

SPEAKERS:

Gordon Hall, Kelly Lloyd

Introduction (Kelly Lloyd) 00:35

You're listening to This Thing We Call Art, a podcast about 'the life of being an artist' and 'all the things that do or don't go into supporting the ability' to make art.

I'm your host, Kelly Lloyd, a visual artist, essayist, and educator currently based in the U.K. I've been interviewing people in the arts about their livelihoods since 2017, and today you're going to hear a conversation I had on the 1st of March 2021 with Gordon Hall.

Gordon Hall is an artist based in New York who makes sculptures and performances. Hall has had solo presentations at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, The Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, The Renaissance Society, EMPAC, and Temple Contemporary, and has been in group exhibitions at The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Brooklyn Museum, The Hessel Museum, Art in General, White Columns, Socrates Sculpture Park, among many other venues. Hall's writing and interviews have been published widely, including in *Art Journal*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and *Bomb*, as well as in Walker Art Center's Artist Op-Ed Series, *What About Power? Inquiries Into Contemporary Sculpture* (published by SculptureCenter), and *Documents of Contemporary Art: Queer* (published by Whitechapel and MIT Press.) A volume of Hall's collected essays, interviews, and performance scripts was published by Portland Institute for Contemporary Art in 2019. Hall is Assistant Professor of Sculpture at Vassar College and will be the 2022 resident faculty at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

I met Gordon in 2013 during a studio visit we had right before their lecture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (or S.A.I.C.). Then I interviewed Gordon for *Canon*, an annual publication that the first-year Visual & Critical Studies (or V.C.S.) M.A. students put together; about how Gordon, and I, and several other people had chosen to pursue two master's degrees at the same time at S.A.I.C.; Gordon graduated in 2011 with an M.A. in V.C.S. and M.F.A. in Fiber and Material Studies, while I graduated in 2015 with an M.A. in V.C.S. and M.F.A. in Painting and Drawing. I've reflected often on our conversations, and continued to follow Gordon's work, and was so thankful for this opportunity speak with them again.

Our conversation was 2 and a half hours long, and while I wish I could share it with you in its entirety, today, you'll listen to excerpts from it. I'm going to drop you in at the beginning...

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Kelly Lloyd 02:49

It was really nice to go to your event! When was it, was it yesterday? Saturday.

Gordon Hall 02:57

Saturday.

Kelly Lloyd 02:57

Saturday. Yeah. How do you think it went?

Gordon Hall 03:01

I thought it was really nice. I really didn't know what people were gonna bring. And we planned it, like, I planned it in collaboration with the people from A.I.R. And so they chose half the people, and I chose half the people. So, the people, they chose a couple of them, I've never met them, and I didn't know much about their work. So not only was I surprised by what my people brought, but I also was surprised by what their people brought, and I loved all of it, I thought it was, like, a really nice cross section. And I like the structure for the event. I mean, I like short things, I feel like most long things could be short things, you know? And then especially on Zoom, I just think long things are hard for people. It's really hard to listen.

And then I liked the structure of... it's not like, I'm the artist to present something and then here's these other people analyzing or describing or trying to, like, say what my thing was about. It's more like they're using the thing I made as a point of departure for whatever they wanted to do, which for some of them was read somebody else's writing, and others of them it was something they wrote at a previous time, and then two others, it was something they wrote for the event. So that was also a nice mix of different kinds of reading. And the vibe was really sweet and loving.

I think there's aspects of the conversation around what the pandemic has meant in terms of Feminist issues that I think might have been gestured toward but weren't talked

about explicitly. And I think if I could go back again, I would have given an introduction that was more like, based in the facts, you know? Like, describing just the numbers of what has happened to women and what's happened to women of color and, and just like how this collapsing of work and home has affected people in such uneven ways. But since I didn't really know what anybody was gonna do... [Laughter] and I felt like just presenting my book was sort of like, a lot of effort for me, so that's what I ended up doing. But yeah, it was really sweet, and I thought the, yeah, the general mood among all the speakers was very loving and kind, and as sort of, like, embodied and present as we could be. And then of course, I'm sad because my favorite thing about doing stuff in public is going out afterwards.

Kelly Lloyd 05:51

Yeah. Did you have like a Zoom drink or something afterwards?

Gordon Hall 05:54

No. We like hung out for a minute afterwards after everyone left, and then we were just like peace, and then I celebrated here with my partner instead.

Kelly Lloyd 06:04

Yeah, the debrief is like the most important part of basically anything. So, yeah.

Gordon Hall 06:10

And I didn't really get to know the people, like the women at A.I.R. There's three of them, Roxana, Mindy, and Patti and I wrote a thousand emails with them. I've never met... I've met Roxana once, like, years ago, but the other two I've never even met. So, I don't know, these people really. And that thing where you go out afterwards and eat french fries and drink a martini together, it's like when you actually get to know each other. And so now I feel like, you know, it worked well as a work relationship but the kinds of things that you know, the kinds of conversations that develop, or friendships or like other projects that kind of emerge out of actually getting to know each other didn't happen. And just the fun. Like, I hate going to my own openings, they're not fun for me, but I really like going out after the opening, that is very fun. So now it just feels like none of the fun things happen.

Kelly Lloyd 07:06

Truly. And I'm fine, right...But still...it's just kind of this unfolding thing of all the things that I have lost, or like, all the things that I'm missing are all the things that I don't get to have. And yeah, and it's like, those middle bits that are sometimes, like, the most fulfilling part of it, or the most sustaining part of it, or something. But yeah, how do we, like, facilitate the thing in light of the tools that we have at hand.

Gordon Hall 07:35

Yeah, yeah. Well, it's so funny. It's like, what it boils down to is pictures of sculpture aren't sculpture, and alcohol. [Laughter] Or like being in a loud crowded space together. But you know, then there's these upsides, like, Terri is in Chicago and Nikita is in L.A., Roxana is in Uruguay with her family. And, you know, and so that wouldn't have been able to happen. You know that group of people wouldn't have been able to be live together before. So, I was trying to, yeah, I was hoping ... and especially because the book was trying to find some little sliver of beauty or significance or like deeper meaning in this compromised scenario. So, I've been trying to look on the bright side about it, but I mean, like teaching the whole time, like talking about people's artwork on Zoom is just... unless they're making, not only screen-based art, but screen-based art that's of the kind that you're supposed to watch on your own screen. [Laughter] Which is a very specific slice of production.

Kelly Lloyd 08:42

Where do you teach?

Gordon Hall 08:44

Where don't I teach? Ah, let's see. I've been teaching at S.A.I.C. in the Low-Res program for many years, like, since 2015, or '16, but different degrees of involvement. So, I have students I advise mostly that's what I've been doing. So, I'll have like one or two or three students at a time that I meet with, under normal conditions in person three times over the course of the semester. And then I started teaching an online class there a couple years ago, which is really interesting, because I didn't have the experience I have now with teaching an online class. So, I feel like if I teach it... but it got it got cancelled in the fall this year, because enrollment is... or no in the spring, enrollment is so unpredictable. And then likewise, I had a class at R.I.S.D. that I was supposed to teach online in the Fall, that got canceled. And then I have random students, like, I have one student at Carnegie Mellon

and one student at Lesley University/Tufts. Both MFA students who I am like their out of network advisor.

So yeah, so I had been like doing all of that for years. And... oh, and last year, I had a full-time job for a year. I was at a Fellowship in the Sculpture Department of R.I.S.D. So, it was classes, but also like service, and committees, and grad students. I was commuting back and forth from the city to Providence, and I had this... it was actually very sweet this like, really, really nice lesbian family with two daughters, like, let me stay in their attic (I mean, I paid them rent) [Laughter]. But it was really adorable, they would kind of look after me. Yeah, but I was there half a week. So that was kind of a mixed bag. I mean, the experience teaching was amazing, but I hardly got any of my own stuff done for like a year.

Kelly Lloyd 10:36

Yeah, do you, like, what's the timeline on turning an opportunity like that into like a... you know, like, into a full-time job that lasts for longer than a year or something? Is that something that, like, I don't know, you would hope for immediately afterwards or like several years down the road, or?

Gordon Hall 10:57

This is a big topic, which I'll try not to make our whole conversation about. With the R.I.S.D. job, for example, they do these Fellowships, they're called Provost Fellowships, and they're very good and generous and benefits and all that, but it's nonrenewable. They would have to officially open a search in the Department that I'm in, or in another one that's suitable for me, and then I would apply just like everybody else. The Fellowship I was invited to do, and then I kind of applied by invitation, but it was sort of understood. And that's how adjunct teaching works, it's all just like kind of behind the scenes.

Yeah, I mean, I finished grad school in 2011, and I was assured by everybody in V.C.S. and everywhere else that I was, like, a shoo-in to get any job I wanted, because, you know, not only did I have this M.F.A., but I had this additional Master's degree, and, you know, I wasn't one of the worst people at all. And it's been impossible. There aren't jobs. Like, they are so competitive. Anyway, so it's frustrating. I mean, the job at R.I.S.D. was informative, because I'd never actually taught that much, and I couldn't get any of my own work done. So, then I started thinking maybe I dodged a bullet by not having that right away, because maybe I wouldn't have actually done all the work I've done, which is what I really care about. I'm not trying to be a teacher only; I want to be an artist primarily. But it's

been really frustrating because I can't get financially stable or job stable. I mean, there's more to talk about it too, because I have like, family money and other things. That I have a lot of shame about relying on because I was sure, *sure*, that it would maybe it'd be a crutch for like, the first year, you know, and then I would be fine. And I have not been able to be fine ever, except the year I worked at R.I.S.D...

Kelly Lloyd 13:09

I mean, that sounds really shitty. I'm not surprised. I went through a hiring year at S.A.I.C., and it was really interesting [because] it showed me kind of what some of the super fucked up mechanics of it are. You know, it's like, they want people from the outside. Um, and also, like, I guess I need gallery representation, but also more importantly it, like, doesn't really matter how long you've taught, and if you're a good teacher or not, like what matters are all of these professional things, which like, yeah, sure, okay, maybe that's important. Like to have an active working knowledge of, you know, the field when you're talking to students. But also, like, you should be a decent teacher. Like, you should have a decent track record of like, being a teacher. And that's just not prioritized at all. And so, I feel like I definitely saw my friends for years just chasing after these adjunct jobs where they got like one thing here, you know, just kind of were piecemealed along ... It's just like, really interesting to be like, God, is there any way? Like, is there any way to do this correctly? Actually.

Gordon Hall 14:14

I have so many thoughts about it, I mean... one thing I found, I don't know if comforting is the word, but post-2008 the schools never recovered, there's like 70% fewer tenure track jobs than there were in like 2005. And the well-meaning people who gave me the good advice that it would be easy, it's not that they were trying to mess with me, it's that the world has changed. And college teaching is now like Uber driving, it's like a gig economy. And it's all about these schools that are run like corporations where the President gets like a million and a half dollars a year, and like you don't get health insurance, even if you're teaching like three classes for \$20,000 a year. I mean, it's so awful. And it's systemic, it's part of the stage of Capitalism that we're in.

There's so many things that are wrong with it aside from my own personal frustrations, but you know, having taught at all these different schools, the talk about diversity, inclusion, equity, you know, endless. But then you take this thing, and basically the answer to your

question, 'How does it work out?' is: you stay in the game as an adjunct for like 15 years, supporting yourself some other way, or having some other money, which basically makes it so the people who, like, finally get their good job at 40, it's basically weeded out anyone who actually needed to support themselves. Or like had children or like, supported their family or like any other scenario... it's so frustrating. And then they wonder like, 'Oh, why is our faculty like 95% white?' It's like, because the whole thing is set up to, like, make it so you can't do it without being rich, basically. That is... it's so angering, and obviously, I feel very implicated because my participation has been predicated on having some other money to make it so that I can essentially feel like I'm volunteering, which is what I feel like I'm doing. Also, for my own joy because I like teaching so much. [Laughter]

So, it's very frustrating.... oh! The final thing I was gonna say was, and then the kicker is because I work with grad students so much, they will ask me, like, 'So should I pursue teaching? Like, what should I do when I graduate with my \$100,000 of debt and this degree?' [Laughter] And it's not appropriate, really, for me to ask them about their financial situation. But I essentially want to be like, unless you want to teach for fun, don't pursue this, because you can't. Or, and this is something that I should admit, if you're willing to move to like Indiana maybe, or Boise, Idaho, or somewhere... You know, like, there's other cities which probably wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, but I wasn't at the point ever, where I was, like, willing to do that. For my own happiness and mental health, but also like, when I was single, I was like, well, then I'll just be alone forever because like, how many people who date trans people are gonna live in this random city... And then once I was partnered, like five years ago, up until now, I'm not going to bring him somewhere random because that would ruin his life. So, none of it makes sense to me... I mean, it's real, how much of your own life are you willing to give up for a job? Like, [Laughter] there are lines that are worth not crossing, I think.

Kelly Lloyd 17:47

Yeah. And that's something I'm thinking a lot about in terms of like, because I move around so often, um... And I feel like I move around to take advantage of opportunities. But at a certain point, you're like... seems like not a great gamble. I think that, you know, this question of, like, how is my life and just kind of accumulating accomplishments? And how is it that that's maybe not actually, like, how you live a good life? And also, especially when this accumulation doesn't get you what you want? Like, sure, yeah, maybe like you can struggle for like, you know, a handful of years if, you know, at the other end you're for sure

gonna get like a tenure track position. Or like, that there is going to be several moments in my life where I'm not just struggling for money all the time, you know? Um, yeah, sure, I'd throw, like, a handful of years at that. But like, once, it just kind of seems like this, you know, never ending pit. Yeah, you wonder like, what's worth sacrificing for what? And what are you relying on to work out that you have to kind of be like, you know what, I have to be okay even if this doesn't work out? I don't know. I'm thinking a lot about that, so...

Gordon Hall 19:11

Yeah. God, it's so funny, my instinct right now is to be like, but it'll be okay for you! Like, you'll come back to the States with your PhD from Oxford, and you're gonna be so hire-able, and you're so accomplished, and it's gonna be totally fine. And you're gonna get like a bomb tenure track job. And that is a possibility, I mean, it happens. But yeah, it's kind of like, just... that's Plan A, and then you have to have like, Plan B, C, D, and E.

Kelly Lloyd 19:36

Thank you for telling me that, that's what I want to hear, you know? [Laughter] Um, yeah. Like, what if we just went to school and then our professors were like, 'Listen. Like, find something that you love apart from this, and invest as much in that to make you money as you do in this.'

Gordon Hall 19:56

Yeah, I mean, if I had spent two years after grad school, like learning graphic design, for example, I could have saved myself a lot of trouble. It's so hard though, It's so hard. Like, I have a ton of debt from V.C.S. and from my M.F.A., but I wouldn't trade in my experience of V.C.S. for anything, personally. In terms of the way it helped me, like, develop as a thinker, and as an artist (nobody's paying me to say this, by the way), you know, and ultimately that's what being an artist is to me, it means I am excited living in my own mind forever. My best companion is, like, in the world of my studio. And that... (God, I sound like a fucking credit card) that is priceless. And so, what amount of wreckage of other parts of my life are worth that? Like maybe any. It's a Devil's bargain, like, you shouldn't have to choose like that. But it just feels worth saying that, even if someone had told me like, 'Strategically, this probably won't result in X, Y, and Z outcome. Are you ready for that?' I probably would have been like, sure. And even now, I would still be like, yeah. 'Cause this was the best thing. I don't know, it's complicated, it's really complicated.

I think I'm in a better mood about it, because recently, during the pandemic, my partner and I decided to move upstate, and it's changed everything. Like, I don't feel like I need to get a full-time job anymore, because it's so much cheaper over here, and I have all this studio space, and I can just like, go make art all the time. And now my career is good enough that, like, money comes in from commissions and sales, and this and that, and my little bits of teaching. And I finally am like, I should have done this 1,000 years ago, what was I doing spending like 70% of my money on my rent living in the city? [Laughter] But then also, I met so many people, and I did so many things there, and my life is how it is because I lived there. So, it's hard to say, but I do feel like leaving a really, really expensive place to live is the key to just... and I feel this incredible.... I've even been applying for jobs this year. There's a couple but I just have this feeling like I could take it or leave it.

And the weight lifted off me not just like, oh, I need to make this happen, but the shame of not being able to have what I want, or like failing. I feel freed from it. It's been amazing. I've been like very happy during the pandemic, which is so wrong, but it's taken a lot of the pressure off of the, like, rat race of my life, to just let me be like, what do I want to do? I want to make art. We're going to adopt a kid. You know, and that's what matters. So, I've moved to a different stage about it, so now I'm like, oh, it was fine. But, like, it wasn't fine. It isn't fine. But I feel less angsty about it now, I guess.

Kelly Lloyd 23:05

Just a technical question: so, when you give like a performative lecture/ an experimental lecture/ a performance that is also a lecture, do you, like in your CV do you put it under, like, 'Performance Lectures'?

Gordon Hall 23:21

I don't really like the way it's broken up, and on my website, I haven't really differently, which is just 'Current' and 'Past'. And when I first made the site, which was 10 years ago, now, it was like a revelation to realize that it's all work, and it can all just pile up. Because up until that point, and even still, sometimes I'll be like, well... you know, I'm sure you have this, I am an artist but compared to other artists, I don't make as much work as they do, or have as many shows as they do. And I'm a writer, but compared to other writers, like I haven't written a book, and I don't publish all the time, and I'm not an academic, and I'm basically bad at that too. And I do this curatorial work, but like compared to other people

who do it, it's very scrappy, and infrequent. So basically, I just do a lot of stuff, and I'm bad at all of them. That was the spiral.

I don't really have this anymore, but I had it a lot, especially starting out, you know? Like, feeling like, how am I ever going to get good at any of these things that I'm trying to constantly juggle them all, and then yeah, like strategically balance them out so that not one of them doesn't take... now I wish I had spent less time worrying about what other people perceived that I was doing, but maybe even just in terms of my own time, like there's only so many hours in a week, so what do I want to spend them doing, right? And there were times where it would be like every day, I'd be working on the C.E.L. [Center for Experimental Lectures] And that wasn't really what I want to be doing with all my time. But then over time, yeah, I mean, it's like you said, I just think saying, this is all work. Some of it I think of as like capital A artwork, and others of it, I think of as maybe a more interesting category, which is sort of, yeah, these like interstitial kinds of projects. Or, like I always thought that bands that artists are in, are always like the best bands, because it's not the main thing that they do. When people do things that aren't the main thing they do, they're often freed of all this baggage and pressure and tension, and they can be really great, you know? Which is why I like the whole lecture performance idea because it sort of is and isn't isn't your real work, you know?

But yeah, being able to just say, all of this is what I make, it's all interconnected, it takes slightly different forms, but the central questions are the same, and I can articulate that, and so it doesn't matter, you know? I think that's the better way to think of it. And... I find that other people care less and less. I remember being in grad school and worrying a lot, like I think all V.C.S.ers kind of worried, like, 'Am I an artist or an academic? And do I have to choose?' It felt like it was really a big deal to be like, 'No, I do both!' But it mattered a lot less afterwards, like, what pocket you were gonna put yourself in, because... and because there's such a history of artist/curator/writers, different people doing all kinds of different stuff, and I think it's fine. Yeah. And for me, it keeps life interesting because you don't have to go and do the same thing every single day.

Kelly Lloyd 26:35

Truly. I feel like this is exactly what we talked about in the *Canon* article. And it was really nice to remember that because it was like, oh, maybe this is something that is kind of like a long running part of my art practice, just like talking to people. Wait, so did you get your MFA in Sculpture or Fiber?

Gordon Hall 26:52

Fibers.

Kelly Lloyd 26:53

Fiber. I loved, loved, my degree, like, I love both the Painting Department and V.C.S., and both of them were, like, incredibly useful in very different ways. But it was really fascinating how people policed, like, disciplinary boundaries. So, I'm in a program right now, I'm in a Practice-led Fine Art program. I'm in the Fine Art program, they have a Practice-led track, and they have a Contemporary Art History Theory track...but it's weird, even when you get into a program that, like, is an interdisciplinary program, how people still try to like, understand you through, like, defining your limitations... which are actually their limitations.

But anyways, it was really interesting reading through the *Canon* and knowing that at the time I needed to be told by you, right, that, like, that there are some people out there that like, aren't confused by like, being in this interstitial space. Maybe it's become like a foundational part of my identity in a way, just because, like, it's a reoccurring issue for people.

Gordon Hall 28:09

I think that there's so many aspects of what you just said, and you articulate it really well. I think it's...because on the one hand, it's an institutional situation, which is just that institutions, both academic institutions and in the most examples, museum institutions are structured in a disciplinary way. And so, it's, it just messes things up when you work between them. And it's kind of an interesting thing where... you know, everybody loves interdisciplinarity, kind of as an idea, and so, these programs get kind of hatched, but then the institution can't really support them fully. So, like, you remember, the endless fights at S.A.I.C. with the administration, both just to explain what we did and keep the program open, but also to get us studios, because it couldn't be explained, like, why we need the Art History lounge and the studios. I mean, they're practical things, I kind of like that they're like funny spatial things. But it's one thing to have interest in an interdisciplinary form, and it's quite another to actually support it.

So, another example that I've had many times with museums with the lecture performance form is they want that, they want artists to give performances instead of just talks and whatever. But then when you're like, I need this many dollars, and I need to be able to bring an object in, and I need to not be wearing shoes, and I need... And they're

like, 'Oh no.' Like, 'The registrar doesn't know what to do with that object because is it an artwork or not.' Literally, I mean, it's so funny. Like, 'We don't know whether we should insure that thing, because we don't know whether or not it's an artwork or not.' (That's the point.) Isn't that what you wanted? But you know... or 'Education doesn't have the budget to pay for this, because if it's performance, then it's Curatorial and their commissioning work, so you can't call it a performance, you have to call it a program.' Anyway, it was just so so funny. I mean, funny is one word for it. It's, it's exemplary of the difference between being interested in interdisciplinary forms and actually restructuring things to be able to accommodate them.

I think one really good example is actually what the New Museum has done, and I'm sure there's other examples of this too, but their Education Department is... I mean it's partly because they're so small compared to MoMA and other other big museums. The Education Department is woven into the Curatorial platform. So, the fifth floor is their, like, Educational Gallery. And so, they have artists working on exhibitions that also have all of this Educational component to it. I think that's how Education Departments should work and they don't care. They don't... they're not worried whether it's Curatorial, or Education.

The other aspect of this that I just want to mention, I mean, I think it touches on questions around people's inclinations to want to just know what you are. I mean, it's, like, such a fundamental human problem. And it's one I'm very interested in. Like, reading, like, how do we read people? And why are we so quick to be like, 'You're this! You're this! You're this!' In terms of race in terms of gender in terms of like a million different signifiers. And what would it be like to just not know? Or kind of tell, but not care, you know? And to let, or at least to let the period of time in which you're not sure last longer.

And they feel very interconnected, like these questions of like, 'Are you an Artist or an Academic?' is very similar to all kinds of other questions of reading. And honestly, I think it has to do with laziness. Or a nicer term is just, the amount of additional, not just mental energy, but the kind of practice it takes to really inhabit that space of accommodating in-betweenness. Or just kind of delaying of making a solid read. It's just it's a lot of energy to cultivate that. Like, you're really changing how your vision is working, you know? How your perceptual faculties are working, and that's hard. You can't just like decide to do it one day. As hard as reorganizing huge, huge institutions; so all the offices have to get collapsed, and everybody gets hired and fired and it all gets moved, right? Like, it's hard, you know? So that's my sympathetic take on it. Which is, rarely do I meet people for whom the intention to not support this kind of work, or these different forms of reading, where the intention isn't

there, but the actual work you have to do to back up the intention is a lot more complicated and it involves other things no longer being supported, which nobody wants to do that, you know? Especially if something is very established and old and has value. So...

I think it's a fight that's worth fighting, but it's quite complicated. And, you know, things that are easy to do get done quickly, and things that are hard to do take a long time. Or never happen.

Kelly Lloyd 33:39

Yeah, in terms of reorganizing institutions, right, so, it's quite interesting that I'm also at Oxford at this particular point in time, because of course, they're having all these conversations about race. And, you know, and it's just so interesting to be there for the perpetual conversation where they're like, 'We don't know what to do. What should we do?' And then it's like, yeah, you know what you have to do, you're just unwilling to do it. And so, like, you're dragging us in, and then half-listening to us.

Gordon Hall 34:07

Yeah. That's a perfect example. Like, invite people in, because you want to diversify but then you're not actually willing to restructure things to support them, so, they have a shitty experience. I mean it's just, perfect example.

Kelly Lloyd 34:22

Yeah. Like, why is my success riding on a qualification of this institution that I should be working towards the dismantling of? And the institution, like the educational institution being this place where like, yeah, artists maybe go to for some kind of stability, like seems like... it may be it just shouldn't be the, yeah, default career. I guess we're, like, coming full circle. It's just like, are we getting our PhDs just a bit at the end, we can be like, oh, God, this is terrible. Like, can I please just like, set up a small [record] shop in a city that I would want to live in, you know? Um, but...

Gordon Hall 35:01

I mean, I will just interject and say there's a slightly more optimistic way of looking at that, which is, you have the record shop, which is like a perfectly respectable, lovely thing to do with your life. But you also have the depth of knowledge and like the richness of your mind from having done your PhD, and all this community and connections and

conversations you're having. And that's what keeps your life interesting, in addition to your record shop. And that that's actually a pretty awesome life. And the only thing that makes that sound bad is exactly what you're describing, which is this expectation that the only successful outcome from an academic degree is an academic job. And so, if you don't do that, it means you failed in some way.

Whereas actually, when I imagine a world with guaranteed income for everybody, and so money isn't a huge problem for anybody. What do I imagine people spending their time doing? Learning, going to school, doing projects, reading, thinking, talking... like, what do we want to do? Playing soccer... you know, all the stuff that I think keeps life fun and interesting and engaging, you know? In addition to your record store. To me, it sounds really good. It doesn't make the PhD a waste, it's just getting yourself out of ... not you, me too, getting yourself out of the expectation that the only outcome from your degree is to get this job. That makes everything else feel like a failure.

But, I mean, it's hard, you know, it's like, if you want to date somebody, and then they don't want to date you, and then you say, well, I didn't like him anyway. It's obviously crap, because you did and you're disappointed. It's similar with this. We shouldn't lie to ourselves and say, "Well, I never wanted this anyway," because I can't have it. Because you did want it, and you do want it. But you can also have a really good life with Plan B, and, actually, maybe a better life in lots of ways. And of all things like being an artist is one of the few things where you can actually continue to do it in perpetuity. You don't need an institutional affiliation to do it, I mean, helps to have shows and things like that. But even without that stuff, there's actually nothing stopping you from doing it. Whereas if you're like a biologist, and you can't get a job... you don't have a lab, you're not, like, at home doing biology, you know what I mean? [Laughter] I mean maybe, as far as I know...

Kelly Lloyd 37:27

I think maybe that's given me some hope. And I mean, it's the truth.

Gordon Hall 37:32

Yeah. I think about this, when I teach now, because I've been trying to sort of think about like, ethically, if I'm going to keep teaching in these schools, where the students are taking out all this debt to get art degrees, with the knowledge that, I don't know, I'm making this up, but like 85% of them aren't going to become, not just... aren't going to become successful artists, but actually, like, aren't going to keep making art at all, with undergrads

in particular. You know, what is it that I'm teaching them? And is it ethical to do this? I'm not completely sure in terms of the debt question, whether it is or not, but in terms of what you learn, I try to teach in a way where what we learn will be useful if you're going to become an artist, but it's also useful if you're going to, like, start a record store or be a mom, or I don't know, be on the PTA, or being an activist or, you know? Organizing a project, thinking outside the box, working with other people, thinking clearly, like having a process, you know? Asking good questions, revising stuff, like, there's all these skills that are very helpful for being an artist, and they're part of the training to do it, but they're also part of the training to do a lot of other things, maybe almost every other thing. And so, I try to remember that it's not like the school was wasted just because they didn't end up becoming a painter, you know? It's a little bit something I tell myself, but I mostly think it's true. [Laughter]

Kelly Lloyd 39:07

Is there anything that you thought we would talk about that we haven't talked about? Or is there anything that you just like, would want to say? Or any questions you have for me?

Gordon Hall 39:16

Well, I have no idea what we were going to talk about. This is very nice. I feel like a lot of the conversations I have where people are asking me questions, they're asking me a lot about, like, the content of my work. Which I like talking about. But I actually find these kind of conversations sort of around, like, all of the things that do or don't go into supporting the ability to do that work. I find that to be equally, if not more interesting. Because it's really about, like, the life of being an artist or creative person, which is... I mean, it transforms your entire life. Like, you couldn't... it couldn't be... I don't know, what am I trying to say... We, like, decide to be artists, and we're young, we're in school, or whatever. We're like, 'Okay, I'm gonna do this.' And then only in my mid-30s, did I suddenly realize, like, wow, I'm living a life that's quite different than the one I would have been living, or that like other people who didn't choose this are living, You know, it's like a real commitment, and so it's interesting to sort of reflect on that. Not that it's all good, it's just... it makes me be like, oh, yeah, okay, really... And I've made progress on certain things, like there's things I used to be afraid of that I'm not afraid of anymore, now I have new problems. [Laughter] Anyway, it's nice to get to know you. I hope we get to talk more.

Kelly Lloyd 40:49

This is so lovely Gordon. Thank you.

Gordon Hall 40:51

Thank you.

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Epilogue (Kelly Lloyd) 40:59

On the 21st of January, Gordon wrote to me ‘After revisiting this conversation, I must add a few clarifications and updates:

- It was a bit of an exaggeration to say that I couldn’t get ANY of my work done while teaching at RISD. I did a few things, including writing my essay “Why I Don’t Talk About ‘The Body’: A Polemic.” But it really was challenging to find time to work during that period.
- I stand by what I said about the exemplary way the Education and Curatorial areas of The New Museum relate to one another, but there are many less positive things to say about that institution, specifically in relation to labor practices. I encourage everyone to read Dana Kopel’s account of organizing to unionize the New Museum employees in 2019.
- Listening back I’m a bit offended by my use of the word “random” to describe various non-coastal US cities. I really do believe in the existence of vibrant art and culture and queer life in all sorts of places across the US, and have experienced many examples of such places. But my overall point stands that I didn’t feel able to make that choice for the sake of an academic job, especially in relation to being transgender. It just felt too hard to imagine trying to make it work in a smaller city.
- In a bizarre turn of events, in the months between having this conversation with Kelly and its release, I ended up getting and taking a new job - a good tenure track sculpture position in close proximity to our home upstate. I am just starting my second semester, and I can’t even express how amazing it feels to finally have institutional support for my teaching and my art practice. Not just financial support, but also wonderful facilities, colleagues, an actual office, a sculpture shop, research support, and much else. So it seems to have “worked out” (at least for now) but it doesn’t change my position on the structural problems that have created this scarcity of teaching jobs that pay a living wage. And though I worked incredibly hard to get here, I also benefited from a variety of privileges that made it possible for me to

hang in there as an adjunct for a decade before securing this position, which I think speaks to the ways this system has not been able to meaningfully pursue equity and inclusivity.’

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Outro (Kelly Lloyd) 43:11

If you are interested in hearing more excerpts from conversations I’ve had with people in the arts over the years, head over to the website thisthingwecallart.com

This podcast was funded by the Arts Council England, Artquest, the Gane Trust, and TILA Studios. If you would like to help make the next season of this podcast a reality, please consider rating and reviewing this podcast on iTunes, becoming a Patreon member, or donating through the Paypal link on the project’s website.

The episode artwork made by Fiona Reilly, and the theme song was made by Alessandro Moroni. This podcast was produced by me, your host, Kelly Lloyd.

Thanks so much for listening, and tune in next week for my conversation with Nicole Morris.