

'What It Takes and What It Means to Actually Become a Regenerative Organisation'

Conversation with Markus Reymann (Co-Director TBA21 and Director of TBA21-Academy's Ocean Space)

Cristina Baldacci and Christina Hainzl: We are living in an uncertain time, marked, above all, by the ecological question and increasing polarisation. As part of *TBA21-Academy*, *Ocean Space* has undertaken both a profound reflection and a series of activities in Venice that address the questions facing humanity today. What are the methodological and thematic peculiarities of *Ocean Space's* approach as regards the climate crisis – and, in particular, ocean studies – as an art organisation?

Markus Reymann: *TBA21* itself was founded in 2002 by Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza and, therefore, *TBA*, *Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary* – that's what the abbreviation *TBA21* stands for – and it was meant as a collection that lives in the public sphere. What Francesca realised early on, when they opened the Foundation in Vienna, was that going around art fairs and galleries and just buying objects and then putting them in the public sphere through exhibitions was not necessarily the way they wanted to engage. And when I say 'they', I mean Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza and her chief curator at the time, Daniela Zyman, who is still part of the organisation. So, understanding this, they decided on the way they wanted to go; and this is the methodology that is true for *TBA21* as a whole, meaning both the collection and the Academy. It is the mode of producing, which is commissioning.

And so, for many years, a key interest was societal issues. In 2010, approaching the ten-year anniversary in 2012, Francesca decided to start a new project within the Foundation, which operated completely differently and looked at the environment. This was somehow the design brief for what later became the Academy. We came to the conclusion that there were two things that were of major interest. One was change, the causes and effects of change: How do you trace change, what are the conditions for positive change and how do you create these conditions? Many artists had a research-based but very engaged practice on the border between art and activism. The other thing that we identified – that became stronger later on – was the importance of creating spaces for transdisciplinary exchange that really cross disciplines; not like in academia, where everybody is an academic and where, for example, biologists, chemists and physicists work together. We had a fabulous seminar in Vienna for the opening of *The Morning Line*, which was a work by Matthew Ritchie. It's a public sculpture, but inside this public sculpture there are six sound spaces and inside these is a sound architecture. Then we used this sculpture as an instrument, and so there were artists, architects, astrophysicists and so on, talking to each other. This was another rather unusual thing.

CB and CH: How did all this take shape in practice?

MR: To start the project – or design the Academy – we made two proposals. On the one hand, we were looking for systems within the environment that actually embodied change or could let us feel change in a very visceral way. This is how we came to the ocean as a system that is always moving, always in flux, yet is intricately interconnected and gives us the chance to really trace the causes and effects of change. But we really had to expand our understanding of what that is. On the other hand, our second proposal was to not make art for a while but, rather, to commit ourselves to a period of deep research, led by artists in transdisciplinary teams. We wanted to do this with this idea of embodiment and of thinking from and with rather than thinking about. So we were able to use a boat and brought these teams together on the boat for two weeks at a time to think from and with the ocean, so that we could think from and with change.

The terminologies 'ocean' and 'Academy' were always meant as provocations, because this is obviously not an academic effort. The idea is somehow to think about who has the right to define knowledge as useful or non-useful. How do

we make the walls that are created around knowledge more porous and how do we create more exchange between these cycles?

CB and CH: You realised that the ocean was an urgent matter rather early on, didn't you?

MR: Yes, we very quickly understood that the urgencies around the ocean back then in 2011 were as dramatic as they are now, it was just that very few people were talking about them. And when we introduced this idea and wanted to talk and think about it in the art world, through colleagues, a lot of people were quite taken aback. They asked: 'Why would you do art and ocean?' They didn't understand.

With this realisation that the situation was urgent, and with all these artists with very engaged practices bringing this information to us, we needed to ask ourselves if it was really enough to raise awareness in a niche within a niche within the niche of contemporary art and ocean, or did we have to engage differently? And so, we decided to engage differently. This meant that we wanted to dedicate ourselves on a case-by-case basis to see how an intervention from our side could serve the situation best. If we thought that a policy intervention or a legal intervention was needed, we would embark on that. If a conservation site was needed, we would embark on that. If an educational programme was needed, we would create that. And with every single one of these efforts, we would actually embark upon it as if it was an artistic commission. We wanted this approach to be itinerant. We didn't want to situate it at first. But going around conferences on climate issues and participating in these large framework events, we realised that people that should be talking to each other wouldn't talk to each other. Somehow, we were able to make this match, because we entered into this world as an oddity, as an art organisation, which meant that we were non-competing, we were non-threatening and we could bring people together who would otherwise not get together. On the other hand, we realised that culture and art have no role in these conferences at all. Despite the *United Nations* having *UNESCO*, artists and cultural producers – like women or Indigenous people – are still not a major stakeholder group. So, it's wrong to say that art and culture are alone in not being recognised as areas of knowledge-building. I would say that, as of late, there are more and more efforts to reach out to the art scene, but this is still thought of as communication. This is somehow a battle that we are trying to fight.

But we really believe in art and culture as transformative agents within situated contexts. At some point, we said that we actually need to put this to the test. And that is how we came to Venice. Venice has had this very strange habit of reflecting on itself and the world with the lens of art for over a hundred years. This way of making questions physically experiential through the arts is obviously one of the defining factors of Venice. It also traditionally sits at the intersection of all kinds of exchanges and is very open as a city. If you have something to offer, Venice gives you a space. And finally – and even if this is not true anymore, it was absolutely true at the time – Venice was the iconic frontline of climate change in Europe. Therefore, it made a lot of sense for us to situate this hypothesis in Venice. When you see historic images of Venice, everybody had access to the water everywhere, and it seems as if there was a very intimate relationship with the water. Now Venice is a super urban space, access to water is highly regulated and people actually forget that they are on a small island floating in a lagoon.

CB and CH: You have taken water, hence the ocean, as a starting point to define a new methodology?

MR: Precisely. In terms of methodologies, I think that this oceanic thinking leads to a number of things. You really understand the ocean as a living entity with multiple voices and that these voices foreground the multiplicity of voices and viewpoints. Another point is fluidity and the way in which the ocean is a kind of conceptual tool – if we don't want to talk about it as an ecosystem – that really forces us to unhinge ourselves from land-based binaries and think with this fluidity and change. These are all things that flow into the methodology.

Other things that we always try to give include time – which is becoming scarcer and scarcer in the art world – but also interdisciplinary exchange and an emphasis on field studies. Because when you look at oceanography today, hardly anybody goes to sea anymore. They think about the ocean from models and laptops. So, this kind of embodied research has always been very important.

I think that these are the common methodologies and, obviously, every artist, every curator, brings a methodology. In this sense, we are trying to be very open and non-descriptive and to foster the best conditions for anybody that we work with.

For example, we noticed very early on that there is a need for mediation, because we all use similar terms, but every discipline understands them differently and individuals interpret the terms within the disciplines differently. This need for a facilitator or mediator is very often overlooked. Sadly, the intervention often falls into the trap of being either a performance of science or a visualisation of data. Both are valuable and insightful in enabling a 'general' audience to understand the processes of science, and if these are brought to them by artists, this is fantastic. But I think that there is an added value in these conversations and collaborations that is not necessarily teased out if they are just the transaction of 'I give you information, you give me visibility.'

CB and CH: *Ocean Space* and *TBA21-Academy* have a special focus on research and educational activities, which are mostly community-based. How do you manage to maintain the balance between local and global/planetary and how does the Venice community respond in terms of (co)participation and coaction?

MR: In general, there is one thing that gives you an insight into our understanding of the global and the local. One of the challenges that we see is that, in many areas between science and policy and also communication, people still believe in the equation that says that we need more data to create more knowledge and that this knowledge will lead to action. This formula has been shared for 40 years and yet, if we look at the climate crisis, CO₂ emissions are still rising and, if we look at biodiversity, biodiversity is collapsing. This equation – data=knowledge=action – doesn't really work.

This is exactly how we are looking at this kind of global and local conversation, because more and more neuroscientific evidence suggests that the pathway to action is actually a lot shorter when our starting point is empathy, context and meaning, rather than pure knowledge. And so, when we run international research projects for fellowship programmes, we try to situate these locally. The current exhibition is conceived and very much situated in Oceania, around the idea of extraction and the potential of deep-sea mining. These are not presented literally and you need to engage with the works to unpack this deep concern about deep-sea mining. But, obviously, when you talk about Tonga and its archipelagic situation you can make this transition – and you can make the transition to Venice as well. We need to take Venice as an archipelago very seriously, and many other small islands have very similar concerns.

I think that the opening was difficult for the Venetian community to understand and was hard to read as an effort that was being made for them. Despite the fact that we have always, from the beginning, made an effort to open before the Venice Biennale and to make sure that the Venetian community understands that this effort is being made for them and not only the international art audience. Of course everything is bilingual, Italian first and then English and all of that, but we opened with Joan Jonas, who is a major international American artist, and this was read as 'ah, here comes another international organisation showing international art.' It was actually only during COVID that this perception of *Ocean Space* and its intention changed dramatically. Because, as soon as Venetians were able to leave their houses, we put a light installation on the facade of *Ocean Space* so that people would understand that something was going to happen. Then there was the moment when you could actually bring people together, but not yet in closed spaces. We started organising walks, guided by specialists. These specialists could be scientists or fishermen or sustainable mussel farmers, and so on. They would guide and narrate these walks from *Ocean Space* to a point in the city of importance to them and they would share their expertise. These walks were thematically curated and organised to relate back to the work that we were preparing so that we would be ready to show it at some point. In terms of the other international organisations in Venice, I'm sure that we were the only ones doing this kind of programming.

Then, when we were able to open for nine weeks, we did everything to be as careful and considerate with our visitors' health as possible. This shifted the perception of *Ocean Space* dramatically. When the second lockdown was lifted and we were able to receive people, we organised a programme that was concluded by three local singers, singing traditional sailors' songs in Venetian and this was such a magical moment. The room was full of Venetians because no one else was allowed to travel to the city at the time. I think that this really was the moment when the idea landed and people understood that it was meant for them.

CH and CB: How important, for *Ocean Space*, are collaborations with other research and cultural organisations in Venice, and how has the Venetian contemporary art ecosystem been evolving since you arrived in town?

MR: I think there are two sides to this. On the one hand, it's probably true that, in general, the conversation and discourse around any form of climate engage-

ment is heavily polarised, especially in Venice. I think that Venice is very much conditioned by competition. It's a relatively small space. We now have fewer than 50,000 inhabitants on the islands, so this is a big village that, with up to 31 million visitors every year, is highly transient. Therefore, everyone is competing for attention and visibility. And then we obviously have all the Biennales that are always connected to competition, and the Giardini, with all of the national pavilions that compete with each other. So this is an environment that is heavily shaped by competition, yet our understanding of the approach to the climate crisis is that this needs to be an effort of the greatest possible collaboration, which means that this is, inherently, a paradox. Therefore, we wanted to see how an international organisation that comes to Venice and wants to understand itself as a Venetian organisation can actually give this platform to local collectives and to people that are involved in restoring the ecosystem or doing exemplary projects. And to see how we can use this space of the arts where we are, where people expect us to somehow push the boundaries and, I think, have come to understand that it's not unusual to have a philosopher, an oceanographer and a physical oceanographer speaking and freely speculating about the future of Venice as a kind of subaquatic environment or as a lake.

This is something that we wanted to utilise. On the one hand, contemporary art has freed itself from rigid disciplines and audiences have got used to really unexpected conversations and programming. On the other hand, I think that, while the climate crisis and environmental and ecological questions have become a huge topic within the art world, organisations are still very reluctant or slow to change their way of operating. And so, we have been thinking internally for years about what it takes and what it means to actually become a regenerative organisation. How do we think about our material flows, our material input, in a way that is not extractive but actually becomes more conducive to life – in the social and the cultural sphere as well. We have been investigating this and really consider our material inputs and material flows. Either everything that we use is reused by ourselves in later exhibitions or we find someone that will take it on from the very beginning. There are many kindergartens in Venice that have elements from exhibitions at *Ocean Space*. If we do events, the catering is vegetarian/vegan. So we are really trying to embody these discourses ourselves.

And we have become a *Zoöp*. A *Zoöp* is a governance model that was thought up by the *Nieuwe Institute* and pioneered by the researcher Klaas Kuitenbrouwer.

It is based on a regenerative philosophy. Within the governance model of the organisation – in our case, our *Advisory Board* – there is a position entitled ‘the speaker for the living’. The role of the holder of this position is to analyse every activity through the lens of its conduciveness to – or extractiveness from – life. Conduciveness to life is interpreted very widely and is about humans and more than humans. Every year we embark on four activities. One of these is analysing the agency of *Ocean Space*: What are the bodies that *Ocean Space* acts upon and what are the bodies that act upon *Ocean Space*? How do our material flows impact on these bodies, and how do we intervene in these in such a way that they leave behind more than they take? Therefore, we experiment with governance, material, workforce and hours and stuff like that.

CB and CH: Which aspects of the ecological turn do you still consider as being under-recognised in museums and art organisations?

MR: In general, it’s very difficult to say, but one thing that is probably true for most museums is that they have an incredibly large carbon footprint. In many places that I’ve encountered, conversations around museum real estate are governed by heritage issues. In other words, they can’t be touched. But if you think about the footprint: If we were able to provide or equip the huge roofs of museum or exhibition spaces with solar panels, they could be immense providers of energy. Museums could be an inspiration and a provocation, a disruption maybe, but real energy communities could also be built around museums and exhibition spaces.

I think this challenges our idea of what is heritage and how you can intervene in heritage. The paradox becomes very clear in Venice. On the one hand, this is a self-declared sustainable capital of the world because there are no cars. On the other hand, if you’re restoring a house, it’s impossible to put a solar panel on your roof. So, the paradox of what we understand as heritage is definitely something that needs to be addressed. I think that museums very often provide radical ideas, but that the way in which these ideas are institutionalised is a challenge. We enter exhibition spaces, we want to be moved, disrupted, inspired or provoked, but then we can close the door behind us and there’s no bridge or transition to the real world. And again, this is somehow especially evident in Venice because of the Biennale. We have the real privilege of being confronted with these incredible ideas from different angles, year on year, but

somehow these ideas rarely permeate the city itself – and Mestre and the mainland even less so.

Having tried to engage with the Venice Biennale for years now, I've realised that the set-up and the mandate of the Venice Biennale aren't designed to enable the city to profit from its capacity to generate ideas, but only from its visitors. I was very pleasantly surprised by the Canadian pavilion this year, by Kapwani Kiwanga's work, because it is actually situated in Venice. Venice often becomes the stage and the backdrop for all of these ideas and the Venetians are not necessarily invited to participate, but they are meant to serve the Venice Biennale. When I went to the Kochi Biennale for the first time, in Kerala in India, the excitement in the city that the Biennale was coming was tangible across the population, from tuk-tuk drivers to restaurateurs to doctors and so on. In Venice I don't think that the Biennale makes an effort to actually energise the Venetians to any great extent.

CB and CH: What is next for *Ocean Space*?

MR: Next year, in 2025, the exhibitions will come from the Caribbean. This is the conclusion of the latest cycle of *The Current* curatorial fellowship programme and the last exhibition that we showed that came out of that programme was last year's exhibition *Thus waves come in pairs*, which was led by Barbara Casavecchia. Next year we will have Yina Jiménez Suriel from the Dominican Republic, who is looking at contemporary, emancipatory processes in a space such as the Caribbean that is still heavily impacted by its colonial past. She is doing this by thinking about questions around the ocean and connecting them to the very unique experiences of the Caribbean.

The way that I would like *Ocean Space* to develop its programming is by incorporating even more ecosystem restoration practices, because I believe that as long as we think of ecosystem restoration or regeneration and its practices or the care for our immediate environment as things that we do to avert an oncoming drama or catastrophe, they will always be perceived in terms of loss. They will always be perceived as things that we have to do because otherwise there will be a catastrophe and, therefore, they are perceived as impeding upon the freedom of people. But if we actually incorporate them as cultural practices, they will be understood as things that we do to care for our environment just as we care for our next of kin, our families and our friends, and so on, and as part

of our responsibility as citizens rather than something that we do to be good people. I think that this will dramatically shift the perception of what it means to care for the environment. And so, we want to incorporate these practices more and more into our public programme. We've been doing this through the *Convivial Tables* where we've been investigating the changing landscape of the environment through the lens of food and food practices. We've been doing this since our second year, but we want to go deeper. Wherever they are present, I see *Ocean Space* and *TBA21* becoming stronger in their efforts to become active agents within the city or within the localities where they operate.

I think that one of the biggest challenges for Venice is housing. The housing crisis is a problem if we want Venice to remain an active and dynamic place for the generation of ideas or initiatives. As long as the *airbnb* model is not rethought and regulated and the young people that come to study at *Ca' Foscari University* can't afford to live and stay after graduating from the university, even though they actually want to contribute something to the place that they live in because they are developing ideas for it – as long as this is not solved, Venice will remain – and probably become more and more – this museum in which we marvel at the ingenuity of people and this kind of feverish engineering dream. But Venice is also an absolute monument to the Anthropocene and so, at the pinnacle, we overcome all kinds of conditions to build such a marvel. I think that this is something that really needs to be urgently addressed.

And then there is obviously the ageing society in Venice, which is quite dramatic. In Italy, the social fabric and family ties are still quite strong, but you feel these being torn in Venice because of the city's business model. Intergenerational exchange and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, practices and traditions are tearing and, without wanting to romanticise this, I think that it is tangible. A key question – and this is obviously beyond cultural institutions – is how to tackle the housing crisis. This is definitely something that we have to raise awareness about and I think that we need to create these intergenerational encounters and, somehow, facilitate the conditions that avoid the social fabric of Venice being torn any more.

CB and CH: You linked *Ocean Space* to the UN Decade on Ocean Science. Would you like to change the programme of *Ocean Space* when the UN's ocean decade ends in 2030?

MR: We are very present in these conversations around and with the United Nations. Next year is the third *UN Oceans Conference* which will be co-hosted by Costa Rica and France and held in Nice. For the first time in these contexts the French government has restructured its stakeholder process, the civic society process, to include art. They’ve organised the process in seven clusters: NGOs, civic society groups, science and so on, and cluster seven is *Ocean Art and Science*. And they’ve mandated us, *TBA21*, to lead the facilitation process. We’re also curating a large exhibition around the time of the conference itself and commissioning a couple of new works.

Once again, we understand that this is a collaborative process. This is not an opportunity for us to somehow claim leadership or ownership over the space but, actually, we see this as a coordination or facilitation process for giving all other practitioners – and there are not that many – visibility in this space in a coordinated manner. I’m saying this in order to give you an insight into our presence in these spaces and our participation in these conversations, because we’re thinking about the actual significance of the fact that the United Nations doesn’t have a stakeholder group made up of the arts, art practitioners or cultural producers. A number of people are discussing what could come after 2030, after the end of the Sustainable Development Goals and after the *UN Decade on Ocean Science* – and some consider that culture should be more present. There are different considerations. One of these is that culture should become a Sustainable Development Goal itself. Other people – and I think that this is the more interesting school of thought – are considering replacing *Sustainable* Development Goals with *regenerative* ones, because they understand that sustaining the crisis is not good enough and that culture is central to this. This means that the important thing is not the goal itself, but connecting all the other goals, because people understand that we become the images that we create and the stories that we tell ourselves. There was a shocking study that analysed all the content, the scripts and everything else, created in Hollywood between 2016 and 2022 and discovered that only 3% of that content dealt with climate change, climate change-related language and climate change-related technologies. So, if one of the biggest cultural producers on the planet doesn’t address this topic, or only addresses it in documentaries that talk about the crisis, it’s not surprising that people feel that this is somehow a problem. I think we need to turn to art and culture to actually imagine a planet that is worth living for and worth fighting for rather than only thinking about the crisis that

we are stuck in right now and the despair that this creates because there is no hope and no way out.