

**SPACE
SHUTTLE**

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THE ART OF CREATING THE TOMORROW

SUSANNE BOSCH

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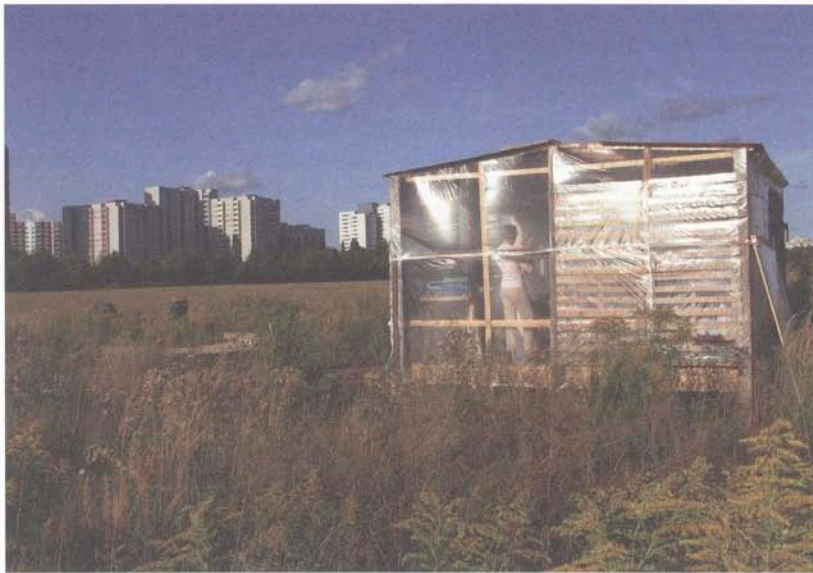
[1] Hildegard Kurt,
Nachhaltigkeit - eine
Herausforderung an die
Kunst?

www.hildegard-kurt.de
(01.03.2007), translation
by Susanne Bosch

The Peace and Ecological movements also fit within this history as does the work of Joseph Beuys, in particular with regard to his idea of social sculpture. Kurt can contextualize all these issues when she says:

"In the arts there has been a shift for some time now to go increasingly beyond metaphorical allusions towards offering models contributing to social questions. For about half a century by now this type of art practice complements a rather traditional practice of object-based art, and challenges the latter through action-based forms of practice. The latter implies labour-intensive practices of open-ended co-operative experiential processes in which art becomes effective (or: instrumental) as a social medium. If a piece of art becomes relativised towards process-oriented aesthetics, by necessity a departure from the dictates of autonomous practice, then this implies that the privileged (autonomous) position of the individual as artistic subject becomes (equally) relativised towards participatory forms of practice.

Core topics of a critical practice of art orientated towards society - "art in the public sphere of interest" (A Raven) - are: the social relationship to nature, the relationship of nature to technology, of economics to ecology, of globalization versus regional identity, as well as questions of social ownership and democratization."



< 'Hausbau', Gropiusstadt
Berlin, F. Köbberling/ M.
Kaltwasser, 2004

This text uses four case studies to focus on the discourse around projects like SPACE SHUTTLE. As author, I am speaking with multiple voices in this text; the voice of a practicing artist in this field, the voice of an observer and the (self-) critical, inner voice.

Common ground

I looked at projects (across Europe) which were and are initiated and managed by artists and have a long term presence in specific neighbourhoods. These projects host short term art interventions, which aim to develop a broader audience and attempt to reach the people in their "natural" environment.

Although the internet offers many documented examples of related artprojects, I want to write from my own personal experience and projects that I have witnessed myself.

Pilotproject Gropiusstadt, Berlin

Pilotproject Gropiusstadt started as a coincident, left over from another artproject (Areale Neukölln 2002).

Birgit Schumacher and Uwe Jonas, artists and initiators of Areale Neukölln, had convinced the GEHAG housing society to give them one of their many apartments in the district of Gropiusstadt Neukölln². The purpose was a residency for external artists, who wanted to work in the neighbourhood and needed to be close to their work during the Areale project.

Due to a very positive feedback from the guest artists, the GEHAG housing society was persuaded to provide a guest apartment for invited artists for their weeklong visits in Gropiusstadt. The visits are not so much to produce and realise

[2] "Gropiusstadt, a satellite town situated on the outskirts of Berlin, was built in the 1960's and 1970's. Its most prominent feature is its 10 to 25 storied building-development. The original plans from Walter Gropius were reworked later by others to house more people. Its current population is approximately 37,000." www.pilotproject-gropiusstadt.de (09.03.2007)

an idea or site specific work, instead, the artists can (simply) hand in a proposal at the end of their stay. From this they have the possibility to implement small-scale, temporary art projects for the general public³.

[3] www.pilotproject-gropiusstadt.de (09.03.2007)

Up until now, eighty six artists from several countries have stayed in the apartment. Around fifty site specific projects have been realized in Gropiusstadt. Dinners have been held in the apartment, bringing together guest artists, the initiators, the head of the GEHAG housing society and several other key persons. In addition to the 'gifted' apartment, the GEHAG housing society annually gives 10.000 Euros to publish a yearbook and towards the realisation of projects.

"The concept of the project is to advance interferences which generally just 'happen' in the area without being announced. The background of this attitude was already discussed in the 1970's: art should be something which belongs to normal life. Therefore the project tries to attract the artists' attention to the inhabitants of Gropiusstadt and their daily life and motivates them to develop ideas which are dedicated to them."⁴

[4] www.pilotproject-gropiusstadt.de (09.03.2007)

The project operates like an international artist-in-residence programme. That way, it travels worldwide within the artfield. It makes Gropiusstadt a known site. The project itself also connects to some early Bauhaus philosophies such as internationality and the change of society through aesthetics.

The tenants feel that they are taken care of, they receive regularly special attention. Even if they do not feel any access to contemporary art, at least they have something to complain about. Complaining means communication. And they most likely find listeners in the artists, sometimes in journalists and for sure in their neighbours. Tenants who perceive attention create a good neighbourhood. In time, one could observe that the renting and property market in these areas is stable or even rising - to some extend also thanks to artistic interventions.

Oda Projesi, Istanbul

In 2003, I spent six months in Istanbul. A number of people recommended, I visit the project of Özge Açıkkol, Güne Sava and Seçil Yersel in the neighbourhood of Galata. Three female artists had opened a studio there in 1997. From its inception the aims and objectives of this project was not predetermined in any way, and because of that it is similar to Gropiusstadt. The children of the neighbourhood literally invaded the studio and the three artists started to act, react and interact with their neighbours. It turned out to be a longterm relationship between this migrant neighbourhood and Özge, Güne and Seçil, the project was called Oda Projesi (Room Project).

Galata is situated in the heart of Istanbul. It is an overwhelming cityscape with its classic 19th century urban house style. Since the state sponsored riot against the Greek population and other non-muslims of 6th and 7th of September 1955, many houses in this area were abandoned and eventually taken over by Kurdish migrants from East-Anatolia.

Although not intentionally, the apartment became a gathering place not only for

other artists, architects, sociologists, musicians, but mainly for the neighbours. This fortyfive square-metre space in Galata functioned as a non-profit space hosting nearly thirty projects with zero budget. Oda invited fellow artists to perform projects designed to relate to kids and other residents. Oda Projesi operated as an artist-run-space, independent, non-budget but effective. It offered experience in meeting the 'Others' without the notion of an anthropological study or 'zoo effect'.

In 2005 Oda Projesi lost their space in Sahkulu Street. In fact the whole neighbourhood lost their homes. Being so excellently located, it was only a matter of time before urban transformation with its capital-oriented face reached the neighbourhood.

As Erden Kosova wrote in his text "Face to Face" from 2004, the special quality of Oda Projesi was the warm, humble and respectful way in which the three well educated women established their interaction, an interaction which took place continuously beyond actual artistic projects. Continuity created trust between these very diverse groups, with mainly women and children as connecting members. The interaction did not try to improve, correct, help, educate or beautify the life of the 'Others'. So what did they do?

When I spent time in the apartment and courtyard, I was at first very insecure about the nature of this project. It seemed so much about social interaction and modelled itself loosely in a community centre style. It did not allow anyone to be there as a passive observer. The space demanded cross-class, cross-educational, cross-religious interaction absent from conventional cultural spectatorship. I was thankful that Oda usually had some kind of "interactive action" with the neighbours, strangers and veiled women, through a film or cooking or to do something else together. I later saw some books, films and other artefacts which were produced there together with the neighbours and as a result of that obvious trustful relationship. These artistic outcomes by themselves worked well. The content of these artworks, Galata, the neighbours, space, Otherness, were profoundly reflected upon. The three artists never tried to talk about their approach in an abstract manner, I guess they were too much involved in the actual doing, living and feeling of the process.

OpTrek

In 2005, I travelled to Hague, Netherlands, to visit some art projects. A colleague had recommended OpTrek. Transvaal, the location of this project, is close to the city centre of Hague. It reminded me of parts of Berlin with its majority of multi-ethnic citizens. What I had not seen before is an ongoing process of demolition in a location, while everyday life went on. As we walked around the neighbourhood, a sad and hopeless feeling of a lost battlefield struck me.

The artists Sabrina Lindemann & Annechien Meier committed their (wo)manpower to that very neighbourhood in that very situation. They founded a temporary non-profit organisation of artists called OpTrek. From 2002-2005 they found public funding with "the goal of visualising the social and urban-development transformation in Transvaal through works of art designed to reach a wider public."⁵ OpTrek initiated around six larger projects in the public spaces each year and



Oda Projesi, Istanbul



> 'INTERACT', OpTrek.
 Facade theatre, built by
 InSitu architects, Den
 Haag, Choir of the Opera
 House with 'Turandot',
 Puccini, 2007

various smaller spontaneous events, such as lectures and screenings. They targeted either the district, city or national level with form and content (community projects for the (people of the) district; lectures and presentations for the political city level and networking, exchanging, collaboration with colleagues on a national / international level). OpTrek alternated between the roles of initiator, mediator and curator at the start of each project. They invited artists and architects to explore the future development of urban space and were interested in the position of the artist in such situations. Having connection at grassroots levels, they were concerned of the possible impact of the regeneration process on the residents.

The Dutch state funds art projects of such type and is at the same time the main power for a fundamental restructuring of urban space, where public, affordable and social housing becomes private housing, where less wealthy residents are driven out of urban centres. OpTrek were aware of the double face of their funders:

"Remarkably, as part of municipal urban-renewal policy, artists are purposely being employed at home and abroad during this interim stage of demolition to new building to upgrade the districts. The aim is to delay the decline of the districts, to keep the streets livable and safe, as well as to attract potential buyers through the artistic aura. In this way, art will be used to brighten the difficult period between demolition and new building, by helping to mitigate the effect on people who are being forced to leave their residential environments."⁶

They see their creative role in this project as that of a "witness" that reflects the locally complex situation and places it in a wider context of urban and social developments."⁷

I was very intrigued by their choice of invited artists and realized projects, excited

[6] www.optrektransvaal.nl
 (09.03.2007)

[7] www.optrektransvaal.nl
 (09.03.2007)

about their energy and enthusiasm and the discourse they created. Yet one uncomfortable feeling remains: If you are funded by the actual creator of such questionable procedures; how can you be critical of these and with your funder; how can you archive change? How can you claim to be a witness only when you are a dependent body within that same structure? The direction of power is very clear; That this is no bottom-up approach, as it might appear at first sight. The artists as organizers are certainly having several hats on, but can OpTrek claim to have functioned as a 'witness'? What is being said here between the lines?

Artists as the 'change masters'

In January 2007, I was invited to a roundtable discussion, with mainly local politicians in a city in South Germany, to discuss the necessity and the task of art to contribute to the change of society.

Without doubt, artists seem to be drawn to the topics and sites, which have been abandoned by others. They seemed to like the role of 'ethical knights', asking: *Where is the responsibility not taken? What should be done? Let us try out creative models in this open field!*

However, I believe it is sometimes not the ethics nor the feeling of responsibility, it is the 'open field' that attracts the artists. Public space is a battlefield for controversies; here one can carry out negotiations for public, social, spatial and economical sub-structures. The position of the traditional art field (itself a sub-structure) within society is marginal. But apart from that defined (art market)-territory, the artist is a much sought after figure. As artist Andrea Knobloch says:

'Maybe with such creative powers, the play-drive, the visions, we find new sustainable solutions for current problems such as shrinking cities, de-industrialisation, migration, unemployment, social waywardness, parallel societies, environmental disasters, ... Funders trust us, politicians believe in our powers and skills. Art is believed to offer relief for negative developments, to make situations and sites acceptable, and maybe even offers solutions.'⁹

Artists have been risk takers and 'change masters' throughout history. At the round table discussion I was confronted as an artist with two ideas: On the one hand, it appears we are now invited as equal partners into the arena of creating a future. Sustainability in German leads to the translations of "Teilhabegerechtigkeit" which means "joint partnership fairness". The attention focuses on long lasting solutions and, of equal importance, responsible participants. On the other hand, there are doubts. Is this art? Are these people artists? The autonomy and independence of the artists viewed in relation to its context and modes of production seems so questioned that the audience demands definitions of artists and politicians, social workers and urban planners and the differences between them. What is it that you are so good at again? And does uniqueness, visionary thinking and creativity not demand an autonomous authorship, a single identity? To evaluate the success of these art projects is not easy, since the objectives are located on different levels. Content and aesthetical output need to be looked at in relation to the aims and objectives of these art projects. One needs to know about the urban/rural context of these pieces and other political, historical, social conditions which form the frame

[9] Andrea Knobloch, 2006, in *Schnittstelle Kommunikation, Künstlerische Kommunikationsformen in sozialen Handlungsräumen* translation from German to English by Susanne Bosch

for these projects. Since these are not generic, we need to develop this for each project itself.

Difficult questions and realities

What is the role of the artist? What is an artist specifically good at? What is the position of an artist in (a transitional) society? How can the artist maintain openness in the achievements? What is the art piece? How can we evaluate the art piece?

Initially, I wanted to communicate (in writing) my excitement about all these wonderful art interventions I have seen, organised by artist-run initiatives, by colleagues and peers. I wanted to be romantic about all the nice moments of interaction with the neighbourhood, of wonderful sites in pre-refurbished areas, of space for visions in an 'unfinished' public (isn't Berlin so exiting because it is unfinished, it is a huge construction site, open for the viewers imagination, what it once was, what it one day might be?). And I wanted to prove, how much these projects change a location with their creative powers. In reality - Oda Projesi was finally driven out of their apartment along with all the neighbours, the neighbourhood Transvaal disappeared and the initial funding lasted til 2005 (2007: Currently OpTrek is doing a project called 'Hotel Transvaal' in the area, renting out empty rooms in the houses under construction or in houses before destruction), that the flat in Gropiusstadt moved from one multi story house to another (at least it still exists).

All the ideas and playful interventions did not leave a trace, it was meant to be temporary and now you would not recognize the areas anymore, they are new, clean and unaffordable. All the creativity did not (seem to) help any citizen to improve their living on a sustainable basis. What is the success of such initiatives? Am I not fair now asking for proof instead of believing in process and the moment? What do these projects claim to be? Did I manage to raise awareness for the foreign neighbours by playing love songs in the elevator for eight days in 2004 in Gropiusstadt? Or was this for me a successful art piece, because I had all these emotional, committed neighbours involved in my work? A passionate audience!

I discover more and more my notion of suspicion. I am suspicious of the intentions of the artists (a wonderful playground with lots of people willing to play with us). And I start to wonder, whether we should start to question more our naivety and lack of criticism towards politics and powers. We are not witnesses or commentators, we are getting funded to keep the neighbourhood in a good mood and to increase the value of property. Re-urbanisation, regeneration, redevelopment is economically, not aesthetically or socially driven.

Even if an artist uses the post-developed site in a very traditional manner and produces public art pieces – 'art' understood as the action which compresses a sensual experience in a unique shape that offers a similar experience to the viewer – by doing that on sites like this, he/she produces a political statement with social impact. For this social impact it is not even necessary to engage with the local community or to offer any kind of creative educational workshop.

Conclusion

Artists are in demand on site, because they have proved that by empowering people's creativity, art leads to problem solving. Art can create images of possible futures. A friend, who works for the United Nations as a specialist on human rights, once told me that the parameters of a successful project in her field was 'a project, were the "specialized external person" initiates carefully new thoughts, new ideas and makes sure as soon as possible that the involved constituency feels that this is their idea, their vision. That person further confronts the politicians and guarantors with these needs and makes them also feel that a potential change is their idea. Constant negotiation and communication is what this third party then needs to do. And then, as soon as possible, disappear'.

Could artists achieve that? Do artists really let go of their ownership of ideas and aren't they getting recognition with exactly their creative input? Maybe at the end we are not so modest and humble about implementing our knowledge and then serving as a mediator, facilitator.

But artists are good in initiating change. Often we are not given enough time or we are not matched with the right partners to develop a change in thinking. Artistic thinking is a 'knowing by heart'. A felt experience rather than academic or scientific. I do question, if we are underestimating the actual possibilities within our work.

I can recollect one project that I consider holistic and a successful role model; 'Park Fiction'¹⁰ in Hamburg, Germany. A multi disciplinary group of neighbours, migrants, artists, intellectuals and leftist people fought successfully against a development plan in their poor district of St. Pauli and managed to gain this piece of land for a "People's Park". The process started in 1995 and was a bottom-up movement with a 'win-win solution': together a transdisciplinary group from the neighbourhood started a social exchange of ideas, needs and visions, they created with a strict basic-democratic approach a strong notion of trust and acceptance among all citizens. They took the time to establish extended processes of communication, focusing on networking. They also did not exclude the decision-makers in this process. The artists empowered the production of wishes; the socialworkers empowered a sense of community; the sociologists wrote and contextualized this idea of civil ownership of public space; the politically driven engaged in local and city politics; the priests discussed the issue among their powerstructures.... Finally in 2005 the city of Hamburg agreed to fund the "People's Park" and to realize the ideas and wishes of the citizens in St. Pauli. on a longterm basis.

Park Fiction artists Christoph Schäfer and Cathy Skene were invited to documenta XI.

I call this a 'win-win solution' because the project itself achieved their aims; the individuals achieved recognition for their contributions and input and the project created a new level of best practice, of creating a better Tomorrow.

Many thanks for the excellent facilitation to Dr. Cherie Driver and Doris Rohr.



Park Fiction, Hamburg, Germany

[10] www.parkfiction.org
(10.03.2007)