

# Framing *the* Hammer

THE PODCAST  
FROM 4A Arts

## Transcript

### Ep. #117: Justin O'Connor, "Culture Is Not an Industry"

**(00:01)**

GAVIN LODGE: Welcome to another episode of Framing the Hammer, the podcast produced by 4A Arts, American Alliance of Artists and Audiences, where we believe that American arts, culture, design, and craft are basic human rights and powerful tools for a whole and healthy society. We work to change the narrative around American creativity for our society and elected leaders so that the creative economy, put an asterisk there for later in this conversation, is supported at a level commensurate with its impact on the entire American economy. Today, Whitney Christiansen, the 4A Arts Director of Messaging and I are joined by Justin O'Connor, an internationally renowned cultural researcher, writer, and advocate, currently the professor of cultural economy at the University of South Australia and visiting professor at the School of Cultural Management Shanghai Xiaotong University. His resume goes on and on. It is thrilling. We will link it in our show notes. So we are thrilled to have this international superstar of cultural studies with us. Welcome to "Framing the Hammer", Professor Justin O'Connor. Let me start by asking you, what was the pivotal moment in your childhood that set you on the artistic path you're on today.



**(01:22)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Childhood? Ehm...I don't know actually. Wow that's out of the blue. Yes, probably around the age of 16. I wasn't a very good reader. I read comic books which of course don't count. I think at the age of 16 I know. So I think at the age of 16 I was down to do physics, chemistry and maths I think at the high school. I don't know. I went into a bookshop and in a small town where I lived in and bought the first book I could see that wasn't Dickens because that's definitely boring and I bought I bought *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, mainly because I heard the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* So I thought, And I read that and I thought, wow. So I think that was it, really.

**(02:15)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Virginia Woolf, right?

**(02:22)**

GAVIN LODGE: Justin, what piqued your interest in the cultural ecosystem in which you find yourself immersed right now?

**(02:32)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: I'm more definite about that. My PhD work was about French intellectuals. It was about French intellectuals and the people. So it's about a connection they were trying to make with the people, obviously in France, right the way through the 90s and all the way up to Sartre and those kind of people in the 20th century. And so I was lecturing in French politics part -time, first job after university and this was 1992 and the guy next door to me said I believe you're part -time you look a likely lad do you want a job doing some research? Yeah we're doing some research on the culture industry in Greater Manchester and okay so I'd never heard of that before I had from Adorno and Hawkeye you know in the kind of philosophical sense.

And I walked out of the door of the university, kind of with a clipboard, and found, hidden away in all the old factories, the crumbling factories of Manchester, bands, t -shirt makers, club managers, the whole caboodle of Manchester's music life at the end of the 80s, early 90s. And it was like



another city kind of unfolded before me. And it's really that that sent me in this direction.

**(04:02)**

GAVIN LODGE: Fantastic. Thank you for sharing that with us. We have been devouring so very much of your writing. But take it back to some of your earlier writing, which is, can you explain what creative industries are or what the creative economy is?

**(04:22)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Yeah, and in fact, it's in the UK, it's come back with a bit of a vengeance because it's almost 99 % sure that there will be a new Labour government in the next few months, weeks. And it's what people are talking about. So people are talking about it's 1997 all over again, which is when after 18 years of the Conservatives.

**(04:39)**

GAVIN LODGE: Right. Very, very soon.

**(04:52)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Tony Blair, etc. got into power and so people are talking, you know, this is going to be another after 14 years, we're going to have a huge majority. And in 97, Tony Blair had the zeitgeist. He was very much, you know, that on the wave of British popular culture, we fed up with years of conservatives. We're now in power. It's modern, it's brash.

**(05:20)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Tony plays the guitar, Bill played the saxophone across the Atlantic. Yeah, you know. And so it was kind of great. There was a big hurrah that they came back into power and they recognized popular culture. They recognized the power of British culture, fashion, contemporary art, et cetera. And I'd been working for a long time, many of us in the 90s promoting the idea that, you know, culture isn't just art.

**(05:24)**

GAVIN LODGE: Saxophone, yep.



**(05:50)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: They funded art, it's part of everyday life, it's a kind of a business in the sense of people were not getting paid from the government to do it, they were doing it themselves, making a bit of money here, there. And so we call those cultural industries. It's a way of describing that they're businesses as well as culture. And New Labour adopted this, but they kind of changed the name to creative industries.

Infamously and nobody cared cultural creative are you going to go to war about that but gradually we realized there was a difference because looking back now especially after two decades you realize they defined the cultural industries, what they call creative industries, in a certain way and basically it they defined it as a kind of a new economic sector based on creativity, the power of creativity, who's really, who's a kind of major contribution to society was for this growth, the growth in wealth and jobs that it produced.

Again, we'd all been making that point, and as I'm sure you have, we're not just mendicants waiting for handouts. Actually, it is an economy, of course it's an economy, and a lot of people out there, trading, doing deals, you know, all that kind of thing.

What was gradually ironed out of that was the idea that people don't just do it for the money. Of course they want to get paid. They want livelihoods, especially as you get older, you know, you've got kids, whatever. So of course people want to do it as a profession, quite rightly, they want to get paid for it.

But the actual purpose of what they did, their professional vision if you like or professional vocation even and the the overall contribution to society wasn't just its economic weight but what what we've seen with the creative industries and this is my kind of core thing was that it's become an industry it's been seen as an economic sector whose that should be to should justify itself in terms of its impact and that that's how it should be recognised and supported by governments as this particular economic sector.

So that's the idea that creative industries were an industry based on creativity. The creative economy was a kind of a slightly more amorphous version of that, but it's about creativity. And when you begin to look at it,



creativity in this sense doesn't mean that, of course it includes the kind of imaginative energies that we've associated with artists.

But actually, in that definition, creativity means the addition of something new to create economic value in a way that can be captured by intellectual property. It's a very, very reductive kind of definition of what's going on there in art, culture, and popular culture.

**(09:09)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: I want to come back to something you said about the difference between creative industries and what we're considering arts and culture, because there is a lot, especially in the US, you've described how it built in Britain, and the US has a tendency to be about 15, 20 years behind Britain in terms of advocacy, anything in the kind of the human wellbeing realm.

And so for us, COVID was the big catalyst for all of this talk about the creative economy. We really didn't make headway in the US government and funding until we had this sort of emergency on our hands. And it became a situation where NIVA, (the National Independent Venue Association) formed and they went to Congress and they basically said, "If you do not help us, there will be no live music soon." And got some of the Nashville representatives involved in all that.

But what has concerned me since then is that, as I think you're talking about that sort of, it starts to limit the argument or limit the conversation to people who are able to use arts and culture as a job. And if you can't do it professionally and full time, well then there becomes no funding and no public support for doing it as a hobby and just what it brings to our lives.

And so in a way that's kind of become for me a little bit of the definite, the defining line between what makes industry versus what is arts and culture. Arts and culture doesn't necessarily have anything to do with money, but is that true for you? How would you define the difference between creative industries and arts and culture?

**(10:46)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Well, maybe just to go back to the definition of creative industries. At the very beginning, and I've got to emphasize, it



was a name. It is a pure name given by a bunch of policy advisors in the minister's office. And I think I say in the book, but quite literally, and this was told to me by the guy who did it, that they were a new ministry.

The Department of Culture, Media and Sport, they had to get a budget proposal on the Treasury's desk by 9am that morning. So they cobbled together a whole range of economic statistics and somebody said, let's call it creative industries because it sounds better than culture.

Now, it's kind of that's the difference. Creative sounds better than culture. Why? Because culture has some association with elitism, with public funding, you know, taking the government dollar, whereas creative, especially at that time, you know, this is Silicon Valley, .com. Creative is a pulsing kind of startup grassroots transformative energy that's going to change all our lives, which it kind of did, of course. So creative was a mere name change from the beginning.

And so, the only difference in that definition to what had been used before, I'd done mapping documents all the way through the 90s, was they added software. So if you look in the list, they came up with a whole list of things, you know, of performing arts, recorded music, film and screen, television, et cetera, but they added software.

**(12:34)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Mm -hmm. Mm -hmm.

**(12:44)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: They also had computer games, it wasn't that. And software, of course, added something like 46 % to the employment figures. And it continues to do that. So people talk about culture and creative industries. And it's a kind of sleight of hand. Because actually, all the economic work is still being done by software. It still accounts for about 46%.

**(12:55)**

GAVIN LODGE: Right.

**(13:03)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Mm -hmm.



**(13:13)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: It's the fastest growing sector. It's making a lot of money. It's employing. There's good jobs in software, as we know. If you put some advertising on that and if you put some design on that, really something like 60 % of the employment figures are in something that are really quite peripheral to what we understand as culture. And when I say culture, I'm including film and games and...

**(13:32)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Mm -hmm. Mm -hmm.

**(13:42)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: ...and popular music, you know, music included that. It's just that this other thing of designer software being stuck on the end. And when you look at the all the prospectuses for this, you see lots of pictures of bright young things, you know, beautiful dancers and guys in headphones singing on microphones. But in fact, the economic heavy lifting is being done by database developers in a bank, you know, or, you know, software developers.

**(14:09)**

GAVIN LODGE: Is this what you would then refer to in the book as the cultural infrastructure? I mean, this is what you're talking about that has such its tentacles that go way beyond what we think of as arts and culture. Is that what that looks like?

**(14:25)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: No, no it's not. So, no, I mean, so culture, software is a big industry, you know, it's, my argument is that actually that's nothing to do with culture. Of course, the cultural sector uses hardware and software. I mean, here we are, you know, looking at devices and softwares and mics and things, but so does the health sector, so does education, so does...

**(14:31)**

GAVIN LODGE: Sure. Right.



**(14:52)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Financial trading, digital is all pervasive. So software is not part of the cultural sector, and yet all its statistical weight is given to it. So I suppose my basic point first is that creative was used to give a kind of zeitgeist feel to culture, to make it feel like part of this new economy. It was also used to...almost double all the statistics, the economic statistics, that went... Yes, exactly. So that's what the creative industries did. They've kind of altered the trajectory of cultural advocacy. They weren't just saying, look, the cultural sector is a certain economic heft. They were really ramping it up. But they're also saying its real purpose...

**(15:24)**

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah, right. Conveniently, because they were trying to make a political point.

**(15:50)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR:...its real power is in this attaching us to, or giving us a route into a new economy where creativity would power all parts of the economy. Creativity is essential right across the sector. So it became this kind of everything and nothing sector, you know, creativity. What's not creative? Does anybody want to be in a non -creative industry?

You know, so it made, it was rhetorically very strong, you know, we're part with a cutting edge of the next wave of economic growth, etc, etc. On the other hand, as you begin to look at what was happening to the cultural sector, as you've noticed, actually, there are certain things happening here. Wages are going down in many parts of it. What outside of software and outside of the real high end of these kind of big industries, you know, people were more precarious, losing jobs, government work.

They were cutting funding, cities were struggling to keep basic things open. So this is tenders, this is what I call the actually existing cultural industries, what was happening to them, which is a complex question. And yet the ever more kind of bigger balloon of hot air talking about creativity is going to change the world. So that, you know, it's that rhetorical divide. So the cultural sector, as you know, arts and cultural sector.





And I include here people working in the film industry, working in games, who realize this massive disconnect between what's being presented by the advocates of this huge sector. And yet, hang on, my paycheck, I've just been laid off, AI is eating my lunch, et cetera, et cetera. And so that's a part of the issue.

And it also means the government's, whatever money they did give to certain parts of culture and as we'll come onto that in a minute why certain parts of culture do need government investment. Of course governments began to say, well you know either we don't need to give this money or we'll give this money but we really need to be doing it in order to make them more businesslike, push them more and more into that commercial sector, into the creative sector.

**(18:07)**

GAVIN LODGE: Mm -hmm.

**(18:13)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: I want to kind of ask about this, because the concept of public funding, and especially in the United States, just has never had, we've never had a Ministry of Culture or anything like that. And so I blame myself for the bringing up the cultural infrastructure because that I, it's in the book, which we do need to talk about, by the way, at some point, we need to mention your book.

But I pinged it because about a little over a year ago, we were, at 4A Arts kind of creating a new vision and mission statement. And part of our vision, we use the term cultural. I'm not sure if it was cultural infrastructure, but we did use infrastructure and we're referring to the ways that education and public funding and community building and, you know, kind of downtown building construction...

Things like that should support culture and should build towards having all Americans be somewhat engaged in our arts and culture scene. And that's how we kind of refer to it. So my question to you is, what do you mean when you talk about cultural infrastructure? And if it has, you know, to me, that means that there's some sort of public investment that's going to have to be required in there. How would we fund that kind of cultural infrastructure?



**(19:30)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Yeah, so I mean cultural infrastructure, if you're coming out of a cultural policy background, tends to be something a bit more mundane in some ways. It means how many theaters you've got, how many community centers, how many recording studios, or you could be a bit more expansive and talk about venues, you know, small pub venues or cafe venues, whatever, libraries, those kind of things. And as you mentioned before about the pandemic, actually,

**(19:52)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Mm -hmm. Right.

**(20:00)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Something it's begun to be it's begun to feel more important because what cultural infrastructure means is the grounds on which all kinds of cultural activities can take place the foundations that which allows other things to happen.

So I use one of the definitions I've been using is from Deb Chachra who's at I think she's at Princeton somewhere she's a professor of engineering actually, but she says infrastructure is that which nobody takes any notice of it. She says a bit more fluidly than that. It's that that's which is it. Nobody cares about infrastructure. You turn the tap on, you get some water, you go into the metro, you swipe your card and you get on your iPhone and talk to people.

**(20:40)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: It's just there.

**(20:40)**

GAVIN LODGE: Ha ha. It's all just a, it's a means to an end.

**(20:54)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Just go.



**(20:57)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Yes, it's something that... Exactly, until it's not, until it stops. And I think what... So a lot of people suddenly realize the things that have made culture possible, whether that's the artistic life of the community or the industrial, you know, the economic part of culture, that which has made that possible is suddenly problematic.

**(20:58)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Until there's a pothole in the road.

**(21:27)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: And that's come about in many different ways. I've been reading recently about, for instance, the bowling industry in the US being taken over by a big company whose name I can't remember probably quite well. Or what's happening in the gaming sector. You know, massive layoffs. We've all heard about Hollywood and things. So there are problems there. But the main thing is that, especially in the pandemic...

**(21:33)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Hmm. Okay.

**(21:56)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: ...the basic access to things like libraries, to community spaces, to small scale galleries, to art lessons, to small scale festivals, all those things that we kind of take for granted. Also, of course, arts education in schools, kind of relatively accessible public education at the higher levels.

There's a whole range of things, pardon me, there's a whole range of things that underlay all this different cultural activity, whether commercial or not for profit, whatever, holds this thing that underlay this, that began to disappear. So a lot of what we're talking about cultural infrastructure is actually a wake-up call as what is it that allows people to participate in culture?

And that's a very broad question that can mean going to your local library, going to a local cinema even, all the way through to making a living from this or studying it in some way. So, and it's quite clear that this is really an



important part of every community's life. It's an important part of what we consider to be a viable community. You know, instantly, if you move to a place and there's nothing there, it's a dead place, it's unconnected.

And again, in the pandemic, a lot of people found that just like social infrastructure, the cultural infrastructure, once it disappeared, you realize that it's a diminution of our community life.

**(23:38)**

GAVIN LODGE: But everything that you're talking about is the fundamental basis that we see of society and the pure, I don't know, enjoyment of our lives. But I mean, how on earth do we convince legislators that it's worth funding everything that you've just described here that we found we needed so badly when we didn't have it?

**(24:01)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Well, some of the connection, at one end of the connection, is with social infrastructure, which again has come up. And when people talk about social infrastructure, they talk about public parks, for instance, which are also cultural in that way, but they talk about public parks, they talk about access to health services, they talk about access to basic kind of other forms of social support, but they also mean relations of trust.


Spaces of socialization, the connectiveness, the associations of everyday life that make up society outside of the state. You know, Robert Putnam's famous book, *Bowling Alone*, where he talks about how these associations were drying up. This has gone on apace. It's gone on apace. And it's so how almost people are asking, how is society possible?

**(24:46)**

GAVIN LODGE: Yes. Yep.

**(25:00)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: When we're locked in lots of our screens, there's no public spaces to go to, there's very little public support. So the erosion of the social infrastructure and the erosion of the cultural infrastructure is part of that.



So in a way, it's saying something quite fundamental. We cannot live a decent life together in society, if we don't have some essential social and cultural infrastructure in place. And I know the cultural aspect of that, most people would agree to the social aspect. What you would do with that, who pays for that, of course, that's a big issue at the moment. But what I'm saying is we've got to make the argument for the cultural aspect of that.

**(25:49)**

GAVIN LODGE: Certainly.

**(25:56)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: And I would say in a kind of formulaic way, I would say almost like it's a combination of rights. Everybody has the right to fully participate in the cultural life of their community and society. I mean, this is going back to John Dewey. It's going back all the way back to some of the foundations of civic life and citizenship in the US and elsewhere.

So everybody has that right and cultural infrastructure is that which is required to make those rights effective. It's that, it's all right, you've got to go and participate in culture. But if you have no education, if you have no money, if there's no local libraries, if there's no local venues, no local bookshops, none of those spaces, then how can you exercise that right? It's a purely abstract right. So I would say it's a combination of those two.

**(26:53)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: So on that note, I want to talk a little bit about your work.

So I will say I stumbled across your article about culture as an objective or as an objective and a means first. And I devoured it and I threw it at Gavin's head and said, read this right now. And then I started digging in and then came across the book, which for listeners, Professor O'Connor here just released a book called "Culture is Not an Industry, Reclaiming Art and Culture for the Common Good."

**(27:23)**

GAVIN LODGE: Giving it a little plug here, I'm sure you can get it on Amazon and everywhere else that Barack Obama's books are sold, right?



**(27:29)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: So in the introduction to the book, you mentioned, and I'm gonna quote here, I'm looking at my notes, "culture's absence hobbles our ability to reimagine a more viable human future."

And this is something that I've talked to Gavin about a lot, that part of the reason, I have a lot of, personally a lot of interest in a lot of different social movements and a lot of kind of moving towards a better future. But to me, arts and culture is the linchpin because it allows us to create an imagination or a vision for something that we can't experience right now, but we can see what it might be. And so then we can reach for it. So when I read that comment, it was nice. It was like, okay, good. Somebody else sees this.

So what are some examples or ways you've seen art forms help us imagine those more positive futures? Futures that are more based on human wellbeing rather than our current kind of, we see a lot of dystopia, but what is out there helping us imagine something better?

**(28:32)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Well, I think it's, I'm not going to point to specific books or things. I think it's the space of dialogue that they open up. It's a space in which, and it goes back to the 18th century, the idea of the public sphere, that society is not just dominated by the kings and priests and those kind of things, that all of us with an interest in society should be able to have a, there should be spaces where that dialogue takes place.

I mean, that's the foundation of our democracy. Democracy means anything. That's part of what it means anyway. And art and culture have always been central to that because it's a different kind of space of dialogue.

It's not the political, you know, editorials, the debates in the New York Times or whatever, it's actually a space of quite intimate reflection, a commitment to kind of very often sometimes quite arcane, aesthetic rules or impulses. But in that space, that's absolutely crucial to how societies reimagine themselves or rethink themselves or come to terms with themselves. It's not direct.



It can be quite slow burning, but it's always been seen as a crucial part of that. And sometimes it's been about national identity and quite top-down stuff. Sometimes it's been captured by the middle classes maybe in certain ways. But that space has been one in which it's not just about expression. We can all express. Everybody's expressing these days.

But it's also a certain kind of judgment. It's people saying, this is good, isn't it? You know, I think that's better than that. Don't you? It's a kind of, it's a space of dialogue. It's a space in which a certain judgment is based on the imagination, on aesthetics, on a kind of emotion, but a justifiable emotion.

All those things that are quite familiar from people who talk about music and I, you know, think of it, you know, discussing, I don't know, Taylor Swift, you know, she's everywhere at the moment, you know, the kind of debates around her are very complex, they're about economics, you know, people talk about, you know, the economics of Taylor Swift, you know, bigger than, you know, all that kind of thing.

But also, you know, what's the quality of what she's writing about, how does she say it, what's the position she's taking, who is this, all those kind of things. And I suppose that the biggest level, our art and culture are the space in which humanity talks about its deepest fears, its deepest values, but also negotiates those in the face of what is increasingly a common future. And it...

**(31:55)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Right. Algorithms curating everything.

**(31:56)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: That sounds very grandiose in some ways, but that's what it does. That's where people talk about these things. To somehow make that conversation impossible or exclusive to only a few, or everybody locked away in their own little fragmented niches, talking to each other. This is clearly a problematic situation. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

**(32:24)**

GAVIN LODGE: I'm curious along these lines of what you've just said, you have so much experience around the world with your research and your



lectures and your teaching and whatnot. I mean, it'd be lovely to know when and how we've reached an economy and a government that prioritizes, say, human well-being. Are there any countries or cultures out there that you have experienced or observed or researched that are doing a better job of prioritizing, say, well-being versus just sheer economics of arts and culture?

**(32:58)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Well, it's been a bit of a journey for the global South, let's say, because of course, in many ways, they saw art and culture as essential to their identity, essential to their development, you know, and this could be quite unitary, you know, very nation state centric of things, but I think it's opened up beyond that. So there has been a long history of that.

But what happened actually round about the turn of the millennia is that they themselves became convinced by agencies such as UNESCO and other agencies, British Council as well, they became convinced that actually culture was an economy and it gave them a fast route to economic development.

The British Council or the Goethe Institute, the UNESCO would say is, you know, manufacturing, it takes research and development, massive amounts of capital, large physical infrastructure, but we're all creative. Everybody's got creativity. You too can set up a fashion industry in Nairobi or you can start a game sector in somewhere else.

So actually the global south is very much adopted or had very much adopted this kind of culture is economy, you know, kind of thing. And I found over the last few years, they've definitely moved against that. And there's led by places. Sometimes it's quite aggressive. So I'm not going to get into the whole Russia thing. There's all sorts of things around that. But Putin is not one of my favorite people.

**(34:42)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: It's about limiting.

**(34:46)**

GAVIN LODGE: Sure.





**(34:51)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: But he represents to me one of the ways in which a kind of very archaic view of culture has been reasserted. Culture is about us, it's about identity, it's against the wet, kind of awful, degrading West, all those kind of things.

**(35:12)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Yeah, it's about limiting and drawing lines. This is allowed and this isn't, yes.

**(35:16)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Well, and it's a very strong rejection of culture as the market. The market is seen as a degraded West. So there's that going on, but in some of the right-wing things. But other countries, and I'm thinking of recently Brazil, Brazil famously under a left -wing president Dilma Rousseff, adopted creative economy quite strongly.

And they've...they've turned against that because they've seen one, that it doesn't work, and two, that they want to reassert everyday life, good living, bumpy there, you know, in the Brazilian sense. They're focusing again on culture as part of every citizen's right, that it's part of the social bond, it's part of building trust.

So that's a movement in the global South again. There's a real pick up of that. And there's a big movement now that's just been endorsed by the United Nations to reaffirm culture as a standalone sustainable development goal. I don't know if you know that kind of thing, the SDGs, and famously in 2015 culture was rejected. UNESCO went and said, culture's, you know, creativity is so important, and they said, well, if it, yeah, that's fine, but put it under industry. So now,

There's a movement now to say, no, culture is an essential part of any idea of sustainable development. It's an essential part of alongside water and ending poverty, all those things, gender equality, decent work, and all those kind of things. And now they want to add culture. And so there's a sense that, again, that culture's been, whatever its economic importance, actually the main purpose of culture is as kind of foundational, which is another word I like to use, foundational to a sustainable, decent society.



**(37:20)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: So I want to, I want to jump in on something you've, you've mentioned there before about the right and about having the right to culture and that, you know, here in the United States, we have a really interesting kind of relationship to the concept of rights and we have a, you know, we actually have very few rights that are legally, you know, that we, we are legally entitled to. We tend to think of ourselves as having a right to education, but that's actually no, there's no legal basis in that.

And so when we talk about having the right to something, we tend in the US to think of something we have the right to as something that's a necessity to live, a necessity to survive. And so it begs the question, and I know you've addressed this in some of your work, are art and culture luxuries or necessities and why?

**(38:11)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Yeah, well, annoyingly, it's both in some ways. I use a very well -known musician, Brian Eno. He's certainly well -known in the UK and elsewhere. You might know him from back in the day, he rocks his music. But since then, he's got his own career, obviously. And he defined art as everything you don't have to do. And so, you know, you have to eat...

**(38:35)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Some of us might, I need to, I need to.

**(38:41)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR:...but you don't have to eat croissants. I won't quote the quote I use in the book. You know, you have to clothe yourself but you don't have to invent a little black dress or a Chanel, whatever. So it sounds like it's a luxury but in fact what that's defining is the absolute essential dimensions of human life.

As animals, as human animals, we have no...We must choose. We are free. We have no... We cannot live our life on instinct. We do have instincts. I'm not a complete, you know, idealist, whatever. But actually, we have to choose. That's the nature of... We have to make decisions. We have to



look to decide a future. That's what separates us. I'm not being the complete hard line, but it is kind of what separates us from the animals.

We have freedom, not in any idealistic sense, but because we have to make our life, we have to choose to do that. And right from the very beginning, whether it's, you know, the most basic form of signing, symbolic gesture, ritual dances, music, from the very beginning, those kind of symbolic forms have been part of how we decide what it is we ought to do. And that's...

So there is no human freedom without that world of symbolic, metaphorical, even that world of symbolic where we decide what is it that we ought to do? What is it that we should do? And so culture is part of that discussion. So, yes, it sounds very luxury when you say, it's culture is everything we don't have to do. But our whole life is everything we do not have to do. And, you know, to some extent. So, I mean, that's that's one one version of culture.

And of course, how we've negotiated that is part of the co -terminus with the history of humanity on the planet. You know, we've evolved very complex and rigidly hierarchical cultures to deal with that. Sometimes it's religious, sometimes it's more straightforward, kind of just symbolic powers, but that's the world we're in. And so you think about, you think about how we imagine our lives together, how we imagine what we should do in the world.

People are not learning that necessarily from ethics classes. They're learning it from Netflix or from, you know, whatever, from pop music. That's where you learn how to live. And...

**(41:31)**

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah.

**(41:32)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Mm -hmm. Right.

**(41:41)**

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah, quotidian life, just everyday experience. Yeah.



**(41:45)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Exactly. So how do we then, and this is a basic question, and, you know, talking about a lot of conservative thinkers in the States and elsewhere, and I'm thinking, well, how is it that how is it that we can have a society if it's so fissiparous, to use that word, if it's so fragmented, if it's so based on the absolute priority of individual desire, where's the collective or the communal kind of space of discussion, you know, so there's both left and right in the very broadest sense of worried about this.

But I think what part of it is, is that, you know, art and culture have been part of what binds us together. What makes society possible? And we're at that question again, really now, we all know that many of the problems that are facing us, and they're not just external, they are really about how we live together in society and art and culture are absolutely part of that debate.

**(42:50)**

GAVIN LODGE: So in your book, you reference frequently, you use the metaphor about creative economy research basically being stuck in the whale. That it's just nice and comfy there and nobody wants to move out of it. But should we stop using these arguments altogether? How do we move on from the whale?

**(43:12)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: It's really difficult for a number of reasons. One, there are a lot of people now who've built their careers on using those arguments. They're pretty much...

**(43:24)**

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah. An entire industry, if I may, has been established.

**(43:29)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: You say that, but you look at who's making the money in the creative sector. I mean, many of them are consultants, the consultants, the management advisors, the trainer, you know.



**(43:42)**

GAVIN LODGE: Sure.

**(43:45)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Gavin and I say a lot, we talk about consultants. That's not a, that's not, it's a bit of a dirty word around here.

**(43:49)**

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah.

**(43:51)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Yeah, no, it's fine. Because I mean, you know, you could also say that about academics, which is what I mean. But what I mean is there's many people who are committed to the arguments and to the kind of policy frame that's required of them. And so I recently did a book tour in the UK and I visited a place in Wales, actually. And I was...

**(43:57)**

GAVIN LODGE: Ha ha ha!

**(44:21)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: I was nearly run out of town. I was saying something very bad. It was seen as almost taking their lunch, but that's too cynical. It's almost like, you know, there is an imaginary here of creative industries. It's a good thing. Economy, culture, win-win. You know, yes, we're getting paid for it, but we're doing good for the world, et cetera. So it's really...

**(44:23)**

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah.

**(44:50)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: ...quite embedded in the sector. The kind of arguments that I found in those kind of sectors when I meet people like that is, so somebody said to me actually, well if you don't want to fund creative industries what do you want? Opera. And it was kind of like



people see you as some kind of old arts person, how dare you bring dirty money in contact with the purity of art.

**(45:15)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Thank you.

**(45:20)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Actually that is not the argument at all. I always say, well no, was it in the 1930s when Bret and those kind of people were around as well, or in the 60s. We all know the way in which art, culture and money are all linked in. So what I'm saying is we need to go beyond it. We need to recognise that there is an economy and culture.

And we actually ought to do something about it because at certain levels it's actually eating culture. You know, the big players, six of the largest corporations on the planet are somehow involved in the production and distribution of culture. You know, Nvidia and other kind of related things absolutely predicated on scraping the products of culture in the widest sense of culture actually, in all our words, all our images, even our biometric data, they're scraping that and turn it into a commodity.

So we all know that. So there are certain aspects of the culture industry that are very destructive. But at the same time, we also know we're not then saying, let's go back to state funding. We're also talking about how do you provide basics things for people?


**(46:19)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Okay.

**(46:44)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: We need the education, cultural education. We need a certain level of cultural infrastructure that allows the basic social and cultural life of towns and cities to go on. We need a certain kind of media world which allows some kind of conversation to exist. We know what's happened to journalism that's collapsed.

So there's a whole range of issues that are...are about economics, are about how do you fund journalism? How do you deal with the platforms? How do you deal with the fact that high streets, main streets are



disappearing? You might have a Walmart, but you've got nothing else on these streets. All these things are intensely economic in the sense that they're about material things or about access to resources. But at the same time, the answer to that is not to say culture is...

**(47:28)**

GAVIN LODGE: Yep.

**(47:43)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: ...primarily an economic sector. It's to understand that you've got to support arts and culture in its broadest sense. You need a whole lot of economic knowledge and tools of how people are making their living in that, how it's structured, all those. But you need to intervene in that based on what you want that cultural sector to be. Is it fit for purpose?

You know...

**(48:08)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: I was...that's where I was headed next. So we're on the same path, absolutely. In fact, I'm gonna quote you. I'm gonna quote you talking about health and education here. So I'm gonna read a little bit from an article you wrote for *The Conversation* in 2021 about arts advocacy. And I think the title is something about advising them to stop worrying and just be happy. And so this is you a few years ago saying.

**(48:12)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Right, okay. Yeah, yeah.

**(48:34)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: "Advocacy works best in situations where basic values are broadly shared. Then issues can be raised and agendas pushed in a melee of healthy civil debate. When that consensus breaks down, when there's no common value ascribed to arts and culture in the first place, advocacy breaks down too. Health and education need no advocates. But when art and culture need to advocate for their very existence, they are already in deep trouble."



And this really resonated with me because I spent a lot of time trying to find where it's common ground between, you know, we have, we are so polarized here right now in the United States, and it is very, very hard to find something that both sides of the political spectrum agree with and value. Do you think there is common ground to be found? Do you think there is something that everybody from each end of the political spectrum can agree arts and culture brings to the table and should be prioritized?

**(49:29)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: I don't know. I mean, going back to that quote, I was very naive about health and education.

I mean, one of the arguments was also, you know, we talk about art for art's sake or the intrinsic value of culture. We don't have those conversations about health, health for health's sake. What's the intrinsic value of health? What's the extrinsic value? It kind of makes no sense. However, education is, it's now difficult to see education outside of certain economic benefits.

So people are now talking about the intrinsic benefit of education, which is usually a prelude to the but. It's also an economic, blah, blah, blah, skill, all those kind of things. Is there a common ground in art and culture? That's really, really difficult at the moment.

**(50:12)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Thanks.

**(50:35)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: I always, when people talk about, say, you know, art and culture are irrelevant, you know, I always think, well, look at one of the biggest kind of spaces of conflict at the moment. And the word for that is culture war. And I know it designates a different kind of thing, but we're at a culture war. What does it mean we're in a culture war? It's a war over some kind of basic values, whether that's, you know...

**(50:50)**

GAVIN LODGE: Right.





**(51:03)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Is it woke hipsters in the inner cities versus good old upstanding Americans? Or is it red necked, awful Bible bashing? So the idea of the culture war, I think we should think, well, what are the values at stake here? If we are to somehow move beyond that really kind of a civil culture war, maybe a real...

**(51:12)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: All right.

**(51:33)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: ...civil war at some point, I don't know, but if we're going to move beyond that, what are the grounds on which we might say, what is a shared culture? What is the shared grounds on which we can dispute what our culture is? And I do think that there's a certain kind of leftism that makes that very difficult.

I think that's come from a whole history of kind of, I would call post-humanism, you know, attack on all cultures, middle class or all cultures, you know, colonialist. There's a certain kind of way in which the left within the cultural sector has gone to a point where there's almost nothing of value in say the Western canon, absolutely nothing of value. It's marked by imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, class politics from day one. Thank you and good night.

Or, you know, I think that's taken us into a horrible dead end. On the other hand, of course, you know, there's this, you know, the anathema on all modern culture that's coming from the right now. You know, again, I heard somebody say young, kind of educated, said...

**(53:03)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Yeah. no.

**(53:00)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: ...it's forests that just burned. He said, you know, he said, well, he said, this is an indigenous practice anyway, so let's just burn them and they will regenerate. And that was his view of American politics.



Let it burn. You know, let it burn and we will come, something will regenerate. And I just find that, you know, well, the...

**(53:16)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Now.

**(53:26)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Yes, something a 25 year old might say. But I think there has to be a sense, and it's God help me, it's not the sensible center, it is not that, but there's got to be a recognition that there's certain aspects of it, what are often called the conservative view of culture that needs to link up with what I would say is a kind of emancipatory view of culture, which I would long stand, you know, adhere to.

These have got to find a grounds on which they can communicate and have an argument, but not a war. And I think that's based on things about the grounds of judgment. How do you judge what's better than something else? That's not always a question of power. It's also a question of debate.

There are certain things we need to conserve and I would say conservatives don't conserve anymore but there are certain things, you know, there are connections between the past, present and the future that is embedded in the very word culture. You know, and not just Western definitions like same in China. Culture means a persistence of certain values but it also means change. You know, that's what it's always meant. It means a growth.

**(54:35)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Like a dialogue, almost.

**(54:52)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: ...a nurturing of what you grow out of, but it does mean growth and change and alteration. And I think it could be a dialogue, yeah. Yes, yeah. And it's, you know, the Chinese Wenhua, excuse your Chinese listeners for that pronunciation, but the Chinese word for culture Wenhua is the change that...



**(55:04)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: ...between past and future, almost. Yeah.

**(55:21)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: ...art and culture, art and literature brings, that's its literal transformation. It's about change, it's about transformation and it's there in the 18th century with the invention of kind of western notions of art but it's there in many other kind of more ancient civilizations.

The idea that somehow we must grow, we must cultivate, we must change and the grounds for doing that also need to be taken care of and I think that's a debate we need to have and I think it's something that, you know, sensible conservatives and the emancipatory left can start to talk about and think about. But it's in that debate which is how do we use some kind of common culture to organize ourselves as a society. In that debate, creative economy has almost nothing to say.

**(55:56)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Okay.

**(56:18)**

GAVIN LODGE: On the note of giving us something to hope for, something to change and progress towards and enrich our lives. What cultural experience have you had of late that filled your soul?

**(56:35)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Well that very last cultural experience I had was live cultural experience. On Sunday night I went to see The Dirty Three. And The Dirty Three are kind of remnants of Nick Cave Band. I don't know if you know Nick Cave. Anyway, they're from Melbourne. They're now global.

They're from Melbourne, so it's good to see them in Melbourne. And there were three guys, some of them older than others, three guys, purely instrumental music, wild kind of mix of jazz, bits, I suppose, avant-garde, classical, rock, of course. I mean, they, you know, they shift albums, shift albums, people shift albums anymore. And it was a packed house. And it was a great experience of kind of pure...



**(57:26)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: Mm hmm.

**(57:29)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: ...music making to a packed Melbourne venue and nobody there thought about the economics of it all. It was there because we were there to listen to that music. So that was the last one I went to.

**(57:43)**

GAVIN LODGE: Yep. Yep. A visceral and human connecting kind of experience. And don't we all need more of that? Professor, thank you for joining us and enlightening us. My head is absolutely exploding with all of the thoughts that you've given and plant sees that you've planted because you are really on the forefront of changing...

**(57:56)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Yes.

**(58:13)**

GAVIN LODGE: ...the dialogue in all of the right ways. And it is just a thrill to speak with you. Thank you for spending some time with us today.

**(58:21)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: No, thanks for inviting me, it's really great to talk to you.

**(58:26)**

WHITNEY CHRISTIANSEN: You've been wonderful. I can't count the amount of time for the last couple of weeks I've read something you wrote and thought, I wish I had written that. So you are not just educated and well versed in what you're speaking about, but your writing is so engaging and it's moving and it does make you want to move in the direction of talking about the arts and their intrinsic benefits. And so we're very grateful that you were able to share this with us.



**(58:37)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Thank you.

**(58:53)**

GAVIN LODGE: *Framing the Hammer* is produced and edited by 4A Arts, with special thanks to Whitney Christiansen for the research and preparation for this episode. Justin O 'Connor, thank you so much. I hope we can talk with you again and again and again in the future.

**(59:07)**

JUSTIN O'CONNOR: Thank you, love to come back.