

Keynote presentation by George Steinmann, artist, at Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 29th September 2009, 2 p.m.

The Artist in the Context of Climate Change – A Subtle Profundity

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon. My name is George Steinmann. I am a visual artist, musician and researcher from Switzerland. You may wonder what an artist has to say about climate change. I believe that everyone has a defining moment in relation to climate change. Mine came when I first read the report on the Rio de Janeiro Conference in 1992. It was then that I understood the serious trouble we were in. Today, climate change is always present for me when I walk in the Swiss Alps. Our glaciers are melting and the mountains are crumbling. We have problems with increasing landslides and with changing permafrost levels. But we all know: Climate change isn't just about the weather, melting ice and the polar bears. The socio-political consequences as well are truly staggering and will probably encompass: increasingly crowded living places and more nomadic lifestyles, more competition for food and goods, a greater gap between rich and poor. The number of scenarios we now face, largely of our own making, all present harsh realities and paint unpleasant pictures of our future. To sum up: climate change is not only an ecological issue but first and foremost a cultural problem. It is about values. The magnitude of the task ahead is almost impossible to imagine, but we have to make an effort to comprehend it. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon therefore said last Wednesday in New York: The failure of an agreement in the Copenhagen Conference is "morally inexcusable, economically short sighted, and politically unwise".

At the beginning of the new millennium fears for our environment have never been so great. We are confronted with a multitude of alarming global problems. The more intensively we grapple with these problems, the more obvious it becomes that they cannot be dealt with in discrete ways. For example, issues of climate change are interconnected and interdependent in multilayered ways and can be understood only when they are perceived as various facets of one and the same crisis, and this crisis is first and foremost one of perception. In fact, we are standing at the threshold of a total change in our conception of the world. If we consider the larger picture, this means we must take responsibility for the fact that whatever we do will affect future generations. From the systemic point of view, the only acceptable "solutions" are those which are sustainable. To sum up, this is the greatest challenge of our time: to create societies operating on the principles of sustainability, to create social and cultural milieus in which we can meet our needs and achieve our goals without however diminishing the options for future generations. In order to understand the complexity of our present situation we have to see our world in a holistic way. Our approach must be based on transnational cooperation and

participatory practice. Dialogue is the only appropriate alternative to segregation, fragmentation and inflexibility. This principle is more important than ever. Not least of all, because social reality at the start of the twenty-first century has quit frankly become far too complex for us to allow ourselves the luxury of over-simplifying it in individual disciplines. So, what exactly does art offer within this context? And what can artists do?

Let me mention 6 essentials:

- Art is a characteristic and indicator of Change. One of the potentials of art is to open up and widen the boundaries of the world.
- Changing perceptions is something that art has always been in the business of. Through provocation artworks can subtly affect the way we see things.
- One reason art can work so powerfully on our perceptions is because artists tend to link different spheres and orders of experiences. Models of collaborations and dialogue are of major importance. If an artist is working with “participatory aesthetics”, which also indicates that he gives up the image of a creator working in isolation he is aware that all phenomena - physical, biological, sociological and cultural are interconnected and dependent on each other. Here art sees itself as a genuine cognitive faculty.
- In my opinion, the real mission of art lies not only in imparting knowledge, but also in producing knowledge. Art is the 4th Dimension of knowledge in addition to Natural Science, Social Science and the Humanities. This is important because debates on the future viability of our society must move beyond the scientific, economic and political structures. I am committed to the notion that artists can work for our society through creative insight and visions.
- Art involves a sense of compassion and caring, appealing to the emotions and senses as well as the intellect. This is the subtle mission of art.
- Much of the art concerned with environmental issues has an inbuilt educative function. Referring to this notion I am especially interested in the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development, – in this particular context – means being able to integrate art into the quest for a cultural strategy that has a future. There is no doubt: We have to strengthen the cultural-aesthetic dimension of sustainable development. The decisive issue here is the question as to whether, and to what extent, art is integrated as a shaping force. This aspect is of great importance in my works. I therefore call on the local, national and international politics to be more open in the future to the shaping potential of culture, aesthetics and art.

Let me highlight just one example from my work that brought art, science, politics and technology into the same mental and sustainable space.

Saxeten: A growing Sculpture, completed in 2006. This sculpture is a research project about the extended potential of art having a viable future. It all began with the State of Berne deciding to convert the former Women's Hospital of

Berne to accommodate the entire State Department of Revenue and the Ecological faculty of the University. After multilayered research, I decided not to do the work in the City of Berne but rather in a little Alpine village which also is the States financially weakest community. The work consists of three parts: A bridge for pedestrians, a cabin and photographs. The bridge has two functions: it is a bridge that restores the hiking trail that was interrupted by the floods of summer 2005. It is also a symbolic act of crossing a boundary and a symbol of the dialogue between urban Switzerland and the alpine region, between centre and periphery. The second part, the cabin, is accessed by the hiking trail; it's a place where you can rest, think, or meditate and is available to everyone, irrespective of their background or views. Both the bridge and the cabin were built with FSC certified, local larch wood that was personally planted in 1823 by the pioneer forester and statesman Karl Albrecht Kasthofer, (1777-1853) who also is one of the founders of the term "Sustainable Forestry". The third part is located at the University of Berne and consists of photographs and maps of the Saxeten village. It was my goal to create an artwork that is socially relevant. The process-oriented aspect and the networking is of key importance here. Also, the approach to Sustainable Development.

Conclusion

Climate change is a fact. Many argue today that we are on the verge of a crisis that could very soon turn into catastrophe. But let me make one thing very clear: There is no time left for paralysing pessimism. We must act. Let's work today for tomorrow's world. If we care about our legacy for succeeding generations, this is definitely time for decisive global action. We must galvanize political and personal will across and beyond all borders. To be successful we have to create a "Symbiosis of Responsibility". This also indicates that we have to question our daily routine and practice mitigation, credibility, frugality and humility. Such practices can be undertaken at even the oddest moments of the daily routine, at once transforming the aimless or anxious mind into an open mind.

I am convinced that a change towards an enduringly viable society is impossible without the knowledge that is imparted by art, with all its aesthetic and cultural dimensions. I would like to go even further: Artists have at their heart the task of transformation. This task is to provide the existential ground for the human condition. It is necessary for a full and dignified life.

Ladies and gentlemen.

We must work to resolve conflicts in a spirit of reconciliation. This involves a sense of compassion and caring. We have to reconcile ourselves with our mother earth. The answer to climatic change is within ourselves. Thank you.