Ecology as Cultural Critique, Ecology as Cultural Change

Today we are facing a double global crisis: an economical and ecological one. It makes much sense to relate these and formulate a new general critique to be able to proceed in a different way with culture, and the arts. By reading through Murray Bookchin (social ecology) and Ivan Illich (tools for conviviality), and situating them in their historical context, new ways of using technology in society are explored, as alternatives to the current industrial monoculture today. Ecology as a cultural system is providing a sound and flexible basis for a general framework of cultural and social critique. But there is more needed than just a critique: media art can provide a new mode of operation, within this new critical context, at the crossroads of artistic research and education. And it should not wait for the outcome of the current double crisis – by working on a new art, with new methods and content, and a new attitude, it can be part of forcing a solution, viable for a new society.

Text:

1. ECOLOGY AS CULTURAL CRITIQUE

Since 2007-2008, we have been living in a so-called global financial crisis, which seems to top any of the 20th century crises before, including the great depression (1930s) and first oil crisis (1970s). within 5 years, we have seen a succession of downfalls of large financial institutions, housing markets, stock markets, and large businesses. related to this seem to be the governmental crises lately, reflected in the european sovereign-debt crisis. after the contested bailouts of the banks, unemployment is everywhere on the rise together with a further retreat by the state from social, health, educational and cultural support. the latest support measures by eu and imf to counter the recessions in greece and spain seem to hint rather at a step-up of known procedures than a turn to any alternative attempt to find new solutions. is this the end of the neo-liberal economical era or simply a test for intensification with a new trial and error game by the dominant eu members, like germany, france and uk, saving their own banks and economies in the same move? It is hard to see.

At the same time we seem to be in the middle of an unsolvable ecological crisis: climate change, air pollution, ozone depletion, fresh water shortages, ocean and coastal threats, shrinking wetlands and gletschers, deforestation, desertification, loss of biodiversity, increasing rate of extinction... At the core may lie the impacts of more than 100 years of genetic engineering, industrial agriculture, toxic and nuclear waste, natural resource extraction, mining, oil and gas drilling, hunting, fishing, wildlife trade, and a lot of the daily activities we indifferently carry on with. Twenty years after the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, the "Rio +20" agenda seems to be overtaken by corporate interests, while critical observers are already warning that the entire conference is likely to become a major initiative of "greenwashing by major polluters". But what should we do to counter all this, since from the ordinary position where we are, it is hard to perceive and imagine the impact of even smaller actions.

That both crises may have a thorough relationship, had already been postulated for years by the American author, orator, and philosopher, and founder of the social ecology movement, Murray Bookchin (1921–2006). Writing from an earlier non-conformist and utopian tradition – think of Thomas More, Henry David Thoreau, Peter Kropotkin, William Morris, B. F. Skinner, Aldous Huxley, and many others – Bookchin states that the current ecological dislocations and many of the natural catastrophes have their origins in a deeper economic, ethic, and cultural core. The origin of the present problems is to be found in the market economy with its competitive "grow or die" mechanisms, and its corporate self-interest philosophy, which produce forms of domination. This can include the cooptation of the ecological into its advertising and customers relations, exactly as we mentioned above. For Bookchin to bifurcate the human from the non-human, ignores the fact that we are part of the same evolution, in which nature and society are intertwined. His solution lies in a social reconstruction along ecological lines, a harmonization process with explosive implications. Where the economy fails, and politics as well as science are losing their autonomy, ecology provides the critical background, integrative and reconstructive, for a fundamental change. Shifting from the dominance of the megapolis, Bookchin situated this entirely on a regional level, with a decentralized and diverse management of the natural resources, under a system of direct democracy. Utopian as it may be, Bookchin and his social ecology prove their influence by inspiring the recent Occupy Wall Street movement, as well as in criticizing the Green Party's involvement in the German Economy over the last decades.

Since the 1970s, a strong critique on the emerging media and the globalization of industry has been formulated. In his essay "Towards a Liberatory Technology" (1971), Murray Bookchin outlined the possibility of an environmentally-friendly technology. Around the same time, the economist, journalist, and gardener E. F. Schumacher published the influential *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (1973). The same year Ivan Illich published his *Tools for Conviviality* (1973). Each of them contributes from an ecological point of view to the formulation of a new kind of technology. Like the Romantic Poets, who in their time acted out strongly against (Bentley's) pragmatism, (industrial revolution) materialism and the distancing itself from nature, they were using ecological critique to give way to a different approach towards tools and technology in general. To cut a story short, there is a strong link between this ecological critique and the development of the idea of personal computing (Lee Felsenstein), the proliferation of open-source small hardware and software solutions, and the ideas for the sharing of code and knowledge, despite the success of the larger industrial developments (Linus Torvalds and others). The emergence of open source and creative commons, in that light, proves to be only a different interpretation (in the form of a contemporary licence) of the idea of a convivial society, in balance with the natural world through a system of democratic social justice. Ecology proves to hold its promise after 150 years, that it offers a sustainable critical background, regardless of any annexation of its ideas by industry, politics or science, for different purposes.

Within the arts in general, we have seen different trends rapidly popping up and then disappearing as fast as they came. Mainly since the fall of postmodernism, we have lived successively through different assemblages combining nature, machine, and society. For instance: popular culture, then social media, then political activism, then relational art, street art, even vj art and games, altermodern, etc. Each one could get a small couple of years of attention. Design and more functional or commercial sections would be coming and going. Of course, also land and bio art were once popular, and they still can benefit from recurrent revivals. Recently there has been some commotion about a trend called "new aesthetic" (see: http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com). It proved to be a blog from a young British journalist, or better someone who was collecting images on the internet for a while, followed by a panel

with curators in an art salon somewhere in New York, followed by a text in Wired (last living dinosaur of neoliberal postmodernist culture). The Dutch from official cultural side had canceled their media art labs last year, privatizing them, or rather offering them for free to competition in the commercial (design and media) market, while inventing a new name for all this: e-culture. They hurried a book and an exhibition together, to enjoy some fame in the limelight before it would be fading again. But unfortunately they ended up just with a whole lot of kitsch, missing art by the 1000s of kilometers. Definitely it was all about art and media, and yes artists working with technological tools. But that is not what we are talking about here.

2. ECOLOGY AS CULTURAL CHANGE

Surely most of the artists have a knack with new and different tools, and as a matter of fact we are stuck with the remnants of the classification of artistic disciplines based on this: painting, sculpture, video art, visual art, music, etc. Also at one time we had electronic art, information art, media art and the like. And with the early pioneers of this trade, it was obvious that there was a fascination for the creative outcomes of experimenting with new audiovisual and network technology. But then again, there wasn't so much amazement for high resolutions, fast data transfer, but rather for the generative possibilities, realizing an abstract program, manipulating different spatial, time-based properties, or ontological parameters of the medium. And one can call it lacking social/cultural critique, but it always has been very similar to the innocent and continuous building of new musical instruments: for making a different music! Today with open source hardware, like tiny computers and electronic data boards, free and open operating systems, mostly unix/linux based, a bunch of computer languages and software, combined with the immense information available on the internet for DIY modifications and innovations, with instructables and tutorials, for dummies and experts, from dummies and experts. Maybe today we should declare media art dead for a while. Let's bring it all back in line with the other media and disciplines that are around, and instead of having more and more separate studios and workshops at academies and universities, let's just make one and call it "The Department of Conviviality" at the "Institute of Liberatory Tools and Arts". Ecology is the main course, transdisciplinary in nature, and independent from any business support, attended by creative people of all ages and trades, ready to make a change.

As we pointed out before, media itself and for that reason media art were very much part of an industrial development till early 21st century. Like design, film and commercials still are. The stagnation of the economy, reflected in the economical crisis, and the unsolvability of ecological deterioration, felt as the ecological crisis, each added to the idea that progress is stopped in its tracks. But technology can return to its position as a tool in society where exchange and the sharing of skills are valorized. This is pointing at a new possible definition of media art, within cultural diverse and open communities. As we proposed earlier, what we need now is again a critique on the use and on the way we are making art, and not as part of a bankrupt urban society trying to functionalize, financially optimize and commodify everything again and again. This is also calling for a new relationship with science, which is in the same disposition, after the loss of independency, structurally and content-wise. A new bond with the new multidisciplinary arts can benefit both, and especially the technological, communication or media arts can easily take up a transient and in-between position. Provided we redefine artistic research from a common basis with mutually beneficial outcomes, academically and artistically.

Recently, within a cultural-artistic as well as academic-scientific context, you have heard everyone almost compulsorily formulating everything as a "project". Content and aesthetical issues hardly play an important role in the evaluation, rather the handling of the resources and accounts are too often the decisive factor in the evaluation or granting support. Not only the conformisation in the application procedures of forms but also the obligation to comply with a uniform formal description of an artwork, support for an exhibition, performance or other artistic event, is producing increasingly identical events. A more creative and inventive work hardly stands any chance against a more easily defined product like a workshop, a residency, a festival, a theatre show. Moreover, it is likely that the "project" has to be conceived and realized within a certain but surely immediate time frame shorter than a year. Pascal Gielen describes in his work *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism* (2010) how the artist today is fitting perfectly within a neoliberal economy, with availability at all times, short-term and mostly repeatable projects, for low pay and bad contracts. There is an interesting lecture online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbnlG5QkkEg in which Gielen also explains the benefits of freedom and flexibility which in most cases is rather vague and temporary, and sheds light on art as a market today within the current economy. He sees the artist as a very contemporary role model. Within a crisis of skills today, he claims the artists are among the few that know how to make their lack of expertise productive. In turn, art schools make from this condition a permanently reflective practice. We find this very speculative and certainly only operating for commercial art, or for the few renowned artists that can afford to be only managing their art practice. The majority of the artists we know are rather looking into alternatives and are rather forced to behave like successful geniuses though it is hard to survive due to the economical crisis with fewer commissions and lesser pay for each creative undertaking. Artists are both confused and ignorant today.

3. ATTEMPTING DISSENT

But artists are looking for solutions, pragmatic as they have to be to survive today. And they are calling out for a halting of the situation. In a parallel to others' cultural activities, like science and the food, there have been several attempts to come up with a different mode of operation, an ecologically inspired one, with a strategy and a larger impact on society. Like Slow Science and Slow Food, we were involved with 5 other artists and curators from Brussels, to write a pamphlet about Slow Art. After working together for 3 months, a first pamphlet was written. The idea is to start from this text and work out a more definitive statement at a later date. The whole pamphlet can be found at http://www.openhousebrussels.be/?page=manifesto but here are the final statements, which may be interpreted at will:
The value of art is neither predictable nor calculable.
- Art is not consumption. A work of art does not become scarce when it is "used". Therefore economic laws do not apply to art.
- Art is not a matter of supply and demand. The market can only demand what is already known. What the public wants can therefore never become a creative or artistic factor.
- Art is discipline. It demands dedication of both artists and audiences.
- The artist should not take part in competitions. Undermine competition by looking at both the weakest and best things of each other and join in to formulate something completely different.
- Pragmatic solutions are always second best.

- If you apply for something and you need to fill out a form, first change the form to accommodate the work of art you have in mind, then fill it out.
- If you care for something, create yourself the conditions in which to develop it. Don't adapt your ideas to time frames, formats and procedures imposed by institutions and managers.
- Formatting leads to monocultures. Life and evolution rely on diversity.
- A cultural field without artist-run organizations is unhealthy. Distrust artist communities that rely on the already existing institutions. Also distrust governments that claim that art is important, but subsequently fail to recognize artist initiatives.
- Art is not meant for "target groups", art is for everybody.

The interesting point is that the idea of slow art is fitting in neatly with the slow science movement, with almost the same objections, imposed by an economy that blindly follows its own rules of imagined growth and progress, reversing the qualitative elements within a society into quantitative ones. Isabelle Stengers lately did a series of pleas for slow science, as an urgent warning against its degeneration: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuiQDrViJPw. Also Murray Bookchin saw in the 1960s already the end of the autonomy of universities and science, as they were becoming more and more dependent on industry, market interests, competition. Science as well as the arts are increasingly perceived as bringing awareness and mostly consumption for the technical innovations. This means a continuing and ultimate restriction of both (related) sectors, together with education, that is seeing its curriculum and quality affected through the same mechanism. Maybe there is more at stake than we can guess. Should we wait for an outcome of both the economical and ecological crises, or rather try to influence it, become resilient in wherever it is turning to? The question remains if a simple opposition can be sufficient. Didn't we inflict this all on ourselves? How to reverse a trend which seems to have declared late capitalism bankrupt, but continues to turn culture, science and education, knowledge itself into an accelerating carrousel, forever. Shall we jump off or slow down, and enjoy the ride? But how, and where?

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