

Heike Strelow

## The Connective Power of Art

'Everything is relationship, nothing exists by itself.' This is the principle that underpins Steinmann's current work, the *Centre for Sustainable Forestry. A Growing Sculpture*. It was conceived as a public artwork for the Priluzje Model Forest in the Russian Republic of Komi. The leitmotif or principle informs Steinmann's entire oeuvre, proclaiming his intention to connect what our society has 'separated mentally and spatially'. In doing so, he finds himself in a tradition with the early 20th-century artists who began to turn against the human inclination to separate 'interests, philosophies, disciplines and responsibilities.'<sup>1</sup>

One of the artistic precursors of this idea is Bauhaus artist Wassily Kandinsky.<sup>2</sup> Although his call for the 20th century to be an 'era of synthesis and interdependences'<sup>3</sup> was not realised, the recent history of science and technology shows that early 20th-century criticism – not only among artists – of 19th-century specialisation and loss of holistic thinking was never quite silenced. In western society, however, this criticism has grown louder since the 1960s, with more voices from the fields of science, politics, art and the private sector calling for a quest – starting from each discipline – for 'patterns that connect' (Gregory Bateson).

Today, hints of a commitment to a culture of integration and transdisciplinarity can actually be discerned in the most diverse areas of our society. Its exponents – biologist Frederic Vester, physicist Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker or linguist Peter Finke, for example – are still pioneers in their disciplines, although they are perceived as important initiators of the accompanying cultural shift. Also, this culture of integration is still widely regarded as a 'phenomenon of realisation and a search for definitions characterised by observation, exploration, experience, self-explanation.'<sup>4</sup> If it is to achieve broad and sustainable impact, however, the paradigms of our western culture need to undergo a fundamental change.

Such an elementary shift in social mentality cannot be achieved without the involvement of cultural activists, art itself and artists. Steinmann and some of his fellow artists have long realised this, considering their realities of life as canvases on which they are free to develop their own ideas. From this position of artistic license, they infiltrate and shape social processes, refusing to be restrained by scientific, economic and political considerations. Their position affords them a global view and an eye for fissures in the overall picture. Like philosophers, but tapping into their innate creative energy and experience, societal artists perceive themselves as holistic analysts. In this context, Steinmann's *Centre for Sustainable Forestry. A Growing Sculpture* is a forward-looking project, a model demonstrating that artists can indeed function as catalysts of social change.

Steinmann developed his idea of a Centre for Sustainable Forestry in 1997, when the Swiss Federal Office of Culture launched a public art project concerning the new premises of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office in Neuchâtel. He visited the Russian republic of Komi to collect environmental data in the virgin forest region of Pechoro-Ilych. During an expedition lasting several weeks, he met the local population, discussed his questions with representatives of WWF and SDC, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and also contacted local scientists and forestry specialists. Since then, Steinmann has led a communication process involving partners such as the Silver Taiga Foundation in Syktyvkar and Finnish architects Heikkinen-Komonen, as well as local specialists. Together they have

<sup>1</sup> Manuel Cuadra, 'Inhalt und Form in der Umweltkunst. Ein Gespräch mit Helen und Newton Harrison', in *Kunst, Kultur und Ökologie, Auf dem Weg zu einer Kulturlandschaft*, Bea Voigt, ed., 1997, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> See Hildegard Kurt, 'Growing Beyond Accumulation', in this volume, p. ...

<sup>3</sup> See Kurt, op.cit.

<sup>4</sup> On this notion, see Heike Strelow, 'Im Dialog mit laufenden Prozessen', in *Ökologische Ästhetik. Theorie und Praxis einer künstlerischen Landschaftsgestaltung*, Basel, Berlin, Boston, Birkhäuser-Verlag für Architektur, 2004.

developed a project for a research and training centre aiming to protect and manage the virgin forests of the taiga, to promote sustainable forestry and to protect local cultures.

For over twenty years, Steinmann has been studying forests and producing artworks involving forest areas – the subject is documented in an archive holding hundreds of photographs,<sup>5</sup> a large number of which were taken in the boreal forests of Northern Europe. The origin of his interest in 'virgin forests' lie in his yearning for pristine nature, a phenomenon deeply embedded in western culture and with roots reaching far back into different layers of cultural history.<sup>6</sup>

However, while most people have a rather vague desire for some kind of untouched nature, Steinmann's yearning can be clearly identified. One of the key motivators for continuing to return to those rather hostile forests is his desire for an intense experience of immensity and timelessness. Through it, he has found a new space of aesthetic perception. Forests are dense and forbidding, imposing slow adaptation and demanding time. Anyone moving through them is thrown back onto his or her own resources and has to learn the essential lessons of patience and slowness. Most of all, however, these forests have honed Steinmann's perception. In his photographic oeuvre, Steinmann has managed to capture the density and power of forests and to visualise his respect of nature.

In this context, an important aspect of his photographs is the integration of processual aspects in his artistic work. Rather than being a negligible precursor, Steinmann sees the gestation period very much as part of his work. It is not the individual, completed piece that is the focus of his artistic concern, but a spatial and spiritual approach to 'virgin forests', their diversity and processes.

The process-oriented approach is relevant also for the *Centre for Sustainable Forestry. A Growing Sculpture*. The name of this two-part project reveals the fact that Steinmann's main concern is not the final, completed product – on the contrary: an essential part of his concept is the continual change inherent in a growing sculpture, a change that refers not only to the scientific research and training centre – i.e. Part One of this public artwork – but also to an artwork in the guise of a multimedia installation – Part Two – that the artist has already presented at several venues in Europe and the U.S.

Formally speaking, while the installation's growth is materialised immediately and concretely as it consists of various materials and artistic media and is continually fed by Steinmann's artistic research on boreal forests and 'Komi culture', the Centre for Sustainable Forestry owes its growth less to the collection of knowledge and materials and more to its fundamental concept involving processes of societal change. It is this process that provides both task and structure to the Centre.

Essentially, the same is true for the installation. On closer inspection, its form and content have been changing inasmuch as the collection of scientific and forestry-related data, materials and Komi artefacts has increased due to Steinmann's efforts, in which he has been supported by local residents. But the installation has also changed because the artist, complementing it with his own project-related photographs, drawings and films, has repeatedly presented its components in new contexts at various exhibition venues. To Steinmann, it is the nature of this installation 'to focus (...) on the complexity of relationships between the whole and its parts,'<sup>7</sup> because 'being aware of the mutual interdependence of things is relevant to the whole process'<sup>8</sup> of a necessary cultural paradigm shift.

---

<sup>5</sup> A large solo exhibition at Helmhaus Zürich in February 2007 will for the first time present a considerable number of Steinmann's forest photographs.

<sup>6</sup> In his highly accessible book, *Landscape and Memory*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995, Simon Schama explores the various cultural and historic roots of this human yearning for union with pristine, hence healthy, nature.

<sup>7</sup> See George Steinmann, *Conceptual Notes on Centre For Sustainable Forestry. A Growing Sculpture*.

<sup>8</sup> See Steinmann, *op.cit.*

The inclusion of processes of social change, which is inherent in the installation, occurs even more drastically at the Centre for Sustainable Forestry. Steinmann has conceived the research centre to be a 'sculptural presence'. Embodying these processes, it will serve as a catalyst and multiplier, as a place of transformation rather than as a final work of art.

His focus on societal processes removes Steinmann from an ontological concept of the artwork as an immutable, final product, placing him firmly in the line of succession of 1970s concept artists, who declared that the artistic moment, the essence of their endeavours, was represented by the mental process rather than the finished work. First and foremost, however, Steinmann's approach is related to that of artists like Joseph Beuys, Newton and Helen Harrison, Mel Chin and others, who are concerned with social discourse and design: they, too, have expanded the artistic moment to include societal processes.

Two further artistic strategies relate Steinmann to these artists, i.e. participation – the involvement of third parties – and context specificity, i.e. the conceptual integration of a location's social, economic, ecological and historic contexts.<sup>9</sup> Again, the driving force is the shift of artistic intentions towards societal transformational processes, for which the two strategies are essential.

Steinmann's public artwork in Komi illustrates this. Here, he has not relied on predefined forms but on initiating, promoting and moderating social processes of discourse, creation and change, essentially relying on the creativity of the people who live and work locally. Without their participation and contribution, the *Centre for Sustainable Forestry. A Growing Sculpture* could not have been created, nor would it continue to exist. It is only through the involvement of the local authorities, forestry specialists and local residents that it will be possible to realise Steinmann's artistic idea. From the very beginning, Steinmann adopted Beuys' notion that each individual has a creative potential and 'is therefore free and in a position to influence his or her circumstances autonomously.' This is why he has involved the local population in the conceptual and design processes. For them to be able to identify with and participate in this work, it will be essential to integrate their own ideas and creativity. It is also important to note that, while this is a forward-looking model, the project is firmly embedded in the location's ecological, economic, social, cultural and natural contexts.

For the project to be site and context-specific, Steinmann's intense, inter- and transdisciplinary exploration of the area was an absolute necessity. And this is where the artist's central idea of networking again comes to the fore. Ultimately, contextuality is based on two essential, interrelated notions, i.e. the synthesis of knowledge, thinking, feeling and acting and – concomitantly – a co-operative approach involving specialists and scientists from various disciplines, as well as interested laypeople.

What is again at stake here is that creative thinking and acting essentially depend on the interrelatedness of spatially and mentally separate fields. In and through his work, Steinmann calls for 'the game of connectedness' (Frederic Vester) – not only by means of analytical thinking, but primarily by intuition. However, Steinmann has no intention of abolishing the various disciplines and forms of knowledge, on the contrary: the *Centre for Sustainable Forestry. A Growing Sculpture* shows very clearly that he wants to use his art to develop our awareness that the boundaries between these areas are actually anything but 'static and hermetically sealed; they are flexible.'<sup>10</sup> In this context, American theorist and artist Suzi Gablik refers to 'connective aesthetics', meaning an art that uses its specific competences to create a space for interaction, for a process of creating relations and networks.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> These strategies also have their roots in the 1960s and 1970s. Environment artists such as Alan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg and Jim Dine aimed for participation. The root of context specificity lies in the concept of minimal art's site specificity as well as in that of place identity in architecture and spatial planning. On this notion, see Heike Strelow, *Methoden und Strategien der Ecological Art*, talk given at Brooks University, Oxford, September 2004: [www.heikestrelow.de](http://www.heikestrelow.de).

<sup>10</sup> Silvia Gauss, Joseph Beuys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg*, 1982/84, Wangen 1995, p. 43: '... aus seiner Freiheit heraus selbst bestimmt die Verhältnisse zu gestalten.'

<sup>11</sup> Steinmann, op.cit.

In projects such as the *Centre for Sustainable Forestry. A Growing Sculpture*, art becomes a form of 'societal practice whose potential lies primarily in developing and making available specific forms of thinking and working (...)'.<sup>12</sup> In this transdisciplinary project that reaches across diverse forms of knowledge, George Steinmann travels back and forth across the 'boundary between art and various environments',<sup>13</sup> challenging us to think against the mainstream, to abandon linear thinking. His goal? To make us aware – particularly by applying art-specific competences – that 'everything is relationship. Nothing exists by itself.'

*Heike Strelow, art scientist and curator in Frankfurt, is co-founder of and. Institute for art, culture and sustainability in Berlin and Frankfurt. [www.und-institut.de](http://www.und-institut.de)*

*The Essay is part of the book: "Komi: A Growing Sculpture" by George Steinmann. 1997-2006. In co-operation with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC and Silver Taiga Foundation Syktyvkar. Publisher: Stämpfli Publishers Ltd. Berne 2007. ISBN 978-3-7272-1112-6 Published in German, English and Russian.*

---

<sup>12</sup> See Suzi Gablik, 'Connective Aesthetics' in *American Art*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring, 1992), pp. 2-7.

<sup>13</sup> See Steinmann, op.cit.