

**Overview of Verbier Art Talks and conclusions on the 2017 Verbier | Art Summit
by writer & art critic John Slyce**

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To my mind, the most significant impact of the 2017 Verbier Art Summit was to open up a non-transactional space - free of the standard commercial and social forces in operation when the art world tends to gather - where thinking, often quite speculative, and emerging ideas were openly exchanged across a community gathered in Verbier, Switzerland.

There was a tremendous generosity and equality amongst all participants and this was the case whether it was an intimate morning discussion session in a chalet, or a public talk during the afternoon. Speakers, participants and audience each approached the theme of **Size Matters! (De)Growth of the 21st Century Art Museum** from individual positions that were at all times engaged, valued and respected.

The 2,5-day Verbier Art Summit was organised in partnership with the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Museum director Beatrix Ruf and her curatorial team invited 10 keynote speakers and chose the engaging theme. The Summit was structured around the following set of questions:

- What does 'Size Matters!' mean in your field at this moment?
- What helps you think about expansion?
- What is the future of growth in your field?
- What is the function of institutions in the future? (How can we define their presence? What experiences will they generate? How will they relate to audiences?)

Rather than aiming for conclusions, speakers and participants explored such questions from their own experiences, research, professional practices and institutional contexts. Each day was organised around a morning debate session held in a private chalet, lead by moderators and including keynote speakers alongside participants and members of the Verbier | Art Untold Association.



Following lunch, there was an afternoon breakout sessions and workshops where attendees explored, for example, what role has art played in your life? What role has art played in museums? What role has art played in the world? Later sessions explored the future of art and its growing institutional import and scale.

In the afternoons, the **Verbier Art Talks** took place. These were twenty-minute talks by the keynote speakers, which included leading artists, museum directors, writers and academics. These Talks were open to the public and entirely free for any art enthusiast to attend. What follows below is a personal selection of what I found to be some of the most interesting ideas and issues raised during the Verbier Art Talks.



Professor Benjamin Bratton approached size and indeed scale through the rubric of Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality. He challenged the audience to confront the ‘indifference’ of Artificial Intelligence and to consider how such ‘intelligence’ is an emerging property of matter where the machines of Artificial Intelligence are perhaps teaching humans a fuller approach to thinking itself. Such a prospect may indeed lead to a moment where humans are confronted by “an image of the way humans think humans think.” Professor Bratton posited this as a ‘machinic image’ generated through new modes of representation in an age of Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality. Here representations can exist at a level, or state of code and offer a form of ‘vision without images.’ As we see ourselves through the ‘eyes’ of the ‘Machinic Other’ we experience a potential disenchantment: we look ‘un-human’ in the machinic other’s eyes. Bratton offered such a scenario up as a form of ‘Copernican Trauma’, where the scale of a shift in consciousness and self-knowledge alters our conceptions of cultural and planetary time and, indeed, our notions of what may constitute ‘the now’.

HRH Prince Constantijn of the Netherlands looked at how the disruptive model of the start-up might challenge the thinking and practices of the art museum to provide just that promised by such small and flexible businesses: ‘superior customer value.’ Here the Prince positioned the museum as an incumbent and therefore, as with the experience of politicians in recent months, perhaps equally prone to a blindness that does not allow the institution to see what is coming before them. He questioned the seemingly limited options for the museum: must the museum become ‘fun and

entertaining', or will it merely remain 'dry and cerebral'? Prince Constantijn challenged the museum to 'let the outside in and to no more be an exclusive club.' This they may do by creating spaces with more autonomy and experimentation. Now is a time of great opportunity given the technological innovations possible to open access to collections. The task is to exploit these technologies to show the 'real thing' and stay true to an authentic experience of art.

Size is the profession of the architect, and **Rem Koolhaas** offered the audience to consider a dimension of bigness that could be ambitious and reinvent the museum. This might be approached by not only embedding the museum in a city, but indeed to relate to a 'museum as city' made up of assembled institutions. In order to get there, Koolhaas warned, we must overcome the intimidation of size, but so too resist 'doing what the economy asks one to do'. In an earlier morning debate, Koolhaas lamented the fact that as museums have grown in size, the scale of the intellectual capacities and ambitions of those inside them have not kept pace. He traced a shift from 'challenge' (exemplified by the work of Richard Serra) to 'comfort' (epitomized by that of Anish Kapoor). The size of museum extensions are not always kind, or fair to the practices of certain artists. Koolhaas looked at his current on-going project with the Stedelijk where he will render a new part of the building as something more than an extension. He concluded his talk by looking at the mega buildings in the countryside regions of Tahoe and Reno that offer up a model of a technological world integrated into humanistic space.

In a highly philosophical and entertaining talk, **Cissie Fu** challenged the audience to shift our perspectives on size through the simple move of lowering our elbow as we drew a circle in the air. Her aim was to open up thinking to embrace 'indeterminacy' or uncertainty as a means of moving forward. The schema Fu sketched was centred on three terms: Unfix - say, an image and open it up to multivalent meanings; Unform - yes, learn a technique but do not be burdened by it; Unlearn - usually we approach 'size' by thinking about and through measurement; what might happen if we expose ourselves to a radical proposition of 'not-knowing'? She concluded with the truisms that, 'Bigger is bigger; smaller is smaller, but more than once in a while, less can be more'.

Christopher Kulendran Thomas, an artist based in London, Berlin and various other places, spoke of his collaborative project of generating a start-up centred on a Real Estate Technology Company. As he did so, the inauguration address of now President Trump was streamed into the lecture space. As this was going on, he posited a project that takes the form of a distributive network, titled the New Eelam, which comes forward as a flexible housing system engaged with by subscription. Based on an analysis of what contemporary art has done in recent years (for example, establishing 'the loft' as a universal marker of gentrification and urban regeneration, to -in more recent years- making visible and consumable a lifestyle of globalization), Kulendran

Thomas's project aims to structurally re-organize housing and explore what a home might be when considered as informational goods and as existing beyond traditional property relations. A product of such a system of subscribed housing might offer a more fluid form of citizenship not so much bounded by a territory but dispersed across a network. In a reversal of a familiar commercial logic of contemporary practice, Kulendran Thomas asked, "How might a brand communicate therein as an artist."

Day two of the Verbier Art Talks began with select readings from the cultural theorist and writer **Mark Fisher**, who was to present as a keynote speaker but chose to leave this world the week before. Daniel Birnbaum, director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and the artist Tobias Madison joined Beatrix Ruf to read movingly from Fisher's hugely popular and important analysis of how capitalism represents itself: *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* What I took away from the readings that is worthy to grasp is, "with neo-liberalism, the more it is named, the less it can pose as post-political." The challenge of Mark Fisher's recent writing is to invent new ways where people might enter into and be engaged and involved in politics, but so too re-examine how the relations of life and work might resist the conditions of mandatory entrepreneurialism.

Paul Spies, director of Berlin's Stadtmuseum since 2015, delivered a lively talk titled 'One Size Fits Not All'. Size here takes on very specific dimensions and challenges when, for example, the Berlin City Museum possesses some 4.5 million objects. Spies asked, 'What is one meant to do with all those objects?'

The artist **Tobias Madison** read a performative lecture that examined the role of the artist in an era of gentrified psychedelia. "I am an artist; I deal in the realm of mind expansion," offered Madison. This was an invitation to look inwards and consider, as technological advances of size and scale grow in proportions, new sentiments come forward lacking shape and form. It is the role of the artist to lend shape to these new feelings and sentiments. Madison offered that art is a parallel entity aligned with a history of sentiments, but one that operates outside a logic of forwards and backwards. Art creates a communal consciousness and galvanizes new communities.

The artist **Dave Beech**, newly appointed Professor at Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg, addressed size and his own confusions with scale when a young painting student. He went on to look at the economic determinants of both size and scale in the supposed oversupply of artists and the scale of artistic production beyond that of demand before looking at the rise of the national museum and collection following the shifts in the post-revolution world of 1789. Returning to his own collaborative art practice in the collective Freee, Beech speculated as to whether approaches to scale in the artwork and its wider social and institutional scale in which it operates is not always already in conflict. He concluded by stating that the only scale worth working in now is the scale of the world and that of the word - each prone to the monumentalising forces of social media.

The final keynote speaker was the artist **Tino Sehgal** who fully engaged his audience in a type of call and response performative conversation as he explored the need of society to generate ritual gatherings to re-enact foundational categories and values across time. He lead the audience to consider what happens to an institution when it considers growth and offered that, rather than growing in size, museums might consider the more radical position of expanding their opening times 24/7 x 365 days a year!

Some conclusions I have drawn on the theme of **Size Matters! (De)Growth of the 21st Century Art Museum** following the Summit:

- The thinking and approaches of the allied art institutions, and here I am thinking of art fairs, art magazines, primary galleries, secondary market operators, biennales, art schools and on - museums are by no means alone in this, but are perhaps the most visible and extreme example - to growth has been largely one-dimensional and centered on size, crude measurement and quantity over and above scale, more nuanced social indicators and quality in the past two decades.
- As institutions have 'grown' the intellectual ambitions and abilities of those who fill those institutions have not kept pace.
- A palpable degree of 'gigantomania' has mirrored the processes of globalization since the 1990s.
- Technological innovations - here I have in mind Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Reality, 3D video and printing, the opening of digital archives, streaming, online connectivity - these are the potential engines of a qualitatively different type of growth for art institutions and museums (over and above the mega-structure or architectural extension).
- Institutions need to evolve their thinking, drawing lessons and models from a range of contemporary examples - the disruptive start-up, digital interfaces, viral media organizations and innovative collaborative or cooperative bodies - where emphasis is placed on small, flexible, speedy responses to a changing landscape and environment (not to mention an ever shifting social and economic context) for art.

- There is a great need for longer-term thinking and strategic planning regarding remits, mission statements and how one might define 'growth' across a range of issues - buildings, audiences, markets, educational agendas, collections, displays, communities - based not on four year cycles, or political calendars and changing governments, but 20, 40 or even 50 year periods.
- There is strong agreement that artists are in the business of 'consciousness raising' and art lends shape to new feelings and sentiments under development in societies. The importance of art and the museum as a site where communities come together, and see themselves and their foundational values and beliefs reflected back at them, is as great or greater now than ever before.
- Art itself really provides the strategies and approaches we need to consider and adopt in relation to growth: slow down, think more and self-reflexively, and then think and act with a longer frame of time and set of ambitions based in a notion of now, or the contemporary that stretches further back in history and is projected further into the future.
- My own concluding thoughts returned to a line from the artist Robert Smithson: "Size determines an object, but scale determines art." Rather than size, it seems that scale is the more powerful concept and experience given its flexible and relational properties. Technological possibilities return us to André Malraux's *Le Musée imaginaire*, or museum without walls whose scale and indeed size can offer a museum as city, but so too one that operates with and on the scale of the world and word. The art it might disseminate through technological images, but also images of new technologies, will both lend form to new sentiments and generate new feeling.

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