

'Art Can Act as an Agent for Change'

Conversation with Karole P. B. Vail (Director, Peggy Guggenheim Collection)

Cristina Baldacci and Christina Hainzl: We are living in an uncertain time, marked above all by the ecological question and increasing polarisation. The *Peggy Guggenheim Collection (PGC)* has undertaken both a profound reflection and a series of initial measures that address the questions facing humanity today. One of these was the series of meetings *Art 4 a Better Future* that was organised in collaboration with *THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE)* at *Ca' Foscari University of Venice* and *CUOA Business School*. What museum activities – starting with the experience gained by the *PGC* – can help to raise awareness and address the challenges of contemporaneity? And what open questions did the meetings with *NICHE* leave for the work of the *PGC*?

Karole Vail: First of all, I think that the *PGC* has been very conscious of sustainability matters for a long time. This consciousness extends beyond economic sustainability to include social sustainability and a commitment to inclusivity. The museum strives to act in a way that is as environmentally friendly as possible, which is particularly challenging for a small museum like ours, especially one that is located in Venice. Even before sustainability became a widely discussed topic, the museum was already working to literally open its doors to new audiences. The underlying belief was, and remains, that art is not just for the 1% or the 0.001%, but for 100% of people.

At the *PGC*, we believe that art can act as an agent for change. Artists have always believed that, while they may not be able to change the world entirely, they

can contribute to change in meaningful ways. Art can pave the way for a better future and provide a new kind of empowerment for humanity. The *Guggenheim Museum* and the *Guggenheim Foundation* were founded on this belief in the possibility of change, better understanding and even spiritual development, with the goal of achieving something better and more positive. This mission continues at the *PGC*. During the pandemic, this idea became especially evident. We recognised that art is crucial. While we're not literally saving lives, we believe that art can offer significant help and support. It can be a source of generosity and solace. In this respect, I think that art is absolutely essential.

Museums have realised, especially since the pandemic and in light of dramatic cost increases, that they must continue to operate as platforms for dialogue, collaboration and reflection. Museums are places where people can experience beautiful works, but also works that challenge and provoke them. As such, museums have become spaces for public discussion and debate.

The *Art 4 a Better Future* project with *NICHE* was an excellent and timely opportunity to share ideas and discuss sustainability issues in partnership with a major university, as well as with corporate businesses. It was significant that corporate actors were involved, as they too are beginning to realise the importance of participation. We must, however, remain vigilant about greenwashing. Many companies, and even some institutions, feel compelled to project an image of being 'green' or 'compliant' without necessarily taking meaningful action. In the case of sustainability, I think that we can sometimes tend to be a little selfish, but real change requires genuine effort from everyone, no matter how small that contribution might be. This is why it's so important that we all play our part.

If we, as a museum, can contribute to raising awareness about climate change, then we should. This collaboration with *NICHE* and the three meetings we held with university professors and corporate representatives were significant steps. Hopefully, we can continue to organise similar events in the future.

These meetings also opened a space for dialogue about possible collaboration between art and technology. Artists have long been interested in this relationship. Today, more and more artists are engaging with artificial intelligence and exploring its creative potential.

I believe *Art 4 a Better Future* was an excellent beginning for us. It's part of a broader discourse that we're trying to address within the limitations of our institution. The PGC is a small museum, and it wasn't originally designed as a museum – it's a house. This poses unique challenges as we seek to make it sustainable, but we're committed to navigating those challenges to the best of our ability.

CB and CH: How can a museum take ecological aspects into account today in the preparation and execution of exhibitions? And how can curatorial practices within a museum institution approach so-called 'ecologies of care'?

KV: One of our biggest challenges relates to exhibitions and the origin of the works that we present. As a former curator, I understand the difficulty of preparing a show when the most fitting works are scattered across the globe. There are certain continents from which we've decided not to borrow works, but minimising transport and crate costs isn't always easy.

For some exhibitions, I've had to make the decision to avoid any loans as much as possible from the U.S. The reason is twofold: first, the financial cost, and, second, the ecological footprint. We have to make an effort here. But then comes the dilemma – if you exclude all works from certain regions, are you compromising the quality of the exhibition? Will it still fully represent the artist, the theme and the overall message that you're trying to convey? Sometimes, bringing in a specific work allows visitors to experience something unique that they might never have seen otherwise. So, it's always a question of finding the right balance.

Transportation is one of the most significant challenges. Costs are skyrocketing but, beyond this, there's the environmental impact. To mitigate this, we're increasingly using remote video couriers. This practice gained momentum during the pandemic and, in some ways, it's proven more effective. Through video, you can zoom in on details, often providing a clearer view of the work. However, there are limitations. As someone who's served as a courier in the past, I know that there's a level of security that comes with being physically present to supervise the work – to be there with it, day and night. For very valuable pieces, we're unlikely to abandon the practice of in-person couriers. But, whenever possible, we've embraced video couriers as a viable option.

There's also a secondary benefit to sending curators as couriers. It gives them the opportunity to conduct research in the destination city – research that might not have happened otherwise. If we move to more video couriering, we'll have fewer of these in-person research opportunities. Again, it's all about balance.

But beyond the practical considerations, it's also about moral consciousness. If we're serious about reducing transportation, we have to set clear limits. For some newer projects, I've told our curators: 'No works from the U.S. this time – we're only working with pieces from Italy and Europe.' Sometimes this means saying no to a single work that would need to be transported across the Atlantic. In other cases, if we're bringing in multiple works from one location, it's more justifiable. If I'm already bringing over five or six works, then it's more worthwhile. But with single pieces, the impact – both financial and environmental – is too great.

The broader issue extends beyond museums. The art world as a whole needs to address its response to these challenges. Do we really need so many bienales and art fairs? It seems like there's an art fair every other day. This constant movement of art around the globe comes with significant costs, both financial and ecological.

Beyond exhibitions, we've also made efforts in our retail operations. We've eliminated plastic bags in our shops, replacing them with recycled paper bags. We print as much material as possible in Venice or within the Veneto region, supporting the local economy while also reducing transport-related emissions. Our T-shirts and scarves are made from eco-friendly materials, and we even stock *Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)* certified pencils.

Where possible, we also partner with local artisans and makers. This effort is about more than sustainability – it's about promoting the rich craftsmanship and artistry that Venice has to offer. Supporting local artists and artisans helps to preserve the city's cultural heritage, and that's an essential part of our mission.

CB and CH: What also came out during the *Art 4 a Better Future* meetings is that you are working together with scientists to develop a green protocol for conservation and restoration?

KV: Yes, definitely. We had one particularly interesting project that involved using lichens and tree leaves for the conservation of cultural heritage. The lichens were placed both inside and outside to monitor the air, as they are excellent indicators of air quality. The leaves, on the other hand, were used to absorb pollution. This approach was highly successful and quite remarkable.

We've also been fortunate to participate in several European projects, working closely with the European Union. From 2015 to 2018, we were part of the *NANORESTART* project, which focused on the development of nanogels for conservation. Then, from 2019 to 2022, we participated in the *APACHE* programme, which focused on the development of active, intelligent packaging materials and display cases. As part of this project, we received a specially designed display case for sculptures. This display case meets the highest standards for preservation, providing optimal air quality and climate control – essential features for a museum environment.

We're currently involved in another European Union project called *GREENART*. Our conservator is becoming increasingly aware of the holistic approaches that are crucial to effective conservation. While these methods sometimes require some trial and error, they're largely effective and represent the direction in which we want to move. Embracing these holistic, environmentally conscious approaches is essential for the future of conservation and restoration.

CB and CH: Is it right that this is an ongoing process that varies widely from artwork to artwork, also because each artwork is an object in itself that has specific needs and also requires specific acts of care?

KV: Yes. But we're very fortunate because our museum is quite small. This also means that our collection is not so large, which in some ways is an advantage. It's more manageable, and it allows us to focus more attentively on individual works of art. This enables us to engage in grant programmes, special projects and collaborations.

We work very closely with the *Opificio Pietre Dure* in Florence, and this collaboration is incredibly valuable. The *Opificio* is one of the most prestigious conservation institutions, and being able to work with it brings significant benefits to our collection. Ultimately, our goal is to preserve these works for future generations. Ideally, these pieces will still be here in 500, or even 1,500 years. That's

the hope, and everything we do is aimed at ensuring their longevity and survival.

CB and CH: The educational programme for schools is one of the flagships of the *Peggy Guggenheim Collection*. There are many interdisciplinary educational activities that are dedicated especially to children and teenagers. Do they address ecological issues as well?

KV: First of all, we're an educational institution and there have been school programmes and family programmes at the *PGC* for decades. I think that we've been very much at the forefront, amongst the avant-garde, in promoting school programmes and bringing children to the museum. Let's face it, most people don't grow up with art at home, and many don't realise that they can go to a museum. Unfortunately, there's still a bit of hesitation or fear about entering a museum, and that's the last thing we want. Museums need to be welcoming, but not all of them are. I hope that we're as welcoming as possible. This means engaging the staff and making sure that they understand that the museum is a place of sharing, education and community. The younger you can bring in children, the better.

We have a wide range of family programmes and children's programmes, but we also think about older audiences. In the summer, for instance, we open the museum earlier for older visitors – people aged 70 or 75 and above – so that they can visit when it's less hot and less crowded. This is a nice time for them to enjoy the museum and its exhibitions. Our aim is to welcome people of all ages, from the very young to the elderly, because everyone has the right and a desire to experience the museum. We want to make it accessible and educational, but it also has to be enjoyable. Yes, it's serious, but it also has to be appealing and friendly.

In recent years, we've been developing more programmes focused on general accessibility and inclusion. One example is *Doppio senso*, a tactile journey through the museum for visually impaired people. The visually impaired have just as much right to be in the museum as everyone else, and we have to facilitate this. Another initiative is *Io vado al museo*, a collaboration with a university that uses the translanguaging method to bring migrants into the museum. The goal is to enable people from different linguistic backgrounds

to talk together and to demonstrate that each language is as important as the next. This initiative is about fostering a sense of community and inclusivity.

We also have *Kids' Day* and various family days, along with *A Scuola di Guggenheim*, which includes programmes specifically for teachers. These programmes get terrific responses from schools across the Veneto region. When you see young kids sitting on the ground, looking at a painting, you hope that they're taking something with them. Maybe they'll start drawing differently, or perhaps they'll tell their friends or parents that they want to return to the museum. That's the ultimate goal – to create a lasting impression that encourages a lifelong engagement with art and culture.

CB and CH: Last year, recognising the impact of museums on the environment, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York appointed an Associate Director of Sustainability in order to follow a greener path. Has this decision also influenced the PGC's green policies? Are you developing a common protocol that affects the entire constellation of Guggenheim museums?

KV: Not really. In New York or Bilbao, they can do that because they're much bigger and have a dedicated team or department. I'd love to be able to have solar panels, for example, but you can't do that in Venice. We recently conducted a sustainability study with *Metroeconomica*. They performed a sustainability analysis for us using the LCA (Life Cycle Assessment) methodology. As we expected, the greatest emissions are linked to the transport of works of art. But we also realised that we're remarkably sustainable despite these transport challenges and the fact that international students and fellows come to the *Peggy Guggenheim Collection* from all over the world, many of whom fly here. We admit to being culprits in that respect.

On the other hand, when it comes to economic sustainability we generate substantial business for Venice and the Veneto region. The economic benefits of this are significantly greater than any environmental externalities or shortcomings. I wish that we could do better regarding our environmental impact, but we do much to support the economic livelihood of our neighbourhood and of the Veneto in general.

We don't have a formal green team as they do in New York, but we try to be as respectful as we can in small ways. We focus on proper waste disposal – although this is quite expensive in Venice – and we've switched to using LED lights.

CB and CH: What are the next green steps for the PGC?

KV: Well, I don't think that there are many new steps that we can take, other than just improving on what we're doing as much as possible and remaining very aware of our actions in terms of sustainability. At this point, I don't think that it's realistic to be completely green. But we must never lose sight of the fact that we live in Venice and that we have a responsibility to do our part, whatever that might be. We're very pleased with our sustainability results and our contribution to the economy. Our goal is to continue improving little by little, especially in terms of transport issues, and to generally strive to be less wasteful.

CB and CH: There is something Janus-faced about thinking of sustainability and Venice. Venice as a place of cultural heritage, threatened by decay and overtourism in the middle of the sensitive ecosystem of the lagoon. And, at the same time, Venice as a reference point for many sustainability events and projects, as a vibrant cultural and scientific scene that deals with the environmental issue. You live in Venice; how do you perceive and deal with this ambivalence?

KV: Well, it's very difficult and very frustrating. It's so difficult because you don't want to tell people that they can't come – everyone should be able to experience Venice. We've been working for many years to break down barriers, and part of that effort has been to make travel more accessible. Ironically, that very success has contributed to the problem of overtourism.

I firmly believe that tourism cannot be a monoculture in Venice. This is true for other places as well – like Barcelona or Malaga – where residents have protested against the overwhelming influx of tourists. Tourism is, of course, an essential part of the city's economy, but it should only be one part of a larger, more balanced system. We don't want Venice to turn into a museum. We already have museums, but we don't want Venice to become one itself.

We know that there has to be political will. And there's probably a lack of strong political will to create the right infrastructures for 'normal' people who are not

going to buy a palazzo on the Grand Canal. What we need are families with two or three children who can actually live here. This means providing good schools, activities and futures for them, as well as ensuring the presence of regular shops. Unfortunately, there aren't many regular shops left. This makes it difficult to do basic things like grocery shopping.

I'm going to contradict myself here. In some ways, it's good that there aren't too many regular shops. We've perhaps grown too used to having too much choice. If there's less choice, it's sometimes easier to make a decision. The problem, however, is that the reduced choice often affects essential items. When I walk from Santa Maria del Giglio or San Maurizio to San Marco, it feels like I've entered a duty-free zone at an airport. The way the shops are positioned, decorated and highlighted gives it that feeling. I know that this isn't unique to Venice – every major city in the world now has these high-end shops – but I still don't understand why we need them there. It beats me.

It's so sad because, even here in Dorsoduro, there was a lovely little shop that sold beautiful old, antique glasses and objects. It recently closed, and now there's another shop selling junk – yet another junk shop. It's not that I want to take jobs away from the people who work in these stores, but surely there needs to be a better solution.

I don't believe in the monoculture of tourism. That's what has to change. But, as I said before, there's probably a lack of true political will – both in the city and at a national level – to bring about significant change. I'm not sure how you achieve this because I'm not an engineer, architect or city planner. But surely there must be brilliant ideas out there for transforming Venice into a truly liveable city – a place where people genuinely want to live, not just visit. Perhaps this also means that tourism needs to be a little more restricted.

CB and CH: Museums are part of Venice's fragile social ecosystem, and Venice itself is becoming increasingly musealised. How should institutions like the PGC position themselves to help keep the city socially and culturally alive in the future?

KV: Well, we have to welcome everyone and be more inclusive than ever. We have to ensure that our programmes of inclusivity and general accessibility are more prevalent than ever. Ideally, we would develop more of these pro-

grammes, but we're also a small team, so there's only so much that we can do. That said, I think that we already do quite a lot.

In some ways, museums – and museums like the *PGC* in particular – should serve as a model of what the city can be. A model of excellence that's open to progress, inclusivity and welcome. But this must be done in a respectful way that isn't solely geared towards tourists but also focused on the needs and interests of residents.