




 Für  Agenda
 eine  der
 neue  Kultur-
politik

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Michael
Wimmer
(Hrsg.)

Where Are the Artists?

Gloria
Benedikt

Looking at the pandemic through a cultural lens reveals both systemic failures and great potentials for vital contributions to the challenges we face in the next decade(s)

The art and power of public assembly

The COVID-19 pandemic has not been the biggest disruption in the past hundred years or so. There were two world wars. The first coincided with the Spanish flu, which—by itself—cost ten times more lives than the current pandemic.¹ Yet, for the performing arts world, 2020/21 has been the biggest disruption so far. During both world wars, performances continued even as bombs were falling. For example, in the 1940s theater tickets in London were in such high demand that they had to be rationed like other essential goods.² Theater was food for the soul. In the Soviet Union, artists performed for the troops and in hospitals and factories to inspire hope.³ There are many more similar stories, and they are not surprising. In times of hardship, in times of crisis, people assemble. And within the practice of assembly, music, dance, and storytelling—later known as the performing arts—have evolutionary significance: they create a sense of meaning and belonging;⁴ they enhance cooperation and solidarity by building trust to master challenges that cannot be mastered individually.⁵

The anomaly caused by the current pandemic is that it has prevented humans from doing what is inherent in human nature, even more so during a time of crisis. Humans are social creatures. Wanting to share something, be it food around the fire while telling stories or a theater performance or a conference, is a natural impulse and part of human nature. Even more, the ability to meet, touch, assemble, think, and experience together has inspired humans for thousands of years. The practice of assembly has bound societies together, enabled them to experience awe, and has given individuals a sense of being part of something greater than themselves.⁶

¹ The death toll of the Spanish flu pandemic is estimated to be 50 million; the world population in 1920 is estimated at 1.86 billion. The death toll of the Covid-19 pandemic as of October 2021 is nearly 5 million.

² Homans, 423

³ Homans, 361

⁴ See e.g. Mithen, 215

⁵ See e.g. Mithen, 213, 236

⁶ Benedikt, 152

In short, the art of assembly has transformative power. As we will see later, this power will be crucial in the next decade, as the next decade—science tells us—will be critical for the future of humanity. But let us first look at what can be learned from the pandemic.

Having temporarily lost the ability to assemble, we have urgently sought alternative ways to connect beyond the digital. Within a week of Italy's lockdown, videos of neighbors singing and dancing together from their respective balconies went viral, and the trend continued across countries. A few weeks later, people started assembling and marching for racial justice in the United States. Soon people in countries worldwide followed suit. "Amid the horrors of the COVID-19 pandemic," psychologists Greenberg and Gordon have observed, "we are experiencing a global social-psychological experiment that is giving insight into what lies at the core of our humanity." Lockdowns across the world highlighted humans' drive to connect with others to reduce the physiological and psychological stress of isolation.⁷

⁷ Greenberg, Gordon (2020): Benedikt, 152f

The historian William McNeill, who devoted the later years of his career to this topic, showed that the muscular and rhythmic dimension of human nature, both practiced and observed, has been a powerful tool in shaping social solidarity and spurring progress.⁸ Therefore people's first response to the pandemic does not come as a surprise: they bonded through music and movement. The momentum could not be sustained indefinitely, but many of us may remember what it felt like to assemble in public again after months of isolation. May we not experience such a disruption and such need for isolation in our lifetimes again. Moreover, may we no longer take collective assembly for granted. Now is the time to think about how we can harness the potential of the art of assembly in future. A closer analysis reveals that what the pandemic took from us—the practice of assembly—is also the key to future progress.

⁸ See e.g. McNeill (1995)

HiStory

We seem to be back. But just as 100 years ago, the threat is not over. Some historians even observe that the Spanish flu was the reason World War I ended. But from a historical perspective we also know that the contracts negotiated back then laid the foundations for World War II, and that what started in 1914 only ended in 1945. It took horrendous atrocities to generate some progress. "Never again" was to be ensured by a new supranational institution designed to prevent another world war: the United Nations. In the future, the signing of the Paris Agreement under the auspices of that same institution may be seen as another turning point in history, one that put a process in motion that could fulfill its promise around 2045 and prevent enormous ecological destruction and the death of millions of people. In December 2015 the world's leaders agreed to

change course and give humanity a chance of survival beyond a few generations by limiting global warming to well below 2—preferably to 1.5—degrees Celsius. Time will tell. For now it remains a commitment that lacks decisive action. Today the existential threat to humanity and much other life on our planet has become more evident than ever before.

The second pandemic summer coincided with wildfires, floodings, cyclones, and heatwaves intensifying—as scientists predicted they would. In August 2021 the *New York Times* published an article entitled “Can a Covid Mask Protect Me from Wildfire Smoke?”⁹ Anyone hoping to read an analysis about the interconnectedness of multiple crises that prevent us from breathing healthy air and their implications for humanity and the state of the world was disappointed. Instead it reported on a new study, which “found that weakened immune response caused by exposure to wildfire smoke last summer could be associated with thousands of additional infections and hundreds of deaths from Covid-19,” and that, no, a different mask was required for protection against wildfire smoke. Losing breath seems to have become the new normal. Still, the pandemic experience coupled with the intensifying consequences of global warming may have a similar effect as one hundred years ago. This time it may lead to the realization that we cannot continue and need to act. If we act now, science tells us, the next thirty years or so up to 2050 will be a challenging period of transition until we have stabilized the climate, are on a sustainable track for humans and all other life on this planet, and end up in a world that is healthier, safer, and more just.¹⁰

This is the best meta-narrative scientists can give us. There is a vision, and there is hope. Now we need artists to break this meta-narrative down into smaller, more concrete stories that help us get there. Why stories? Because, as I wrote with Martin Puchner, professor of drama, English, and comparative literature at Harvard University in 2019, “Humans are storytelling animals. We tell stories to make sense of the world and our place in it. Stories connect us to the past, to great causes beyond ourselves, and they offer glimpses of the future. They have mobilized individuals and groups into action across the span of human history and contributed to reshaping the world.”¹¹ And because, as Puchner points out in his upcoming book, “climate scientists have woken up to the power of stories. For the past forty years, their strategy had been to do better climate science, assuming that improved models and more accurate predictions would translate into appropriate changes in policy and behavior. The strategy hasn’t worked, and now scientists are asking for stories that pinpoint agency, that capture complexity, that make ten thousand years seem like a millisecond collision. What is needed are new stories as well as new ways of understanding old ones.”¹² What is thus also needed is for leaders of art institutions and art policymakers to join forces and create structures that support artists to make it happen. The

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/article/covid-mask-smoke-fire-protection.html>

¹⁰ This conclusion, which is based on scientific papers published over the past decades, has recently been illustrated for a non-expert audience by e.g. Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac in the book *The Future We Choose* (2020) and Johan Rockström with David Attenborough in the documentary *Breaking Boundaries* (2021).

¹¹ Benedikt, 99

¹² Puchner, 8f

future is now. After thirty years in relative diffidence, scientists warn us that the 2020s are the make-or-break decade.

Theater in—and for—a brave new world

“The scientists have given us 15 years to literally create a new civilization, an ecological civilization. So where are the artists?” the theater director Peter Sellars asked at the opening of the Salzburg Festival in 2019.¹³ A closer analysis of his question reveals that a few systemic issues need to be overcome so performing artists can fulfill their potential in the next decade and beyond.

Today’s predominant performing-arts model (measured by funding allocation) is to preserve the cultural heritage by gathering large audiences who passively listen to/watch the work of predominantly dead composers, dead choreographers, and dead playwrights. This is a recent phenomenon. Even in the past 500 years, and the rise of “high art,” artists have created original work that inspired awe, transcended politics by fostering empathy, expressed essential human truths with a force that words alone cannot convey, embodied fundamental scientific developments, inspired hope, and bound people together across Cold War divides.¹⁴ “Theater has never stopped being a nonhierarchical tool of the people. The early 20th-century movement we now call Theater of the Avant-Garde or ‘experimental theater’ emerged from the wreckage of the World Wars as a deliberate alternative to and condemnation of the institutions that held power over people and art. It demolished traditional forms to reflect better the unjust society that was revealed by war and genocide”, the theater maker Jeremy Pickard writes. “Most theater that is made is never seen by tourists but exists as it did thousands of years ago as a public service intrinsically tied to the communities it serves and as a tool for actively responding to the political moment.”¹⁵

It is not surprising that this kind of art is equipped to meet the current moment. Yet, surprisingly, this kind of art with a clear public value proposition finds itself on the fringes of the funding landscape. This is even more surprising given that art as a force to help strengthen democracy and support sustainable development (SD) is increasingly encouraged on the policy level. For instance, in 2015 culture’s importance to SD was recognized in the preamble of the United Nations 2030 Agenda.¹⁶ In 2017 the European Council stated in its strategic approach to international relations: “Culture is an essential part of EU’s international relations.”¹⁷ In 2018 the EU adopted a New European Agenda for Culture.¹⁸ In the work plan for culture 2019–22, “the subsequent Council conclusions emphasize culture’s potential to foster SD and peace.”¹⁹ Yet, to date, artists wanting to grapple with SD or work on cultural-diplomacy initiatives have access to structural funding neither on global, nor European,

¹³ <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/blog/keynote-address-peter-sellars>

¹⁴ See e.g. Benedikt, Chapter I

¹⁵ Benedikt, 143

¹⁶ de Vries (2020), 10

¹⁷ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7935-2017-INIT/en/pdf><https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/05/23/conclusions-culture/#>

¹⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/document/new-european-agenda-culture-swd2018-267-final>

¹⁹ de Vries (2020), 20

nor national levels. Why is the link between policy intention and artistic implementation broken?

On a global level, C (Culture) within UNESCO is not set up to support artists. It is mainly focused on heritage preservation. (If we take the reports published by another United Nations body, namely that for assessing the science related to climate change (IPCC) into consideration, we increasingly may have to ask ourselves: preserve for whom?) On a European level, 0.19 percent of the multi-annual budget is allocated to culture through its flagship cultural program, Creative Europe.²⁰ Its funding schemes are designed to connect cultural actors across Europe. It is not structured to enable artists to work on the pressing problems of our time. On the national level, while having committed to enhancing the contribution of culture to SD through the Agenda 2030 and the European Council resolution on the cultural dimension of SD,²¹ cultural ministries have failed to turn what is on paper into policy that provides a notable funding stream. Their funding remains focused on supporting what Gijs de Vries calls “national high art.”²²

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is time to turn to performing-arts institutions themselves. After all, they are the ultimate gatekeepers of what is performed for wider audiences. Why are they not encouraging work that grapples with the most pressing problems of our time? Partially, they are restricted by a cultural policy that still promotes the preservation of the cultural-heritage model, which is considered commercially viable. In addition, artists are hindered by a conservative assumption within the theater world that the role of theater is not to create a better world. At a time when the contribution of all disciplines is needed to guide humanity through the make-or-break decade, this attitude seems somewhat quixotic.

Despite all systemic difficulties, a new generation is rising. For instance, Climate Change Theater Action, initiated by the Canadian playwright Chantal Bilodeau, encourages plays about climate change to be written around the world. Likewise, the Brooklyn-based Superhero Clubhouse Ecotheater “creates theater to enact climate and environmental justice, cultivate hope, and inspire a thriving future.”²³ The classical-music establishment recently discovered Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* as a work that can easily be connected to climate change. But the Dutch composer Merlijn Twaalfhoven has shown how this can be done on a much deeper level. He composed the piece *Four Drifting Seasons* based on temperature-rise data from 1880 to the present. The composition is accompanied by video graphs and sung by a children’s choir. His motivation is to make the abstract data of temperature rise audible and felt while giving a voice to the next generation, who will have to live with the consequences of temperature rise. Meanwhile Jessie Jeanne Stinnett, the artistic director of Boston Dance Theater, tackles sea-level rise, an issue that will affect the local population in coastal cities, such as the company’s home base.

²⁰ On December 14, 2020, the European Commission welcomed the political agreement reached between the European Parliament and EU Member States on the new Creative Europe program (2021–2027). It will receive 2.4 billion, 0.188% of the overall budget, which is 1,279.4 billion.

²¹ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:42019Y1206\(01\)&qid=1610484078516&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:42019Y1206(01)&qid=1610484078516&from=EN)

²² de Vries (2019), 90

²³ <http://www.superheroclubhouse.org/>

These are a few examples of performing artists involved in the *Science and Art Project*, which I lead at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA). Dozens of artists and scientists worked together on performances that fused science, music, dance, theater, and visual art for over five years to figure out how partnerships between artists and scientists can inspire a cultural shift toward sustainable thought and action. The initiative has generated a framework and method for artists who seek to engage with scientific findings that are relevant to the public.

Meanwhile, in the world of literature, the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh made a first attempt to grasp the possibilities of engaging with climate change in *The Great Derangement* (2016). Martin Puchner now follows suit with *Literature for a Changing Planet* (2022). Within the six years that have passed in between, a few novels have emerged, most notably *The Overstory* (2019), *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), and *Bewilderment* (2021). With *The Ministry of the Future*, a new genre, climate fiction, seems to be emerging. It takes science as a basis and then tells a realistic story about the future. All the aforementioned work has emerged from the Anglosphere. But the issue is now also coming to the fore in continental Europe. For instance, in October 2021 Bernd Ulrich, deputy editor in chief of *Die Zeit*, published an essay entitled “Why, the hell? We live in an ecological crisis, but the world of literature leaves us alone with it. Even though we need it. Now!”²⁴

Moving forward

We need new stories—both written in books and performed on stages—that give us a vision of the better world we can create and how we can get there. We need experiences that create meaning and belonging to help us overcome tremendous challenges like in the old days. Back then we had to defend ourselves against creatures that were much larger than us. We did so successfully because we had the ability to cooperate. And eventually, a few ten thousand years later, we became so powerful we now determine the future of the planet. Whether we can save ourselves from making it uninhabitable will yet again depend on our ability to cooperate, this time not in groups but on a global scale. It will depend on whether we can convince enough earthlings to join the quest to transform our life on earth so that we can sustain the ecosystem and the ecosystem can sustain us.

Gestural, muscular communication bonds humans together into emotionally connected groups, and this emotional connection is what, for millennia, has given meaning and purpose to the human experience. “Our contemporary disregard of this aspect of human sociality is unwise and probably also unsustainable over the long haul. Time will tell,” McNeill wrote twenty-six years ago.²⁵ Time has told. The current pandemic has

²⁴ “Warum, zur Hölle? Wir leben in einer ökologischen Krise, aber die Literatur lässt uns damit allein. Dabei brauchen wir sie. Jetzt!”
Die Zeit, no. 43, October 21, 2021

²⁵ McNeill, 157

reminded us. We need artists to step in for harnessing human potential. Beyond preserving our cultural heritage, we also need them to help shape our future. Recommendations have been made at the highest policy levels. At the implementation level the know-how is now there, and artists are ready to contribute. But we lack commitment from the gatekeepers of art—that is, the governments allocating funding and those responsible for programming within arts institutions—to support artists so they can engage in the transformative quest ahead.

“When future generations look back upon the Great Derangement, they will certainly blame the leaders and politicians of this time for their failure to address the climate crisis. But they may well hold artists and writers to be equally culpable—for the imagining of possibilities is not, after all, the job of politicians and bureaucrats,” Ghosh wrote in 2016.²⁶ Let us now work together to make sure this will not be the case. The artists are here. They are ready.

²⁶ Ghosh, 135

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