

**MOVING ←**

**2019 AWARDS**

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Geneva, February 2019

Dear visitor,

Can we go on claiming that art is a universal language that requires, for its very existence, an ideal public with a shared cultural background? I think it is time to concede that this view of art, which is one of the ideological foundations of modernity in Western art and which still prevails in our museums, has led us to some dead ends. Don't you find it surprising that, in the name of this universalism inherited from the Enlightenment, we continue to impose the same institutional model all over the world and the same approach to experiencing works of art?

I don't know about you, but I'm less and less keen on going to see art in big white shoeboxes that all look alike. Why do we go on asserting that a neutral, pristine space is required for the existence and appreciation of art although we have long since come to realize the limitations of this mode of presentation? Not only has this approach exacerbated the disconnect between works of art and the social sphere, but what bothers me most is that it tends to reify artworks, to idealize and fetishize them, thereby diminishing their capacity to produce any effects other than those of detached contemplation.

How can we claim to be aware of ongoing changes in the world and the need to open up to different ways of thinking and creating in order to establish more equal relationships, when artists from other cultural horizons continue to be subjected to the dictates of Western art: namely, originality, uniqueness, formal autonomy, and conceptual reflexivity? Excuse me for such a cursory enumeration of the tacit criteria that govern our assessment of works of art. To give a specific example, at the art school where I teach in Geneva I can't count the number of times I've seen the disarray of foreign students whom we expect to know the history of Western art, without attaching any importance or paying any attention to the distinctive features of the artistic traditions and belief systems of their native countries.

This tension also informs the controversy over "cultural appropriation" in art. To satisfy the demand for novelty, cultural appropriation (which consists in injecting elements and motifs drawn from other cultures into the language of art) has become a common practice among contemporary artists. It may even go so far as to give the impression of involving a form of organized looting of the iconographic repertoires, symbols, and know-how of foreign artists and cultural practices which, to this day, have been denied access to our museums of contemporary art. These forms of creative influence and borrowing—which are an integral aspect of every act of creation—would be less problematic if we had the courage to commit to a necessary reform of art and its epistemology.

If the contemporary art world really wants to open up to cultural difference, I think we should first admit once and for all that creation is, by nature, collective. Complex streams of ideas, beliefs, and practices are conveyed in an artwork where they might evolve and be transformed, before they continue to circulate and materialize in other works. But in exalting artistic originality and glorifying the unique act of individual creation we tend to neglect the underlying collective effort involved in the genesis of a work of art.

All too often, moreover, we forget that a work of art is nothing without an audience: its viewers, users, participants, and commissioners. Whatever its nature, whether a permanent artifact or a one-off performance, what counts is the dynamic processes of exchange and confrontation that a work of art triggers. We know that it can shake up our habits and perceptions, heighten our sensitivity, expand our awareness, stir us up and set us in motion. In a word, a work of art speaks to us and acts on us. And we, in return, act on it by ascribing intentions and enriching it with our own interpretations, thereby augmenting its power of fascination and effectiveness.

Acknowledging the artwork's "technology of enchantment" might provide a basis on which to open up the field of what we call "art" to greater diversity (a key insight from anthropologist Alfred Gell's seminal 1998 book "Art and

Agency"). A work of art isn't merely a passive vehicle of symbolic communication for us to decode or interpret, it is a social actor, an agent, that articulates and engages in relations with the world. It acts as a catalyst on a collective. Its political function used to be even more manifest in the past and in other cultures, in which it served to intercede with invisible forces, to protect and influence the course of existence and establish or assert the power of those who fostered its creation, to bring people together, to commemorate, to affirm shared values, and to celebrate.

Isn't it time we took a *big step back* and broke free from our modernist habit of appreciating artistic creation only for its formal and conceptual innovations and so-called progresses? What would we risk by embracing its agency in terms of the experiences, relations, and actions to which it gives rise? To be sure, this would involve addressing some tricky questions: What would be our criteria of assessment? What sorts of agency and experience are we talking about? What are the different contexts and nexus of legitimization? This is a daunting task, but wouldn't you agree that only by embracing these various components of artistic experience can art regain its agency and its function as an active, driving force in our fragmented, frayed society?

Yours sincerely, Charlotte Laubard

## Imprint

The Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia is mandated by the Swiss Confederation to promote artistic creation in Switzerland to contribute to cultural exchange at home, promote the dissemination of Swiss culture abroad and foster cultural outreach. It is responsible for Swiss contributions to the several editions of Art and Architecture biennials in Venice. Switzerland has taken part in the Biennale Arte since 1920 and in the Biennale Architettura since 1991.

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[www.movingbackwards.ch](http://www.movingbackwards.ch)

## Newspaper

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Grip: Camilo Sottolichio  
Lights and stage: Riccardo Clementi, Pieter Jurriaanse  
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