

## If you focus on the process, the product will look after itself with Sarah Campbell, Daksha Patel and Sian Docksey

### (Research Adjacent Episode 92)

Exploring creative partnerships between artists and researchers

<https://researchadjacent.com/sarah-campbell-daksha-patel-sian-docksey-episode-92/>



[00:00:01] **Daksha Patel:** Because artists are also researchers. They also experiment. They reflect, they're curious about the world around them.

[00:00:08] **Sarah Campbell:** Historically there can be feelings of extraction and I've heard it from both sides of the fence where artists have felt stripped for their ideas and also academics have been stripped for their research.

[00:00:20] **Sian Docksey:** AI doesn't really ask questions so much. Like it can be trained to ask questions, but it doesn't have that like hunger for the unknowable that people have. And I think that is where artists can give real soul to all kinds of practice.

[00:00:36] **Sarah Campbell:** I do think if you focus on the people in the process, the product will look after itself.

[00:00:42] **Sarah McLusky:** Hello there. I'm Sarah McLusky, and this is Research Adjacent.

[00:00:49] **Sarah McLusky:** Each episode, I talk to amazing research-adjacent professionals about what they do and why it makes a difference. Keep listening to find out why we think the research adjacent space is where the real magic happens.

[00:01:04] **Sarah McLusky:** Welcome along to a fresh new episode of Research Adjacent, all about partnerships between researchers, artists, and other creative practitioners. I have three guests today: Sarah Campbell, who is associate director for arts and culture at the University of Exeter, and two artists who have collaborated with Exeter researchers through the university's Creative Fellowship Scheme.

[00:01:25] **Sarah McLusky:** They are visual artist Daksha Patel, and writer, comedian, and pole dancer Sian Docksey. As you'll hear, the Creative Fellowships program pairs up an artist, in the broadest sense of the word, and a researcher, and gives them the time, space, and resources to explore and create together. In our conversation, we talk about why researchers and artists have more in common than you might think, why time, resources, and freedom are the key ingredients for successful collaboration, and the unexpected benefits that can come out of these creative partnerships.

[00:01:58] **Sarah McLusky:** This conversation is a taster for what to expect at the free symposium Activating Creativity in UK Universities, which is happening at the University of Exeter on the 17th to the 18th of June 2026. So if that sounds like your kind of thing, make sure that you check out the link in the show notes and you can go and book yourself a free ticket.

[00:02:17] **Sarah McLusky:** But for now, let's listen on to hear Sian, Daksha, and Sarah's stories.

[00:02:24] **Sarah McLusky:** Welcome along to the podcast. We've got three guests today, Sian, Sarah, and Daksha. I will invite them all to introduce themselves to you in just a moment, but it's fantastic to have you here and get all of your different perspectives on this topic of creative research partnerships. I will first of all invite Sarah, if you could just introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

[00:02:51] **Sarah McLusky:** Thank you. Hi. My name is Sarah Campbell. I'm Associate Director for Arts and Culture at the University of Exeter. So I head up a small team and we are responsible for delivering the arts and culture strategy across the four campuses of the University in Devon and Cornwall.

[00:03:10] **Sarah McLusky:** Fantastic. Thanks very much Sarah. Daksha, would you like to introduce yourself?

[00:03:15] **Daksha Patel:** Hello. My name is Daksha Patel and I'm a visual artist who regularly works with academic institutions through residencies, fellowships, and commissions. I've worked with researchers in biophysics, biomedicine, applied mathematics, environmental justice, and my current project is with astrophysics.

[00:03:37] **Daksha Patel:** I work across a wide range of media, moving between analog and digital methods, so I draw with pencils, I make ceramic pieces, but also increasingly working with digital technologies to make experimental films in response to research.

[00:03:53] **Sarah McLusky:** Fantastic. That's quite a collection, Daksha. I'm really looking forward to hearing about that.

[00:03:57] **Sarah McLusky:** Thank you. And Sian, tell us about yourself.

[00:04:00] **Sian Docksey:** Hi everyone. Thanks for having me on the show. My name's Sian Docksey. I'm a multidisciplinary artist, mainly known for combining pole dancing with comedy. My biggest claim to fame is that I was the pole dancing seagull on Britain's Got Talent, which makes it hard to say if things are going very badly or very well.

[00:04:21] **Sian Docksey:** So yeah. I do a mix of stuff. At the moment my main practice is writing. I'm trying to write a book about pole dancing and mental health because I've ended up not really by choice but it became very relevant to a lot of the projects I was exploring in collaboration with Exeter as well. I think a lot about resilience in the creative industries for individuals and organizations. So the book I'm trying to write is about how pole dancing is a really interesting environment to explore ideas about feminism, resilience, economics, inequality, wellbeing, et cetera. And I got involved with arts and culture at the University of Exeter through a creative fellowship in the dark days of lockdown, which was a shining light in a horrible well of despair. And yeah, have had some just incredibly positive experiences of collaboration since then. So very stoked to discuss.

[00:05:17] **Sarah McLusky:** Excellent. Fantastic. Again, lots to talk about there.

[00:05:20] **Sarah McLusky:** I feel like we might need to get a video is, does it exist, the video of you as the pole dancing seagull?

[00:05:26] **Sian Docksey:** Oh boy. Does it exist?

[00:05:29] **Sarah McLusky:** Excellent. We shall see if we can get that and put it in the show notes. Brilliant. So yeah, so both Sian and Daksha, you have both collaborated with researchers at the University of Exeter. Sarah, you're the champion for arts and culture at the University of Exeter. Could you tell us a bit about why this is something that the university considers so important?

[00:05:52] **Sarah Campbell:** Yeah, sure. It is creativity and creative processes are things that are fundamental across all disciplines. And it's a subject that I've been really interested in for a long time. I was previously working in museum and gallery education, so working in different galleries across the UK working with visual arts and design, and I have a real passion for bringing people together and how people come together. And also I think when you're working with various art forms, often people think about the product at the end. They think about the output, whether it's a poem or a show. And what's perhaps less well understood is the amazing process that goes into making any work of art and it takes an enormous amount of time and research and content and bringing people together, and you need to draw on a really amazing sort of combination of skills to make that happen. And there are so many interesting parallels between how universities organize knowledge creation and the way that the arts.

[00:06:59] **Sarah Campbell:** I appreciate their arts within universities but the way that the cultural sector outside of academia goes deeply into ideas and explores ideas and unpacks them in different ways. And, with the way that universities run now, there is, they're very complicated challenges. You can't just dive into a single discipline and go deep down that channel.

[00:07:23] **Sarah Campbell:** You have to be working across disciplines and and that's where the exciting stuff is, that's where I get a real thrill and it's where I think arts and culture brings something useful. When you are working with people who their lives are ideas and having ideas, having good ideas, realizing ideas, improving and honing ideas, and you put them with other

exciting ideas, people who are coming from different spaces, it's thrilling, people just love it. And and I feel like when it's perhaps. Historically there can be feelings of extraction where sort of one party feels used by the other. And I've heard it from both sides of the fence where artists have felt stripped for their ideas and also academics have been stripped for their research.

[00:08:13] **Sarah Campbell:** And so the models that we try to put in place are ones where everyone wins and so the Creative Fellowship program is one example that I love as a model. And Sian and Daksha have both been artists who have worked with us on this, where we start by an internal request for members of staff who would like to work with a creative practitioner from outside their field.

[00:08:36] **Sarah Campbell:** And the main thing is that it's open ended and there isn't an expectation on the artist to make work. They do, because that's how artists process and but we don't go in saying, okay, put in a proposal, what is it that you are going to make at the end of this? And by alleviating that pressure from both the academic and the artist.

[00:08:58] **Sarah Campbell:** When folk are coming together in that way, and it's genuinely designed to be a kind of, okay, what happens? Hang out, have some chats. People get really sparky and fired up about it. And and so our job in arts and culture is to try to hold that matchmaking process as well as we can. It doesn't always go as perfectly as we wish because you bring humans together and, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. But when it does work, it's it's just really thrilling. Yeah. And so that's benefits all the way around as far as I can see. Yeah.

[00:09:31] **Sarah McLusky:** So the creative fellowship program, that's something that, it's not attached to specific research projects or things, it's just run at a university level.

[00:09:40] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah.

[00:09:41] **Sarah Campbell:** It's open to, we have predominantly worked with researchers, but it is open to staff across the university. And the ask is that people aren't coming in with a predetermined idea of the thing that they want. It's more about do you have a question that you are chewing on? And it would be interesting to bring different perspectives on that question so that your thinking is sort of expanded into unexpected directions.

[00:10:08] **Sarah McLusky:** Interesting. And it is, and it, that sounds like it really is that focus on the process rather than the output, which I know is a real sticking point in some research arts collaborations, is that, the university, the researcher, they want a piece of art to hang on the wall at the end of the process, rather than treating the actual intellectual exchange as the work.

[00:10:37] **Sarah Campbell:** I think that it comes back to that problem of if you haven't worked in these environments or spaces, your sort of understanding of art is only from ever having seen the product and it shifted enormously. The sort of the cliché is I've had a huge amount of money to do this research project. I have 500 pounds left and I would like an exhibition and a whatever from an artist. And all of the, sort of the timescales and the expectations are all out of alignment. And if you're thinking about the product, then your head jumps there. But if you think about the process, okay, if you've been doing a research project for three years, there are many ways throughout that process that it would be exciting and interesting to challenge, okay, how could we come at this different way?

[00:11:18] **Sarah Campbell:** And I particularly like when anything is, as most research questions are, when anything is complicated. Daksha used these lovely phrases in her project,

wicked sticky problems. Things that are not, you can't just land on one side of the fence or the other. And so that's super helpful to get the arts into those spaces because the arts can hold that complexity in a really interesting way.

[00:11:44] **Sarah Campbell:** I think that is appreciated in a research space too.

[00:11:48] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Oh, fantastic. Thank you. I think probably a nice point then to, to come to Daksha and hear about some of the projects that, that you've been involved with.

[00:11:59] **Daksha Patel:** Yeah, so I just wanted to come back to what Sarah just mentioned about yeah, that sticky wicked ambiguity. I think that what's valuable about bringing creative methods, processes into sort of academic institutions? Because artists are also researchers. They also experiment. They reflect, they're curious about the world around them. But particularly if I think about the scientific context I work with.

[00:12:26] **Daksha Patel:** Artistic research is non-linear, is not systematic. It doesn't follow strict protocols. It often creates its own methods, which are unique to each project. And rather than generate like new knowledge through facts, I think artistic practice often generates new perspectives. Or different ways of thinking about imagining a subject. And yeah, start starting different conversations. Also creative methods often prioritize subjective experience, the emotions, the senses, rather than abstract theory. And they can make unexpected connections between different things, which again, opens up different ways of perceiving this a topic or the research subject.

[00:13:12] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah,

[00:13:13] **Daksha Patel:** and artists are really comfortable with ambiguity and not knowing. They can remain in not knowing, and they often value it as a process, which might seem a strange thing to say in relation to research, but the ability to remain with ambiguity and the unknown is the first step of all research. So by bringing an artist into an academic institution, particularly the STEM subjects that I tend to work with, there's a opportunity for different ways of exploring your research, of talking about ideas, starting different conversations, and also reaching audiences beyond academic institutions through storytelling, through the senses, and by bringing the imagination and a sense of wonder.

[00:14:01] **Daksha Patel:** Into the research. Yeah, I think that's really important. But I didn't answer your question did I?

[00:14:06] **Sarah McLusky:** No, that's okay. That's okay. But that's really useful stuff. I love the fact, so a couple of things there that I just wanted to pick up on that you mentioned that I talk about a lot when I'm talking about communications of research.

[00:14:20] **Sarah McLusky:** The ability of the arts to tap into and communicate emotion and those kind of less tangible aspects of human experience, I think is incredibly powerful, 'cause those are things that standard research, communication can find really challenging and also that the not knowing and again, that is something that for academics, I know some academics find that a really difficult place to sit in and to, to acknowledge the things that they don't know. So the fact that an arts project, that an artistic process can help to hold those things, I think is fantastic. But yeah. You were gonna tell us then about your, tell us about the creative fellowship that you did with Exeter first of all.

[00:15:09] **Daksha Patel:** Yeah. It was in environmental justice. And I was working with Professor Clare Saunders and her research amongst other things, addresses inequalities such as the impact of climate change upon countries that are often the least responsible for creating it. So during our first conversations, we first started talking on Zoom before I visited Penryn Campus, I realized that Exeter had links with the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and Jaffna University in Sri Lanka. So that sort of immediately sparked ideas about working with their students. And so we planned a series of online conversations called Diverse Voices between students in the UK and in Tanzania and Sri Lanka.

[00:15:56] **Daksha Patel:** So they were co-designed in that we first asked the students what kind of questions they wanted to explore in relation to environmental justice. And we compiled a list from their suggestions. So some were like, what role can students play in helping to achieve environmental justice? There was, I think, 10 questions in all.

[00:16:16] **Daksha Patel:** And by way of introduction, I asked all participants to post an image of something in their local environment. So some posted a tree, a river, insects, a rubbish dump or smog in a city. And they introduced themselves by explaining why that image was important to them. And that was really successful 'cause it gave a sense of the different places, but also they were, it drew out all these personal stories connected to these images, which really resonated.

[00:16:48] **Daksha Patel:** And gave space for them to express their concerns. Having an equal voice and to be heard equally was central to the workshops. And obviously that's in keeping with environmental justice values. So participants took it in turn to choose one question from that list to ask to someone from a different country.

[00:17:10] **Daksha Patel:** And everyone had an equal amount of time to reply. And after this initial structure and then just discussions just evolved organically. So that was like the starting point of my fellowship. But then as part of the fellowship over time, I also created a large on site wall drawing, a pencil drawing.

[00:17:32] **Daksha Patel:** Which is a kind of creative counter map of the local area around the campus where more than human species jostle with space for human beings and their different needs are like overlapping. And I also delivered mapping workshops with a group of interdisciplinary staff, which was also followed by a lot of discussions.

[00:17:56] **Daksha Patel:** And after the fellowship I co-wrote a paper with Clare Saunders about the project. And since the project Clare and I have, we've tried to apply for other funding to continue the projects. And what I think one of the things that I feel really sad about with these fellowships because they're so wonderful at the time, but to me they're like a starting point.

[00:18:21] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah.

[00:18:21] **Daksha Patel:** And I'd like to build on them 'cause I've already started a conversation with Clare and I'd like to carry on developing it. And so many ideas came out of that project. And it's always really difficult for that next step. So that's really sad.

[00:18:36] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Yeah. Oh, that definitely anything where you've only got a certain amount of time and sometimes you feel it's run its course, don't you? But sometimes you just think there's so much more we could have done. And Sian, it looked like that was something that resonated with you as well.

[00:18:51] **Sian Docksey:** Hugely, I'm just absorbing everything Daksha said, and so much of it completely resonated with my experience. Also, I've written down the phrase wicked sticky problems. That's so delicious. And that like swimming around in the unknowable. Yeah, it's a bit of a tangent, but I was listening to a podcast about AI and how. How we make peace with the fact that this is here, this is part of the world we live in now, and also be aware of its potential dangers and liabilities. And one point the this tech writer made about AI is that AI doesn't really ask questions so much. Like it can be trained to ask questions, but it doesn't have that like hunger for the unknowable that people have. And I think that is where artists can give real soul to all kinds of practice, whether that's in business, whether that's in academic research, et cetera, but that constant goop of uncertainty. Goop of uncertainty. There we go. That's the value.

[00:19:52] **Sarah McLusky:** Love it. Excellent. So tell us about the creative fellowship that you were involved in with Exeter.

[00:20:00] **Sian Docksey:** Sure. So historically, God, it is bleak thinking back to COVID, but that is where it started. So I found out about these fellowships by accident and it was something that had not been on my radar before. My day job that pays the bills is I'm a freelance copywriter, so I get these newsletters with oddballs, little marketing jobs, and the creative fellowship with Exeter appeared in an email. Which had, other really boring stuff. Do you want to write copy for Benefit Cosmetics? Anyway and I think at that point, and this is a thing that comics have as well, like standup comedians, for me, the word like artist had never really felt available or like it was in my vocabulary because like I considered myself a writer, performer, but art felt something a lot more lofty.

[00:20:50] **Sian Docksey:** And I did an arts degree and had been in those spaces, but what we were discussing before we started recording of what label is appropriate to use and visual arts sounds elevated, whereas, standup comics feel like we make dick jokes in the back of a pub.

[00:21:06] **Sian Docksey:** Is that art? Yes. But yeah, so I found out about this creative fellowship having no real previous connection to this area. And then the sort of interview process felt like a kind of academic speed dating, Dr. Ina Linge, who is now one of my closest friends, was the academic host with the University of Exeter, and her research is on concepts of nature and sexuality.

[00:21:33] **Sian Docksey:** So she's an expert in like 20th century German literature about social mores and yeah, concepts of like identity and sexuality in animals in a lot of literature. And we just clicked to be honest, and I was doing all of this like weird experimental comedy. Like my first show was about turning myself into a lemon, which was if you wanna make it a bit more lofty it was really about like identity, gender, and sexuality. I just wanted to dress in yellow and make lemons get naked and make a porno in the back of a pub. But yeah, so Ina and I paired up and, yeah, so I'd never done any kind of project like this before and I think at first what really surprised me about the invitation from this organization was to not have an end product.

[00:22:22] **Sian Docksey:** And I think I can only speak for myself, but I feel like as artists and creatives, we always feel really insecure about oh, I've gotta show something. And also in my other, like more corporate life, it's always what are the deliverables? What are the end products that are expected?

[00:22:37] **Sian Docksey:** And also as Sarah mentioned, we do just make stuff. If we're not making stuff, we get confused. But yeah, for me it was a bit bewildering to have an invitation to explore and have these conversations. And also both me and Ina, I think, have survived in the

like academic environment for Ina and in the like arts and marketing environment for me by just being very dogged about no, we're gonna make a thing and it's gonna be good.

[00:23:01] **Sian Docksey:** So we really gelled on that point. I was exploring Ina's research into nature and sexuality, and using my own practice as a response. And my practice at that time was running chaotic comedy cabaret gigs. So we made those and because we were in the depths of lockdown, oh my God. And we were just like, it sometimes gives me a little bit of incredibly light PTSD being this as well.

[00:23:24] **Sian Docksey:** Just oh my god, remember when we all just lived on Zoom and talked into the void and that was the essential human contact we could access. Yeah, we, basically mirrored what a lot of people in the comedy scene were doing at the time, which was figuring out how you could put gigs online and create a social environment and keep working while we all lived in our pods of sadness during the plague.

[00:23:47] **Sian Docksey:** So yeah, so Ina and I created what we called the Sex and Nature Salon, which was an online kind of comedy cabaret social. And what was lush was being able to just explore what that could feel like. Not have the pressure to deliver like a polished gig, but go right, what happens if we host a couple of acts, but then go off into breakout rooms and do an activity or kind of open things up to more like a chat, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah.

[00:24:15] **Sian Docksey:** And yeah, so we created a bunch of sessions, which like honestly it was nice to have something to do because it was so miserable. And I had the thing of, because a lot of my work as like a performer, but also like an events organizer had completely dissolved with COVID. It really was just like, okay what can we do? And also like genuinely the funding was like life changing for me and to be able to offer artists a like non insulting fee to perform and, do their like 10 to 15 minute comedy set and do some hosting. Yeah, was it just, it felt like, oh my god, good, there's something happening.

[00:24:55] **Sian Docksey:** Since then me and Ina have continued to work together. Something I wanted to make sure I mention is from the very beginning of the collaboration. I think what I felt that I didn't expect was this weird sense of relief that I was like, oh my God, in academia people are spending whole careers like researching what I feel are just disparate, weird interests around the sides.

[00:25:17] **Sian Docksey:** So yeah, I mean, Ina's research is relevant to things I find really interesting, like concepts of like desirability in nature or what is quote unquote natural versus what is maybe like queer or artificial. And I feel like so many of the standup comedians I know, or like cabarets, whatever, all of their art and maybe autobiographical writing, like touches on this. And just the ability within the like salon project that we created, which we wanted to make a, kinda like a sort of structured hangout, like it was a show and it was a gig, but we wanted authentic connections to form and my like the thing that gives me real joy is when I hear about people who may be connected with each other through these projects, who then went on to have a Zoom coffee or made a project together. Kind of these things creating connections that then go on in the real world, honestly.

[00:26:07] **Sian Docksey:** Yeah, I used to be a publicist, so honestly I'm just happy when that happens. Yay, people have spontaneously gone on to make cool stuff together. Very happy that we facilitated this in some way. But yeah, I think for me there was a kind of weird sense of relief of oh my God, this is.

[00:26:23] **Sian Docksey:** It's not just me, there's like people who are Yeah, just really going all in on these ideas and as Daksha expressed a lot better than me, artists are researchers as well, like a lot of comedians are real nerds as well. Like we basically just want to, we just wanna talk uninterrupted about our incredibly like public interest for a long time. And yeah, it was very cool to start seeing those connections. Also a lot of academics are performers and artists as well. Like many people have a very integrated, like creative practice as well as a research practice. So it's all kind of like soupy. But yeah, I think just to wrap things that for me came out of the process of doing this creative fellowship with arts culture, University of Exeter, and then, I then went on to do an artist residency with Ina and a bit more of an expanded team on similar subjects. The research is called Queer Natures. It was rad. It's one of the most positive experiences I've ever had, and I genuinely wish that every artist could like access that kind of experience 'cause it was so like, enriching and cool for me.

[00:27:31] **Sian Docksey:** And yeah, it was alien to me to not have to create deliverables, but see those conversations and that dialogue and like the process of creating in and of itself as inherently valuable. And the weird irony of that is that sometimes you end up making better finished things. Because that pressure isn't there.

[00:27:48] **Sarah McLusky:** It looked like Daksha, you were nodding along there when Sian was talking about how sometimes when the pressure's off, you actually feel like you can get better outcomes.

[00:28:00] **Daksha Patel:** Yeah, that's definitely the case because you start through, through your artistic process, you start messing around with materials and just asking, what if I did this? For instance I was asked to, to run some workshops King's College with their language students. And at first I was language, art, where do I start with this?

[00:28:23] **Daksha Patel:** And I started with just materials and, developed something which was very much about embodied learning. So for, if you're learning languages, it's often desk based, sitting in front of a screen often. Yeah. Or just you very much with a tutor in front, student sitting back that kind of very rigid structure.

[00:28:44] **Daksha Patel:** So I knew, I thought how can we turn that on its head? So one of the first questions I asked myself was, where does language experienced in the body? We think of speech as located in the larynx or in the lungs, or maybe in the brains. But I was wondering if certain words can trigger sensations in other parts of the body. So I asked students which words, and they were working with three or four different languages, got them to identify these words, quite emotive, powerful words, love, hate, fear. Also sensations cold. And got them to say them out loud and, with their eyes closed.

[00:29:22] **Daksha Patel:** And at one point we, had these huge sheets of paper. Students lay down on top of them and somebody drew an outline of their body and then we pinned those on the walls and then saying those words out loud, drawing words rather than writing them. So we are using crumbly pastel that made a mess everywhere and they could choose their colors, draw them into where in the body that word you feel.

[00:29:44] **Daksha Patel:** So activities like that really opened up language between the students and opened up discussions. So we asked them to think of phrases in certain languages, which you can't translate, are not readily translated people into other languages and outta those phrases, oh, that was a word. I forget what it was called.

[00:30:06] **Daksha Patel:** It was German, but it was basically one word that explained when you have the house to yourself, when your parents have gone out and when you're a young person, you've got the house to yourself, the freedom. And so then we talked about the social cultural context of those words, and so it opened up language into a much bigger thing.

[00:30:25] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. It's clear that, it's so much about the people and the process and the way both of you have talked about it, much more than what comes out of it in the end. And I don't know, maybe that is something that would come if you were gonna give advice to people who are maybe thinking about doing their own creative research collaborations, what advice would you give them? Sarah, I'll come to you. You've been quiet for a while. What sorts of advice would you give to universities or individuals thinking about doing something like this?

[00:30:59] **Sarah Campbell:** Yeah, it's really I love, this is my job, right? I get to listen to interesting people doing interesting things. I think that point about when you,

[00:31:08] **Sarah Campbell:** I do think if you focus on the people in the process, the product will look after itself.

[00:31:13] **Sarah Campbell:** There is obviously some worlds where you do need to be thinking about, okay, how's it all gonna come together? But there is so much pressure on getting it right and it really makes me think about the pressure that universities are under, league tables, income generation, and particularly, for your stress levels when you've got a shrinking job market, it's very real, the pressures that universities are under. And that is not a space that is always conducive to, hey, let's play and let's see what happens. Because it, what the na the other side of that coin is not everything you do is gonna work.

[00:31:49] **Sarah Campbell:** If you wanna do something genuinely new, you've gotta try a bunch of stuff and to, you can't be blase about that when there's so much pressure going on. So that kind of effect, I think can end up squeezing out the joy and the curiosity. And actually it is that irony, all the stuff that we really need to get us outta the tight spot that we're in at the moment.

[00:32:12] **Sarah Campbell:** How do you keep pushing back and carving out space for that. And there, there are plenty of, it's not unknown. There are plenty of models, particularly in the business world. Google used, I think it used to have it every member of staff had 20% of their time to follow their own interests and all sorts of great stuff came outta that.

[00:32:31] **Sarah Campbell:** And MIT back in the day had an old building that basically the staff were able to work in whichever way they wanted. And because the building wasn't treated as some precious, designer thing that you weren't allowed to put anything on the walls, they literally cut holes through the floor so that you could make things taller than one storey high.

[00:32:50] **Sarah Campbell:** And all sorts of great innovations came outta that. And it's so important and it can feel perhaps high risk, but I think it's much higher risk to not allow for that and not to encourage that because you're blocking off a really essential route to new thinking and new ways of working and new ideas and you've got so much talent in universities and in the cultural sector and I, I'm a big fan of the sort of gardening metaphor. You've gotta plant a whole bunch of seeds and allow some space and good stuff will come.

[00:33:28] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. See which ones grow, see which ones take root. Yeah. Daksha, what are your thoughts on advice that you would give for somebody thinking about doing something like this?

[00:33:38] **Daksha Patel:** So I think arts and culture in Exeter is already doing this, and it was fantastic to to be part of the fellowship, but I think it's, not everyone does, and I've had to negotiate my way around some of, some residencies. So it's really important to keep things open-ended so that the project evolves organically and is not highly structured. Often they're very short, discreet with lots of structure. We want you to deliver this and what, we want you to do a blog and to do workshops. We want you to do this. And it's too structured. Build in lots of time for the artist and the academic researcher to meet together, ideally in real life and outside of the research institution if possible.

[00:34:23] **Daksha Patel:** So doing field work together or visit the artist's studio, it's really important where you are when you have those conversations as well. If academics have no prior experience of working with artists, it is really important to ensure that they understand that the artist's role is not to illustrate an aspect of their research. It's surprising how often they do think that's the role.

[00:34:48] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, I've definitely seen that. Yeah,

[00:34:52] **Daksha Patel:** And also that the funding shouldn't be directly linked to a specific aspect of research. 'cause that puts so much pressure on both of them. So the funding is really crucial. And for the artist, spend time understanding the research that's going on in the institution.

[00:35:10] **Daksha Patel:** But don't be afraid to ask questions and question assumptions and think outside of their parameters. Take creative risks, explore new methods. And if you can, I try and do this if I can in science institutions make use of their technologies and materials through your own way. So an artist would use a scanner very differently to a scientist.

[00:35:34] **Daksha Patel:** They don't often allow you to get your hands on that, if they do play with it. Yes. And trust in your practice, hold onto it because actually you, you are the sole person in this institution, which has its own hierarchies, its own protocols, its ways of doing things, it's actually quite a vulnerable position. Hold onto your identity.

[00:35:58] **Sarah McLusky:** Excellent advice there, Daksha, and if anybody's got a scanner that they would let you have a go on and I'm sure they can give you a call. Sian, do you have anything that you would add to that?

[00:36:07] **Sian Docksey:** Everything that Daksha said with also the big, just go ahead to, just do it. Just absolutely do it. And I think from the artist side or the researcher side. Just go for it and roll with it. As I said, this collaboration, which kind of came out of nowhere, is one of the most like positive experiences I've ever had. I love the model that arts and culture have at Exeter, and it would be great if that was more widely available or could be discussed.

[00:36:38] **Sian Docksey:** And I really agree with everything Daksha said, but the specific one. I just wanted to reaffirm was creating space for dialogue between the practitioners and the artists to borrow a, like horrible corporate term as well, but there's a lot of value in it, like alignment on what it is that you are trying to achieve or what you've decided to like jettison, like what you've decided, like no, actually this was the initial set of agreements, but in the development we've gone no, no, no, no, no. This is more interesting. You'll discover so much stuff and also it sounds a bit trite, but just remember that everyone in it is a human as well, and yeah, I'm just echoing what Daksha said again, but with artists be aware that we come in with a lot of assumptions and prejudices as well. I think I had an idea that academia was maybe a bit

more like rigid and stable and stuffy. And actually what has been so enriching for me is, has been to connect with researchers who are having a lot of the same challenges that people in all areas of work and life are having. How you cope with chronic burnout as an expectation of structures. I'm very interested in the motherhood penalty at the moment, 'cause in arts it's just game over for people. But I've been reading about how in academia, the motherhood penalty is brutal because we haven't built institutions for caregiving and expectations of like constant availability and overwork, which are true in like business, academia dah, dah, dah, dah.

[00:38:06] **Sian Docksey:** Yeah, really penalize people who have caregiving as part of their life or desires. And yeah, it sounds a bit trite, but it is just this kind of basic, the best thing that has come out of these collaborations for me has been the friendships. And just seeing the sort of tools that we play with are different and maybe the intentions that we have might slightly vary, but I've just found that so many people are interested in very similar things. And I think I was lucky with the salon format because our intention was to like, keep it social and keep it fun, to slightly just ease up on this need to look professional and look polished all the time and just go okay, it's people in a room? Let's assume that we're all just like clever and rad. What are we trying to, what are we trying to do here? But my main thing is to go for it and see what happens. 'cause it was wonderful.

[00:39:00] **Sarah McLusky:** As you know, I like to ask my guests what they would do if they had a magic wand. Would you use your magic wand for one of those things you've spoken about or do you have a different answer?

[00:39:12] **Sian Docksey:** The magic wand I would wave would be robust funding and support for people who I describe as being in the kind of messy middle of their careers, and I'm bang in the middle of it now. As a creative, I'm in this sort of mid space where in terms of my creative practice, there's too much happening to not do this for the foreseeable and as a quote unquote job, but not quite enough that it really works.

[00:39:42] **Sian Docksey:** And that's partly in terms of finance, partly in terms of security and yeah, it's it's a weird one because you feel like you've earned your stripes in a way that like, you know. I've made a short film. I've done a bunch of shows, I've had all these things, but they don't quite translate into enough like income or yeah, just a structure to do this as a main thing.

[00:40:02] **Sian Docksey:** I have to hold down another, like at least part-time or full-time job, or a few, which artists have done for generations. This is not a new problem, but yeah, I, I think that to me it comes down to a bit of a question of value of going okay, this sort of inbetweenie, but maybe everything is inbetweenie. We're all between birth and death, like obviously the span of the middle. But I think, I feel, quite aware of it at the moment because my friendship group and people in my age group especially, but not limited to women, like I'm 36, this is the period where decisions are very real about whether your creative practice can sustain a family or not, or whether it can just sustain your rent.

[00:40:40] **Sian Docksey:** And yeah, there's just a lot of questions on how to build things going forward. I feel like whenever I go home for Christmas, my parents are desperate for me to say I've had my fun, now I'm gonna work in HR, or dah, dah, dah. And instead I'm adamant that I wanna make a pole dancing show about capitalism and continue to teach pole and do all of these bits.

[00:41:02] **Sian Docksey:** And there's just this wave of despair that like, I'm not gonna go into something more stable. But yeah, I think that if I could wave a magic wand, I'm not the first

person to have this idea. There's precedents in Ireland there is more of a like basic income for artists who are maybe like in between residencies or in between jobs or in between projects. Or it would also just look like sick pay and like maternity pay for creatives, or Sarah, what you were describing if you work full-time in another job, workplaces, maybe including universities, like easing up a little bit so people have a bit more time for their own like creative practice.

[00:41:39] **Sian Docksey:** And I do think, I think so much of the strife that people encounter when it comes to the difficulties of sustaining a creative practice or research practice are also linked to, are systemic failures around like care, work and creativity as well. Like those real kinda human contact points.

[00:41:58] **Sian Docksey:** But yeah, my, anyway, maybe it's not even a solution. The magic wand is just a spotlight on this kinda like messy middle. Phase. And I also, I feel like I've had that, like for me, the last artist residency helped me have a bit of a window of breathing space to acknowledge the unsustainability of my creative practice up to that point.

[00:42:18] **Sian Docksey:** Yeah. And equip me with community and tools to verbalize that and start having ideas on okay, what would a more resilient creative practice look like? What tools can I bring from this into areas that I work with? And also just disrupt some of the shame around it. People feeling like it's a personal failure to not have the blueprint on, like, how do I keep going?

[00:42:40] **Sian Docksey:** What do I do next? And go firstly, no, it's not your fault. There's a cost of living crisis and our wages have stagnated, so it's not on you. Don't worry. But yeah. So the magic wand, I guess isn't a solution. It's a torch light. It's going right, this is a thing.

[00:42:53] **Sarah McLusky:** Yep. Ask an artist and you get an, you get an artist's answer.

[00:42:56] **Sian Docksey:** I know. Yeah. What is brevity? I don't know her.

[00:43:00] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Thank you. Okay. Sarah, what would you use your magic wand for?

[00:43:09] **Sarah Campbell:** Yeah, there are so many things. I think what would make the biggest difference and, God I'd love it to happen, is that the arts and humanities stop having to argue for their value.

[00:43:23] **Sarah Campbell:** It's understood across the board that it is a fundamental aspect of human experience. And to cut off a child's education from the opportunity to dance or study drama or pursue a career in literature or like I did loved, loved art history as a kid. Just loved looking at pictures and was able to learn about art history in high school, study at university. Had no idea. No idea what sort of career I could make out of it, but I knew that I was passionate about it and it made me happy. And I just think of a generation of kids who've gone through an education system here where they've been told that if you love that, it's wrong.

[00:44:09] **Sarah Campbell:** And and if your parents can afford it, you will get those music lessons outside of the state curriculum. And it's just so shortsighted and all of the energy that we have to put into trying to justify our existence. If that could all just stop and we could just go, it's important. We're all agreed. Can we just crack on and do really cool stuff now, please? That would change my life.

[00:44:34] **Sarah McLusky:** Sounds like an excellent use of the magic wand. Thanks, Sarah and Daksha, what would you use your magic wand for?

[00:44:40] **Daksha Patel:** Actually to build on what Sarah said, this idea, academic institutions have a kind of, they have to justify the research that's going on in particular way that in some ways can put researchers into straitjackets, where it's very difficult for them to be creative.

[00:45:01] **Daksha Patel:** So if we could radically change how academic institutions worked so that there was a real value upon creativity within them, within how the researchers themselves do their work, that would be amazing because then you would then be bringing in artists to explore those methods. But that's, I can't see that happening.

[00:45:27] **Daksha Patel:** But the key thing at the moment for me is time. Residencies are far too short. I think one to two years should be normal. And it's not just for artists, but I see when I go into institutions, it's how time limited the academics are.

[00:45:42] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah.

[00:45:43] **Daksha Patel:** How much pressure they're under. They're literally running from one meeting to another and it's very hard to be creative or think outside strict parameters when you are under that kind of pressure. So for them to have that freedom as well to be able to engage with artists.

[00:46:01] **Sarah McLusky:** Sounds like an excellent plan. We should think about wrapping up our conversation now. The reason that this, all this conversation all came apart, came about was through some conversations about an event you've got coming up at the University of Exeter. Sarah, I dunno if you want to tell us a little bit more about that event and how people can find out more if they're interested.

[00:46:21] **Sarah Campbell:** Yeah, thank you. Two of my amazing colleagues, Annie Sheen, Programme Manager for Arts and Culture in Cornwall and Naomi Glanville, who's our Arts and Culture Coordinator, have been working together to create a two day event on the 17th and 18th of June called Activating Creativity.

[00:46:39] **Sarah Campbell:** And it's an opportunity for colleagues and peers and other universities who do this kind of work, who do that sort of exciting how you bridge university life and cultural sector. And there are lots of different ways of doing it. And it's a pressurized time and post COVID everything, everything's moving, right?

[00:46:59] **Sarah Campbell:** So how can we come together, learn from each other. And just get a sense of what's going on collectively as a sector ourselves. What are we up to? Because it's always I always enjoy going to conferences and symposia like that. Where you go it's not just me.

[00:47:15] **Sarah Campbell:** So I think what Sian was saying earlier, it's oh, it's so reassuring to know that, there's we're all in the same boat, or I love how they're doing that, I can really, learn from that and I can try a bit of this over here. So we're wanting it to be energizing, inspiring, supportive and spend time together. We'd love to see you if people can come along.

[00:47:32] **Sarah McLusky:** Excellent. We'll put that link in the show notes and people can go and check that out if they're interested.

[00:47:38] **Sarah McLusky:** Daksha, do you have a website or a social media profile you would encourage people to go to if they want to find out more about your work?

[00:47:45] **Daksha Patel:** Oh yeah. I'm on Instagram at Daksha9art and I've got a website which is dakshapatel.co.uk

[00:47:54] **Sarah McLusky:** Excellent. Can go and check that out. And Sian, where could people find out more about your work?

[00:47:59] **Sian Docksey:** So on the gram, I'm on Instagram at SianDocksey, where you can also come take a pole dancing class with me if you are in London. I also have a Patreon, it's patreon.com/siandocksey, where every Sunday I host a writer's meeting, open to creatives of all flavors. It's basically a way of putting writing time in the diary so we have a little chat, do some writing together, and then meet to talk about how everything's going. I have a website, siandocksey.com, and the place I think I'm most active at the moment is my substack newsletter substack.com/siandocksey. So choose your avatar, whatever

[00:48:37] **Sarah McLusky:** Excellent

[00:48:38] **Sian Docksey:** platform is easiest.

[00:48:39] **Sarah McLusky:** We will get all of those links and put them in the show notes.

[00:48:42] **Sarah McLusky:** So it just remains to say thank you so much, all of you for coming along. And yeah, I'm sure when I say about putting things in the show notes, I'm gonna go find lots of nice pictures and videos and things like that as well, so people can find out more about what you do. So thank you so much for sharing your story.

[00:48:57] **Sarah Campbell:** Thank you, Sarah.

[00:48:59] **Sian Docksey:** Yeah, thank you.

[00:49:00] **Sarah McLusky:** Thanks for listening to Research Adjacent. If you're listening in a podcast app, please check you're subscribed and then use the links in the episode description to find full show notes and to follow the podcast on LinkedIn or Instagram. You can also find all the links and other episodes at [www.researchadjacent.com](http://www.researchadjacent.com).

[00:49:18] **Sarah McLusky:** Research Adjacent is presented and produced by Sarah McLusky, and the theme music is by Lemon Music Studios on Pixabay. And you, yes you, get a big gold star for listening right to the end. See you next time.