



Climate change meet the Art world. Art world meet Blockchain.



INTERVIEW WITH MARIANNE MAGNIN, BOARD CHAIR OF THE CORNELIUS ARTS FOUNDATION AND UK MANAGING DIRECTOR OF ARTEIA

Q. We have had conversations about how art can potentially help clarify and capture the insidiousness and urgency of climate change. Much like yourself, I believe the creative industries have a role to play but how can they drive meaningful change in countries most at risk from climate catastrophe?

There isn't a single solution to climate change. It is a highly complex challenge that requires multiple approaches, ensuring complementarity. Art, culture and the creative industries are some of those mechanisms. In order to prevent or at least mitigate catastrophic climate change, humanity must be open to what can be described as a fundamental cultural shift. We need to imagine, experiment with and implement new ways of working and living, and to do so at an incredible pace – less than two decades, as is argued in the new report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

In this context, the cultural sector and the creative industries can drive change by imagining and visualising those new societies and economies, overcoming a feeling of despondence. Only if we remain hopeful can we dedicate our energy to preventing the worst from happening, and art can play a role in this by broadening our horizons beyond the present and the ways of living that we already know.

This is why one of the five strategic themes of the work of The Cornelius Arts Foundation, the R&D arts charity that I founded and whose board I share, is sustainability. We want to understand and unleash the power of the arts to, among other things, speed up the transition to more sustainable modes of living.

Q. So much of the messaging around climate change calls for a global movement. Art, however, engages on a more personal level. To what extent can the visual imagery and emotions instilled from experiencing climate focussed photography, paintings, or music provide a safe space for people to connect with and accept the urgency of the issue?

Change must happen as much at the personal as at the collective level. In this framework, art is a privileged arena in that it does both at the same time: it engages us on a personal level but also allows us to establish connections with those beyond our communities and networks.

This is particularly evident in the music sector, which is known for not respecting borders. At the same time, more and more visual art is participative and performative.

Finally, one must also mention new art forms such as digital art, which by definition has a global reach. That is, while I agree with you that visual art has an important role in terms of calling attention to the urgency of climate change, its importance is broader than that: it reminds both artists and art lovers, no matter where they are in the world, that we are connected.

This was why we decided to host acclaimed photographer and artist Gideon Mendel in our 2017 summer residency in Lagamas, in the South of France. Known for his series of photographs of communities around the world that are already facing the consequences of climate change (ongoing Drowning Worldseries), we invited him to investigate the complex interpersonal links that define a small local community (Lagamas and its Hérault valley) as well as to explore the creation of bridges between a rural community and the arts.

Q. Global warming represents a set of new and serious risks to our health, our infrastructure, our relatively stable existence. Art is therapeutic and provides us with an opportunity to explore and confront what's at stake, even if only in the abstract. Ultimately, it can help us reach a point of acceptance but what comes after that? Beyond motivation and provocation, what can creativity offer?

Art is therapeutic indeed. But it also gives us better access to our subconscious, which is a prerequisite to develop empathy, build relationships based on trust, and work with others to change our surrounding environment.

Individual awareness of our interdependency is important not only to grasp the impact of climate change but also, as I suggested earlier, to find ways to address it as part of a global community. In other words, art and creativity can nurture mental agility and societal resilience to accelerating climate change, namely by imagining and implementing the lifestyle shifts that are needed to face the former.

Yet while this role is something that everyone who works in the cultural sector can understand intuitively, the truth is that it is difficult to find data to make this case. This is part of the mission of The Cornelius Arts Foundation. Having strong evidence of the multidimensional and crossover impact of art will allow the sector to argue more convincingly for its recognition by decision-makers as strategic and therefore generate more investment.

Q. The kind of civic activities the creative industries are generally equated with are movements and revolutions. Is that where this is heading?

Artists are by definition sensitive to subtle cultural shifts; this includes identifying emerging concerns, discussions and social movements. They may not always be at the inception of a revolution or radical change, but nonetheless visualise it, discuss it, reflect on it and materialise it. In France, this was clear with the May 1968 street posters, which crystallised and galvanised the movement so well at the time and still resonate today. Artists are often seen as individualistic and lonely, in the romantic sense of it. But the nature of the sector is changing and there are many engaged initiatives (such as Occupy) that have included a substantial number of artists in the fabric of collective movements challenging the status quo.

This said, there are also some artist-led collectives piloting new ways of working together. One in the making is DECAL (Decentralised Arts Lab), whose agenda is to build fairer and more connected ecologies and economies for the arts. Understanding the ins and outs of our actions is critical to apprehend why e.g. collaborating on a project or recycling at home participates in a broader agenda, without which we cannot foster long-term social change. That is the case for artists as it is for any individual.

We need to respond to climate change not as a closed movement or via a one-time revolution but by implementing profound transformations to how we live and work together.

Q. You and I are fortunate enough to be the beneficiaries of a stable climate, whereas Africans are already having to contend with the spread of climate-linked diseases and rising heat-related morbidity and mortality. In the context of the issue, we're the winners and they are losing. Can art be leveraged to help those on the losing side?

As you know, in both the medium- and the long-term we will all be losers. And we already see some signs of this danger in the northern hemisphere, where weather patterns have become gradually more extreme and the richness of the biosphere is in danger. Additionally, the massive migratory movements that are to be expected as a direct and indirect consequence of climate change also place the northern hemisphere under increased socio-political risk.

This said, you are absolutely correct in stressing the inequality of the expected impact of climate change. We must leverage the power of art to not only make this danger visible but also enable a profound shift in how we operate around the world, and to do so in a more inclusive manner.

Pursuing on the collective initiative I mentioned earlier, DECAL is one example of new models with a better distribution of roles that fundamentally promote a shift in what we define as being of value and how this value should be acknowledged. Blockchain and web technologies, by facilitating the crowdsourcing of intelligence and mutualising the contributions of diverse international communities and stakeholders, can be designed to introduce better accountability, as well as much needed transparency and fairness in the allocation of global resources.

To invent and pilot new models testifies to the experimental, risk taking and technologically savvy nature of the arts, which is what the world urgently needs today to extract itself from its self-destructive path. My role as part of a blockchain startup in the arts, Arteia, also reflects this personal interest. But that's for another interview!

