

SPEAKERS

Kelly Lloyd, Anonymous

Introduction (Kelly Lloyd) 00:36

You're listening to This Thing We Call Art, a podcast about, 'what if [we] said, okay, four times a year we're going to meet, and we're going to look at how things have been going, and what's working, and what's not working, and how we can do it differently. Or what we're going to put in place, so that [we] don't repeat this whole year next year, you know? I'm sure there are some things we can't change, but what can we change? What can we think about differently?'

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 22nd of March 2021 with an artist based in London who would like to remain Anonymous. Thank you to Sandra Gayer who is the voiceover artist for this episode.

Our conversation was an hour 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 01:34

Now that we've started talking about the reality of being an artist being what's hidden, yeah, how do you see this broader understanding of what it means to be an artist, in relationship to what you understand it is to be an artist for you?

Anonymous 01:51

It's hard. It's hard because for us, it's reality, right, and for other people, they see the stars. Or they have this other narrative of the artist rotting in their garret and suffering. But we know from our experience, and the experiences of all of our friends, that there's a definite disjuncture. I think there's lots built around this idea of what success is and looks like. Even if you look at the structure where I teach, you've got the permanent staff, who are the superstars who are not pretty much involved in a lot of the day-to-day actual teaching.

I'm sure some of them have struggled to get there, but maybe some of them haven't, as much. But there's huge inequalities, even within that. And I'm kind of aware, just in terms of time, there's not even an acknowledgement. In the arts and education, if you love what you do, you do it for free. In these times of blended learning, it's like your life doesn't belong to you anymore. I have really felt this the last couple of months. And then equally, when teaching is so full-on, dealing with the stuff that you really want to do. I have this exciting commission and in order to do the two days a week, to go there and collect the materials, I've had to work every weekend. And I kind of feel like I've sacrificed my health and mental health. If I was a full-time artist, I could have had such a different experience. And now, I really need a rest, but I have to work every single day to make this work in time for the deadline, which should be a pleasurable experience as something I've been looking forward to. That's why we do these things, so we can have that. Yeah, actually, I feel really overwhelmed...

So yeah, sort of those kinds of things around the amount of work. Even when something to ourselves seems like, oh, yeah, that's something I really want to do, there is the idea and then there is the reality. The reality for this project has [been] traveling three hours a day to the other side of London and back, just carrying lots of stuff from one place to another, and all of those kinds of things that even we ourselves don't factor in sometimes what doing something will actually involve.

Kelly Lloyd 04:16

I was talking to somebody about artists residency and what artists residences are for. And it's like this artist residency has to be so many things at the same time. If you're working a lot, which most people do, it has to be the time when you actually get to focus on your work, but because you've been working a lot, it also has to be the time when you get to rest. And if you have a family, it has to be your time away from your family. If you're, you know, struggling for money, it has to be the time when for a couple months, you don't have to think about it. So, it's like, am I working for, yeah, these opportunities? Am I working for this residency? But then once I'm in the residency, especially if it's like a month or two months, you just spend the time applying to other residences. It's really quite difficult to try to figure out, when the work actually gets done in relationship to all the work you have to do to position yourself to like, receive opportunities to do the work.

Anonymous 05:16

Yeah, yeah, no, I totally get it. That whole, having time to apply for the things. It is this vicious circle, isn't it? I had a list of things to apply for, but I haven't had time to apply for them. But then, like, suddenly, things started coming to me. I don't know what that is or how long it might happen for. How long I can trust it? So, there's all these things of, constantly evaluating the situation, and being prepared that it might all change. I personally, love residencies and am trying to get them where I can, because it is at least some sort of break where you're not juggling all of these things. And then, you're right, it does give you some time to sort of apply for more things.

But you raise the question of, what do we do it for? And I think that's really interesting. And I think I've been asking myself that. Like, with this commission, because I'm so process-based, suddenly to produce something specific by a certain time is a quite different way for me to think about things. And what do I get from that? At the moment, I'm trying to think, what do I want in terms of this whole career thing. Increasingly I'm thinking I just want to have the work that somehow makes a connection through which more connections are made. Which lead to these relationships and conversations and exchanges that nourish me. And that sometimes lead to a sharing or a show or something. I'm kind of coming to the understanding that that's kind of enough for me.

This idea of success that I thought once is what I might have wanted, I don't know if I want that anymore. Yeah, I think I've become quite disillusioned with what that model is and wanting to be part of it. So, it's finding people who have similar values who allow you to do what you want to do. And it seems like somehow, more things like that are coming to me. Which is a bit of a novelty, you know, not having to apply. But I'll still apply just in case it all disappears.

Kelly Lloyd 07:18

Yeah, exactly. You don't want the full year where it's just empty because you got off the treadmill. I've started thinking a lot about in the pandemic, is how, like, not only have I lost the context for where I would normally put my work, I've also kind of lost the way that I've accumulated material for my work. And, and so then what does it mean to try to operate in this way where like, some of these moments are gone, you know? And I don't know if I can recreate them or create from memory, you know? It's a practice of living it and being in a certain set of behaviors that allow you to think in certain ways and connect with people in certain ways that generate ideas and partnerships and conversation and interaction and,

kind of, noticing. I wanted to ask how the pandemic has shifted or not shifted the way that you make work and the way that you are in community with other people? But, yeah what does it mean to take the time to observe while you're also on this, like, very fast, professional treadmill, where you have, you know, these deadlines, like you said, from your commission that may or may not work with your timeline, and then you also have these teaching obligations that don't necessarily accommodate for the art that you should be making in order to professionally advance, or whatever, in these opportunities?

Anonymous 09:11

In terms of having time to observe that's a really good point. I'm really trying to do that now the teaching has paused for a bit. I was talking about it in this conversation group, actually, about this building up of actual real and digital sources that you're *supposed* to look up, and that you've tagged, and that just keep getting bigger and bigger. And then almost feeling overwhelmed by them, because you never quite get to them, but you really desperately want to because they're all so interesting and relevant. I feel like I need to really think about this treadmill and think about getting off it. I have to think, okay, I've got to make this work, but I want to get back to that point of enjoying it and not getting so caught up in it having to be amazing and this pressure and this deadline. And saying, enjoy it. It will be what it will be in the time that I've got, and just accepting that. Otherwise, what am I doing this for?

So yeah, I think it's good that I'm having this conversation with you right now. Because that's what I need to do. I was in this situation last year, where I was super busy, like crazy. And then the pandemic, and then I got some Arts Council funding, and the summer was amazing just in the studio but with, 'Oh, my God, what's gonna happen next?' At the back of my mind. So, I couldn't properly enjoy it. But I somehow managed to do that until this teaching came up. The other thing I want, apart from the things I described, from this career is having enough stability so that when that quiet summer comes, I can actually properly enjoy it, and be in there and observing and taking time and making things shift, rather than stressing and applying.

I've been saying recently, like the last week with health issues from being over-worked and stressed. If you're single, and if you've been in the pandemic on your own, and if you're really really busy and haven't connected with the people who normally tell you, 'Oh, yeah, you need to do that.' Or you know, 'You've gone out of control, now you need to stop.' Maybe it's a good idea, maybe I'm gonna start enforcing this, to try to every so often

have a conversation with other artists about these things, right? What if you said, okay, four times a year we're going to meet, and we're going to look at how things have been going, and what's working, and what's not working. And how we can do it differently, and what we're going to put in place. So that I don't repeat this whole year, next year, you know? [Laughter] I'm sure there are some things we can't change, but what can we change? What can we think about differently?

Kelly Lloyd 11:38

That sounds like a great idea. I mean, because you need someone to hold you accountable, and you need somebody to remind you, like you said, like, 'You said the same things a year ago.' And like, things, maybe haven't changed in the way you wanted, or they can say to you, like you made this change, and it has made this difference, you need like an outside observer.

I realized very recently how unbalanced my life is. And how I rely too much on my professional accomplishments for my happiness. And how that is clearly inadvisable. I know that I shouldn't do that. But I still do. And this year being so disappointing. And just trying to figure out, yeah, like, what am I doing? What point am I actually trying to get to?

I know, I need to have like some backup plan that I should probably start working on now. Or maybe I'd be happier off the treadmill and maybe that is actually more important than some certain kind of professional accomplishment. Anyways, I feel like I'm having these conversations with people, but if we were physically in the same room [Laughter] then maybe we could all just quit together, once and for all. As opposed to just like, constantly being like, 'This is unacceptable. Like, when will things change?' And, like, if things aren't going to change, like, when are we going to leave, you know?

Anonymous 13:12

I feel a bit like I'm getting off the treadmill, but I'm going to carry on doing what I'm doing. Would you stop doing what you're doing, or would you stop playing the game?

Kelly Lloyd 13:21

Yeah, I mean, I feel like so much of my work is about institutional critique. Like, I really care about institutions, even though I know all of them are super fucked up. Like, I know that, but like I... I believe that they could be better, you know, and I want to work to make them better. Like, this is how they trap you is by... like you said, right, like, educators,

people in the arts, people in the nonprofit fields, like, if you love what you're doing, they don't have to pay you for it. And, like, I'm a good teacher, and I like teaching, but I don't know if I should be a teacher because I don't want to scam these kids out of all their money, and I don't want to put them in institutions that could be openly hostile towards them. I don't know if I have enough time and energy for it. Like, it's exhausting.

Of course, I'm going to continue to do the things that are important to me, but it is really very frustrating, as soon as you put that into some kind of weird, like, professional advancement, like institutional hierarchy. That gets, like, I don't want any of that, you know? But I want to work with students, so do I have to put up with all the bullshit and the paperwork, like, and the not getting the jobs, just so I can, like, do something that I care about?

Anonymous 14:53

It's really tough. I mean, I've been thinking about it a lot, because when I didn't have the work, it was freaky frightening. And then suddenly teaching came in, I was like, oh, my God, it's great! And then it's been so hard. It has taken over my life, and, you know, just assessment and marking, and I hate it. It's horrible. Like, I don't even believe in marking. But the thing that makes it okay somehow is that a lot of the people teaching are in a similar position.

So, you've got the institution, then you've got the students and the people who are teaching who on the whole share your values, and that, for me, makes it doable and, okay. And the fact that as tough as it is, it's really rewarding, and exciting to be with these young people who are full of all of this stuff. And it's like a mutual learning. It's great. I've really enjoyed that part of it, as much as all the other stuff stinks. So, I think that's how I'm squaring at the moment.

But both places are precarious, and yet, ironically, it's the most security I've had in a while. But then I've just started to think well, nothing is secure, you know? I just have to live slightly in the moment, which is kind of what I've done and what I've been trying to practice, and it's not always easy... but like, what is secure? Corner shops are not secure, there are very few things that are. So, I don't know. Firstly, I'm figuring, don't put all your eggs in one basket. So, at least I've got these two things that could screw me over (hopefully they won't both at the same time). And, yeah, I mean, I'm trying not to analyze it too much, because then I'll probably come to the conclusion that it doesn't make sense, and I should stop... and then it's like, well, what the hell do I do then? I don't want the things that people with

ambition want. I don't want more power, a more senior position, or more responsibility. I actually just want to keep it going as it is, so I can do what I want to do. So, it's sort of simple in that respect, it's just I'd like a bit more security.

Kelly Lloyd 17:04

I mean, is that one reason why you like, kept your apartment while you were in graduate school? You know, I thought that was quite an interesting choice, and a sacrifice. Your entire life can't just be like, up in the air at the same time, you know, like you kind of need... It doesn't have to be a house, or it doesn't have to be a partner. It doesn't have to be a job. But you know, one thing staying kind of close to the same thing.

Anonymous 17:34

That's so interesting. Yeah, yeah, you're right, actually, maybe it is the one stability/safety/security, knowing it's there. Yeah, yeah, maybe you're right.

It's really important where everything else is in flux. Do you know, quite often, once a week or maybe once in a while, I come in and I'm like, oh, thank you for this! Like, I really am so grateful to have it because I never believed I would, you know? When I decided to do it, it was such a scary thing, and I was like, I don't even know if this is all gonna land on its head. And every time I'm here, I soak it in. It is my haven. You do, you need one stable thing, you're right. Because that makes all the other uncertainties somehow easier to handle. Yeah. I never thought of it like that.

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Outro (Kelly Lloyd) 18:30

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

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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 Hilary Powell.