

interview

PARLEY
FOR THE OCEANS
RELENTLESSLY BATTLES
THE GLOBAL PLASTIC DISASTER.

CYRILL

INTERVIEW BY OLIVIER ZAHM
AND ALEPH MOLINARI

GUTSCH

FACED WITH
THE CHALLENGE
OF CLEANING AND
RECYCLING IN AN
AGE OF ABSURD OVERPRODUCTION,
IT'S BETTING ON THE INSPIRATIONAL
POWER OF ART AND FASHION.

THE REVOLUTION MUST COME
FROM WITHIN.



OLIVIER ZAHM — So, how is Parley for the Oceans doing? It's been 10 years? CYRILL GUTSCH — Yes, last year was our 10-year anniversary.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How does that feel? Aren't you exhausted? It's such a massive mission. CYRILL GUTSCH — I think the biggest challenge is to not feel insufficient, to not feel meaningless. In the beginning, it was really also a bit about my ego. I wanted to be known for that, or I wanted to know if I could do it. But that gets less interesting at some point. Then you say: "Okay, now it's all about the impact. What are you actually achieving?" Over time, you gain a different perspective on the problem. Also, the facts change so rapidly. Now is very different from 10 years ago.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Really? CYRILL GUTSCH — Oh, yeah, we thought we had way more time. So, you have to go back to your plan all the time and just pivot. There is also a lot of other stuff happening. Suddenly some governments are doing things, others are not, and you have other environmentalists going out. It's a very unpredictable process, but that also forces you to find a very clear spot for yourself. Parley has taken action in 34 countries. We have 200 people in the core. We have over 500,000 volunteers. We are collaborating with about 20 governments.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, each time you go somewhere, you find a possibility of action. You set up a plan, find the people, and then jump to the next project? CYRILL GUTSCH — A bit like that. [Laughs] You look for champions. At the end of the day, it's just people who you find. You go and meet the most influential families. Now we have a system. When we started, we didn't. We were just like, "Oh, I know somebody." Now it's really systematic. We have access to the governments. So, we first meet with the governments, then the governments show us what is happening in their country. That's new. They really want us to be involved often. Then we meet

the families that own the businesses there. All the environmental issues we're facing are caused by business. That means you have to get the families first.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What kind of businesses? Plastics? CYRILL GUTSCH — Everything. At Parley, to make it even more complex, we're now doing plastic, climate, and biodiversity loss. Plastic is the easiest because it's something you can communicate. So, that's our poster child. Climate is very hard to communicate, but people don't realize how intertwined these issues are.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The source of carbon emissions? CYRILL GUTSCH — Yes. Two things: the source of carbon emissions, and changing that, and also intercepting the carbon emissions that are out there, which makes it very similar to plastic — because you're intercepting something that doesn't belong in nature.

ALEPH MOLINARI — And is carbon sequestration effective? CYRILL GUTSCH — Yeah. You need to get it, and you need to do something with it. Either you park it somewhere, you sequester it — that's a natural solution — or you accept it as feedstock. The big advantage of carbon is that it's way better than plastic because the substance itself is great. All life on the planet is based on carbon. But it doesn't belong up there. So, one aspect is to take it and turn it into something else. Recycle it, the same way you recycle plastic.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What about preserving biodiversity? CYRILL GUTSCH — For us, protecting biodiversity means protecting nature and supporting the scientists and communities who are working to safeguard and restore carbon-sequestering sea forests and the remaining ecosystems that maintain the delicate balance. Sometimes it also means chasing the bad guys — poachers, polluters.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, you're the police. CYRILL GUTSCH — We collaborate with people who are the police. [Laughs]

We don't own a boat, but we know people who own boats, and the best people to collaborate with are navies. So, we have partnerships with navies. We raise funds, or we work with them on strategy. They can do things a private organization can't do, and we can do things they can't do. We call that new arm Parley Ocean Defense.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I don't have the numbers, but over the past 30 years, plastic consumption has quadrupled. CYRILL GUTSCH — Yes. It's going up, up, up.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I also heard that TotalEnergies, understanding that they will sell less petrol to the car industry, decided to install a big industry for plastic — in Dubai, I believe. CYRILL GUTSCH — Exactly. That's the deviation for them. With the war in Ukraine, they all expected that oil demand would go down, and they all went toward plastic and deep-sea mining. It's driven by the phaseout of oil — that's the crazy thing.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Plastic is your most visible activity, and it's a catastrophe. CYRILL GUTSCH — It also stands for so much. It stands for our arrogance. It stands for an outdated technology that industry keeps alive, knowing that it's bad, because it works so well for them. And it became something very tangible. People can see it and feel it. They can relate to it. Overfishing, chasing sharks, or carbon emissions — nobody feels responsible for that. But a plastic item can be mine, and it can be yours. That's why we picked it in the first place — because we wanted to make everybody feel that they're actually related to the problem, but they can also relate to the solution.

ALEPH MOLINARI — It's also very much linked to the idea of owning the new, of continuously consuming. It's very much a question of transforming the mentality of people. CYRILL GUTSCH — Yes. I just got a rental car, and I went into it. As a kid, I loved that citric smell. You felt like, "This is a new car!"

Now I know that stuff actually goes into my brain and really fucks up stuff up there. So, I didn't enjoy that anymore. I was feeling polluted in that car. I couldn't stand it. So, that is, I think, a new sensitivity. You don't cross the street without looking because a car can hit you. We've learned some things already. But we haven't yet learned what materials are bad for us, and that's what will happen. We will learn that plastic is extremely dangerous, and it's not actually needed.

ALEPH MOLINARI — Shouldn't this be a responsibility of governments? CYRILL GUTSCH — Yes, they're just being cowards.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I guess it's not an expensive material because we put plastic on everything. We put plastic on plastic. CYRILL GUTSCH — Double-wrapped, triple-wrapped. Companies are so fixated on the old ways of calculating their products that they sometimes don't understand that if they spent a little bit more on the product and a little less on packaging, it wouldn't make a big difference for the price. But also, plastic packaging and plastic have been seen as a luxury. In the US, for example, it's a good thing to get a plastic cup wrapped in a plastic bag. They consider that a service.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I do think people are starting to understand now. You can't go on a beach without looking at plastic. You eat plastic every day in your food. You can't touch anything without being confronted by plastic. I think there's a revolution there. People are getting more and more conscious that this is not healthy. CYRILL GUTSCH — People often don't understand what plastic really is, where it is. It has so many names. Some objects, like plastic bottles, are obviously plastic. But everything in your clothing that has stretch is most likely plastic, and there's plastic in chewing gum, in toothpaste, even in paper and money. It's very hard today for somebody who's not well educated to understand what's plastic and where it is hiding.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Recycling plastic is an option for fashion. You're pushing companies like Dior to do this. Can you speak a bit about it? You did a small sports collection for the beach, right? CYRILL GUTSCH — Yes. Recycling is something everybody needs to do. Especially when we're talking about fashion — there is no reason to use virgin plastic. First of all, where is plastic used? It's used to make fibers; it can be used for any kind of polyester fabric. It takes some work for recycled plastic to be on the same level as virgin plastic because recycled material — especially from us, where it's been intercepted from coastal communities, islands, and beaches — is not that pure. So, you need to optimize the whole process. That's why the partnership with Dior is so important for us. You heard Kim Jones talking about it. It took years to have the perfect look, the perfect feel, the perfect durability, and a variety of materials. The whole collection was completely made with material that we collect.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And Parley is now a brand. CYRILL GUTSCH — Yes. We are a guarantee. We are a brand. We have our own way of doing things. And we are also a pirate flag because when you have a Parley logo on a product, then we are challenging this company. That's why we don't collaborate with so many people. I was very careful to start a collaboration in fashion. Who would have believed that Dior would be the first to commit long term? We had a lot of offers from other famous brands, but they wanted to do one thing, and fast. They were like, "Oh, I need it now." And "Oh, in three months, I have to show it." And we were like, "That's not really how it works."

OLIVIER ZAHM — Fashion is a major source of pollution, but it's possibly also one industrial domain that understands this. Because fashion is close to the consumer, they understand that they could really drive change. CYRILL GUTSCH — And they understand that the consumers actually care now,

and they feel guilty as well. Everybody feels guilty, and that's not helping. In this moment of shame, we're saying: "Hey, there's no reason to feel shame. You just do things. Let's just figure it out. But we don't want you to hop in and out. If you're interested to go on this long term with us, we're doing it." And that's what they agreed on. Honestly, the work together was beautiful. It was full of respect.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, this being *Purple's* Revolutions Issue, can we adapt the system, or should we destroy it? CYRILL GUTSCH — The challenge is time. The moment you infiltrate a system, and you're doing things differently and with different intentions and values, you're automatically disrupting the system. Because suddenly everybody who wants to do things in a different way feels encouraged. For so long, we've all heard: "Oh, this is not possible. This is too expensive. No, let's stick to the status quo." And our number-one focus was to take the crowbar and open up the engine room, settle in, camp out. And then start everywhere. And suddenly you have a new engine.

It's a very gentle revolution that I have in my mind, but it's also a radical one because nothing is stronger than ideas.

An idea is something you cannot put back in a box once it's out. My target is to turn the people in companies, governments, and finance into rebels, so they fight the system from the inside. For too long, I have in the environmental movement, but it's also a radical one because nothing is stronger than ideas.

pointing fingers. It should happen in the boardroom.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you sometimes have fights with more radical environmentalists? CYRILL GUTSCH — I am fighting with them, but I'm also an ally. On some sides, we are very aligned. In the beginning, they thought, "This guy is selling out the environmental movement," and there was tension. But now many activists are collaborating with brands. Working with a brand for an environmental organization can be the perfect Trojan horse.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I think fashion is at the forefront of the change of mentality. CYRILL GUTSCH — Fashion and art have the biggest impact on society because they trigger something that is beyond logic. And they reach people.

OLIVIER ZAHM — They're also disconnected from tradition, in a way. Take food, for example. If you want to change the way people eat... CYRILL GUTSCH — They're not open to it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And the same is true if you want to change the way people go on vacation... CYRILL GUTSCH — Or their cars and homes. But with fashion and art, you expect to be surprised. You expect to be shocked. That's what's interesting: when we started Parley, we thought that it was just a moment where people come together. And the artist's home was the perfect place to bring people together because they would come with an open heart and open mind. They'd be like: "Okay, provoke me. Bring it on."

OLIVIER ZAHM — That's interesting. It's very difficult to move the true culture of a country because people stick to what they know. CYRILL GUTSCH — Yes. Fashion, art, and youth: I'm very focused on these three

PARLEY OCEAN DEFENSE, A PROJECT LAUNCHED BY CYRILL GUTSCH TO HELP PROTECT THE OCEAN, STARTED IN THE MALDIVES, ONE OF THE MOST ENVIRONMENTALLY VULNERABLE COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD. THE INITIATIVE, WHICH INCLUDES THE REMOVAL AND RECYCLING OF PLASTICS, HAS NOW SPREAD TO 34 COUNTRIES. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



things. And kids are crazy good educators. When we started Parley in the Maldives, we helped bring ocean education to 100,000 kids. Every school in the Maldives is now a Parley partner. The kids then educated their parents, and the parents came back to the school to say, "Is that true what my kids are telling me?" It changed the country like that. They have only 500,000 people living there, so it's easier than in France.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The Maldives is one of the most beautiful places on Earth, but it's also facing the danger of rising oceans and the impact of changing temperatures on the reefs. Plus, you have so much plastic arriving in this paradise. CYRILL GUTSCH — It's like somebody put a full load of dump-truck waste into a jewelry space. It's such a visual contrast because it's a dream when you're there — you're like, "Oh, my god, this is so beautiful." Then you have the stark contrast of these objects, and you're like, "This is just misplacement." It's like a glitch in reality. The whole island is surrounded by a belt of trash. It's mainly plastic because it's floating, and you see it, but then there's a refrigerator and other things.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And it's the current that brings them? CYRILL GUTSCH — And the storms, often, but the current washes them up. The source is plastic washed in from other countries, but also people mismanaging their own waste.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The locals. CYRILL GUTSCH — Yes. They're often using the ocean as a dump site. In the past, they used the beach as a place to discard their trash, which you can do with banana leaves and mango peels but you can't with a material that never goes away. You find a lot of stuff coming from inhabited islands or from far away. It's washing in from other places. A lot of plastic doesn't float. Plastic bottles, for example, only float if the cap is still on, but if they stay out there longer, and they break, then water goes in, and they go down. Shampoo bottles made from HDPE

and PPE float. You have different materials: some go down, some go up. The truth is that the bottom of the ocean, in some parts, looks way worse than the islands. But so much stuff washes up that, when you're there, you're confronted with it — you no longer need anybody to preach to you, you don't need a lecture. You understand that this doesn't fit. There's a misfit between human technology, alien matter technology, and innate natural life.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The Maldives is far out in the ocean. CYRILL GUTSCH — It's in the midst of the Indian Ocean. Henderson Island, in the south Pacific, is the most remote island on the planet from any mainland, and it has the same problem. Nobody lives there — I mean, I think there are 40 people, but the currents wash up stuff. Or the Great Barrier Reef, or Hawaii. The islands often serve as a trash barrier where all this stuff washes up. In the Maldives, our idea was to create a collaboration with the government and all their government offices and the island councils, and to show how a country together can end the problem. We've had such success because we reach people through education in the schools, and they suddenly understand that if the oceans die, then they won't have an income anymore. They live off tourism, and they live off fishing. They see now that when they open a fish, there's plastic in its belly. Eight out of 10 fish normally have plastic pieces in their stomach. So, people got educated, and they've started doing things. We do a lot of activities with schools — contests where they compete on who collects more. But now resorts are a part of it, too, and lots of government offices. It's a big thing. You can change a country.

ALEPH MOLINARI — What about bioplastics? CYRILL GUTSCH — Yeah, bioplastic. The first issue is that the word "bioplastic" doesn't say anything about what the material is really made of. I think that in Europe, legally you only have to put 7% of biological

material into a material to call it “bioplastic.” So, you could use regular plastic or other chemicals to bind it and protect it, and then you throw in a bit of natural material to call it “bioplastic” or “bio-based.” That’s an issue. The second issue is that you need a separate waste line for materials that are different from the plastic we have. Otherwise, it’s jamming up recycling. I think the future is non-plastic, non-fossil-fuel-plastic. I believe in that. And I believe that you can find the organisms in nature that can grow alternative materials. We are seeing alternatives already, from food waste, algae, or mushrooms. There are alternatives. But the whole naming convention, how you regulate things, how you build laws around it — it’s total chaos. You can compare that with AI, where the governments are overwhelmed with new technologies; everybody is creating something, and nobody knows what it means. Nobody knows what the damage or the good is. It’s this moment right now of chaos in the material world, as it is in the digital world.

OLIVIER ZAHM — There are too many kinds of plastic and too many definitions. CYRILL GUTSCH — And nobody says what they’re putting in it.

ALEPH MOLINARI — Plus, there’s lobbying from all the industries. CYRILL GUTSCH — The industry wants to keep things in place. They’re lobbying. It’s massive chaos. And the people who have to make the laws often have just been elected. They’re not experts in materials. Then they go to a consulting firm, and they get advice from these big corporations that also work for the fossil fuel industry.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, the solution is drastic: stop producing plastic. CYRILL GUTSCH — Plastic should be banned. They should say, “We’ve got to phase out plastic over the next 15 years, and we’ve got to do it in these steps.” You would see an explosion of new materials. We can replace it — we just need time and money.

I like to compare the material revolution with the digital revolution. Why do we have an Internet today, where everything is connected? Because trillions of dollars were spent. It was a race.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Same thing for AI now. CYRILL GUTSCH — Exactly. Which, for me, is the next level of the digital revolution.

ALEPH MOLINARI — The problem is it might be too late by the time we wake up to design this material. CYRILL GUTSCH — It is already too late because we’ve lost a lot of life, but on the other hand, nature can come back. And we will have a new nature. We will no longer have the nature that we knew growing up — it will never come back like that. But new things will come; life will recover. The same way you have AI happening in digital, it will also be happening on the hacking biotech side. AI will help us to be even faster in creating life on our own. So, we humans will play God on all levels.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, there’s recycling plastic and protecting biodiversity, but there’s also stopping the production of plastic. CYRILL GUTSCH — Yes. This goes hand-in-hand with innovation. We need future materials. That’s also a Parley job now. We are doing these two things: Parley Ocean Defense to protect against poison, which is plastic, and then inventing new materials. You find the inventors, and you collaborate with them, and you find technologies that you can use. We’ve seen amazing stuff for leather — phenomenal, next-level stuff.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Fake leather. CYRILL GUTSCH — New leather, not plastic-based. We’ve seen it for concrete, where you use enzymes that would normally grow coral reefs — they produce calcium carbonate, and you just throw them into a mix with sand, and they make beautiful concrete for you, without any carbon footprint. And we’ve seen it for dyes with enzymes: you take a plant, isolate the organism that creates the color,

and deploy that on a fabric. You can hack nature, collaborate with nature and these organisms out there, and make things with them that they would normally do in a plant or an animal.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Let’s speak about Doug Aitken. You’re doing a project with him in the Maldives, too, similar to the one you did off the coast of Catalina Island, California. CYRILL GUTSCH — You saw that? We made a set of pavillions for the Maldives. A yacht company in Italy, Rossinavi, produced them for us for free.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It’s a beautiful boat company. CYRILL GUTSCH — Yeah. And they gave us all the technical assistance to make them really good, so they last. But then they got kidnapped, so now they’re in St. Barts. [Laughs] But we’re making a new set for the Maldives. The idea is to create places around the world where you have art. Art, for us, is such a good instrument to attract people, to create visibility and storytelling, but also to explore. So, with Doug, on one side, we’re making these pieces together, and we’re bringing in guys that make yachts or submarines, and we’re creating stuff together. But on the other side, the whole conversation, I learn every time when I’m with him, and he also learns. We challenge each other, then new ideas come.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Different perspectives. CYRILL GUTSCH — Yes. Values. “What you’re doing there, it sucks. That’s not right, what you’re doing there.” Or, “That’s great!” With all the tech and all the revolution happening, it again comes down to basic human interaction with like-minded people — people you can trust. Then, if you trust them, you can accept really harsh criticism or radical ideas.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Coming back to your mission, do you remain optimistic for the future? CYRILL GUTSCH — A hundred percent. I believe that everything that is a problem on this planet right now is human-made, and I believe humans are actually good

people. So, most of the big problems were created with the best intentions. [Laughs] But we didn’t know. The guy who invented the plastic bag didn’t know that, at some point, man-groves would die because of plastic bags. I think humans were so scattered, and everybody had a big ego and wanted to invent something new on their own. We were full of arrogance and a little drunk on our amazing ideas.

And now is the moment when we need humans to come together and to recalibrate, have new ideas and values, and drive a new revolution. It’s really one of the most exciting moments in human history.

We can fail, which any-totally way will and we’re look different from live lives the past. that are like a bad science-fiction movie. Or we can turn it around and have a new form of a future,

there is fear and pressure and anger — and being overwhelmed. How can I solve that?

You see young kids being dragged to political events, to big conferences, and they’re presented as if they will be the solution. These are kids — they have no fucking idea. Yes, they can confront leaders, and they can say things an adult would probably not say, but at the end of the day, they’re kids. Let them be kids. They can be an excuse for adults to say, “Oh, they have to fix it.” Uh, no, you have about five to 10 years left in your office. You fix it. Don’t push it over to the kids — fix it yourself.

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