



## **On Contestation**

Reflections after the [Salzburg Global Seminar 561- Beyond Green: Art + Sustainability](#)

Art is always contested.

It is a condition of the critical perspectives and cultural exchange of art. We argue *about* art - we argue *with* art – we argue *for* art. Art is rhetorical, meant to persuade, and thus every artist is contesting some assumption or world-view, some or all prior imaginaries. This contestation and rhetoric can produce overt and tacit actions, even subversions, and persuasive, argumentative affect in art *and* artist.

Artists are comfortable in contested space.

Artists know how to dwell within contestation with acceptance, without striving for complete agreement, or pushing for artificial or premature synthesis (which may dissolve later because it is not authentic). We see it as a necessary dimension of complexity, diversity, democracy, expression, and the values alive in the human condition. Artists may also contest the very contestation we embrace, a rhetorical ruse that belies our ultimate embrace of the necessity of uncertainty. [“Art is a lie that tells the truth”](#) (derived from Picasso 1923)

Poet John Keats called this [negative capability](#), the ability to be in “uncertainty, mysteries, doubts” without “irritable reaching after fact and reason”, without anxiety. The poet/artist dwells in this space, outside certainty. There may also be a public or private political contestation; many things that are contested are ambiguous and value driven, sometimes with subtlety, where *reasonable people disagree*. We are in a time of paradigm-shift, a Kuhnian [“post normal”](#) where [“facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decisions urgent”](#) (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1991) However, even outside the urgency of the postnormal condition, artists perpetually dwell in “beginners mind” /“don’t know mind” where, *we know we don’t know*. This is key for post-sustainability where we face adaptation. [Get comfortable being uncomfortable.](#)

There is an internal and an external dimension of this dwelling. This may be the internal nature of individuals attracted to the arts (disposition) but it is also learned externally, collectively. It is the habitus/culture of the euro-modern domain we call “art” and is reflected in the live, responsive, critical, argumentative space of the salon, the café, the critical review, and the oral critique in art/design school settings. It hones our intentionality and our critical thinking, this we know, but it also thickens our skin and our resolve, gives us courage through affirmation *and* objection, and enhances our ability to dwell comfortably within contested space.

As we map the knowledge of artists and the contribution to the urgent work ahead, we might add, *negative capability* to the list. Perhaps leadership (by example if not consciousness) in contested space, managing the values-driven subjectivity of contestation/ambiguity/ uncertainty is a methodological and dispositional contribution artists might make to public processes, adaptations, negotiations.

We must always remember that this capability is often paired with other dispositions and attributes, including those driven by ethics and empathy. The artist arrives in contested space not only as a provocateur, a problematizer, a contestator, but also as a [public amateur](#), (Pentecost 2009) one also driven by *conviction* and *love*.