

## **Consequence Paralysis**

**Key note lecture by Till Briegleb on the occasion of the IKT 2020 Virtual Meeting,**

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The article with the title “Consequence Paralysis”, which prompted Roland Nachtigäller to ask me for this lecture, was part of a themed issue on dilemmas in the cultural sector. In its magazine the German Federal Cultural Foundation wanted to shed light on the difficulties that arise in international cultural exchange if one takes the current major crises seriously – especially the climate crisis.

Their invitation to discuss the ecological footprint of the cultural sector was again based on various articles that I had written in the German daily "Süddeutsche Zeitung" about the relationship between culture, climate and economic growth. And one of these stories about the Istanbul Biennale 2019 began with an observation that I perceive as exemplary for the often grotesque consequence paralysis of great cultural actors.

The biennial, curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, was entitled “The Seventh Continent”. This meant the gigantic plastic vortex in the Pacific, ten times the size of Germany. But while Bourriaud explained at the press conference why he had made this environmental disaster the trigger for his art selection, coffee in disposable cups with plastic lids was distributed to the many journalists and curators who had flown in for the event. And because it was windy on the terrace of the Art Academy on the Bosphorus, where the press conference was taking place, soon some of these cups, carelessly left outside, were swimming in the sea.

I really do not want to blame Nicolas Bourriaud, nor the organization of the Biennale, whose public work is trying to make the issue of the global ecological crisis heard. But for me, this picture of the dancing plastic cups on the waves is a good example of the dirty backrooms of the entire cultural scene when it comes to the topic of ecological reason. We don't practice what we preach.

The number of exhibitions and projects that deal with the destruction of the general livelihood by humans is increasing all the time. The consequences that institutions draw for themselves, on the other hand, are mostly at a stage as if climate change were a completely new event to them and not a scientific prediction that is around 50 years old.

Since the Club of Rome's revolutionary report, “The Limits to Growth” from 1972, there has been little change in our fundamental knowledge about the consequences of our way of life. The world is not too small for humanity, it is just too small for their habits.

But this insight was at least as consistently ignored and repressed in large complexes of cultural mediation as in all other areas that benefited from the consumption of the world. And even in cultural

institutions that have introduced measures to reduce the ecological footprint, this happens quite unsystematically.

At least that is the result of a large survey that I carried out this summer for the art magazine *Art* among 70 museums in Germany, Austria and Switzerland as well as 10 international biennials from Sydney to Sao Paulo, and which appeared as a focus in the September issue of *Art*. The questionnaire consisted of ten simple questions. How much energy is required for operation, how many flights are there for employees and works of art per year, and how much plastic and meat is consumed?

We asked whether there had been any construction work and whether this had improved the climate balance, and how high the company's carbon emissions are in tons. In addition, questions were asked about optimizing measures taken in the past and plans for the future to become a "greener" institution.

The implementation of this survey turned out to be extremely tough. After asking several times, almost all museums and half of the biennials took part, but only two-thirds of the participants were able to provide specific data. The rest sent short to detailed affirmations of goodwill.

And the number of questionnaires on which information was provided on all ten aspects after repeated deadline extensions was: zero. Not a single one of the institutions surveyed is really fully aware of the impact their work has on the environment. And in many climate-relevant areas, almost all actors lack the simplest information.

A total of six museums knew their carbon emissions. Only 15 museums were able to indicate how many flights their employees made in the past year and how many works of art are on the move by air freight with courier in their loan traffic (maximum: 165, minimum: 10). Over 50 institutes did not provide any information about that topic.

The numbers are even smaller when it comes to the consumption of environmentally harmful products such as plastic and meat. Although museums are not directly associated with yogurt tubs and schnitzel, exhibitions and museum catering use enormous amounts of these problematic substances. But only 6 out of 70 museum administrations knew how much plastic they use every year (maximum value: 4800 tons). And only 3 institutions did not hide behind the argument that the amount of meat is a matter for the restaurant tenant: 4,400 kilograms is the meat consumption of a museum restaurant in a medium-sized house per year.

Among other things, this generates around 24,000 kilograms more carbon in the atmosphere. At biennials like Venice, where primarily meat-containing food packaged in plastic goes over the counter for the 600,000 visitors in 6 months, this amount is more likely to be the weekly value.

The question that arises quite clearly after this survey is: How do you want to turn things around if you don't know the simplest basic data? On which information you can make sensible decisions for a better

performance if you can't name your problematic output precisely? Obviously, even the most problem-conscious institutions in the art world act mostly on gut instinct.

The serious answer to this problem would actually be quite simple: to commission independent experts to first analyze the status quo of the entire institution according to its impact on the environment, and then to look for potential for improvement on the basis of this data. In all matters from packaging waste to exhibition planning.

Incidentally, the major art festivals were either unable to provide any data or only provided isolated estimates. Only the Biennale in Sao Paulo tried extremely hard to provide relevant information on the occasion of our request. And its president, José Olympio da Veiga Pereira, was the only festival director to name the biggest climate pest in this part of the art world: it is the visitor.

Pereira said in a statement: "In our long-term goal of becoming a climate-neutral festival, we are aware that the greatest challenge is the amount of flights we generate."

If a million people visit the second oldest biennial in the world in Brazil, then the audience survey about origin in Sao Paulo shows that 200,000 to 300,000 flights are booked for it.

From my previous research on the subject, I know that it is precisely these numbers that are shamefully concealed everywhere. When Frances Morris, the director of the Tate Modern, once said that her museum generates 26,000 tons of carbon emissions, but that visitors generate 260,000 tons when they travel there, then that is one of the very few clear statements on the subject that can be found. As long as the company's curatorial goal is to count as many spectators as possible, the environmental damage caused by the biennials cannot be seriously reduced by any other measure.

A particularly blatant example in this context is documenta 14. Adam Szymczyk's kind invitation in 2017 that all visitors to the world's largest art festival would like to see both locations of his double documenta in Kassel and Athens would have meant the following in figures: That the around 800,000 Kassler guests would have flown to Greece, the around 300,000 from Athens to Hesse and back. In fact, there was probably only a tiny overlap, especially culture professionals and people who wanted to go to Greece for vacation. And that actually saved a million tons of CO2 emissions that would have been released by the corresponding air traffic.

Although documenta 14 focused on global power and injustice, had it been successful it would have become a prime example of what is now called "climate racism". That the luxury behavior of privileged states, as expressed in the mass flying to art events, produces ecological damage that is particularly visible in the countries of the global south due to the consequences of global warming.

And another point of expansive cultural policy is consistently kept secret when it comes to improving what is on offer. The construction of new museums causes such an unreachable amount of pollutants and ecological problems that all energy-efficient measures that engineers and architects think up can never compensate for them.

For the approximately 250,000 tons of concrete that was used, for example, in the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, 250,000 tons of carbon also escape into the atmosphere. It takes 24 million liters of water just to make the cement. And the production of more than 20,000 tons of steel, the stone facades, the windows and house systems devours additional gigantic amounts of energy that will not appear in any balance sheet when it comes to the ecology of the building.

If this “gray energy” were to be included in a holistic view, would the horrendous consumption of resources in prestigious new building projects finally raise the question of whether there is another way? And that brings you back to conjuring up dilemmas. A word that always sounds to my ears as if it were a justification not to change anything. Many representatives of an internationally networked art travel society speak of dilemmas when they are asked about their overall ecological behavior as if they were powerless before the facts: How should we hold a biennale without flights? How to organize a blockbuster without huge loans? Where should we cope with the public interest if not in a new building? Each of these questions sounds like a refusal to ask fundamental questions in the face of a fundamental crisis.

In the many conversations with directors, curators and other employees of cultural institutions that I have had during my research in recent months, everyone is now open to the topic of ecological self-responsibility. But when it comes to questions about the specific consequences, very few people question their own concepts.

Rather, most of those responsible in the cultural sector announce the same solutions as corporate managers and politicians who do not want to identify the core of the climate problem. Here as there, the answer is not, “We have to say goodbye to our habits and economic thinking as quickly as possible”, but rather: The technicians should please fix it.

In the top ten measures for a greener museum that our climate survey revealed, the replacement solutions in the technical area clearly dominate, followed by the promises of avoiding waste and matters. It is undoubtedly correct to replace lightbulbs with LEDs, letters with e-mails, and old air conditioners with new ones. But apart from the fact that these improvements also consume resources, and often not less, but only somewhere else, this turn to the engineers split the problem from its political dimensions.

In this context the question should be: Doesn't the cultural industry act according to exactly the same rules as the global growth economy, whose destructive consequences it likes to criticize? Isn't it all about growth, about increasing visitor numbers and profit, about competition between institutions, cities and countries, about brands and innovations, consumption of values and the personal status of artists, curators, collectors and gallerists? Only that one likes to name these parameters differently and explain them to be of cultural value?

Fortunately, it is slowly becoming noticeable that many of the actors are changing their views. It just becomes harder to be inactive with each day of grim news about the state of the planet. And the longer we wait to make changes, the faster the radical answers become the realistic ones.

That is why the entire cultural sector, including my own journalist profession, must now ask itself new questions: What are the new priorities for cultural mediation that have arisen from the crisis? What can be changed in terms of exhibition policy? What could be new goals for the organisation of cultural events and the relationship with visitors so that the culture industry does not continue to harm the environment? And I suppose there will be unknown positive effects if you accept the challenge of the crisis and develop new concepts for cultural exchange.

I would like to briefly name a few ideas of changes that have emerged from many discussions with curators and artists.

#### 1.) Transparency instead of shame

In order to make serious decisions about a clean operation, all cultural institutions would have to carry out a sincere and, if possible, annual examination of their environmental concerns, including their supply chains, the gray energy and the consumption caused by their visitors.

These results should in principle also be published, for example in the form of a comparable environmental traffic light. This not only increases the credibility of the institutes and creates empirical knowledge to make reliable improvements. It also creates the fundament for a constructive exchange with other institutions.

#### 2.) Cooperation instead of competition

Even if many museums and other exhibition formats cooperate closely with one another today, the idea of competition is still a key driver in the business. When it comes to viewership, public attention, star hunts, and hip news, competition is heavily promoted by politicians, the art market, and personal vanities and status thinking. This competition leads to the "higher, better, further" that still has a firm grip on the art business as a whole.

As in the growth economy, this attitude also obstructs the view of wear and tear in the sub-area of culture. Cooperation as a guiding principle can in many areas, from travel to exhibition architecture, stimulate alternatives that conserve resources and perhaps also result in new artistic concepts.

#### 3.) Content instead of prominence

Stars, sensations and events have become the determining factor in the field of art in the last few decades. Driven by the capital power of the art market and the international competition for attention, large areas of the exhibition industry have taken on the characteristics of a consumer and entertainment market where content is of secondary importance. Blockbusters and Must Sees guide the crowd.

Reversing this trend would not only relieve the environment of large volumes of travel, but also regain a discursive terrain where stimulation rather than excitement counts.

#### 4.) Intensity instead of exclusivity

Although everyone knows from experience that productive debate is promoted less by brief impulses than by patient processes, the event is the ultimate in capitalist cultural production. Therefore, the restriction of the cultural jet set would perhaps also be an opportunity to create the change to a more sustainable form of art and discourse production.

Fewer, but longer and more intensive stays by artists at art institutions could certainly improve the quality of cultural understanding, be it in the form of residences, links to education institutions or in the form of an open studio. And also art institutions can intensify their efforts to bring their ideas to people who never cross the threshold of a museum because they think, this place is not for them.

#### 5.) Local instead of international

After all, favouring the local contexts and treasures is at least as necessary in the art world as in economy. Intelligent collection presentations by external experts can make you forget that you are no longer served with elaborate solo shows. And the redefinition of the museum as a discursive place, where less the masterpiece is admired than the social debate is stimulated with artistic means, could be a great achievement for the community.

#### 6.) Creativity instead of conformity

Against the depressive or easy-going proclamation that the world of art will end if it cannot go on as before, only creativity helps. The situation is now so urgent for everyone that only serious consequences will ensure survival. And the consequences of our habit to exhaust the world will not stop at the doors of the art world.

That is the reason why we need new ideas in every sector of the society. And the art institutions are a fantastic place to create, push, spread and connect new ideas.

As long as there is still time, it is important to overcome the consequential paralysis with spirit and courage. Because the whole art world cannot stay the way it was.

One last sentence I would like to add: I know that many of those gathered here digitally are already working on some or all of these points. But I also know from my research and discussions that there is still enormous resistance to fundamentally questioning the operating rules.

Whether it is about prestige buildings or revenue demands from politics, key figures for increasing the audience or press articles about exhibitions. And that's why I believe that the only way to dissolve such resistance is to act in solidarity. As long as everyone tries to turn small cogs for the better in his or her own institution, he or she must despair. Only networked action helps. And that's where I place my hopes in organizations like yours.

Many Thanks