(INTRO MUSIC)

(MUSIC FADES TO A STOP)

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
Hello, and welcome to the Big Anxiety Podcast series. We’re recording on Gadigal land in the studios of 2RPH, which is a community radio station and radio reading service in Sydney. In this interview series for the Big Anxiety Festival, we’re talking to different creative people about their mental health and their creative lives, and how these things come together. I’m Barbara Sullivan from Radio 2RPH. And to kick off the series today, Jill Bennett, executive and artistic director of The Big Anxiety Festival, joins us to explain what it’s all about and what we can expect during this year’s program.

(INTERLUDE MUSIC)

(MUSIC FADES TO A STOP)

Hello, Jill. Now, life must be incredibly busy for you at the moment with the festival starting in late September running through November, and all your other responsibilities at the university, plus your publishing.

JILL BENNET:
It’s pretty chaotic, but it’s all exciting.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
Now, The Big Anxiety is your brain child. What prompted you to put the idea forward and to put the enormous effort in to getting it started and continuing it?

JILL BENNET:
Well, I’ve worked for a long time at the intersection of arts and mental health, and in particular, arts and trauma, and so, I’ve always been aware of the real and important work that art can do in that sphere. But it seemed to me that, you know, as many other people were working in this space, it really wasn’t growing sufficiently, and that’s because health and arts are quite silo. You know, fantastic projects on both sides and interesting people making connections. There’s not a lot of money or infrastructure in that between space. So, I thought that Sydney could do with another festival. You know, we have this fantastic Biennale (LAUGHTER) and the Sydney Festival. But what I thought would be interesting was to try to bring arts together with the mental health sector, to try to really further the agenda of the mental health sector.

So, when we talk to people in mental health, we address some very significant problems. So, for example, it’s always said that 65% of Australians with a mental health problem don’t seek help. And given that those people aren’t stepping into mental health spaces or institutions, it seems to me clear that we have to do something on the outside, as it were. And we also need these disciplines, that are the rich communications and engagement disciplines, to actually further the conversation and the communication techniques that we’re using to engage people.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
So, it’s a very new concept. Well, it was in 2017. Was it hard for people that you needed to deal with to get this up and running, to grasp what you are trying to do?

JILL BENNETT: Yes and no. Everybody loves it ‘cause it’s kind of a no brainer. Why wouldn’t you do it? And it steps on nobody’s toes and it’s a kind of missing link. But, at the same time, nobody will pay for it, because there are buckets of money on either side and you never quite fit the terms of the existing funding rounds and grants. So, we had to be quite inventive to build the support, and we’re still building it. But I do think we’ve got quite a lot of traction and it seems to me that this is something that is good for the future. And I hope that in ten years’ time, whether we have The Big Anxiety in this form or not, we’ve paved the way for a different way of doing things. And that creates opportunities for artists as well as, obviously, people in the health and disability sectors, importantly.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
Specifically, what are your aims and objectives with the festival?

JILL BENNETT:
I come from a university base, which is partly how I’ve built the foundation for the festival. So, you know, we do a lot of research and we work with communities. That’s really important that we don’t just put on events like a circus coming to town and then disappearing. Because we work with some vulnerable communities and traumatised communities, there has to be that sort of sustained engagement. And so, finding the means for that is often quite challenging. But it’s very important, because we learn all the time from communities, how to do things better. So, we tend to have ongoing collaborations and research projects, and they tend to snowball. And also, you know, in the arts, if you do a theme, you never repeat it. We always want the new thing, and we do the same thing in more depth. We really want to understand lived experience of mental health and disability better. And it’s very bottom-up. We want to work with people to expand that understanding and to make everybody more comfortable with difference and diversity, and with processes of care, really. We use all these different creative tools to do that. So that’s a project that is forever deepening and we can always do it better in more imaginative ways.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
Well, on that subject, the 2017 festival, the first one, was hugely successful. And I understand you won an award, the Australian Events Award.

JILL BENNETT:
Yeah, Best New Event. Yeah.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
Best New Event? That’s pretty impressive. What did you learn from it on the subject of deepening that you can apply to this one?

JILL BENNETT:
We learn a lot, I think, about how to do engagement. A festival is not just about product or things that you exhibit, outputs. It’s really about the nature of the engagement. We knew from the start that the purpose had to be to create enriching experiences for people who do have their own lived experience, of the people whose voice isn’t necessarily represented in other forms. And more than that, actually, I would say that we want the work to have direct mental health benefit. So that might be in terms of promoting understanding and self-reflection. But in some cases, we do what we call reparative projects that are – by virtue of people participating – they do enable you to progress on a road of recovery in some sort of way. There’s a kind of science to this, but it’s very kind of emergent. It comes out of the collaboration. We learn what works by being very attentive to people and their needs.

I suppose the projects that we developed in the first year led us directly to our 2019 theme, which is empathy. And how we think about that is really as a sort of process that can be learnt. If empathy is a sort of value that makes lives better and more liveable and enables us to care and support for others and to defeat stigma in a way, the skills of empathy have to be really cultivated in a quite reflective way. And so, we’re thinking about the sort of active use of artworks and engaging with art as a means for doing that for acquiring and deepening empathy skills. And those skills are things like the skill of listening and attuning to different voices. And actually, just being comfortable with difference and the unknown. And sometimes, things that are quite frightening like illness, dementia, psychosis. But actually, if we don’t panic and go into this sort of fight or flight reaction and we just kind of attune to the person, it becomes less frightening and –

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
And we’re all less anxious.

JILL BENNETT:
Exactly.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

Can we expect to see many of the same types of programs again this year? For example, you’re very successful Awkward Conversations.

JILL BENNETT:
Yeah, I love that program ‘cause in many ways, we have all these high tech multimedia productions, but this was the most lo-fi and the most simple in its elements but also one of the most effective, ‘cause it was just based on the idea of one to one conversation. But quite carefully designed conversations so people come along and book in to a conversation with someone else – usually an artist with some kind of interesting mental health lived experience or a disability experience. There was a great one last year with Debra Keenahan, an artist with achondroplasia dwarfism who took people on a walk so they could sort of walk in her shoes and understand what it’s like to be looked at every time you walk down the street. So, these were quite subtle but high impact discussions. And we had one, in fact, called The S Word that was about suicide.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
Yes.

JILL BENNETT:
And that was fantastically successful, people reported that they’ve found it very moving and enriching. And that one, we’ve been able to develop as a much larger program in partnership with Lifeline. So we’re doing a big and quite spectacular project on the Mental Health Day, which is 10 October, and it will be on the lawn outside the MCA where there will be a very large S manifesting for the S word. And people will be able to engage in conversations. This time will be the Lifeline Crisis Support workers participating, but it’s quite a new and experimental project for them, stepping into this kind of cultural arena outside the health support provision space. And so, we’re very excited about how that will go. And we’re also running a whole range of Awkward Conversations at customs house, the weekend after that.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
This event with Lifeline is one of the big events. I guess, what you might call your key events.

JILL BENNETT:
Yeah.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
What are some of the others?

JILL BENNETT:
Probably, the core of the festival is an exhibition called ‘The Empathy Clinic’. And that’s at UNSW Galleries. But it sort of spins off in all sorts of directions, so we have an evening at the art gallery of New South Wales that extends from the Empathy Clinic. But the idea of The Empathy Clinic is – as much as I’ve been described, plays with this idea that art is not just kind of a passive appreciating experience, it’s something that can actually change you for the better. So you go through this clinic and you will in fact become more empathetic. We have an app as well that – if the exhibition visit alone doesn’t do it, there’s an app called ‘Course of Empathy’ that will be launching, that will actually cultivate empathy, if that’s something you want to do.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
So even if they can’t get to the festival, this will be available.

JILL BENNETT:
We’ve designed it so that it works well with the festival, and there are some festival outposts. We’ve actually got something in Melbourne at the Cunningham Dax Centre. So there are various things people can engage with, but then we’ll put some material online so people can participate in some way from wherever they are.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
One of the interesting aspects of the festival is the inclusion of ambassadors. Talk to me a little bit about how you see their role and how you go about appointing them.

JILL BENNETT:
The ambassadors are really central to the whole conception of the festival, which has this tagline ‘People plus art plus science’. It started off ‘Art plus science plus people’, and this year, we’ve flipped it around ‘cause one of the things we did learn was that the people are really the core of this. And you can see that in our brand and how we use the headshots of the ambassadors. And so, the ambassadors really have to be just ordinary people with some kind of lived experience. And their lived experiences are quite diverse, different kind of mental health stories, disabilities, and just a diversity of backgrounds. But the idea is their ordinary stories and they’re the stuff of the festival, rather than being celebrity ambassadors.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
Yes, who were just out to promote it. You mentioned Melbourne before. Will the various events be held across different parts of Sydney? What about Parramatta?

JILL BENNETT:
Yes, because we have a good ongoing relationship with the Paramatta Female Factory Precinct and a group of women, the Parragirls, who form the residence at the Parramatta Girls. We did a big project with them last year. And this year, they’re holding an event out there, a Long Table called Women in Power. And then, we’ve got a lot of work around Circular Quay Customs House project at the MCA with Project Artworks, who are a kind of a radical British art group who do work with people with severe neurological disability and behaviours that challenge. And they do some quite experimental artwork that engages the public in really exciting ways. So that will be at MCA.

What else do we have? One thing I should talk about, and this is part of the work that we’re showing in Melbourne. And this came out of last year’s work actually. A group from the Northern Territory, the NPY Women’s Council came to visit the Parragirls work, actually, and they got very interested in our work and ask if we could collaborate with them. And they are a very interesting sort of grassroots mental health operation. So their artist and Ngangkari Traditional Healers, but they work with all of the problems on the ground that you’d imagine around mental health, addiction, youth suicide. And they’re looking to develop culturally appropriate materials that sort of fuse traditional and Western medical mental health knowledges. And so, we’ve been working with them on some virtual reality projects.

In fact, I was up at remote spot just outside Uluru last week, finishing a virtual reality film, which is very interesting. It’s a traditional story of a man who gets trapped in a log. But the being in the log is a very powerful metaphor for that feeling of entrapment and separation, and not knowing how to reach people you love or who care about you and feeling completely dislocated and alone. So, it feeds into ways of thinking about addiction, incarceration, all of those experiences. So, anyway, you can see this group called Uti Kulintjaku at the art gallery live on 16October. Also, we’ve got a two day conference, which we didn’t have last year, on 18 and 19of October. It’s at the art gallery of New South Wales and also at the Powerhouse on the second day.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
So who can go to the conference?

JILL BENNETT:
Anybody. (LAUGHS)

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
And do any of these cost?

JILL BENNETT:
The conference does. We actually have a policy of keeping almost everything free or very low cost.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
To put on an event of this scale must cost a lot. How do you raise the money for it if you’re not charging people to go to the events, conference aside?

JILL BENNETT:
That’s the challenge. But to put on the actual events, our biggest supporter this year is the Federal Government Department of Health. That’s really nice, actually, because last year we went for a predominantly arts funding. But, I think, this is a testament to the impact that we’re able to show last time, that there really are actual mental health benefits and that this is something that should be part of what Department of Health are looking at. Also, the state government, Department of Health, the Minister for Mental Health actually supported the development of a very interesting project called Edge of the Present, which is also at the UNSW Galleries. And this one also came out of some work we were doing with people who have survived suicide attempts. And we’re started of running workshops using virtual reality. The concept of Edge of the Present came from this idea that you sometimes find yourself at the edge of the present, unable to see a future. So how do you do cultivate that capacity to see the next stage of your life if you just don’t see it?

So, it’s a question at a lot of levels. Even at a sort of neurological psychological level. What’s happening in people’s brains? How do you stimulate that capacity to imagine the future? So we put together this group of neuropsychologists, and obviously, the people with lived experience and the technical artists, and just started experimenting. And what we ended up with is a very interesting environment that’s being created by a mixed reality artist, Alex Davies, where you wear a headset, you go into a room that’s quite a plain room, has a window and a door. But when you put on the headset, you see a facsimile of this plain room, but everything you do transforms that room. So, wonderful things happen when you open doors and windows (LAUGHTER). The idea is you get ten minutes to completely transform your life in the future. Invent the next ten minutes. It’s interesting because it’s a project that in some way is about suicide and depression, but what you see bears no relation to that content but it has this interesting other dimension to it.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
How would you measure the success? Is it a statistical thing?

JILL BENNETT:
It’s not just attendance. And obviously, we hope as many people as possible will come and one of the things we hope is that we do bring in people who are interested in the mental health dimensions because of their own experience or something that they want to engage with. So, the real measure is the quality of engagement. Does it change your thinking? Does it provide you with information and insight about mental health? Does it inspire you to go further? So, we evaluate all of that via a purpose designed survey. But there also – ‘cause we have the scientific collaborations, there are lots of possibilities, especially within the Empathy Clinic to engage a deeper level with the research to do the app or even work with scientists sort of measuring things if you’re interested in that. So we try to really cater to a whole range of interests. If people want to plunge themselves into the research or if they just want to browse in a very light way, it’s all possible.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
But since one of the main aims is to increase empathy, then, what you need is interaction from the people who go. You just don’t want them to turn up and walk away. Their lives may have been changed by it or their thinking, but it would be very important for you to know that that’s happened and how.

JILL BENNETT:
That’s a good point actually. So, one of the things that happens when people go to an art show is you sort of browse and something in your head says, “I like that. I don’t like that. I’m bored with that.” It’s quite judgmental about the art the art itself. We’re actually proposing a different kind of engagement. Of course, you can make comments about whether the art was resolved or not. But we’re looking at the kind of relationships that are facilitated through the art. So you might come and engage in Debra Keenahan’s first person virtual reality experience that portrays her life as a woman with dwarfism. Or the Uti Kulintjaku project that takes you into a very different world, in a remote community in Central Australia.

There’s another quite challenging work that is about the loss of children in communities where suicide at a young age is endemic and just devastating. So, there are these quite challenging realities that people confront. And not that we want to sort of bang people over the head with this and they go away repentant or something. The point is not that kind of learning at all. These are experiences in our world and how do they touch us, how can we engage? And then, what are the options for action? Because we don’t just want people to feel, you know, that’s terrible, my life is better, I feel bad, what can I do? And so, part of the function of having the app and so on is we do look at this. You know? Options for action. I’ve realised that, actually, I do feel quite a sense of discomfort when I encounter a body that’s not quite mine and that’s because I’m just out of place and embarrassed of how do I sit quietly and be receptive and attune. And so, our works are great at that. I mean, it’s really a way that a great film that’s changed our life works. You know? You’re just drawn in. And you suddenly understand another life world, right? And make that connection.

So, we’re trying to really foreground that experience and think about, maybe, you can go to a gallery in order to have that and be quite transformed and open out a little bit. So, yeah, that would be the measure of success – whether people feel that that happens.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
Well, may I wish you every success for the 2019 Festival, Jill.

JILL BENNETT:
Thank you.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:
Thanks for coming in.

I’ve been speaking with Jill Bennett, Executive and Artistic Director of The Big Anxiety Festival. We’d love you to come back and listen to other podcasts featuring artists and festival ambassadors in conversation with Bec Dean, curator of The Big Anxiety, and me, Barbara Sullivan from Radio 2RPH.

(OUTRO MUSIC)

(MUSIC STOPS)