



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 Andrew Grant, Senior Partner at McKinsey & Company.

Kirsten Paisley:

Kia ora and welcome to Cultured Conversations. I'm Kirsten Paisley, director, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. This is part of a series of conversations we're having with leaders throughout Aotearoa New Zealand about issues facing arts and culture organisations today, here and right across the world. Today I'm joined by a classic Kiwi success story, Andrew Grant. Welcome.

Andrew Grant:

Thank you so much. Kia ora.

KP:

Andrew is of course senior partner at McKinsey & Company, leading the public sector advice department and a whole host of other areas of McKinsey's work with government, public and private sector. You're home now and confronting I guess a whole range of advice between both governments here in New Zealand and also in other parts of the world, but you love Auckland. A Rhodes Scholar who grew up in Onehunga, worlds apart. Tell us about that, Andrew.

AG:

Well, they are, but I went to Onehunga High School, which I just loved. I see myself as a South Auckland boy at heart. It's interesting that, for me, there's actually values and things that I learned at Onehunga High School. The toughest business negotiation I've ever had in my life was on the rugby field at Onehunga High School, so one kind of apprenticeship was actually wonderful in that sense, but also part of my passion for art is because we had some art teachers who were passionate about how art could nurture and nourish the human spirit. And it was not a wealthy school by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, we were mostly at the other end of the spectrum. But we had an art teacher and some principals who got access to a print collection and Onehunga High School probably has the best print collection of any high school in New Zealand, arguably many other institutions. They found a way to make art accessible and interesting to all of us, from the day we arrived as 13-year-olds right to when we left. There was something about these teachers who were passionate about not only art as a profession but just the

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way art could help your spirit soar. The way art could actually be relevant and speak to the issues of the day. I'm incredibly grateful for the gift that was given to me at Onehunga High School. I also think the reason that often Kiwis do well on the international stage is that we're taught an incredible ability to get on with everyone and in everyone to see something wonderful. There's a quote ascribed to Winston Churchill – whether it was one of these things that Winston Churchill actually said or not – but he had a lovely saying: 'There's so much good in the worst of us and so much bad and the best of us that it's hard to know which of us ought to reform the rest of us.' I think Onehunga High School taught me early that there's something magical in everyone. The more you progress, the more you go into leadership learning about art; how do you actually find the magic in everyone and stitch it together in a wonderful way? So going from Onehunga High School to doing reasonably well on the global stage – I actually think they're very interconnected.

KP:

It's amazing, isn't it, how one or two people in a child's early life can have such a legacy in where they ultimately end up going, and the influence they then have in the world as well. Of course, there's a lot going on globally at the moment, following the riots in the United States, and we're starting to rethink how we understand not only our own personal past but our nation's past as well. That brings us to the role of collections in telling the stories of our nation's history, not only to educate the young and inspire the creative mind within the individual but also how we understand our own histories and, of course, the colonial narrative. A tough question, perhaps, but one that's very current right now this week is the review of how we accept or utilise or manage sculptures that celebrate complex and sometimes difficult historical figures. And Cecil Rhodes is of course one of those. What are your thoughts about the idea these statues should be brought down and how might an art museum or an institution navigate the recontextualisation of history?

AG:

I think it's very difficult to generalise because there are some statues of bad people who should have never had statues in the first place—

KP:

And there's also just some bad sculptures!

AG:

—and they should have never had a sculpture, even back then let alone now. So I think that that's one class. Fortunately, there are many great individuals who we've celebrated and I think we have more of

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those than not in New Zealand. There are the Cecil Rhodes, which I think are difficult because Cecil Rhodes was not a good man. But Cecil Rhodes created an extraordinary legacy. And actually, when you look at what he sought to achieve in the legacy, I think there was magic and I think that the legacy has gone on to be even more powerful. If you look at the Rhodes Scholarship today, much more of the funding has not come from the original endowment but from what Rhodes Scholars have gone into. By the way, the Rhodes Trust, I think, has done an outstanding job of it; they've said, 'We had a responsibility before the legacy to create something great.' How do we actually create many more leaders from this part of the world? How do we actually lead that conversation? So it's much more of a look forward. How do we correct and do the right thing? Not, how do we look back? The unfortunate thing, I think, is that these individuals like Cecil Rhodes were bad people who created good legacies. You might argue Andrew Carnegie was not dissimilar in terms of being a bad person who created something great. We wouldn't have libraries, arguably, without Andrew Carnegie. And so it's about making the conversation more three-dimensional. I love the idea that the statue just doesn't become the statue, but perhaps there's a QR code that actually tells the broader story in a digital way and it ends up being a moment to have the bigger conversation. I also don't think you can undo history. History is history; these figures, you can't just rub them out. They did exist. I come back to where I started: for really bad people I think they should go. I think the more challenging conversation concerns the Cecil Rhodes of the world, where it's a mixed conversation.

KP:

It actually goes right to your quote from Winston Churchill, in fact, doesn't it?

AG:

Absolutely.

KP:

There's the polemic that we have to deal with, here, too, in New Zealand as well. The conversations populating the globe – we're all rethinking who it is that we heroicise in public spaces and the function of public spaces in terms of debate.

AG:

Absolutely. The other thing is having a little bit of our humility about our place in history as well. We don't have it all right either, so how will we be viewed in 100 years? Some of our greatest philanthropists today actually destroyed a lot of firms in their corporate world before they became philanthropists. I think their

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philanthropic story is extraordinary; history might have a slightly different view on how they conducted themselves as business leaders. That's why I think it's important there's also humility around our place in time as well. It's not that we're the one perfect generation.

KP:

It's an interesting hook you've thrown me, because of course this is a big issue facing art museum boards. I've been doing a lot of thinking about this, because the Auckland Art Gallery has just established a dedicated advisory committee, with the support of the Regional Facilities Auckland Board, as you know, so it's an exciting time for the Gallery as we establish this important external leadership to support and nurture the institution going forward. But for some of the institutions you've been working with, and there are a lot; you've been working with The Met, with the Louvre, with MoMA – places all over the world and really major, leading institutions, providing advice about how they actually navigate some of the complexities around their constituents that represent and make up their boards and their corporate lives. Can you talk to us a little bit about what your advice has been on this?

AG:

Well, I think we start from a premise that liberal democracy is not having its finest hour. When we look across the world and the traditional places that we've seen as the light on the hill, as it were, for the democratic world, they're not having their finest hour. Great cultural institutions, and more often than not art galleries are at the forefront of that, for me, this is the moment when they actually have to shine. They have to carry more of the weight of what it takes to have a healthy liberal democracy. Maybe they could have been a little more complacent or have more of a back-seat role historically. We need them to be at their best, given they play a very fundamental role in a democracy, but particularly when the other institutions are not having their finest hour. So that's the governing thought: that we actually think your role in society is a much more prominent and a much more critical role than it has been historically. To play that role well, we argue, there are three worlds that you need to manage really well, and more often than not these three worlds have been quite separate. We argue you need to pull them together and make them overlap much more than in the past. One of those worlds is financial stewardship. You need to be able to have financial sustainability, which enables you to be more independent, maybe to your government masters, to your philanthropic masters. We actually think independence and financial independence is quite critical. The second element is curatorial distinctiveness. Sometimes people mix that up with excellence. But those institutions you mentioned, they've all been excellent for many, many years – distinctiveness is slightly different. Essentially, we describe as: What do you really stand for artistically? A lot of the ways in which you operate, you've just been doing that the way you've been doing it for many, many, many years and now, given the global world that we're in and need to be much sharper, around what do you really stand for and do you have the curatorial distinctiveness to really enable you to stand for something? If you were to let me view your collection completely, could I guess what you

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stand for from the collection? Rather than telling me first what you stand for and then having me view the collection. So that's the second piece. The distinctiveness around your curatorial excellence, the bar's gone up on that significantly. The third, and arguably the most important, is what we call relevance. Relevance has a number of a number of dimensions to it. One is: Are you really engaging with society around the issues that matter to them? Climate change, Black Lives Matter, inequality, poverty; I mean, the issues that really matter to a culture today. And secondly, when citizens come through the door, do they actually feel engaged? Do they feel that this has been a great experience? I think another part of it, given we're in COVID, are you starting a little bit citizen back around what you're providing and what you think citizens need for this moment. So, my own bias – I think citizens need optimism at the moment. I think we need a dose of looking at the stars and optimism. Covid's called all of us to reflect a little bit more existentially on what matters in life, on what really is important as citizens, as humans, as husbands, as wives, as partners. Being able to do that, we are nourishing that sort of citizen back, or are we starting more from what we think is interesting as art professionals and moving forward? So that's the third world: Are we really a relevant force in society or are we an elite institution that's become a bit decoupled from society? So those three – financial stewardship, curatorial distinctiveness and societal relevance – we think, are the three critical worlds. But, more importantly, how do you make them overlap?

KP:

I was going to touch on that because you talked at first about privatisation or being financially independent, financial stewardship, but there's also an inference with that of a more complex model. For example, it's common in Australia and also here in New Zealand to see a third-third-third of public, private and self-generated revenue shaping around an institution. For us at Auckland Art Gallery, it's actually even a bit further in terms of private philanthropic funding – we're sitting at around 45 per cent. So there is arguably a question around the privatisation of a public entity. That's one piece. When you then look at the questions around relevance to the broader community, how do you then start to manage the tensions between the philanthropic partners that you're engaging with and the desire to democratise the institution, and see the visitation reflect more with greater equality the make-up of the community generally. That's when you start to get into some tensions, particularly about what the constituents of your board represent in their private activities. We've seen some huge examples of this. So what's your advice there to institutions? When do you sacrifice the dollar for the brand, which is unquestionably focused on equality and access?

AG:

They're fantastic questions and questions that don't have straightforward answers. There are a couple of principles that we have. One is that the tensions are good; the tensions are actually healthy, so embrace the tensions and more often than not the collisions, the creative collisions around those tensions, is where you actually get the innovations and the great ideas.

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KP:

But certainly where you feel you're working hard.

AG:

I think that often people's initial instinct is to manage away the tensions, but I think the tensions are really healthy. The Met, for example, ran into all of these tensions in a big way. I was part of the conversation and I remember one of the workshops that was really quite tense was actually realising that one of the big problems was that we just weren't getting people to the spaces that they could be, and we weren't actually being innovative in the way that we were leveraging. So, the best parties in New York now happen at The Met – at one level, everyone thought that's prostituting this institution but they've actually done it with such professionalism and with such fun and such chutzpah that it's massively enhanced the reputation of The Met. It's now becoming the place where you engage, so it's made it more relevant; it's made it more financially independent. And I'd argue that the curatorial creativity that came to bear in those events has actually had a secondary sort of playback into the way that they curate journeys around The Met more broadly. That's why I'd argue the one kind of growth, the growth mindset of tension, is good. But I also think that the old trade-off world, that these are all trade-offs – I think that's a bad mindset because there are many more ways where we can get the two to act together. By democratising and making something more available; I do think if citizens pay for something, more often than not that's actually quite a good discipline on whether or not you've got a product that citizens want to engage with. Clearly, you don't make it at a price point so that it's not accessible. You want to make it accessible. If we look even to rugby. What we've seen with Aotearoa, they've made it work brilliantly with a different price point that all of a sudden the crowds and the engagement is different. There's many more of those worlds that can overlap and come together; they don't have to be trade-offs. I do have to come back to financial stewardship. For me, not every institution but there are institutions where if you are overly dependent on one philanthropist or one particular public-sector funding, you lose your independence to do what you think is right. I do think this principle of doing what you think is right and being independent is really important. Starting with the citizen and asking what's right for the citizen, how do I best engage the citizen? As a principle, too often the citizen just didn't figure.

KP:

No, it's about managing a PR issue or those kinds of issues. Should an art gallery, in your mind, take a position on social issues in the heat of that moment or is it really through the programme that you're articulating the role of the institution and the need of the citizen?

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AG:

Personally, I don't think that institutions should take strong positions. Unless things are just blatantly obvious, if it's something like Black Lives Matter, about the right side of history you need to be on. I think some conversations that are complicated, like climate change; in New Zealand, climate change is a little bit more straightforward than climate change is in your own country, but it's a tricky conversation. And, therefore, I think an institution should more be a curator of the conversation and making sure the right voices are being heard in a respectful, interesting, provocative way. That's much more interesting than the institution thinks.

KP:

Yeah, and it can also run the risk of looking a little bit tokenistic. For example, a party on a single issue, or an event on a single issue, as opposed to actually actively representing, in our country, Māori curators and artists actively in the programme.

AG:

Absolutely. I also think the conversations you probably should be leading into are by definition complicated and complex. Genetic editing – an incredibly complicated conversation that I think New Zealand will be forced to lean into, but it's rich. What does sustainability really look like going forward? Climate change and all of the inequality; I think inequality is a fundamental conversation for our time. Leaning into those conversations where by definition it's very difficult to have a black and white or a and b. In New Zealand we're very blessed that we've got very rich voices in and around many of those fundamentally critical conversations. This is possibly the parochial Kiwi coming out, who thinks that we have a station in life: I think we've got an opportunity to lead the world in finding a way; can we create some digital platforms and avenues where the conversation that we are having is a conversation that's being reflected globally. In the work that I do, I always come home, and these days I come home virtually, to be really proud about the nature of the conversations that we're having and the way that we're having the conversation vis-à-vis some other parts of the world. I think small nations in general are actually at the forefront of having these conversations in a much better way.

KP:

And we can be. You touched on the digital world, enabling us to amplify a conversation like this one to the world and in a way that people are now wanting to listen and in fact turn towards the south, turn towards New Zealand for its cultural achievements, and particularly right now through Covid. I thought it would be good to talk a bit about programmatic issues in the Covid environment. At the start of the year,

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the Auckland Art Gallery announced five major international exhibitions. It was a new direction: we were wanting to bring international art from the world to New Zealanders who couldn't necessarily travel and make sure that the very best art of the 19th and 20th centuries saw its way to our shores in the first half of this century. So we were on this new programme mandate. That's obviously gone out the window and we've pivoted and taken a very different tack going forward. At the beginning of lockdown, there was a sense that this was a short-term issue. You know, we'll all be back on exhibitions and collections will be travelling the world. Museums and galleries abroad desperately depend on the loan revenues from the touring of their collections. They put them to hard use and you've got small institutions with extraordinary cultural treasures and national treasures that they are no longer able to lend. What's the advice that you've been giving galleries abroad about international programming and the exchange of collections?

AG:

One thing overall, as a philosophy, Covid has been an amplifier and an accelerator of what was going on anyway. And in many respects, when you try to move from what you're doing to the new world, and the boldness of the programme that you were doing was just exceptional in the New Zealand environment. But our view is that more often than not, when you move from the existing to the new, there's always trade-offs around how we're going to cannibalise what we were doing. It's a painful transition. Our advice has been that this is the moment to be bold, because COVID just provided a break and a need to reset. And therefore, a lot of our advice is really view COVID as that amplifier and the accelerator of what was happening anyway; pull forward the future. Because in the end your budget's shot anyway, so trying to make it five per cent better is not going to be. It's going to be 100 per cent worse. The prime minister's got this lovely saying: Build back better. I do think we all have to rebuild. I think we all have a choice: Do we build back better or do we build back what we had? And I think there are too many people in cultural institutions that are yearning for 2019 as opposed to trying to get back to it, as opposed to saying, 'This is the moment let's pull forward 2030.' By the way, I don't say that in a trite way because I know that will also require some pain and some change, but it's worth it, because the future was coming anyway. We're now just on an accelerated path. So that's one bit of advice. The second bit of advice is innovation. The innovation that Covid caused, I don't think people quite realise that months became days in terms of what people were able to just all of a sudden figure out. In the business world, there were just extraordinary examples of incredible agility, of just responding to a new reality. The great cultural institutions of our world are not known for their agility and their ability to have a metabolic rate that works. We now have this saying, which isn't ours, but we talk about Covid speed, and I think we all learned Covid speed when we were in Covid. I think there's now a need to make sure that the innovations that we make stick around. Some of the challenges you raise, it is an unstoppable force against immovable object and normally, how would you resolve that? But I've just been staggered by how people are actually coming up with

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really creative solutions. And another thing. There's a great English publicist G K Chesterton, who had this lovely saying that creativity is finding a great idea and then forgetting where you found it. I think, at the moment, a little bit of utter humility around we will beg, borrow and steal good ideas from anywhere. Some of those names you mentioned aren't known for looking in other places for great ideas. I think we're being confronted because the great ideas are typically coming from fringe institutions, and actually being humble to look in those unexpected places for some of these great innovations to resolve those ideas.

KP:

I've been looking, at times in my own career but also in the 20th century, when we've seen enormous constraints on museums and, amazingly, it was the Second World War when we saw the National Gallery of London, for example, send all its treasures to the regions and then bring one work back at a time, during the blitz, to share with the public. So even that as a concept – one-work masterpiece exhibitions – is something that institutions are looking at; making our own collections work harder, really celebrating digital contemporary practice, sound-based practice, performative practice, which we can get into the country with greater ease than vast crates of our master works collections. You're thinking about different media, which is actually already in step with the way living artists are already working. There's nothing like a constraint to generate creativity. I spend a lot of time in regional Victoria too, and some of the programmes that you see generated out of regional places have the most extraordinary innovation within them, due to the fiscal constraints that people are working in and the tyranny of distance as well.

AG:

Absolutely. One thing I'd also just throw in with Covid: all of us have spent more time with epidemiologists than we probably wanted to at this time but the one little insight that I just think is extraordinary is that the problem with viruses is from a biological perspective. Of any organism on Earth, they have this incredible advantage in that they have enormous surface area for their organisational bulk, so they have a way to have extraordinary reach with very little organisational energy. I actually think there's a real learning in that for institutions around how to build this incredible reach of touch with less energy. We started with a conversation about Onehunga High School. How do we think boldly about getting the collection out there? I've shared ideas in the past about how I'd love to have the collection at the border at the moment. There are now some institutions that are putting their collection in the airports – it's the first experience you have as you enter a country. I'd love to have the collection on the road. I'd love to have the collection digitally. Maybe in lockdown facilities, it could actually be the one sort of positive aspect of New Zealand life. But to your point that Covid's given us an ability to just think differently and boldly around some of those different things, I also think from the perspective of democracy – it's going to demand that institutions have more surface area and have more relevance than they've ever had historically.

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KP:

What a beautiful point to end our conversation today, Andrew. Thanks for joining me today.

AG:

Thank you so much for having me. It's been an absolute pleasure.

KP:

This has been a Cultured Conversation, led by me, Kirsten Paisley, director, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. You can find out more online at aucklandartgallery.com or use our hashtag and keep the conversation about culture going on in our community, because it's so important right now.