the space feels like, what the light is like. And I can be in touch with the space around me really differently. It feels like a kind of different embodied experience and the space feels tangibly different. Again, I'm grasping language because I didn't quite have it.

### **Anna**

And the interesting thing is, you sort of are different in space - I studied physics, and there's a beautiful book by a physicist called Carlo Rovelli that came out a couple of years ago. And in that he describes the fact that there is no one universal sort of flow of time. However much you could divide space up, there is a different little dot of time happening. So my time like a metre away from you right now is different to your time, like quite literally.

### **Raquel**

In terms of space time, like it's a fabric, isn't it?

### **Anna**

Yeah, we've been sort of conditioned to think there is this sort of time. Time does exist, obviously, in terms of how we organise things, but I think it again comes back to that notion of perception and how our brains work. Like we can be in different states, and it

doesn't feel like this arrow that is moving at a certain speed. And actually, if you stop moving through space as fast, and you're still, your experience of how you're moving through time, then completely changes. And actually does -

**Raquel**

In terms of physics?

**Anna**

Yeah

**Raquel**

It's so pleasing to me to have better language for that experience. Because otherwise, those experiences can be dismissed as slightly arty, whereas science is taken seriously.

**Anna**

Yeah. And we're back to hierarchies of types of knowledge. And the Long Time Lounge, and The Imaginary Museum, and this notion of not knowing, is where all these different types of knowing come together. Because there's such benefit and such necessity there. Actually, you know, we're living in this world of, wicked problems. So those problems that are so complex and intractable we're probably not going to outright solve them. But we can make things better around them, we can mitigate them. And that's not going to be like one person coming up with the solution for it. It's going to be I think, like Long Time spaces, in which different people's practices can kind of flow in and out and intermingle and meet each other, and start to find ways through this.

You know, I think back to We The Curious when we were designing the new exhibition floor. There was one exhibit idea that we just couldn't solve for ages. And I think it was almost a year like I just kept saying, "Don't worry, like, we'll just keep I keep coming back to it and like tickling it a bit and nudging it around". And it was a real discomfort like for the team, we haven't solved this! But that exhibit idea sort of sat about in different forms for a whole year before somehow, something just clicked and we worked out what it needed to be. But I remember the discomfort of being in a position where I was leading a team of people through that. And we all wanted to solve it. But it was a better exhibit for having, like sat in our brains for a year.



**Raquel**

I'm kind of thinking about, -and maybe I'm sort of jumping to something - but I'm thinking about, how would it be to be together in a Long Time Lounge, letting those different practices overlap and rub up against each other? Because expensive time is something I really need, something I need to balance pain levels and to do what I want to do in the world. But then the times that I can be "on" (whatever "on" means), with other people is quite limited. So in terms of the different different temporalities existing together - I sort of dreaming out loud - how that could be?

**Anna**

I think what I was hearing from you, is the difficulty or the challenge that we all live with different temporalities, and different ebbs and flows of energy and attention. And so if we're really designing a space that enables everyone, in all of our difference...I don't know the answer to how we design for those moments to intersect, when the energy is right. But I'm really interested in thinking about how we design for it. And maybe it's just even having an understanding of that, is the place to start. Because that doesn't get considered most of the time.

**Raquel**

No, I'm assuming that normally experiences are designed around a kind of normative body. It's like with architecture [we design around] a standard body that doesn't really exist. But I think you described the Long Time Lounge as a space where you could have different temporalities, and where you could choose your pace and choose your your way of moving through it. I really appreciated that, and that's a space I would love to enter, and I guess I long for the time when rest and lying down is so normalised and so accepted, that I could go into that space and literally roll into a circle for interaction and roll away when I need to. And then rest and roll into another interaction, or step into another interaction when I'm able to. And not have to worry about that behaviour being rude or unprofessional, or not showing up for people, or any of that.

**Anna**

Yeah, I love the idea of that space. But yeah, as was you were speaking, I sort of had a vision, you know when you go on holiday, somewhere warm, like Italy, or Greece or something, and you find a little town, where time seems to be operating on a different level. One of those beautiful squares - I mean, I'm in real fantasyland here - but like, you

one where people have been playing chess or drafts or something on a table all day in the sun. And they've got a temporality in that Public Square Space, and then other people are coming and bouncing in and out, they're like having a quick drink, or they're dancing or whatever is happening. And it's about all these people existing for a moment in a different temporality. And some flow out quicker than others. But there's a moment where they all come together, and there's sort of a beautiful thing happening, and it is the quality of the space that is made by that. So yeah, I dream of almost every public space having these time layers in it. So that actually there's beds in every shopping centre. And I can bang in and out and get a quick item - I don't know why I'd want to lie around in a shopping centre for too long, but maybe I would, if it was designed better.

And actually, I'm noticing my own conditioning there, because actually shopping centres are really interesting, aren't they? Lots of people go to shop because you need a thing. But also it's a place where mates meet up and your teenagers classically hanging out in the mall. You haven't got much money to spend necessarily and everything in the shopping centre is about a financial exchange. And yet people, make it a sort of social space. And it's a place where you can be together with people and the objects in the shops are almost peripheral things. Again, I keep coming back to this idea of things you can rest your mind on. And they're sort of secondary, like little conversation sparkers, and you might buy something or you might not, and then you kind of flow out again. But the fact that capitalist spaces have become spaces in which people also use it to be around other people and socialise and meet sort of cries out to me that there is a massive lack of a space that does that, that isn't designed to sell you stuff and take your money.

[Alarm sounds]

### **Raquel**

That's time! That's literally time! I set a timer because the installation starts in 10 minutes, and here we are talking about expensive time!

### **Anna**

I love the fact that time has just got involved there. I love that! And we were so surprised. We were both like "what is that sound?"

I feel like I've sort of rambled like terribly across all of these different things in talking to you. And it's also the case that, there's so much to say about it, but my brain has sort of

got about 25 different thoughts every time you mentioned anything. So it is one of those conversations that needs sort of Long Time to percolate a little bit, and then come back again, at some point.

**Raquel**

I would love that. I would really love to talk more about language and what are those different types of rest? What is the language around time and care? But I really, appreciate being in this kind of imaginative space. And this invitation to both of us to be in a Long Time space, and in a place of less knowing so that we could be that expansive and rambley. And I would love to have another conversation with you like in the not too distant future, where we allow ourselves the same thing again. Rather than trying a different temporal experiment. I'd love to try the same thing again.

**Anna**

Yeah, I think this was an experiment for me, and I think the quality of the space and you've said, having a conversation that's horizontal brings a different type of conversation to the fore. And I think, in a way, it's almost what I was trying to talk about with the Long Time Lounge - our brains have ranged over all sorts of things, not necessarily made all the connections yet, but it does bring all those things together in a way that perhaps if we were having this conversation in a different way it would have been a bit more linear and less interesting, maybe,

**Raquel**

I think so. I think I would have jumped to things, because we place so much value as a culture and being the 'knower'. But this has felt like a very expansive and open conversation to me maybe it can just set off little thoughts that we can rest our mind on, and come back to another time.

**Anna**

Yeah. Thank you.

**Raquel**

Thank you so much.