



Cultured Conversations

Cultured Conversations is a digital series that delves into the value of the arts and importance of visionary leadership in this time of global uncertainty. In each edition, Gallery Director Kirsten Paisley is joined by a guest whose thoughtful conversation offers listeners motivation, resolution and solace.

In this episode Kirsten Paisley talks to Timothy Giles, the producer of Cultured Conversations.

Kirsten Paisley:

Kia ora, and welcome to Cultured Conversations. My name's Kirsten Paisley. I'm the director at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Today, our producer joins us, Timothy Giles, who has asked, in fact, to interview me about why we have been producing this series right now, at this particular moment. Welcome, Timothy.

Timothy Giles:

Kia ora. And so that is the first question. As I said, you are the busy, some might say, extremely stretched leader, in a time of crisis and charge, of a massively important arts and cultural institution in Aotearoa and Tāmaki Makaurau. Why spend time investing in conversations like this? What's the point?

KP:

Well, I think right now, everything has changed globally, right? And particularly for galleries and museums and cultural producers, artists, practitioners around the world. Here in New Zealand, we're open. We're able to congregate as we are today. Our galleries are open. Our theatres are open. Yet everything is different. What this podcast series has enabled us to do is to bring cultural leaders into a conversation, a public conversation, about giving some language and articulation to the role of arts and culture right now, as governments are recasting budget after budget, policy after policy, on how they are going to ensure that civic life continues in some new form.

TG:

Yeah, civic life is not something I hear talked about much. Two questions: What is civic life? And do you distinguish between arts and culture? Are they the same or are they encompassing different things?

KP:

New Zealand went into lockdown on the 10th of March, for about six weeks. At the end of that period, when the city was reopening again and we were moving through our lockdown levels here in New

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Zealand, there was real genuine concern that people would return to the CBD; people would return to public spaces again, and feel safe in them, right? And thinking about the Auckland Art Gallery, we are – as are the museums and my colleagues, here in the city – responsible for some of the most trusted public brands and places. We're also one of the very few public buildings in the city where people can congregate safely with some space around them. So the ability for the institution or for a gallery to navigate through what it means to return post-pandemic to a city and connect again with others was a really, really critical role. And yet at the same time, we were facing as an industry – and in the tourism sector as well – a massive reduction in revenue, loss of all tourism and tourists to the city; a complete change in our audience demographic is potentially on the horizon line, and the carriage of duty and care was not only to ourselves and our staff and our people, to the community in which we were posited. And it's really, I think, shifted the spotlight on the critical role of a gallery, and a major gallery in a cultural city.

TG:

So I guess two other questions. When I'm listening to these conversations that you have, what should I be listening for? Is there an action I'm meant to take?

KP:

I think what I've been hearing from my guests is the extent to which the arts is impacted, but also impacts all sectors right now. The cultural rights of the citizen and the cultural life of an individual is so critical to how we as human beings navigate through challenge and change. We often talk about the arts in terms of its social impact, its artistic merit, its economic impact, in terms of tourism dollars, GDP, and so on. But actually what we've seen in the Covid era, and what I think has really come through in some of the guests I've interviewed, is that it has a critical function in the well-being of the individual – whatever your sector you're in, whatever challenges this particular crisis has brought upon you. How are you going to navigate through it?

And the voice of an artist and providing platforms for artists right now in public spaces is what we're doing at the Gallery. It's providing some stewardship to the individual as they're working through how to come out again, how to connect again, how to understand job loss or income loss or industry shifts; the changing of family dynamics as a result of people being confined over prolonged periods of time. Where do you go for some stewardship through all of that? I go to the arts.

TG:

A big part of your role is generating funds in order to enable your curators and artists to do what they do, right? Is there a duty of care? Is there a driver for you in terms of trying to find the funds that enable art

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practice, as opposed to just running the Gallery? Do you see yourself having a role for that and in driving some conversation around that, too?

KP:

Oh yeah. It's not just about the institution. This podcast series is not about the Auckland Art Gallery. It's about public policy and it's about influencing decision makers and public opinion to ensure that we can indeed continue to invest in a vibrant arts and cultural sector throughout the next two years. And I think when we first went into lockdown here in New Zealand, the horizon line of this problem was it was in the near view. We're now seeing a much longer-view impact here. So having an active, live and healthy conversation with decision makers and leaders across multiple sectors is really, really important if we're going to get the policies in place that are going to ensure vibrancy across Aotearoa, and also our engagement on the world stage. There are a lot of opportunities in this moment for New Zealand and for artists to be leading, in fact, a cultural response to the crisis. You asked me when we opened the conversation about arts and culture and if they're different and, you know, two sides of the same coin.

In my view, culture is not a slightly expanded view of the arts itself. When we talk about the arts, we are talking about the performing, visual, literary, it can be culinary, plastic arts, filmmaking, and so on. Those kinds of disciplines play into our worldview of what encapsulates the arts. When we're talking about culture, the arts is part of how we express our cultural identities and self, but culture is a much bigger thing. It's about how an individual, a group of people, a community, express who they are at a particular moment in time, in a particular place. And that of course can take the form of many, many different things. We recently had a huge sports match – I don't know if you were there, Giles, I wasn't, but you heard about it here in Auckland: a full stadium, 30,000 people, came together to support that event. It was massive.

TG:

It was the first game back, right. Eden Park was full. Yes. Yeah.

KP:

Yeah. It was a massive expression of the identity of a people coming out of lockdown; a particular place in time. And it was shared, it was a shared cultural event. I see that as almost the epitome of a major cultural event for a community, when you see that shared energy of expression and shared values.

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TG:

Can I say one last thing? I'm so pleased. You talked about having leaders who you've also got engaged in practice, artists and the curator tutorial talent in the conversation. And I think there's an integrity around that of bringing a voice that I don't often get to hear. I can engage with some art, I can go and see a show, but hearing their voice has been important to me, too. It was great – Helen Clark and these various people. Fantastic. But those more specific voices I'm excited about listening to as well. So, thank you.

KP:

Pleasure. Well, thanks for talking to me, Giles. It's not often we get to reflect on the whys of what we're doing. We're so busy in the delivery of it. It's been great working with you and the team here at the Herald Theatre. You've been listening to Cultured Conversations. My name's Kirsten Paisley. Stay connected with our programme online and use the hashtag #culturedconversations.