

## Of Blueberries and People

Helen Hirsch

“Growing sculptures are always in a flux. Something grows, transforms, and at the same time dies. This attitude contains an awareness of ‘being on the road’ and refers to another time culture. I like to imagine an art that is based on the cycles and rhythms of nature. A key component of growing sculptures is dialogue. Growing sculptures are a kind of communication laboratory. This means that the artist is the author and initiator, but focuses on the linking of communicative relations.”

*George Steinmann, 2001*

George Steinmann’s growing sculptures take form in unexpected and remote locations on our planet. Steinmann becomes active where people try to live in harmony with nature, and where large landowners, agricultural companies and adventurers encroach at the expense of indigenous peoples and minorities, where it is only a matter of time before the last reserves are exhausted, and where forests are still pristine but can soon only be experienced as a nature reserve. His work process is analogical to the natural cycle, as it is subject to constant growth, prosperity and decay, but never to a standstill. The parallels are apparent to the roots of a tree, which spread in the soil to stabilise it and take water and nutrients for its growth. Steinmann’s sculptures are tied into various phases of artistic growth. Each needs a specific breeding ground. He analyses and determines the location of his interventions in cooperation with local experts, international research groups, as well as with residents. The development of the works takes place in the studio and on site, in close cooperation with scientists and architects. He sifts and selects the collected research results in the studio with the help of sketches, documents and intermedial tools. He creates the installations for the forests<sup>1</sup> from wood and makes them accessible, small, compact buildings that are executed in close connection to the surroundings. One can retreat into the huts to look at the trees through the various openings or just to relax.

An important function of the sculptures is to impart knowledge. For the artist it is an important prerequisite to locate his “longue durée” sculptures for public spaces in a

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<sup>1</sup> In my essay I only refer to the growing sculptures that have been implemented in protected forest areas, keeping in mind that a growing sculpture can also be created in the urban context and there it can be subject to different material requirements.

scientific and art-immanent setting. As place to meet, learn and retreat, these installations fulfil the role of a catalyst for a variety of groups who also actively use this opportunity. In turn, in the institutional framework, Steinmann performs translation work and transforms and transports the results for the given space through a visual medium. Here there is always the challenge of the projects' processuality that has to hold its ground in an art context aligned to the art market but is otherwise barely mentioned within the institutional setting.

Steinmann's by now extensive oeuvre contains different, implemented growing sculptures, such as in Tallinn, Estonia (*Ruumi naasmine*, 1992–1995), Komi, Russia (*Komi. A growing Sculpture*, 1997–2007) or Saxeten, Switzerland (*Das Werk Saxeten*, 2002–2006). Currently an installation is in the making on the northern German island of Vilm. The process-oriented and complex development of the individual sculptures is the result of longstanding interdisciplinary dialogues between Steinmann and selected scientists. Moreover, it is essential for the artist for the work to initiate a dialogue between local people and visitors of the artwork. For this end he creates spaces and places and thereby also enhances the awareness of the environment among the residents of today and tomorrow.

His project in the Russian autonomous republic of Komi was created as part of a long-term collaboration from 1996 to 2007. The taiga zone of Komi is the largest pristine forest area in Europe and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995. The Komi are a Finno-Ugric people who kept to themselves until the Soviet era. Under Stalin's regime, the number of inhabitants and the ethnic proportions changed dramatically. The deportees of the numerous local gulags and members of all Soviet peoples who flocked to the area rich in natural resources and industries for economic reasons, made the Komi a minority in their own land. The area is abundant in mineral resources, especially coal, oil, gas and iron ore. The primary forests provided the Komi nomads not only with food, but were also a spiritual source for their shamanic traditions. The knowledge of it and the traditional application is only granted to a few insiders. Steinmann's sensitivity and curiosity for the religious and spiritual practices of indigenous peoples in northern Europe (besides the Komi, the Sámi in Lapland and the shamans in Kyrgyzstan) brought him close to the last authentically surviving nomads.

The Komi women get their remedies from the plants of the surrounding natural forests, mostly rare lichens, herbs and mushrooms. Steinmann was initiated into their

application, and eventually also got ingredients and a recipe. "For me, art is a kind of research," he says. He knows the healing power of berries as well as the endangeredness of plants, and he puts his perspective as a perceptive artist as a source of knowledge on a par with scientific research.

The "Centre for Sustainable Forestry" was created in collaboration with scientists, architects and local people. It consists of a training and research centre in the model forest area of Priluzje. For the museum presentation Steinmann focuses on the knowledge of the residents. In the video installation *Elisaveta*, women from the village of Objachevo sing old folk songs dressed in their traditional costumes. Among other things, they talk about sacred places in nature, feelings and hopes. The shamanic culture is heavily influenced by music. One encounters it with the Sámi as well, where the *joik*, a form of onomatopoeic singing, is strongly based in tradition and performs a magical function. The gift of medicinal herbs, roots, berries and powder presented to the artist by natural healer Nina Tugolukova form the essence of the museum installation. They are carefully presented on tables along with maps, sketches and diary-like entries. The work is "framed" by the application of blueberry juice mixed with emulsion paint on the walls of the museum, which immerse the collection of works in a special atmosphere.

Another involvement with northern Europe in the context of the exhibition project ***Strangers in the Arctic*** brought Steinmann to the Sámi population in the Russian Arctic. In the fragile taiga ecosystem, where there are deposits of precious raw materials, including the richest ore resources in the world, the Sámi are struggling to survive. The tundra and taiga forests where herds of reindeer have lived and shared habitat with the native population for centuries, are now being sacrificed for economic interests. The mineral resources, particularly copper, nickel and uranium, are plundered by industrial corporations, but the forestry and paper industries also obtain their raw materials in unscrupulous amounts. And, as if the environmental impact of nickel mining was not catastrophic enough, - the city of Nickel on the Norwegian-Russian border is a shocking example - the destruction of the environment continues unabated. One of the world's biggest Russian nickel producers (Norilsk Nickel), which is regarded as the world's largest individual air polluter, leaves behind black lunar landscapes contaminated with heavy metals. From this bleak environment, where once vast forests grew, Steinmann brought back documents that photographically record the last remnants of the landscape and the

dramatic effects of the massive industrialisation. The material, collected under strict military control and partly also in secret, forms the basis for the creation of the work, *From-To-Beyond* (1995–1997). The journey undertaken by Steinmann took him through the territory of the Murmansk Oblast to the Kola Peninsula and the Barents Sea, to the Russian army's nuclear submarine base in Severomorsk and the nickel-polluted cities of Monchegorsk, Apatity and Nikel. *From-To-Beyond* testifies to the artist's dismay. His reflections and possible future course of actions are discussed. For the installation of 1995, he made twelve steel drums, which he filled with plasma slag, the residue from the combustion process of contaminated soil and inorganic structures at extremely high temperatures, carried out in a specialised Swiss company. Steinmann stained the photographs that are part of the installation with blueberry juice and thus created a reference to the symbolic significance and healing power of the berries, which are vital for the local population and wildlife. Through his commitment and his investigations in the last great forests of northern Europe and the Arctic, Steinmann confronts us with the serious consequences of a constant exploitation of natural resources and the dramatic consequences for the nomadic population. For this, he found a language that is poetic, melancholic and universal, which also carries his work outward, on site, to the local people. In this way art can exert an even wider influence on our society and make visible, as a medium of communication, those things that are not allowed to become visible for economic and political reasons.

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