Desmond Peeples (00:00:05):

This is Vermont Made, the show where Vermont creatives sit down with me, Desmond Peeples to wax on about one thing they've made. In this episode, I had the pleasure of meeting a local champion of the arts, John Killacky, who for many years, was the executive director of The Flynn in Burlington, and who now is a representative for South Burlington in the state legislature.

We spoke about his new book, Because Art, which collects 56 pieces of commentary, critique and conversation published throughout John's 30 year career as an artist and arts administrator for major institutions around the country. The book includes interviews and profiles of artists, including Alison
Bechdel, Keith Haring, Tony Kushner, and many more, as well as John's insights into countless corners of the art world from curation to philanthropy, to advocacy, and even what a post pandemic art world might look like. As you can imagine, our conversation is very rich, so let's get to it.

In 2018, you retired from your position as executive director of The Flynn, then you became a state legislator for South Burlington. Then a couple of years later, you released this book. Why now?

**John Killacky (00:01:22):**

Well, I think the pandemic had a lot of us thinking internally about what's really the meaning and what can we do in our world to make a difference. And at the same time I was talking to my younger brother, there's five children in our family. I'm the middle child, first boy, and two older sisters, two
younger brothers. And my youngest brother told me that my father had given him a cassette tape and I'd never heard this. And I said, "Well, what's on the cassette tape?" And my brother said, "Well, dad said that if any of the kids ever wanted to listen to what he had done in his life, he just did a small narration of his life." And I thought, well, that's interesting what would be my cassette tape in my life?

And I've been very blessed, I've been published in over 30 articles since the nineties. And so I went back and looked through all those articles and thought, "Is there a cassette tape here that kind of unites myself as an artist, myself as an administrator working in philanthropy and now working as a legislator?"

So I culled it down to 56 pieces and it didn't have a shape at first, but then as I got these pieces together, I thought, well ... First part's really about
commentaries that I've given both early on in my career and 2021 commentaries as well. So right up to the present. And the second part is profiles I've written about artists, but it's artists from the seventies and the eighties and the nineties, and many of them had died from AIDS or ... I realized in telling their stories, I was able to tell my own because I moved to New York in the seventies and we can talk about that and then lived through the AIDS crisis and the culture wars and worked in philanthropy and as a legislator. And so I thought I really can tell my story by talking about those artists.

And then the last part of the book is interviews, 10 interviews with artists like Alison Bechdel, Tony Kushner, Meredith Monk, Bill T. Jones, many of them, heroes of mine, inspirations of mine. And I really felt like those interviews, even though they were done over the last 20 years were really about
resilience. And I thought, "That's what we all need
to understand as artists that your career has many
ups and downs and life has many ups and downs
and you don't always make good work, you're not
always popular, but you persevere and you resist."
All of my artists in the book and myself have a
political edge.
So that's how the book came to be, called Because
Art, and it's gotten a really nice reception, which
I'm grateful for. Because as an artist, as you know,
Desmond, you put something out in the world and
it's like, "Okay, will anyone care about this? Does it
matter to anybody?" Anyway, I'm grateful for
those that have read it and responded.

**Desmond Peeples (00:04:51):**

Well, I think there's a lot of great work in there
and I love so many of the conversations you had,
talking to people like Alison Bechdel, your profiles
of Keith Haring, and I particularly love your piece about Joan Rivers when she came to Burlington to perform at The Flynn. I love that.

**John Killacky (00:05:13):**

A lot of people do and most of the artists are very avant garde in the book, but Joan wasn't of course, but she was avant garde in light of if you think of her as a female comic in the sixties.

**Desmond Peeples (00:05:23):**

Absolutely.

**John Killacky (00:05:23):**

She was very radical and she was so fierce on stage and so politically incorrect, but so kind. And again, her life was about perseverance and
resilience. Her husband committed suicide and she didn't realize that there was no money. So she had to start and start again. After rehearsal, I gave her her check and I said, "We're really excited you're here Ms. Rivers." First thing she did is open the check. And she said, "That's the right amount." I thought that...

Desmond Peeples (00:06:04):
That was professional.

John Killacky (00:06:05):
... thank heavens I didn't make a mistake, she probably wouldn't have performed. But it was a great evening at The Flynn
Desmond Peeples (00:06:15):  
Before I forget, this book had a little bit of support from the Arts Council, an arts development grant.

John Killacky (00:06:22):  
That's correct. I applied to get copywriting support because the 56 pieces were all published, but they were published under different editors with different style guides. Some were speeches, some were Vermont Public Radio Commentary, some were in Digger, some were in The Gay and Lesbian Review and everyone had their own style guide. So what I really needed to do in putting these together is to make them seem a whole. And so I worked with a copywriter and it was important to me. And so I'm grateful for the Arts Council for the grant, because it's very hard when you've written things to go back in and make them stylistically congruent with the other pieces.
So luckily I had not only one copywriter, but I had three other friends help with copywriting to make it consistent. Because now, the pieces live as they live here, not as they live there. And I did put a note in that things were edited for consistency and it was hard looking at pieces from 1993 that, did I become a better writer over time? I hope so, but I didn't ... I wanted to rewrite them and I thought, "No, no, that's not fair. I can tighten them up, but I can't rewrite them." And so there's a whole range over the last 30 years of my writing.

**Desmond Peeples (00:07:59):**

You mentioned a couple times that a lot of the artists that you were working with, that you interviewed were avant garde artists really responding to the politics of their time and whose lives were really personally affected by the politics of their time. What do you think artists today can
take from those artists and their responses to crises of their times?

John Killacky (00:08:29):

Well, I'll walk through a little bit. At the age of 20, it was 1973, I moved to New York and back then it was post Stonewall, and I was a classical ballet dancer. I get to New York and I see a whole other world exploding out of the tritus of what New York is. And punk started happening, people were doing postmodernism.

And I went from my classical bubble into this world of questioning everything. And Charles Ludlam was doing high camp stuff and thought it was fantastic. I was out as a gay man. I was in a play called Coming Out, which I'm told was a first gay history play. I don't know. I'm nervous when someone's the first of anything, and friends of mine in the classical world would say, "Well, is it art or
politics?" And it's like, "Well, I don't know. It's both, I'm working really hard as an actor here and it's a well developed script and so it's both."

So that was important as my grounding of that art and politics were the same and that artists were on the ground floor of this. And then fast forward a decade into the AIDS crisis and artists were often the first responders. Act Up was a very vibrant or organizations filled with artists doing these very dramatic street demonstrations and the visual iconography that happened of the silence equals death logos and things like that, were very powerful and it really showed that artists could really have a say here.

So when I was then at the Walker Arts Center, we brought many of those artists forward who were coming out of the AIDS crisis, the Karen Finleys, the Bill T. Jones, the Tim Millers, the Holly Hughes, David Warren Novich, and many of these artists
really upset the mainstream. And the nineties were the culture wars, and I was very involved in that. When Karen Finley came in 1990, we had a series called Cultural Infidels. And I wanted to show the young provocateurs in relation to the Andy Warhols and others Jack Smiths and other folks. And the Vice Squad showed up opening night. "Why are you here?" And they said, "Well, we got a complaint." And it's like, "Well, she hasn't performed here. So how could someone complain about it?" "Well, we've been told it's obscene." And I said, "No."

And so they came in and they left midway. They realized there was nothing obscene, but it was an angry woman doing a cathartic performance and at one point she was nude and she's really screaming about inequities and misogyny and homophobia. And what was interesting to live through that is people were frightened by the image in their mind
about it, people were thrilled in the performances. It was affirming to see someone like that. But there was this fierce anger that was happening.

Bill T. Jones also did a piece called Still Here. And he worked with people facing life threatening illnesses, and he workshopped it around the country, and when it was premiered, Arlene Croce, who was the most preeminent dance critic at The New Yorker, refused to review it. She called it victim art. She said, "How can I not empathize with someone dying that's on the stage, that's an unfair position to put a critic." And I was like, "What is wrong with you, Arlene Croce? What are you talking about?" "Greneker?" "What's that about?" People can look at paintings, but the living artist embodying these issues, frighten people.

Later on in 1994, we had Ron Athey, who was this punk guy from Los Angeles who was a body artist and the neo primitive movement. And he did
piercing on stage. And that upset the cart once more, people were terrified in AIDS hysteria that was there about body fluid. And so for this gay man to be putting needles in, and people were like ... So anyone who saw it, saw it was a piece about redemption, anyone who heard about it, it upset their world. And so people like Senator Jesse Helms wanted to deny grants. And we had to sign anti obscenity forms and stuff, it was just insane time.

But the radical Christian right mobilized, and this was pre internet and Donald Wildman and the American Family Association gave out my home number and address to his followers. These letters were unbelievable that I got, and then I would get calls saying, "We got the abortion doctor, you're next." And I was like, "Wait a minute, these people are talking about God and they're threatening to kill me because of something they didn't see, they
only heard about?" It's a long way of trying to answer your question here that, I've always seen that these kind of catalytic artists are the most powerful. And in hindsight, you look back at them and it is the same.

Stravinsky, even now, whoever wrote us a play surprise me, but when he was first heard, The Rite of Spring upset people. And so I think change does happen from the edges. And I was grateful that I had that opportunity to work at places like the Walker Arts in Minneapolis that that happened.

Today, it's a very interesting moment that we're living in. And I think it's a liminal moment because the art world got pretty complacent.

And now with the pandemic, and I think the racial reckoning that's happening in this country, it's cracking things wide open again, and we have to start a new. And so I think artists have now a more urgent relationship to the now and they're
talking about work in a different way. So I think once again, we see some of the most powerful things coming out of culturally specific communities and it's coming out of anger, it's erupting again. And I'm thrilled for that because I think it is an infusion that is much needed.

Desmond Peeples (00:15:19):

The term culture wars, it's interesting, actually, just yesterday I was reading an article, I think in Seven Days about the response in Vermont to the critical race theory controversy. And someone was saying that the culture wars are alive and well today. I'm just interested in your thoughts on that and its relationship to your experience in the culture wars as they were first iterating.
John Killacky (00:15:53):

Well, I would say that my experience in the nineties of the culture wars was informed a lot because the NEA put out this thing that we had to sign a pledge if we received money that the work wouldn't be obscene. And so I said to the Walker Arts Center where I was and I said, "These artists are not obscene. I have no reservation signing this." It silenced a lot of other institutions, but some people refused to sign this, which meant that they declined getting money from the National Endowment for the Arts. And one of them was Bella Lewinsky, who was a choreographer in Los Angeles. And it was really interesting to me because she is a modern choreographer, abstract works, so there's nothing that I see as overtly political in her work.

So I called her up. I knew her. And I said, "Bella I'm really interested in this. Why you declined the
money from the National Theaters by not signing that pledge." And she said, "Well, I'm older than you, John and I lived through the fifties during the McCarthy era when Joseph McCarthy was subpoenaing people to come and talk about communists in the arts world or homosexuals in the art world or whatever the other was that he was starting to demonize. And there was a knock on my door and someone was there to deliver a subpoena to me to appear before the Joseph McCarthy hearings. And I opened the door, and when this person went to hand it to me, I said to that person, well, my dear, I'm a dancer, not an opera singer." And she slammed the door, refused to take the subpoena. And she said, "I'm not going to capitulate 40 years later. I did it in the fifties, I'm not going to do it in the nineties."

So I think that Bella would say her culture wars were then with Joseph McCarthy trying to destroy
things, mine might have been with Jesse Helms. And now in the legislature of Vermont, the culture wars are really interesting is really being played out on school boards across our state where the schools boards are being demonized, terrorized, attacked for this critical race theory that is not being taught in our schools. And it's a white society just trying to hold itself together and not crack apart, but it's happening anyway. And this thing about, well, people are too on to learn this. It's like, "Really, the truth. We shouldn't learn the truth." So it's been interesting to watch it play out on our school board in a very divisive, ugly way. So yes, I'd say that's the culture wars of today.

Desmond Peeples (00:18:51):
There was a phrase you used before, which you use in the book as well, culturally specific organizations. Just a moment ago, you were
saying how today the most provocative work is coming from culturally specific organizations. Can you just define that phrase for me quickly? What exactly you mean by culturally specific?

**John Killacky (00:19:11):**

Well, I would say, in the eighties, it was probably defined by organizations based in communities of color led by artists of color. I think in the nineties, it broadened to be a Pan Asian thing, a Latinx community thing, not just like the Galeria de la Rosa was pretty much a Chicano focused organization in its beginnings. And then it really opened up to a much more Latinx experience as it evolved and changed.

I would say that by the late nineties, the queer community also could claim right to having culturally specific organizations where artists felt like they could make their work and feel
empowered by their communities. So I would say it's evolved over time. In Vermont, it's an interesting issue of what is a culturally specific organization when it is so predominantly White, but I think we see across the state a number of interesting artists working in organizations that are, I would say burgeoning, beginning to take root in communities as they should.

I live in South Burlington and when I worked at The Flynn Center we brought in a lot of artists from around the world, but also we began to look at artists from around the world and our own communities. And so we started a new voices project that was really musicians that were living in Winooski and Burlington, and they were from many different cultures from around the world. And so I wouldn't say that is culturally specific, but it is about engendering cultural pluralism.
Desmond Peeples (00:21:16):

Engendering cultural pluralism, yes. So in one of your essays or commentaries in the book, it's called Regrets of a Former Arts Funder. You talk about the evolution of arts philanthropy and how efforts at funding these culturally specific organizations have come up short. What progress have you seen since writing that essay? That was in 2011, I believe.

John Killacky (00:21:49):

That was in 2011 and I'd just left 14 years in the Bay Area where I was living. I had run the Yerba Buena Center and worked at the San Francisco Foundation. And so I both was running an organization that was supposed to be about cultural pluralism of the Bay Area because before it was built a survey was done and it showed that 85% of philanthropic dollars went to 17
organizations in the Bay Area. And I think you can name them. They're called ballet museum orchestra.

But what was fascinating is there is no majority culture in the Bay Area. And so to have this systemic racism be seen in that way, it was pretty startling to people. So the Yerba Buena Center was built on top of the new convention center. And its mission was to be about embracing the cultural pluralism of the Bay Area. So right from the beginning, it had a different mission than many of the other organisms.

But 14 years later after I was leaving the Bay Area to move to Vermont, I wrote this piece. Because I found it interesting that after 40 years of affirmative action funding, which was both federally and with the state of California, really targeted to culturally specific organizations and these were pretty much communities led by people
of color that they were still underdeveloped. But what I realized when I look back at the funding, it was all for technical assistance with marketing or administrative stuff. It was short term. It wasn't really about supporting the artistry because I think philanthropy didn't know how to judge quality, but they didn't support it either. So what happened is there was an underinvestment in artists that artists were not given resources to develop their work.

There was this structure that happened to help, but it was all short term. And I think living in the Bay Area, I realized, well, there's actually a different model that philanthropy should have used and it really was the venture capital model. And I write about that in the book too. One third of your investments are going to fail, one third's not going to do so well, and one third's going to pay off really well. And I thought, philanthropy should look at that. They also should invest long term and not
just these short little pidly grants that we're giving to people.

And I would say, what's interesting right now, Desmond is the national funders like the Ford's and the [inaudible 00:24:29] are doing that right now. They are investing in some culturally specific organizations like Philadanco, a wonderful dance company in Philadelphia. Joan Myers Brown, she's now gotten a multiyear grant, I think $400,000. That's how these organizations can really grow and thrive. They weren't thriving because I think the funding model was wrong.

And then I also did a survey while I was at the San Francisco Foundation, it was a national survey. We paid for the Bay Area part, but it was 10 in cities. And it showed that 50% of all grants to artists in this country are under $2,000. You can't do very much with $2,000.
Desmond Peeples (00:21:49):
Right.

John Killacky (00:25:20):
You're a choreographer working with a group you
don't pay for very much that way. If you're a
filmmaker, I've made 16 films, $2,000 does get
you very far in making a film. So it's an interesting
thing that in a way, the American funding system
distrusts artists, they don't want to really invest
there. So I think it's that undercapitalization, and I
think it happened because of the culture wars of
the nineties, because by 1995, the National
Endowment for the Arts stopped it's grants to
individual artists because of this. Then the states
start stopped giving the grants to individual artists
and corporations decided they wouldn't. So
everyone started supporting institutions versus
artists. And I think it just has to be both.
Desmond Peeples (00:26:16):
Do you think the support of institutions over artists that came out during the culture wars was because the artists are the ones whose perspectives change the institutions and institutions provide more static structure?

John Killacky (00:26:37):
Well, I sent the book to the director of the Walker at the time, Kathy Halbreich, who lived through these culture wars with me. And she told me that it was so refreshing to visit those times and realize how powerful artists like Ron Athey and Robert Mapplethorpe and Karen Finley and Bill T. Jones were and how thrilling it was in hindsight to have come and challenge the notions of what a contemporary art institution should be. And she
said, it changed the Walker for the better, it changed her for the better, but sometimes in the controversy, it didn't feel like it was going towards the better, but in hindsight, it was.

And, I think earlier I said that change happens from the fringe. And I see that in my avant garde world, I see that in my political world, I see that now in this critical race theory war that we're having, because they're all culture wars in Vermont that it's these fringe groups and fringe people at school boards that are screaming and yelling and they're silencing our school boards, they're silencing our schools. And it's just a small group of people, which is terrifying. But that's how change happens.

**Desmond Peeples (00:28:04):**

Well, earlier you were talking about how the artists that you were working with in the nineties and
eighties were screaming and yelling, making their rage shown, and to put that beside the screaming and yelling, which we hear now, I think the loudest people are coming from a place of silencing and fear of change rather than embracing and working with change. I don't know. Where do you see the artists that are really pushing the edge right now?

**John Killacky (00:28:57):**

Steve McQueen was our artistic director at The Flynn when I was the executive director. And I would always say, "I don't like pretty, very much." And I said, "Pretty's nice and it's fun to go to the theater and be assured about something, but I actually like to have my mind scrambled and I like more assaultive work." It's an interesting balance when you program a 1400 seat theater, and then you have a 200 seat theater. You can't put many challenging works in the 1400 seat theater
because it just isn't going to work. You can't put them in a small part, but you also have to mix it up a little bit. You can't just tokenize having the radical people downstairs, but there were some incredible pieces that I saw down there and it's ... John Jaspers is a choreographer and he did a small piece, it was two men and two women.

So we were in the Flynn space and it was a square thing and audiences were on all four sides. So you were very close to the performers. And at one point, the women, I think, were topless. I think they had skirts or something on, and then the men were complete nude and pretty much the dance became about their buttocks. And it was such a startling image that we were so close up to this, and it was unsettling to people and it made people really uncomfortable. And I thought, "How thrilling it is that we have to be uncomfortable and the theater can bring that to us." So there's someone
like a John Jaspers who still makes ... It's gorgeous work. It's not ugly at all, completely gorgeous, but it's unsettling.

There were comedians who came down and did pieces about rape and it was personal narratives. That was hard to hear, and to have it in a comedic form was a little bizarre. Joan Rivers the first five minutes on her, she insulted everybody in my drawings, I said, "Oh my God." And she was up stair. I thought, "I'm going to get a lot of calls about this." But within 10 minutes, everyone had been ... She's telling people that they were too fat or she doesn't like the dykes because the gays like her more than the dykes and think the dykes should leave. And the old people, she's tired of old people. And it was like, my head was spinning. And after about 10 minutes, everybody in the audience was insulted and everyone exhaled and then
enjoyed it. Provocateurs do that in a way. I want more of it in my life. Ugly is what interests me.

Desmond Peeples (00:32:04):
This all tires back, I think, to a concept that you bring up in the very beginning of the book, the beginner's mind, which is something that has guided you throughout your life. Can you talk a little bit about that?

John Killacky (00:32:20):
Sure. I was raised an Irish Catholic boy, working class family in Chicago, and I went off to New York in '73 and the Patty Smiths, the Philip Glasses, the Meredith Monks, the Laura Deans, these artists that I'd began to know and work with and stuff, they were all interested in Buddhism. And so I thought, "Well, I want to know more about this."
And certainly John Cage, who is like my big daddy of inspiration, he was very involved in Buddhism as well. And so I really wanted to understand an Eastern thought. And so I started studying both with a Zen teacher.

I had a boyfriend who went every Friday and Saturday to this Zen teacher. And I said, "Well, I'll go with you." And he said, "He only has four students. I don't think he'll take you." So I got a meeting with the Zen and the guy said "Well, what do you want to do?" I said, "Well, Richard's here, I want to be with my boyfriend and I'd love to study with you." And he looked at me and said, "I'm too old to take on new people." He said, "So you can come and you can sit in meditation, but you're not to ask any questions when it's a question and answer, period."

And so for years, I sat in silence with this authority figure in the room who refused to recognize me,
who I wanted desperately to be recognized by. I wanted to be his student, right? And so that was really interesting to just sit through all this. And then I went to the Tibetans because they would do teachings and were more open. I eventually went and lived in Sikkim, which is between Tibet and India. It now doesn't exist. But in '79, it was a small country and where there was a Tibetan, Buddhist monastery. India has taken over the country and it's just called India now. So the land still exists. It's called India now, but it was an established state...

Desmond Peeples (00:34:23):
What was the name of the country before?

John Killacky (00:34:23):
Sikkim.
Desmond Peeples (00:34:24):
Sikkim.

John Killacky (00:34:25):
S I K K I M.

Desmond Peeples (00:34:27):
Okay. Gosh, never even heard of Sikkim.

John Killacky (00:34:29):
And so I lived for a month in Rumtek Sikkim in this monastery, and it changed my life. I watched people being healed, I watched miracles happen, I watched the rain being stopped, I watched the monks leave their bodies. It taught me that really, anything was possible. This is a long story, but I
came back to San Francisco, because I thought I was done in New York after I did my vision quest in the Himalaya mountains, and I was going to start a new and stuff. And it was a horrible time. Harvey Milk was assassinated, the previous week, Jonestown happened where 900 people were poisoned to death from a San Francisco cult basically. And it completely freaked me out. But I got a call that the Roshi, that Japanese teacher who wouldn't take me on as a student, was coming back from his temple in Japan, and would I meet him at the airport? He was going to stop in San Francisco.

So I was like, "Oh my God, this guy's going to finally take me on as a student." Well, he got to the airport and he apparently didn't feel well. And instead of me meeting him, he directly went to the hospital and he died. It was the most profound Zen experience because here I thought I finally was
going to be a student and it didn't happen. So I called Japan and they said, "Well, we know because when he left the dog cried and we thought something was up. So we went into his room and he had laid out his cremation ropes. And he also wrote his last poem about, even though the master is gone, spring blossoms will come again."

So we had a service for him in San Francisco and then I was handed his ashes and they said, "Well, you should bring them home." And I said, "No, no, I live here." And they said, "No, you need to complete the journey." So I got on a plane to New York and brought the ashes with me and we dispersed the ashes in New York with his students. But, I think those moments were about the now. And I think I've learned that throughout my life. I was a dancer and then I was asked to manage a dance company. Well, I didn't know anything about managing a dance company. So I approached it
like a rehearsal process where, "Okay, you're going to learn something." And I would say, throughout my career, I went from that to working at the Pew Foundation where I was managing 23 million dollars a year to working at the Walker, running the Yerba Buena, running The Flynn, that budget was seven and half million.

I always called on the artist in myself to figure out what to do here. Because when an artist is making something, if it's working, you can try to make it better. And if it's not working, you drop it, you try something else. You don't just keep saying, "I'm going to do it this way, this way." And now as a legislator, I'm so grateful that I've made films because you could storyboard a film, but once you shoot the film and you start editing it, you have to forget about your storyboard and work with the material you have. And I would say the same thing is happening whether I'm working on substance
use disorders, I'm working on minimum wage changes and looking at some of those exceptions that were put in, Franklin Delano Roosevelt put them in, and there's different iterations that happen.

We start with an idea, I propose something with legal counsel, we draft it. We start getting testimony from people with the lived experience of the different issues we're working on. I do a lot around homelessness as well, and that changes the bill itself. It informs the bill, and then it comes to the committee. The committee makes its changes. It goes to the floor of the house. The floor body makes its changes. If it passes, it goes to the Senate. The Senate makes its change, comes back to the house to reconcile. And then if it passes, it goes to the governor to veto or to accept. The same process is how a film is made.
So even though these are very different worlds, I felt like my artist self has been able to inform my process all along. I'm really grateful for that because I see colleagues getting stuck, and they're like, "Well, let's try something different."

**Desmond Peeples (00:39:32):**

Colleagues in the legislature getting stuck?

**John Killacky (00:39:35):**

Colleagues are very stuck in the legislature, yes. A lot of people have served a long time and I think that people need to be able to listen more deeply to people. And it is very hard for me as a human being, to listen to people with different opinions who are strident and yelling. And I really, have found that I have to try to understand what they're actually trying to say, make sure that I hear them.
I don't have to agree with them, but I have to find a way to hear them. And that's a struggle.

It's a struggle for me when people are so [ignorant 00:40:22] about vaccine mandates and they don't want them. Last week we passed a, what's called a mask mandate, but it wasn't a mask mandate. It was for every town, local control there. So Underhill can determine what it wants to do, Burlington can determine what it wants to do, because Brattleboro had passed a mask in indoors and the governor turned it down. So it was really important to give it to towns that ... But when people are so opposed to it and feel like it's taking away their freedom, I'm trying to think, "What freedom are they to talking about?" So it's been difficult for me, but I actually try then to sit with the Rochi again. Just try to hear what people are saying, not to agree, but just to try to understand
where they're coming from. We've gotten very philosophical here.

**Desmond Peeples (00:41:30):**

Yeah, we are. I like it that way.

**John Killacky (00:41:32):**

Okay. I did, in the book, have a piece called Imagining A Post Pandemic Arts World. And it's fascinating right now because in the sixties, everything was stripped down. Peter Brook and those folks were just stripping everything down, John Cage was destroying what conversational notions of music were and a lot of change happened. And I thinking that we need to almost go back to that because when I watched major institutions close down during that pandemic, the leaders freaked out and it's like, "Okay, we can't
do anything." I was like, "That's not true. Your mission is not your building. Your mission is supporting artists or engaging audiences or." And I said, "So there's many ways."

So slowly, many institutions transitioned a bit to virtual space. And some did it very successfully and others not so successfully. But now as we look to go back, I don't think arts organizations can have the same kind of transactional relationship that they had with their audiences. Like, "Here's good art, you consume it." Because I think what has to happen is that arts organizations have to be community centers on a virtual space and in a real space, they have to be community centers, which means that there's a different relationship to the audience.

And I think one thing I hope that will change is the paradigm of what curating means for an arts organization because it's not the older, middle
aged, white male or female director determining what culture is to impose on a community. It's really about inviting in a co-curation of meaning with a community. And that means different choices, different interpretations. And I think that would be a great thing if that results from the pandemic, because if we rush back to put things together as they were, we've lost any of the opportunities of let's begin again, kind of beginner's mind thing that we've been talking about.

So I hope there's a change because it's a real opportunity and one that's necessary. I say it's the pandemic, but it's the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd had a profound impact because it really was the next racial reckoning in our country. The sixties there certainly was racial reckoning, but this was a profound thing that happened. And I saw all arts organizations say, "Yeah, black lives
matter." I was like, "Okay, show me. Show me your staffing, show me your board, show me your artists. Does it really matter or is this a slogan for you?"

And so I see in Vermont, even our organizations trying to dismantle its structural whiteness and trying to figure out what to do and the Sheldon down in Middlebury and the Fleming here in Burlington are really trying to decolonize their collections and they're having different interpretations about it. And these things are long overdue. And I think that that's a changed paradigm that I think is going to revitalize these organizations and make them relevant to the communities in which they exist.

**Desmond Peeples (00:45:45):**

That idea of arts relevance to the community and it's integration into parts of the community that
might not otherwise be seen as connected to the arts, you talk a bit in the book about that. I think seeing through your experience as a legislator, how few people see the arts as connected to the rest of the community. Can you talk a little bit about?

John Killacky (00:46:17):

Sure. I learned a lot in my career about the isolation and the siloing of the arts. So in the culture wars in the nineties, there was Minneapolis at a contemporary art institution. And I didn't have any relationships with any of the politicians with any of the school boards with any of my neighbors. It was just, I kept throwing contemporary art at people and expecting them to come and see stuff. And so I realized, when I needed community support, I hadn't done any community building. And so I think that changed. There's a great
interview with Tony Kushner in my book where he talks about how artists and arts organizations have to become politically engaged, they have to find their own agency. And I think that that's something that I've ever since tried to do. But in philanthropy, when I worked both with the Pew Foundation and San Francisco Foundation, it was interesting because the arts funding I did, the poverty funding someone else did, and we never left our silos.

And I felt like that was really wrong. People did it this way. And so at the San Francisco Foundation, I realized that the filmmakers were making really interesting political work, documenting filmmakers, but they were about the environment, they were about criminal justice reform. So I said to my colleagues, "You each give me $50,000 out of your portfolio and we're going to start a social documentary fund. And we will vet them together."
If there's an environmental proposal, you can look at it and you could tell me if this is congruent things you're seeing in your field and stuff." And that was terrific, but that has changed behavior.

Here's something I wrote in the book, it's from that arts advocacy through a politician's lens is the piece you were referring to. And this is what I wrote, "People living through generational destitution, addiction and trauma need the arts to help with healing. More money is not needed to diversify audiences for major institutions. Investments need to be made to enable all community members to be enriched by art and culture in order to live more resilient lives. And so I felt like just giving money to the museums, to the VSO, to The Flynns, to the Paramounts, just to try to diversify their programing and do outreach, isn't really enough. It's really about what can we do? Like the women's
prison in South Burlington is in my legislative district. So I'm in the program. And if there is a hell in Vermont, it's that women's prison. I haven’t been to the men's prison so I can’t compare, but it's ... And arts are so needed there. There had been writing programs there, there aren't currently. There could be dance programs. There could be so many things, storytelling, able to have some of the women find their own voice could be life changing.

So I just feel like we have to look at it in a different way. And when I look at the need in our state as a politician, then I have to vote on things. The arts in their own silo just don't really resonate as strongly as arts that are integrated in their communities and making a profound difference where people live.
Desmond Peeples (00:50:24):
Were you involved much with the drafting of the CreateVT Action Plan from the Vermont Creative Network?

John Killacky (00:50:31):
I had some input early on. From your colleagues at the Arts Council, I saw drafts so I made comments on, which I was glad to do. And here's the great thing is, your agency, the Vermont Arts Council and with this creative network plan that has come out has changed the conversation, because it really is about a creative placemaking and what that means and the creative economy, how many people are employed in the creative sectors in Vermont? What kind of money that is? What kind of money is in our communities because of that and those kinds of things. And the legislative seat makes people look and say, "Yes, I understand
now the importance of dance or the museums in our community in a different way."
And so I am grateful for that work and I think it's the path forward. But it always should have been. We're so focused on the studios, the proscenium, the galleries of making the work there. And that's only a piece of our call to conversation in the world. It's only a piece of it. And so we have to flesh that out.

**Desmond Peeples (00:51:56):**
I think the siloing of the arts is what can keep the arts almost neutered. It would make sense to the powers to let be, let's say, to keep artists just in the stadium or in the big gallery, which we talked about this a little bit before how the funding structure rather than funding individual artists might be a safer strategy for institutions themselves.
John Killacky (00:52:48):

But here's the interesting thing is that, my artist self versus my administrative self versus my political self, I have a piece right now up in Israel, that's just a two and a half minute abstract work. And it's basically a close up from below my nose to my chin. And so you only see my mouth and my head is back and there's clear fluid that starts dripping down the sides of my mouth. That's the whole piece, it's an abstract piece. It's beautiful. I love the piece. You look at it and you think, "Is he crying? What's the fluid? Is it sexual? Is it water?" You don't know what it is.

So, I still make these abstract works, or I did a piece recently that I think you saw with a choreographer from the Eiko Otake from New York. And it aired on Vermont PBS, and it was shown on galleries up in Stowe at what was the Helen Day
Art Center now, The Current, in a love show. And it was basically elegies told very simply front onto the camera about our mothers.

First I spoke about my mother then Eiko spoke about her mother. These are small works that I make. And they're very myopic. I'm not really an agitprop artist politically, but if you look at the mouthpiece, some people think it's very sexual. They think it may be cum. And it's like, "Well, you take what you want out of it." That's what's interesting about this. Artists make this work and then it belongs to the viewer. The same thing with my book. I put this together, but it's your book now, it's not my book. It's how you receive it.

So I still believe that you can make these works abstract or literal, it doesn't matter, that don't have to be political. Not everything has to be politicized. But they don't exist by themselves. And so in Israel, the curator he's a great guy, originally
from San Francisco, I knew, and he ran a gallery called the Refusal and Gallery, and he liked my book very much.

And he said, "Well, can I have your book in my exhibition?" And I said, "Well, sure you can, but it doesn't make any sense because it's all about American artists and American experience." He said, "No, no, just the concept, because art, is so interesting." He said, I'm going to name the whole exhibition, because art." And I said, "Well, that's great." And I said, "You can't copyright a title. So great, use it. It's great. I'm thrilled." But I felt like it didn't make sense just to have the books. So the books there, along with this abstract water piece that I did.

So I've been doing a lot of reading about the Fluxus artists that were in the sixties and they did these kinds of body pieces, like the water pieces. It was very influenced by that. And those are radical
notions, right? Because it wasn't about the grand gesture, it was about the very minute things. So things don't have to be overtly political to be radical, but what you have to do is make authentic work. So whenever I make these works about things I care about, and I don't know if anyone's going to find any interest in them whatsoever. And luckily over my life, there has been an audience, and I'm very grateful for that.

We talked a lot about change, and I did write about this time where I was invited by the Mellon Foundation to speak to 15 orchestras. And they weren't the top tier orchestras, they were level B orchestras in the country. And they were having a really hard time with the end of the 20th century in what they were programming. And so the Mellon Foundation brought them together to have a immersion retreat, basically, to talk about new things. And so, since I was one of the guys known
for presenting new work, they asked if I'd present. It was in San Francisco, and I said, "Well, I can, but I don't really work that much in the orchestra world." I said, "But I have an idea."

I said, I want to invite Alice Waters, who was the chef owner of Chez Panisse, which was a revolutionary restaurant in the Bay Area, very high end, beautiful work, and it's really about sourcing with your neighbor farmers and fresh food. And so I said, "I want to invite Alice and see if she'll come and talk about her philosophy of food." And they're like, "Okay, well, this will be interesting for the orchestra people. I don't know how it's going to work." I said, "No, no, it will work. I'll talk to Alice and we'll set."

So Alice came in and she brought some of her chefs. And as she and I talked, the chefs started preparing lunch for the orchestra leaders. But what Alice talked about was diversity and freshness on
her menu were essential. And that at her restaurant, Chez Panisse, there was people known for its quality, its cuisine, how people were treated there. People loved it there. It was hard to get a reservation. You had to wait months in advance for this. But she said that what you have to do is you can't keep the menu the same. Because people will have an exquisite time once and if they have the same exact time, a second time, they'll be disappointed and they may not come anymore. So what you have to do is introduce diversity in an evolving way and have a freshness in it as well. So every time people come, they have that Chez Panisse's experience of excellence, but it's slightly different. And they're like, "They tried something new this time."

And by the end of us talking, I saw the light bulbs going off in the orchestra director's head saying, "I think I get it." We don't have to throw out all our
20th Century Masterpieces, we just have to evolve and not scare our audiences, but change. And then everyone had a meal. And for me, this restart moment really is about that, that you want to make sure people come to the Bridal Burr museum or the Sheldon museum and have that experience they're used to, but it has to change and it has to be fresh and it has to be different to be alive and resonant. So it's all about resiliency. And I'll just end with the title of the book, Because Art

Desmond Peeples (01:00:54):

That's all for our show folks, find out where to get a copy of John's book, Because Art in the show notes at VermontartsCouncil.org/podcast.

Vermont Made is a production of the Vermont Arts Council, the primary provider of funding, advocacy, and info for the arts here in the Abenaki homeland of Ndakinna. Thank you very much for listening.