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[Excerpt]

Sezzo

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[Intro music]

Mariam Arcilla

You're listening to *Interno*, a podcast profiling artists who are recalibrating their internal lives and perspectives of home, longing, and connection during the global pandemic. I'm your host, Mariam Arcilla, and in this four-part series, I speak with creative people about ideas that amplify artistic value and social duty in times of flux.

My guest for episode 2 is Sezzo, a proud Ngāpuhi woman whose practice investigates what it's like to be a modern Māori within experimental club music and sociological theory. Sezzo was the founder of the club night events Milkshake and Precog, as well as the Māori-Australian art collective Ngāti Kangaru. She has played at arts institutions around Australia and supported Coolio, Charlie XCX and Cher on their Australian tour. And I remember she once interviewed Alain de Botton about modern-day philosophy over a glass

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of red wine. Earlier this year, during the coronavirus peak, Sezzo made the impromptu move to leave Melbourne to relocate to Dongtan, a town just outside of Seoul in South Korea, where she is now teaching english to kindergarten children.

In this conversation, we explore club music behaviours, the Biennale of Sydney, and the term 'edgy' in contemporary art, as well as the manifestation of cultural ancestry through the dancing body. We also talk about Sezzo's early days in the Brisbane dance scene, and why she turned her back on the DJ world.

Interno episodes are accompanied by reading notes covering the topics I discuss with guests. I've popped them into the transcript sheets, which you can find on the *Making Art Work* website. *Interno* is made possible with support from the Institute of Modern Art. Before we start, a warning: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listeners are advised that this episode contains the name of a deceased person.

Mariam Arcilla

Sezzo, thanks for joining me on *Interno*.

Sezzo

Hi, Mariam, thank you for having me.

Mariam Arcilla

So you left Australia earlier this year to decamp to South Korea. When was that specifically?

Sezzo

In March, during the height of corona in Korea. Which is crazy, like I travelled in an airplane during COVID to Asia. We weren't allowed, really, to go out [in South Korea] except for essential things. And being away in itself was actually awful at first, to be honest.

Mariam Arcilla

You didn't know a single person in South Korea. Was that a lonely experience for you?

Sezzo

It was...it was lonely. There was a lot of culture shock, a lot of loneliness. I realised how important objects are that have personalities. A pair of socks that my friend Nadia made meant so much to me in that first month, a makeup bag that my friend Hannah Brontë made for me and gave me — it's like a monstera leaf — was like my favorite object. So, like a pair of socks and a makeup bag.

Mariam Arcilla

So have you been following any of the self-isolation habits that a lot of Australians seem to have picked up, like gardening or baking banana bread.

Sezzo

I'm keeping tabs on self-iso culture. And I love that meme that says '*I love how we went from making banana bread to abolish the police*' within a matter of weeks. But I'm pretty naturally

iso, and I've always been comfortable like nerding out in my bedroom with music or a book. It's probably why I became a DJ, because you just pretend to be social without necessarily having to interact with anyone on a genuine level [laughs]. Yeah, it's just stupid banter, like being in an art opening.

Mariam Arcilla

But, when you're a DJ though, nobody can truly talk to you, because you're up on stage, there's probably a bouncer in between you, and you have headphones on. Whereas if you're an artist at your own solo exhibition, people will be constantly coming up to you asking you didactic things like 'what is your art really about?' And 'what are your underlying concepts', right?

Sezzo

Yeah, that's exactly why I didn't become an artist, for those social reasons [laughs]. Not because of my lack of ability. But also you because you're a DJ like, everyone thinks that you're cool, which is the opposite. But like, they're too scared to talk to you. So it's fantastic. It's like you get all this social cred and all you did was just press PLAY, and no one talks to you. It's my paradise, I'm glad I did it [laughs].

Mariam Arcilla

Look, I know you've only been in Korea for a short time, but I wanted to know if you've noticed any initial comparisons between how Australians responded to coronavirus in comparison to South Korea?

Sezzo

Koreans are really hardy people. And it's been my impression that they just soldier on. So it's meant that the country hasn't shut down, even during the pandemic. Lucky that they have excellent medical technology, so they've been able to flatten the curve while keeping their economy relatively intact. So they go on with life quite normally, because they all tend to do the right thing, which is probably a reflection of this collectivist sort of culture. Ever since I got here, everyone's been wearing a mask from then until now, like even now, when things have gotten a bit better, you know? And there were never any toilet paper roll shortages here. Because I think people would be so self-conscious that people would know that they were doing that [self-hoarding], and it would seem incredibly selfish. So I guess the culture is very different...

Mariam Arcilla

...compared to Australia [laughs]. And what's the energy been like in terms of work and lifestyle?

Sezzo

The energy I guess if you want to sum it up it's like, sensible but aware. The MO in South Korea is to work very hard all the time. And that work ethic has persisted through coronavirus. So of course gyms and clubs are closed, but a large number of businesses have remained open, like restaurants and cafes. Schools are open, private language institutes, like the one I work at, are open.

Mariam Arcilla

So prior to your current life as a teacher in Korea, you were a leading DJ back in Australia and you played at iconic events like DARK MOFO, Mardi Gras, Next Wave Festival and places like the IMA and GOMA. So you've built an admirable career in the Brisbane and Melbourne club circuits. What made you decide to become a DJ?

Sezzo

I had a big house party in Brissy. And a DJ came. And he liked my music which was New Orleans bounce music and everyone was twerking and he'd never heard about it. And it's this really

nice genre that had come out of New Orleans. And he encouraged me to become a DJ. And I thought he was just hitting on me and I ignored him. But then a friend of mine, Alice Eather, who's this really amazing Indigenous activist who passed away a few years ago sadly...she encouraged me. She was like, *'nah, he's cool and you're being an idiot.'* And I think I was just actually— now reflecting as a wiser, older woman—I was probably creating some kind of stupid young person psychological barrier where I was afraid to be happy. But in reality, I care a lot about what's being played, and I always had an intuitive sense of what needed to be done.

Mariam Arcilla

And you did do something. In 2013, you formed Milkshake, a club night event in Fortitude Valley for queer, trans and intersex and POC people living in Brisbane. Were there any similar clubs like this back then?

Sezzo

There was nothing. You either went to the Rumpus Room and hung out with lots of smelly hippies or you just went to a white guy dole wave thing. If you were into alt culture, that's all that was available on the spectrum of the Brisbane underground. But there's nothing wrong with either of those scenes. I enjoyed both, but I just wanted to shoot my damn ass in a way where I wasn't like an object for white male hip hop DJs. And I felt like I wanted to hear things that were dance and POC oriented, but more experimental without being pretentious, which is what I found in a lot of white sound art scenes. You can also acknowledge, like, fuck, I just love Kelis, and I want to listen to [her song] Milkshake. And I wasn't seeing that. What's great there is a lot of dole waves and hippies ended up coming to milkshake. And art school kids and the experimental sound crowd, so it was pretty cool. Yeah, I was also acutely aware of what Venus X was doing in New York at the time. And I wanted to do the same for Brisbane. So I just literally saw a gap in the Brisbane underground market.

Mariam Arcilla

So let's fast forward to late 2019 when you decided to quit DJing. What was the reason for this? Were you just simply over the scene?

Sezzo

Yeah I was. I wanted to escape from a lot of the weaknesses, I see in art and DJing and go for something more direct and long term in its altruism, like teaching sort of like, Oh, I'm

teaching a child and they get something, and it's immediately satisfying. And, you know, I've got a lot of that actually from teaching DJing, and I taught DJing in prisons to young people of colour. But I did have this really strong intuition that everything would be okay, like, something just kept pushing me. You know, it's getting this intuition to leave and I was like, okay, well I'll teach overseas. I gradually began dialing things down with DJing in favour of sort of more long term ideas for my future. I'm 32 and I wanted to start thinking of doing things that were more satisfying to me on a deeper level than partying. Not that there's anything wrong with partying, I've made a living out of theorising about it. But I think as I get older my desire for sensation-seeking goes down, and I crave a quieter life. And I think I kind of held on for a bit too long when I got back, which was a mistake because I stopped trying and recycled a lot of sets. I'm really sorry to anyone who came to a set between August and December last year. It would have been kind of boring if you're a fan. But I was in a transitional zone okay [laughs]. But I don't regret DJing, like it gave me so much and I especially love teaching it, and I love empowering others with it.

Mariam Arcilla

So how do you think coronavirus will affect the future of clubbing?

Sezzo

I've had this intuition for quite a long time that clubbing wouldn't be viable in the future. And that's now becoming true with coronavirus. And I feel like it could be that way for a long time. In Itaewon — where the clubbing district is, and that's where coronavirus is actually spread from in the latest spike that we've had — all the clubs are closed. People feel really stupid for opening them up. Because for me, it's about like reading the current signs. And what I'm seeing is like it's time to put down the knobs, guys. The world's telling us to slow down, like something needs to change. So I think we need to go inward a little bit and so I am trying to avoid that world. Yeah, I'm trying to sort of like go with the flow of whatever's going on.

Mariam Arcilla

From the discussions I've been having with people online and offline, there's clearly two divergent groups. You know, some are antsy for things to go back to normal. They don't really like going with the flow. They just want to go back to how it was before...

Sezzo

People are very attached to that old identity.

Mariam Arcilla

Yeah, that old identity. Yeah and for others, these are transformative times. People are using this corona downtime to organise their thoughts and find tangible solutions for unveiling and fixing the problems that we have — that we've always had — with racial inequality and protecting trans rights and climate crisis action and social political empowerment. And even people who are in privileged positions are now reimagining new business models that elicit change. And you were one of those changemakers as a DJ, because you used music and the club environment as vessels for liberation and activism. What place does social empowerment or enlightenment have on the dance floor exactly?

Sezzo

There's heaps of ways you can look at it. The club impacts the human psyche, which influences human culture. So from a psychological perspective, you walk in and there's extremely loud music, bright lights and drugs, which force you to become present. All of that forces you to be present. Like you can't write in a club. Or it'd be very experimental prose. And this is essential for people, not only looking for some kind of mental break or reset from their work week, which is what I think a lot of commercial clubs do for people, but for a society as a whole. That's why I called my night Precog, which is literally *'that which comes before thought'*.

Mariam Arcilla

And what does this pertain to in terms of the current global mindset?

Sezzo

I think we've become lost in our minds in our own minds, and our phones, which are now extensions of our minds. And it's a severe modern affliction that prevents us from experiencing all the facets of being human. So it's sort of indicated by the popularity of things like mindfulness based practices, which gives you an explicit directive to become aware of yourself and your surroundings, and to have distance from your thoughts. And modern science is really catching up to Indigenous cultures, and thinkers like [David] Hume and [Martin] Heidegger. But modern science has shown us that we actually feel our way through life and rationalise decisions afterwards anyway. So in this way I think the club environment encourages an authentic mode of being which hopefully...hopefully carries through into people's lives. And then also from a psychoanalytic perspective, the club provides the stage for dreamlike and regressive behavior. So you can imagine and make real who you want to be. I mean, we all know this: when you go to a club, you can wear whatever you want. You can dress in S&M. You can show off your new Acne or Balenciaga sneakers. Or literally regressive behavior, like sucking on a pacifier momentarily jumping around like a kid because it's fun. Like there's basically no other place in adult society to do that. And it's healthy, because people are experimenting with their identity. And that's like a less rigid way of being and it's linked to idea-generation. So a lot of clubs have spawned a lot of experimental art, especially performance art that we see, and voguing and fashion as well.

Mariam Arcilla

And social conduct...

Sezzo

Yeah. And then you can look at it from a strictly sort of social and cultural level. We have certain codes of conduct and ideals of radical acceptance that I think, we hope, serves as a guide to moral behavior outside of the club. Like for my club nights, we like to advance this philosophy of broadening the idea of normal, which is very different to a lot of the queer scenes that I see. Like we don't assert our own new normal, just widening what is accepted is the goal, without sounding too abstract.

There's so many ways that people can gather. And what is it about like being in this space and then moving the way we do? Why is it the body? Why is everyone spontaneously dancing in a really free-form kind of way? It's very intuitive. You're negotiating space, like everyone's trying to be some ultimate version of themselves, whilst accepting everyone else's version of himself. So in that way, I can see how people see the club is a really utopian space.

Mariam Arcilla

It's a utopian space, but it could also be a space for survival. For example, the New York City bowl culture in the 1980s — which was covered in that iconic documentary *Paris is Burning* — was transformative for many. At these clubs, marginalised groups like African-Americans, Latinax, gay and trans people twerked and vogued and did drag to show that they were invincible...

Sezzo

Yes, and empowered.

Mariam Arcilla

Yeah and empowered, exactly. And to show off their physical and mental prowess. And for many of these people who felt socially oppressed and invisible in their daily lives during the daytime — for a few hours at night at these bowl parties, all eyes were on them.

Sezzo

I always say the opposite of war is not peace; the opposite of war is a party. and that's sort of why places like Germany, or in Berlin, especially is now like a club district. I don't think that these things are coincidences. My theory is that our bodies are a vessel of your inherited past. It's a function of all of your DNA and all of your inherited trauma. And they inform your intuitions. Because intuitions themselves are informed by the past and they're embodied. And so for oppressed peoples, our past is a history of colonial trauma. We've already experienced an apocalypse, you know, and that's affected us. And that's carried through to later generations. And so, I was trying to theorise about freeform dance in these bodies in that space. And when we're dancing, it's an intuitive expression from your body. So your inherited past is present as you dance, and clubbing—when you're dancing around other people who respond to your movement—affirms the past into subjective agreement in this embodied agreement.

Mariam Arcilla

Yeah and when you dance with this type of agreement and agency, it becomes metamorphic and spiritual and folklore. The fact that dance is a way for the marginalised and oppressed to make room for their bodies to have this ancestral awakening and to purge trauma and colonialist echoes.

Sezzo

It does. It purges. I think also lately that's why Indigenous music or music that's Indigenous in origin that's been repurposed for the club — so you have a lot of now what's coming up, which is like, ethno-clubbed up sound; that's sort of a phrase that I use sometimes; Elysia

Crampton or throat singer remixes — stuff like that is having a huge Renaissance. And I think that's sort of like a counterpoint to Afrofuturistic theories that spawned a lot of early techno and how they might have failed. Because techno has kind of failed. Look at the techno scene and most people are white. And they're white guys that have taken something that was once really raw and made it really nerdy and no longer fun.

Mariam Arcilla

Let's talk about something fun. I'd like to know more about the way you've interweaved your Māori identity concepts and passing of ancestral knowledge into your music projects, in particular, your club night collective Ngāti Kangaru. Did I say it right?

Sezzo

Yeah, that's perfect, Ngāti Kangaru. First of all Ngāti is a Māori word that denotes a place or a tribe. So I'm Ngāpuhi or Ngāti is often used. So Ngāti Kangaru is sort of a word I made up. Actually, I didn't make it up. This Māori author, oh my god, Patricia Grace, actually invented the term for Māoris in Australia as part of a short story that she wrote. That's where I got the inspiration from.

Mariam Arcilla

So who are the other members of Ngāti Kangaru?

Sezzo

Tyson Campbell is a friend of mine from Melbourne. He's a visual artist and he also writes poetry and he's part of Ngāti Kangaru. Bella Waru is a part of Ngāti Kangaru and they're a mover and do spoken word and a healer. Also Ngāti Kangaru is Jamaica Moana who lives in Sydney and is voguer and rapper. Yeah and they're the core members of Ngāti Kangaru and they've always performed with me.

And actually, I had the idea for Ngāti Kangaru when I went to the Māori All Stars versus Indigenous All Stars match, the rugby league match that they have. I went, and by the way, I love sport, like, I love going to [see] sport. I think art needs to be as exciting as sport to be successful. Yeah, and I go there, and the atmosphere is electric and it's like this fusion of cultures, [so] we need to come together more and feel unified as a group. Those kinds of games, I love it because that was the first one and it was great. So hopefully, we can keep having more awareness of each other and more unity. And that's when I decided to do Ngāti Kangaru after a footy match [laughs].

And then just from the identity perspective, I want all Māori to feel like they belong to a culture, even if they've spent their whole life in Australia. And I wanted us to throw a party where all Māori feel welcome. And also as a way of saying to anyone else, coming to the party that we exist, and we care about Indigeneity and who's *whenua*, or whose *land* it is that we live on at the moment. Then the party itself, it is experimental, and I've got the Māori artists there. The experimental part comes from us being inherently experimental as Māori. So I think we've always evolved and with voyages and identity, it's very fluid as Māori, and I think art from our most experimental artists in Australia could really reflect that.

Mariam Arcilla

So who are the Māori trailblazers that we should be paying attention to right now?

Sezzo

Besides Taika Waititi?

Mariam Arcilla

Besides Taika Waititi!

Sezzo

No, including him [laughs]

Mariam Arcilla

He's an intellectual dreamboat for sure.

Sezzo

Like there's a character that [Taika] has — and you know who he is as well as a person — he feels like *every* Māori. We are all Taika. And Taika is us.

Mariam Arcilla

So I wanted to talk about another trailblazer, Filipino-Australian artist Justin Shoulder. He invited you to travel to Paris in July 2019 to perform with him at the Palais de Tokyo as part of his *La Manutention* residency. How did this come about? And what was it like to play in an iconic gallery?

Sezzo

Best weeks of my life. I loved this so much. It's crazy, I still think about it now and nothing will ever be better than that. It's actually totally depressing. But no [laughs], it's amazing. Justin asked me to go, and I went. And I guess Justin and his partner Matt [Stegh] — who runs Haus of Hellmutti, a fashion label — they've always been really avid supporters of my DJing. Like I played at Monsta Gras [co-produced by Justin]. I don't know if you know about Monsta Gras?

Mariam Arcilla

It's at the Red Rattler in Marrickville, right?

Sezzo

Yeah! It's at the Red Rattler, which is a community run space run by a lot of queers. It's sort of like this ongoing party. It's kind of revolutionary. It's an anti Mardi Gras party, because Mardi Gras has become something that's really commercial like white cis, gay men corporate space. It's like an anti Mardi Gras for alt queers, I guess. And like, I placed here many times and it's always been epic.

And so Justin is someone who really I think understands me as a DJ and as a curator. I think he appreciates my sound. He knows where it's coming from, and he knows what I'm going

for, which is experimental and raw, but I was honored to even be a small part of Justin's program.

Mariam Arcilla

So I guess your experience in Paris turned you into a Francophile instantly, I'm guessing?

Sezzo

Totally. Well, I also like the French. So yeah, we had a really good time. I like how dramatic they are. And if I'm my own dramatic personality, like I could be very emotional. I didn't realise how much I edit myself in Australia until I went to France and felt so comfortable in my own skin. I can be really emotional and it wasn't a big deal. It was like culturally validated.

Mariam Arcilla

Yeah it's a very culturally liberating country, the way the French fight for human rights and equality in such a magnetised way. Actually, I was in Paris during the city protests last December and you could feel their passion for freedom of speech on just about every street...

Sezzo

[Gasp] Did you just scooter everywhere?

Mariam Arcilla

No, I should've, but I was just walking for hours everywhere because of the transport strike. But the way that the French celebrate and protect progressive ideas is evident in the literature that I read from people who lived there. Like James Baldwin, for example — who left America because...because of the insane racism directed at him. And he spent his life in Paris where he not only felt accepted, but he was allowed to bloom as a writer and thinker.

Sezzo

Totally, yeah I felt really accepted. Like Josephine Baker went there because of the racism that she experienced in America. She just became like one of the world's best dancers and performers, but she lived in Paris, because she didn't get the racism to the same extent that she did in America. And she invented the banana dance, right? She'd wear bananas around her hip. And nothing else.

Mariam Arcilla

So as someone who lives outside of their homeland of New Zealand, do you have any mantras or sayings that help ground you wherever you may be?

Sezzo

I think one that comes to mine is *kia kaha* which means *to stay strong*. So that's something I often think about. Māori are warm and loving, but we also have this essence of raw strength. And you can see that in our warrior culture. Like, it always helps me through, because you do draw on the strength of your ancestors. It's something I'm really in love with. Like, I'll watch a *haka* from the rugby [game] from 1989 and I'll cry. Like, it's something I feel so connected to. And it makes me really emotional, and it helps me to get through. And then

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there's also a Māori saying, *He Waka Eke Noa*, which means *we're all in the same waka*. And that just means we're all in the same boat. Everyone flows in and out of each other. We're all in this together.

Mariam Arcilla

That's so interesting, because I was interviewing Sari-Sari for the first episode of *Interno*. And they're artists of Filipina descent and one of their favorite Tagalog sayings was *kapwa*, which is *shared identity* and *being with others* and *togetherness*. And that's kind of similar to being in the same *waka*.

Sezzo

And I actually connect that to Heidegger as well, you know how I was studying psychology way back in the day? And philosophy? I think I relied too heavily on Western philosophers initially. But it was all sort of a part of my path to find my way home. You know, I really loved Heidegger at the time as in my mid 20s or something, and I was still very assimilated into white culture. But his approach is basically what Indigenous people have thought for thousands of years. But because he's white, he's put on a pedestal. But in simple terms, what we do and what he does is: we don't separate the human from its environment. So we're a necessarily embodied part of the world, which runs counter to this damaging Cartesian view that we're one mind and everything else is external to us, to our minds, this 'thinking thing'. And then you just have outside of you, the environment and other people. You know, it has the subject-object divide.

Mariam Arcilla

It's very dissociative.

Sezzo

Yeah, it is. In Māori thought and Heideggerian thought, you know, the trees are our lungs, the rivers are all circulation, and so on. And we flow in and out of each other in our surroundings. I think if we saw things this way more, we wouldn't have the environmental and social problems we have today. This might sound radical, but I just, you know...people think the solution to global warming and things like that is like throwing more money into science. I'm not anti science at all I'm pro-science by the way. But science still considers the world as like an object for your study and for your manipulation.

Mariam Arcilla

Yeah, I agree in using science for the greater good and not using it purely for advancing humanistic superiority or funding colonialist discovery tools, which is what Elon Musk talks about colonising Mars.

Sezzo

Eww! It's such a colonial project. And like, I don't want to go to Mars, it sounds like shit. It's a desert dude.

Mariam Arcilla

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Yeah, exactly. Like even top scientists are against it. I went to a panel for the World Science Festival in Brisbane several years ago, where an astronaut and a NASA planetary scientist said that everything on Mars is designed to kill you. Like low gravity, toxins in the soil, radiation in the air. Like, there's absolutely nothing on that planet that is designed to make human existence possible, let alone comfortable.

Sezzo

Yeah, it's like some weird, childish dream he's trying to bring about.

Mariam Arcilla

Yeah, because conquering Indigenous lands on Earth isn't enough.

Sezzo

Yeah, exactly. It's just...exhaust the resources in one place and then go and destroy another. Maybe what's more useful is fundamentally rethinking your relationship to the world and others.

[Interlude music]

Mariam Arcilla

Heidegger's theories on our relationship with the world through objects and place and actions...it reminds me of Bundjalung activist Djon Mundin, who also talks about the representations of objects and how they connect to the identities of people and places. It makes me think about what you said earlier, about the kinship with the objects that your friends gave you before you moved to South Korea — like Nadia Hernandez' socks and Hannah Brontë's make-up bag. I've always believed that handover objects have the spirit of the giver imprinted onto them. And when you touch these things you activate memories and feelings of longing.

Sezzo

They took on a whole new significance that I've always taken for granted in the past.

Mariam Arcilla

I'm interested to see how you maintain these significant connections. Because even though you're living in Korea now you still collaborate with people in Australia. And I believe you're working with Nadia, who's based in Sydney, on this writing project called 'edgy'. Can you talk about this?

Sezzo

We have an ongoing Google Doc that is sort of like a half-shared journal, which we love. By the way, I highly recommend doing something like this with a friend. It's how we stay updated with each other's lives, and we literally just journal at each other, and like what comes out of it. By the way, I love Nadia. She's like my spiritual sister and she's an incredible artist. I feel so happy for her. She's been able to traverse the so called public art arena, and the quote unquote serious contemporary artworld. Yeah, that was quite an intentional move on her behalf too. I think she wanted to see if she could rise to that

challenge and be accepted by that world. Her and I have been reflecting on that move as well.

Like recently, we've become really interested in these divides. And I think that we especially resent the term 'edgy' to describe work that isn't considered cool or underground enough. So Nadia's work for example: it's very colorful, and for that reason, it can be regarded as commercial or has commercial appeal, right? And she knows that she's aware of this, or might not be called 'edgy' to a kind of punk crowd, right? But she's always been a political artist though, at heart, if you look at her work properly. And anyone that knows anything about South American art knows that her work is actually very deep and comes from a long lineage of Latin American artists and practices. But she of course has her own really well-developed personal practice. At the end of the day, she's a woman of colour. And she's creating art and her country is in ruins at the moment in Venezuela. So yeah, and we're just like, what could be more edgy than that? And like so we wanted to conduct an investigation into the concept of 'edgy' and why we think it's a shallow tone often used by cool white artists with notice to denigrate Indigenous art that they don't understand....

Mariam Arcilla

...in the same way that the music industry says 'urban genre' or 'urban categories'.

Sezzo

Totally. So we think it's the sort of millennial extension of the idea that Indigenous art should be termed craft, or it's like folk art. It's similar to what many POC have issues with the term contemporary for similar reasons or traditional artists, things like that. Because our traditional artists are our contemporary artists, and this has meaning for us now.

Mariam Arcilla

Mmm interestingly, the Biennale of Sydney has reopened to the public here in Sydney after the coronavirus hiatus. This one's curated by Brook Andrew who wanted to topple the word 'edge'. So the theme of this [22nd] Biennale is NIRIN, which means 'edge' from his mother's nation, the Wiradjuri people.

Sezzo

Someone's already doing it [laughs]. It's good though.

Mariam Arcilla

Yep it's really good. Because Brook worked with artists of the diaspora, and black and Indigenous artists and artists of the diaspora, to present a Biennale that puts many of their ideas and voices — which many in Western art canon would consider to be 'peripheral' or 'edgy' — in the centre of its own narrative. So it gives power back to marginalised people in a big way.

Sezzo

Yeah.

Mariam Arcilla

So I think the word 'edgy' can also be looked at as another word for 'revolution' and 'truth-telling'. Actually I was listening to a Time-Sensitive podcast episode with Ghana artist Ibrahim Mahama, where he discussed the importance of making works that bring him in tandem with the generational shifts in the world. And he's professor at art school taught him ironically, that there was no point being in a room full of artists talking to one another about their artworks or saying 'someone stole my style' and all that reductive stuff.

Sezzo

Oh, my God, I have so many opinions on this.

Mariam Arcilla

I'm sure you do. So the takeaway is that if artists want to make art that will become revolutionary, then they should look outward you know and continue having dialogues with non-arts people, like botanists and engineers, or reading up on quantum theory and climate crisis. Because these avenues extend our roles in society and revamps our attitudes towards materials. In my research, I see more artists working with seaweed scientists or design ethicists and biotech companies. Or simply, I'm seeing people using their COVID downtime to recalibrate the way they think about their practices in a wide-worlded sense, which is partially what this podcast is about.

Sezzo

With COVID, artists have been classed as non-essential workers, which I know the artworld is up in arms about, but I kind of find it a little bit funny. And like COVID also intensifies current social issues. So things to do with income inequality, you know, and then it's police brutality, racial injustice and so on. But to put art on that level, I think we do need to like...I want to say this: so much art really is inessential. I'm sorry, I know that people want to say like it's wrong for capitalism or the economy to determine what art gets made because it leaves it to the market. Or like what's marketable isn't always culturally valuable, or like large corporations will only fund what's strategically good for them. But like, by the same token, I think artists also have a responsibility to prove their worth. Like the world doesn't owe you jack shit because you call yourself an artist. Why should anyone spend money on what you're doing if it doesn't positively affect their lives? Ideally, it would be essential, and it can be essential, but I don't know, only good art is essential. And I know what's good is always up for debate. But like, that's where we come in, right, Mariam? [laughs]

Mariam Arcilla

Well, I agree. As an artworker, I find something like the Biennale of Sydney tremendously essential. It is revolutionary but it is also long overdue. And for a person of colour to experience a fully-formed, edgeless circle filled with a myriad of voices — that are actually usually invisible and unheard in contemporary art — is intensely empowering and liberating. So thinking back to what you said earlier about your inherited past coming through your body as you dance, and it being a vessel. I feel the same way when I see these Biennale artworks — looking at the works of... Teresa Margolles, Karla Dickens, Huma Bhaba, Brain Fuata, Manuel Ocampo — it's like they become a vessel too for me to revisit the stories of my childhood in the Philippines, or to learn about intergenerational trauma from the eyes of trans people and First Nations people, for example. Actually, Ibrahim Mahama is showing at

Artspace and Cockatoo Island at the moment during the Biennale. So I've learnt a lot about labour and trade history and economics behind reading the stories behind his massive installation of jute sacks. So how we judge true artistic value is definitely subjective, yes. But personally I'm drawn to artworks that jolt my mind into taking action, either by educating myself or unlearning my biases or reactivating my role within society. So I think these are the works that endure.

Sezzo

Yeah! I care so much about artistic value, that I think artists need to try really hard to show that what they're doing is important and like petulantly stomping their feet saying give me money. And I know it's been a really popular stance and like, many people will think it's surprising for me to say this kind of thing. But I come from a really underprivileged background. I see people busting their asses every day to make the measliest living. I'm sure everyone would rather be an artist, right? But they can't 'cuz like they're trying to survive. Artists need to be way more honest about what they're doing, and the value of it to others, or initial lack of value like and what the world really owes them. I see so many artists as well — sorry, I'm on my soapbox now — like they're playing the system based on some identity marker or Instagram following. I agree with what you said about that man from Ghana...

Mariam Arcilla

Ibrahim Mahama

Sezzo

If it's important enough to you, then you can figure out a way for it to get made and accept that not everyone is going to get it at first — because that's the nature of something truly new. You're seeing something from a perspective that no one's seen before. And that's what makes it important. And not everyone's gonna get that. And that's how it works, that's how human minds work.

Mariam Arcilla

I wanted to end this episode by asking you about your internalised thoughts during this isolation and pandemic time. And what you think the future could look like ideally, based on what is happening in the present.

Sezzo

Corona has sort of been like Mother Earth telling us to stop. And what happens when we have to stay inside as we go inward. And I think that there needs to be more of that, like people just being really at home with themselves. And it's forced people to become present. You've seen a lot of creativity coming out of this period. And I think that's related to people thinking more intuitively. It's trying to teach us the importance of those interactions. And like, you know, when I talk about the club, it forces you to be present and everything is heightened; we're too far in our minds and in our phones. Things like physical presence have taken on this whole new value now. And that's a lesson we all needed to be taught.

Mariam Arcilla

And hopefully, we'll continue to learn. Sezzo, thanks for joining me on *Interno*.

Sezzo

Thank you, Mariam.

Mariam Arcilla

I'd like to conclude this episode by reading 'Tusitala' a poem by Selina Tusitala Marsh. This poem was published in 1999 in the book 'Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics and Identity in the New Pacific'.

"Tusitala"

teller of tales
that i never heard
till yesterday
born away
for another life

today
the tale i tell
is my own
theirs and yours
a way of seeking
some more
of Sāmoa
of my sacred centre

today the tale i tell
will book its way through
tongued histories
timeless mysteries
sanctioned violence
spaces of silence
telling lives
"tala tusi"

tell the book
worded spirit of brown
in theory

in creativity
we make our our sound
renowned

Interno // Ep 2: Sezzo

Interno is produced by myself, Mariam Arcilla. I'd like to thank Alex Holt, Sarah Thomson and Tulleah Pierce at the Institute of Modern Art for supporting this project. *Interno* takes place on the unceded lands of the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation.

// END OF TRANSCRIPT //

INTERNO EP 2: ONLINE READING NOTES

Tackling White Privilege and Western-Centrism Ch. 3-Curatorial_Activism.pdf

Salt/Tears/Water by Talia Smith in 4A Papers

Aroha Bridge - Angeline in Concert by Piki Films Ltd.

A Conversation on the Bleaching of Techno: How Appropriation is Normalized and Preserved

Conversations: Poet laureate Selina Tusitala Marsh

Time Sensitive: Ibrahim Mahama on the Great Potential of Art to Change How We Look at the World

A Caltex Spectrum soundtrack by Daniel Jenatsch & Sezzo (FKA Kōtare)

CREDITS

Interno episode 2

Guest: Sezzo

Creator, producer & host: Mariam Arcilla

Soundtrack Music: 'Step Inside' by Paper Plane Project

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Top image: Sezzo, Māori Hongi greeting. Photo: Louis Lim