

Agency for Change Podcast: Stephan Grot, Executive Director, KANEKO

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Stephan Grot:

Be comfortable getting out of your comfort zone because understanding how to navigate through that leads to peace of mind.

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Kelley Peterson:

Art can help people understand their emotions and surroundings by giving the means to experience other ways of life, cultures and feelings. There is an organization in Omaha that offers art exploration opportunities that inspire complete freedom through imagination. Stay with us as we meet a person who is helping make art more accessible for the community and find out how you can go see it for yourself. Hi everyone, this is Kelley Peterson, vice president nonprofit creative director at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today, we're inviting you along as we talk with Stephan Grot, executive director at KANEKO, an artistic venue which aims to encourage and explore creativity through exhibitions, performance, lectures and education. Stephan, I'm eager to talk with you today and learn more about the great impact you are making on the world.

Stephan Grot:

Thanks, Kelley, appreciate you having me on the show.

Kelley Peterson:

For anyone who isn't familiar with KANEKO, can you talk a little about what it is and the art that someone might see there?

Stephan Grot:

Sure. So the elevator speech that I like to give is, KANEKO is a creative exploration center that masquerades as a contemporary art museum. And what I mean by masquerades as a contemporary art museum is we are called a museum, but we don't necessarily associate with that. But if you were to walk into our space at any given moment, really 75% of the time, it's going to look like a contemporary art museum. There will be modern artwork on the wall. There are going to be video installations, lots of different things that one would associate with a modern art museum. The thing that I think differentiates us is what we do with that and sort of the rules that we get to play with that I think are outside of your standard museum model.

Stephan Grot:

And that is, because our mission is about facilitating the creative process and having complete freedom and creativity, we give the artists, the creatives, the scientists, the researchers, the people that we work with, a lot of latitude and decision making with regards to what they want to do in our space and what they want to show in our space. It's not necessarily something that is always going to be an exhibit that you could walk through and look at paintings on the wall or sculpture on the floor. Certainly we have those things, but oftentimes we have things that are a lot more interpretive. Sometimes they are all situational, meaning you have to almost be there in order to experience it. We don't always play by the rules that everybody else does, which I think actually was a very intentional thing from our founders and the artists, and the researchers, and creatives and educators that we work with find it very satisfying.

Kelley Peterson:

I love that statement, "We don't play by the rules." If we could all say that in our professions, and I think marketers get to say that a lot too. So it's one of my favorite things about what I get to do every day. And I appreciate rules, they need to be there, but then how can we push those boundaries? And that's exactly what you do in your line of work too.

Stephan Grot:

The interesting thing about that is, oftentimes while I'm the one who encourages people to get outside of their comfort zone, bend the rules, make our own rules, I'm also the person who has to enforce the rules and make sure that we're staying within some sort of guidelines. And it's a funny conversation, even with my board members where I'm the one who has to say, "Okay, we got to reign it in here. Let's take this dream and turn it into reality now." So it's an interesting dynamic that I have to work with every day.

Kelley Peterson:

Very much. I understand that as well, because you want a brand to go out and be, so there needs to be consistency, there needs to be a same voice. So sometimes we call that being the brand police, but then brands don't, they need to be flexible and revolutionary and how can brand change? That's definitely playing both sides of that coin, like you described for sure. So Stephan, I love hearing about the winding paths and experiences, which lead people to their current roles. Part of your path took you through running your own marketing company, teaching at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, and even co-founding a startup. How did these experiences prepare you to be KANEKO's executive director? And were any of them particularly formative for you?

Stephan Grot:

Yes. Well, so the winding pathway that I took, I wouldn't say that you could train for this job necessarily, nor would I say that I am perfectly trained for this job, except for all of the things that I have done in my professional career. And in fact, just sort of what I like to do out of habit is I learn how to solve problems. I get outside of my comfort zone, I explore new possibilities. I ask a lot of questions. I talk a lot. And what that has done has led me to a lot of different opportunities that were kind of self-formed. So when I started my own company, it was actually a very small two person marketing firm. I was a graphic designer when I graduated Creighton University in 2003. And many years later when I started my own firm, it was just because I had so many side clients from my day job that were asking me to do things that I realized all I needed to do was just take on a few more clients and I'd have a full-time job in and of itself.

Stephan Grot:

That was the start of me just finding lots of different kinds of opportunities, taking conversations that may last years and just connecting those dots and making it so that when the opportunity was ripe, I was able to just kind of jump onto another path and see where that took me. So I've always been very comfortable in sort of exploring what the new possibility is. It's hard to say what the most formative was because they each presented their own opportunity. Having my own company made it so that I really needed to learn how to hustle. Teaching made it so that I was very planned in my communication and making it so that these students who need an awful lot of guidance understood what their plan was and what my expectations were many months in advance.

Stephan Grot:

And then having the startup was really honing my business acumen, making it so that everything from understanding where the funding came from to how to sell it, to make it so that it was an attractive product. And just always thinking about what people were going to be thinking about when they saw our product made it so that I was always kind of trying to get into the mind of the people that I was working with.

Kelley Peterson:

So good. I love the combination of hustle and planning.

Kelley Peterson:

That also sounds like marketing communications, the perfect intermix of some hustle and then, of course, having the business in there as well. To what end are we hustling and planning and what results are we trying to reach? So that sounds like a perfect combo. What classes did you teach?

Stephan Grot:

So I taught graphic design and computer modeling, so 3D animation, motion graphics, et cetera. So I was an adjunct professor for two years during the stint where I had my own marketing company. And I did that for a couple of reasons. And certainly not for the pay. Educators, I have learned firsthand, do not get paid nearly enough, but I did it because it kept my skills fresh. It made it so that I was around a lot of young curious people that had a lot of energy that were always asking the right kinds of questions, but they also understood technology and the trends and what marketing graphic design, the things that I was interested in, what was cool, what was the latest?

Stephan Grot:

I really took an awful lot of just great momentum from that and turned that into my day job so that every day I was coming home and learning something new and being able to apply that to my own firm. I also got a couple of really great interns out of it too. So that was really wonderful.

Kelley Peterson:

Yes. It's a great recruitment tool as well, to do that. I am a professional in residence at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, for their student advertising agency that focuses on nonprofits and everything that you described about the curiosity and the energy and all of that, what's up and coming, I really enjoy having that opportunity and working with students for all the reasons that you described there. And I do

think it helps you connect in all those paths and winding ways where we all end up in the world. So what was it like working for Jun Kaneko in those early days before the permanent gallery existed?

Stephan Grot:

So that is the missing piece of the puzzle. As far as my career is concerned. So that was the first 10 years of my life after college. I just completely threw happenstance, walked by a room and overheard that somebody needed a website. And I said, "I know how to make websites." And they sent me to somebody's front door and that front door was Ree and Jun Kaneko studio, which is right across the way from where I'm sitting right now. I can see the door. And I was buzzed into that place, and I was allowed to walk through that studio on my own, and it took me 15 minutes to get to that office. And I had completely forgotten that I was there to try and get work and was completely distracted by just row after row, floor to ceiling covered with artwork. I must have passed by several thousand pieces of artwork before I got to the office where I was going to find out whether or not this person needed a website.

Stephan Grot:

And by the time I got to them, I was committed to figure out how I could work with these people. It was like the scene in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory where they open up the doors into that room that's completely made out of candy. And just, that kind of magic happened at that moment. And I met with Ree Kaneko, Jun's wife, and I said, "Who are you? And what do I need to do to work for you?" And she just said, "Well, I don't know if we need a website just yet, but we could certainly use somebody who knows how to run computers. Do you know how to do that?" And I said, "Yes, I do, whatever you need." From there, it was my perfect job. It was a little bit of everything.

Stephan Grot:

It was building crates; it was running errands. It was working on computers and graphic design. I love building things and making things. And we were always doing that. It wasn't just how do you make a studio run in sort of a standard business sense where you just punch out a product and then try and get it to market. An artist studio, especially the one at the scale of operations that the Kanekos have, you are figuring out how to do everything on your own before you try and go out and have somebody else do it for you, because you're never quite sure what you want.

Stephan Grot:

That idea of, how do we do this ourselves? Or how do we get this to happen in the way that we want it to, was really exciting. And I was surrounded by other people because Jun, he would employ several artists as his assistants. I was surrounded by people who were also very interested in exploring and we were just always kind of figuring out the next thing. We were doing, huge, huge projects, multimillion dollar public art installations, internationally traveled operas. We were selling his artwork all over the world. We were setting up museum shows all over the world. And it was just fabulous. It was just such an incredible experience. And Ree and Jun, to this day, are my strongest mentors.

Kelley Peterson:

I think this is when my pure jealousy and envy sinks in. That just sounds so amazing. And that, it was also one of those moments where all stars aligned probably for you when you walked into this magical place. And I loved the story that you told about it being like Charlie, the Chocolate Factory.

Stephan Grot:

There's no better way to describe it. When I walked into that room, I felt inspired right at that moment. And those are the kinds of things that I remember when we invite people into our space at KANEKO, when we are trying to inspire people to understand what creativity is, how it fits within our daily lives, why they are creative, why they should like art, why everything is art? All of those things correlate into that feeling that you get inside. Inspiration is a really difficult thing to describe to somebody until you actually feel it and can point at it and say, "That's a moment that I felt inspired."

Kelley Peterson:

That's so great. So what was Jun's vision for the facility? You talked about going into a studio and this wasn't built yet. And how did that all come to fruition?

Stephan Grot:

Well, so I had mentioned that I'm right across the street from where I started. He and Ree just started to have conversations about this space when I started in 2003. And that was a really interesting time because it was this notion of Jun wanting to give back to the community, wanting to do something that was a service or a class, or he wasn't quite sure exactly what it was, but he wanted it to be an organization that gave back to the community, gave back to artists and allowed for an opportunity for creativity to happen. A conversation that he and my wife have all the time, because she's an educator is, he constantly asks her, "Do you think you can teach creativity?" And I think that, that question is something that he asks over and over again on purpose, because he's trying to understand whether or not there is some sort of formula solution to inspiring people, to generating the creative process, to walking somebody through the ability to be creative.

Stephan Grot:

And the answer is, he's almost 80 years old and he's figured it out for himself, but to do it for other people requires...well, I think anybody can do it. People can be taught to be creative, but creativity lies within everybody. And they just need to be taught how to unlock that creativity. After the many debates that I've listened to over dinner tables with my wife and Jun, neither of them have completely come up with this formula. But what it really does come down to is giving people the opportunity to be inspired and inspiration doesn't happen universally for one thing or one show, or one exhibition, or an experience. You have to try over and over again and see if you can find that opportunity for somebody else.

Stephan Grot:

It's like teaching somebody music. Maybe they're not really into the guitar or the piano, but they're really into the oboe or the saxophone. And that's the thing that really locks them into music. You have to try these things over and over again so that people can realize that, "I am creative and it might not even be in the arts." It might be in something that is closer to cooking or banking or whatever. Get as far away from artwork as you possibly can. And creativity works in that way. So that was kind of the basis for what KANEKO actually is. And that's another reason why we sort of work outside of the rules is creativity doesn't really have boundaries. The whole idea of our imagination is that it's limitless. We have this universe inside of our minds.

Stephan Grot:

And for a place to foster that and encourage that, and just keep setting up opportunities for people to be not only inspired, but maybe to explore their own creativity was the seed that got planted long ago. And

from there it was, "Okay, well, we've got a building and now we need to fill that building up with something and that's artwork and programs, and classes, and a little bit of everything." In the spirit of our mission statement of the exploration of the creative process, we've tried an awful lot of different things, and that's why we look so different all the time. And we've been open for 12 years now and it's still fresh every single day. We are always figuring out the next new thing that we want to be able to do.

Stephan Grot:

We're much better at planning, but we get too planned than we lose the spontaneity. What our mantra is to create structure for spontaneity, it's working within the limitations. And it's much more difficult than you think. You just say, "Create some guidelines and just move around in the inside of those guidelines all you want." But the nature of creative people is they want to bust outside of those guidelines as soon as you make them. Then it's kind of like, well, okay, how do we generate these new guidelines? How do you do it on the fly? And I think that's the thing that's really exciting for people is, we start there. We don't say, here are the rules. We say, "Here's the space. These are the things that we know that we can provide right now. Now what do we do?"

Kelley Peterson:

So great. We've had discussions too. I like how you described it as music. And just because it's different instruments that we play. We talk a lot about creative formula in words, and how to write. And is there a formula? And I just don't...I agree with the conversations of your wife and Jun and everyone at that table of, can you teach that? And there are formulas that you need to figure out as a creative, but it's not set in stone. Those formulas change over time too. Like the old saying, there's more than one way to skin that cat. There are creative problem-solving ways that are amongst us, and to be inspired through places like KANEKO, you are creatively inspired to solve them differently than you ever have before. And that helps us all grow and see us as creative people.

Kelley Peterson:

So I am a true believer that everyone is creative too. And especially in marketing and advertising, sometimes we say, "Okay. The people that work with the great brands or the clients are not creative." And it's so not true. So KidGlov is a creative agency, and that means every single person within it brings their own creativity to the table and know all of our formulas aren't the same, but we're not all playing the same instrument either.

Stephan Grot:

Right, right. Well, it's a very individualized experience to realize your own creativity means that you have to try things over and over again and realize that there's not one thing that you can point at and say, that is creativity, or that is my creativity. You might be able to say that's a product of it, but there's no singular action that we can all identify as creativity. It really becomes that act and that constant exploration that defines what creativity is. When it comes down to defining it, teaching it, pointing to it, that's not easy. And I would say that it's not really exactly possible because it's so individualized. Collaboration is the same, but collaboration requires individuals to be able to work with each other and have that experience of creation in and amongst themselves, without it, you're just going through the motions, you're doing something that's repetitive.

Stephan Grot:

And I think that's important for everybody to keep in mind is that failure is inherent, trying over and over again is inherent in the creative process. What we are all trying to do as kind of self-proclaimed creatives is try things over, over and over again, and make those little tweaks, sometimes big, big tweaks. But when we're working with people who don't believe that they're creative, it's an interesting thing to have to talk them into that. And they usually kind of say, "Well, I suppose I'm kind of creative when I'm cooking." And it's like, "Well, what do you do?" "Well, I'm a banker." And it's like, "Well, are you a really good banker? Are you successful at it?"

Stephan Grot:

And if so, what is it that makes you a really great banker, right? Is it the ability to identify those numbers? See those patterns, predict the future? Those kinds of things where you're seeing trends and understanding models, such that you can make the best decision possible, such that you're generating wealth and security for a community of people, that's really creative and not something that I am particularly good at.

Kelley Peterson:

And I do think that there, we talk about this at KidGlov as well about being a changemaker. That's why this podcast exists because people change the world in different ways. And that is their creative piece. And just as you've said, that banker is changing, could be an entire community through wealth management and their creativity of how to do that. And that's changing lives and making the world a better place. So, yes. One of the things KANEKO had a hand in was helping plan the sculpture garden in Gene Leahy Mall. How did this partnership with the City of Omaha come to be? And what do you hope people take away from seeing these sculptures?

Stephan Grot:

So that is a subject matter that is very much on my mind. We just completed installing the fifth sculpture out of five, really incredible artists who have we've been working with for the last year. We were approached about a year ago from MECA, which is the Metropolitan Entertainment Convention Authority.

Stephan Grot:

And they came to us and said, "We have a challenge for you. And we know that KANEKO can do it. We only have a year before Gene Leahy Mall opens and we have a rotating sculpture garden, and we need five really incredible sculptures so that we can match the reputation that we're really trying to go for. This is a huge investment with the city. We want these artists to be really incredible, but there's a catch. We need the artwork to be able to withstand Omaha weather because these this is an outdoor situation. It needs to fit on a six foot by six-foot pad. It needs to be durable enough so that thousands, maybe millions of visitors who want to walk by and touch it and really get up close to it so that it doesn't wear down and we need it in a year. Therefore, we need it to be a sure thing."

Stephan Grot:

So that set us into a really quick process of figuring out how are we going to find fantastic internationally renowned artists that meet all of those criteria, gigantic pieces of sculpture, but not too gigantic because they need to fit on a six by six pedestal, that have really durable, beautiful artwork that is already made because a year is not enough time to be able to commission artwork, especially commission it, and know for certain that it's going to be made.

Stephan Grot:

What I did was I went and talked to the three most connected people in sculpture that I knew of. And fortunately, two of them were right at hand because I had been working with them right at that moment. One is Ree Kaneko, who's one of the founders of our space. She knows everybody in the art world. She used to be the resident of the International Sculpture Center. Two was, Johanna Hutchinson, and she is the executive director of the International Sculpture Center. They also published Sculpture Magazine. So that sounds like a pretty good resource for sculptures.

Stephan Grot:

And three was, George Neubert, who was the former director of the Sheldon down in Lincoln. He's also the former director of the American Association of Museum Directors. And he just knows everybody in the country, in the art world. He's been in this game for a very, very long time. He loves sculpture. He's very fascinated with it. He's made it his business to know these people. Once I got those three people to the table, my job was actually pretty easy. They just listed their top 15 of their favorites that we could give a call up to and just say, I know I can reach out to them and they definitely have some pieces available. And we started there. So within a week, I think that we had something like 10 confirmed artists that said, "I've got a piece that would fit there. And I've got it right here, sitting in my studio."

Stephan Grot:

And I think within a couple of weeks, we had 20 and needed to start to whittle it down. We started to go from practicality regards to their durability, but also started to think about themes of materials and how the objects were going to start to play off of each other. And the short story there was, there were maybe seven of these sculptors that were really hitting all the marks. They had a couple of really gorgeous pieces available, and they really started to play off of each other in a great way. Meaning, they felt like a very wide variety. They all look completely different, but there was something really fantastic about this collection of totally disparate items.

Stephan Grot:

We whittled it down eventually to seven, we spoke with the folks at Gene Leahy Mall, and we had them kind of help us make some of the final decisions. I thought that, personally, we were a little bit lacking in diversity because quite honestly, especially in the old world of modern art, most successful sort of lifelong, internationally known sculptors were older white men. And we were trying to make sure that we were including everybody. We had a really fantastic woman be a part of the selection. Her name is Linda Fleming. So she had, a really wonderful piece. We found a piece that just barely fit on the pedestal. She was brought into the mix.

Stephan Grot:

And then the last selection, which was actually somebody that we didn't think that we were going to be able to get, because they did not have any pieces available, was a man named Richard Hunt. And Richard Hunt is an artist from Chicago. I'm from the Chicago area originally. And he is a legend there, but he's also a legend everywhere. He's the most collected public artist in the United States. He's a black artist. He is in his eighties. His health is failing and there are all sorts of really interesting things happening in his life where he's a very sought-after artist.

Stephan Grot:

And we just didn't think there was any way we were going to be able to get it. And lo and behold, we found a collector in Chicago that was willing to loan us that piece. And that just totally capped off the selection of the five people. And these five artists, John Clement, James Surls, Linda Fleming, Richard Hunt, and Bruce Beasley, those five are absolutely wonderful people. I just like, we couldn't have done a better job in finding these five people, both from the caliber of the artist that we are looking for, but just also the quality of the person, lovely people. They're very excited to be exhibiting in Gene Leahy Mall. And that actually gets to dovetail into exhibitions at KANEKO. So as a part of the deal, we are going to have a major exhibition of each one of these artists over the next three years while their pieces are on display at the Gene Leahy Mall.

Kelley Peterson:

Wow. That is an incredible project.

Stephan Grot:

We're so lucky. Everybody in Omaha is so lucky that we get to do this and kudos to the folks at Gene Leahy Mall and MECA and the stakeholders there because they really put a lot of trust in us and we didn't want to let them down. I truly believe that we delivered the highest quality product that we possibly could have with regards to these five. We just all got so lucky and Omaha is really going to get to enjoy some fantastic artists and artwork. These personalities are incredible people.

Kelley Peterson:

And I think it's going to be a draw beyond, yes, everyone in Omaha and Lincoln are lucky, but I think it'll draw people from everywhere to come and see it, yes. So as part of KANEKO's work with the sculpture garden, you were quoted in the Lincoln Journal Star as saying that public art is like architecture. Tell me a little bit about that comparison.

Stephan Grot:

Well, so I think that public art is necessary for a great reputation within a city. And there is very little distinction in my mind as to what public art does for the reputation to a city as does architecture for the reputation of a city. You think about some of the cities around the world that have iconic places like New York or Paris or London, you may think about a couple of buildings, but you're also thinking about the artwork, the public art, the structures that are there. I know that the Eiffel Tower is a tower, but also that is an architected public art piece. The Statue of Liberty is the one of the most iconic pieces of public artwork in the entire world. And it's a symbol for the reputation of that city. It's a symbol for the entire United States. It's so good.

Stephan Grot:

And those are things in, not to be completely dramatic, I'm naming some of the most iconic things in the world, but even from a block-by-block basis, I'll go back to Richard Hunt in Chicago, I knew who Richard Hunt was before I even really know who any artists were because he has been living and working in Chicago. And you can hardly turn a corner in Chicago without seeing one of his sculptures on a building or by a building. And those are the things that are landmarks within the space that identify this block versus some other block, because you're looking at giant concrete walls and windows. And while that building might be beautiful, it's not really something that you walk up to a building and feel like you're experiencing in a personal way.

Stephan Grot:

You might get to walk through an atrium, and it's really wonderful, but to have public artwork in a space, it helps you define the personality of that particular area that you're in. And it's something that I believe that Omaha is really beginning to do a great job in investing in, a lot of the folks that I have worked with in the last 15 years, I would say about the last 15 years is when I really started to get heavy into public art. Because I used to be Jun Kaneko's public artist, public art designer. There are people who are a lot more aware of why public art needs to be incorporated into an architectural design. And it's really, it is a part of the plan for, say, a new building or a new campus from the start.

Stephan Grot:

People are really starting to get it around here in that, one, it's a relatively inexpensive way to be able to generate personality city. A building is very, very expensive and a building, we have beautiful brick buildings down here and they have wonderful personality, but if the city didn't have any trees, would it look as nice? No, but we have fantastic trees around here. We don't have a lot of landscape. We certainly don't have any huge bodies of water or mountains or anything like that or beaches, but we can make our space beautiful and different and memorable with public art and with intentional design around our city.

Kelley Peterson:

So as the daughter of an architect, I love that you said that in the Journal Star. So I also am very appreciative of the KANEKO pieces, Tower Square. Our downtown in Lincoln wouldn't even be the same without that fabulous piece. And there's also out front of Sheldon as well as in the Haymarket, some KANEKO pieces as well that I greatly appreciate every time we see them. And universities are great for those art pieces as well. And when they change their architecture, incorporating some sculpture is great to see too, like the notebook on UNL's campus as well. And there's so many great pieces. We could just have a podcast about that.

Stephan Grot:

I actually helped design the Tower Square. That was my very last project before I left Jun studio.

Kelley Peterson:

KidGlov's office is not far from there, our Lincoln location, and those of us get to experience that and have that be a part of our lives every day. And I'm very appreciative of it. It's just so bright and I love it.

Stephan Grot:

Thank you.

Kelley Peterson:

I love how it towers in Towers Square and towers in our city. In your view, what is the importance of art to a healthy community? In what ways does it offer people new perspectives and experiences?

Stephan Grot:

Well, so I think we've covered a little bit as far as offering new perspectives and experiences. I'll answer this in reverse because the idea of creativity requires new perspectives and experiences. And because creativity is the name of my game, we are always trying to evangelize why creativity is good for somebody and if it is good for somebody, therefore it is good for their living situation and therefore good

for your community. I think an awful lot about what it could have possibly been like before there was this level of open-mindedness and our own ability to express ourselves. I try to imagine what somebody would be like if they were living in a dictatorial society where they don't allow you to be able to express yourselves. I don't think Americans especially, can truly imagine what that's like.

Stephan Grot:

Self-expression is so ingrained in what it is that we do, that we really take it for granted. It allows us to be able to move in any direction. It allows us to be very flexible and find happiness in a lot of different ways. And people don't realize that, that is what art really is. Art is one version of an outward ability to have outward expression. Artwork is something that one person decides to be able to create. That might be an abstract expression, it may be a literal expression of something historically important, but artwork really is a symbol of a thriving community because without having a thriving community, without people being able to get well past survival, you're not going to have artwork.

Stephan Grot:

There are people who use artwork to survive, but that's a very individualized experience, but to have a whole entire community that celebrates art, that celebrates the culture that's around them, that is really a sign that says this community is healthy, that we are thriving in lots of different directions. And it's not just the art community, but businesses, schools, as well as the arts and culture sector, they all need to be doing well in order for art to really show its true colors to make it so that we are kind of celebrating what it is that we've done. So art is great for our own minds as well. And there's this big mental health crisis that's happening with everybody, everybody.

Stephan Grot:

Artistic expression, because it can come in so many different forms is something that I think a lot of people feel uncomfortable with exploring. I think that a lot of people have started to open up to it. The thing that people don't realize is that art doesn't have to be for everybody. If you are writing in a journal, if you're drawing, if you're playing music, if you're doing something that is purely for yourself and nobody hears it or see it, it's still good and it's still healthy. And if your mind is good and healthy, then you are there for your community. And that's how these things trickle down or bubble up and just make everything better.

Kelley Peterson:

So this feels a little less like a question then more like commentary, but in thinking about your role, it occurred to me that you must wear a lot of hats. You handle the day-to-day operations of the gallery, but you also work closely with artists, work with patrons to organize fundraising and develop partnerships with different organizations in the community. What are some other surprising hats you find yourself wearing in your line of work?

Stephan Grot:

You're not wrong. I am always doing something a little bit different, every day is an adventure. And that is very, very true for me. Just to give you the most localized example that I possibly can, this last week, because I have been in the art handling business for some time, even though I'm a trained graphic designer and have done tech startups, I have also installed an awful lot of artwork. Therefore, I oversaw the installation of all five of the pieces of artwork in the Gene Leahy Mall. And that means I was driving a forklift. I was drilling holes into the concrete. We were anchoring rods into there and we were very

carefully placing these pieces in place. And each one of those presented their own challenge because they're very big, they're very heavy and it's very difficult to pick them up in lots of different ways.

Stephan Grot:

You have to use all of these different skills in combination and at this moment to make it so that this piece, while it may just seem like a very physical process, there's an awful lot of logic and logistics and math and structure that you need to worry about such that, not only do you have to get this piece from one place to another, but you have to make sure it stays there. And you have to make sure that it is secure because it's in a public space. We also had to worry about all of the weight bearings for the sidewalks that we were driving down. We had to come up with some creative solutions just to get the piece from one place to another. We couldn't just take a crane or drive a forklift anywhere we wanted to.

Stephan Grot:

We have to be really, really careful because this park is almost done. That hat that I really enjoy wearing is this kind of like, we're in the moment, we're in this situation, we have a huge complex problem, how do we do it? And that's not always something that's very exciting for lots of people. In fact, I think that I thrive on that moment-by-moment kind of getting out of that comfort zone or having that big challenge right before me. When I'm wearing that hat, I really, really enjoy it. In the past, it's something that I really do love saying. And I know I mentioned it, is I helped Jun design three internationally toured operas and everything from the lighting to the stage, to the costumes we kind of did it all.

Stephan Grot:

And that was a time in my life that I really look back with an awful lot of awe and inspiration as well, because the thing about operas or being involved in designing of an opera or any kind of show like that is it's a production. It requires hundreds of people. And it's not just that moment of the performance, that's when everybody gets to really enjoy it. But it's that whole entire process of working in concert with all of these people for years that I find really, really fascinating. To have gotten the opportunity to build those experiences with Jun, with these other hundreds of people in several different cities, I would say, it was one of the more formative things that made it so that I understood the longevity of time that it takes to really do something of that scale and do it right.

Stephan Grot:

And the number of people that it takes and the amount of communication that it takes to do it well and make it so that these things that we might just show up for. And we get to sit back and relax and watch it for a couple of hours, took years to fabricate and put together and an awful lot of negotiating. And negotiating in every way and sense of the word, it's monetary negotiation and also compromise with hundreds of personalities, which is not very easy thing to do.

Kelley Peterson:

That is so many hats. So many hats.

Stephan Grot:

I don't know if it's just a lot of hats or if it's just one really big floppy hat.

Kelley Peterson:

Well, it's definitely flexible. It has a flexible brim. What are you looking forward to in the future for KANEKO? Is there anything you're excited about seeing come to fruition?

Stephan Grot:

Well, so we currently are having an exhibition called Carne y Arena, and that means literally translated into flesh and sand that is running for the summer. And while we're a month into summer now, the next couple of months are really exciting for us. We have been working with 15 different community organizations, all of whom are in some way, shape or form working in education, public policy or activism around human rights and immigration. The reason that that's important is Carne y Arena is a VR experience that you take your shoes off and you walk around in a desert. We actually piped in 33 tons of sand into our gallery so that we could have a desert and you go through an individual experience that is unlike anything that I have ever seen, that most people have ever seen in any kind of VR experience. It is like you are walking around in a lucid dream. You feel like a ghost.

Stephan Grot:

And when you come out of that, it's like you've had a memory implanted in your brain. It's so real. It's just an incredible, and it is about immigrants who are crossing the border. And the subject matter is extremely important to the director of this. His name is Alejandro Inarritu, and he's one of the most decorated artists directors of our time. He made Birdman and The Revenant and Amores Perros and Babel, the list goes on and on. And he made this in such a way to where he wanted somebody to generate as much empathy as possible for these very real, very common human experiences that are happening all the time. And for him to choose this subject matter and this medium of communication through the VR experience, I think is a really fascinating story.

Stephan Grot:

Over the next couple of months, we are working with these other organizations to have conversations around the immigrant experience about what immigration means to the United States, what it means around the world, but also talking about what we, as a world, we're a global society. How can we frame our minds such that, we can have civil conversations around this, not make it polarizing, but understand what immigration truly means to us as a global society. And it is relevant in the wars that are happening around the world, in the famine and poverty and climate change. All of these things can be tied to human rights and immigration in some way.

Stephan Grot:

These conversations that we have coming up in the next couple of months, I think are really, really going to be fascinating because all of the groups that we're working with are very close with UNO, the Immigrant Legal Center, Elevate Omaha, the Goldstein Center for Human Rights, it goes on and on. These are all people who are helping us, not only just structure conversations, but they're an advisory group to say, "How do we take this exhibition, bring it outside of our walls and really do it well? Not push an agenda, but just have conversations, make it so that we can enlighten ourselves, make it so that maybe we're all learning something that we hadn't before." And hopefully, we are working on having Alejandro Inarritu to come up and do a talk with us at the end of the summer as well. And that would be a fantastic honor to have him come to the community.

Kelley Peterson:

That would be, there was... You just spoke about so much meaning in that particular exhibit but, Stephan, has there been a show or an exhibit that had special meaning to you and what was it?

Stephan Grot:

Well, that's a really good question. I'd say that my gut reaction goes to the very first exhibition that I did here, which was done on a shoestring budget. It was a turnover in administration. I was very new. And as I mentioned before, I was not very trained for this job. I actually tried to convince Jun not to hire me because I said that I was not experienced at all. But the putting together of that exhibition I thought was really fascinating because we were able to call on a lot of favors. We were able to work with a lot of different people who had artwork that generated a theme that was talking about kind of the human experience. It was called human condition.

Stephan Grot:

And just having gone through that very stressful, but very kind of inspiring exercise of just working with people to make something come to fruition. I always equate it to Stone Soup, that book about somebody coming into town and just saying, if only I had a little bit of barley, if only I had some onions, it feels like that where it's just getting people who can come together contribute something that they're passionate about, that they're interested in and make it so that something really fantastic happens that everybody gets to enjoy and contributed to it. They were involved in it. They feel a part of this thing that is really inspiring.

Stephan Grot:

The other show that I would say is very near and dear to my heart is Jun's exhibition. So Jun is, he's turning 80 this year and we had not a retrospective, but really just a kind of a monumental installation of his work when he received the lifetime achievement award through the International Sculpture Center last year. And it was a fantastic collection of really gigantic pieces, a 75-foot-wide painting, but also some of the pieces that are going to go into our permanent collection. And it really felt like we were starting to get the community to realize just what this permanent collection that we're trying to build for Jun is going to be like.

Stephan Grot:

So we have a been doing a capital campaign for a few years now, and we're trying to build a collection building that's going to house over 2,000 pieces of his life's work, and that's going to be attached to KANEKO and it's going to be a really major space, a really major treasure for our community. And to have that show go up and have people see that these are some of the things that are going to be involved in this permanent collection and really see them understand after many years of kind of talking to people about this subject matter, I thought was really satisfying because Jun, I can say this in all honesty and not with bias, he is my favorite artist.

Stephan Grot:

To get people excited about that and make it so that they understand that if we have his collection in a permanent space, something for Nebraska to get to call their own and enjoy, and say to the world that we've got this international caliber right here, I think is really exciting. That exhibition kind of really, really finally hit it home for me and for a lot of people that this is going to be a really incredible thing for us.

Kelley Peterson:

Absolutely lucky we are. Looking at the city as a whole, what do you think Omaha is excelling at and lacking in terms of availability and diversity of artistic experiences?

Stephan Grot:

Well, I'd say that from a lacking standpoint, we are certainly pulling ourselves out of a lack of diversity in every sense of the word. When I first came here in '99, the art scene was kind of buried underground. You had the Jocelyn, there was the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, which was really my first place to hang out in the art world around here. And there were a couple of galleries, but the food scene was okay. Actually, I'll say that it was terrible. The music scene was getting really good, but just from the opportunities that artists had, there really wasn't a lot. And again, that goes back to murals, public art, the respect that developers and architects and interior designers gave to artists I think has grown and awful lot.

Stephan Grot:

I would say that from just a level of diversity of opportunities, but also outreach to a diversity of different kinds of artists, I love that there is a huge movement to make sure that we are recognizing that we need cultural and racial diversity in everything that we're doing to make it so that we are hearing lots of people's ideas because exploring all of these ideas just makes it so that we can pick from the best. And with regards to what I think our community is doing really well, Nebraska, Omaha, Lincoln, we are at a size and a relative level of comfort that we can sort of stop and look at all of the surrounding cities around the world really, and say, "Who do we want to be?" We are not so large or so populated or entrenched in anything to not be able to pivot or not be able to kind of make ourselves who we want to be.

Stephan Grot:

Being intentional with our ideas and how we are structuring our communities, our downtowns, our public art, our job, landscape, even our public transportation, those are all things that we can still decide and not feel like we're locked in on. There's a tremendous amount of investment that's going into our state to create public art, to create these spaces like the Gene Leahy Mall.

Stephan Grot:

And I really see this dedication towards making good decisions that are for the entirety of the community. And I think that Omaha and Lincoln are doing it really well. I think Nebraska has... It's a big, big state in Nebraska and Omaha and Lincoln are on the very far east side. And, obviously, everybody, we don't want to force our hand on all of that. But I think in particular, our cities are making really good decisions with regards to, how can we make our own local communities better and make it so that people see us as a place that's wonderful, that's worth visiting, that is a really great place to live.

Kelley Peterson:

So great. I've had a privilege to work with the Nebraska Community Foundation and all of their work with towns. And I know that art is a big piece of, beyond Lincoln and Omaha, expansion and making those communities enjoyable for everyone that lives there and getting people to stay in their hometowns. And I know that art is, and will continue to be a big piece, but we have so much more to grow even in that aspect as well. So you're clearly a super busy person in your floppy hat. What do you do in your downtime to help yourself recharge?

Stephan Grot:

Well, as I said, I'm married to my wife Morgan, and we have three kids. I have-

Kelley Peterson:

What downtime? What downtime do you have with all of that?

Stephan Grot:

So my downtime consists of being with my family, but I would say that if there are things that I do that are kind of hobbies projects is really just more building and making of things. I wouldn't call myself a traditional artist. I used to think that I wanted to be an artist, but I really just find that I love to be around creative people and I love to make things. And I learned how to build houses at a very young age. A lot of my downtime, if you can call it that, is spent doing larger projects in and around my house. So large scale landscaping, I'm currently redoing our basement, building and knocking down walls and rewiring things and all sorts of stuff. And I like that. I like being able to understand the space in which I live and know what's behind the walls and know that I made something and know that if it breaks, I can fix it.

Kelley Peterson:

So much to know and add that to your other hat of many, add it to its floppiness.

Stephan Grot:

Well, it's helpful when something breaks around here too, even though I have a couple of people who are much more knowledgeable than me, it's always good to just have a little bit of insight.

Kelley Peterson:

Absolutely. So I'm inspired by motivational quotes. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom for our listeners?

Stephan Grot:

Well, I'm not very good at one liners because I talk way too much, but something that I tell my kids, that I tell a lot of my students is be comfortable getting out of your comfort zone, because understanding how to navigate through that and how to solve a problem and how to work through the challenges that are in front of you, leads to peace of mind.

Kelley Peterson:

Wow. That is inspiring and very mindful. So, Stephan, for our listeners who would like to learn more about your work, how can they find out more about KANEKO?

Stephan Grot:

Well, I would encourage them to follow us on social media. That's where kind of the day-to-day communications happen most often. But, of course, our website is a great place for you to go. It's, the Kaneko, T-H-E-K-A-N-E-K-O.org. And we are a very easy organization to get in touch with. We put a lot of focus on our local community. We work with a lot of local artists and partners. And we are not this big, exclusive bastion of culture where you have to get behind the vault. I'm pretty easy to get in touch with. If people want to learn more about us or want to find out our opportunities, just look us up and get in touch with us.

Kelley Peterson:

Super. As we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work you're doing?

Stephan Grot:

I think we've touched on it. That creativity is involved in every good decision that anybody makes around here. And we are really just trying to evangelize that, to support the arts and culture organizations within your community is supporting kind of symbolically the greatest things about our community. These are the passionate people who are working very, very hard to make our lives magical, to give inspiration to people. I hope that everybody can see that the work that nonprofits, that arts and culture sector workers are doing, yes, it is passion run, but those are things that are very difficult to define as far as what the product or what the return investment is. But they are truly the product of a thriving society.

Stephan Grot:

And I think that it's very important that people understand that if we didn't have these things, I think we all see what COVID did to us, that we'd be leading pretty boring lives. Hopefully, everybody gets out there and just loves their arts and culture sector in any way that they possibly can.

Kelley Peterson:

Stephan, I fully believe that the world needs more change makers like you. Thank you for taking the time to share with us today.

Stephan Grot:

Thank you, Kelley. It's been a pleasure talking to you. I really appreciate it.

Announcer:

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities, or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from, visit KidGlov.com at K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com to get in touch. As always, if you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.