

Art Changes People

James: Thanks for downloading or tuning in. This is Curious Public at London Public Library, and this evening we are framing a discussion roughly around a quote, I guess, or a meme on the internet that may or may not be attributed to John Butler, who may or may not have once said, “Art changes people, and people change the world.” To launch from that proposition this evening, I’m joined by three very awesome and interesting people who are involved in art in one capacity or another here in London.

Eugenia Canas co-coordinates the Center for Research on Health Equity and Social Inclusion. She is a Health Information Science PhD Candidate, where she uses critical, participatory and art-based research approaches to understand issues of epistemic justice in the engagement of vulnerable populations.

Tom Cull is the Poet Laureate for the City of London. He grew up in Huron County, and he teaches creative writing and American Studies at the University of Western Ontario. He runs the Thames River Rally, a grassroots environmental group he cofounded with his partner Miriam.

Third, Holly Painter is a spoken word artist, public speaker, certified teacher. She is passionate about sharing her stories, inspiring audiences, and advocating for important causes through poetry.

Thank you to all three of you for being a part of this.

Tom: Good evening.

Eugenia: Thank you for having us.

James: So, let’s begin. Maybe, Eugenia, we can start with you, with a snapshot of how art is a part of your life and what you do.

Eugenia: Reflecting on how I would tell this story, I think I had to go back to being about 9 or 10 years old and making art in some way or another with my grandma and my aunt. I realized it runs in the family, almost like a congenital rash or some sort of ache that needs to be followed. This was in El Salvador actually, but when I moved to Canada it seemed like a career in art or some sort of life that included it was a lot more viable. So I studied visual arts at Western, and then later I worked at the Art Gallery of Ontario writing about art. Then later still I became an art therapist. Looking back on that trajectory, I realize that I was just trying to fit it in, to make it be part of the everyday. I think that that might be a common thread that unites a lot of us who’ve found that medium of expression.

From art therapy I realized also that in order to make it fit into my life more I needed to contribute to the kind of evidence that we have as to the value of art. In particular, I focus in health and mental health. There is so much to be said about the value of art-making to the individual. Unfortunately, our policies and programs are shaped by different kinds of evidence that are more like randomized control trials or scientific experimental type of evidence. So, that’s where I am. I’m trying to push forward the notion that different kinds of knowing through art-making are important. Day to day, it looks like research. It’s not pretty, but hopefully it’s to a good end.

James: When in your bio we mentioned participatory and art-based, could you say a little bit about how that might work for someone who’s maybe outside of the research world? What does art in a participatory research context look like?

Eugenia: Sure. Of course. Participatory research is really on the other end of the spectrum. If you can imagine a scientific survey that is asking people to read questions and tick yes or no on a box, participatory research really goes to the people whose knowledge we're trying to get out, and it involves them in all stages of defining the questions, defining how we're going to get at this knowledge, defining how we're going to share it. And so, within that paradigm, that way of thinking that participatory research yields good knowledge, one excellent tool is any kind of art-making, be it visual, be it spoken word or narrative or music.

I particularly focus on the art-based that's about pen to paper or collage or hands on a medium. It tends to be a very productive generative way of working, because it helps people who maybe haven't had a chance to put things into words to actually share their story and share their experience and have something that they hold in their hands in the end as a document of that process.

James: Tom, when you're walking down a sidewalk, and someone says, "What do you do?" and you say, "I'm a Poet Laureate," and they go, "What is a Poet Laureate?"

Tom: Yeah. Then they generally say, "Well, good for you," and that's the end of the conversation. Yeah. It's been a process of kind of figuring out what I am as a Poet Laureate. My mandate through the London Arts Council is to be an ambassador for the arts in London, and not just literary arts, but all arts. So, I'm asked to write poems for certain functions, and I'll and go and I'll write those poems and participate, or I'll visit schools and talk to people about their poetry, or I have my own office hours where people come and just talk to me about their work. I would say that the thing that I do the most is I go out into the community, and I try to find the people and the groups that are practicing art and somehow use this position to shine the light on what they're doing and give them a platform to showcase their art.

One of the joys of being Poet Laureate is that everyone will start telling you that they are an artist, that they're artists. They're writing a book. They're taking a painting class. It's amazing to see that. I guess I'm interested in how art changes the world, but also how art as a practice of everyday life, right, and how that can kind of interrupt and disrupt the world we live in. I'm always looking, on the outlook for people who are in the arts and doing stuff and want to connect with other people who are doing that.

James: When you say people come out of the woodwork saying, "I'm an artist. I'm working on this. I'm taking this," do you also hear the, "I don't do art. I'm not an artist. That's something that happens in some other realm where there's museums and galleries and people who curate things, and that's just not part of my ..." Do you hear that sense very often from people?

Tom: I hear it all the time, and I hear it from students that I teach in creative writing. They're kind of interested, but they don't think that poetry, for example, is for them. They feel that poetry is something that's cutoff from them, that's only in a select elite people that kind of know the codes and the words can participate in. I love trying to disabuse people of that thought and to kind of try to tear down those walls, and to kind of open those doors and show them that the arts for them as much as for anybody else.

James: I think that very much segues into much of your work, Holly.

Holly: It does. I was thinking that that's one of the most frequent sentences I hear is, "I used to write poetry." That's what that made me think of. I sort of, I wouldn't necessarily say stumbled into my work as an artist, but I was going through school to be a teacher and

had recently moved back to London from Toronto. It was a friend of mine who just happened to invite me to this thing called Poetry Slam and said I might enjoy it.

We're sort of talking about art changing the world and the cliché of saying that art changed my life, but, literally, that invitation to the Poetry Slam did absolutely change my life, because I started going just as a hobby, watching other people use Poetry Slam, use spoken word as a way to share their stories, be creative, speak on things that mattered to them. Sat in the audience for, I think, two years, two and a half years, because I was deathly afraid of public speaking or performing in any sort of way, but it was really just that, I don't know, it was like a gravitational pull just to sort of hearing so many people share stories and thoughts on different things, and sort of reflecting. I had my own stories and things that I wanted to share.

I eventually got up on stage, just performing at the Poetry Slam, and my background in teaching sort of helped. I was supply teaching at the time, and a few teachers that I was supplying for said, "Hey, why don't you teach them about spoken word." That was kind of the stumbling upon my first ever workshops. Now I do it fulltime, and run the London Poetry Slam, and I'm also the National Director for Spoken Word Canada. I think a lot of what I do is in the realm of spoken word, but really, even when I do workshops, I always say, "It's not necessarily about the poetry." I'm not going in to teach youth how to write the perfect poem. It's more about that voice and that expression and getting them to come out of their shell a little bit, try something new. Just to speak on what matters to them. A lot of times it's through poetry that they can really start to find that voice.

James: Towards that end, or towards that aim, when you have the opportunity to stand in front of a classroom of students, or an assembly of students, how do you get that across? What's the secret?

Holly: I don't know if there's a secret. If there was a secret, do you think I would tell you, James? I don't think it's a secret. I think it's a modeling almost. It's just sort of a way to, like one of the very first things I do when I'm speaking to students, whether it's a class, and it's not just students I work with, but one of the first things is just to model that, to sort of say, "I have stories. Here are some of the things that I've written poems about. Some of the things that are maybe a little gritty or a little hard to discuss, a lot vulnerable."

As soon as you mirror that, for a lot of them it's that moment of, "Me too. I have stories. I have things that I could share. I have things that I've been through." Really, it's just that bringing in community and hearing from different people. I think it's not necessarily a secret. It's just a moment of creating space for people to say, "Here's room for your voice. What do you want to do with it in this moment?"

James: I think that's kind of the theme that really is going to tie so many of the threads here. On one hand, I mean, we're kind of coming at art from a research perspective, a civic perspective, an education perspective. We're kind of delving into the pool from different directions, but that idea that you could give someone a piece of paper and say, "Just write down something about your experience as a child or something."

You're probably not going to get very much interesting out of most of us, but in a space, in a context like where art has been summoned, like the Muses have been called from the Heavens or something, all of a sudden people are writing. I just say this from experience too. All of a sudden, you're just spilling your guts on this piece of paper, and that's a remarkable thing.

The premise that art changes people, let's start with that. How have you seen art change people in the things you do? Can we come back to you, Eugenia?

Eugenia: I've had quite a few people share their story with me, or I've been there. You go to a museum, and you encounter a piece of art, and it's not the one you expected. It's that thing in the corner you didn't notice before, and it just takes you. You're looking at it for a long time, and it speaks to you a lot, or you can't tear yourself away. Oftentimes, the majority of the time when people have that experience they talk about, "It kept opening up for me." As in, they kept seeing more and more, and it was both humbling and exhilarating, and they felt like they were sort of making it, in that they could see more.

To me, I think that's the primary way in which art can change you. It's not the content of the art, but it's suddenly igniting in you an ability to see more. I think that that's humbling and exhilarating. It's so cool to know you have it in you to see more. You carry it outside the book of poems or outside the museum. Hopefully, you carry it with you, right? To me, that would be the answer to that.

Tom: Yeah. I think there's the way that we practice art, and it does that, but also the way we receive art, and how it opens us up to other people's perspectives, to other stories that we don't know. I think that's one of the things that I've been thinking about as Poet Laureate is having people share their stories in a kind of civic space, so that we can understand who we are as a city. What are our common goals? How are we trying to work together? How can we understand each other? How can we mend some traumas that are ongoing? Art has the power to do those things.

But art is also just a tool, and we have lots of historical examples of how art has been used to reinforce ideologies that are particularly damaging to the social good. It's interesting thinking about that in that context. I was just thinking about recently in London we had this example of pictures of a police officer dressed in blackface. I think of it, because I study American history. I was thinking about the history of blackface as a form of entertainment in the 19th Century, and people who practiced it considered themselves artists. They would kind of dress up in this way and promulgate very negative stereotypes as a piece of art. It was popular culture in the 19th Century, right?

Having some literacy about that is, I think, really important for us to understand when we something like this happen in the city. I think about art in the way that it can really engage these things that are happening now that are hard to talk about but seem to be coming up perennially in our city. Ways with art that we can begin to kind of bridge, and we can begin to kind of have conversations of understanding and empathy.

James: In the space of going beyond the literal, it opens up that, almost like license to not have to color within the lines, but then with that license can come potential cost and responsibility.

Tom: Absolutely. Yeah.

Eugenia: I think when you go back to this notion of art-making being for everyone, part of the reason why we need to have that is because the making of it allows you to tolerate the ambiguity and some things that are intolerable sometimes. Something could have been of some use, and yet it was also offensive, and it was also doing something bad. It's hard for us to tolerate those dualities, and so we need to practice that through access to art.

James: Holly, how does that play itself out working with younger people? I'll only speak for myself as a young person, I was not known for nuance. I was a rather binary character much of the time.

Holly: I don't know. I think I could go in a couple different direction with what's been said before. For me, through spoken word, I think, even just with poetry sometimes, I sort of come back to that idea of people say, "I used to write poetry." A lot of times it's that permission to be creative. Again, it's that permission. So, some of that comes back to what we were saying around sometimes the change in people through art is so small.

For me, working with youth sometimes, it's students putting up their hands at the end of a workshop and saying, "I wrote more today than I thought I was going to write," or "I wrote about something that I didn't think I needed to talk about." So, sometimes the change can be very small, or it could be a teacher coming up afterwards and saying, "That student who shared a poem today hasn't said anything all semester." Those are certainly, I would say examples of small changes. They're actually huge changes.

There's that piece, but then there is even sort of what Tom was going on with too, around art as, I don't know maybe if it's the right bridge, but using spoken word in my context for advocacy and being able to share stories that should be vulnerable and kept secret almost and kept to ourselves, and then bringing them to a platform where the point is to say it out loud and to say it in front of people and to say it in front of strangers.

There's that, what you were saying around the duality of it, can be really magical, I think. I don't know if that's maybe the best word, but I don't know, maybe it is the best word. It is just magical, where you sort of take something, and for me, with poetry, it's that thought that poetry is something to be quiet, to be held just by ourselves, and when you open it up it can really give you a whole different experience.

James: In the context we've talked about art so far, there seem to be sort of delineating parameters, like this is in this is in this class we will do this thing called art, or in this research study we will now do this thing called art. Let's maybe think for a little bit about art in the public space and how that resonates or doesn't with some of the things we've said already.

I don't know if you saw this story out of Toronto. I just read about it today, but apparently in one of the subway stations they've installed this art installation which is, I think, a bunch of LED characters, kind of along an escalator or something like that. The art installation is commuters, people going through the station, can type words into this little console, and they light up this whole area. Right now, they haven't activated it, because now they're scared that people are going to come along and write things into the console that are racist, defamatory, etc. This idea of art as this place where we could engage in this expression was created, but we haven't turned it on yet, or they haven't turned it on yet in Toronto. How do we navigate that space? What about art invading the common civic space? I'm going to look at Tom on this one.

Tom: I think that London is lucky to have an Arts Council, and an Arts Council is a way that funding can get to artists, and it's given to artists by artists who are vetting artists and thinking about what art should be doing. They're the ones that are qualified to be doing it and thinking about it, and it's arm's length from City Hall. You can get these kinds of works that are, I'm still thinking about this piece that you're just talking about. I mean, that's really in some ways really exciting, but also maybe potentially quite terrifying. Art exists in that space. I think it kind of needs to exist in that space. It needs to do things that disrupt.

I think younger people especially are seeing this world, and they don't like what they see. They're looking for ways to change it and looking for radical ways. I think art is a

pretty big hammer. I like when a city is serious about its artwork, because I think it's really serious about community building and about city building.

James: Holly, when do you a Poetry Slam like on Dundas Street during Nuis Blanche or a festival, and someone just gets up into the mic and goes to town, how does that work?

Holly: Well, that's a good example of our Nuis Blanche Open Mic, just a microphone on the street and saying, "Hey, do you have something to say? Come and say it." Even in schools, I mean, I go into classrooms, and I say to a group of teenagers, "Speak your truth through poetry." A lot of people think, "Don't you hear a lot of inflammatory sort of things?"

There's two things that I thought of in that. One is there has to be a trust in people, that they understand what's happening, that they understand that it's art, that they know that it's public. There has to be some sort of trust to know that most people are not going to jump at that chance to try and dismantle it purposely. I think the other thing is that it lends itself to more conversations. If I'm in a classroom, and there is a student who writes a piece of poetry that maybe does speak to something that ruffles some feathers or something like, it just lends itself to more conversation among their peers, among students and teachers. I never think that that's a bad thing.

I don't think it's art's place to go in and say, "These are the things you must create." If we're asking people to be creative, then we can put barriers on it or boundaries on it, but I don't think then you really get to the heart of some of those conversations that need to be had.

James: In an art therapy context, Eugenia, how does that play between structure and we've got to get wherever we're going, and we don't know where that is? How do those work together?

Eugenia: I think that's very similar to this situation in research, where the holding of the space is a very active and explicit task, and someone is doing it. In an art therapy setting, the art therapist is holding that space and holding it to safety. I think, to some degree, you are getting at this in your classroom too, right? You have certain ground rules. You have safety mechanisms for if something is too triggering to the person who made it, or too triggering to persons that it's being shared with, then there are things that can be done. You can establish what works for you if you get triggered well ahead of time of ever being triggered.

I think when you tell the Toronto example, it's not about applying research ethics to Toronto public art, but it is to learn from such provisions. Rather than trying to check off some words that cannot be input into the system, it's about what happens if those words come up, and who is here to support? Who is here to talk about it some more again? Because, again, as Holly said, generating that discussion and mining it is crucial. That's why you want these methods.

James: The article I read had the Toronto discussion kind of left off of whether or not they should just put a bunch of blacklisted words into the computer. One of the artists, one of the two artists that had created the piece, said something along the lines of that feeling more like North Korea than Toronto. There was the article.

Tom: It's tricky though. I think about the city of Calgary. I think that their public arts program, their Arts Council, was just suspended, because of a public arts piece that ran into trouble. I don't know the specifics around it. Of course, there's a huge budget and lots of artists involved in many projects, and so it is tough territory to work in. You have to be

careful about how you do it. Being careful and producing art sometimes don't feel like they kind of go hand in hand, but I think what Eugenia was just saying, about that duality doesn't necessarily have to be. It's about how you implement supports or how you think around these issues and make that part of the work itself, or part of how you deal with that.

Holly: Absolutely. I was thinking that in terms of the work I do in schools. Sometimes teachers do get a little, I've had response before like, "What if they write poems about self-harm? What if they write poems about sexual assault?" I say, "Well, what if they do? If they do, who do they speak to? Where do they go?" If the reaction is, "Let's just get them to not talk about it," then all of a sudden my back goes up, and I say, "Is that any better than if they do talk about it?" Why are we more okay with the fact that people might stay silent on certain things than putting supports in place for them to be able to do that through art?

I think the interesting thing about that is sometimes art really does allow people to have a voice beyond what they might in a typical conversation, and a lot of times, I know me as a poet, and I'm sure in other mediums as well, there's that moment of surprise almost from the person who's creating the art. To sort of say, "Wow. I didn't know that was inside me, or I didn't know that I had to talk about that." That's a really beautiful moment, and that can be a really groundbreaking and sort of moving forward for a lot of people, so why would we take that away from them? The better idea in my head would be to, again, what you were saying, sort of what are the supports if this does happen?

Tom: Some training.

Holly: Yeah.

Tom: I have the experiences in my classes teaching. Students are stressed. There's a lot of anxiety issues out there, and then they're at an age where there's a lot of things going on, very vulnerable, and if art is where they want to express that. Sometimes I have to talk to colleagues, and I have to talk to superiors, and say, "I'm worried about this case, and I'm not trained to deal with this." We've always found a way, but to say, "All of these topics we're not going to talk about," then you're done before you get out of the stables. That's not going to work.

I've been thinking about this in the public realm as well, because there are open mics, and you can't necessarily control when someone comes up to the mic and starts saying something. I've been at events, at open mics, where that has happened, and it's been a situation that has to be dealt with. I've thought about that too, about probably there should be some more kind of training or thinking about how to work through those things.

James: Maybe this is overly simplistic, but it seems like on one side of the equation we humans love our institutions and our bureaucracies, so the idea of a curriculum or research question where it's very linear, we are going to all check off the box. We're all going to kind of come out of the process with a certain degree of homogeneity, having gone through the thing together. But then you have something like art come along that seems like it deconstructs that a little bit, and it maybe challenges some of the willful blindness that can happen in systems and institutions that have this interest in producing a bunch of carbon copies of more or less similarity at the end.

The example of the role that art and religion have played over the centuries kind of comes to mind, where religion's always required art and creative expression, but it's

always, always is a dangerous word to use. There have been many cases in history where religion has been very vested in controlling said expression. Any thoughts about how, or any thoughts about other ways that religion and the institution, whatever that institution might be, collide?

Eugenia: Do you mean religion or art and the institution colliding?

James: By institution I mean any institution, any human structure that more or less exists and exerts some sort of control.

Eugenia: I think of a funny example. This has to do with the institution of academia, and stuff that comes out of art. In a research project that I was involved in, we were asking young people to talk about their stories of immigrating into Canada, and they were given cameras. A young woman, 14 years old, was given a camera, and she took a picture of five ducks and one swan in the Thames River. She reflected upon that image by saying, "I feel like we're all the same. We might look a little bit different, but we're all ducks." It was a message of unity and self-reflection and recognition of belonging. It was a beautiful message, but it was four ducks and one swan. We knew that as researchers, and she didn't. It didn't matter to her.

I find that a funny example of how academia has a hard time grappling with how art might lead to not knowing or looking like you don't know everything. Because even though that was a great piece of data, this really showed something about our question, we never showed it at conferences. We never talked about it publicly, because we didn't want to be the academic who was saying these are five ducks. I think that that's hilarious. I think it's so telling of how we love being certain. We love being comfortable with what's going to come out at the other end. At least as far as research using art, you have to be comfortable with the risk that things are going to come out that don't go with your agenda. They don't really make you look shiny and great all the time. That's what comes to mind.

James: Which I'm assuming is something that most artists would say, very rarely do you ever just have this idea and then create a thing, and it's exactly what it was supposed to be the first time around?

Holly: If you know how to do that, tell me.

James: Well, there's a secret.

Tom: And not in some way have to also think about its reception, how you're going to be funded, who are your patrons. I mean, this is the ongoing concern of an artist is you have to produce something. That ultimate freedom to produce is very rare to find, because institutions, I think by their very nature, are conservative, a lot of them are. You have to walk a line and try to figure out, "How am I going to try and do the work that I want to do, help the people that I can help, and pay the bills, and at the same time maintain some artistic integrity, or integrity in the work that you want to do?" That balance, I think, is an ongoing tension. Just like you say, that tension between religion and art and the kind of back and forth. I mean, that's just kind of the warp and weft of art, I think, and institutions.

James: The statement that art changes people, and people change the world is positioned in a sense of time and space. There's duration between these things happening. I don't want to get overly philosophical, but this question of art and time I think is really fascinating. We can only create what humans could create right now, given the materials and the resources and the concepts and the ideas that are available to us in this moment in time.

Yet what we create is going to be something that shapes a world that someone creates in down the road.

Tom: I like the way that art is a kind of something thrown forward, right? It is something that you create in the now. I think in some ways the most effective art—I shouldn't say something like that. Generalizing, but art that kind of gets away even from the person who's making it, you know. It doesn't mean that art doesn't engage with political things and doesn't try and change the world, but it's not kind of didactic or closed in that way. I do love the idea that you're talking about. We make it in this time, but then we throw it forward, and we don't know what happens to it when it's thrown forward. It kind of bounces around history and hits things in the future, and people pick it up and use it. We can't know how it will be taken up, but there is something, I think, disruptive about that.

I think that there's something where you're kind of thinking about the now, but also thinking about the now thrown forward. That I find exciting about what art can do. I think that specifically because I think about what does it mean to live in the end times. I think every generation thinks they kind of are living in the end times, but I think we have a heightened sense of it, whether it's about current political situation or thinking about the environment, mostly thinking about the environment, but how do we live in that time? How do we produce art in that time, and what is that art for? I think that those are interesting questions. That did not answer your question.

James: No. I think there's a beautiful made up meta-story in my mind of the person who thought to themselves, "I'm going to create a piece of art that's going to change the world," and did absolutely nothing. You can't direct art to this end that you have for it. When we say art changes people, and people change the world, that changing that art does is, it seems, quite out of control.

Holly: I think it's really interesting, because you can never really know what you've created and the impact it has. When I'm working with young people a lot of times they'll say, "I'm really shy. I don't know if I really want to share this." I always say to them, "Do you think that there's one person in this room who could benefit from listening to what you have to say, in any way that you can think that they may benefit?" Usually the answer is yes, and then usually that person will share what they've created. Then the beauty of it is that you really have no idea then what moves forward from that. You don't know what you've stirred in someone else, and then what they go on to create or what they go on to change. I mean, I think that's some of the beauty of it.

There's no control over it, but I think the creation of art still does give you a sense of control over something. Whether you're speaking about something that's happened to you in the past or speaking about something you hope for in the future, or even just dissecting something you're living currently, it gives you that sense of control in the creation of the art around that thing, but then there is no control in terms of where that goes. I think it's kind of a beautiful mess in that way, I suppose.

James: It's interesting to think about that in terms of the theory of art history to begin with, and when does art become this self-aware thing that we define as art? From someone scribbling the bison on the cave wall, is that art? Is it expression of something? Can we call that art in the same way we have art? I have no answer for that question, other than to just, I think, repeat what you said, Holly. The point is you don't know. You don't know when you're the person scribbling on the cave wall that you're creating that's going to be in some art institution in Paris one day. You just clearly can't know that.

- Tom: From a public arts perspective too, when a culture kind of gets together and decides that they want to commemorate something or memorialize something, they can make, for example, Civil War memorial statues. These are within the realm of public art, and then they've been created, and they're thrown forward into the future. Then cultures have to deal with those pieces of art and think about those pieces of art, and that has generated, of course, so many questions contemporarily, like right now. People are how do we deal with this, these pieces of art that were constructed? What were they constructed for, and then what do we do with them now? Because now they are with us, and we have to kind of reckon with them, as much as we have to reckon with the past that created them.
- Eugenia: I think that to me it's interesting, because it's brings you to examine your context a little bit more explicitly. If you think of a statue of Stalin, maybe that's what you were alluding to. I think of those big dictator statues that fall down, get toppled down. Now, again, you're seeing your context in a completely different light, and you're reexamining what's going on now in very explicit terms. Maybe that's part of the discomfort sometimes, having to articulate our own ambivalences and our own contradictions.
- Holly: Sorry if I can jump in, James. I think it's even interesting, we think of it in that large historical context, but then even to bring it down to the individual. If I am someone who has written a poem when I'm 15, and at 25 I look back at that poem, I might want to topple it over as well or crumple it up or whatever. It gives context, and it can give context to you as an individual and what you have created previously, or it can give context culturally and socially. It's really interesting to see both sides of that.
- James: Tom, when you were speaking I was thinking about like the Robert Lee statues in the States as well, as being very immediate timely. They're these monuments, and they didn't come out of nowhere. They have a past and a history, and someone created them for a reason, in a time, but now they're here. They don't exist back there. They exist here as well.
- Eugenia: If I go back to your quote, James, about art changing people, this is the line of thinking I followed with it. It's very small and personal, but it has to do with when you've taken pen to paper for a long time, and you've drawn something, and you either love it or hate it or both. You kind of learn to pay attention. Years later you may be walking down the street. You're no longer painting, but you see the shadow on the snow, and you think, "What could possibly make that color? What would I have to mix to make that color?" I think that, personally, individually, that's the biggest change that art has made for me in that every once in a while it just clicks on that lens, and it brings me to the present, and it makes me feel so grounded in my world. I mean, over the last two days all this snow that we've dealt with, somehow magically I could feel that I was sculpting something out of all that ice.
- I think that that's tiny, but it's also really revolutionary. Quite often, we might reward ourselves from the snow shoveling and go shopping and be another consumer, or maybe we can feel artistic while we're doing it and somehow be more grounded in our lives and be resisting a lot of pressures of the present day. I think that that's where I get very exciting about how art can change anybody.
- Holly: I love what you said about it can be so, you kept saying small and personal and tiny, but those small, little things, they're not little things. They're huge things. Even the example I gave earlier, if someone stands up and says, "I didn't think I could create that, or I didn't

know that I had to speak about this," that seems like such a tiny thing. It's just a poem, or it's just a reflection, or it's just whatever, but they can be monumental.

Tom: I'm trying to convince people that they should take the time to have those thoughts. To look out a bus window or to walk or to think. I'm going to, of course, slam technology. Cellphones. We're constantly engaged, and we don't turn off in that way that allows us to kind of think in those ways that I think are really important. Just for the way you just said, grounding. I think one of the problems with anxiety is you don't feel grounded. You feel cut up and kind of spinning, the widening gyre. I think that that kind of meditative work that comes with art is why everyone should do it. It's because it gives you this moment, these moments.

It's very hard in our society. Where do we find this time? Because it seems so frivolous. What did you do for the last three hours? "I wrote three lines of poetry." I mean, that just seems like such a decadent thing to do, when I would argue it's quite a disruption of the modes of living that we're constantly under pressure to commodify ourselves through social media in certain kind of ways. We all do it. Make money or be happy, all these kinds of things. I think art really can help break that up and give us space. I hope it can.

Holly: That made me think though. If you say, "What did you do for the last three hours?" and you say, "I wrote five lines of poetry."

Tom: I said three.

Holly: Three lines of poetry. I would struggle maybe to write two lines of poetry right now in three hours. It's so funny, because I keep thinking, and I always come back to that I hear so many people who say, "I used to write poetry." When you're a child or when you're young, you're just creative by nature, and you create all the time. You're drawing, and you're doing all sorts of different things. Then somewhere along the line that creation of art becomes something selfish. If you're a working mum with kids and so many different responsibilities, how could you possibly take two hours for yourself to draw a picture or to write a poem? It becomes this selfish thing.

I think that that's interesting to try and flip that, to say that it's not selfish to create. It's everything we've just been talking about. It's maybe selfish in the moment. It's not even selfish in the moment, but it just lends itself for so many other things beyond ourselves. Somewhere along the line that shifts for us, and we sort of take that creativity or that time that it takes to create as something that we shouldn't be doing, that there's so many other things.

Tom: Or that we can't do.

Holly: Or that we can't do it anymore.

Tom: I'm not an artist. People will say, "I'm not an artist. That's not what I do." But you're a thinker. You're a thinker. I think that thinking and art and creativity, they're all there.

Eugenia: To some degree we've been deprived of this ability or this time and space to develop the tools that connect our thinking to our emotions to the things we produce. It's a concern. There's the question of how do we shape our future with art. Imagine a future where we don't have it, where nobody has the tools to articulate their own truth or know themselves and develop self-hood. I think it's a huge concern. I think that we should always be a little bit on alert that this could happen, and we need to foster it.

James: Maybe in closing I'll be the hypothetical listener to this conversation, and I ask each one of you. I have two hours on Saturday. What should I do with it? What could I do with it? Don't tell me what I have to do, but give me some ideas. What could I do with those two hours on Saturday?

Tom: Walk the river. Go for a walk. Get outside. Take a pad of paper with you if you feel like it, but walk and unplug. Don't listen to music. London, the first thing that I noticed when I came to this city was the river and the pathways along it. You can get out of yourself, and you can get out of the city a little bit. If you open your eyes, it's like you're down at the Forks, and you'll see a deer, or maybe you'll see a muskrat hunting, or maybe you'll see an osprey. Not this time of year. I'm just sharing my own practice. That's what I do. When I lead poetry walks, that's what we do. We go out, and we walk, and then we kind of think about what we say and try to record it. It's very simple, and that's why I like it. I just don't ever think you can go wrong. You'll ever come back thinking, "That was a waste of time. I wish I had updated my Facebook profile."

Holly: I don't know. I think my answer you would have to do something before the two hours on the Saturday. I'm trying to really, even just personally, trying to recapture how to get into that sort of inspired state, that feeling when I'm just super jazzed. I'm so excited about something. I have ideas just bubbling everywhere. I want to create. I don't want to go on social media. I don't want to do my chores. I want to be in this idea creative space. If I can figure out what it is that sparks that, then I would spend the first 15 or 20 minutes of my two hours doing whatever that is. Then spending the rest of the time kind of creating and exploring.

Even just to go on what Tom said, any time you can get out and see something in a different perspective. I think that's a lot of what I do with the work through Spoken Word is you hear different stories, and you start to see people in different ways. You start to think of your own stories in a different way. Any time, if you're a person who drives all the time, like myself, if you can get out and walk, that's a different perspective. Even something I've been thinking about lately, if you see your parents as always your parents, and you never think about what they were like as children. It's all those shifting of perspectives. I don't know that that even really answered your question.

Tom: If you have two hours on a Friday night, go to a Poetry Slam, because that's a lot of fun.

Holly: Thank you for the plug there, Tom.

Tom: It is. It is.

Eugenia: I cannot better that answer. I had thought about someone I know who goes for walks and sees leaves on the ground, and suddenly there's like faces that he makes with them. It's about unplugging, as you said, and seeing things in a different way. I agree fully.

Holly: I think maybe it's about playing. That's what that made me think of. We don't play enough, and we don't be silly. I think that brings it back to what we used to be as children, but also that's what creativity is. It's playing. It's trying new things. It's getting out of our heads a little bit, getting off our screens.

Tom: Having fun.

Holly: Having fun.

James: Thank you, Eugenia, Tom, and Holly, for being part of this conversation.

Holly: Thank you.

Eugenia: Thank you.

Tom: Thank you.

Eugenia: A pleasure.

James: Anybody else have any thoughts or questions to ask our stellar panelists this evening?

[End Audio]