

Press Release – 2019 Verbier Art Summit Reflections and Findings

By John Slyce, Writer and Critic
Senior Tutor in Fine Art, Royal College of Art, London
Member of the Verbier Art Summit Board of Advisors

Verbier, Switzerland, February 2019 – The 2019 Verbier Art Summit took place on 1 & 2 February in Verbier, Switzerland, around the theme **We are Many. Art, the Political and Multiple Truths**. The annual Summit is organised by art patron **Anneliek Sijbrandij** and her team, and the 2019 edition was curated by museum director Jochen Volz of Pinacoteca de São Paulo. Now in its third year, the 2019 Summit embraced a great diversity of voices and positions in line with its theme.

In his opening address, the Summit's partnering museum director **Jochen Volz** set the tone for the Summit by exploring the increasingly binary simplicity – good versus evil, proper versus corrupt, clean versus filthy and immoral – that shapes the strategic lies, 'post-truth' and 'fake news' that run through the conflicting narratives that characterise elections and public policy not only in Brazil, but in the United States, Great Britain and indeed every political and social region of our globalised world system. What can art do and how does it function in such a social context? Volz writes:



2019 Verbier Art Summit Speakers with Summit Founder Anneliek Sijbrandij
© Frederik Jacobovits Photography

How do the arts operate in the light of the ever-increasing alienation between convictions and cognition? Historically, the arts have insisted on vocabularies that allow for fiction and that qualify the unknown. Information is lost and doubt persists, but art can moderate such paradoxes by operating outside standardized systems and far from common paradigms of efficiency and pragmatism.

Art dwells on the incapacity of existing means to describe the system we are part of; in other words, art is obsessed with inventing signs for phenomena or things, we have not named yet. Art points often to disorder, mostly without judgment and always with joy. Art can do this because it naturally joins thinking with doing, reflection with action. Art is grounded on imagination, and only through imagination will we be able to envision other narratives for our past and new ways into the future.

The artist **Grada Kilomba** spoke of transforming spaces through embodied speaking and unlearning the codes of producing knowledge. We each speak from a specific time and place; this is positionality. Unlearning implies decolonising the dominant mechanisms of knowledge production to explore: Which questions warrant asking or even answering? Who or what determines absolute truth? Who can speak? By asking such positional questions we arrive at a reconfiguration of knowledge production. Whose knowledge are we confronted with or talking

about? What is knowledge? What stories get told and who tells them? Kilomba turns metaphors upside down in her own work to allow universal stories to open up onto other dimensions. We produce knowledge in art by asking questions and making a new configuration of narrative. Through speaking, listening and silencing we can learn to listen to a narrative that might have not been there before.

Federico Campagna spoke of the techniques and magic of social change. He inspired one to imagine that ideas are alive, much in the manner a child might relate to their toys. The central melody that plays behind such disenchantment is language. This is our primary reality system. We are each a linguistic construct, but beyond this web lies the ineffable, which is its own field of the possible. We might allow the ineffable to shine through and become a symbol and not a substitute, but a pointer to change and to things that might be different. This is a necessary intervention that is to take place at the level of culture. How might culture change and alter such a reality system? Campagna suggests that this will take place through what he terms 'prophetic culture': a form of speaking out, narrative, or object that reminds a listener of the ineffable kernel within things. To speak prophetically means that one has one foot in and one yet outside the world, or even history. The author of prophetic texts is only ever the receiver and does not generate a product but a position. Campagna went on to suggest a model of broken language that embraces the grotesque and revels in paradoxical juxtapositions.



Left to right: art educator Naine Terena, museum director of Pinacoteca de São Paulo, and Verbier Art Summit Founder Anneliek Sijbrandij at the 2019 Summit © Frederik Jacobovits Photography

The art educator and indigenous activist **Naine Terena** came to tell a story that doesn't belong only to her anymore. She was representing 800,000 indigenous people whose art is that of resistance and a political strategy to stay alive. Here "art is not for cowards! Art is politics, aesthetics, beauty and a framework for telling the story" of a struggle to keep a cosmology alive. She reminds us "the forest is a portal. If the forest goes away, so does our spirit." If we – all of us – are to survive we will need more patience and less intolerance.

Gabi Ngcobo explored the grammar of inhabiting histories in the present. She suggested we need a new grammar in order to speak to each other and across cultures. As artist and educators, "we must deploy pedagogy as a form of politics."

Wolf Singer, a neurophysiologist, spoke about the spiritual and the physical from the position of neuroscience as he argued for a material basis for the spiritual, that might give rise to a secular ethics that could address the need for reciprocity of tolerance. As science changes our views of the world, it also changes our view of ourselves. In this we must both support and embrace uncertainty and acknowledge that people from different cultures will perceive and therefore understand the same things differently.

Ernesto Neto embodied his artistic practice in Vida, Vida, Vida and related how his work brought him to reconsider his life and practice through the spiritual research he carries out with the Huni Kuin along the Amazon in Brazil. Self-deprecatingly describing his artistic activity: "I fill bags and make knots," Neto went on to explore how culture separates us, while nature unites us. Embodying the spirit of the forest, he suggested we each become a little bit indigenous and reconnect to the earth.

Day two of the 2019 Verbier Art Summit began with UNHCR Ambassador and singer **Barbara Hendricks** in conversation with **Gonzalo Vargas Llosa**, who is the UNHCR Region Representative for EU Affairs. Hendricks recounted her life and work and explored how art might facilitate a conversation between human beings where humanity 'vibrates together'. This is a shared vibration amongst a family.

The sociologist **Boaventura de Sousa Santos** explored the ecology of knowledges, which are always already incomplete. Systems of dominant knowledge reach inwards rather than reach out. Knowledge is indeed embodied in our lives and if we are to address the global social injustice in our world we need more justice among knowledges. The epistemologies of the Southern hemisphere might shift onto those of the North and thus disrupt its false sense of universality. Describing a sociology of emergence, Sousa Santos offered the agent here may be 'the artist of the not yet', who acts to destabilise knowledge and provides an alternative thinking about alternatives.

Tania Bruguera explored how political art is art with certain consequences. Shifting the question from 'What is art?' to 'What is art for?' leads to an ever-greater question and challenge to the institutions of art, namely: Are art institutions ready to be civic spaces? Bruguera describes her practice of Arte Útil as not the production of art works, or objects, but as the implementation of a process. Arte Útil transfers affect into political effectiveness.

The artist **Latifa Echakhch** spoke of her practice directly through projects and installations and explored what happens after a gesture? During such an engagement where gesture is likened to a process, an artist decides to 'remain seized by the matter.'

The director of Tate, **Maria Balshaw** addressed the political turbulence that surrounds us in an age of social media and inter-generation clash in values. Operating by necessity in sensitive times, the public art museum must hold an open space for dissenting voices and provide a space for disagreement. Balshaw called for 'a deeper dig into what we can do together' that might introduce two seismic shifts: the first in the demographics of the museum in being for the many, not the few, and then to also become more diverse internally. We ultimately need safer spaces to explore unsafe ideas. She closed by exploring what types of qualities leadership demands in an age of uncertainty. The classic leadership attributes of focus, clarity, and vision seem ill placed for our moment. We might need to embrace vulnerability as a leadership value now.

The artist **Rirkrit Tiravanija** spoke on how we are all together and many, but asked: What do we really share? What are we doing here? He asked, 'What am I doing here and what is the import beyond myself?' Echoing the embodied conversation and shifting of space the Summit opened with, Tiravanija invited all to re-arrange the furniture to see and address each other. He asked: 'What is our shared common ground?' This performed conversation led all to explore the questions of what will we do with this experience? How will we behave as we talk and think together? How might we generate something that doesn't stay here in Verbier but that moves out of here and off the mountain?

The Summit proffered art as a force of resistance, but so too a great source of resilience. While We are Many, we can never really be alone.

For press inquiries or any further questions, please contact:
Noepy Testa
info@verbierartsummit.org | +31 (0) 629 14 10 54



Above: Maria Balshaw, director of Tate, speaks at the 2019 Summit
Below: Artist Rirkrit Tiravanija on a snowy balcony in Verbier
© Frederik Jacobovits Photography