

Statement by George Steinmann, Project “Symbioses of Responsibility” at COP21 Climate Conference Paris 2015

## What Change Can Art and Culture Achieve?

Due to the enormous complexity of our globalized world, we are confronted with a fundamental shift of perception. We are standing on the threshold of a total change in our conception of the world. Not only from a scientific, social, or economic point of view, but also from an aesthetic point of view. We are faced with a new picture of the world and will be forced to change in multilayered ways. Many adaptation and mitigation options can help us address change, but no single option is sufficient by itself. Effective implementation depends on policies and cooperation on all levels, which will be enhanced through integrated responses that link adaptation and mitigation with other societal objectives.

What change can Art and Culture achieve? Arts and culture matter. Even in conflict situations, they are anything but a luxury. The promotion of arts and culture holds great potential for conflict prevention and transformation, as well as for post-conflict reconstruction. Guided by the conviction that arts and culture can change individual lives, strengthen social cohesion, bring about transformation, and build bridges between communities, art is a characteristic and indicator of change. I believe that our society, together with state agencies, should include arts in the debate on future viability. In order to understand the complexity of our present situation, we have to see our world in a holistic way.

Our approach should be based on transnational cooperation and participatory practices. Dialogue is the only appropriate alternative to segregation, fragmentation, and inflexibility. In fact, I believe, dialogue is the essence of the 21st century. This principle is more important than ever. Not least of all because social reality has become far too complex for us to indulge in the luxury of reduction to discrete individual disciplines. We live in a globalized world, we are completely interconnected, and we have access to infinite information: Big Data. But this will count for nothing unless we find our way to a culture of mutual respect. Only mutual understanding of different views and perspectives will allow us to resolve our current problems. I therefore believe that art which adequately meets the challenges of our time will have to overcome its self-imposed isolation in the modern age. I not only want to respond with my art, but to enable and foster relational networks.

Let me make one thing very clear: There is no time left for pessimism. We have to find ways to overcome the climate of cynical resignation. Let us work today for the world of tomorrow. If we care about our legacy for future generations, now is the time to take decisive global action. We must galvanize political and personal will across and beyond all borders. To be successful, we ought to create a “Symbiosis of responsibility.” This also means questioning our daily routines and practicing mitigation, credibility, frugality, and humility.

Within this context I would like to highlight two significant publications. In 1988, Pope John Paul II appealed for an increased awareness on ecological issues. He wrote: “We have removed ourselves from the essential meaning of life and the means to sustain life, while destroying ourselves spiritually, morally, emotionally, and economically, as we

have separated ourselves from the natural world in which we live.” And he specified, “Artists in particular, are called upon to collectively use their power to inspire others to shape a more peaceful and more resilient future”.

2009, a group of 56 Nobel laureates from all disciplines gathered in London to discuss the ecological and economic future of our planet. At the end of the meeting they published the St. James Palace Memorandum calling for an equitable low carbon future and an agenda to protect global natural resources.

Their keynote statement was “We must recognize the fierce urgency of now.”

It is within this perspective that I am asking myself and you, what is the role of art in our time? What makes the scale and urgency of the human, ecological, and economic challenges facing the world today?

I see three essentials:

1. The principle of dialogue. Art is no longer the product of a body of hermetic loners. It is much more based on context. Art is interested in interdependency. In the foreground are criteria which make us empathic, compassionate, and ready for cooperation. It is my deep conviction that personal responsibility is a substantial dimension in the vocabulary of an artist.

2. Art is a socially relevant practice. Artistic creativity detached from social conditions and context is undesirable in the 21st century. I prefer an engagement between the field of art and other disciplines, other lifestyles. Such art promotes valuable discussions, shakes the power structure of politics, and questions the dominance of the western Cartesian logic.

3. The most essential feature of the arts is Solidarity. We need symbiotic systems. Symbioses in nature are highly effective systems with existential effect. Lichens, for example, indicate that the evolution of nature is not only shaped by competition but also by social behavior. This is highly relevant. Instead of competition - the usual approach-- we also have the option of mindfulness. The established approach of plundering the other must be replaced by an ethos of protection.

I am certain that a lastingly viable society cannot be achieved without the knowledge inherent in and imparted by art in all its aesthetic and cultural dimensions. I want to say more: artists have at their heart the task of transformation. We must work to resolve conflicts in a spirit of reconciliation. Doing so involves a sense of compassion and caring. We have to reconcile ourselves with our world. The answer lies within ourselves.

George Steinmann, Bern 2015

Copyright by George Steinmann 2015. Parts of this text are from George Steinmann’s keynote address to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, *The Artist in the Context of Climate Change – a subtle profundity*, delivered on September 29, 2009.