



Framing *the* Hammer

THE PODCAST
FROM 4A Arts

Transcript

Ep. #118: Ellis Rosen, “Cartooning Around in the Creative Economy”

(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 is supported at a level commensurate with its impact on the entire American economy today.

I am joined by cartoonist Ellis Rosen, who has had his works published all over the place not just on Instagram particularly at the *New Yorker*, which is very exciting to talk to somebody who has both been published there and hear his excitement at being published in *The New Yorker*. I was first introduced to him through his very, very proud parents. So welcome to *Framing the Hammer*. Ellis, thanks for joining us today.

(00:45)

ELLIS ROSEN: Thanks. Thanks. Good to mention the parent connection there. I'm sure my mom will be happy.

(01:02)

GAVIN LODGE: They are very, very proud. Very, very proud. So we always lead off our conversations with the question, what do you think of first when I ask what artwork influenced you as a child?



ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah, I mean, for sure, the sort of the go -to answer that I have, I think, is we used to have these book fairs and in the book fairs were these ripoff calendars from The Far Side. I feel like everybody knows these. I think that is probably one of the bigger ones. I loved those. Those were like the things that you'd go through and then you'd read the whole thing that night and then you know, then it was sort of worthless as a calendar. I think that was a huge one.

There was a comic strip I loved called Groo the Wanderer that was drawn by Sergio Aragonés magazine and was written by Mark Evanier I don't know if that's how you say his name, who's an extraordinarily funny guy. wrote for some cartoons and I think that really formed my sense of humor too. I sort of, I mean, as I was learning to read, sort of used that. It was a comic book. It my first comic book.

And I remember I would just read the bubbles that just had one word in it. And then a little later, I'd start to read the bubbles that had a few words in it. And little by little, I would actually just start reading the whole thing. That journey through learning both read comics and read and through this lens, was a very funny comic of humor, I think was influential to me as well.

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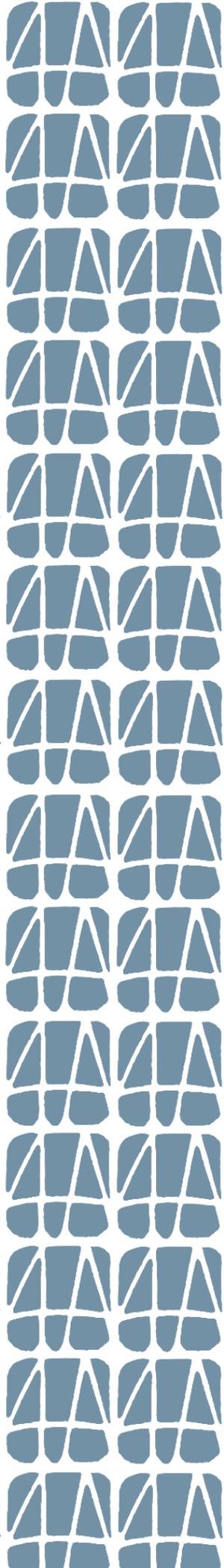
GAVIN LODGE: You have already sent me down a memory lane because my goodness how I loved The Far side Side a kid. Particularly in high school, I loved my planning calendars. mean, that was when I first started to actually plan my homework situation and my schedule and everything. And it was those weekly calendars of The Far Side that were just so great. Gary Larson, man. And I have old books of theirs that I've to foist upon my children and they have no appreciation for. For written cartoons whatsoever.

ELLIS ROSEN: Really? man, I've got a huge collection. He's just the absolute best. If you go to anyone's childhood home, and you'll see eventually somewhere in there is a Far Side collection book, they were just huge. I have also attempted to for my kids are a little too young for it. But they'll, they'll, get some more foisting later on. They'll show and make sure they read them. I mean, they're just the best.

GAVIN LODGE: Ha ha ha.

ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah.

GAVIN LODGE: And so then I was going to later in the conversation ask what put you on the path to being a cartoonist, but are you implying that



you've been on the cartooning path for a very long time since your childhood appreciating the far side, huh?

(03:40)

ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah, I mean, I was obvious, I think from the start that I was definitely going to go into something that involved a lot of drawing. And because I was good at drawing and I love to draw, but also because I was not good at anything so art school was just like, you know, the what?

By the time I graduated high school, when I was coming to an end to that, was just clearly the option, the only option for me. But cartooning itself, gag cartooning itself, it wasn't my initial goal. I didn't even really consider it because outside of the New Yorker these days and back when I was

in college, it just was not really something you would consider. mean, print wasn't nearly as in bad shape then as it is now, but it wasn't really the career that you thought of, particularly in art school, where it all focused on fine arts. I think the comics were sort of fufu'd, or the ones that were liked were the very sort of artsy ones in general.

So, yeah, humor and gag cartoons, that type of thing was not obvious until my friend Sam Marlowe, who is a cartoonist for The New Yorker, he sort of introduced it to me and he said, should try this and do this. And when I did, when I started, it was just immediate, just like that. This is exactly what I should be doing. I mean, is all my sensibilities, all my

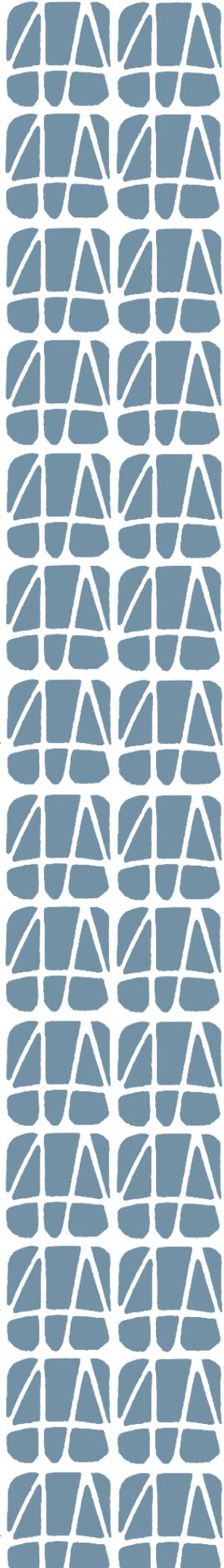
You know, there's someone told me once, another cartoonist said, cartoonists are people who can't really draw and can't really write.

And I was like, perfect for me. can, yeah, I can't really draw and I can't really write. So it's this good combination.

(05:11)

GAVIN LODGE: But what you really can do is encapsulate so many relatable moments for all the rest of us. So there's a collective sense of bonding there for all of us. Well, what inspires your cartoons?

ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah, so I have a there's like a switch in your head that you turn on and it just starts a recording that's playing in the background and that recording is, is this a cartoon? Is this a cartoon? Is this a cartoon? And if you have that on while you live your life while you go about doing, your everyday stuff, particularly everyday stuff like minute little things, you're going to just come up with a bunch of premises for cartoons, whether that's loading the dishwasher or deciding what you want to eat for dinner and other things that aren't related to food. You start to realize that all



these tiny things that we take for granted that we don't think about, that we don't...

GAVIN LODGE: Mm.

ELLIS ROSEN: ...dwell on, is just the connecting tissue between all people and is ripe for joking about.

GAVIN LODGE: How is this different from being a standup comedian, like a situational, observational comedian?

ELLIS ROSEN: I don't want to say I'm convenient, so I don't know the process, but I imagine it could be very similar in some senses. Now, it's not necessarily the name of the game is finding something relatable. That is a huge part of it for sure. But silliness is also a part of it. Just doing something that's totally ridiculous, just making a joke, something that's surprising, something that is contrasts between high and low.

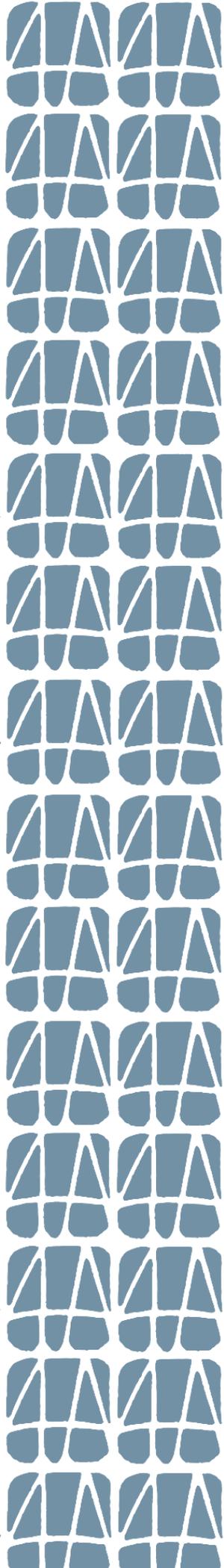
Contrast, in my opinion, is the real, the secret ingredient to humor. And I guess that contrast is just another way of saying surprise because you don't see it coming. so I have cartoons that are absolutely just silly, just funny. But even then, there's always this element. I mean, it's...you're doing everything in shorthand. You're doing everything for immediacy to try and get the joke across. So you are picking up on things. Now, this could be dangerous in some places and ways that we don't have to talk about, for the most part, shorthand is a very, okay, do you mind if I give an example? I have a cartoon that's kind of popular. It's called Ned Helped Out. It was published in the New Yorker.

GAVIN LODGE: Please do.

(07:41)

ELLIS ROSEN: It's got this guy, he's holding a vacuum cleaner. And he's thinking he's got a little thought bubble. There's no caption, but it's the thought bubble is a picture of him. And everybody's cheering him on. And there's all this confetti. And there's a big banner in the background that says Ned helped out. And when I got this idea for a cartoon, which was being just a little bit too proud of myself for having accomplished some minor tasks.

I wasn't vacuuming though. That wasn't what I was doing. But vacuuming - giving him a vacuum was an extraordinary, it was a quick, immediate, shorthand way to show what it is that he was doing that he's praising himself for. So that's what I mean by shorthand and I feel like I've gone way off topic here.



(08:23)

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah. I was going to ask what is one of your favorite cartoons that you've created?

ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah, I mean, I like that one for sure. The first one I ever sold to the New Yorker is one I like too. It's also captionless, sort of, it has words in it, but it's a guy on a train and it's, if you've ever been to the subways in New York, you can see like, this is the first stop, this is the second stop, this is in three stops, this is in four stops, blah, blah, So the first stop, says, that was a great party.

The second stop says, what about that stupid thing you said? The third stop said, nobody heard it. The fourth is everyone heard it and they're judging you. And the fifth stop is what a terrible party. And that, that just is just basically how my brain works all the time. So I like that one too, because it's very deeply personal. And at the same time, it's also mean.

So many people think that way. it's not even like, it's not just me, it's everybody. And it's the first time that I learned that when you think that there's something happening to you, the way you think or the way you look at things, it's really, it's not, it's everybody. And that's what I think is so great about cartooning is this, like I said, the connective tissue, yeah.

(09:26)

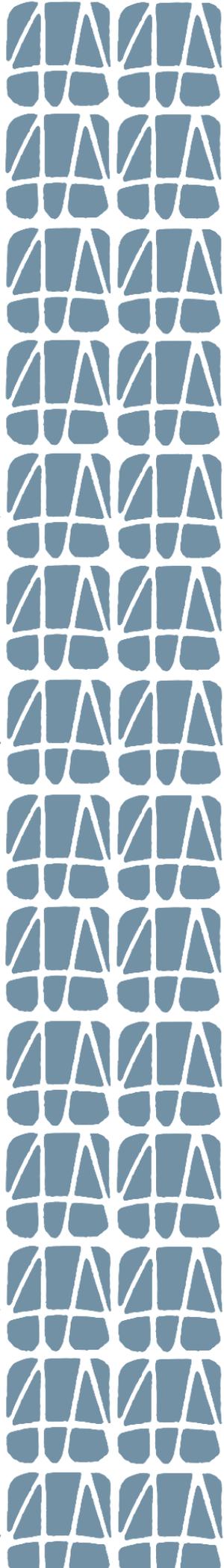
GAVIN LODGE: Yeah, into all of our neuroses as well. Well, then, so you were proud of that one and it went to the New Yorker and that was great. But I have a feeling you might have some favorites that have bombed or some ones that you would have considered a dud that went viral. Can you share about those?

ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah, so, so...Yeah. First of all, I love that question. Yeah, I have a cartoon that I love that nobody likes. It doesn't, never performs well. Nobody bought it. I think it just, maybe it's just too silly, but it's, it is a shampoo bottle on a witness stand being examined by a lawyer. And the lawyer is saying,

You sort of talking to the jury and then pointing at the shampoo bottle and saying, so I submit that this is not a, two and one shampoo conditioner, but a three and one shampoo conditioner murderer.

GAVIN LODGE: Ha ha ha.

ELLIS ROSEN: And I just, I don't know. I think I just love the language that the lawyer's using and how ridiculously silly it is. But that one never really



goes anywhere. Let's see, one that I thought was just kind of a whatever, but people love.

There's this one cartoon I did for a restaurant in New York. I can't remember the name of the restaurant. But they did this special thing. had a couple of cartoonists come in and they gave us a free dinner. And we just had to like draw a cartoon based off it for promotional use. The cartoon I did was, they were known for having Manhattan's, like serving their Manhattan's there, the drinks. So I have a cartoon, it's like a bunch of Godzilla's at a restaurant.

The Godzilla waiter is bringing on his tray of drinks instead of drinks. It's the tiny little city of Manhattan and he's saying who ordered the Manhattan and people love that one. To me, it's just a little throwaway pun but that one always does well. No one bought it because I never it was for specifically for this restaurant so I couldn't sell it anywhere else but

(11:14)

GAVIN LODGE: Ha ha ha.

Well, I appreciate the silliness and the punny-ness as well, but it's so fascinating to know, hey when we're creating art for ourselves, you never know how others are gonna take it. That's for sure how do you keep your ideas organized?

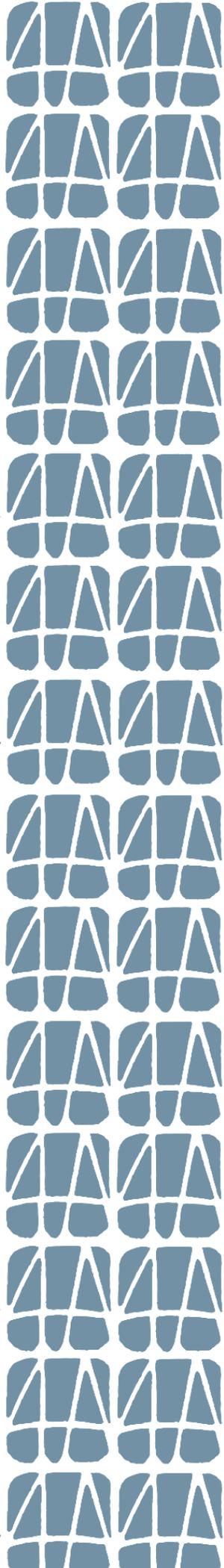
ELLIS ROSEN: I mean, I my notes, my note app on my phone. When I think of something, I concept, I put the concept into my phone. And then when I'm trying to come up with cartoons later in the week, usually on a Monday, I will go through all those notes and I'll look at other cartoons, whatever. And then that's when I go to the pad and my sketchbooks are and I start drawing out various ways.

GAVIN LODGE: Mm.

ELLIS ROSEN: And it's interesting what, or maybe it's not interesting at all, maybe it's most boring thing in the world, cartoons that seem really simple and obvious when they're done, for me, usually have like these very overcomplicated ways of getting there. Like I said, the "Ned Helped Out" one, I gave you the short version of that, but there were 100, not 100, there were very specifically three other versions of..

GAVIN LODGE: Ha ha ha.

ELLIS ROSEN: Ned that came before that, that didn't really get at what I was getting at. They were, were stranger and they were, they didn't quite make sense, didn't quite add up. So, yeah, these, simple ideas, these



obvious things that seem so well designed are actually start off from usually for me, very messy places.

GAVIN LODGE: Mm.

ELLIS ROSEN: Until suddenly the obvious thing appears to me and I go, why didn't I think of that at first? Yeah.

(13:04)

GAVIN LODGE: Right, right. earlier, before we started recording, you specified that I might have written a couple of times in our notes, political cartoonist, and that was probably just, I don't know why I honestly just put those two words together, but we're talking about being a cartoonist. Do you also consider yourself an artist?

ELLIS ROSEN: Sure, mean, why wouldn't I?

GAVIN LODGE: For instance, in a lot of the ways that we segment in our society, gradations of art and whether or not Basquiat and ballet are the same as quilting and car decoration. I would, of course, I would say a cartoonist is an artist, but have you ever contemplated that in a different way or ever had to defend yourself or argue it?

ELLIS ROSEN: I don't know, those are like real, that's the stuff you think about in college and then you realize like it's all who cares. What's the ontological sort of, yeah, I don't know. I mean, I'm sure there are absolutely people out there who would not consider what I do to be art in the strictest sense or like in the most romantic way.

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah, sure.

(14:19)

ELLIS ROSEN: There's certainly weirdos on Twitter with Roman statues as their avatars that don't consider anything art unless it's photorealistic and painted purely from a masculine perspective. But there are classic, classicalists who are, how do you say that? Classicalists who are also not weirdos, by the way, I should mention.

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah. What? But also even classists, I suppose, who might be.

ELLIS ROSEN: Uhhhh...Yeah, right. Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I would consider an artist that would, you know, I'm drawing, I'm, you know, making art. I do illustration. I don't think anyone really says illustrations.



GAVIN LODGE: Well, we definitely share that philosophy at 4A Arts that everyone is an artist, whether or not they're drawing or doing anything. mean, every single person is making a creative choice every single day of their lives. And we like to think that everybody has creativity within them and everybody is an artist. But...

ELLIS ROSEN: I agree with that. And if it makes it easier for people to call it a hobby, call it a hobby. I don't like, sure. Whatever it is that makes you like, there's a particular joy in it. And that's the goal here. It doesn't matter what you call it to get to that joy.

(15:30)

GAVIN LODGE: Well, then tell us how do you get your stuff into *The New Yorker*?

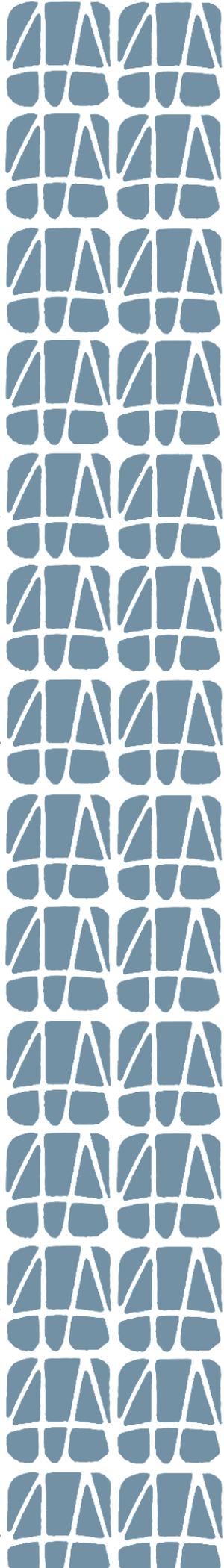
ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah. Well, there is a, every Tuesday you send in your batch of cartoons, which is these days I'm doing five, other people do more. It's smarter to do more. At the end of the day, it's a numbers game. I do five because I'm a harder and harder to come up with ideas, but I used to do 10 before. Anyway, so you send in five, you email them to the cartoon editor.

Emma Allen, she looks at everybody's cartoons by noon, you have to send them in by noon on Tuesday. And she whittles that down, I don't know the numbers, she has the numbers somewhere, she's mentioned them before, I think it's around 1000 or so, or more cartoons. She whittles that down to I think around 50 and five zero and she takes that

And then she has the cartoon meeting with David Remnick and that's her David Remnick and a third person who I think generally changes up the switches around. As I understand it, just have a third opinion there and they go through that 50 and they have an in basket and out basket and a maybe basket. And between the three of them, they take that 50 and they turn it to around 15 or so 15 to 20. And those are the issues that they buy that week.

GAVIN LODGE: Mm -hmm.

ELLIS ROSEN: And then those are not the they don't go in that week, I should mention. I have cartoons still from 2018 they haven't published. if they buy one, then you get an email on Friday, it's called the OK email just says OK, and then a PDF of the picture that they've chosen. And then you have a week or so to draw the final and send it into them.



(17:18)

GAVIN LODGE: So you have, they're sending it back to you to be polished a little bit more, huh? Generally?

ELLIS ROSEN: And then, yeah.

Yeah, I mean, it depends. Some people do different levels of polish, too. Some people just do their finishes as their submission, if cartoons are about clarity, it's about immediacy. So it's helpful tactic just to sell it too, because it'll be funnier if you know exactly what's going on. But some people just sketch them out. And I think if they're familiar with you and your style, they don't mind if you just do some sketchy.

And I usually send them like 80 % done 80 to 85 % done is good enough for me to put on my Instagram when they don't buy it. because I'm not doing finishes on cartoons that no one's buying. Yeah, that's how it that's how it goes. Yeah.

(18:02)

GAVIN LODGE: That's the process. Before we zoom out and look at cartooning vis -a -vis the greater creative economy, let me just say to our listener out there that you believe the arts deserve more support from our elected officials, right? I mean, you're listening to this podcast, so I'm guessing you do. And if so,

ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah.

GAVIN LODGE: We would welcome your, your commitments, your engagement, your donations to 4 A Arts and support our movement to change the narrative around American arts, culture, design, and craft give now at 4 A Arts .org and thanks.

As I spoke about in our introduction, we talk a lot at 4A Arts about the creative economy and what we consider to be, you know, anybody who is making their living or contributing somehow to, well, let's face it, dollars and cents with creativity. I bet you have some thoughts about that, but do you think a lot about your position in what we call the American creative economy

(19:06)

ELLIS ROSEN: I mean, absolutely when you're first starting out, it's kind of this fun, interesting process that I feel like places take advantage of, like esteemed institutions, where you come in and you're just happy to be there, you're happy that somebody is interested in buying your art, you're



happy that you, you sort of like, my god, I'm drawing a cartoon in the New Yorker. This is my cartoon in the New Yorker.

When that starts to wear off, and this is not just the New Yorker, this is every creative industry, you hear this with actors too, all sorts of things. Yeah. When that wears off, at one point, you start to understand, wait a second, sure that

I'm lucky to be part of the New Yorker, but the New Yorker also needs me. Not me necessarily, but it needs cartoonists, it needs good cartoonists. And you start to feel a little undervalued. You start to feel a little unappreciated, maybe taken advantage of a bit. And so that every, in any industry you go into, I imagine not even creative, if you love it, what you love about it starts to fade.

How you think it's poorly or unfairly or mismanaged is right in your face. so yeah, absolutely more so than ever, I think about my place in the creative economy. I think about my shortcomings, my sort of cravenness to try and get money and that rubs up against with my sort of not wanting to like ask for it and...

And it's like, how much goodwill can you spend to then pay off in some sort of way? So it's like, yeah, this tightrope thing, which I honestly don't think is particularly fair, because, you know, everybody wants art, nobody wants to pay for it. And at one point, I just sort of start to feel as if I should be being paid for it. So that's the long wobbly answer

(20:50)

GAVIN LODGE: Huh. On a lot of different things and I would love to be able to peel back many different layers of it, but I can certainly relate that even in my time as an actor many years ago, I made my Broadway debut in a show, 42nd Street, and I hit about three months into it and I started to think, wait a minute, is this all there is? And I was grateful to be there. I was loving it. And in live performance show business,

ELLIS ROSEN: Peace out. And for me.

GAVIN LODGE: You are literally being paid to do the same thing eight times a week. mean, exactly the same thing eight times a week. Yeah, the actors are certainly not the ones making all the money in show business. And so yeah, you do start to think about your place in the world, but not the least of which is like, wait, is this all there is? Is this, this isn't how I imagined it all being. And yet you're thrilled to be there.

ELLIS ROSEN: You...right.



Absolutely. Yeah, I agree with that sentiment. Exactly. Is this all there is? You hit this wall, the ceiling, whatever it is, you've hit whatever top there is that you've decided was the top and then you realize, wait a second, this doesn't actually bring me the sort of doesn't meet up the expectations that I had in my head.

Which is why I'm trying to branch out. mean, everybody does this, the New Yorker editors will talk about how cartooning is not a career in and of itself, that it needs to be a side career. Now, I don't love that. I wish it were. I think there are things we could do to make it more so of a career. At the same time, you get fatigued. And I'm, at this point in my career, attempting to do other things so I can rely on my cartooning less.

Like I've been writing a lot and...

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GAVIN LODGE: I would imagine a lot of the writing is probably entertainment based to that observational not comedy but or are you trying to write about something else?

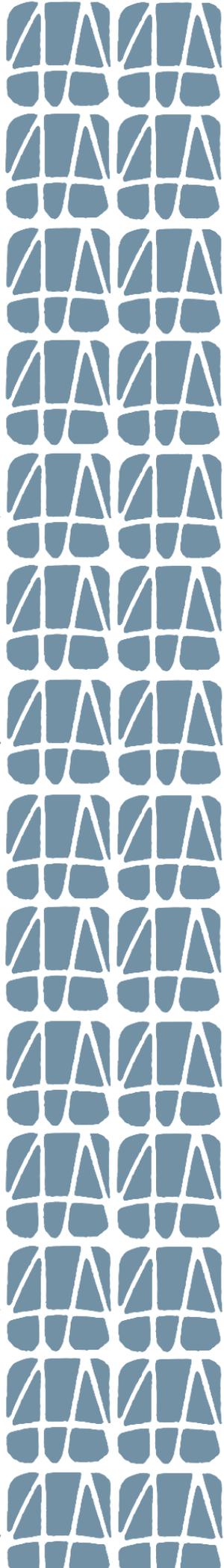
ELLIS ROSEN: No, no, I don't have what it takes to write any The Great American Novel. No, it's still based on the same skill set, for sure. It's just a different industry, a different form of expression, different goal. I mean, you're jumping from one golden prison to another and like that really is the game. And I should say not bronze prison from how golden these prisons are.

(23:07)

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah. If money were no object, how would you spend your time?

ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah, mean, outside of like family stuff, you're talking purely creative. Yeah, I mean, what I love is coming up with an idea, that, that...the feeling you get when something connects, when something is right, when something original pops into your head, when something fun or funny makes you smile, makes you snicker. Or in my writing, when I'm trying to connect these ideas together and this plot point comes into way and then all these other doors open up and suddenly you're just in your head and hours pass and you've been sitting in the chair, but you've been in so many places.

That to me is the goal of everything. That is what you're chasing. That's what's fun. That's what makes it worth doing. And then executing it too is



also fun in its own way, but it's not quite as exciting. yeah, so that I would still, I would be doing that, I think. I would just be...

GAVIN LODGE: Uh-huh.

ELLIS ROSEN: ...dreaming up I'd be daydreaming one way or another maybe I'd be doing less of the execution because the daydreaming is most of the fun part. So I wouldn't be as productive not to say that I'm so incredibly productive right now but yeah like I don't know I've got I think like all creative people, shmillion ideas they just pop into my head while I'm showering or something that I never do anything with so would, you know, they're not necessarily good ideas. But when you're in the shower, there's no such thing as good ideas or bad ideas.

(24:36)

GAVIN LODGE: Sure. Well, you mentioned in a previous conversation we had, wanting to do a Twitter thread, frankly, on the idea of monetizing art. You recall saying that?

ELLIS ROSEN: Hmm. Yeah, okay. I should mention I'm not going to do it.

GAVIN LODGE: Kid. Right, right, right. No, no, you mentioned the idea of having a Twitter thread about mentioning, about monetizing art. But can you just share with us what would be in that thread? And also I'm curious if that would be in cartoon form of tweeted pictures or would it be written?

ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah, that right. Yeah, exactly.

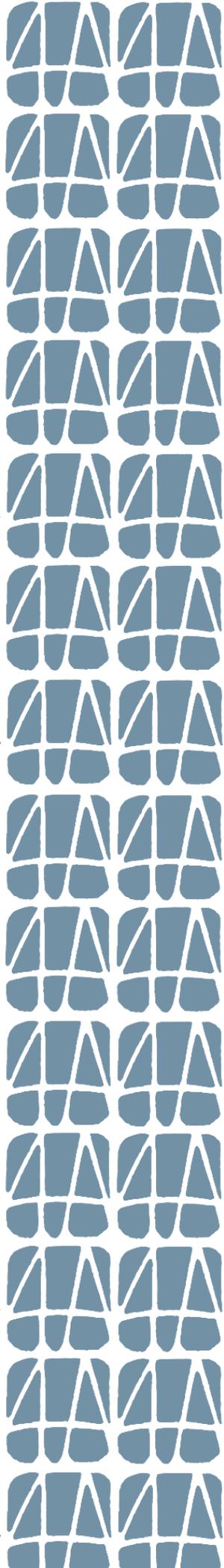
That's interesting. mean, maybe that that sort of makes me actually do want to do it. There wouldn't be a Twitter said then it would be. I don't know. Yeah, yeah. I. Be interesting to write about would be a little outside of my comfort level, but that's OK. That's good. It's good to do things outside your comfort level.

GAVIN LODGE: Well, there's plenty of, hey, there's plenty of videos and graphics on Twitter as well, so put it everywhere.

(25:34)

ELLIS ROSEN: But yeah, what it is, it was a comment, start of the comment, somebody referred to one of my cartoons as a meme. It wasn't the first time people have done that before and I get why. hold no, you know, whatever. What's the word? Umbridge, is that the word? Is that the word?

GAVIN LODGE: Sure, yeah, you take no umbridge to that. Sure, sure,



ELLIS ROSEN: I try to write too, it's terrible. I get why people call it that, but to me that word was a bit inaccurate and it made me feel less of a, as you say, an artist as a person and more of another dehumanizing word, content creator.

GAVIN LODGE: Hahaha.

(26:14)

ELLIS ROSEN: To me, a cartoon comes from an individual who made it, who has this perspective, who came up with this joke, who went through the connections to make this happen. A meme may have an origin point, but at one point, it is so disseminated widely on the internet, becomes... People do different versions of it. They change it. They add to it. They make it their own. They self-reference.

Memes get...extraordinarily meta and they get so out there that you don't if you're looking at it, you don't understand. I mean, I probably shouldn't bring this up. there's this maybe this out. for your if you're curious about this, there's a meme called loss, you should look this up. It started with a four panel comic strip that was sort of a webcomic in the heyday of webcomics. That was about some some...

GAVIN LODGE: Ha ha.

ELLIS ROSEN: ...some young guy liked to draw webcomics about video games that he liked to do. his wife and him had a miscarriage. And for whatever reason, they decided this comic artist who just did this light video game stuff, did a four panel comic about his wife's miscarriage. That was so out of place. It was so strange that people really picked up on it and made fun of it.

And anyway, what happened to it now, if you look up loss, you can, it has now turned into a series of four lines, there are four lines, literal straight lines, if put in the same in the correct order, that it shows you that that is loss, you just people just know immediately from knowing the history of this meme.

GAVIN LODGE: Uh-huh.

ELLIS ROSEN: They've narrowed down to these four lines and then people play with that like, it doesn't matter. You can look through this if you're interested. But that to me is what a meme is.

GAVIN LODGE: Uh-huh.



(28:01)

ELLIS ROSEN: Cartoons become memes. My friend Asher Perlman's cartoon about a jukebox. It's somebody it said he's going for the jukebox. And it's like a guy who's wearing a shirt of like whatever fish or whatever whatever band you don't like. And so everybody's trying to stop him from going to the jukebox. And that becomes a meme because people place whatever band they don't want on the guy's t shirt.

But to me, a cartoon is still a different thing than a meme. And it is a more human thing than a meme. Having my cartoons called memes make me feel slightly uncomfortable. Just like when people call content makes me slightly uncomfortable. These words that sort of dehumanize me, I don't love.

So I was going to do, I mean, I wasn't going to do, I thought about doing, and a thread about that and how that ties in to the greater sort of ideas of why nobody wants to give artists money. Because a meme doesn't belong to anyone, right? A meme is everything and it's just this sort of... Yeah, it's not even supposed to look beautiful. It's not supposed to look like anything human. It's just this joke that is disseminated throughout the internet.

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah. And nothing at the same time.

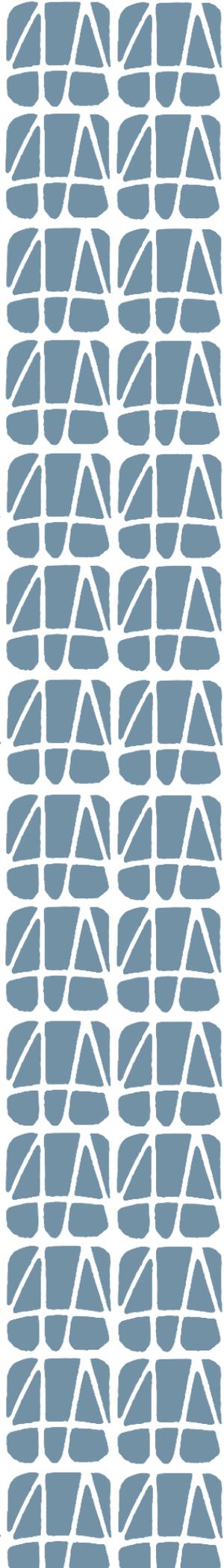
ELLIS ROSEN: And so why would you? There is no monetary value in that. There is no, it should, that in a sense is a freak. I'm like joking around. It's just a thing people do. But my cartoons, I think, are, have a bit more value than that. I like to think so. Maybe I'm wrong. I'm sure there are many people who disagree with that. But that's the way I see it.

(29:36)

GAVIN LODGE: Getting also a little esoteric here, could your, one of the big worries in the art world is obviously our flagging attention.

Dissolution of society, democracy, or disconnection as people. And of course, 4A Arts thinks that the solution to so much of that is creativity. But could your art be replaced by AI?

ELLIS ROSEN: That's sort of the question. I mean, that also relates to what we just talking about with this idea of content. I do feel like there are AI enthusiasts out there who do not care about what it looks like. It looks like what they want, like it just looks like the thing without any sort of...personalized sort of touch to it or any sort of like individual reality. No humanity in these things. And you look at any AI art there's just no, you



see it immediately. People don't care because it is content. It is not art. And people like the content more than they like the art. People want content more than they want art. Some people. So

GAVIN LODGE: Mm.

ELLIS ROSEN: That, sorry, that's just my thought trying to connect it to what we were just talking about. But do I think it can replace it? I've seen people try. There's someone who kept a blog of like trying to make a AI cartoon. I don't think I've seen anything particularly successful. I mean, art-wise, like drawing-wise,

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ELLIS ROSEN: If you don't care that there's no humanity in it, sure, they can do that part. They can make an approximate, approximate, approximate, approximate. Can't wait for my novel, right? It's gonna be really good.

GAVIN LODGE: Approximation, approximation.

(31:12)

ELLIS ROSEN: It can make an approximation of what it imagines a New Yorker cartoon looks like based off the history and the content. There I just used it. All the cartoons that have been in the New Yorker before. It's interesting. I've seen it. My guess is, I don't know what these people's prompts are, but my guess is the prompts are somewhat sparse and not very specific because they all look...

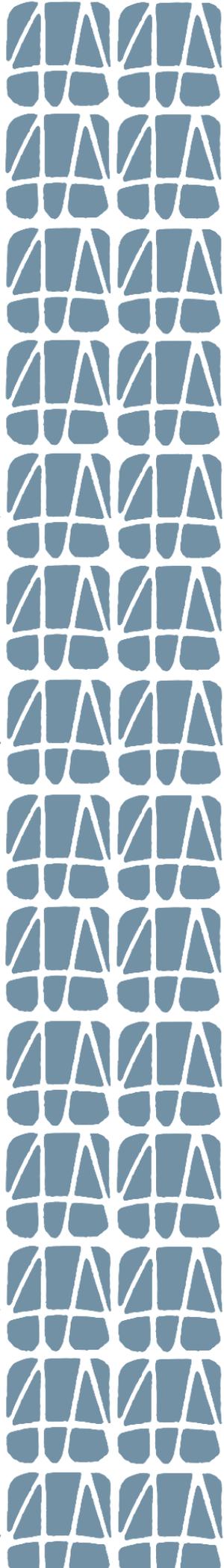
They all have this strange sort throwback look to it, like what a New Yorker cartoon might have looked like in the 70s, 80s, or 90s. There's sort of like this old fashioned, or maybe even earlier, maybe the fit. Like you see guys with like hats on and just like...

GAVIN LODGE: Seventies. Yeah. Yeah.

ELLIS ROSEN: Or like, you know, the clothing and the attire. So I don't know if it's basing it off that or what. Jokes, can it do the humor? I've seen it get close. I saw the best AI cartoon I saw personally. I'm not sure other people would agree with this in terms of joke. There was a bunch of kids entering Legoland.

And one of them was barefoot and he said, sorry guys, I can't come in.

GAVIN LODGE: I mean, sorry, that's funny.



ELLIS ROSEN: And yeah, that was, it was a cohesive idea. It was connected. That is, I think, an outlier. I don't think there are many like that yet. Maybe there will be, I don't know.

GAVIN LODGE: Mm.

ELLIS ROSEN: I just don't think cartoons lacking humanity are going to be on a whole as successful as cartoons that are intrinsic with humanity.

(32:43)

GAVIN LODGE: But so to that point then, in terms of the intrinsic nature of a connection to humanity, that brings me to another one of our existential questions, which is what is art's purpose, if not to make money?

ELLIS ROSEN: I think to be a, what's the word I'm looking for here? a, just a practice, an excuse, I guess, to explore the sort of limits of our own creativity. I mean, it's...

GAVIN LODGE: Mm -hmm.

ELLIS ROSEN: ...it's a like, intrinsically, again, it is an intrinsically human thing. It is the whole purpose of it is the expression of humanity in one way or another. They are in people argue that it's a relationship between the maker and the reader and it certainly is.

GAVIN LODGE: Mm.

ELLIS ROSEN: But if there's no expression from the maker that is a person involved in it, to me, you've lost half an important part of the equation. So people can like it all they want. And that's important. People liking things is absolutely important. it's just one half of the equation.

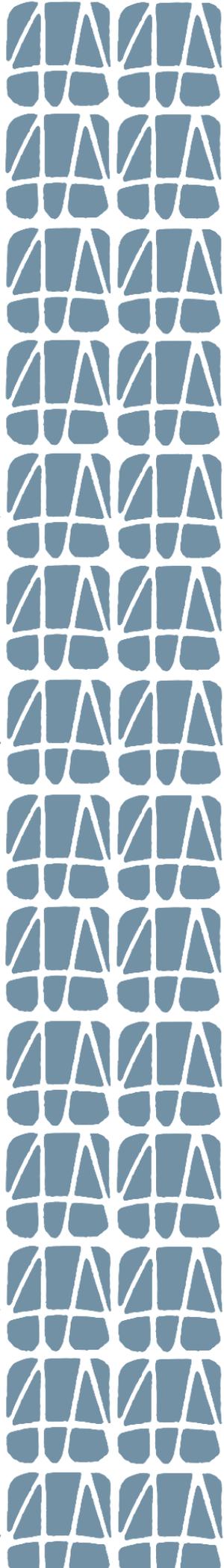
GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

ELLIS ROSEN: If I just do cartoons and I show it to no one but my computer, like there's something missing there. which isn't to say like, I don't know, it's not to say that it isn't art one way or another. It's just not. In my opinion, one where I'm just showing my computer is art for no one's sake.

GAVIN LODGE: Uh-huh.

ELLIS ROSEN: And I guess the one where the computer is making it is no one for everyone's sake. I don't know. I don't know. I'm definitely getting lost here. Cut this part out.

GAVIN LODGE: Ha! No, this is the juiciest part.



(34:32)

ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah, I would say short answer, art is an expression of humanity one way or another. is a creativity is just seeing where you can go. I mean, that's fun. That's a fun thing for people to do. It's the thing for people to do. Well, you know, some people like solving problems. Some people like just generally helping and we're all sort of doing that. But I think, yeah, what I love to do is just to sit and to make things up and express that out.

You know, it's funny now that I'm talking out loud though, because you know, like I said, I have ideas that I don't actually get out there. So those are ideas just for myself that aren't, you know, they aren't for anyone. That, that's still, is that as valuable as AI art? Boy. You've got me down. You know what? You should probably cut most of this out, please.

(35:14)

GAVIN LODGE: Big questions, big questions.

So then, in everything that we've talked about here, I am still curious, what is art's purpose if not to make money?

ELLIS ROSEN: I would say it is to explore the territory of one's creativity.

Whether or not you express that to everyone else or keep it for yourself is a different kind of question. But I would say that that's an essential ingredient. And when the computer is doing it for you, you're not really engaging in it in a way that I would think is the entire purpose of it, which is something that is for..

GAVIN LODGE: Mm.

ELLIS ROSEN: ...people and should be made by people.

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah. Well, because earlier you had, you had inferred there's a relationship in art, right? Between, between two parties, the maker, the maker and the reader or the, the, the artist and the consumer or whatever you want to call the person in enjoying the art. so it seems that you're also inferring that there is something inherently there in arts. Purpose is a relationship.

ELLIS ROSEN: Yep. Right.

Yeah, at least in the expression of it, because I'm not trying to say that when you come up with an idea just for no one or for yourself that isn't



like, doesn't necessarily not have value. mean, it doesn't have, certainly doesn't have value monetarily, but it doesn't.

That's still part of you and your own. There is a value in there. When you express it, when you communicate, when you have that relationship between maker and viewer, I think that seems to me a more important... I know, important is not the right word.

At least when it comes to communicating with our fellow human beings, that is an essential ingredient. And I think when you take the person out of that, one way or another, whether you're just doing it for yourself or whether a computer is doing it for a person, you are missing something valuable there. I will say that I...

I know people who believe AI can be an interesting tool for art, and I'm not necessarily against that idea. It can help you generate ideas for sure. And then you take those ideas and like you make them your own. I can't figure out why that would necessarily be bad outside of just endorsing AI, which can be sort of a dangerous thing, I suppose, for artists in this moment.

GAVIN LODGE: Mm.

(37:48)

ELLIS ROSEN: But yeah, there are certainly people who use it as a tool and absolutely. I mean, I think there can be absolutely good applications for AI art too, outside of art in particular. even I suppose to a degree in art, you know, my...

GAVIN LODGE: Mm.

ELLIS ROSEN: My fellow cartoonist Amy Kurzweil has written a whole book on this and she has a lot of really great thoughts on it. She's much smarter than me. I'm sure that if you play this and if I share this, there are going to be people who know a lot more about AI yelling at me for one thing or another. And to those people, sorry or I'm not sorry or I don't know. It doesn't matter. Don't yell at me. I don't like it.

(38:17)

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah. Bringing this then to a head also, what is it that you would say makes your life most meaningful?

ELLIS ROSEN: Again, outside of family, we're talking here, right?



GAVIN LODGE: Well, no, actually, this is the part of the, as we wrap up this conversation, honestly, we at 4A Arts talk about a well-being economy as well. And what it means to take some of the monetization out of the way we measure pleasure or success or meaning. So...

ELLIS ROSEN: Success.

GAVIN LODGE: Family, this is where you get to wax poetically about good food, good friends, good family, and being able to be creative. But what's your formula?

(39:13)

ELLIS ROSEN: Wow, okay. First of all, it's so intrinsically tied for those things that it's so hard to imagine it not. yeah, what you were just saying, how'd you phrase that in very beginning again? You said something that really resonated.

GAVIN LODGE: I guess I said, think I, shamefully, I think I started with food for one thing, but we, guess when we talk about a wellbeing economy and trying to measure what it means, what pleasure and success are.

ELLIS ROSEN: No.

Right, success, that's it. That's the word. Because there is this horrible aspect to all of this, which is like this feeling of success and how tied it is to how much you sell or how many likes you get or if you can whatever finish something or I don't know.

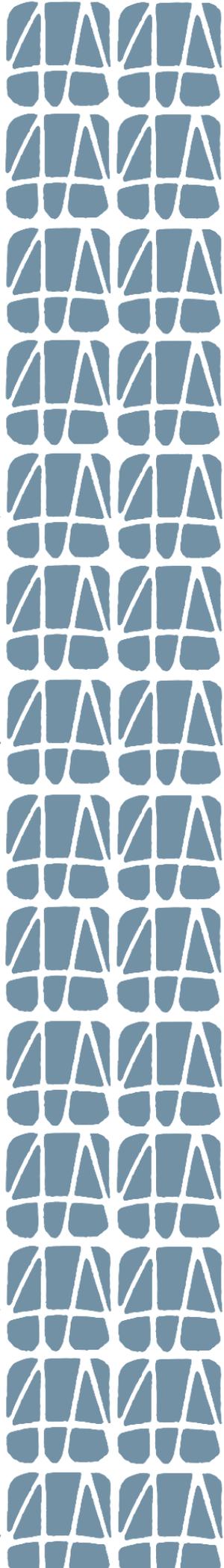
That is the most toxic aspect of all of this. And I think this pressure of success and when I can acknowledge that it's toxic and also acknowledge that I'm fully completely like in that stew myself. I mean, that's what worries me the most and I hate it. And when I hate myself and I hate my art and I'm like, I'm failing, I'm failing, I'm failing.

It's all tied to this notion of success. When I'm getting jealous of my peers, which is a terrible thing, people should not do that. Again, I do it. I'm not saying I don't. I'm not above any of this stuff, but I wish I were because that is the, success really is the word there. What I would say, so what was the question?

(40:22)

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah, you're right.

Back to what is it that makes your life - you, Ellis Rosen - most meaningful?



ELLIS ROSEN: Yeah, well, family, mean, yeah, first and foremost, that is it. My children, my wife, my relatives, my parents, brother, that is the whole point of everything. But that being said, I would not be a very happy person if I could not engage in my own creativity to one extent or another.

If I had all the money in the world, I would be hanging out. I'd be, yeah. I mean, there's aspects of family that aren't fun. I don't like going to PTA meetings. I don't like, you know, trying to stop the fights between my two kids. yeah, I'd be maximizing the amount of joy that I can get from that. And I would be taking still as much time as I can.

GAVIN LODGE: Ha ha ha ha.

(41:23)

ELLIS ROSEN: For creativity. would still want to write a book even if I make no money off of it. I mean, if I ever wrote a book and sold it, I would not make money off of it, regardless, no matter what life I'm living in here. yeah, because the process of coming up with that is so much fun. And that is the joy. So it's both. It's everything. mean, I don't think I would be happy if I didn't have...

GAVIN LODGE: Mm.

ELLIS ROSEN: ...one or the other, but you know, got to family first because it's true. And also it makes me sound crazy if I don't. So that is it. Yeah.

(41:54)

GAVIN LODGE: Right, right. final question here. What cultural experience are you most looking forward to right now?

ELLIS ROSEN: We have tickets to "Mary" which I don't know a ton about, but I hear is exactly right up my alley. So I'm very excited about that.

GAVIN LODGE: Mm hmm. Is it still off Broadway or is it a Broadway show right now? I forget.

ELLIS ROSEN: I do not know. They certainly had the prices of what I feel like Broadway is.

GAVIN LODGE: And it's, it's...

ELLIS ROSEN: Also, I share a Shutter account, my friend Johnny Napoli. And it's the best streaming service of them all. Just like horror. God, I love it. Just so much fun stuff in that. yeah.



(42:30)

GAVIN LODGE: Ha ha ha! Awesome, Ellis, thank you for waxing poetic and ontological and in all the ways. Thank you very much for joining us here.

ELLIS ROSEN: Sure. Thank you so much for having me. And if anyone could decipher any bit of meaning from my weird ramblings, I hope it helps.

42:53)

GAVIN LODGE: Thank you so much. And *Framing the Hammer* is written, produced, and edited by 4A Arts American Alliance of Artists and Audiences. We invite you to join our own other podcasts, ideas and initiatives, to have grassroots organizing for the arts turn arts consumers into arts advocates nationwide. Come check us out at 4AArts.org. Thank you.