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EXHIBITIONS: GREEN ISSUES AT EVERY STAGE

As mirrors of the times and the institutions that run them, exhibitions are gradually being examined through the prism of sustainable development. Whether permanent or temporary, they incur variable energy costs that professionals must now take into account, from design to final dismantling.

Space planning and the use of equipment, loans of works, human movements, management of flows and temperature within the space... Among the various functions of the museum, the exhibition is certainly the most visible, but the energy consumption it involves is often overlooked. Professionals are gradually getting to grips with the subject and practices are becoming more aware. In light of this growing ecological awareness, what are institutions and players in the art world doing to design and organise their exhibitions?

Ecological Impact

There are a number of stages involved in creating and organising an exhibition, and the ecological impact is multi-layered. On the one hand, it is linked to the design of the event itself, including the production of the materials that will make up the exhibition route — frames, picture rails, panels, labels, etc. — and their use throughout the exhibition opening period — in particular the lighting, sound and video projections. The loan of certain works also needs to be taken into account, and a decision needs to be made about the possibilities for transport — by lorry at best, or by plane — and the costs involved, both financial and in terms of energy.

The exhibition space itself also has an ecological impact. The flow of visitors and their movements will determine the temperature regulation of the infrastructure, both for the comfort of the public and the preservation of the works. Travel outside the exhibition space also needs to be taken into account: journeys to and from the exhibition site, which can take from a few minutes to several hours, involve a

considerable amount of transport and expense. They even represent the largest carbon footprint in the balance sheet of temporary exhibitions. The same is true of art fairs, which attract professionals, collectors and art lovers from all over the world.

While the presence of a large audience is a guarantee of success, it also seems to contradict any ecological approach. Blockbuster exhibitions, in particular, are highly publicised and designed to draw in the crowds, like “Munch. A poem of life, love and death” at the Musée d’Orsay between September 2022 and January 2023, which attracted more than 700,000 visitors; and the Morozov collection at the Louis Vuitton Foundation, which attracted more than 1.25 million visitors last year, breaking attendance records. So how can we combine the museum’s various missions — or those of cultural events — to disseminate its works with an ecological approach?

Responsible Exhibitions

In November 2021, the Shift Project, a think tank working to decarbonise the economy, published its latest





report, *Decarbonising Culture!*

It highlighted a number of points: relocating activities, slowing down travel, reducing the scale of events, and eco-design by documenting the ecological impact of all activities. These are all elements that directly involve the production of an exhibition.

The energy consumed by exhibitions is apparent at every stage: when they are installed, when they are open and when they are dismantled. The fate of equipment produced for specific purposes, for a particular scenography, also raises questions. Exhibition curators and institutions need to take an ecological approach right from the design stage, so that the equipment they use can be reused. Their quality and adaptability to other modes of presentation must be taken into account to limit waste.

Spearheading this movement in France, the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille opened “Goya Experience” in February 2022, an exhibition bearing the eco-responsible stamp, using materials that are reusable, low in pollutants and sourced in France. The choice of bio-sourced, recyclable and sometimes recycled materials, responsible manufacturing and short supply chains are all part of a greener approach to creating exhibitions ... but they also entail additional financial costs. The “Goya Experience” also proposed an innovative form of exhibition, using new technologies to compensate for the lack of a wide choice of paintings. Immersive and sensory, it focused on two paintings. It was a way of overturning the current exhibition model, which is based on offering a very wide range of works on loan.

Digitalisation: a viable alternative?

To limit the need to transport works of art, digital technology appears to be a possible option. As well as appealing to audiences who are usually far from cultural venues and offering an alternative to loans, digitisation also offers a more immersive experience, accompanying

the visitor and enabling them to approach the works in a different way, as close as possible to the details. A relationship that is the very opposite of the traditional museum exhibition, and one that many museums are now embracing in monumental installations such as the Atelier des Lumières in Paris, a site entirely dedicated to this new model.

The health crisis has greatly accelerated this transformation, giving pride of place to digitised art that can be accessed directly from a computer. Many museums have embraced this new approach, going even further and offering online exhibitions as virtual tours, offering an alternative way of reducing the need for visitors to travel and helping to spread art on a global scale — at the risk of undermining the experience of the physical object in the process.

In fact, the possibilities offered by new technologies are double-edged: they make works more accessible to audiences who are socially or physically distant from cultural venues, but at the same time alter the relationship with the object by transforming the experience of the work in favour of the sensational. Between data storage, energy consumption and obsolescence, the carbon footprint of digital technology is also very real. And in an exhibition using such tools, the electricity used over the duration of the opening increases the financial and ecological costs.

Challenges of a sustainable approach

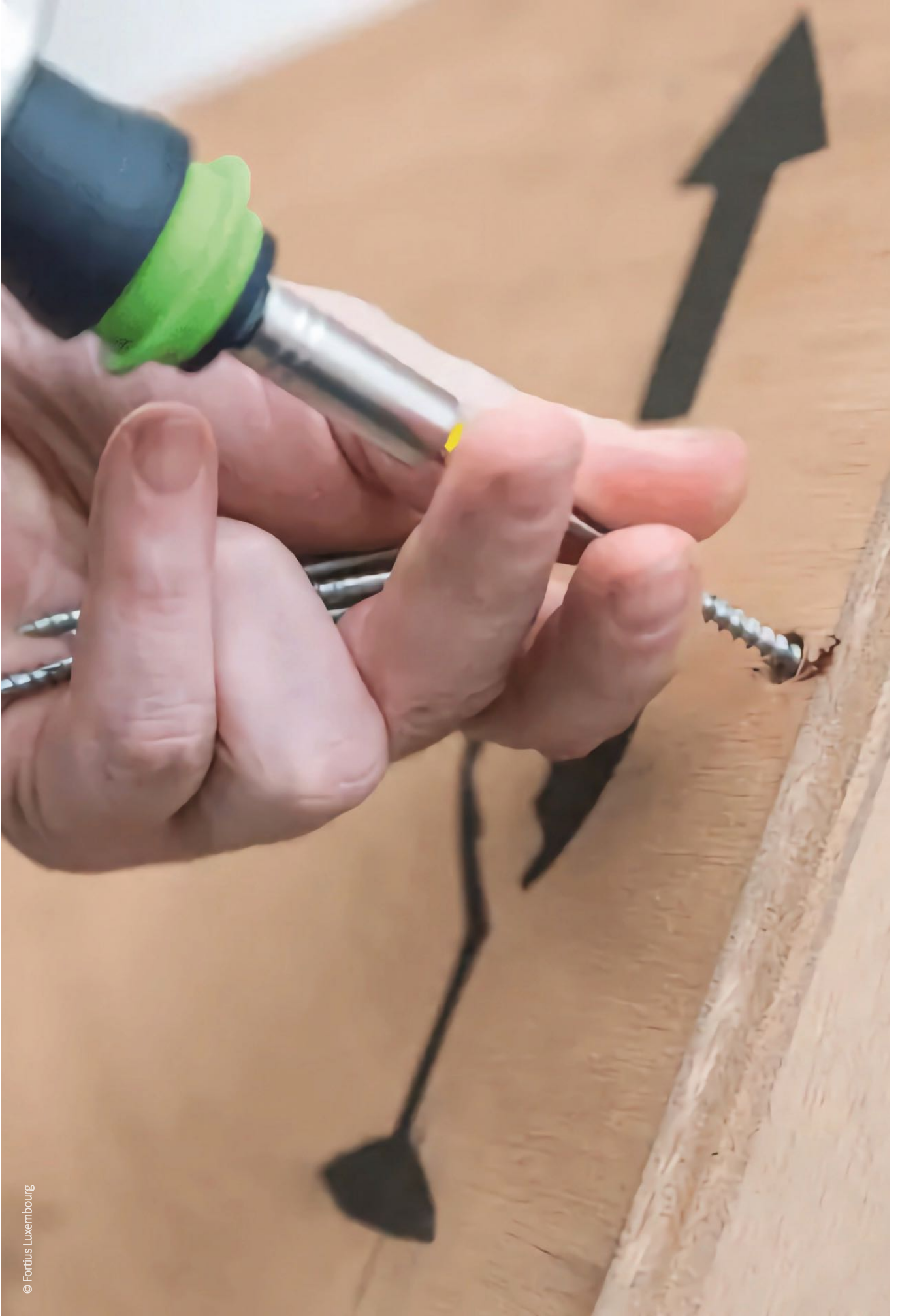
Ecological awareness, precipitated by the health crisis, is a relatively recent phenomenon in the cultural sector. CIMAM, a forum for modern and contemporary art collections and exhibitions, has produced a guide for professionals on how to manage the carbon footprint of an exhibition. The Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille is offering workshops on the theme of museum sustainability. Generally speaking, the introduction of courses on green issues seems to be a fundamental step towards

rethinking exhibitions from the perspective of sustainable development.

However, the cost of the ecological transition remains a major issue for institutions. The Amcsti bulletin on the sustainable approach to exhibitions published in February 2022 highlighted the lack of financial investment by public authorities to support private sustainable initiatives. The institutions, for their part, “are asking professionals [...] to be a driving force in eco-design because they do not have enough in-house resources [and] are lowering [...] the remuneration of professionals, which they continue to regard as proportional to the amount of work rather than to the “time spent””. This is still a delicate situation for the professionals involved in finding solutions, which are still time-consuming and more costly.

In an age of globalisation and constant displacement, those working for sustainable development are also stressing the importance of relocation – a central theme for art today, but also for the economy as a whole. The Shift Project proposed relocating activities to local areas, shortening distances travelled, reducing scales, eco-designing works, integrating mobility issues and ... giving up. Dynamics that engage contemporary creators, professionals and audiences alike. And, ultimately, the opening up of other exhibition models to embody new relationships with the world.

In the light of the challenges facing the world of culture today, the green initiatives taken at every stage in the organisation of exhibitions need to be made visible in order to raise awareness among professionals and the public alike of the energy costs involved. At a time when contemporary art is increasingly concerned with the environment, ecology and the relationship between man and the living world, it would seem that institutions too should follow suit and give concrete expression to the works they exhibit.





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