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Beyond Green: The Arts as a Catalyst for Sustainability

Sunday, February 21, 2016

Join in online!

If you're interested in writing either an op-ed style article or a personal reflection blog post whilst you're here this week, please let Salzburg Global Editor, Louise Hallman know or email your submission directly to lhallman@salzburgglobal.org.

If you do intend to write for your own organization either whilst you're here or after the session, please make sure to observe the **Chatham House Rule** (information on which is in your Welcome Pack). If you're in any doubt, do not hesitate to contact Louise.

We'll be updating our website with summaries from the panels and interviews with our Fellows, all of which you can find on the session page:

www.SalzburgGlobal.org/go/561

You can also join in the conversation on Twitter with the hashtag [#SGSculture](https://twitter.com/SGSculture) and see all your fellow Fellows on Twitter via the list [www.twitter.com/salzburgglobal/lists/SGS-561](https://twitter.com/salzburgglobal/lists/SGS-561)

We're updating both our Facebook page www.facebook.com/SalzburgGlobal and our Flickr stream www.flickr.com/SalzburgGlobal with photos from the session during this week and also after the session. (If you require non-watermarked images for your own publication, please let Louise know.) We will also be posting photos to Instagram www.instagram.com/SalzburgGlobal



Share your Instagram photos with us using the hashtag [#SGSculture](https://twitter.com/SGSculture). Thanks to [@msprairierose](https://www.instagram.com/msprairierose) for this photo!



What are our conscious limitations?

If we aim to change mindsets and shift behavior with our art, we need to understand how the brain works, argued one Fellow at the Salzburg Global program *Beyond Green: The Arts as a Catalyst for Sustainability*.

For non-neuroscientists, much of our understanding how we think and how our brains work is based on four assumptions. We assume:

- We're rational and logical;
- We notice things when they're put right in front of us;
- Our memory allows us to accurately store and recall information;
- We all grasp the ideas of time, the past, present and future.

Through a series of short exercises in Parker Hall, the Fellows were made to realise these assumptions were in fact false: "The human mind is particularly prone to cognitive illusions."

We often do not apply logic, such as laws of probability, to our decision making. We fail to make very basic observations when our attention is trained elsewhere; our brains can become trained to filter out what it assumes not to be important. Our memory doesn't function how we assume – we don't remember our past,

we often reconstruct it in response to stimuli in our present.

One of the most important fallacies for those seeking to tackle inertia surrounding climate change is that we assume we can achieve more in a given time in the future than we can in the immediate present. People frequently overestimate how much work they can achieve in a week in the future than they can in the week currently facing them.

By recognizing these false assumptions, we can start to recognize why such tactics as repeat messaging, appeals to logic, arguments based on time, and emotional appeals have been unsuccessful. One method that can prove useful to change mindsets and shift behaviors is by creating analogies to process new data – and this is where art can play a powerful role.

Besides understanding our neurobiology, we also need to expand our understanding of "sustainability" and "understand what sustainability is in our own contexts."

Panelists also urged Fellows to seek to build trust. "Trust is not about feeling safe... It is the relation I build to you and sharing my lack of safety with you."



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Raising Awareness and Catalyzing Public Engagement

Patrick Wilson

Artists have a powerful role to play in raising awareness of social injustices. As the African saying goes: “Until the lion finds their storyteller, hunters will always be portrayed as the hero.”

As the Fellows of *Beyond Green* heard on the first night of the session, artists can help share the stories of areas afflicted by unsustainable development. Many communities have been and continue to be displaced in the pursuit of “development,” such as a community in Cambodia whose ancestral lands will be devastated by the building of a hydroelectric dam.

Provocatively, one Fellow remarked that we have all been displaced “because we have become disconnected from nature and the green spaces and the beauty of the world. We’re more connected to technology... than we are to the natural world... this has made us isolated.” Art can help us to

reconnect with that beauty and, in turn, inspire us to protect it.

The following morning, discussions continued in a plenary session on the topic of “Raising Awareness and Catalyzing Public Engagement.”

Panelists started by looking at artistic exhibits and campaigns in Bangladesh and the struggles one Fellow faced in attempting to present socially impactful pieces of work and collections. Although now an independent country, and nominally a democracy, one Fellow pointed out that like many countries, a democratic society may not be as democratic as it appears: “Elections in themselves to do not mean a democratic process.” Art can give people a way to express themselves in undemocratic and oppressive situations. One project highlighted was *Kalpana’s Warriors*, which featured a combination of poetry, performance and laser burn art to promote knowledge and discussion about an indigenous woman of the Chittagong Hill Tracts who spoke out

against military occupation and was abducted on June 12, 1996.

It is not only in Cambodia and Bangladesh where art can play an important role in public engagement and democracy, with another Fellow sharing an example from the US.

Beautiful Solutions, which stemmed from the book and documentary *This Changes Everything*, is a gallery, lab, web platform and book that “gathers the most promising and contagious strategies for building a more just, democratic and resilient world.”

By engaging the public and collecting and sharing “real” stories, the project aims to change society from that in which someone has “power over” others, to instead a system of “shared power.”

Grassroots efforts and engagement are important, and such projects can promote change from outside of a structural system – but still have impact on the system.

However one Fellow made a counterpoint that “we have to go inside the structures to change their behavior.”



Learning from ArtCOP21

From September to December 2015, leading up to COP21, 550 events were held under the auspices of ArtCOP21, with 54 countries engaged, and 250 artists present in Paris. But to what end?

For many people the COP events are too technical and political, rendering them inaccessible and incomprehensible. One aim of engaging artists alongside COP21 was to lift this mystique and make the event understandable and relevant to the general public.

As one Fellow remarked, ArtCOP21 “did it’s job” – it was diverse and it was visible. Indeed, as another Paris-based Fellow corroborated, the French capital, and more broadly France, has become a more climate- and sustainability- aware city since.

Besides making the international convention more accessible to the general public and mobilizing people to take action, ArtCOP21 also aimed to include culture in the political agenda of climate change and position the artist as an important stakeholder in the debate.

The arts and culture sector has become increasingly prominent at such events. As one Fellow shared, at COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, ARTPORT making waves (an “international curatorial practice” that raises awareness of climate change and environmental issues) struggled to find a space to exhibit and attracted few visitors. At Cancun, Mexico in 2010, ARTPORT partnered with museums to bring in a ready audience of school children. Building on these past experiences, despite the “extreme bureaucracy”

in France, COP21 was much more successful. Their project, while created for COP21, will not be an isolated, one-off exhibit: it will now travel to Astana, Kazakhstan for the next World Expo and later New York. ArtCOP21, engaged diverse artists, including poets, cultural experts, and performers, eschewing the approach of “one big name in one gallery” of COP15.

Bringing art into the negotiation space (usually a drab conference center) and encouraging the negotiators to connect with the issues on a more intimate, human, rather than political level, was mooted. One of ArtCOP21’s project, the COPbox, had sought to do this, collecting messages from Parisians as the installation traveled around the city ahead of the event. However, following the Paris terrorist attacks, the budget for the final installation (through which the negotiators would all have to pass), was cut in favor of increasing security.

Engaging directly with “the system,” be that at the international level of COP21 or with local, municipal governments, is important, one ArtCOP21 participant reminded Fellows. “We need to focus on systems change instead of behavior change” because too many individuals have too little agency. As another Fellow remarked, “We have to get on board the people who are actually creating our world,” not just artists, but also designers, politicians, business, et al.

We need to avoid what one Fellow admitted was his greatest fear: “We in the arts are talking to each other – we are not talking to the world.”

“The artist has left the building”

Artists need to “opt in” and go beyond the gallery to inspire political change

Marina Abramovic might have called her show *The Artist Is Present*, but as Frances Whitehead remarked in the opening evening’s panel of *Beyond Green*: “The artist has left the building and gone to city hall!” And why to city hall? “That is where the decisions are being made.”

For art to have greater impact, artists need to change strategies away from “acting up,” pointing out,” and “opting out,” to instead “opt in,” Whitehead argued. Quoting Janeil Englestad, she urged artists to “make art with purpose.” Artists are not there to only draw attention to issues but to encourage change.

Opting in can lead the artist to engage in domains outside their usual realm, but opting in does not stop the artist from being an artist: “Opting in is not about becoming someone else. We never stop being artists as we enter other domains,” said Whitehead.

One such “opt in” project is *Environmental Sentinel*, part of the greenway/linear park “The 606” in Chicago, USA. *Environmental Sentinel* combines art, landscaping and climate change monitoring with civic engagement. While the project’s focus was beauty and public engagement, it also incorporates sustainability and climate change activism. The planting of over 400 Amelanchier trees not only provides beauty along the 606 route, but also enables monitoring of the microclimate by encouraging the public – citizen scientists – to note the blooming of the trees – a practice modeled on the traditional annual cherry blossom festival in Japan. This approach blends participatory arts practices, climatology and public infrastructure; inspired by the blossoms, Whitehead calls it “pink infrastructure” – infrastructure for raising climate awareness.

However, if the project had had an explicit climate change remit, it may have been tied up in political discussions. By being called “art,” *Environmental Sentinel* was able to gain wider support.



Hot Topic: “Why should artists be involved in discussions surrounding sustainable developments and what do we expect of them?”

Patrick Wilson

“I believe artists are really important stakeholders in negotiations and what kind of future we want to design. We can help scientists and politicians to be more creative and we can succeed where scientists and politicians fail.”

Anaïs Roesch

Project Manager, COAL (Coalition for Art and Sustainable Development), Paris, France

“I think that artists need to be involved because artists are not different to anyone else; we all need to be part of discussions about sustainable development. I think we need to ask what is particular about artists when we look at what we expect from them. Artists have a certain ability to see the things others can't, they're cunning like a fox to get things to happen and they use certain practices that are interesting – and work.”

Ben Twist

Director, Creative Carbon Scotland, Edinburgh, UK

“Art is a very efficient tool to transport an idea about sustainability and the conservation of nature in general. “Sustainability” is a vast word and artists are thinkers who are linking different issues and different layers of society. Artists can be catalysts of transmitting an idea or message. Art is usually more touching to the normal citizen than a document.”

Anne-Marie Melster

Co-founder & Co-director, ARTPORT_ making waves, Paris, France

“I think we need to define “Artist.” I define “art” as the word that capitalism made up to deal with the concept of culture. It's a word that slips in and outside of the current paradigm that has caused the problem of climate change. Artists make commodities and they also exist in a spiritual plane outside of commodities. I think artists need to be double agents in society that can leverage resources and power towards the grassroots.”

Rachel Schragis

Visual Artist & Cultural Organizer, New York, NY, USA

“I believe the artists should be engaging in sustainability because sustainability is boring. It's not popular and people just don't care about it. Art is the tool to make it more interesting and to simplify the idea that everything is wrong and we are destroying our planet every day. I've spent half of my life using art as a tool and I think I've achieved amazing results. Getting exposure in mass media through art is a powerful tool for change.”

Mundano (Thiago Ackel)

Artist; Founder, Pimp My Carroca, Sao Paulo, Brazil

“I'm not sure there really is such thing as sustainable development; I think this is a term that should be examined. The reason to have artists involved is we are uniquely skilled at critical analysis that can understand this philosophically as well as offering practicality in new cultural models.”

Frances Whitehead

Principal, ARTetal Studio; Professor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA