

Growing Beyond Accumulation

Are we capable, in this age of highly developed technical civilisation, of doing something other than destroy? While a boundless economism has engulfed the entire planet, and social and ecological crises everywhere have grown worse, *Komi, a Growing Sculpture*, in progress for almost ten years, has demonstrated an unflinching trust in the human ability to develop and change. Buoyed by his unique personal commitment, George Steinmann has deployed a complex aesthetic of attentiveness as a counterproject to the monostructural, centralist constructions produced by an – as yet – dominant materialistic and mechanistic world view.

Komi is a work of art that – from the forests of Northern Russia – radically but very subtly questions our knowledge society. It explores how we can practice our knowledge effectively yet free from dominance, and how we can expand our knowledge while becoming more modest. What are the (thought) patterns and competences of a modern era that no longer primarily relies on permanent material increase? Can “growth” be redefined according to the needs of human beings and of nature instead of being defined by the economy? How can we overcome the one-sided predominance of the analytical, technical-instrumentalist thought patterns that have streamlined values all over our planet, thereby threatening diversity? Finally: how can we now accomplish the transition from the “either-or” to the “and” principle that Wassily Kandinsky called for as early as the 1920s?

Discovering Interrelations

In fact, George Steinmann’s explorations are part of the “stream” (Joseph Beuys) that also drove Classical Modernity. An exemplary essay succinctly entitled *und*, published by Kandinsky in 1927 when he was master at the Bauhaus in Dessau, states that the 19th century was an era of “either-or”, an era in which science – and life in general – was completely subject to separation, specialisation, differentiation and fragmentation. Science, technology and art, aesthetics and ethics – each was isolated from the other. No doubt the “either-or” principle had proven hugely successful in science and technology. However, still according to Kandinsky, “chaos” ensued with regard to societal development. If this chaos was to be overcome, the 20th century needed to ring in a new era, i.e. a shift from “either-or” towards “and”, a shift from analysis towards synthesis – a shift towards a “realisation of interrelations”: “In the beginning is the realisation of interrelations. Increasingly we will see that there are no ‘special’ issues which can be identified or resolved in isolation, because in the end everything is interrelated and interdependent. The continuation of the beginning is: to discover further such interrelations that can be exploited for man’s most important task – his development”.¹ Note that here “development” does not refer to industrial society’s linear and quantitative progress, but to the evolution of humane awareness in the individual and in society, for which art, the «mother of the future» according to Kandinsky, was to pave the way. Kandinsky’s method for introduce this reformatory cultural shift from fragmentation to the “realisation of interrelations” was abstract art – which, according to art history, he is said to have invented. On close examination, his “compositions” consisting of pure colours, lines, forms and fields were research studies: rather than represent some natural detail as it manifests itself to the human eye, Kandinsky wanted to penetrate, as it were, the material world where phenomena are perceived as isolated from each other, in order to reach life’s common ground from which the great diversity of phenomena is born. In this, Kandinsky was led by his conviction that “the root of compositional laws is the same in art as in Nature”.² Chronologically speaking, Kandinsky’s research in the field of art coincided with the equally radical scientific discovery of quantum physics. However, these two developments also coincided and reinforced each other in the epistemological and cultural-philosophical dimensions. Cartesian dualism, according to which Nature is a mechanistic “engine” and man her “master and possessor” (René Descartes), was refuted by the micro-physical proof that

matter and energy are ultimately one and indivisible. Modern physics thereby performed a shift from primarily analytical, fragmentary thinking towards that “realisation of interrelations” that the artistic avantgarde was also striving for. However, this great potential did not actually produce a paradigm shift, mainly perhaps because totalitarian regimes violently seized power all over Europe and Russia from the late 1920s onwards. So, rather than becoming the century of “and”, the 20th century spiralled down into unequalled barbarism. The art world also remained largely set in the old thought patterns, becoming an increasingly self-referential subsystem. And the Cartesian-materialistic world view of classical physics continues to provide legitimacy – completely against the insights of modern physics! – to vast tracts of today’s scientific and political thinking; it is the basis for the structural violence that has recently been escalating, especially in the field of our globalised economy.

Tugging at the Concept of Art

It is no coincidence that George Steinmann launched his career as an art school graduate in painting passionately interested in the historic avantgarde and the tradition of monochrome painting. In his current work, *Komi*, as well as in *The Revival of Space* (Die Rückkehr des Raumes) or *Saxeten*, he is motivated not least by a “very critical questioning of the concept of art, which includes an expanded or different artistic vocabulary, a tremendous tugging at the concept of what actually still constitutes art”.³

While Kandinsky, aiming to end the “nightmare of materialism”⁴, used abstract forms to fundamentally renew the artistic idiom, Steinmann in his turn develops an equally radical, boundary-exploding aesthetic to overcome art’s disengagement from integral responsibility which was proclaimed in the 20th century. One of the characteristics of Steinmann’s aesthetics is his involvement with the site that far exceeds any common «site specificity». Then there is his extremely precise perception guided by empathy and intuition; his use of multimedia, systemic networking and his transdisciplinary approach; his processuality along organismic time-lines; and last, but not least, his almost spectacularly selfless attitude.

George Steinmann renounces any kind of self-dramatisation, which contrasts with attitudes common in today’s world of art, a separate segment of society increasingly dominated by market mechanisms, subjectivism and personality cults. His autonomy as an artist is based on interrelatedness and commitment. From such a combination of creativity and unlimited personal responsibility emerges a rising spiral of energy that produces a humane future.

Plunging into Phenomena

Komi is based on a complex, non-fragmented and non-fragmenting perception of landscape and the mental geography of the people who live in it; of biosystems and traditional medicine; of the loss of economic viability; of threatened diversity; and of spaces for new forms of action.

From Steinmann’s initial taiga expeditions to the research and education programme at the *Centre for Sustainable Forestry*, all the components of this creative process (and its documentation in artistic forms of expression) articulate a flexible, open and empathetic spirit. While the verbal-intellectual, scientific approach is a search for generalisations, keeping sensual aspects of the phenomena that it studies at arm’s length, Steinmann’s intuitive perception plunges into the fullness of the phenomenon, penetrating its sensual surface and perceiving it in its very own depth. It is an attitude reminiscent of Kandinsky’s aesthetic strategy and of the etymology of the term intuition, from Latin *intueri*, «to contemplate». The resulting insights lead Steinmann to unity without uniformity. Beyond

the material-sensual surface of the world in its chaotic, contradictory diversity, he recognises an indivisible potentiality that knows no «either-or». When, as is the case with Steinmann, this kind of perception acts as a catalyst, the result is a transdisciplinary, constructive co-operation of diverse elements that increases rather than diminishes life and aliveness. Interestingly enough, George Steinmann’s approach is currently corroborated by science rather than by the art world. Thus, the

2005 Potsdam Manifesto and its *Denkschrift*⁵, co-authored by physicist Hans-Peter Dürr, winner of the Alternative Nobel Prize, can be read as the verbal, scientific theoretical parallel to Steinmann's art. Bridging the gaps between quantum physics, ecology and philosophy, this manifesto, immediately signed by more than one hundred renowned scientists and people in the public eye, calls for «thinking in a new way», a way that acknowledges plurality, difference and change as genuine characteristics of life.

As in the early 20th century, it is again physics – «queen» among the exact sciences – that has taken the lead in identifying the obsessiveness of a narrowly mechanistic world view. Pointing out the fundamental limitation of knowledge, the *Potsdamer Denkschrift* states that, ultimately, even the sciences rely on metaphors to discuss reality.⁶ This conclusion, formulated at the heart of the world of science, amounts to a palace revolution, vitiating the claim that science is founded on «objectivity» and negating the ultimate authority of science on the interpretation of reality. The Potsdam Manifesto states that, for the sake of the future of mankind, the «powerdriven instrumental knowledge (machtförmiges Verfügungswissen) produced by analytical, quantifying scientific methods urgently needs to be counterbalanced by value-driven, non-linear, holistic knowledge (*Orientierungswissen*)». Is that not precisely the kind of knowledge that George Steinmann's art practices in an exemplary manner – a knowledge that by no means disparages, let alone excludes ratio, but acknowledges sensory perception, emotionality, intuition and imagination as sources of truth and insight? Thus, here and there, in both art – see Steinmann and other pioneers of his ilk – and science, we are currently finding an intense process of searching and research that adumbrates perhaps more than the mere contours of a desirable, renewed civilisation that fosters life and diversity. The sciences will of course remain indispensable to this new civilisation; it is only their hegemony that will be tempered. The realisation of sustainable ways of living is unthinkable without the knowledge of art.

Growing

Will this so urgently needed change of paradigms finally be achieved in the 21st century? The concept of sustainability, launched by international politics at the 1992 «Earth Summit» in Rio de Janeiro involves just such a radical change – radical in the sense of *radix*, i.e. going for «the root». Sustainability means combining social justice with ecological responsibility. Also, the economy must be organised to nurture rather than impede this interconnectedness. A complete illusion? Admittedly, not much has thus far been under-taken to implement these principles. But the insight has been gaining ground that technological strategies and political regulations and instruments alone are not enough. To achieve sustainable development, our social values and motivations must be fundamentally revised. First of all, we need to question our concepts of progress, growth and welfare – which is why the concept of sustainability is a genuinely cultural and creative challenge. It is precisely this radical cultural-reformist aspect that, as we have seen, is at the root of George Steinmann's art. It should not, therefore, surprise us to find him among those avantgarde artists who were interested at a very early stage, from the mid-1990s onwards, in exploring the premises and possible forms of sustainable development. Conceived as a *growing sculpture*, *Komi* undermines the growth dogma of industrial modernity, i.e. the ideology of faster, higher, further, more. The growth that Steinmann has in mind does not involve more and more of everything – in a biophysically limited system. It does not mean the macabre programme of material accumulation that is threatening to drive our whole world into a kind of collective suicidality. Let me dare to make this prognosis: however much our consumerist society may currently triumph in even the most remote corners of our planet, its collapse is certain to occur in the course of this century. And this collapse of false wealth is necessary for the long-term well-being of mankind. Only Earth's material, biophysical dimension is limited. The spiritual-cultural dimension of our existence on this Earth wants to grow and can do so continuously – the evidence for this lies in *Komi, a Growing Sculpture*.

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1 Wassily Kandinsky, "und", in: ders., "Essays über Kunst und Künstler", Bern: Benteli, 1973, p. 97–108; these quotations from p. 107f.

2 Wassily Kandinsky, "Analyse der primären Elemente der Malerei", *ibid.*, p. 109–117; this quotation from p. 116.

3 Interview with George Steinmann in: Hildegard Kurt, Bernd Wagner (eds.), "Kultur – Kunst – Nachhaltigkeit. Die Bedeutung von Kultur für das Leitbild Nachhaltige Entwicklung", Bonn, Essen: Klartext, 2002, p. 239–246; this quotation p. 240.

4 Wassily Kandinsky, "Über das Geistige in der Kunst", Berne: Benteli, 1952, S. 22.

5 Hans-Peter Dürr, J. Daniel Dahm, Rudolf zur Lippe, "Potsdamer Manifest 2005", München: oekom, 2006.

6 *ibid.*, p. 31.