

Transcription

HoGCast Conversations Over A Brew: Michelle and Gary on Art and Work.

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P - Hello and welcome to HoGCast, a.k.a. Conversations Over a Brew. My name is Patrick Fox from Heart of Glass, we are an arts organisation based in St Helens, Merseyside, and broadly speaking, we support artists and communities to go on creative journeys together and make art. HoGCast is a series of intimate recorded conversations exploring the stories of the people we make art with; they're typically recorded in St Helens over a brew. So much goes into the making of a new artwork that you might not ever get to see or experience. So these conversations are a window into the process of making work behind any great artwork, and no matter the art form, there always exists a network of relationships between people and typically lots of tea. This podcast is about the power of listening and conversation and how making art can bring us together and create change.

This podcast was recorded before measures relating to Covid-19 have affected how we interact with one another so it was recorded in person. The themes, however, seem more relevant than ever. In this our second episode, the focus is on art and work. This is a really fascinating conversation between artist Michelle Browne and Gary Connelly. Gary is an ex miner and a bit of an all around local legend and good egg here in St Helens, and Michelle is an interdisciplinary artist who we've had the good fortune of working with over the last number of years. Gary and Michelle have been working together on an upcoming project titled World of Work, which is a new cooperative game, an exploration of labour histories and futures, where the aim is to achieve a collective win. In this broad ranging conversation, they touch on the employment history of Pilkingtons Glass, here in St. Helens, stories of mining, how Gary met his

wife, the changing nature of work, which feels super relevant and is a great listen. So without further ado, I'll shut up and you can enjoy our second HoGCast. Let us know what you think.

G - When did we first meet?

M - Umm.

G - You was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar.

M - [Laughs]

G - That much is true [Laughs] Is that line from a song.

M - Ah if only. We, we, we first met when I was doing the, when I was making the, tour for the Pilkingtons building I think. Which was years ago.

G - That's correct

M - I think that was the first time we met.

G - That's right

M - Um, and for that project I, I. They were putting me in touch people who were kind of connected to um, different kind of ways of working, or people who were working in different sectors and particularly things that had kind of, y'know, industries that had stopped in the town, if I remember correctly.

G - Mmm

M- And, I remember you talking to me a lot about, about being down the mines.

G - Yeah

M - And, kind of what the job was like.

G - Yeah

M - Do you remember that?

G - I certainly do yeah, because I've umm, a fascination with the Pilkington building.

M - Mmm

G - And it's really funny now because I've gone back working with public health, and they have a team within that building now. So to go back there, because that's where, I didn't meet my wife...

M - Yeah

G - ...in that building, but she used to work in that building.

M - Did she?

G - She was um, a PA for one of the, one of the top guys there. And um, I used to pick her up every night from work 'cause I finished earlier than what she did. And, um, I cannot tell you about, how big a employer Pilkingtons was, and especially that building. Because there was no, um, there was no proper computers then. Everything had to be typed up and uh they, yknow. She tells me some stories sometimes about um, they used to have um, uh, a, a, a photocopying room with a photocopying operator. So you would go with a piece of paper and say 'Can I have a thousand copies of that' or

M - Mmm

G - Where now

M - Yeah, yeah, yeah

G - We just do it ourselves don't we. So everything had to be filed, everything had to be typed up manually. So, it's nice to go back in to that building

M - Yeah, that was the, kind of fascinating thing about doing that project was that we got to, like go in through all those parts of the building and the tour kind of brought people through different segments of it. And I guess, within that was kind of trying to also work through this idea about how work has changed over the, over the kind of centuries. Not centuries.

G - [Laughs]

M - But there, in, in St Helens because it's like your classic kind of, y'know industrial revolution town.

G - Absolutely.

M - And then bow, it's kind of in this post...

G - Mhmm

M - ...post industrial process of figuring out what it is

G - That's right yeah

M - Which, and I remember you talking about what it was like to work down the mine and the group of people that you worked with and you described really well to me what it was like to go down the shaft and go in along the kind of the ground level that you were at.

G - The tunnels, yeah.

M - Yeah, and then hit the coal face and you were, you talked really nice, like it was kind of amazing to hear about.

G - Oh thank you

M - So I can't even imagine it!

G - [LAUGHS]

M - Y'know. I remember just going "Jesus, I don't know, I don't if I'd be able for that"

G - Yeah

M - But the comradery sounded really special, y'know

G - Oh, just unbelievable yeah. I mean it's just, um, it's just a unique industry. That really, the skills aren't transferable. You know, everything is very unique about, about working at a colliery. The health and safety conditions that you have to adhere to, and the knowledge that you would, you, you have to have. Because I mean I just. I think the, the Victorians were just an absolutely fabulous um, um, sort of era of engineering. And they of course um, discovered steam engines, in the industrial revolution. And it was amazing that in, in the initial days they used to use wood to fire the steam engines up to provide the power. And of course, they was quickly running out of wood because they was chopping all the tress down. So they had to find another mineral that would produce that steam. And of course that was coal. And they, they found out that they was gonna need it in great quantities, so to find that out they had to go down 2000 feet. Just to give you an example of a coal mine, Blackpool Tower, we've all seen Blackpool Tower. Umm, it's 500 feet tall, a coal mine if 2300 feet deep. They were the equivalent of 5 blackpool towers, and that's where the great resources of coal lay, and St Helens, we had it in abundance.

M - Mmm

G - So we had the knowledge, and, and we had the facilities to get all this coal out. So on the back of that, places like Pilkingtons, well, they came here because they had access to the power, and the sand, that, that is needed to create, to create glass.

M - Mmm

G - That place at Pilkingtons, um, the head office at Pilkingtons, is where a guy called Sir Alistair Pilkington discovered how to make float glass. And float glass is, is windows. In great, great quantities. And he devised this very simplistic approach of oil on water, molten glass producing, y'know, um, hardened glass.

M - Mmm

G - In vast quantities. So not only do I find that is a fabulous building, it's just rich, so rich in heritage. Did you find that when you was working in there?

M - Yeah, I guess umm, yeah I was really spent, like I'd, I was researching kind of how the company worked and kind of like, I'd been to the museum and all that kind of stuff and it's kind of amazing that all that innovation came out of this area. I think

G - Mmm

M - As well. Umm, and because when I would talk to people like I would go home to Ireland and then they'd be like "What are you doing?" and I'd be like "Oh I'm working in this place called He-, St Helens and I'm looking at this company called Pilkingtons" and they were like "Oh yeah, Pilkingtons Glass" and it was like people knew it, um, really well, it was really recognisable. Um, and the thing that I was really, I suppose, then really interested in was just, talking to all the people that worked in, some of the people who worked in the building still, and how they had been connected to the company, and how their relationship to the company had changed over time. Which was really synonymous with the way that work had changed as well, y'know.

G - Massively, yeah.

M - To go from being part of the company to be someone who was kind of hired in by the company. So that happened with the postal staff, and with the deliveries and all of those kind of, um, different services that could be outsourced, basically.

G - That's right

M - Um, and that in, in a way is kind of, I suppose part of, um, I suppose part of what interested me then about kind of thinking further about this idea of work. Or how we work. Or how people work in St Helens. Because obviously there is, there is huge levels of unemployment, um, in the area and kind of, I remember you talking to me about the, the difference between different

people who had worked in the coal mine, and I suppose it's kind of also similar to people who would have worked in that company as well, like, you become very familiar with one thing that you know you're very good at it, but you might not necessarily, like you say, have these transferable skills that will allow you to do something else.

G - That's right.

M - So you, you, I remember you talking about, the different paths that your colleagues went on.

G - Mmm, Massively.

M - And that also being kind of I suppose quite um, interesting to think about, what the kind of, I suppose what are the conditions or what are the things that impact your ability to be employable? And I suppose

G - Mmm

M - That, yeah, you talked about um how, because you had ended up doing accounts, or doing some kind of paperwork as part of the work in the coal mines.

G - That's right

M - That that meant that you had some skills that you could um...

G - ...transfer over, that's right.

M - Yeah!

G - We, the, um, you're right in exactly what you're saying there. And that's why I loved your, y'know, your project so much is because um, life takes you on a certain route sometimes, and to take it off in a different way, perhaps it's got a lot to do with your background, your education, look.

M - Yeah

G - Y'know, and that's what I loved about what you was, what you was trying to do because I'd seen it at the colliery. I'd seen people brought up within 50 yards, 50 metres of the colliery gates, uh, because it had it's village, own village attached to it. And I've seen them, um, have an apprenticeship, y'know, serve their time there, have a, a occupation, and then all of a sudden, it was just whipped away from them. And some people never worked again.

M - Mmm

G - Some people couldn't transfer that skill, or that ability over to anything else.

M: We met again then after the Pilkingtons thing, after that project, then when I was kind of researching for um, what has become *World of Work*. And um, I remember, I was meeting all these people who were kind of doing training courses, or kind of working in different and thinking about how do you get, this idea of getting people work ready.

G - Yeah

M - And um, and I, I, like, it's, it's such an interesting thing because work is changing so much and what people are doing, kind of, how you work, all that stuff is changing.

G - Massively

M - Really rapidly! Yeah.

G - Massively

M - And like, whereas y'know you're talking about that's, that s- like, a systems change from being like, y'know, analogue to digital lets say.

G - That's right.

M - And whereas now we're also working from kind of like ideas around permanency, or um, like even having a fixed place of going to work, it like, it's all turning into this kind of, like, super flexible kind of almost, actually, precarious way of working.

G - Yeah

M - Y'know, um

G - There's one thing we couldn't do at the pit, and that is work from home. [Laughs]

M - Yeah! And that, that's the thing. Because that's one of, one of the um, one of the cards in the game. Um, so in the board game, there's a whole set of cards and they all have different things which impact the workers who are on the board, and you're trying to keep them in work. And one of the cards is like; OK, you have to pick the certain jobs that you think might be able to work from home. And actually there's so many people that can't work from home, but this kind of shift or demand for us to kind of, to not have to provide certain things like a place to work from,

G - That's right.

M - is kind of interesting. Like, I, I, I teach art as well, and I remember um, I remember a guy came in to talk to us, he, he became the interim director of the college that I was, that I work at. And he came in and he was talking to us about how surgeons were learning how to do surgery through videos, and, um, just watching them. And he was kind of like "I wonder why? Could we teach art that way?" I was like "OH MY GOD!" Like, horrified.

G - [Laughs] No.

M - But y'know, just horrified because um, I suppose also for me it's like, I, I'm also really drawn to the experience of meeting people, and understanding people.

G - That's right, yeah.

M - And bringing them in to the way, in, in, bringing them into the process of making things as well.

G - Well that's my question to you now. What was your inspiration behind this, this, this project, this game? What, what triggered it off? Was there a certain moment that you was somewhere and you, and you thought "Bang I wanna do this, this has inspired me?"

M - Well, after I had done the tour in Pilkingtons, it was very clear that that, like it was the start of something y'know. And I was talking to Patrick Fox, who's the Director at Heart of Glass and it was just like, it was, it was clear it wasn't finished, we'd only just kind of scratched the surface of it.

G - Yeah

M - And then as I was doing, like, he basically said "OK we'll do some more, you come over and do some more research" and I met lots of different people and I'd heard um, about this board game that they used in schools to encourage children to be interested in work and it's um, it's like an enterprise game, um, but it, it, like, it's kind of like a standard board game in that you roll dice, and you're moving things around a board and it's competitive, so someone wins basically.

G - Mmm

M - Um, and I was kind of interested in what it was actually teaching the young people and how it related to really what they were going to be confronted with when they went out to try and work. EVEN if they go to college, or even if they finish their, their, um, education in secondary school, like, the kinds of things that they'd be confronted with that they might not even be aware that they're going to be confronted with. And then also, at the same time, um, I was learning about just how the council had been kind of moving more toward this kind of er, er being a logistics hub and this idea of having warehouses on the outskirts and it being this kind of warehousing hub, um, in the, in the North. Um, and, they have a course now, on the, in St Helens college that's like a Logistics course, so you can do certain, you can learn certain things

about it, but they have a board game that teaches also how what you do in a warehouse, how it related to what's going on in the world.

G - Yeah

M - So you're looking at how things get moved around the world and how you're part of a bigger thing.

G - Right. Wow.

M - So it seemed like um, it seemed like a kind of a no brainer to think about it. OK, well how might we think about a board game that would talk about some more of the intricacies? And also thinking about other forms of board games. So again both of those board games were kind of roll the dice, move things around the board. Whereas um, I had just been researching kind of cooperative board games and thinking about how um, actually, y'know, a society only works if we kind of work together y'know.

G - Mmm

M - When everybody is kind of working against each other, it actually means that only certain people win. So we see that now with the fact that the 1% basically own the majority of the wealth and that is also because there is people working against each other rather than with each other.

G - With each other. Mmm.

M - And so it was interesting thinking about how you would form er, a game that would look at that. Um. So yeah it was those kinds of things that kind of made it become very apparent that it was a board game that was needed. Um.

G - Absolutely

M - Yeah, so the process then was just um, working with these design students at the college to look at how you would design a board game. Um, and, thinking about like, what's the process to how you would all build the different elements from it. So, um, yeah, looking at, what are the kind of questions within it and how do we even think about work. So we like talked also a lot about the kinds of jobs that the people that they know do. Or the jobs that they were doing as their part time job and thinking about how those jobs stood in society. Y'know, like. Who has, y'know, a greater level of pride. Who is kind of revered for the jobs that they do.

G - Yeah.

M - Thinking about those kinds of things and actually how they contribute to society.

G - Do you think with your, with your game now, do you think that could inspire people, or?

M - I think like, for me, I'm really interested in just um, having a slightly different conversation about what, how we prepare particularly young people for work, or how we think about work and the fact that, there are so many things that, like, there are controllable things and there are uncontrollable things. There's known things, and then there's the, y'know the unknown, unknowns if you know what I mean. Um. That are going to impact on people's working life and it's kind of like y'know, this notion that like, OK, y'know, you'll go and you study a course and you'll get a job and, it, it does, it no longer kind of follows these linear paths and that like often, y'know. I'm often saying to my students, y'know, like "What do you, what's your whole like, what kind of hobbies do you have?" because you just don't know the way that things come together is no longer just one, one thing. And so I'm interested in kind of, ha-,ha-, y'know having conversations about; OK, we know there's like a climate, y'know we know climate change is here

G - Mmm

M - And on the way. And that's also going to impact the way that we're going to have to work. The way we're going to have to think about how we do everything. So how is that going to impact? Like if we're trying to keep people in employment, how's that actually going to impact the way that people work?

G - Right, right.

M - Yeah, that kind of, just even because that's going to one of the major things, and automation is another one. But then just simple things like, y'know, um, like political things. If you, if you, y'know, live in a country where the far right for example, they y'know, the far right come in to power, or rise then you're going to have more levels of discrimination, which means that if you're from a minority background that might impact your ability to work.

G - Yes, yes.

M - So it's just trying to understand all of the complexities of it. It's kind of like, let's have a slightly more nuanced conversation about what it means to try and work and to keep people in work. Because there are all these different things what impact it, y'know.

G - Mmm, yeah. And what's your feedback been from these students, and from people who's, who's, who's played the game? What's been the feedback?

M - Yeah, for, uh, the feedback's been really interesting. Like, most people kind of really enjoy playing the game because it's y'know, you end up having kind of interesting conversations about

like “Oh right, ok yeah, who’s, who’s the person now who’s gonna be most impacted by y’know, a reduction in disposable income” for example.

G - Mmm

M - Like, OK, so if we now all have way less money, what, who are the people who’s employment’s going to reduce because we’re no longer have extra money in our pockets after we pay all our bills? And it’s like, thinking about those kinds of things. They’re not conversations that you generally have. Um. Or is start to, it’s kind of like nearly future imagining.

G - Mmm

M - Kind of how you might be impacted. I say all that but I also think that you should follow your, that you should really try and follow your, the gut of what, y’know.

G - Absolutely

M - Wh-, wh-, what really excites you, or what really you’re interested in.

G - That’s right.

M - I think that’s really important. Um. But it is important to be aware that these things are out, these things are kind of out there, and they might impact the way that you work and you need to be thinking about them. And particularly for young people, because I think sometimes the, the way that we talk to young people about work is still this idea that you, you work hard and you’ll y’know.

G - [Laughs]

M - It doesn’t, it doesn’t follow. You also have to pay attention to what’s going on in the world

G - Yeah

M - And think about how, what your position in the world is and how, also it relates to politics. How do you relate to what’s going on, because the government policies are going to impact your ability too, to do things and we see that.

G - Mmm

M - Um, we see that through, kind of like cuts, the austerity that we’ve seen in the last 10 or 15 years. Um. Y’know, all of these things. Brexit, like. Y’know. All these things are going to have a huge impact on people’s ability to work, so it’s not just “I’ll work really hard and then I’ll get a job.”

G - Yeah

M - It's all of the stuff you have to consider. And, you know, rather, not in a way that it's supposed to be overwhelming but it's just to start to change the conversation around it I think.

G - Mmm. What a pity we can't predict the future isn't it. [Laughs]

M - Well. And look at us now, like, with the y'know, the coronavirus. Like, that's another thing that, like, nobody saw coming, and we're like, already, y'know the global economy has been hit by it. And that will have a knock on effect in smaller areas. I'm sure.

G - That's right

M - Logistics hubs there will be impacted, because they won't be able to be getting stuff from China, or whatever. Y'know it's all those,

G - Mmm

M - It's the knock on effect.

G - Yeah.

M - Board games are very good

G - But

M - For that kind of that kind of stuff as well.

*NOTE - The Jeremy Deller piece discussed is titled *So Many Ways to Hurt You*