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Environmental Art, Intervention Art and Others – Towards Sustainability Art?

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Cultura 21

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The German Web Magazine

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I Introduction

In the 21st century societies worldwide find themselves faced with existential challenges, such as the diminution of the biological diversity, third world poverty, the growing world population and a seemingly non-stoppable climate change, of which people are aware but which they also too often tend to push aside. Social problems are to be solved with further economic growth, public control and military security, and as an answer to the evident ecologic crisis, new technologies are celebrated as the all encompassing solutions. This is the point of departure of the Institute "Cultura 21" and its work, criticizing not only the status quo of globalized structures and their effects on cultural and ecological systems but also the dominant strategies of cultural, social and political actors that basically don't have the objective to bring about real changes. As a counterpoint to the prevailing methods, the project defines itself as "[...] a interdisciplinary platform committed to a cultural change in terms of a social-ecological development, that is a cultural evolution of societies and their ways of living."¹

Since the cultural dimension of social change is the main focus of Cultura 21, the project directs its activities at the media, arts, formation, sciences, forms of communication and organization and human emotions, all following the proposition of sustainable alternatives. This division of different working fields is also reflected in the structure of the German web magazine of the Institute which serves as a link between the different disciplines as well as between the editorial staff, active and passive members and generally involved actors. Articles, book reviews, and conference reports divided into eleven different sections give a general outline of the issues Cultura 21 stands for. News about the state of sustainable approaches, for example the failure of the EU to accomplish the Kyoto directives or the IPCC report on climate change, an advisory section for books, organizations, websites, and the announcement of important dates supplement the articles. A general forum dedicated to the presentation of people, organizations, ideas, press reviews and a space for discussions and exchanges round of the offer of the website. As the topics and sections of the web magazine are too numerous to be all taken into account, the

¹ Org.: Cultura 21, self-presentation: „Cultura21 ist eine spartenübergreifende Plattform, die sich für einen kulturellen Wandel im Sinne einer *sozial-ökologischen Entwicklung* einsetzt, das heißt für eine *kulturelle Evolution* der Gesellschaften und der Lebensweisen.“

following paper will center on a summary of the most prominent texts on the arts and cultural assets. An outlook on the Cultura 21 journal which provides more profound academic texts will then help to extend the theoretic background and to explain some recurrent themes, which form the general basis of many articles, before a conclusion can be drawn.

II The Association “Cultura 21 e. V.”

As a registered association, Cultura 21 is split up into three different parts that all work together as a multi-dimensional organization. Since the foundation of the German branch in 2006 the Institute and its network link social, political and economic actors and give them an opportunity to communicate, to inform themselves and to exchange their knowledge between different fields of research nationwide. It also tries to bring together those parts of the society who offer creative potential but so far didn't have the chance to cooperate, such as unemployed persons, immigrants and others. On the whole, the Institute Cultura 21 provides the substance of the platform by developing and discussing different analyses, visions and strategies of the movement. On the contrary, the Agency Cultura 21 forms the economic basis of the platform, i. e. it takes care of the management, general administrative tasks and translates the idea of a socio-ecologic economy into action. Among its areas of responsibility are public relations, event management, web design and advisory functions. Last but not least the media of Cultura 21 help to spread the information by internal and external communication. This is where the German web magazine comes into play, being kind of a laboratory for independent and critical information as well as a forum for all the issues raised by the association's engagement for a social and cultural evolution towards sustainability. The editorial staff is composed of journalists, artists, writers, and scientists headed by Davide Brocchi, an Italian sociologist situated in Cologne, Germany, and founder of Cultura 21. First of all, a view on the publications gathered in the Arts section shall give a first impression of the content of the German web magazine.

III The Arts section

Generally speaking, the texts about the arts that are currently accessible on the website, be it the newer publications or those in the archive, are as diverse as the art field itself with all of its controversies and different issues. They are subdivided in the categories visual arts, performing arts, literature, and music which can be chosen separately, either directly from the main page or from a summarized overview. As to the visual arts, the speech published by Hans van Oyen, a writer, photographer, and representative of the Off-Art-Parliament in Recklinghausen, definitely is an attention catcher. In one of the more recent publications he addresses a subject of current-affairs importance, namely the installation of a company called “Kulturhauptstadt Ruhr 2010 Inc.” and its methods of establishing the cultural status of the city of Essen that has been elected “European Cultural Capital 2010” last year. The challenging way van Oyen addresses his colleagues of the alternative Off-Art association reveals his anger about the missing respect for the cultural peculiarities of the region and its inhabitants in the company’s actions as well as its elite behavior.

“We are at war. Again we fight against England. Haven’t you noticed?”² With these words he introduces his argumentation referring to the bargain the newly founded company made when it ‘bought’ the famous director Simon McBurney, sponsored by the energy supplier Ruhrkohle AG, to use the Londoner’s fame for cultural events in Essen. Criticizing the idea of purchasing stars from all over the world and putting cultural politics on a solely monetary basis, van Oyen especially opposes the “cultural politics for the media circus”³ as the contrary to a sustainable approach to the arts. In Van Oyen’s view, sustainability can only be achieved when culture is based in the own society where it can have long term effects instead of relying on foreign stars who will leave the region after a certain time. Furthermore, he accuses the lack of transparency of the company “Kulturhauptstadt Ruhr 2010 Inc.”. On the one hand the executive director of the Ruhrkohle AG also directs the cultural company so that the independency of the executive board cannot be guaranteed. On the other hand, the company claims the exclusive authority for any decisions by introducing a new logo and permitting its use only to official partners. Hence van Oyen depicts the

² Org.: van Oyen, Hans: „Wir sind im Krieg. Wir ziehen wieder gegen Engelland. Habt ihr nicht mitbekommen?“

³ Org.: van Oyen, Hans: „Kulturpolitik für den Medienzirkus“

current developments as the “Nightmare Cultural Capital” that can’t be solved as long as the administration doesn’t take into account the interests of the people.

But van Oyen’s position doesn’t remain uncommented. Tina Jerman, head of the association “Exile Kulturkoordination e. V.” in Essen, remarks in a short reaction that the company was only founded in April 2007 and therefore hasn’t had the time and the staff to present any serious procedures yet. In addition, she thinks that the polemics produced by the autonomous art scene aren’t helpful but rather promote a victim’s position which impedes them from developing own ideas and quality criteria.

Beside this direct confrontation of two sides of a specific issue, the visual arts section of the web magazine offers several book reviews, e. g. of Birgit Mandel’s research about the “New Cultural Entrepreneurs” who work on the edge between the arts and other social fields as mediators, managers or artistic advisors. As Margret Karsch points out, Mandel emphasizes the need of cultural institutions to react on the diminishing public support and the growing competition in the cultural sector itself. Usually this is counteracted by extended PR and advertising campaigns, the outsourcing of certain services and the trend for specialization and working as freelancers. As a consequence most of the cultural entrepreneurs work in projects and rely on a network of partners instead of working with permanent employees, a development Mandel calls “exemplary”. That this may just as well have negative side effects can be seen in the French sociologist Pierre Michel Menger’s argumentation which is summarized in another book review in the same section. He analyzes the modern economization of the classic idea of the artist, i.e. the exemplary competences of the artist, such as fantasy, improvisation or creative anarchy, are applied to other areas of production, especially to the economy. As to Menger, the artist’s position as an entrepreneur of him/herself who follows a “the-winner-takes-it-all” principle goes hand in hand with the capitalistic ideals of individualism and neo-liberalism. Consequently, entrepreneurs in the creative industries apply the same directives as the field of arts, namely a free but also more unsecure and risky way of working that seeks a high reputation instead of financial success.

To complete the presentation of the visual arts section, the announcement of the ESA conference in the Leuphana University of Lüneburg in March 2007 as well as several texts about the connection between art and science, art and ecology, and art

and society are also worth mentioning. Furthermore, there are quite a few texts in honor of Joseph Beuys on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of his death. A detailed description, however, wouldn't fit into the margins of this paper, neither a complete summary of the subsections "film", "literature" nor "music". On the whole, there may be fewer texts in these sections, but especially the book reviews of German and international literature give interesting insights and hints for the reader. For example, the journalist Christian Semler presents Michel Wieviorka's attempt of a general theory of violence, basically situated on a macro-level point of view since he differs between left and right wing strategies, national states and international terrorism. Hans Arnold gives an impression of the "Critical EU Book" of the Austrian left wing organization Attac, describing the political crisis of the European Union that never has been more significant than today. "The European politics have failed in its duty to find solidarity in a European way of thinking and acting, especially regarding new challenges like globalization, climate or a new world order à la USA"⁴, that's how Arnold summarizes Attac's main criticism. Besides, like numerous other articles on the website this review was also published in the German newspaper "Die Tageszeitung" which is renowned for its critical standpoint.

One of the apparent principles that can be noticed in all parts of the Cultura 21 web magazine is its international orientation, which appears rather unusual especially in the arts section. Too often the arts are seen solely from a western or European angle, excluding works from Africa, Asia or South America and showing that the term 'globalization' mostly implies the dominance of the West. Here the reader doesn't only find critical views on the western politics but also reports on developments in other parts of the world that are mainly taken into consideration in the literature section. For example there is an article about Indian authors on the occasion of the book fair in Frankfurt and a review of a book titled "African Intellectuals" by Thadinka Mkandawine containing the lectures of a conference about "Nationalism and the Pan-African Idea" in Dakar, Senegal, in December 2003. Yet its summary by Barbara Höhfeld comprises many of the discussions that occupy African academics today. First of all, she describes the fact that nearly all of the African intellectuals study or

⁴ Org.: Arnold, Hans: „Insbesondere hat die bisherige Europapolitik bei der Aufgabe versagt, gegenüber den neuen Herausforderungen wie Globalisierung, Klima oder neuer Weltordnung à la USA ein solidarisches europäisches Denken und Handeln zu erreichen.“

have studied abroad, mostly in Paris, London, Moscow, sometimes in Berlin. Many of them have adapted to a different culture, losing the grip to their homeland. Second, there is the question of the controversy of nationalist feelings, split up into many different ethnic groups in every (formerly colonized) African country, and the idea of an 'African brotherhood' that is too frequently shaken by national and ethnic conflicts. And then there is the scattering of Africans all over the world, the 'African Diaspora', and the steadily growing number of emigrants of all classes that turn their backs on Africa for good. Therefore African research is fragmented, too, a deficit the 'Council for the Development of Sociologic Research in Africa', CODESRIA, fights against. The conference and this book form an important step stone in its work, and it is definitely a step forward including it in the publications of the German web magazine.

IV The Culture Section

In the articles about 'culture' the international approach is continued, a principle which can already be seen in the division of the section. It consists of three main parts, which are titled 'Other Cultures', 'Inter-Culture' and 'Culture of Sustainability'. On the one hand it is evident that in this respect, the term 'culture' is to be treated in a general and theoretic way and that it is applied to specific countries, contexts and cultural characteristics of ethnic groups. On the other the articles don't claim to present overall solutions but rather show fragmented pictures of a culture's situation, giving the reader a chance to draw his own conclusions. This clearly is the case in Hans Hübner's report on the central market in Accra, Ghana, which is kind of a female 'enclave' in the middle of the patriarchic country. The former correspondent of the German public TV ARD in Africa describes the system of the market where trade is exclusively reserved to women; men are only admitted as carriers or low level workers. A market queen rules over the whole organization and regulates its restrictions, for example even the president has to ask her when he wants to set foot on her sovereign territory. As opposed to the state Ghana, the market system is thoroughly democratic: the saleswomen elect the queen as well as one representative for each market section, i.e. for the trade with meat, fish, fruits and vegetables. If there's an argument among the women it is settled internally by their own court, and if one of them is in need of money, they can raise a loan at the market

bank, of course founded and organized by the saleswomen, too. Hübner concludes his article with a general statement: “An example for the fact that African women are capable of organizing their own survival successfully and efficiently, if they are free to do so”⁵. And, in contrast to men, they take care of their conflicts and problems in a peaceful way.

The subsection ‘Inter-Culture’ puts the main emphasis on the relations between different cultures in one country, exemplified mainly by the challenge of integrating ‘foreign’ cultures in Germany and fostering a peaceful and sustainable process of mutual learning. Assia Maria Harwazinski has published numerous articles on this issue, beginning with a report on the first Federal Congress INTERKULTUR in October last year. Since Stuttgart is the city with the highest rate of emigrants in Germany and calls itself a ‘microcosm of the United Nations’, it was already predestined to host the conference. Harwazinski describes in detail the issues and the solutions proposed in the diverse speeches and working groups, e. g. the necessity of an intercultural dialog, the adequate communication with the Islamic world, and the exclusion of emigrants from social and cultural institutions in Germany. The central points that came through in every discussion were the demand for better resources and more staff to improve the intercultural dialog as well as the necessity of culture as a ‘stronghold’ against religious fundamentalism. However, Harwazinski expresses critique in the uncertain way the term ‘culture’ was used in nearly every discussion. “Culture comes from ‘cult’, and that contains ‘religion’”⁶, a premise reflected in the large number of theologians who took part in the congress and who presented a one-dimensional view on the topics. Therefore, Harwazinski remains skeptic about the outcome of the event. Another article which underscores her critique on the conference is the summary of the history of the migration movement in Germany, seen from a German angle. In a synthesized version she describes the changing flow of immigrants, departing from the end of World War II, when Germans migrated from Eastern border regions, and reaching as far as the breakdown of the Berlin wall. All in all, she argues that ‘migration’ has always been part of modern German history and cannot be reduced on the influence of foreigners. As she states,

⁵ Org.: Harwazinsky, Assia Maria: „Ein Beispiel dafür, dass die afrikanischen Frauen fähig sind, ihr eigenes Überleben erfolgreich und effizient zu organisieren, wenn man sie nur lässt.“

⁶ Org.: Harwazinsky, Assia Maria: „Kultur kommt von ‚Kult‘, und da steckt ‚Religion‘ drin.“

“there are many ways of ‘being foreign’, even those that are not directly visible to the eye.”⁷

To complete this section, a short outlook on the part about culture and sustainability shall give a more general perspective on the issue of ‘culture’. It comprises a diversity of texts completing the argumentations of the former sections with more profound information, directing towards one of the main goals of Cultura 21: a sustainable conception of culture. For instance, there is room for conference announcements or project presentations, such as “Culture is it!” which was started in Berlin in 2006 and of course for more theoretic articles pleading for responsible actions in economy and cultural institutions. In this respect, Michael Zimmermann’s article can serve as an example since he raises a question that today seldom is taken into account. Basically he wonders why people don’t react anymore on ecological warning points whereas in the 70s and 80s, the endangered environment activated mass demonstrations. Today even grave incidents like the accidents in two Swedish nuclear plants in 2006 remain unnoticed by the public, though an ecological consciousness does exist. He finds fault with the social passivity that is often seen as sense of realism, and concludes with the assumption that the “[...] seeming disinterest of the people for ecological questions is strongly connected with a sense of resignation in economic questions.”⁸

V The Journal Section

All in all, to clarify once and for all the basic definitions of ‘culture’, ‘environment’ and ‘sustainability’ Cultura 21 works with, a last look into its journal section can be helpful. As a supplement for the web magazine with shorter texts and recurrent news, the Cultura 21 journal provides longer and more ‘academic’ articles. Davide Brocchi’s contribution about “The Cultural Dimension of Sustainability”⁹ is one of them, giving a synthesized version of the premises the formerly presented texts apply. In this sense, ‘culture’ is understood as an anthropologic, semiotic and sociologic notion that

⁷ Org.: Harwazinsky, Assia Maria: „Es gibt viele Arten von Fremdheit, auch solche, die nicht sofort sichtbar sind.“

⁸ Org.: Zimmermann, Michael: „So hat das scheinbare Desinteresse der Menschen an ökologischen Fragen auch sehr stark etwas mit Resignation in ökonomischen Fragen zu tun – ob nun bewusst oder unbewusst.“

⁹ Org.: Brocchi, Davide: „Die kulturelle Dimension der Nachhaltigkeit“

stresses the integrative function of culture between society, ecology and economy. But culture also creates borders that exclude the 'other' in order to foster the cohesion of the own social system and to regulate its exchange with the environment. As to the notion of environment, Brocchi negates the 'western' separation of nature and culture, e. g. as argued by the Cultural Studies, and demands a definition that considers the relativity between the two. The recognition of the environment depends on the cultural and cognitive point of view. Unfortunately, discarded hierarchies of power in today's globalization lead to a generalization of the western view that dominates our dealings with the environment: "That's how we treat the tropical forests and its inhabitants."¹⁰ For the explanation of the concept of 'sustainability' Brocchi refers to the Brundtland report as presented by the 'World Commission on Environment and Development' of the UNO in 1987: "A sustainable development complies with the needs of today's generation without endangering the possibilities of future generations to satisfy their own needs and to chose their way of life."¹¹

But the definition of key concepts and the realization of things that are to change isn't enough. Brocchi locates some of the biggest obstacles in promoting an evolution towards sustainability as follows: first, he complains about the inconsistency of most governments, companies and people who prefer a superficial sustainability without conceding radical changes. Second, the structures of social inequality, i.e. the unbalanced distribution of wealth, influence, formation and information are decisive factors of the ecological crisis, a fact that is too often ignored. And finally, the real challenge is to change the dominant culture while being part of it oneself, a dilemma that hasn't been solved yet.

VI Conclusion

The key concepts and problems for the work of Cultura 21 presented by Davide Brocchi leave a negative but realistic image of the success the idea of sustainability has undergone ever since it was first declared in the Brundtland report in 1987. That

¹⁰Org.: Brocchi, Davide: „Entsprechend gehen wir mit dem Tropenwald und seinen Bewohnern um.“

¹¹ Org.: Brocchi, Davide: „Nachhaltig ist eine Entwicklung, die den Bedürfnissen der heutigen Generation entspricht, ohne die Möglichkeiten künftiger Generationen zu gefährden, ihre eigenen Bedürfnisse zu befriedigen und ihren Lebensstil zu wählen.“

is why Cultura 21, with its steadily growing network and the publication of its guidelines, is an important agent in the change process towards a general shift in thinking. The web magazine helps connecting researchers, publishers, journalist and all kinds of interested persons. To end the summary of two exemplary sections of the web magazine and the 'excursion' into Davide Brocchis journal article, a quotation by Meral Cerci, one of the participants of the international conference "Cultural Diversity – Europe's Wealth. Bringing the UNESCO Convention to life" in April 2007, gives a good summary of some of the main objectives of Cultura 21 and its important media, the web magazine: "I have the dream of a society where everyone is free to express one's cultural preferences and habits, where nobody is afraid of "the other", and where cultural diversity is perceived as an enrichment for all. [...] I have the dream that everyone is able to think globally, leading to a changing consumer behavior and that experts work in global networks and use their knowledge and creativity to achieve sustainable solutions for environmental and economic problems."

Literature

I herewith certify that I refer exclusively to texts published by Cultura 21 in the web magazine (www.cultura21.info) and the latest edition of its journal (www.cultura21.org/journal01.html). I therefore renounce a detailed index and prefer to summarize the texts according to section and author.

The Arts Section:

Arnold, Hans (2006): Tristesse européenne

Höhfeld, Barbara (2005): Welche Zukunft für Afrika?

Höhfeld, Barbara (2006): Nicht im internationalen Mainstream

Jerman, Tina (2007): Eine Reaktion zu den Kritiken des Off-Art-Parlaments

Karsch, Margret (2007): Die neuen Kulturunternehmer

Misik, Robert (2006): Ausweitung der Freiheitszone

Semler, Christian (2006): Der schwache Staat

van Oyen, Hans (2007): Welche Kulturhauptstadt 2010 braucht das Ruhrgebiet?

The Culture Section:

Cerci, Meral (2007): I have a dream...

Harwazinski, Assia Maria (2006): Interkultur

Harwazinski, Assia Maria (2006): Migration in Deutschland: Ein innerdeutscher Blick

Hübner, Hans (2006): Männer raus!

Zimmermann, Michael (2006): Scheiß auf den GAU

The Journal:

Brocchi, Davide (2007): Die kulturelle Dimension der Nachhaltigkeit