

## 'Themes Which Concern Contemporary Artists Are Often Present in the Past Too'

Conversation with Bruno Racine (CEO and Director, Palazzo Grassi – Punta della Dogana | Pinault Collection)

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**Christina Hainzl:** We are living in an uncertain time, marked above all by the ecological question and increasing polarisation. The Pinault Collection contains many works that address the challenges facing humanity today. What museum activities could help to raise awareness and take care of these pressing issues?

Bruno Racine: I would say the traditional activities — which are, of course, for a museum, exhibitions, conferences, public programmes and educational activities. That's the way we do it. I can give you an example, not in Venice, but in Paris at the Bourse de Commerce last year. There was an exhibition entitled *Avant l'Orage* (Before the Storm). The exhibition specifically focused on all of those themes, but through the language of art, which is a unique and distinct approach. It's about not only illustrating potential consequences but also fostering awareness.

Interestingly, people often visit such exhibitions already aware of these issues. So, in that sense, the exhibition's role is to deepen or reinforce this awareness rather than to introduce it from scratch. I wouldn't necessarily say that it's about creating awareness from the ground up, but it certainly has the potential to strengthen it, especially for those who are already engaged with contemporary art. The audience for contemporary art, like the visitors to the Bourse de Commerce, often comes with a certain level of prior awareness. These activities

can help to expand and deepen their understanding, making the impact more meaningful and enduring.

However, there is also public art, which, of course, can be seen by everyone. Public art can sometimes provoke reactions or spark controversies, but it's also part of a broader public debate that takes place outside the walls of a museum.

Of course, all of this also depends on the commitment of the artists themselves. Some artists, although they may be deeply concerned with ecological issues on a personal level, do not necessarily express these concerns in their work. To have an impact in this area it's important to showcase, or commission, works by artists who are open to engage with these questions. And it's worth noting that these artists are not necessarily the youngest ones.

**CH: Is it difficult to take ecological aspects into account when preparing or executing an exhibition?**

BR: It's not difficult because it's actually quite practical. There's a wide range of approaches that we can take. For instance, reusing the installations from one exhibition for the next. We also try to avoid the unnecessary transportation of artworks. For example, if we have a painting in Australia and it's not essential to the exhibition, we'd usually renounce it due to the cost and the ecological impact of shipping it. We prioritise sustainability wherever possible. The materials used for the installation can often be recycled. We're also working on ways to recycle lighting and to optimise heating and air-conditioning. Many of these aspects are highly technical, but they're increasingly being taken into account — not just for ecological reasons but also for economic reasons, as they help to reduce costs. I'd say that these considerations started becoming more prominent around eight to ten years ago.

**CH: Some larger institutions have set up sustainability or environmental departments. Others see this as a holistic process. What is your view? And what do you still consider under-recognised in museum organisation in terms of the ecological turn?**

BR: No, it's altogether different for us. We are a team of 25 people, so having an environmental department wouldn't make sense. Even in larger institutions, the role of ecological awareness needs to be embraced by everyone. It's a

transversal, horizontal responsibility rather than something that can be siloed into a single department. The role of such a department, even in larger organisations, is more about coordination, about managing long-term projects and fostering reflection rather than directly overseeing operations.

For instance, the exhibition department must almost automatically integrate ecological considerations into its work. Here, we had a training session on digital sustainability for the entire staff. It's about all the small gestures and actions — the everyday practices — that contribute to a more sustainable way of operating.

**CH: Museums of contemporary art often raise questions that relate to our current challenges. Sustainability is also about conservation and restoration. How does the Pinault Collection at Palazzo Grassi meet these challenges?**

When Pinault purchased the Palazzo Grassi, only minimal adjustments were made. We did, however, change the lighting system, and the electrical infrastructure was updated. We are also in the process of changing the heating system; that's not restoration but maintenance in order to ensure the conscious use of resources.

**CH: I would like to add a question about the collection, which consists of a large number of contemporary artworks. Aren't there also conservation problems or challenges in storing them?**

BR: Yes, absolutely. This is a question that would be better answered by the staff in Paris. But what I can say is: It's a huge collection — several thousand pieces.

Contemporary works of art generally pose very specific and often difficult conservation challenges. The materials are sometimes fragile, and the configuration of the works can also be problematic. Storing them properly requires unique solutions, and I would say that it's not an exaggeration to claim that each piece is a challenge in itself. Every artwork has its own specific issues. For certain artists' works, long-term preservation can be especially difficult, and it's not always guaranteed.

Of course, you could argue that ancient paintings have their own conservation challenges as well. However, the methods for conserving and restoring those

works have become much more scientific over the past three or four decades, since the 1980s. Before that, restoration often involved something akin to re-painting. But now, the process is much more respectful of the original work and its integrity.

Many works of art are made from items found on the street or even from rubbish.

Digital works, however, present an entirely different set of conservation challenges. I know a bit about this from my experience running the National Library, where they had to deal with millions of digital files. Ensuring their long-term survival is costly and requires sophisticated systems. From an ecological standpoint, this raises further concerns because these systems consume a lot of energy.

When it comes to contemporary art, this is a significant issue for many works. Some pieces are more straightforward to conserve, such as conceptual drawings, where the artwork is essentially an instruction on a sheet of paper. But for other contemporary works, especially digital ones, the preservation challenges are substantial.

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

BR: It's a contradiction. I mean, I would say that it's a contradiction that we have to live with, because you can't claim Venice as a World Heritage Site and then leave it empty. It's not just about the heritage; it's also about the unique situation of the city. It's actually quite remarkable to think of building a city on islands in a lagoon. You wonder why they made that choice. It's against almost all rational factors, except for one: protection. It served as protection from invaders. Now, however, we have a different kind of invader — peaceful tourists, of course — but their impact is no less profound. People are trying to find ways to regulate tourism, but it's not easy. The city is small, and it will always re-

main attractive to a growing number of people. Frankly, if there were a clear solution, it would have been implemented already.

During the years in which there is the International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale, our public numbers are higher, and people are more willing to come. The interesting thing is that the Venice Biennale's duration has been extended, and the idea behind this is that, by having longer opening times, we might be able to distribute visitor flows more evenly. But the political debate has recently focused on tourists who don't spend the night in Venice. These tourists now have to pay a five-euro entry fee. I won't dwell on the efficiency of this system, which has been tested, but what strikes me is that the city has not been able to maintain a minimal level of permanent inhabitants.

It doesn't seem as if there's been a clear policy to maintain, let's say the policy of keeping a steady population in the historical part of the city. Thousands of students, for instance, could be part of the solution. They're not permanent inhabitants, but they stay long enough to frequent bars, small shops and other local businesses. During COVID, when I arrived in 2020, it was striking to see the city so empty. Most of it was deserted, and that's not a desirable situation. You can't return to what the city was 60 or 70 years ago, but perhaps a different balance could be struck. Part of the city's charm lies in its narrow streets and unique character, but this, of course, also poses challenges.

**CH: What could be the future development of the city?**

BR: A few days ago, I was thinking about this issue. Humanity will soon number even more billions, and the pressure from tourism will inevitably increase. It's a problem that's not exclusive to Venice. You find it in Paris, Rome, Florence — in every tourist city where beauty is concentrated in small spaces. It's unavoidable. But Venice has an additional challenge that Rome or Paris don't face: the rising water levels caused by climate change. The impact of climate change is more destructive here than in Paris. While a heatwave in Paris can be unbearable, the consequences of rising waters in Venice are far more existential. Venice could also be seen as a kind of laboratory for the future, for testing how we might respond to these changes. In that sense, it's both a curse and an asset.

**CH: Museums are part of Venice's social ecosystem, and Venice itself is becoming increasingly musealised. How should institutions like Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana position themselves in the future?**

BR: We're an international institution open to local cultural realities. Since there aren't so many theatres or cultural spaces like this one, we see our role as contributing to this cultural fabric. It's deliberate, and our activities are free of charge, anyway.

**CH: You once said in an interview that it is more interesting to discover 'how much is contemporary in the old than to think in terms of a simple chronological orientation'. Do you think that this is an idea that can help us face the future?**

BR: For the general public, contemporary art — like contemporary music — is often seen as a separate world. There's a barrier. It's interesting to show that themes which concern contemporary artists, such as ecology, war and genocide, are often present in the art of the past. Connecting contemporary art to art history could be a way to bridge this gap, and I believe that this connection could be explored more systematically.

I'm not suggesting that we reduce contemporary art to historical references. Contemporary art is often subtle and sometimes appeals more to the margins of society. But I do think that the gap is too big. Even the way we present exhibition texts — I'm not sure that they effectively communicate to the majority of people. Punta della Dogana is an interesting example of how a historical building can be reused for entirely new activities. It respects its historical identity while being transformed at the same time. It's different from places that are preserved but feel lifeless. Punta della Dogana, like the Bourse de Commerce in Paris, goes further. I think that they're bolder in their approach.