

Environment

By Mitch Speed

Flying to the End of the World

Instead of jetting to Venice, Basel, Hongkong, or New York, you should probably stay at home and read a book, or look at Instagram if you must. Every flight bringing people to artworks and artworks to people adds to the art world's enormous carbon footprint. Is the value of seeing art IRL really worth it? Nobody can live in the sky for ever.

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Julian Charrière, *The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories I*, 2013

Us humans are starting to look a lot like a suicide cult. In the matter of our death-driven warming of the planet, we are religiously impervious to reason. Scientists have provided a clear ultimatum: change our behaviour, or expect calamity. In turn journalists have illustrated these warnings with scenes that could make Hieronymus Bosch sweat cold bullets. With a strange glassy-eyed horror, we register all of this, and share the relevant headlines and memes. Then we revert to business as usual.

It would be a lie to say that we don't know how to stop ecological collapse. Governments need to regulate industry, and we need to make them do it. Equally, we need to radically change our lifestyles. Forget efficient light bulbs. The problem is an addiction to consumption: of products, of meat, of fuel. Take airplanes: way back in 2006, the *Guardian* journalist George Monbiot wrote that "flying dwarfs any other environmental impact a single person can exert". And yet thirteen years later, vapour trails web the skies more densely than ever. In the time it took me to edit this paragraph in a friend's New York apartment, three flights roared overhead. Two days ago, one such plane delivered me here from Germany. Working as an art writer, I am by definition also a too-frequent flyer. For most art workers that I know, keeping one's job means flying relentlessly – to biennials, editorial and publishing meetings, exhibitions. Burning fossil fuels has become a professional responsibility. And anyway, isn't life too short to turn down a paid trip to Portugal?

At the opening of this year's Venice Biennale, a friend of mine heard a well-known artist ruminate that "the opening parties aren't what they used to be. They're smaller: lavish indulgence now seems in bad taste." Might not the same logic apply to the whole rigmarole in general? How tasteful is it to dump exorbitant quantities of carbon (and other warming particulate matter) into the air for a few days of networking and Aperol-binging – a kind of drunken industry conference, for which the actual artwork inevitably becomes a tragically exhausting backdrop?

Like all biennials and art fairs, Venice has a heavy carbon footprint. This year's central pavilion includes seventy-nine artists, eighty-nine international pavilions, and twenty-one collateral events. All of those artworks need to get to the mythic Italian archipelago. So do the artists, the curators, the dutiful assistants, the equally dutiful (if more cynical) critics, the mysterious aristocrat funders, and the

speech-giving government official. And so scruples are smothered, and flights are purchased – first-class transcontinental for some, thrillingly cheap and abysmally destructive discount Ryanair jaunts for others.

Because airplanes burn fuel at their highest rate while taking off, the cheap hopper flights that service Europe's art world could rightly be thought of as weapons in a fierce campaign of eco-violence. Their affordability is of course backed by capitalist structures, and run-of-the-mill neoliberal worker abuses. Exemptions on jet-fuel tax have made flying far too affordable; hence the perceived high cost of train travel. The other thing that makes those Euro 19.99 trips around Europe possible is the underpaid labour of freelance and often non-unionised pilots.

As I finished drafting this essay on a Munich runway – en route to New York after a Bavarian layover – a diffuse roar shuddered my body. An invisible fossil fuel bonfire had erupted around me. For each passenger thus propelled skyward, a few square metres of Arctic ice melted. You could argue that the contemporary art industry is just a bit player in this collective self-sacrifice. But being a bit player is not the same thing as having a get-of-out-jail-free card.

The presumed higher purpose of art can make it hard to critique the art world for anything at all. But this humanist pretence becomes rapidly less believable when you start focusing on the material relationship of the international art world, to the much less privileged local cultures that linger behind it – shadows haunt the image of international conviviality. From the perspective of ecological justice, the art world's values of empathy, cooperation, and cultural exchange compete against the destructive reality of constant travel and shipping. While it is the privileged who consume, it is the poor of the global south who first suffer climate change's effects.

Arguing for the reduction of air travel, journalists and activists urge professionals to sacrifice face-to-face business meetings. In response, business communities invoke the necessity of personal contact. So too in art. But in our industry, there is also the problem of the artworks themselves, and our habituated way of encountering them. Our business relies not only on the delivery of products around the world, but the transportation of viewers who crave first-hand experiences of them. This need persists, bizarrely, eighty-four years after Walter Benjamin predicted the camera's destruction of the auratic power of the unique object, and well

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Martin Kippenberger, *Business-Class*, 1989
Installation view, Villa Arson, Galerie Carrée, Nice, 1990

into a digital age where experience itself has been largely consigned to easily transmissible images.

For a person who harbours a stubborn belief in the power of first-hand experiences of art, all of this might seem to present a certain problem. I am not alone in believing that there is something in the haptic, material, and retinally complex experience of looking at non-technologically mediated objects that deepens their effect. But the idea that such pleasures might be precluded by a retreat from massive international art festivals or a moratorium on touring exhibitions is laughable.

Great art transpires equally on local scales. And besides, if there is a tantalising and invaluable fetish experience in the act of viewing art in person, there is – or at least *there can be* – an equally rich, albeit different, kind of indulgence in poring over images of art and engaging with their vibrant art-historical, philosophical, and critical interpretations. This is how I first became fascinated by modern art, in my Canadian hometown's small but

magical library. The pleasure of being inside the book – inside the codex, inside the transmission of art through image and writing – was enough.

It would probably be too much to ban flying for pleasure and business. The odd trip to see the world's transformational artworks in the flesh might be excusable. It's a revelation to see for the first time how light travels in and out of Monet's *Reflections of Clouds on the Water-Lily Pond* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Then again, you have to wonder whether the experience is worth the ecological cost. Actual water is everything to life, human or otherwise. Climate change-driven ocean warming, acidification, droughts, and polluted drinking water are just some of the many catastrophic effects of our spiralling habits of consumption. This fact remains curiously invisible from high above the blue Atlantic.

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