

Culture shift

The art world must adapt quickly to survive the crises of our times, writes **Heather Ackroyd**

The year 2020 is not how any of us imagined. Covid-19 is now indelibly imprinted on the lingua franca of this emerging decade. The last two decades, as observed by director of Tate Modern Frances Morris in a podcast by The Art Newspaper, have been “so incredibly intense. We were due for a pause.” Tate declared a climate emergency in July 2019, and its Power to Change citizen-style art assemblies are on the longlist of cultural casualties in our Covid-19-altered reality.

In the glare of enforced reflection, the radical globalisation of the multibillion-pound art industry – art fairs, biennales and a worldwide explosion of contemporary art museums – is under scrutiny. In the podcast interview, Morris confesses her love for the blockbuster show and its capacity for bringing in hard-to-reach audiences, but admits that its light-stealing competitiveness has stifled nurture for alternative, emerging, minority interest. “The whole ecosystem will collapse if we don’t bring on new perspectives, shed spotlight on artists who have fallen outside the canon,” she said.

So, how do we change the culture of culture? I spoke to a number of artists (via the internet, as I’m writing this during lockdown) about how the urgency of the climate and ecological emergency can take centre stage in a post-pandemic world.

Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro

Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro, artist and environmental engineer, is nurturing a vision to bring the ecosystem into the boardroom – to connect a museum to the natural monuments and non-humans within its vicinity: a tree, a river, parkland or multi-species. These boundaries are not just encompassed by institutional bricks. In his practice they extend further afield, as exemplified by his residency at ZKM Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany. The museum has taken into its care an

abandoned orchard just five minutes’ walk away, a translation of the conservation of care expressed to an object or artefact extended to the dedicated care of a neighbour, a living ecology. Staff have become involved in reclaiming the biodiverse space, pruning trees and caring for the land. Verlet-Bottéro told me: “This elevated their awareness process and supported the campaign inside the institution to address sustainability. Being out there in the field made them more activist than reading books.” He points out that if the rights of Nature are planted into boardroom decisions, different decisions are made, and this in turn pushes attention onto issues of climate justice.



The Ecocide Trial, 30 September, 2011 (still from film) © Ackroyd & Harvey

INTERPRT

Environmental lawyer Polly Higgins embedded the rights of Nature in her quest to bring the crime of ecocide – mass damage or destruction of the natural, living world – into judicial law at



Culture Declares Emergency launch procession, 2019. Photograph © Kelly Hill and CDE



Above: Left Right & Centre by Cornelia Parker, Election Artist 2017 © Cornelia Parker
 Below right: Green and Pink with Rubbish Bag, 2019. Acrylic paint on canvas, 1805 x 1600 x 38mm by Gavin Turk

the highest level, the International Criminal Court. Her untimely death last year was a great loss to both the legal world and the art world. Since 2013, she had collaborated with Nabil Ahmed, co-founder of INTERPRT, a newly formed environmental justice project that undertakes fact-finding investigations, visualisations and spatial analysis on behalf of civil society to assist in the global campaign for the inclusion of ecocide as an international crime. Here we found a remarkable connection. I shared with Ahmed our earlier work with Higgins, filming a mock ecocide trial at the Supreme Court in London in 2011, subsequently exhibited at Ballroom Marfa, Texas in 2012. Ahmed described his first meeting, with her: “Polly and I met and got on really well. She saw how what we could bring to the table would help move these questions around evidence forward and to new audiences and new forums.” Art exhibitions are part of the dissemination of this profoundly important intersectional work, which tracks under-reported environmental acts of violence in securing evidence for future court cases where the crime of ecocide will be brought to book.

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Zena Edwards

On 13 April last year, wearing a coat of living grass, poet and performer Zena Edwards walked alongside a white horse into the Tate Turbine Hall, singing: “I am an artist / I know where my voice belongs / I am an endangered species/ but I sing no victim song.” Her performance was part of a series of events marking the beginning of Culture Declares Emergency. The horse had been in a procession that walked from Somerset House across Waterloo Bridge to the South Bank. Along the way, people had stopped traffic and performed readings and declarations, calling for immediate action to combat the devastation of the planet. Culture Declares Emergency was born from a number of influences, including the Fridays For Future youth strikes and the move by many councils in Australia to declare a climate emergency before



the wildfires that devastated the country, and is closely aligned to Extinction Rebellion's non-violent actions. The movement is also rooted in decades of art advocacy and activism to bring the climate and ecological emergency into the centre of the cultural landscape.

Edwards told me it is important that culture be open to diverse and marginalised communities. "We should remember that culture is a media producer and narrative creator in its own right," she said. "Making visible black and brown voices in culture and these discussions – particularly groups who have been surviving in climate-change-affected conditions for a long time – is important and shows how there is a plethora of approaches towards saving this planet."

Cornelia Parker

Visual artist and Turner Prize nominee Cornelia Parker is a news hawk, as is beautifully captured in her mesmerising film *Left Right & Centre*. What happens at the top, our choice of political leaders, will ultimately determine our fate. She keeps her eye on the climate crisis and mentions the recent news of massive methane leaks from a Texan oilfield as Donald Trump rolls back environmental and climate regulations. She thinks a worldwide fund into accelerating research is needed post pandemic to retool the world's clean energy supplies. In a world now awash with crude and negative oil prices she sees the opportunities

for wind and solar as very exciting. At a specially convened breakfast last July, Parker persuaded Tate to commit to running its galleries on 100% renewable energy as part of its declaration of climate emergency.

Gavin Turk

Contemporary artist Gavin Turk courts controversy. Making a splash by putting his name on a blue plaque reading 'Borough of Kensington, Gavin Turk, Sculptor, worked here 1989–1991', he is equally willing to put himself on the front-line to draw attention to the climate crisis. In 2019, he was among hundreds arrested for an XR action blocking bridges in London. He acknowledges his attachment to the international art world and its huge carbon footprint, even though he does not fly. During our conversation, in which we discuss reframing climate change through the ecological crisis, he holds up his copy of *The Case for the New Green Deal* by Ann Pettifor, a book he's halfway through and is clearly finding a source of inspiration. "If we actually want to try to establish a cultural and societal identity which puts the ecology at the centre, we have to understand how to get the money thing working," he says.

Ethics and aesthetics

The question is whether ethics can be laced into aesthetics. There is a shift. When I spoke to Frances Morris, we talked about Kate Raworth, of doughnut economics acclaim, and Mariana Mazzucato, founder of the Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose. As these visionary economists move rapidly into the centre of mainstream economics, their expertise can activate businesses to restructure in the face of the climate and ecological emergency. In the words of the growing movement of Culture Declares Emergency, New York City, "We invoke collective and individual powers as arts and cultural workers to come together to reimagine – and act upon – new models of work, maintenance, production and presentation. We commit to shift from a production paradigm of growth, competition and extraction to one of regeneration, reciprocity and circularity." The multibillion-dollar question is whether the post-pandemic art industry will take note and rapidly devolve its destructive and polluting economy for the sake, not just of the art world, but of the entire planet. **R**

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