

## IABR END-OF-YEAR LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

2020 was, of course, an abysmal and unhappy year. A lost year, in many ways and for most people. But nevertheless a year that we shouldn't forget *too* quickly. Because the pandemic acts as a stress test, making us focus on things that we'd otherwise have kept sweeping under the carpet. It's a much-needed reality check, because the planet is not doing well.

### **On the State of the Planet**

In *The State of the Planet*, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres said on 2 December: 'We are facing a devastating pandemic, new heights of global heating, new lows of ecological degradation and new setbacks in our work towards global goals for more equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. To put it simply, the state of the planet is broken.'

In his long and impassioned speech Guterres did not fail to systematically list everything that's going wrong nor to clearly identify the *real* crisis, the climate crisis: 'Humanity is waging war on nature. This is suicidal!' He squarely places the responsibility on humanity, that's all of us, and ends with expressing his hope that we can also work it out together. 'Solidarity is survival', the Secretary-General states, and how could one disagree?

But where will this get us? That things are really getting out of hand, that's clear to anyone who's willing to look. But instead of relying on yet another series of world summits and climate conferences to figure out common agendas and compromises that, at the end of the day, have us running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, shouldn't we get a bit angrier and start tackling the root causes of the problem?

### **Extractive Capitalism**

Over the past 30 years, mankind has been responsible for more CO<sub>2</sub> emissions than in all the centuries before. The emission of methane, even more harmful than CO<sub>2</sub>, is growing exponentially. The Earth is warming up faster than we dared to think. The ice is melting, floods and drought are the order of the day, forests are burning everywhere, the weather is becoming more extreme. Social inequality is growing rapidly, exclusion and discrimination are on the rise, and democracies

we took for granted are on the verge of collapse. And it's all closely intertwined, *this is how extractive capitalism works*. And it's flourishing, literally, rampantly.

Not all of us are waging war on nature as a matter of course. The pandemic puts it under the magnifying glass: it's the 1 percent that has benefited – 2020 was a triumphant year for the most extreme form of extractive capitalism, *disaster capitalism*, as Naomi Klein calls it. That's one problem we have to tackle. It's fundamental to the theme of DOWN TO EARTH, that this is inevitably our new challenge, politically, socially and culturally, that we have to redefine all of our actions as that which takes us back to earth.

### **Emptyhanded**

For the culture sector, 2020 was a stress test, reality check, and self-confrontation all in one. The sector lies in tatters. Shocking as this may be, it should come as no surprise. Over the past decades, many cultural organizations have allowed themselves to be converted to the 'ideology of the market'. They unintentionally but willingly became, it has to be said, agents in that 'war on nature'. And often in such a way that, in order to function at all, they've become dependent on what is called – somewhat perversely because it sounds rather tough but it boils down to getting stripped while having to pay for it – 'own revenue': from the sale of tickets, but increasingly also coffee, services, square meters and merchandise. Here as well the pandemic cuts to the chase: after incessant reductions in funding, down to almost nothing, we shouldn't be surprised when, all of a sudden, the sector is left emptyhanded.

### **Because We Can**

The IABR, by the way, is doing pretty well under the circumstances. Of course, we're missing out on considerable income because large commissions are not forthcoming. Governments have other priorities than design research at the moment. But the IABR as such is immune to a loss of 'own revenue' because it doesn't touch the core of its functioning. The IABR has not allowed itself to be made dependent on own revenue, I saw the writing on the wall. We don't sell coffee but procure commissions, because we produce relevant knowledge and generate new knowledge all the time. We can tackle things differently now that we have to because of the pandemic, because our basic



premise has always been that we need to tackle things differently, anytime and anyway. The IABR has been ‘agile and resilient’ to the max for years, adaptive and lightweight at its core. In recent years, the IABR has had a very high ‘own revenue’, up to 60 percent of the total turnover, but it’s not at all dependent on it to survive and function. We didn’t have to fire anyone in this disastrous year, self-employed people have been paid, and we’re doing what we said we were going to do. Just differently. Because we can.

As I said after the draconian cutbacks in 2012, the IABR has been surviving and will survive by an obstinate mix of cut-off and pop-up. It’s trial and error as a strategy. It is, you might say, our runup to the art of living on a damaged planet.

### **Are Biennales Sustainable?**

Of course it’s true that the sustainability of the concept of the ‘biennale’ itself has also come under scrutiny because of the pandemic. International biennales, such as the IABR, and international research projects, such as the IABR, came to fruition as a result of globalization. This caused the explosion in mobility that, at first unintentionally, led to a toxic mix of culture and tourism: city marketing and city trips, festival cities, look-at-me museums, and art and architecture biennales all over the place.

It is not sustainable. The environmental consequences of the growing international mobility present international biennales such as the IABR with increasing challenges. Questions such as what sustainable values biennales create, also and specifically locally, and what content the concept of ‘international’ can have in a local context, then arise.

### **Hitting the Wall**

We’ve asked ourselves these questions. Which is one reason why we’ve become less and less a ‘festival,’ and more and more a research institute. In all our current research trajectories – aimed at finding solutions to the completely new problem of drought in the Dutch Delta, at how to use improved water safety as a lever for sustainable area development in Dordrecht, at the energy transition as a lever for socially inclusive urban development in Rotterdam, and at demographic growth as a lever for sustainable regional development in East Flanders – global knowledge, imagination, and design power are engaged to create local added value. And subsequently, back from



bottom to top, the projects contribute to the realization of globally sustainable development goals. We link the world to the city, and the city to the world: persistently.

But alas, 2020 has made it clear that this can be a problematic way of working for a cultural institution. Not because it doesn't make sense in a world on fire, on the contrary, our approach works. But because it hits the wall in a cultural sector running on an outdated business model. The cultural subsidy tap is not open to in-depth social investments. In its negative advice on funding for the IABR, the Rotterdam Council for Art and Culture confused visibility with audience numbers, the social impact of cultural research with the economic impact of cultural tourism, and the long term with short-sighted profit. I wasn't surprised, but it certainly didn't contribute to my peace of mind in 2020. New funding policies are desperately needed to organize the cultural transfer of meaning in times of climate crisis, to present the imaginations that help us, by trial and error, to find our way into the future.

### **Visibility and New Contours**

Speaking of visibility, I missed our friends from all over the world this year, very much so, but what I didn't miss was the traditional big biennale opening itself, when normally around 2,000 professional visitors nervously try to divide their attention between the ever-changing other and the trays of free prosecco – losing sight of the work itself in the process. After all, the vast majority of those professionals don't come back after an opening. And although all too often they have an opinion about what we do, they rarely actually *see* what we do.

The current situation has its advantages, I sometimes find myself thinking. Because an unexpected gift of the pandemic is that unfolding the biennale, in an unhurried way, not only leads to less concentration and therefore lower health risks, but also to more space, literally. We don't have to show the results of all of our research projects all at once. The work itself, up to and including the underlying arguments and research, is now much more visible.

Given the circumstances, I'm satisfied with the course of events, we've escaped our shadow side, the all too in-the-moment manifest. And although of course fewer people visit per day than during a 'normal' biennale, on balance there is much more time and space for people to come. And they do come. Some come more than once. They are



attentive, they seem to be studying, to be reflecting, even to be quieting down. And then they want to talk about how they can actually do something.

The new contours of what a biennale –as a cultural space in which the transfer of meaning and knowledge is visibly organized– could be in times of climate crisis are emerging. And in any case, it’s a good and activist approach in these abysmal times.

On behalf of everyone involved in any way with the IABR and DOWN TO EARTH, I wish all of you a very healthy and productive 2021. We will continue in 2021, step by step. And even though we haven’t gotten rid of the pandemic yet, we do hope circumstances will get better, and that more of you can come and see, because there is plenty to look forward to.

Stay safe and sane, and may 2021 be a happier and healthier year than the current one!

George Brugmans  
president IABR