

du dialogue social

Corporate Citizens and Civil Society

Summary

Sixty years after the passing of the Declaration of Human Rights, as part of the European “Land of Human Rights” network, the project “du dialogue social” addresses the theme of dialogue between various agents of change towards a more humane society.

Key participants in this dialogue include organisations from civil society, business and politics. However different they may be in terms of their aims and structures, their shared character as organisations means they have significant similarities.

One important question here is whether the organisation succeeds in matching the claims it makes outwardly, in terms of contributing to increased civic commitment and democratisation, with its own internal practice. And another important issue is of course how antagonists or dialogue partners are dealt with: Is the treatment they receive democratic or dictatorial?

The project will invite artists to examine this situation and to reflect on various aspects. Focussing on specific examples, they will also be called on to develop concrete strategies for raising awareness of these contradictions and possibly even rendering them productive.

The project will comprise an exhibition with artistic works, project documentation and proposals, a temporary media archive and library, and a programme featuring film and video screenings, workshops, lectures, excursions and a symposium. In addition, there will be a newspaper published by artists in cooperation with civil society organisations, in a certain sense continuing the tradition of artist magazines in formerly socialist countries.

Debate initiated by the project will be fed by artistic analyses, reflections, visions, proposals and suggestions, as well as by the film programme, reports, research papers, political statements, philosophical and artistic texts, and excerpts from discussions.

The project will invite artists, academics, politicians, film- and video-makers, civil society organizations and representatives of corporate citizens who deal with issues in the field of the right to work and the dialog within society on this issue.

Individuals involved in the activities and projects of the other five organizations in the “Land of Human Rights” network will of course also be invited to participate, thus extending the in- and output of the project beyond the range that would otherwise be accessible to the organization submitting this proposal.

The “Land of Human Rights” Network

The “du dialogue social” will be carried out as part of the European “Land of Human Rights” network. This joint project funded by the EU as part of Cultur 2007 examines the status quo of human rights in Europe from the point of view of visual art in an interdisciplinary manner.

The original stimulus for this project came from the observation that even today, sixty years after the passing of the Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly of the UN, in many respects its implementation is not sufficiently assured even in Europe.

In addition, the year 2008 has been declared European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. In this sense, the aspects of the Declaration of Human Rights selected for study in the participating countries are to be understood, against the respective cultural backgrounds but also within the context of European integration, as common concerns.

Over a period of 18 months, six contemporary art institutions from Central and South-East Europe (Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia) will use artistic means to conduct public debate on the state of human rights in Europe.

The planned exhibitions, poster campaigns, conferences, artist exchange programmes, publications and other activities are intended to activate a broad public, one that explicitly goes beyond the circle of those interested in contemporary art.

Each of the participating countries will focus on special themes corresponding to their particular context, and the results of their artistic and research-based work will be made available to the other partners in the network.

In the course of the network project, over 140 artists and more than 50 experts – theorists, activists, academics – will be involved in the various approaches and events, as well as contributing to public debate and to publications. Multinational cooperation within the project permits each country’s national results to be contextualized within a European framework.

Partners

< rotor > association for contemporary art, Graz (A)
Skuc Gallery, Ljubljana (SL)
G-MK Galerija, Zagreb (HR)
Press to Exit Projekt Space, Skopje (MK)
TRAFO, Budapest (HU)
FUUD, Ustí nad Labem (CZ)
riesa efau / motorenhalle, Dresden (D)

Theme

Sixty years after the passing of the Declaration of Human Rights, as part of the European "Land of Human Rights" network, the project "du dialogue social" addresses the theme of dialogue between various agents of change towards a more humane society.

The creation of a society in which social, ecological and economic conditions allow sustainable development for the community and for its citizens is an objective that should be capable of achieving broad consensus in Germany across all relevant groups. As is well known, such fundamental agreement can end abruptly, giving way to bitterly fought-out confrontation, when it comes to finding solutions to specific problems which themselves are often fraught with contradictions.

Organisations from within civil society, the business community and politics usually play a significant part in this dialogue¹. However different they may be for the most part in terms of their aims and structures, their shared character as organisations means they also have significant similarities.

These include the gap that always exists between the wish to contribute to the development of society towards increased democratisation and civic commitment, and the reality of an organisation with its structural and human problems.

Does the organisation succeed in matching the claims it makes outwardly, in terms of contributing to increased civic commitment and democratisation, in its own internal practice. How does the organisation conduct dialogue within society, are its dealings with antagonists or dialogue partners open or guarded, or does it even attempt to impose its own position?

Two concrete examples: How credible is a company that claims to be particularly caring towards its staff and especially family-friendly when it does not tolerate union activity? And how authentic are the social objectives communicated by an NGO when it does not assure a minimum of transparent or participatory decision-making structures?

Other questions derived directly from the Declaration of Human Rights can also be posed in this context: Are working conditions and pay adequate and satisfactory? Is there equal pay for equal work? Is there protection against unemployment and discrimination? Are there offers of vocational training and social security? Do members have the right to create and join unions? How can NGOs in particular maintain their pairing of professional work and structural openness to the spontaneous development of events? How does an engaged civil society organisation behave towards members of staff when jobs have to be cut? Do the strategies deployed in the non-profit sector differ significantly from those used in similar cases in businesses and politics?

Of course, in some cases the questions that can be asked differ fundamentally depending on the type of organisation under consideration. In an organisation based entirely on voluntary work, for example, it makes no sense in material terms to focus on the issue of equal pay for equal work, although in practical terms there may be a serious problem.

The working title of the project refers to Rousseau's "Du contrat social". When broad consensus exists within society concerning the basis for our state, questions about the conditions for a successful dialogue towards further civic involvement and humanisation of this society become increasingly important.

¹ For all their differences, and in contrast to general linguistic usage, these organisations can be referred to interchangeably as both NGO's and corporate citizens in order to identify and examine shared problems. However, such a reduced study model cannot take into account any links with the executive and legislative that may exist.

Objectives

The aim of “du dialogue social” is to focus attention on and discuss aspects from the above-mentioned fields, concentrating on issues within organisations or on specific dealings they have with one another. The specific projects and contexts to be examined by the artists will be decided in the course of discussions on their contributions. In this context, their analytical work is to be understood as observation, stimulus, analysis, alternative model, or even provocation. The participating artists are invited in their capacity as curious or knowledge-hungry citizens, often involved in the discourse within society, but at the same time not usually directly active in established civil society organisations.

Besides observation and analysis and the processing of the results into works, artists can also get involved in organisations as a potential for creative disturbance, making proposals or developing strategies through their interaction with decision-makers, raising awareness of contradictions between mission statements and paths to their implementation, or even rendering these contradictions productive.

A third main focus of the project is handling conflicts in dialogue between organisations. In Central Europe, too, there are plenty of examples of insufficiently civilised responses to critical voices from within civil society. Conversely, however, civil society groups have also been known to operate with information they know to be false. Is it possible to focus attention on such contradictions within the respective milieus? Can a learning process take place or is the Machiavellian principle deeply rooted as an evolutionary fact for the foreseeable future? Here too, the artists are invited to contribute pieces about or with organizations or to make available the results of past analyses.

A further objective is to set in motion concrete exchanges between individuals and organisations from committed groups. Debate between players from different subsystems, art/culture, academia or politics is often comparable to an intercultural dialogue within society in which it is a question of reaching mutual understanding between groups that each speak their own distinct language.

With the exhibition, media archive and library, ActivistClub with project space, newspaper, film programme, actions/events around the city, discussions, workshops and symposia, the project will realize formats that are suited to communicating problems and conditions of the discourse on civil society well beyond the circle of those directly involved in contemporary art or politics. In this light, rather than aiming primarily at problem solutions, the organizers envisage a result consisting of suggestions, alternative models, and possibly a number of calls to action.

Formats

April 2008	Newspaper
April/June 2008	Exhibition, films, media archive and library, project space, workshops, lectures, discussions
April/May 2008	Symposium