

Self-Obviating Art Institutions - Towards a Degrowth Artistic Commons



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Contents:

- P3** | Introduction- Self-Obviating Art Institutions, Towards a Degrowth Artistic Commons
- P4** | Is Contemporary Art Impotent in Challenging the Economic Structures it sits Within?
- P4** | Neoliberalism's Thematization of Art
- P5** | Institutions as Agents for Change
- P6** | Addressing Institutional Changes in the Creative Arts
- P7** | Case Study – The 59th Venice Biennale
- P9** | Reimagining Engagement with Art Institutions
- P9** | Case Study - The ruangrupa Approach
- P11** | Art Institutions as Self-Obviating Systems
- P12** | Conclusion
- P13** | Conclusion

Introduction

The essay focuses on how institutional models in the arts can evolve to align with degrowth principles. Through case studies and contrasts between traditional and emerging economic practices, the essay aims to highlight the potential transformation of art institutions into catalysts for social and environmental change, interrogating the responsibilities of art institutions and their role and ties to the climate crisis, and the broader planetary crises we encounter today. This essay argues towards a degrowth model for art institutions as self-obviating systems, and this will be interrogated with a chief focus on the art institutions themselves, and their role in engaging with crises thematically through their selection of artists, artworks and exhibition themes but not in addressing their growth imperatives that impact on the ecological, economic and social contexts in which they operate and exist within.

Challenging the notion of institutional disengagement by artists as a method for societal change [Gawronski, 2021, pp.13] and the notion that art institutions' problems lie solely in their thematic engagement with crisis, I argue instead for a deeper examination of their operational practices. Drawing on ruangrupa's approach to "institution building as an artistic form" (ruangrupa, 2020) which is an argument for integrating artistic practice into the institutional framework itself, thereby elevating the institution's operations to the same significance as the artworks they present.

The critique of relentless societal growth, through consumption of materials and resources, captured in 'The Limits to Growth', remains pertinent as we grapple with the impact of our societal behaviour on a planet with finite resources (Meadows et al, 1979). The response from developed nations has been a drive towards decarbonisation and decoupling economic growth from carbon emissions, yet Hickel and Kallis argue that such decoupling is illusory under current approaches, with little evidence that decoupling is truly happening at the required pace (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). Daly and Kallis articulate a vision of sustainable degrowth that prioritises social equity and ecological balance over Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth (Daly, 1996; Kallis, 2009). Kallis specifically asserts that the aim is not merely to reduce GDP but to ensure that any reductions occur within a framework of social and environmental sustainability (Kallis, 2009, pp.874).

Amid this discourse, Hickel calls for a radical societal transformation to avert the intertwined fate of ecological degradation and societal collapse (Hickel, 2021), while Jackson posits that degrowth may already be unfolding in advanced economies, highlighting the need for more equitable resource distribution and enhanced well-being as key strategies in managing this transition (Jackson, 2018, pp.244). In addressing the debates surrounding degrowth, it is essential to consider critiques that highlight the potential shortcomings. Schwartzman (2012) emphasises that a comprehensive transition to a sustainable energy infrastructure is feasible. He further argues that a transnational ecosocialist movement is crucial, given the global nature of capital and the obstacles it presents to international climate agreements in contrast to overly localisation-centric approaches of much degrowth scholarly work (Schwartzman, 2012, pp.123-124). Furthermore, examples exist where periods of economic decline have not necessarily led to improved ecological outcomes, suggesting that simply reducing growth is not a panacea for environmental issues (Liodakis, 2018).

This complexity underpins the exploration of how the arts sector can embody and enact degrowth principles. This essay explores two case studies: a growth focused 59th Venice Biennale and the decentralised, economically redistributive model of Documenta 15. Banks (2020). Banks points out a perceived aversion within degrowth academic discourse to embrace the arts, and considers how degrowth theory potentially reinforces traditional biases against valuing art and culture in social formation, despite acknowledging its potential for 'green' cultural production (2020 p 7). He critically examines the role of the creative economy in developed nations, highlighting the arts and culture sectors are portrayed as key drivers of economic growth (Banks, 2018). This essay considers Banks' (2020, pp.9-10; 2023, pp.23-29) critique of the values placed on the arts and culture sector as vehicles for growth, where he advocates instead for 'Creative Degrowth', urging a re-evaluation of cultural practices for their societal benefits, rather than just economic metrics. This includes a redefinition of prosperity beyond mere economic indicators to encompass cultural engagement and well-being (Banks, 2018, pp.369, 375-376).

Despite the peripheral status of the arts in the Sustainable Development Goals (Culture in the implementation of the 2030 agenda, 2021) which some argue needs to be centred given culture's critical influence on society (The British Council, 2020), this essay examines the interaction between art and economic imperatives, especially in the context of international art exhibitions and Biennales. It explores how critical need to reduce carbon emissions may be undermined by a growth imperative, while thematic representations of crises like the climate crisis are used for the continued expansion of these types of institutions.

1 Is Contemporary Art Impotent in Challenging the Economic Structures it Sits Within?

Art institutions represent a paradox, championing artworks that call for societal transformation while simultaneously struggling with their own social and ecological implications. Will Bradley scrutinises this tension, suggesting that when cultural activism is absorbed by the institutions it critiques, its potency may be diminished (Bradley, 2007, pp.22). Alexander Gawronski further reflects on this, questioning the impact of institutionalised art that aims to critique economic and environmental issues, proposing it risks becoming tokenistic within spaces often entangled in exploitative systems (Gawronski, 2021, pp.13).

This essay navigates the delineation of 'fine arts' in the globalised art world as outlined by Ginsburgh (2012, pp.4), focusing on 'high culture' within institutional frameworks, and specifically excludes art outside such structures.

Economic theories from Adam Smith to Karl Marx provide diverse perspectives on art's value. Smith regarded art as a non-essential indulgence (Smith, 1776), while Alfred Marshall acknowledged art's subjective enjoyment, albeit without fully appreciating its societal contributions (Marshall, 1890). Ginsburgh weaves a historical tapestry, noting David Hume's hesitance to conflate art with economic theory and Marx's equating of artistic labour to commodified goods in capitalist markets (Ginsburgh, 2001). Adorno and Horkheimer also contribute to this discourse, suggesting art's supposed autonomy is compromised by its commodification, describing in this way that art affirms, rather than challenges society (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944, pp.127). Ginsburgh (2001) further cites Goodwin (2006) on William Morris's vision of art as a collective asset, challenging the free-market ethos of his time. These scholarly insights frame the current predicaments of art institutions amidst contemporary economic, ecological and societal crises.

Neoliberalism's Thematization of Art 2

Despite exhibitions and events focusing on the potential and challenges of degrowth, there's a recurring problem of thematization, where institutions may promote the idea of degrowth but continue to operate under growth-oriented and capitalist frameworks, often resulting in contradictions and a lack of substantive change in their practices (Dragona, 2022). This thematization poses a challenge for the arts as a testing ground for degrowth concepts.

In the atmosphere of neoliberalism, the market's supremacy, deregulation and individual (over collective) responsibility in an arts context, are discussed by Segbars (2019) and Appadurai, A. et al. (2021, pp.131-132). Thayer's critique of the Chilean art scene underscores how the neoliberal transformation has led art to become ensnared in thematic representations, particularly within arts academic institutions, which may inadvertently maintain rather than challenge the status quo (Appadurai, A. et al., 2021, pp.154-157).

Neoliberalism frequently surfaces in contemporary art critique, yet often as a thematic concept driver according to La Berge (Appadurai, A. et al., 2021). Comments from artists, like Hito Steyerl are critical here, while she echoes similar challenges expressed by La Berge. She delves deeper into the ways that the neoliberal atmosphere permeates arts institutional structures to commodify culture itself, where commodity becomes a bundle of cultural attributes, and where culture and its reproduction becomes the commodity (Steyerl, 2012, 2010). This complex relationship is further challenged by cultural propositions in the arts such as degrowth, which find themselves at odds with the very institutions that present them, as highlighted by Dragona (2022).



Source: Superflux - Refuge - cited by Dragona (2022), an example of a degrowth arts practice engaging through artistic institutions.

3 Institutions as Agents for Change

Gawronski introduces the concept of creative 'un-doing', which they suggest as a retreat from contemporary arts institutional structures as a form of resistance, and to pressure for institutional change (Gawronski, 2021, pp.13), yet this may inadvertently align with neoliberalism's emphasis on individualisation. Foucault, in 'Subject and Power', sees power as embedded in a network of relations, advocating for an active engagement within those relations to transform the very fabric of these structures (Foucault, 1982, pp.777-782). Lovink (Appadurai, A. et al.) posits that we must envision new institutional architectures for the arts that challenge neoliberal encroachment (2021) that Steyrl (2012, 2010) observes. Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator of the Serpentine Gallery in London, articulates the urgency for art institutions to act decisively in supporting artists and engaging with the public in the context of manifold crises (Obrist, 2020). For Obrist, the extension of institutional influence beyond physical boundaries is not just a cultural imperative but also a societal one, where art becomes a conduit for exploring global issues with transparency and a sense of hope. In the wake of adversity, the concerted effort of local and national entities in providing infrastructures for change becomes vital, signalling a redefined and supportive role for art institutions in the world's reconstitution.

In this way I sympathise with Obrist's perspective over Gawronski. What is changed in institutions by extracting oneself from them? Would a more powerful approach be to bring structural alternatives from within, with explorations of what else these types of institutions might be or become? To challenge is not to disengage, but to be cognizant of the intricacies of power (Foucault, 1982), creating collective subjectivities to counteract the isolating effects of neoliberalism. This requires not a withdrawal from these systems but a strategic use and transitioning of their structures.

Addressing Institutional Changes in the Creative Arts

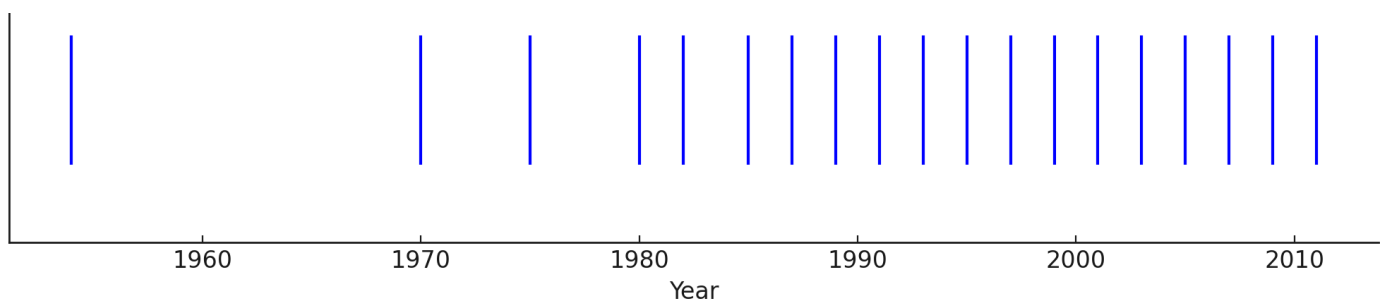
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The concept of creative un-doing (Gawronski, 2021), raises questions about the actions currently undertaken by art institutions to adapt and evolve in response to crises. While the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) (Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2023) do not explicitly address arts and culture, the arts sector actively engages with these goals. The Arts Advisory Board, noting culture's limited mention in the SDGs, advises arts institutions on environmental responsibility, aligning with specific SDGs to utilise arts as platforms for sustainable development (Advisory Board for the Arts, 2022). This has prompted some organisations to develop their own initiatives in response to this lack of primacy of arts and culture in the SDG's.

The Gallery Climate Coalition (GCC), established in 2020, develops tools for the visual arts sector to address environmental goals. It provides resources like carbon calculators and best practices tailored for the sector (GCC Impact Report, 2020). The GCC's 2023 Decarbonisation Action Plan for Non-Profits advocates for pragmatic decarbonisation measures. These include appointing green ambassadors, using GCC-developed tools for emission measurement, and aiming for a 50% reduction in carbon equivalent emissions from 2019 levels by 2030, with a recommended target of 70% (Decarbonisation action plan For non-profits and institutions, 2023, pp.10, 15, 72). The GCC discourages conventional offsetting, suggesting Strategic Climate Funds for internal carbon reduction and external environmental initiatives (Decarbonisation action plan For non-profits and institutions, 2023, pp.27, 71).

The GCC also critiques traditional, carbon-intensive art events, promoting a shift towards more sustainable methods (Decarbonisation action plan For non-profits and institutions, 2023, pp.57). This perspective is essential in evaluating large-scale events like the Venice Biennale, especially regarding claims of carbon neutrality.

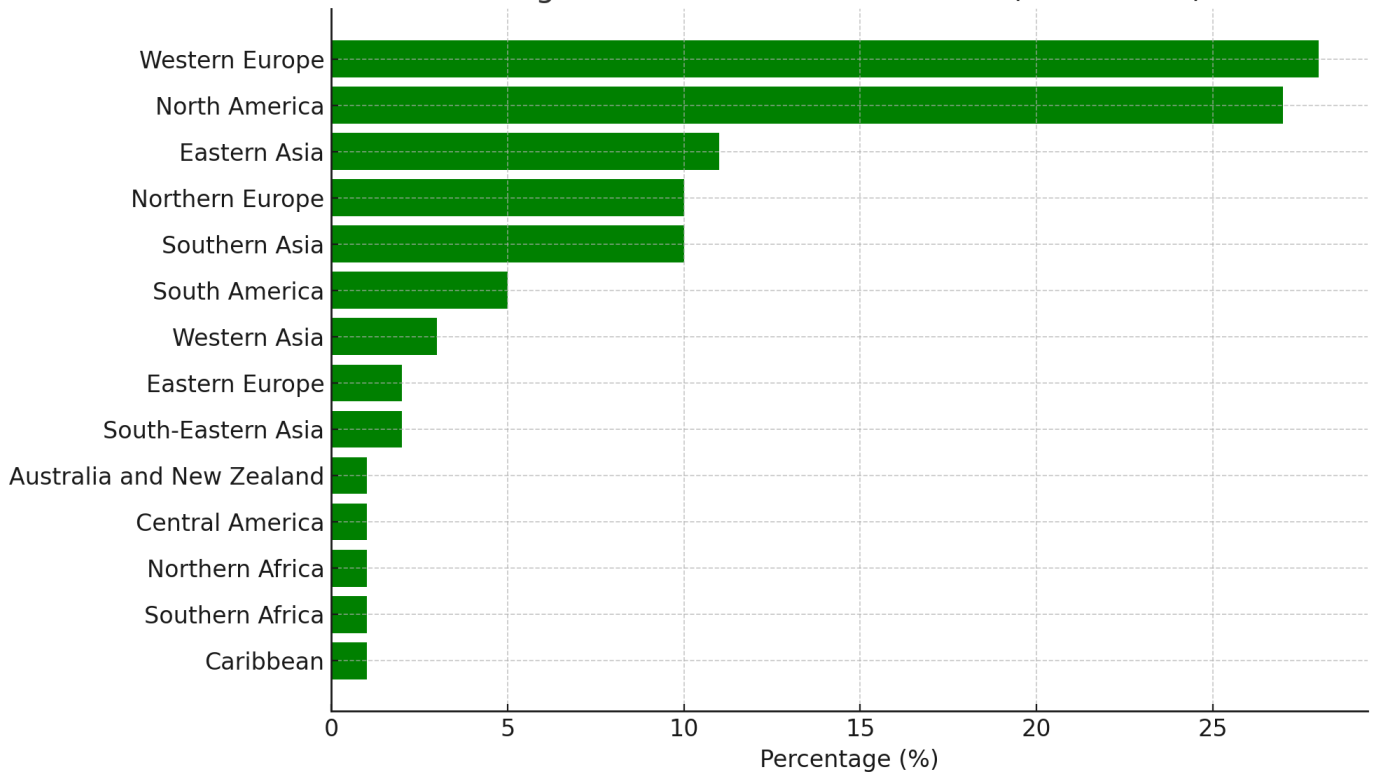
It is critical, also, to take into account the growth of art fairs and biennales. Christian Morgner (2014) describes the pivotal role they play in the contemporary global art market. These events have not only experienced significant growth but also impact local economies through tourism and collaboration with various industries. Simultaneously, their network-like structure links art dealers, professionals, and collectors worldwide, reinforcing their influence in shaping economic imperatives and trends within the global art scene. Since the late 1960s, the number of art fairs has grown significantly, with several hundred known to exist today (Morgner, 2014).



Timeline of Art Fair Foundations (1954-2011)

This timeline mapped from Morgner's (2014) research graphically represents significant years in the establishment of art fairs from 1954 to 2011. Each blue line corresponds to a year in which key art fairs were founded. This visual indicates the increasing frequency of new art fair foundations over time, particularly from the 1980s onward.

Regional Distribution of Art Fairs (1999-2010)



Regional Distribution of Art Fairs (1999-2010):

The bar chart mapped from Morgner's (2014) research graphically represents the percentage of art fairs founded in different regions worldwide between 1999 and 2010. Western Europe and North America dominate this, while it can be said that the art market is global, this chart is also dominated by the regions of the world that degrowth theorists argue need to de-grow.

5 Case Study – The 59th Venice Biennale

The choice to reflect on the 59th Venice Biennale is important as this Biennale is the first of its scale to claim carbon neutrality (Labiennale, 2022), on top of being one of the most respected and influential international art exhibitions.

The 2022 Venice Biennale, themed 'The Milk of Dreams', offered an artistic exploration of the relationship between bodies and the Earth. Curated by Cecilia Alemani, the exhibition centres on reimagining the human condition in the face of ecological crises. As highlighted by Rebecca Ann Hughes, it explores the changing definition of humanity, our responsibilities towards the planet, and life's potential in a posthuman world (Hughes, 2022). Mark Hudson further elaborates on this theme, noting the focus on surreal transformations of human identity and the interrelations of species, prompted by global challenges such as the pandemic and climate change (Hudson, 2022). According to Ben Davis, the exhibition's focus on surreal transformations and mythic conceptions of human identity (2022) offers a stark contrast to the grim tones of the previous Biennale, underscoring a nuanced exploration of humanity's future in an increasingly complex ecological and technological landscape. These themes critically set the stage for an in-depth discussion on the Biennale's approach and the underlying economic model of this large-scale exhibition, which seems to conflict with its thematic selections.



Source: Uffe Isolotto - We Walked the Earth - Danish Pavilion photographed by Ugo Carmeni

While the Venice Biennale showcases works that resonate with social and environmental themes, its drive for ever greater visitor numbers and captivated audiences is potentially incongruent with a stated desire to reduce its impact. Aligned with the Paris Climate Agreement's objective to cut emissions by 45% by 2030 (United Nations, 2015), the Biennale has implemented a decarbonisation strategy. This includes transparently reporting its carbon footprint and pursuing carbon neutrality, independently verified by an organisation called RINA (Labiennale, 2022). The 59th International Art Exhibition notably achieved this goal in 2022, as documented in the Environmental Sustainability- Carbon Neutrality Report (2021-2022 environmental sustainability -carbon neutrality report 2022, pp. 2-3).

The Biennale's sustainability report details efforts to adopt circular economy principles, such as recycling carpets and plasterboards, designing reusable totems, and implementing digital ticketing and conference streaming to cut travel-related emissions. (2021-2022 environmental sustainability -carbon neutrality report 2022, pp.3-6) However, the report acknowledges that the festival's travel and accommodation by the general public accounted for 98% of the carbon footprint, totalling 105,641 tCO₂ with a carbon intensity of 0.13 t for its 807,706 visitors (Goldstein, 2022), which, was a 35% increase from 2019. (Attendance at the Biennale International Art Exhibition in Venice 2015-2022, 2022)

This stark figure suggests that, despite internal efforts to decarbonise and reduce waste, the larger impact of visitor-related externalities may reflect misaligned priorities. To counteract its carbon footprint, the Biennale has engaged in several offsetting initiatives in developing countries, encompassing projects in renewable energy, CO₂ reduction, forest conservation, wind energy, and biomass energy production. These projects are geographically diverse, covering initiatives predominantly in developing countries (2021-2022 environmental sustainability -carbon neutrality report, 2022, p10)

The Venice Biennale's use of carbon accounting and offsetting is ambitious, yet the efficacy and long-term sustainability of offsetting as a solution, rather than direct reductions in emissions, especially those associated with visitor travel, is a critical issue that warrants further examination. Offsetting, particularly when it comes to the substantial emissions generated by visitor travel, may not offer the same long-term benefits as direct emission reductions. As Calel et al. (2021) note, the effectiveness of carbon offset programmes, such as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), is debatable since they often fund projects that may not contribute to genuine emission reductions. This is a significant consideration for the Biennale, where the true impact of its offsetting efforts must extend beyond nominal claims of carbon neutrality.

Samuel Randals' examination of carbon markets further challenges their role in addressing climate change, suggesting they serve neoliberal agendas more than the environment (Randals, 2017). While the Biennale's move towards carbon neutrality represents a step forward, Imam J and Harris G highlight the need to question the effectiveness of these strategies against the backdrop of urgent ecological crises that affect Venice in particular (Imam J, 2022, Hurrel, 2023). This situation raises critical questions about the effectiveness and longevity of the Biennale's economic and environmental strategies within the broader context of global crises like climate change.

This approach, commonly adopted in neoliberal economies, tends to prioritise immediate, quantifiable gains over long-term ecological well-being. Such strategies often fail to consider the full spectrum of negative externalities (Mazzucato, 2018, p 806), including the increased environmental footprint due to large-scale events and the global effects of rising temperatures that threaten the very existence of the show through rising sea levels. The Biennale's engagement with carbon offsetting, while a gesture towards environmental responsibility, may inadvertently perpetuate a 'business as usual' mindset, which undermines the fundamental changes needed to achieve genuine change. This underscores the need for a more holistic and foresighted approach in addressing environmental challenges, moving beyond tokenistic measures to integrate comprehensive strategies that consider the long-term impacts and externalities of such cultural events. This is also reflective of the perpetuation and evolution of colonial mentality, whereby less developed nations are used as carbon offsetting sinks for the developed world, which is perpetuated by neoliberal practices, which, rather than taking responsibility for externalities, seek to mitigate them by paying communities in the GlobalSouth to take responsibility for these impacts (Bumpus and Liverman, 2008). As Amitav Ghosh reminds us, colonialism is tied to the climate crisis, and the broader planetary crises we encounter today (Ghosh, 2021, p158)

Reimagining Engagement with Art Institutions **6**

As we move from an analysis of the curatorial approach to the Venice Biennale, which, as an organisation, focussing specifically on its own environmental impact insular to the organisation, whilst giving piety to externalities like visitor number growth, and the use of carbon markets to offset those externalities, it is difficult to justify the Biennale's vocal commitment to reducing its environmental impact, and the thematic display of arts that are critical of these issues, with its growing scale. It is an example of the problems with continued 'green' economic growth to counter such negative externalities as discussed by Hickel and Kallis (2020).

Aligning with the principles of degrowth discussed, there is a need for a more integrative approach that transcends symbolic fallacies of decoupling negative environmental externalities from growth.

7 Case Study – The ruangrupa Approach

Building on the initial discourse, this essay examines the juxtaposition of policy that, on one hand, signals a need for transformation within the arts, and on the other, continues to remain uncritical of continued growth. This duality is mirrored in the art sector, where institutional rigidity often stifles the radical change necessary for degrowth strategies.

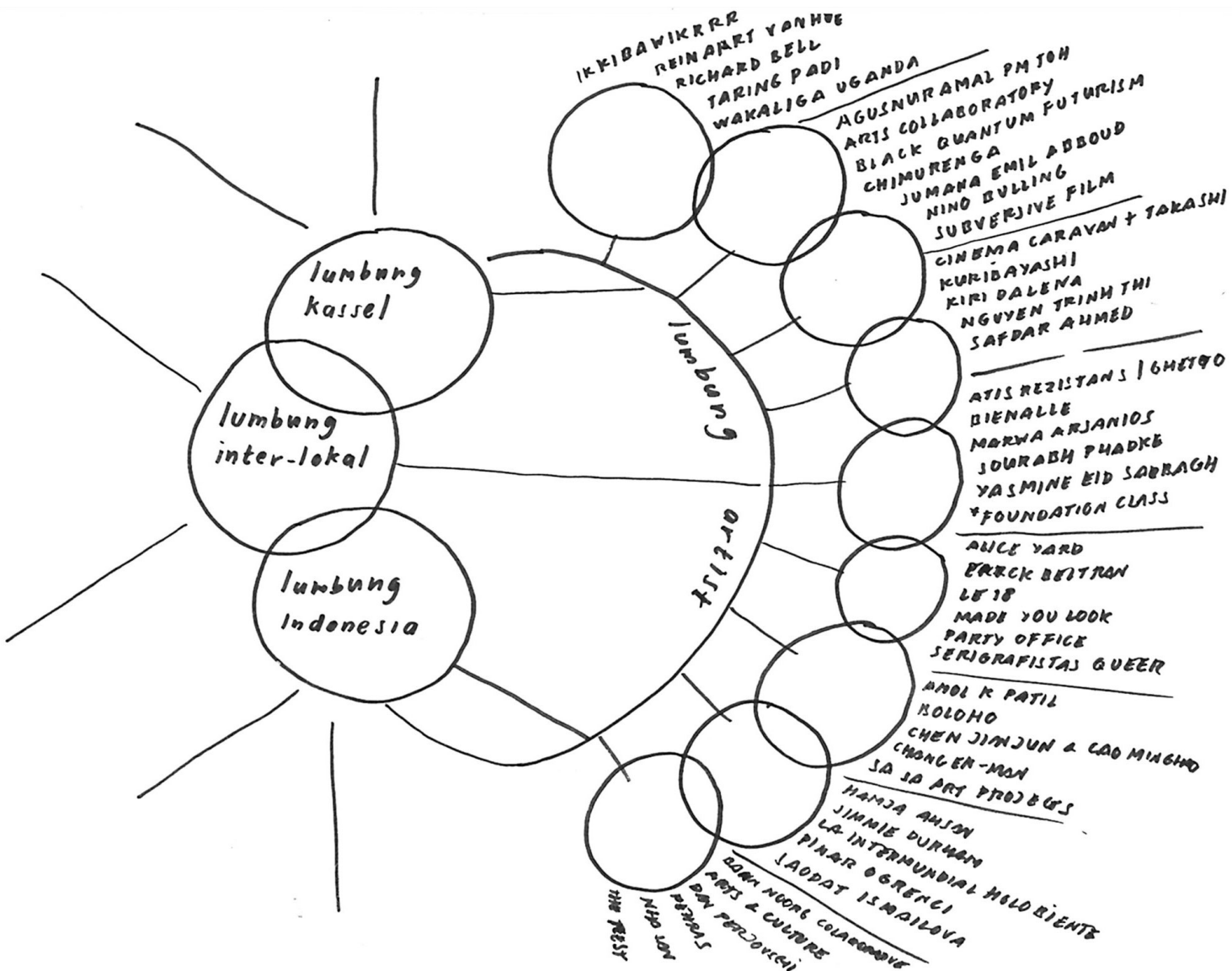
In a rebuttal to Gawronski's notion of artist withdrawal as a means to provoke institutional introspection (2021), we now explore ruangrupa's active engagement with institutional organisation at Documenta 15. This Indonesian collective's prioritisation of 'means of analysis' challenges traditional production-centric approaches, advocating for a critical examination

of societal constructs (Ruangrupa, 2000). The Lumbung concept, symbolising a communal rice barn, heralded a departure from the carbon-centric, growth-focused methodologies of events like the Venice Biennale, offering a collective model of resource stewardship, economic experimentation and decentralised management (Ruangrupa, 2021).

Ruangrupa's Lumbung concept aimed to address the systemic wounds caused by colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy—not merely redistributing resources but also confronting historical and present-day inequities (Ruangrupa, 2021). Bhambra and Newell (2023) articulate the interconnection of colonial legacies with contemporary climate crises, arguing for a systemic perspective to address the resultant global inequalities and devise equitable solutions (Bhambra GK, Newell P 2023; Funes, 2022). These sentiments are echoed by the IPCC report, which recognises the lasting impact of colonialism on climate vulnerability, particularly affecting indigenous and local communities (Atmos, 2022).

'Koperasi', or cooperative resource management, was central to Lumbung's ethos at Documenta, informed by the concepts of 'rapat' (assembly), 'mufakat' (agreement), and 'gotong royong' (mutual cooperation) (Ruangrupa, 2021). This framework aligns with the theories of the commons as proposed by Hardt & Negri and Dardot & Laval, (Hardt & Negri, 2009; Dardot & Laval, 2014) integrating democratic and communal management of resources within the art sector. These theorists present the commons neither public or private property but as resources managed democratically for collective use (Hardt & Negri, 2009; Dardot & Laval, 2014).

A defining attribute of Documenta 15 was the artists assuming traditionally curatorial roles, illustrating a transition to an artist-led, practice-driven approach (Farago, 2022). This move signifies a broader reorientation of institutional engagement, representing an active challenge to and reconstitution of traditional structures within the art world.



Source: Lumbung organisational structure (Lumbung, 2021)

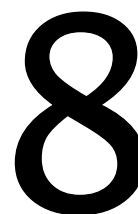
Documenta 15's commitment to economic and environmental reform, operational from 18 June to 25 September 2022, marked a significant moment in the contemporary art world. With an attendance exceeding 738,000, the event channelled a €42.2 million budget into the Lumbung concept, intending to democratise artistic participation and challenge entrenched economic structures within the art establishment (documenta fifteen - Retrospective - documenta, 2022; West, 2022; Broe, 2022). This approach, facilitated by the Rapat (assembly) System, granted autonomy to fourteen collectives and numerous participants, enabling them to make collective financial decisions and manage substantial seed funds and production budgets. However, such decentralisation also introduced complexities, namely a scarcity of impact data that might otherwise clarify the efficacy of Documenta's model of egalitarianism.

The critiques by West (2022) and Topal (2022) provide a nuanced examination of ruangrupa's methodology. They commend its departure from conventional market dependencies yet question the long-term viability and transparency under non-open source decision-making platforms. Topal further lauds initiatives like "The Question of Funding" a project exploring unconventional funding models for Palestinian arts organisations, while simultaneously urging a deeper focus on the technological underpinnings (the use of Zoom and other technologies) of such decentralised systems, which he critiques due to their non-open source nature and monopolistic character.

Documenta 15's environmental strategy, while receiving positive visitor feedback, primarily relied on qualitative evaluations (Ozga and Hellstern, 2021), which, when compared to the Venice Biennale's quantitatively driven assessments, may lack a certain analytical depth. This methodological choice highlights the event's non-carbon-centric approach but also underscores the need for more robust, data-driven environmental assessments, for example, making use of the accessible and readily available tools of Global Carbon Council (GCC, 2020), which are specifically focussed towards individuals and smaller organisations. Similarly, the event's decentralised fiscal management, though in line with its progressive ethos, has inadvertently led to gaps in Documenta's own analytical documentation. This poses questions about the event's transparency and accountability.

In my view, Documenta 15's strategy represents a bold experiment in the redefinition of curatorship and institution building with the implementation of some degrowth principles within the art sector. The challenge moving forward lies in reconciling the innovative spirit of such events with the tangible metrics necessary to evaluate and ensure their contribution to broader societal and ecological objectives, as well as evidencing Degrowth theories.

Art Institutions as Self-Obviating Systems



ruangrupa's process at Documenta 15 presents the institution not as a static entity but as a process-oriented incubator, prioritising community organisation and the equitable distribution of resources. The notion of self-obviating institutions comes into play here. Drawing parallels with degrowth computing models (Raghavan & Pargman, 2016; Maxigas & Troxler, 2022), self-obviating systems, by design, make themselves redundant or unnecessary over time. Art institutions could evolve to adapt to their ecological contexts, minimising resource use and environmental impact over time whilst redistributing their power over assets to other groups over time. This is seen in how over Documenta 15, resources from the budget were allocated to 14 groups initially, and then dispersed to other collectives globally, there were over 1500 participating artists and many of the events in the run up to the show happened in the local areas where the artists and collectives were based (documenta fifteen - Retrospective - documenta, 2022; West, 2022; Ruangrupa, 2022).

This is an example of how the benefits of a show like this can extend beyond the exhibition's temporal and spatial limits, fostering growth in communities that may indeed 'need to grow' under a degrowth scenario (Hickel, 2021). In such a model, we can imagine how an institution's relevance and power may diminish over time as its activities empower other organisations to flourish independently.

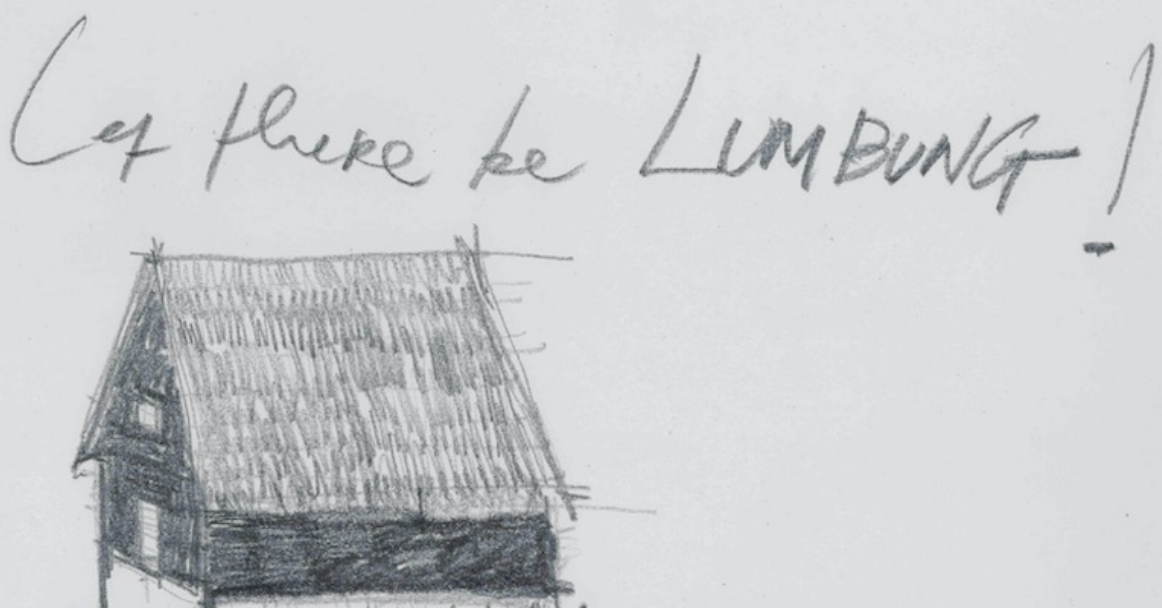
Conclusion

In an era where crisis becomes aesthetic and thematic, the art world's economic and institutional imagination must transcend superficial production and embrace a transformative ethos. Degrowth, as Hickel (2021) argues, is a radical critique of colonial capitalism. Degrowth seeks an economy that values human need over capital gain, opposing the exploitation of labour and natural resources and the racial ideologies that underpin such exploitation. It aligns with ecosocialist movements that challenge the necessity of growth for well-being in high-income nations, advocating instead for justice, equitable wealth distribution, and the expansion of public goods. Non-participation in arts institutions (Gawronski, 2021), in order to catalyse change may not suffice. Instead, a more imaginative engagement with the system's mechanisms is warranted.

The practices of *ruangrupa* at Documenta 15 challenge the traditional economic influences of grand exhibitions and propose a new route for the institutional art world. By aligning with degrowth principles outlined by (Hickel, 2021; 2019), such institutions can foster sustainable cultural production that truly resonates with ecological and social imperatives. This approach underscores the need for art institutions to reimagine their roles, transforming from centralised hubs of cultural activity to facilitators of a communal, democratised cultural landscape. This presents a vision of art institutions that not only support artistic creation but also enhance the autonomy and resilience of the artistic communities they engage with. The idea that an artistic show such as Documenta could serve as a conduit for redistribution within an artistic commons is compelling, and brings reflections and a marked contrast to other approaches such as that of the Venice Biennale that can be reflective of a desire to maintain normative structures of power and process.

The curatorial strategies employed by Documenta, involving artists as curators, suggest a reimagining of the curator's role in the context of degrowth. Rather than setting thematic agendas, curators could actively participate in institutional restructuring to facilitate degrowth experimentation, transforming the institution itself into the artwork (*ruangrupa*, 2020) and into a self-obviating entity, redistributing resource and power to smaller artistic collectives. The discourses around the proliferation of art exhibitions and Biennales illuminate their dual role as stimulators of the art market and indicators of economic hegemony. These events, closely monitored by an elite collector class must be questioned in their proliferation, the associated negative environmental externalities are evidenced, yet they perpetuate to the benefit of inflating values across the art market (Morgner, 2014). The question arises, growth for whom and at what cost?

Within this landscape, the Venice Biennale, despite its cultural prominence, can be critiqued for its lack of structural societal impact. In contrast, Documenta 15 signified a concerted effort towards instigating change beyond the metrics of neoliberal carbon accounting practices. This was evidenced by their redistributive initiatives and decentralisation of resources, and proliferation of activities conducted beyond the physical site of Kassel. While there is scant evidence as to whether Documenta 15 had a lower environmental impact than its predecessors, its commitment to attempting alternative economic and organisational models is commendable. However it seems pertinent that alongside this more holistic and decentralised approach, there is also a commitment to quantifying the results of such experiments. The combination of approaches would allow refinement of future iterations like the Documenta 15 approach and provide the necessary evidence to convert the orthodox economic sceptic.



Source: Let there be lumbung (2022)

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