

# Do You Want a Future? A Protocol for New Cultural Commons

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Today we all know that we are in urgent need of viable and strong solutions for planetary problems. But then it always sounds a bit dubious when someone claims to have a truly good solution to a planetary problem. You're quickly suspected of being pretentious or, more likely, of being a populist. So this morning I was delighted to read an interview with Judith Butler in *The New Yorker* in which she said, "Sometimes you have to imagine in a radical way that makes you seem a little crazy, that puts you in an embarrassing light, in order to open up a possibility that others have already closed down with their knowing realism. I'm prepared to be mocked and dismissed."<sup>1</sup>

So here we go—I'm certainly going to look a bit ridiculous when I say that I can think of at least *one* good idea for planetary problems. It isn't my idea, but it's a good one.

## LES NOUVEAUX COMMANDITAIRES

I first heard about Les Nouveaux Commanditaires, or New Patrons,<sup>2</sup> in 2007. In a Berlin street café I met François Hers, a Belgian artist from Paris. He told me that in 1989 a major private foundation, the Fondation de

1 Masha Gessen, "Judith Butler Wants us to Reshape our Rage," in *The New Yorker*, February 9, 2020.

2 *Nouveaux Commanditaires* can be translated into English only rather inadequately as *New Patrons*. According to country and language area, these groups are called *Nuovi Committenti*, *Concomitentes*, *Nieuwe Opdrachtgevers*, *Nya uppdragsgivare*, etc.

France—which promotes innovative projects ranging from medicine to education—had been looking for a new initiative for sustainable and social cultural funding, and he was asked if he had any ideas. He did, suggesting setting up a program to enable citizens to commission new works from contemporary artists. Cultural mediators and public producers would assist them, contributing the necessary know-how. He explained:

Ever since Dada and the Russian avant-garde, it has been clear that art can find its forms and take its place in society anywhere, at any time, in any shape, and on any subject. Nevertheless we could see that almost everything we did as artists after that ultimately landed in galleries and museums; that in the end there was no other place for us than the usual institutions and a market whose requirements were uncertain and that most people have nothing to do with. The autonomy of art and artists had at some point reached a dead end. Since the Romantic Age, the principle had become established in Western cultures that artists were committed to nothing and no one apart from their own inner need to create new works. Their independence from commissions and external rules governing what they did and how they did it was synonymous with the independence of free citizens who had shaken off authoritarian régimes and gradually built up democracies in which they could manage their own interests.

This historical sense of the autonomy of art, however, had at some point exhausted itself. With the globalization of the art world, concepts of the middle-class modern movement and its discourses on autonomy became the international standard—but in the nineteen-eighties it was clear to us that the individual's

inner need for the democratic project could not longer occupy a central place. The question now was how people around the world, in their new-found relative freedom, could find ways of living a self-determined life together. This question could have only collective answers. It was no longer compatible with the idea that artists should rack their brains alone as to what art society might require, what forms would be appropriate, what critics, and what representation would be needed.

So as an artist, I wanted to turn the tables: Let society itself tell us what it needs. We needed to ask every single citizen, what do you need art—and us artists—for? What are your demands? What do you expect from painting, architecture, literature, music, film? My personal need is not important. I want to know what your need is. What do you want to achieve? What can we as artists do about it? And so the protocol of the New Patrons emerged. The crucial point is that with the mediator, a new protagonist appears on the stage of the art world to help citizens to commission artists with projects they consider important. We need a mediating entity, so that citizens and artists can come together with a purpose and cooperate.

That was the idea: a new kind of art commissioned by citizens, as an operative model for democratic cultural production. True, history shows sundry instances of artworks commissioned by citizens who are not part of the cultural, economic, or political elite. But there had never been a systemic approach, a general policy allowing people with no particular privileges an active, decisive role in the art scene. The Fondation de France adopted Hers's suggestion. In 1990, New Patrons was established as a decentralized network of mediators and nonprofit organizations, which



In the French village of Trébédan, a group of mayors, school board members, and friends worked with artist Matali Crasset and mediator Anastassia Makridou-Brettonneau from 2007 to 2015 to add facilities to a school called Le Blé en Herbe. The project linked the school to the village and created a lively community center.

enter independently into dialogue with citizens in their regions, asking them what they expected from art. Soon people from villages, small towns, and metropolitan areas across France were commissioning artists to develop local projects that would provide innovative answers to local challenges.

COMMENTS ON THE PROTOCOL  
OF NEW PATRONS<sup>3</sup>

In both the analogue and the digital worlds, protocols regulate many things. They ensure the Internet works; they determine what billions of people can see, and when. The protocols of diplomatic services stipulate how political hierarchies are included in formal processes and their representation effected for the public. There are the written protocols for church weddings; unwritten ones for Tinder dates; protocols organize large parts of communal life, of (re-)production, consumption, and representation. They are designed to ensure functional rules, to avoid errors, to establish trust and reliability. Thus every new protocol recognized as such is a major intervention in the social world, and a tool for regulating future processes.

The New Patrons protocol is exactly this kind of intervention and tool—not, however, in the form of a norm or specification, but as a proposal for a shared practice by people who desire this practice, who organize it together and, should they come into conflict, have to resolve the conflict themselves. This means that there is no external authority that can intervene—whether to help or to regulate. The New Patrons protocol knows no authority apart from the protagonists involved in the process. At the same

3 Protocol available online at <https://neueauftraggeber.de/en/about-the-new-patrons> (accessed April 30, 2020).

time, it is universal insofar as it can be put into practice in any community, in any place, and at any time. Legally, it is drawn up as an artwork which anyone may adopt, comparable with the model of the Creative Commons License. This is exactly what is being sedulously implemented today.

THE HISTORY OF SELF-DETERMINATION  
HAS NO BEGINNING AND NO END

When in 1992 the first mediators went door-to-door trying to motivate residents to commission artworks, it was no more than an experiment often greeted with a patronizing smile. Weren't citizens interested in more important concerns than contemporary art, of all things? Why should artists engage with citizens' concerns? However, the history of cultural self-determination goes as far back as human cultures themselves. Skepticism proved unfounded. Soon people were approaching the mediators, seeking to exchange ideas, and one project after another emerged: sculptural memorials to previously uncommemorated people and events, architectural interventions to change the shapes and spirits of rural environments, new spaces and venues for communities that had none, works that made unresolved conflicts tangible, or that gave bold expression to previously shy visions. After eighteen years, at the turn of the millennium, there were already several dozen projects, and from a bird's eye view, all of them stood in a long tradition of self-empowerment that runs throughout history. In 2002 the first projects in the Nieuwe Opdrachtgevers in Belgium began, soon followed by the Nuovi Comittenti in Italy, then the Concomitentes in Spain. Word spread. In more and more regions of Europe, the protocol inspired art experts, cultural practitioners, and activists to become active as mediators and to support citizens'

commissions, and it motivated citizens to visit artists' studios to discuss their wishes, aims, and problems.

In Germany, the *Neue Auftraggeber e.V.* was founded in a back room in Berlin in 2007. The first members were a few curators and people interested in culture—including myself. Some initial funding came from France, then from Bonn, Lübeck, Hamburg, and Potsdam—but hardly enough to keep body and soul together. As mediators with tiny budgets, we started pioneering projects and learned through experience, along with citizens' groups, patrons, and the artists themselves. Lots of things went wrong; quite a lot worked well. A protocol may be brief, clear, and simple; the corresponding practice is not necessarily so. Today, in 2020, we've made some progress. A poster of the protocol hangs on the wall in our Berlin office. We work as a team in roundtable discussions to coordinate the program in Germany. With support from the Federal Culture Foundation and many other partners, we currently support nine mediators, and more than a hundred citizens have joined forces in throughout Germany to commission new works and projects in their towns and villages. Many of them express the need for more community and less social isolation, or trigger silent local issues in order to become conscious. It's about getting voices and bodies into the public sphere to draw new distinctions there. The artists come from the worlds of theater, performance, sculpture, architecture, painting, and comic books.

We have contacts with new colleagues in Switzerland, Spain, Cameroon, Sweden, and Lebanon. Fifty-two mediators are currently active in eleven countries. Worldwide, more than 500 projects have been implemented, each one autonomous in form and content. Tens of thousands of citizens are behind these projects—mayors and municipal



After restoring a 1836 washhouse, the twenty-odd residents of Blessey, a village in Burgundy, France, decided to erect a sculpture. Through mediator Xavier Douroux they commissioned artist Rémy Zaugg, who recognized the issues of the shrinking village and convinced the residents of a more ambitious plan. Old paths and walls were rerouted to a new pond dug behind the washhouse. It became a focal point for the village. Executed from 1997 to 2007, the project was a turning point for Blessey, which began to grow in population again.



authorities, sponsors and foundations, societies, and associations have provided both moral and financial support. Many of the artists commissioned are well known. Some of the projects have become famous; others have failed. More than 100 million euros have been spent on encouraging people to speak to one another so that their conversations give rise to new cultural common goods that are not ordained from above, not ordered by any committee, not decided by any parliament, and all of which are community property and nonprofit.

The protocol for new art commissioned by citizens is working well, and there have long since been commissions going beyond the field of culture. For some years now, besides artistic projects, unprecedented scientific research programs have taken shape, commissioned by citizens. In architecture and urban planning, in development and conflict resolution, in the educational sector and music production: the New Patrons model is being discussed as one of the more recent methodologies—one might call it a cultural technology—for democratic production of meaning in the twenty-first century.

Precisely because the form of the protocol is universal (ultimately, it is no more than a proposal for a specific relational model which may or may not find appeal), and because the New Patrons are not an organization, but a loose network of independent protagonists who share a common idea, interest is increasing in regions of the world that are tired of colonial encroachment and foreign aid, though not tired of meaningful forms of collaboration and collective action.

It is a loosely associated community of practitioners, within which each individual is in turn involved in further local, regional, national, and international *networks* of



The Baka, an Indigenous community in southern Cameroon, were forced to create a permanent settlement in a place called Bifolone after centuries of nomadic existence. The villagers want to preserve their knowledge of the forest and their traditional artifacts while living a more modern life. Since 2014, with New Patrons mediator Germain Loumpet, they have begun to create new spaces, such as a living museum and botanical garden.

citizens' initiatives, social movements, politics, funding programs, economics, media, artists, and colleagues. Thus the international program of the New Patrons is now a wide-ranging network of complex individual, collective, and institutional relations that cannot be represented in its totality. Nevertheless, there are constant points of intersection in the exchanges between protagonists, and the debates and discussions linking them, as well as common public platforms. This may sound complicated, but it isn't really. It is in the nature of decentral and particularly planetary networks that their complexity cannot be reduced—and why should it be? This may not always please politicians and funding bodies—but it is perfectly fine for democratic initiatives in civil society.

#### BOTTOM-UP—TO THE PLANETARY?

When I give talks about New Patrons, I am regularly asked whether its protocol would also work in Nigeria, Venezuela, Russia, China, Liechtenstein, or in Germany's eastern states. I always answer yes, because all initiatives that follow the protocol are local. They are formed locally, organize their own content, and all decisions as to what should be done, and how, with whom and with what resources, are taken locally. Such initiatives can of course fail, and occasionally do so—usually if they are politically impeded, which is one problem, or cannot be funded, which is another problem. Both problems are serious and systemic, though not a question of principle.

There are people everywhere who desire a future that is different from the present. I therefore see no reason why the New Patrons protocol should not work in principle anywhere on the planet<sup>4</sup>—especially since for many

4 To date, initial plans have been formally or informally drawn up in Cameroon, Tunisia, Nigeria, South Africa, and Lebanon.

societies it ultimately means not much more than adding a new variation to the countless forms of collaborative activity, one that is neither particularly complicated nor costly, but that is well suited to the twenty-first century. For other societies that have little cultural infrastructure, the New Patrons offer all the more a model for creating structures that point the way to a future—to a more democratic future.

What comes next? It doesn't take much imagination to picture how, over the next ten years, New Patrons' existing network will produce several hundred projects commissioned by citizens and thus be further consolidated as a cultural technology. It takes only a little more imagination to picture how, given funding and the necessary political will, further mediators will start more New Patrons initiatives in more regions of the world. Somewhat more imagination is necessary to visualize a possible situation in 2050: if over the past thirty years 500 projects have taken shape with a moderately exponential growth,<sup>5</sup> then over the next thirty years, even with a stagnating growth of the network, 1,000 projects could be added, or with a continuation of the past growth of annual new initiatives, perhaps 2,000 projects. Looking at the long list of countries already involved, this number could be quite different again, which brings us back to Judith Butler.

Protagonists from Holland, Austria, Poland, Croatia, Greece, Iceland, the United States, Argentina, India, China, Australia, Namibia, Sudan, Senegal, and Iraq have connected with the New Patrons network to talk about adapting the protocol to their own regions. Various pioneering projects have been or are being planned. The crucial hurdle is generally a lack of funding.

5 Approximately twenty-five completed projects in the 1990s, 150 in the 2000s, 325 in the 2010s. There are no precise numbers, since a systematic registration of all projects and relevant data will not be completed until the end of 2020.



Between 2010 and 2013, in Nichelino near Turin, Italy, twenty young residents worked with artist and designer Martino Gamper to create public seating and this tree sculpture made from discarded road signs. Local artisans and the poet Chiuto also collaborated. The project was developed from an idea by Elena Greco.

Of course, it is not a question of numbers and growth. It is a question of opening up *a possibility that others have already closed down with their knowing realism*. The quest for planetary, and particularly planetary democratic, approaches is difficult. The planetary suggests proximity to the universal, and the universal has long been corrupted by colonialism. Despite this, we need universal—planetary—concepts if we are to make progress. I welcome any idea that results in people deciding how they want to live in the places they live, just as any idea for how this community can sign up within a larger picture containing as many people as possible who live on the same planet. This picture cannot be drawn without art. The New Patrons protocol offers a way of making this picture not only include as many people as possible, but also of having as many people as possible actually standing behind the picture.

Numbers are important to explain to politicians and funding bodies on the planet that something is feasible, what it will cost, and what the possible result could be. There's no point in being diffident. If a bottom-up movement—and the New Patrons is one of many of these—has a prospect of integrating the local, regional, and national into a larger common perspective and narrative, then there is a chance, beyond any major global institutions, or parallel to them, of making progress with the great themes of diversity, of cultural identities, of the counter perspective to national-populist attacks. I would not have helped to build the program of the New Patrons in Germany and presented it in other countries if I hadn't hoped that there was a real possibility of this joint prospect.

Even if it's only this perspective: to share the idea that anyone can and should be a protagonist in the story,

in the community; to share the idea that in our own practice as people, citizens, artists, scientists, and so on we can achieve the paradigm shift, as far as possible to distance ourselves from unwanted authorities, as well as from our singular necessities. It's a question of understanding the interests of our complex communities and thus succeeding in creating new alliances acting in the collective interest and not solely the personal. Does that sound pompous? As I said at the beginning, I'm prepared to be mocked and dismissed.

#### DO YOU WANT A FUTURE?

Lionel Manga and I sit facing each other. Between us are microphones on stands, a bottle of wine, and two glasses. We are in the studio of Radio Nostalgie Cameroun in Douala, doing a live broadcast. I went to Africa with the help of the Goethe-Institut, to discuss and explain the experiences of New Patrons in Europe. I have just said into the microphone that in my opinion, the New Patrons idea can work anywhere in the world, because everywhere there are people who want to do something, artists who also want to create something. Potential commissions by citizens, and money to implement them are everywhere—except that generally the money is deplorably distributed.

“That may well be,” says Lionel. “But if we now leave the studio and ask people on the street what they expect from their future, they’ll answer: ‘Nothing. We have no future.’ Here in Cameroon, a mediator of the Nouveaux Commanditaires wouldn’t find it easy to meet patrons who want to do something, because they don’t believe they can do anything.” I answer, “In Germany, the same thing would happen to us in many places. Perhaps we should ask people not what they expect from the future—but whether

they want a future. I can't imagine that anyone, when asked whether they want a future, would answer no. And if someone said yes, the next question could be ... what future do you want?" That might get us further. Lionel finds the idea pretty good, and we drink a glass of wine during the commercials.

This scene has stayed in my memory because this tiny shift in the question made a difference for Lionel and me through the rest of the conversation; not only the difference between having and wanting, a sense of reality and a sense of possibility. The question "Do you want a future?" implies more. When you say it quietly to yourself, a feeling of empowerment resonates; asking the question is almost a performative act. Do I want a future? Yes, I do. Here a decision has almost been made; something has almost been done. The next question, exactly what future you would want if you could wish for it, almost presses for an answer. It suddenly becomes urgent. Something needs to be done and could be done tomorrow. Thus the future may become—perhaps again—a project for us, the many around the globe.

Translated from German by Gail Schamberger