



The veridical travel of the truly imaginary plant: curatorial approach and underlying ideas

A viagem verídica da planta verdadeiramente imaginária: abordagem curatorial e ideias subjacentes

El viaje verídico de la planta verdaderamente imaginaria: enfoque curatorial e ideas subyacentes

Annick Bureau^I; Claudia Schnugg^{II}; Marta de Menezes^{III};
Robertina Šebjanič^{IV} and Tatiana Kourochkina^V

ABSTRACT

The Traveling Plant project is a collaborative project that unfolds over a network globally to be shared locally. It is dealing with the duality of global and local actions and diversity of perspectives and ways of doing; it is dealing with the duality of sharing practices and exchange across a distributed network virtually and physically/non-virtually; it deals with approaches of going beyond purely human perspectives, including the non-human; it tries to avoid colonialist and anthropocentric strategies. This article presents the curatorial approach and challenging questions the team of curators is starting from, the organizational structure of the project in development, and gives insights in how the project is intended to unfold practically.

Keywords: Contemporary art; Art and technology; Art and nature; Collaborative project; The traveling plant

RESUMO

O projecto The Traveling Plant é um projecto colaborativo que se desenvolve através de uma rede global e tem o objectivo de ser partilhado localmente. Pretende lidar de uma perspectiva composta numa série de ações que impactam o global e vivem na localidade, transparecendo e projetando uma variedade de modos de fazer e de ver; de modo a abraçar a dualidade de práticas partilhadas e troca de saberes presente numa rede distribuída de forma virtual e física/não-virtual. Procura lidar com as questões de um fazer concentrado em perspectivas para além do simplesmente humano, que incluem o não-humano e procuram evitar formas colonialistas e antropocénicas de agir e estar. Este artigo apresenta uma estratégia curatorial e as suas questões adjacentes que o grupo de comissárias toma como ponto de partida, a estrutura organizacional para o desenvolvimento do projeto e clarifica como se vai desenrolar.

Palavras-chave: Arte contemporânea; Arte e tecnologia; Arte e natureza; Projeto colaborativo; The Traveling Plant

RESUMEN

The Traveling Plant es un proyecto colaborativo que se desarrolla a través de una red global y mediante la realización de eventos locales. La iniciativa lidia con la dualidad de acciones globales y locales, la diversidad de perspectivas y maneras de hacer; lidia con la dualidad de compartir prácticas usando una red que distribuye sus contenidos tanto de manera virtual como física; lidia con perspectivas que van más allá de las humanas, incluyendo las de no humanos; intenta evitar estrategias colonialistas y antropocéntricas. Este artículo aborda la aproximación curatorial, los retos que el equipo de curadoras toma como punto de partida y la estructura organizativa del proyecto en desarrollo. Asimismo, da una idea de cómo el proyecto se despliega de manera práctica..

Palabras clave: Arte contemporáneo; Arte y Tecnología; Arte y naturaleza; Proyecto colaborativo; La planta itinerante

INTRODUCTION

The Veridical Travel Around The World of A True Imaginary Plant traces the voyage of a plant —real, artificial or fictitious— around the world, telling its own story, the stories of other plants and living creatures (other than human and humans) it encounters, of whom and what it meets. Thereby, it is based on a network approach to curating and art production, interweaving local and globally shared experience, addressing a duality of “real-world” art experience and virtual distribution. These main curatorial questions have been prevalent and become more pressing during the last decade, but have been surfaced in an uncompromised way during the lockdown and travel restrictions of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The Traveling Plant project is the umbrella title for a series of new artworks and events created and taking place in different times and locations around the world under the direction of diverse participating organisations and curators. The Traveling Plant Project intends to avoid anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism but to present the point of being and point of view of the plant about itself and its surroundings. The project will unfold over several years, in a slow process, in line with plant rhythms. In doing so during a challenging period worldwide, the project will challenge organizational and curatorial rhythms, require experimental curatorial approaches, and allow a diversity of artistic processes.

This project emerged during the COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020 and tries to address the following aims and goals:

- How to reinvent art practices and their sharings that are both decentralised and distributed, collective and individual, for as many people as possible and for a few at a time in the same place.
- How to remain in contact globally by local actions without becoming nationalistic and parochial.
- How to include humans and others than humans.
- In this article, we - the seed curatorial team of The Traveling Plant - describe our curatorial approach and put it in a contextual framework, describe main ideas that drive us in the development of this project and its content, describe the organization and structure of the project, and give insights into the first steps of bringing it to life, as well as how we intend the project to unfold.

This project emerged during the COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020 and tries to address the following aims and goals

Contextual Framework

The project idea was born in the middle of the COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020. In a situation where suddenly it wasn't possible anymore to leave the home to enjoy art or cultural events, not to mention to travel and exchange with others in person or to discover museums and a cultural scene at foreign places, the need to exchange and experience art did not just vanish. As a first reaction, the cultural sector provided virtual exhibitions, virtual exhibition tours, streamed concerts and performances, even festivals became pure online versions of themselves; conferences were transferred to virtual conferencing systems, and interest groups created virtual spaces for regular exchange on such virtual conferencing systems. Being stripped of the personal, the physical experience and in-person exchange, the presence of the others, created a sort of cognitive dissonance. It is brilliant what can be done online and to bring as much content to the virtual space for free to reach an even bigger audience. Curators like Peter Weibel (2020) strongly reflect on the opportunities this brings for the cultural sector. Nevertheless, experiencing only in front of their own computer screen without any possibility for a shared physical experience raised many questions about how to balance the shared physical experience and the virtual. Additionally, another question raised: how to get out of your filter bubble which is narrowing everybody's view in this vast internet? Endless conference calls with enormous numbers of attendees posed the question: How to share and stay connected globally in a way that goes beyond superficial introductory sessions?

This abrupt lockdown led to a situation where two worlds met, or better crashed into each other: the “cosmopolitan” art world including increased speed, frequent exchange, but also exchange facilitated by internet, technological platforms and filter bubbles; and the world in the COVID-19 lockdown, reduced interaction possibilities, virtual art and cultural experiences, difficulties in exchange and the questions - still vastly open - in the societal and individual use of the rapidly developing communication technologies.

Connections and exchange became limited not only due to closed borders and travel bans, but even travel within countries or movements within cities became restricted. All these insecurities and discussions about the emergence and distribution of the virus led to insecurities in the society. Travel is also an essential part of exchange, bringing back home experiences - and in the case of the curator: art and cultural insights. Up until now, we do not know when travel will be possible again to the same extent as it was before the COVID-19 pandemic. As curators are traveling to discover new art and cultural ideas, bring them back to their environment and connect societies, this responsibility of the “nomadic” curator (Rugoff, 1999) has abruptly been made impossible. Although throughout the last 15 years this “nomadic” life of a curator has been called as a by-product of the biennale culture (Rogoff, 2006, O’Neill, 2012), and criticized on many instances (e.g. CO2 footprint, jet-set life), travel and personal experience brings an essential component to the curator’s work in connecting societies beyond local context and locally known art practices. This has already led to suggestions like the “semi-nomadic curator” (Filippi, 2016) who has a translocal perspective, acknowledges local expertise, and has a propensity to work in a collaborative manner - in order to travel less and be engaged more deeply in the community on a local level.

Additionally, discussions about the virus, the emergence of the pandemic from the relationship of humans with their natural environments intensified the conversation about environmental topics and non-human actors. Such conversations have been led before in art and science, but barely on the same level with a broad audience (except for climate change).

Thus, when The Traveling Plant project emerged, Annick Bureaud put forward three major goals to be addressed in the project organization:

- How to reinvent art practices and their sharings that are both decentralised and distributed, collective and individual, for as many people as possible and for a few at a time in the same place.
- How to remain in contact globally by local actions without becoming nationalistic and parochial.
- How to include humans and others than humans.

To address the three main questions as pointed out above, the contextual framework of this project has to be elaborated on all three levels.

Project Description

We think of exchange by travel. We want to travel to experience an adventure, foreign cultures and natural environments that differ from the natural environment each of us is used to at home. Amidst of a lockdown and travel bans, this is not possible. Can we exchange in a positive and learning way by sharing an experience of a non-human actor that travels?

Plants travel. They always have. By themselves with the wind and clouds. Helped by other living creatures such as birds or humans. Sometimes humans carried them involuntarily under the sole of their shoes or hidden in their luggage, sometimes voluntarily. In the 18th and 19th centuries western botanists travelled around the world to bring back to Europe samples of marvellous plants and flowers unknown to them. They would share their discoveries as precious gifts with other botanists. Often those botanists were associated with artists and sometimes they had some artistic skills themselves.

The Veridical Travel Around the World of a True Imaginary Plant builds upon this botanical and human history but reverses the process: its aim is to overturn anthropocentrism and present the picture from the plant’s point of view, about itself and its surroundings. It is the plant - real, artificial or fictitious - which is going to travel around the world to carry and tell its stories and those of the creatures it encounters in all dimensions of existence. This - its - narration will be at the centre of the project, and in doing so, this endeavour will restore the plant’s agency and place us humans as instrumental to its needs: of being hosted, cared for and listened to.

The project is structured around a common basis and rules with a common output (online and physical) but each participating organisation and curator will be free to interpret the project, choose the artist(s) it wants to work with, the format of the event it wants to organise and the outputs (on site, online, printed or any other media) it finds relevant and meaningful. Likewise, the artists will propose their own vision and interpretation. From a starting point the plant will travel to a first location where it will be hosted by and an artwork on the topic of the plant will be created. This will become a local and physical experience which will be shared virtually with The Traveling Plant global network:

- A plant is going to travel around the world and back, holding a metaphorical bag that will fill up slowly with stories, seeds, grafts and cuttings (ie: new artworks).
- At each step it will find a place and meet humans, collect stories, seeds, etc., perhaps pass the baton to another plant that will pursue the journey (ie: organisation of an event).
- It may be using different routes simultaneously, going at the same time, North, South, East and West.
- The plant is imaginary but it can, in the different locations that it is stopping over, be embodied in real plants or

artefacts that may be different from places to places. It can be terrestrial but also aquatic plants, or digital or robotics ones, or anything in between.

• At each location, one or several commissioned artists will create an artwork or an art project that can take all sorts of different forms.

The curatorial team will mirror the plant's travel on a virtual platform and bring together physical tokens that represent each stop on the plant's route. This collection can be shared and experienced virtually and in-person/physically. It can be remembered and brought into new contexts after travel ends.

Project Development and Fundamental Ideas

The development of the project structure is based on the idea to work locally and globally connected, but also to emphasize the real next to the virtual, fuse the dimensions, create a network of exchange, shared experience in virtual and non-virtual dimension. Additional questions that guided the development were: What can a curator do to foster artistic production and exhibition? What can a curator do to create shared experience and connection? What can a curator do to exchange art and share it beyond their own locality without imposing one specific local view by creating e.g. a rigid traveling exhibition or putting together a purely virtual show?

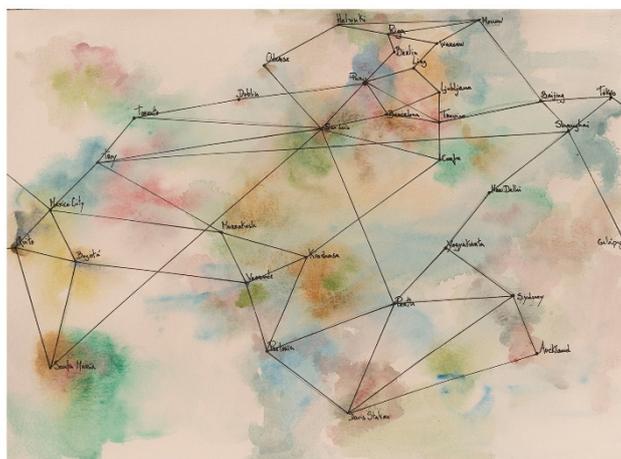


Figura 1 Mapa
Foto Pavel Tavares

Organization

The Traveling Plant project will be led by the “Seed Organizations & Curators” who design the framework of the project, and bring together what happens on the plant's travel in a virtual and physical space. They started the project and are responsible to run the project and keep its coherence. The Seeds Organizations & Curators are:

Annick Bureau, Tatiana Kourochkina, Marta de Menezes, Claudia Schnugg, and Robertina Šebjanič working with or supported by the following seed organizations : Leonardo/Olats (Paris), Quo Artis (Barcelona, Treviso), Cultivamos Cultura (Lisbon), Sektor Institute (Ljubljana)

- Annick Bureau, Leonardo/Olats, France (Paris);
- Tatiana Kourochkina, Quo Artis, Barcelona, Spain (Barcelona) + Italy (Treviso);
- Marta de Menezes, Cultivamos Cultura, Portugal (Lisbon);
- Claudia Schnugg, Austria (Wels, Linz), Independent Curator and Researcher
- Robertina Šebjanič, Slovenia (Ljubljana), artist & Sektor Institut

These “Seed Organizations and Curators” connect to “Host Organizations”. These Host Organizations are curators, museums, galleries and other organizations based around the world who will host the project locally and realize at least one event on the topic of The Traveling Plant.

To connect even more locally, each Host Organization will commission one artwork in connection with The Traveling Plant. The art commission, the size of the art commission and the event are curated and organized by the Host Organiza-

tion, but in line with the idea of The Traveling Plant.

The Traveling Plant is open to any form of plant - real or fictitious; digital, terrestrial, aquatic, and underwater plants; historical and future plants; including fungi and algae. Each artist will propose his/her vision of this imaginary plant (that can be a real one) and, possibly but not necessarily, what it understands from the human world around. The form of their artwork will be fully open and to be discussed with the curators and host organisations.

The Outcome are:

- **Onsite events:** performances, telling stories, exhibitions, workshops, lectures, screenings, artist residency, etc. Meant for small or large audiences with some forms of counterparts online and/or some other physical elements such as posters, cards, fanzines, catalogs, drinks, clothes, hats, cuttings, herbarium, garden, etc. The Traveling Plant project can be part of a larger event organised by the participating organisations and curators.

- **Online Publication Exhibition:** each organisation will be able to do what is meaningful in its context but The Traveling Plant will provide a common format on its website for each event.

- **Cross gardening:** When possible and with a great attention paid to local plants and not disseminating invasive species, real plants will be planted along the development of the project in the locations of the different participating organisations.

Shared outcome and Shared experience. A token from The Traveling Plant will travel from Host Organization to Host Organization.

Additionally, token from each event at a Host Organization will be brought into a standardized format and added to the physical collection of tokens of all The Traveling Plant stops along the plant's route. This physical collection will also be accessible virtually.



Figura 2 Traveling Plant
Foto Pavel Tavares

Curatorial Approach, or: what are we doing and how are we building the project?

In the curatorial framework we are building for this distributed curatorial project, we are bringing together aspects that have been prevalent in our curatorial work up to now, but as importantly, we aim at revisiting ideas and practices, putting them into the context of current issues and restrictions, and to find a way to curate and create cultural environments differently, in a way that is hybrid instead of "online only" or "nomadic only" or "on site only", bridging the local and the international. The curatorial team aspires to point to the possibilities new formats bear that intersect these dimensions.

Here is a selection of additional core ideas the curatorial team brought together as important aspects that we aim at integrating in the project structure and the project's process as it unfolds:

For Annick Bureaud, "This is a distributed collective curatorial project. It is about doing something locally and individually while sharing the same platform and the same goal and collective project. And it is about connections: between humans, between the plants themselves and between us and the plants."

Tatiana Kourochkina, a Russian-born producer and curator in art-science projects based in Barcelona and Treviso and co-founder of Quo Artis says: "we can learn so much from plants: how they coexist with other species. They are never by themselves, they rely on birds and insects to reproduce and spread around, they live in close contact with all sorts of other animals, as well as with fungi; they are connected within each other. And we humans violate their ecosystems constantly and we don't listen to them. The project enables the plants to transmit their knowledge to us. A time to listen to them."

Marta de Menezes, is a Portuguese, Lisbon-based artist, the founder of Cultivamos Cultura and the co-founder of FEMeeting. For her, The Traveling Plant “it is an opportunity to think of possibilities and paths to move forward. It’s about doing and actively looking for ways to move beyond the things that restrain us in our contemporary world. It’s about dealing with the difficulties that we face as species and as planet as a whole and trying to think through them into possibilities that will make sure that the whole is a surviving one and not one at the edge of the precipice.”

Claudia Schnugg, is an Austrian independent curator and researcher in art & science, based in Wels. She says: “I really love the idea of a slow project because it gives enough time to go into depth and grow into the depth; and to pause whenever necessary instead of rushing through a project on its idea’s surface. There are too many projects that cannot unfold their potential as they are being rushed in fixed timelines, squeezed into full work schedules, and only measured by pre-determined ideas of outcome. From the subject’s side, I am interested in creating awareness of how we treat the plants and with them the environment around us. Plants bring great solace. This project is also a reminder of this.”

Robertina Šebjanič, is a Slovenian, Ljubljana-based artist and the co-founder of the Sektor Institute says: “Over the last years I’ve been thinking a lot about how to develop better methodologies and strategies to reconnect with non-human and other creatures with whom we share the world with. I think strategies like empathy are quite interesting in regards to how to get further together.”



Figura 3 Elas
Foto Pavel Tavares

First Steps

Seeding the project virtually, the Seed curators were able to germinate the project in a first in-person workshop meeting in Treviso in July 2020, making use of a short pause of the lockdown and travel restrictions. In summer and autumn 2020, the team could work more detailed on the organization of The Traveling Plant project, and on the launch of the project at the Ars Electronica Festival 2020 (which also used an interesting hybrid format, bringing together local events in a globally shared virtual space). For this launch, three manifestations of The Traveling Plant were realized:

- The webpage with the core information about the project and guidelines for future Host Organizations.
- A video tour introducing The Traveling Plant project with reflections by the Seed Organizations & Curators, a contribution by philosopher Michael Marder.
- The Preparatory Logbook, an interpretation of a guide book for plants, a travel guide around the world.

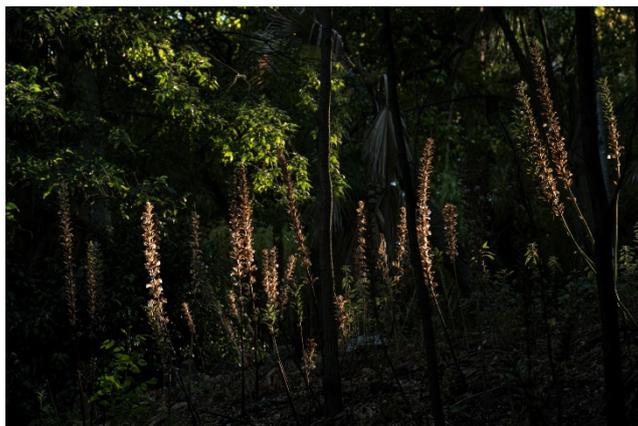


Figura 4 Traveling Plant
Foto Pavel Tavares



Figura 5 Traveling Plant
Foto Pavel Tavares

The Preparatory Logbook

The logbook consists of a compilation of short paragraphs (up to 200 words) that responded to the question we initially formulated: what could the plant expect to experience and discover along its journey, what and whom (humans and other than humans) might it encounter?

Participants responded by introducing her to local plants, friendly or frightening creatures, local food markets, deserts, cities, myths, books, museums, science labs, robots, dead things... Some were personal, others general, practical or theoretical. But all of them were rooted in the deepest curiosity towards what its thoughts and impressions of its journey would be. Collected together in the logbook, they become the stepping stone from where this project takes off: an open invitation to collaborate with other species in an attempt to rediscover the world.

Here are some fragments of the logbook:

“Good morning TP! Is it ok to call you TP instead of traveling plant? Here on Space Station, we use abbreviations a lot. I am in the midst of preparing your arrival. We have this really nice greenhouse which will become your home soon.”

Barbara Imhof

"Singapore is the strange child of the Southeast Asia family. Many popular and trendy houseplants like Southeast Asia for its humidity, warmth and bright sun, but those in Singapore find themselves yearning. Our forests are made of concrete buildings and our rivers are made of asphalt."

Mengju Lin

"Imagine our traveling plant as a matrix for language invoking deeper knowledge of ourselves, maybe even giving insight on the multiverse. Our traveling plant is not just any plant, we are talking here about a plant which is itself the vehicle allowing us to travel through time and space, through the junction of our synapses to the core of our pineal gland where lucid dreams may unfold."

Eléonore Hellio

"Dear traveling plant, you are going to love visiting Aotearoa - the land of the long white cloud - that is, if you manage to get through immigration. See, New Zealand has learned from the past when settlers brought plants and animals that are now destroying the native ecosystem. But you are not a plant of an invasive species, are you?"

Anne Niemetz

"My name is Balapan, I'm an atomic lake. Yes, I am radioactive, but I hope this won't petrify you much. My name in Kazakh means a 'nestling'.

Aliya Sakhariyeva

"Swedes love Nature. Beware of them. They might eat you up. Stop them from all that! Sharpen your Thorns! And you will travel safely"

Pierre Guillet de Monthoux

Outlook

The Veridical Travel Around The World of A True Imaginary Plant is a challenge, an endeavour. It represents hope and action in these difficult times. Our intention is to add this project to the increasing number of voices that are advocating for the need to include other living and non-living beings' perspectives in our understanding of reality and to explore other ways of creating and sharing artworks beyond our local zones.

This project will be developed through a series of artworks and events that will be created in different locations all over the world and take place over the course of several years and at a very slow pace, in line with plants' natural rhythms. It will unfold collectively via a network of participating host organizations and curators that will define, carry and support each step and the new creations and events locally. It will be open to all kinds of aesthetics and artistic mediums. All artworks and related events will aim to provide the time and space that allows us to listen and adapt to the plants' needs in new and fruitful ways. At each stop of the plant's travel, there will be an art commission - an artwork, a full exhibition, or an evening event - on plants. Connecting to the local community and to the Traveling Plant network it will allow us to connect in meaningful ways.

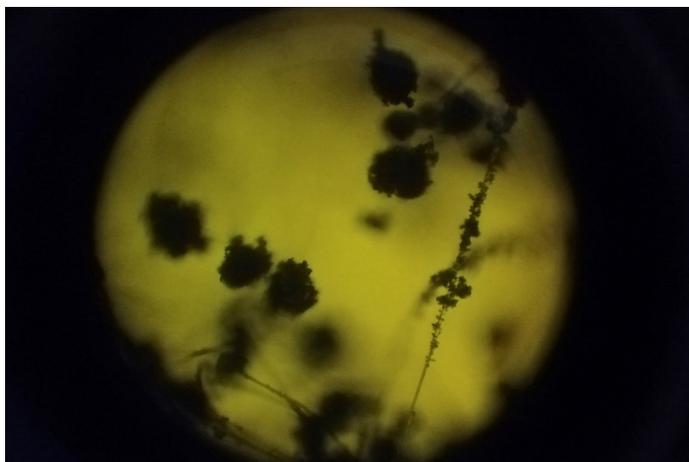


Figura 6 Traveling Plant
Foto Pavel Tavares

In an attempt to adapt to current and future restrictions, The Traveling Plant is devised to sustain decentralization, and enforce hybrid distributions that digitally and globally reach as many people as possible, while also allowing for each project to be held in a physical space for only a few people at a time. We encourage collaborators to adapt their proposals to their local restrictions and collaborate with us to collectively create new, relevant and meaningful ways of cohabitation.

We invite you to browse and read the "Preparatory logbook" and to watch The Traveling Plant Video Tour on our website**, in which the philosopher Michael Marder joins the seed organizers of this project to share their thoughts about how to think of new ways to move forward ***.

** <http://www.thetravelingplant.net>

*** If you would be interested in becoming a host to the Traveling Plant, feel free to contact us, all information on our website.

References

FILIPPI, LAVINIA: **The semi-nomadic curator**: Towards an informed, translocal and collaborative approach. Dissertation, Royal College of Art London, Curating Contemporary Art, 2016.

O'NEILL, PAUL: **Biennial culture and the emergence of a globalized curatorial discourse**: curating in the context of biennials and large-scale exhibitions since 1989. In: The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s). MIT Press: London, 2012.

ROGOFF, IRIT: **Geo-Cultures**: Circuits of Arts and Globalizations. open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain, 2006. <https://www.onlineopen.org/geo-cultures> Accessed on 5th November 2020.

RUGOFF, RALPH: **Rules of the Game**. frieze Issue 44, Jan-Feb 1999, p. 46-49. <https://www.frieze.com/article/rules-game-0> Accessed on 5th November 2020.

WEIBEL, PETER: **Museen müssen das bessere Netflix werden**. Interview with Peter Weibel by Cornelius Stiegmann. monopol Magazin für Kunst und Leben. 5th October 2020, <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/peter-weibel-interview-museen-muessen-das-bessere-netflix-werden> Accessed on 6th November 2020.