

Hello and welcome to Art & a new show from Stanford Arts.

In this series, we explore what can happen when art and artists are integrated into different fields of academic inquiry and research. And where better to do this interdisciplinary work than here, at Stanford, a university known for innovation and breakthroughs that have had major ts on the world around us.

Before we get started, I should introduce myself. I'm Ellen Oh... the Director of Interdisciplinary Arts Programs. In my role, I try to weave art into all parts of the university.

I develop visiting artist programs, often in non-arts departments, and support faculty members who want to bring the arts into their research.

I tell people that I'm a seed planter - sparking ideas and collaborations and seeing what beautiful things can grow in-between spaces. A lot of the work I do is bridge-building.

But I'm not alone in this effort.

Along with so many other colleagues within Stanford Arts, we are creating the conditions for creative research and practice to thrive. That can look like exploratory dialogues, cross-disciplinary collaborative research, new methods of working and teaching, or exhibitions and performances that reveal new ideas about critical issues.

The biggest questions and challenges of our time require different perspectives and new creative approaches.

Art can bring so much to the table. And open us up to so many new possibilities.

And so with that, we're launching this first episode with someone whose leadership has been instrumental in shaping the vision of Stanford Arts today.

Deborah Cullinan is the Vice President for the Arts at Stanford. Before joining Stanford, she served as CEO of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and Executive Director of Intersection for the Arts—two of the Bay Area's most influential arts institutions. She also co-founded CultureBank and has worked nationally at the intersection of art, health, and systems change.

In our conversation, Deborah shares the journey that brought her here, and why she believes art is not just additive—but essential. Her leadership continues to guide and expand how Stanford Arts supports creative practice and interdisciplinary collaboration across campus.

Here's our conversation with Deborah Cullinan.

Ellen Oh: Okay, so hi, welcome.

Deborah Cullinan: Hello Ellen. Thank you for having me.

Ellen Oh: Of course. So you have had an extensive career in the arts working as director of Intersection for the arts, CEO of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. During that time, you also co-founded Culture Bank. You have been a fellow at ASU, a Cultural Innovation fellow. You've been part of national networks looking at art and health. So, now you're here at Stanford. And looking back, what are the moments both personal and professional that have brought you to this point?

Deborah Cullinan: On a personal level, my mother was born and raised in Scotland, and her first venture into the world was to a bomb shelter. So it was World War II, and she was very poor and really throughout her young life was encouraged to meet an American GI. There was a big presence in the shipyard town that she lived in and to come to this country for a better future. And she arrived by herself just shy of the age of 17. And I would say of my mother, maybe more than anyone I've ever met, poetry and music, and just a kind of way of thinking about the world was just deeply a part of who she was, and she had a really hard life. And even coming here, it didn't get all that much easier.

And it was music and theater and poetry and writing that I think saved her. So that's where I come from. I was working in the Twin Cities right after college and I was doing fundraising, and someone said to me, you could have a fantastic career as a fundraiser, and I was 21. But the idea of having a whole career set out for me at that age when I felt like I hadn't seen the world, didn't actually feel like what I wanted it to be. So I took an opportunity to take a leave of absence, and that led me to a moment where I lived in Prague, in Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic, before it split apart. And there was so much art-making. We were on the cover of the Smithsonian magazine because there was this huge poetry scene. And I just knew then that art integrated deeply into my life and people who are creative and are imagining different ways of knowing and different ways of being were the people that I wanted to be around.

That led me to Intersection for the Arts in a sort of pretty quick fashion. And I think that experience was so shaping for me because Intersection was posting for an executive director. I was in my mid late twenties, just absolutely no business being an executive director of anything. And it was this venerable institution that had launched the careers

of people like Whoopi Goldberg and Robin Williams. And every writer that I ever loved had read at some point at Intersection, and yet it was really struggling.

It was nearly dead in the water. And it just struck me that an arts organization that had meant so much to so many different people across disciplines could be vulnerable and detached from its community. And it just set me on a path of thinking about art as an integral part of life, not art, as a separate thing. As a thing that you have to knock on the door to come inside, that you have to be invited, but in fact it should be everywhere and it should be a part of just the way we live.

Ellen Oh: Well, I'll just say that I was really inspired by the way that you led that organization. The way that you embodied that role and what you did there was so impactful for so many artists that I know, and also people like me who are trying to make that kind of life as well.

Ellen Oh: Your mantra has been art is essential and consequential. Can you expound on that and talk about why art is especially necessary in this present moment?

Deborah Cullinan: Yes. I often say that because I know what it's like to be transfixed by a work of art, to stand in front of a painting, hardly believing what you're experiencing or to be in a concert or in a theater performance with other people just being transformed. Because I know what that is, I feel very motivated because I think that then means that we have an obligation to assure that everyone has access to art experiences that are meaningful to them. And I think because we understand that transformative power, we also have an obligation to apply it to the social good whenever it makes sense.

Ellen Oh: I agree. I want to write that down. I want to let that sink in for a minute.

In this season of our show, which is called Art & we are talking to faculty members and artists about issues like migration, sustainability, virtual identity, and more. We want to shine a light on what happens when you bring artists into the conversation and the value of interdisciplinary collaboration. How do you think artists and this kind of approach can have an impact r?

Deborah Cullinan: I think that artists can help us see things in different light. And maybe one of the most consequential things that artists can do is help us see beyond where we are, beyond where we've been. And I think art can provide that thing that is a luxury, that perspective of knowing where you've been, being able to be in the moment, and also seeing something for yourself and your family. I think art can do that for us. And so for me, there isn't really an issue or a challenge or even a system or a structure that would not benefit from art and creativity.

Ellen Oh: And the different kinds of approaches that that brings. Art makes everything better.

Deborah Cullinan: That's right. Art makes everything better. And as you know, I think my contributions to all of this really are about looking for those systems and those structures where if we do just apply the arts, just integrate the arts, they're just going to be better.

Ellen Oh: Now coming from the nonprofit art world to an academic environment like Stanford, do you think that that ethos or approach is understood here? What kinds of work have you seen that excites you since you've been here, and where do you see the resonances happening?

Deborah Cullinan: Yeah, I mean, your work excites me, so let's just make that clear. I think it absolutely does transfer. And in fact, one of the things that was so attractive to me about coming to Stanford was what I saw as this sort of infinite potential for us to think about interdisciplinarity, to think about how art can be integrated into teaching and research practice, into laboratories, into the way we're thinking about the future. And I see it all the time everyday. And maybe one of the most exciting things beyond very specific artists and projects and scientists and others who have brought art into their practice... one of the most exciting things to me is just that it kind of already is everywhere.

We're convening faculty from across campus who are bringing art into their teaching and research practice, and they're just doing that on their own. I can't imagine what will happen when we illuminate that, and lift that, and make that a thing because art makes everything better. So for me, it's the idea of art in medicine, art in science, art in the way we think about design, art just in the way we breathe, the way we think, the way we learn. The thing that manifests in my dream is that people understand that living a healthy productive life includes creativity.

Ellen Oh: So you just got back from the Chicago stop of the Open Minds Tour, where the arts were featured with some of our colleagues doing this kind of interdisciplinary work. What was the reception like and what does that signal about the arts' role in Stanford's future?

Deborah Cullinan: Yeah, so the Open Minds Tour is a tour that our new president Jon Levin is doing as a way to introduce himself to the Stanford community across the country, and to reconnect them with what makes Stanford special. The event in Chicago was fantastic. I love Chicago, love Chicago. And so being there with that community was pretty great, and I felt really proud of being part of Stanford. And there were three micro lectures by Stanford faculty. And we were the closing session and I was like, "Oh my goodness, how do you follow these people who are doing such extraordinary work?"

But I was joined by Hideo Mabuchi, who is a professor of Applied Physics, and also the Faculty Director at the Stanford Arts Institute. Michael Rau, who is in Theater and Performance Studies, and Camille Utterback, an Arts Practice faculty member. And each one of them spoke to their interdisciplinarity. They spoke to intersections of art and science, art and technology, and they spoke to what it means to really integrate the arts

into how we think about teaching and just all the ways that you can imagine bringing art, in Hideo's case, into a science context. And I don't think it could have gone better. It was so well received. And in a way it told me a lot about how important artists can be in lifting people's spirits, in reminding them of our collective strength and creativity and in really flowing us to this idea of shared inspiration.

Ellen Oh: I think they are... those three especially are the perfect representation of the kind of work that's being done here. And I also feel like there is some kind of cultural shift happening where people are starting to really recognize that power of art and how it is saving us in moments of collective doom.. (laughs) doom. But since the pandemic, I feel like there has been a shift where people recognize how they're turning to the arts and it is necessary and essential.

How can we encourage more of this kind of practice of collaboration and being open to new creative approaches to research and practice? How do we encourage more of this work to happen on campus?

Deborah Cullinan: Yeah. I think that, as you know, I'm a big believer in building community around practice. We do know that there are lots of people across the Stanford community who are already engaging art in their own work, whatever their scholarship may be. And we know that's true of the world too. And so part of it is, let's bring them together, let them see one another, let them feel like they are part of something and let them begin to shape what that something can be. And then I think from there it is to find ways to support it. We've talked very specifically about what it would look like for us to have fellowships for faculty members who want to be in a community of practice around bringing art into their scholarship.

We have talked about what it might be like to afford Postdocs, who are artists, to be able to take one day a week out away from the lab in order to do their own art practice. So again, how do you look for these systems and structures and imagine them in a way that affords everyone the time to be creative? And my theory is: you invest in an artist, they will invest tenfold in the community around them. If you make time for creativity, you will accelerate innovation and growth and impact. And so, the more we can also gather that evidence and tell the story of that impact, what happens when someone is afforded the time and the space to be creative. Right? And I think we can tell that story.

Ellen Oh: I agree. That would be amazing. I would love to see so much more of that happening, even though it's starting already.

Ellen Oh: You have said if you ever wrote a book, it would be called "Art &." I'm wondering if you could talk about your interpretation of art and what does it mean to you?

Deborah Cullinan: I think of it this way. I think that art in all its forms is like a glue, or it's something like a glue. It's like water. It flows in between and across things. It helps make connections. There's no one strategy, for example, for supporting community

health and wellbeing, but there's a connected set of strategies that can support community health and wellbeing. And art is the glue. So for me, it means that art can be integrated into almost everything. And it also means that art, in and of itself, is entirely worthy and necessary. So for me, it's both and always. Art for the sake of it, for the beauty of it, for its transformative power is essential. And art integrated into the systems and structures that make up our lives is also essential.

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From Stanford Arts, this is Art &.

Ellen Oh is our host. The show is produced and edited by me, Taylor Jones, with additional support by Edi Dai.

Chase Everett is our sound designer and mixing engineer. Our theme song and music is composed by Juana Izuzquiza.

Series artwork is by Connie Ko. Executive Producers are Anne Shulock and Ellen Oh.

Special thanks to Deborah Cullinan, Stanford Vice President for the Arts, and Stanford Live.

Art & is recorded at Bing Concert Hall at Stanford University.

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