

NOTES

What is the Point of it All?

Working Internationally in the Age of Ecological Crisis, Part 1

Saturday Oct 19, 2019

Notes compiled by Sanna Kangasluoma, Dance Info Finland, Nov 2019

Keynote via video conference: Ben Twist (UK), director of Creative Carbon Scotland

Panel discussion

Moderator: **Ása Richardsdóttir** (IS/BE), general secretary of IETM

Speakers include: **Sari Palmgren** (FI), dance artist, **Anna Talasniemi** (FI), director of Kone Foundation, **Antti Majava** (FI), artist and researcher, BIOS research unit, **Nina Refsnes** (NO), senior advisor (mobility), Nordic Culture Point, **Rosa Meriläinen** (FI), general secretary, KULTA Central Organization for Finnish Culture and Arts Associations.

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Ben Twist, director of Creative Carbon Scotland spoke in his video conference about why we in the arts need to be more ambitious in our work on climate change. What this means for the arts? What can artists or cultural organisations do?

Transformational changes are necessary

Ben Twist emphasised that transformational changes are needed, small individual things are not enough.

The world has changed a lot in the last 25 years - regarding to traveling, technologies, international conferences etc – and it has been for the worse from the climate point of view. But he is still optimistic. In the next 20 years time the world can be changed, too, but this time towards less carbon and travel, more local.

Artists and arts managers – imaginers of different futures, highly skilled people with an extraordinary level of versatility and problem solving, have an important role to play in creating a fairer, more just, more equal world, Ben Twist explained.

We have to work out what this better new world could look like and then work out how to get there. - And this is where artists are well placed.

To make the change happen you need to work on three fronts: with individuals, organisations and structures

Ben Twist presented some solutions they have adapted at Creative Carbon Scotland. One of the main principles is to understand that you cannot deal with this problem only on your own.

"From early on we realised that if we wanted change we needed to work with individuals, organisations and structures:

- Individuals can't change if the organisations they work for and with don't want to change.

- Organisations can't change if their staff, artists and audiences don't want to change, and nor can they change if the funding, legal and other structures within which they work are opposed to change.
- And the organisations that create those structures – funding bodies, trade groups – can't change if the organisations they serve don't want to change."

So, it's necessary to work on all three fronts, to combine top-down with bottom up, individuals and structures.

At Creative Carbon Scotland, for example, they have run training workshops for cultural organisations, helped artists develop work relating to climate change, and created projects in which artists work with public bodies to bring about change – not necessarily by making art but by helping them think in different ways.

"In Scotland – and probably in most of our countries – the most effective action will be to reduce travel, to reduce the carbon intensity of travel and to eliminate fossil fuels from our heating and power supplies," he stated.

Localism is a radical solution

Ben Twist suggests that one way forward may be a 'radical localism'.

Local arts organisations would make works that belong to local audiences, that are meaningful and relevant to local people, instead of importing shows that after one or two performances go somewhere else. They could employ more local artists to strengthen the local cultural economy, and they must work with local audiences both to strengthen the bonds with them and to develop the artistic talent of the future, and future audiences.

To the criticism that in order to develop the artists need to travel and exchange ideas, meet different people and break down barriers, Ben Twist answers that close to us there are often people who have different reference points and views and with whom we don't really communicate. It's not always necessary to travel abroad to enlarge one's perspectives.

Artists shouldn't refuse politics

The audience raised a question about inequalities in the world. Artists living in poorer parts of the world or in dangerous places need to travel to Europe to be able to make their art, and to benefit from our funding possibilities. Staying local is not always an option for everybody.

Europe has strongly exported its values and ideas and ways to do things, but we should be careful with choices we teach others to do, Ben Twist commented. It should always be questioned whether the project we're proposing will be benefiting people locally, in their countries and conditions.

"We should work here with our politicians so that the world will be changed," Ben Twist underlined.
"Artists shouldn't refuse politics."

**Panel discussion: Sustainable and responsible mobility - what would it mean?
Should the political agenda affect an artist's work?**

In the panel discussion and audience comments that followed Ben Twist's presentation, there was a lot of debate about whether the traveling is needed or if localism leads to parochialism.

Traveling is not an absolute value *an sich*. Artistic and cultural exchange create empathy and understanding between people. In Europe we could even say that this is the basis for the peace.

In the future we will need more empathy and inclusion – the climate is changing, there are more refugees and immigration, one audience member pointed out. If we just stay local, will it lead to closing, to nationalism and non-believers in the climate change? It's a vicious circle.

The question should be the way and the purpose of traveling. The meaningful travels are such that make people really meet each others and exchange.

Also the communication and understanding between different cultures doesn't always succeed through the digital medium.

In short, to stop traveling was not considered a realistic solution. Instead more sustainable ways of traveling, and funding for this should be created. And it was highlighted that you also need more time in order to travel slowly. That time is not "wasted" - at best it's beneficial, used for working, developing ideas or artwork, even performing... But can you afford that? Who pays for that time?

One of the panelists, **Anna Talasniemi** from the Kone Foundation, pointed out that as academics and artists are very international by nature, her foundation has introduced grants for more sustainable – meaning slower and more expensive – travels for grant holders, but they didn't get many applications. They also have a special support for meeting colleagues virtually, without travelling.

It was also suggested that festivals work together, so that there would be a real touring network. When travelling from one place to another you could stop in different cities and festivals to give performances.

What about the autonomy of artists?

The autonomy of an artist is very narrow. Art and creativity are often being used by politicians in the rhetorics that puts the emphasis on economic growth.

One of the panelists, **Antti Majava**, researcher and artist himself, explained how artists are not independent of the whole system. They should be aware of this, and do practical things, for example request municipalities to change the heating system to low carbon – as the place where you work is a fundamental thing for an artist.

"For example, I could be doing artistic work in my studio, but what am I doing instead? – I'm trying to persuade companies to invest in new sustainable low carbon ferry lines crossing the Baltic sea," he said.

The climate crisis was generally experienced as such an emergency that we must act on all levels and make individual practical ecological choices. But this is not enough, we really must speak for the change that is needed on the structural level. We need to talk about big things that really develop the dance sector towards more sustainability and less carbon emissions.



How to measure the value of art is one big structural question. The criteria used in evaluation of artistic work often value international fame, international experience and performances, which means a lot of traveling. Being international is considered a merit for an artist, described one panelist, **Sari Palmgren**, choreographer. These criteria steer the ways we work, act and behave.

Instead of asking the audience numbers, number of touring performances and the money, the policy makers could support artists by measuring the impact of their artistic work on the environment, suggested one artist from the audience.

Autonomy of art is not evident. Instead of letting politicians use art in the ideology that worships growth, we could as well instrumentalize it in the service of sustainability and saving the climate.

The conclusion of this session, by panelist **Rosa Meriläinen**, encourages us to action:
Art is a powerful tool for activism!

(That's also the theme for the next IETM meeting in Tromso spring 2020.)