

Converging Parallels

George Steinmann in a Polylogue on Arts, Sciences and Ethics

Hans Rudolf Reust

The responsible use of natural resources and human capital seems to have arrived in post-Fordism, as every company mission statement today proclaims a “philosophy” wherein the adjective “sustainable” occurs at least once. George Steinmann has nothing in common with such eco-marketing. For decades, he has been pursuing approaches in his artistic work, which query anew ethical principles in their tangible impact on how we deal with growth and human relations. With a solid basis of research and the depth of formulations, his approach also differs fundamentally from some socio- and ecophile practices of the recent documentary or activist wave in art. He does not simply arrive in any trouble spot on this earth, and already knowing everything, thanks to Google. Steinmann communicates directly with selected scientists and thinkers, and thereby possesses up-to-date knowledge. In the course of inspections, often during extended stays and numerous visits to the site, he acquires a personal, even physical knowledge of the specific circumstances of each work.

In essence his approach covers the following processes to connect the potentials of art on an equal footing with scientific and philosophical discourses:

Indication: haptically and visually experienced materials as signs that are used metaphorically or sometimes symbolically (e.g. the radiation protection suit as a carrier of informal painting, the piece of rail track on coal, flock made of waste paper to visualise geomantic forces, material collections of lichens and spring sinter, radioactive materials, the photographic or cinematic recording).

Injection: Injecting or pouring of visible or invisible substances into image carriers or entire structures (blueberry juice into papers or canvases, spring pigments dissolved in water for coloured paints or concrete).

Installation: The synthesising organisation of tracks and documents of own or researched practice in space (tables, accrochages, architecture in indoor and outdoor spaces).

These moments of action are linked by the high-energy use of verbal language and diagrams, not only in the written form of official correspondence or manifestos, but also in personally dedicated speech or lecture.

Steinmann’s manipulation of signs always follows two basic forms of dialogical principle: the watching of and listening to nature and the understanding of nature as well as the impulse of persuasion, which seeks changes in the behaviours of all actors involved in the dialogue. Through the multiplication of such dialogues over the years, this artistic practice has developed into a polylogue, into a landscape of interactive processes, among which internal relations and reference structures meanwhile appear under traces and signs, comparable to the motif-based, coloured or gestural relations in a pictorial work.

During the renovation of the Tallinn Art Hall in Estonia, for example (*Ruumi Naasmine/The Revival of Space*, 1992–1995), or while supporting the new

administration building for the wastewater treatment plant of ara region bern (since 2013), by a titanic effort ultimately invisible conditions for a lasting social and artistic communication were created. "Voids" would be the wrong term for the wealth of potential that will only gradually unfold through the use of the created structures. In Bern Steinmann started every morning with the workers at the construction site to add his spring substances to the concrete mix, or the colour. The respect that he earned as an artist from the initially slightly amused workers, he also claimed in politics in his capacity as the ambassador of ara region bern ltd, which is part of his work, just like the water forum co-initiated by him. The administration building can only inform about the ecological relationships around water and its use, because it is itself informed by a genius loci, which is always recreated from an overarching artistic and architectural perspective.

All these aspects of artistic practice are supported by an intensity which in the Finnish culture is connected with the word "sisu". Although this term is commonly regarded as untranslatable because of its mythical connotation, it can be linked to positive characteristics such as courage and endurance, stubbornness and perseverance. Steinmann is married to a Finn, and has lived and worked in Finland for a long time. The North as an area of expansive landscapes and imaginative spaces plays an important role for him, even in the East or in the high Alps. Beyond winter war and popular sport, "sisu" is for him the ferment of an impressive persistence in initially unpromising projects. His element is the dialogue, or even more, the constant insistence on the creed of people. Here, a personal intensity is decisive, which takes no breaks in its presence, which is borne both by spirituality and pragmatic accuracy in the detail.

Steinmann does not care about the over-hasty short circuit of art, science and ethics. A network of parallels does not allow for simple oppositions anymore. Even in *Das fossile Zeitalter (The Fossil Age 1983/1989)* it seems as if the two brightly painted irons converged in the perspective foreshortening. Condensed in moss and lichen, in watercolours, photographs or texts, the simultaneous strands of thought form an inseparably complex nexus. Injections into the material medium can change its colour even later on and let the discursive content recede in favour of a nuanced monochromy. Blueberry juice organically strengthens the sense of sight and thus also the constantly to be encouraged viewing of these works.

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