

Press Release – 2020 Verbier Art Summit Reflections and Findings, 3 March 2020

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Verbier, Switzerland, February 2020 – Our two-day Summit centred on the title **Resource Hungry: Our Cultured Landscape and its Ecological Impact**, and questioned how contemporary art and our practices—as active members of the global art world and citizens—can both produce and address the global climate crisis through art works and actions. The annual Summit is organised by art patron **Anneliek Sijbrandij** and her team, and the 2020 edition was curated by **Jessica Morgan**, Nathalie de Gunzburg Director of Dia Art Foundation (New York).



John Slyce
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2020 Verbier Art Summit speakers with Summit Founder Anneliek Sijbrandij.

From the start of the Summit, **Jessica Morgan** set out the challenge and agenda to consider across the Summit how we might respond to “*Doing less, better and for longer*,” which could be considered a contemporary manifesto for Dia. Morgan astutely contextualized the longevity of the crisis and its relations to cultural production by setting the theme-song to the Summit in Marvin Gaye’s *Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)*. Released in 1971, the track was the second single to Gaye’s concept album *What’s Going On*, whose prescient song cycle surveyed drug addiction, poverty, the Vietnam War and what many recognised already then as the ecological crisis confronting the inhabitants of a life-world and ecosystem posited as inclusive rather than merely centred on humans and our quality of life.

*Whoa, ah, mercy mercy me
Oh things ain't what they used to be, no no
Where did all the blue skies go?*

*Poison is the wind that blows from the north and south and east
Oil wasted on the oceans and upon our seas, fish full of mercury*

*Radiation underground and in the sky
Animals and birds who live nearby are dying
Oh mercy, mercy me
Oh things ain't what they used to be*

*What about this overcrowded land
How much more abuse from man can she stand?*

Hopefully, it was not lost on listeners at the Summit that this was the shared social backdrop and context to a good many works made by the Dia foundational artists—Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson, Donald Judd, Robert Whitman, Dan Flavin, La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, the latter both pioneers of sound and light environments, who worked and collaborated with Heiner Friedrich, the art dealer and collector of minimal and conceptual art who co-founded Dia with his future wife, Philipa de Menil, and with Helen Winkler in 1974. As a name, Dia was coined for its connotation, drawn from Greek, as a through conduit of creativity. The purpose of the Foundation—many still relate to it as the Dia Art Foundation—was *“to plan, realize and maintain public projects, which cannot be easily produced, financed or owned by individual collectors because of their cost and magnitude,”* as stated in its first annual report in 1975. Helping to realise artist’s visions and making these visible in a way perhaps only imagined and heretofore impossible is what Dia has always been about. A perfect partner to address the remit of this Summit in thinking about how we, as cultural producers and consumers of culture, make sure we are not merely part of the problem and make a real contribution to finding a solution to the fundamental crisis that confronts us.



Joan Jonas at the 2020 Verbier Art Summit.

A pioneer of video and performance art—indeed, a founding mother of the medium—in recent projects **Joan Jonas** has situated her art in dialogue with science to build and foster better communication of what is at stake in this ecological crisis. Working in layers of video, performance, land and seascape, her work *Moving Off the Land* expresses the power of art to connect with other disciplines and forge understandings and alliances that can provide a foundation on which action and change might happen. Jonas’ elemental uses of nature and the natural in her art is a prime example of how boundaries and barriers between categories and disciplines—nature/culture, or art/science—can be dissolved to produce a new knowledge that can shift consciousness and trigger social change. Jonas’ engagement with children in her work is a focus of recent projects, and she spoke eloquently about the power of youth and how they might channel their anger to do better than the generations that preceded. Suggesting the need for something of a 21st century ‘Children’s Crusade,’ Jonas spoke of the need for both direct action and the strategic use of ‘the vote’ to affect change. *“Nature has always played an important part in my work. In recent years, the*

environmental situation has become more and more important to me and visible in my work, due to the increasing threats to our livelihoods and that of numerous other species.” In conversation with Jessica Morgan, Jonas spoke of her extended engagement with technology reaching back to the early 1970s: *“Technology alters ideas and narrative, not only its delivery.”*

El Último Grito, Professor **Roberto Feo** and **Rosario Hurtado** presented a performative lecture where they sketched out some of the salient ideas encapsulated in their ‘pre-content’ zine *They Painted the Mountains White*. Key here is the truism that ‘Permanence is an illusion’. It can indeed be said the classic mistake of all thought is to eternalise the transitory. Time encapsulates connotations of both the ephemeral and the permanent. Feo and Hurtado put forward the paired neologisms of the ‘Ephemermanent’, that which was intended to be ephemeral but has become permanent, alongside the ‘Permeal’, that which was intended to be permanent but has become ephemeral. Which term relates to our life-world as we have known it? Which term might relate to ourselves as a species? In Peru they are actually painting the mountains white.

Djamila Ribeiro, a writer, publisher, social justice activist and one of the most influential leaders in the Afro-Brazilian women's rights movement spoke of the necessity to recognise the intersectionality or role played by other categories, such as gender, class and race in addressing the environmental crisis. Ribeiro illustrated the 'environmental racism' at play in the favelas of São Paulo. Surveying a great wealth of feminist activists and writers in the region, she left the thought that a Eurocentric canon can block new ideas and thinking. She stressed that both resistance to the dominant and our ecological survival will rely not only on apprehending and appreciating the indigenous knowledges and ways of living foreclosed by the West, but also embracing new thinking.

These themes were directly addressed by Professor **Adrian Lahoud**, Dean of the School of Architecture at the Royal College of Art, London. Lahoud curated the inaugural edition of the Sharjah Architectural Triennial, which he themed: *The Rights of Future Generations*. The theme is all the more challenging in that the future generations addressed here of course do not yet exist! Who will speak for them and how to preserve, protect or restore rights to those who are only just a projection into a future? The answer in part Lahoud suggested rests in the idea of a longer and different type of memory and relationship to the land. This he illustrated through his research into the indigenous Australian Ngurrara people and the *Ngurrara Canvas II*, an excellent example for the power of these practices. On one hand, the 8x10 meter painting looks like a very good example of indigenous abstract art. On the other hand, it's the only instance of paintings being used as proof of native title, as a sort of map, in a land rights claim. Lahoud described how the Ngurrara artists stood on the canvas and testified to their country while they were on that painting. *Ngurrara Canvas II* looks traditional from the perspective of its makers, while being a radical, if not in fact avant-garde art object. Drawing on the writing of Bill Gammage and his landmark book *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, Lahoud wove the Ngurrara's millennia-deep knowledge of their land with the fire technologies of Aboriginal nations to describe the intensity of an indigenous approach to landscape management lost on both the Eurocentric invaders and contemporary Australian governments.



2020 Verbier Art Summit speakers Jessica Morgan, Philippe Rahm and Adrian Lahoud.

Philippe Rahm brilliantly presented his practice of climatic architecture with energy, humour and charm. Rahm proposes an architecture that starts from climate and then lets that lead design rather than attempting to build fortresses against and over climatic conditions—the design slogan might be: *Form follows Climate*. He linked climate change directly to the problem of CO₂ emissions rather than couching the climate crisis in the problems of the 1970s and dwindling resources. Rahm looks very closely at forms of architecture over time and how these have historically been linked to energy. His is a position very much against, what he terms a 'Romantic Heideggerian view of nature', an illustrative example which he offered is the very realistic understanding that if we were to attempt to offset our carbon footprint by planting trees, we would each have to plant some 300. The effect this might have on the darkening of the landscape would in fact increase heat absorption even while soaking up CO₂.

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For Rahm, we are of course very much a part of nature but we also battle against it. His practice of architecture draws on an amalgam of old and new technologies. Old, in that the underlying principles he works from are those of thermodynamics with a focus on heat emissions and loss through convection, radiation and conduction. The new technologies of 3D heat mapping and infrared imaging allow his embrace of the older knowledges in the spaces he designs.

Day Two—*Water is part of us, when you pollute the water you pollute yourself.*



Andrea Bowers at the 2020 Verbier Art Summit.

Andrea Bowers documents activists and their activism, and this flows into the video and installations she presents as her art and practice. Bowers is both observer and participant and includes herself in the documentation and representations of the activists she works with. This is an established strategy to mitigate against the otherness inherent in any act of representation (when we represent something in art, pictures, or words we make it other than it really is). Bowers began her talk by erecting the twin poles of *Grief + Hope*. The grief she referred to is environmental grief, or Eco-grief as she said. Hope resides in the actions, often collective, of those who do not let such grief disempower efforts and erode consciousness. She showed such resilience in the face of a complete loss of electrical power during her talk—a powerful example of just how resource hungry and reliant we are and, so too, how we are always already part of the problem just as we are seeking to imagine and create solutions. Bowers cast two terms in opposition in order to help us think beyond our own individual positions: Ego-logical versus the Eco-logical. She spoke freely about her 2013 project *I Plan to be a Believer* where she joined the activist John Quigley, a treesitter, in defending a 400-year-old oak against

developers in Arcadia, California. Bowers admittedly spent more time in jail than in the tree, but her project proves that in documenting and disseminating the work of environmental activists, art can extend such activism and in a very real way redeem apparent losses by fostering memory and amplifying voices. Bowers called on a Bill of Rights for water, mountains, sea and land.

Dorothea von Hantelmann, Professor of Art and Society at Bard College Berlin, brought an art historical approach to the theme stating that since the 16th century, art has reflected and mirrored the socio-economic order of its time. Her challenge was this: *“If we are to take sustainability seriously, we have to rethink what we take as art and also what an art institution might be.”* She stated the rise of ‘autonomous art’ mirrors the rise in the exploitation of our environment for both production and progress. Casting this as a ‘modernity of separation’, von Hantelmann drew on the work of the German sociologist Georg Simmel, who at the beginning of the 20th century theorised attempts of the modern individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society. For the singular isolated subject, to detach is to gain a form of emancipation. Such gained critical distance comes at a price, however, when predicated on vision and visibility over and against other senses. This type of bourgeois individualism is characterised by strong and weak bonds.

The examples she gave were the strong bonds of family and obligation derived in the plural and communal versus the weak bonds of choice and gender. Von Hantelmann aligned the strong communal bonds of the theatre over and against the individual and weak bonds of the gallery premised on a singular experience of autonomous art. Von Hantelmann does propose the exhibition as a ritual form that brings people together, but this perhaps belittles the role of many contemporary art practices to offer structures and forms of shared if not indeed engaged collaborative experience. For the Professor, art is part of the problem (due to its 'autonomy' and visibility) but so too part of the solution. What she feels is needed is a new form of aesthetics.

Director of The Showroom in London, **Elvira Dyangani Ose**, focused on an exhibition of the Spanish architectural collective Recetas Urbanas (Urban Recipes). *Affection as Subversive Architecture* is a project where they explore how to create alternative architectural and educational spaces through participatory self-construction and active citizenry. By destabilising mainstream assumptions about public structures and their legislative frameworks, this project features new architectural strategies for schools, community centres and higher educational platforms that prioritise engaging with nature and building sustainable communities. The Showroom has a long list of very impressive young curators who have developed its programme since it was inaugurated in the east end in 1983—long before other galleries, institutions and visitors to the London art scene began to head east. Ose is picking up the work of expansion former director Emily Pethick initiated when the space relocated to the west side of London near Edgware Road and refocused its mission to commission and produce art as well as social discourse and gather and share communal knowledge.



Elvira Dyangani Ose at the 2020 Verbier Art Summit.

Cristina Davies, of UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) and **Daniel Maselli**, of SDC (the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation) represented institutional partners to the 2020 Summit and presented their work and projects to stress the necessity is not for *change* but for *transformation*. Swiss water is under threat of being compromised and the focus was on how, in what should be the foreseeable future, a shift will transpire from a struggle for resources like oil to that of clean and viable water. The question posed: *“How do we transform water from a ‘problem’ to a ‘solution’?”*



2020 Verbier Art Summit panel with Cristina Davies and Daniel Maselli.

In 2018, a gigantic postcard breaking the Guinness Worlds Records was staged just under the Swiss Jungfrauoch to raise awareness worldwide of the emergency and necessity to fight climate change. Maselli recounted how the SDC organised the making of a huge collective postcard. Composed of 125.000 small cards, each with drawings, messages and wishes of fighting climate change from children and youngsters from 35 countries worldwide, the project was staged just under the Aletsch glacier to stress the necessity to fight climate change.

Cristina Davis spoke of the UN Refugee Agency’s landscape, which is now 70 million people forced to flee. In less than a decade, the population under UNHCR’s protection has doubled, and she asked *“Where are we headed and what can we do in a resource constrained world?”* Energy is a basic need and a key to overcoming poverty and resolving environmental degradation. Restrictions on energy access negatively impact populations in humanitarian settings, and UNHCR seeks to provide widespread electrification of refugee homes and communities, promote the transition from dependency on biomass fuel to renewable energy sources, and eliminate competition for resources between refugees and host communities. Another example of their work in our resource hungry era is the effort to transform refugee camps from an agglomeration of plastic tents to structures that draw on indigenous methods of construction in creating earthen walls made of mud bricks. Philippe Rahm was ready with advice on the necessary thickness of the mud brick walls to provide adequate cooling properties during the heat of the day in Somalia.

The Berlin-based artist **Stefan Kaegi** has a diverse practice that derives much of its force from the strong bonds of theatre and analogue interactive practices that come out of travelling troupes of artists and performers transforming the localities they arrive in. Kaegi focused on the project *Weltklimakonferenz*, where unsuspecting theatre goers were suddenly cast in a role of representing a nation they were not part of and tasked with putting in place a policy to reduce emissions of CO₂ to bring global warming to agreed IPCC levels of +1.5°. Instead of communicating facts, Kaegi’s projects attempt to create experiences that have the potential to last longer and transform the consciousness and actions of participants in his theatrical projects. The goal is to transform knowledge into experiences. This is something more than creating consciousness. His projects ask, ‘How can we transform our industries and ourselves?’ The jellyfish is one of the winners of global warming. The many of us who have experienced their growth during beachfront holidays might ask the question, ‘How will we adapt to our changing climate and lived contexts?’ It’s a very good question to ask oneself. If climate change was not outside and connected to something many of us feel can still be controlled, how would we react? If global warming rendered certain rooms uninhabitable in our own homes—holiday, or other—how would we react? Kaegi asks, *“How will we react and what will we leave for others?”*



Above: Stefan Kaegi,
Below: Catherine Bottrill of
Julie’s Bicycle

Catherine Bottrill of Julie’s Bicycle joined the wrap-up for the day and also ran a mid-day inspiration session on the first day of the Summit. Julie’s Bicycle is a London-based charitable organisation that supports acts on climate change and environmental sustainability. Bottrill challenged our thinking in a number of diverse ways, opening her inspiration session by asking us to consider how our conversations might be different if we were in Australia now, or Brazil? A very salient quote she shared then was from Dan Kahan, the Elizabeth K. Dollard Professor of Law and Psychology at Yale Law School. Kahan writes: *“What you believe about climate change doesn’t reflect what you know; it reflects who you are.”* This brought me back to thinking about Joan Jonas and her statements on the anger felt by many in the women’s movement in the early 1970s and how breaking down the artificial barrier between the personal and the political was a key move in the early women’s movement. Questions Bottrill advised to ask ourselves: *“What qualities do you think arts and culture bring to climate and environmental action? Where can we be most effective in creating positive and lasting change?”*

Catherine also shared Julie's Bicycle's work on analysing Olafur Eliasson's *Waterfall* at Tate Modern to assess its carbon footprint. His 36-foot waterfall, a work of undeniable import in the effort to raise awareness of the climate crisis had itself a carbon footprint of 30 tonnes when you considered flights, materials, water wastage and its impact on the environment. How *can* we do less, better and for longer?

This question was also discussed in a more local context. **Eloi Rossier**, President of the Commune de Bagnes, remarked that Verbier was the first protected zone in Switzerland—since 1968—and that nearly all the energy and electricity is already green and locally sourced. Even so, the improvements towards a fully sustainable infrastructure require technologies that have yet to be invented (for example electric busses cannot yet function in steep snowy mountains). In looking towards the future, Rossier emphasised the importance of our relationship with nature, stating *“we need to remember the past to forge the future.”*

Joël di Natale, CEO of Altis, elaborated on the theme of energy and water, asking, how can we convince people to change their habits? Individual responsibility is key to a sustainable future. This urgency continued with **Laurent Vauchez**, CEO of Téléverbier, who underlined that ‘economy’, a combination of economy and ecology, is the only way forward. **Simon Wiget**, the new director of the Tourist Office, stated *“we can create meaningful touristic experiences that also benefit our ecosystem.”* **Câline Yamakawa**, COO of the Verbier Festival, continued this thought, stating that *“Verbier is part of the magic of the festival: preserving it is crucial.”* Young **Maéva May**, the final speaker at the local Table Ronde, is doing exactly that with her organization DEVORE, addressing food waste and recycling.



2020 Verbier Art Summit Table Ronde moderated by Summit Director Valerie Reinhold

My personal reflection of the Summit intimately connects to my relationship with nature. I grew up, in part, as a young hiker in rural Maine along the Appalachian trail. It was the 1970s and the Whole Earth Catalogue was around even if there was no T.V. We left nothing behind when we hiked—what went in came out with us. Where it went from there was long before societal practices of recycling. But then, we didn't carry water bottles—I was fortunate, or naïve enough to drink from the springs and brooks along the trail from a tin cup. What do we want our world to look like in ten years? What is the generational transfer of rights and responsibilities we are willing to bequeath to those coming behind us? What kind of life chances are we willing to pass on to them?

The focussed question in the context of the 2020 Verbier Art Summit is: What do we want the arts and the art world to look like in ten years in relation to climate change and our ecological crisis? Business as usual? Any reasonable life cycle analysis of how we currently behave and what we currently do cancels out much hope of progress. I took hope from some of Philippe Rahm's ideas about how we might use the past and its resources of thinking and technologies while still stepping away from it. We need to discover and not be afraid of making use of forgotten wisdoms, be those indigenous or lo-fi. We have more than the technologies of now. We have ourselves and a deep memory of the place where we have lived for time unmeasured. We have forgotten a good many things we might remember by drawing on the words and memories of those of us we have relegated to the margins and subaltern. *Ars longa, vita brevis. Terra brevis, tempus brevis.* Act now—let's ask whether who we are and what we do is part of the problem, or the beginning of a solution.



Much, if not all social thought, activism and change has its start in knowing who to be angry with. Important is to know who one is and just how they fit into the structures that both produce and reproduce norms. We each and all need to transform our behaviours. We are all part of the problem. The Summit hopefully has inspired how we each, in our own way, might begin to fashion ourselves as part of a solution.

For more information on the 2020 Talks programme, please visit verbierartsummit.org or follow: Instagram @verbierartsummit | Twitter @verbierartnow | YouTube @verbierartsummit

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