

Editorial: The Art of Survival – The Survival of Art

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Some years ago I was asked to introduce a new opera for Norwegian radio listeners – Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s and Hans Werner Henze’s play “The End of a World.” The opening scene sees the cultural and artistic elite gathering for a congress in a palace on an idyllic tropical island. Art historians are discussing the sensational discovery of the bathtub of Marat while the musicologists rave over the recent discovery of two baroque sonatas for flute and continuo. During a performance in Rococo costume of one of the sonatas the waters slowly start to rise. The enraptured audience however seemed totally unaffected by the looming threat, and so during a beautiful adagio the artists, sonatas and all disappeared into the sea, aesthetic in life as in death.

As it later turned out the sonata, which distracted the listeners from saving themselves from their approaching doom, was indeed the work of one of the musicologists, but attributed to a composer that never existed - Gianbattista Bloch. The opera text sarcastically comments “Although this circumstance was only established much later, it was unavoidable in retrospect not to feel that it was degrading for the Marchesa (the conference organizer) to have occupied herself during her final minutes with an – albeit masterful – forgery.”

Intended by the authors in 1953 as an attack against “ the smiling snobs and cynics who do their business on the artificial islands of pseudo culture” (Henze) the prophetic message is hard to avoid in these times of ecological disasters.

In the process of planning for the 10th Jubilee Forum of the Urban Research Plaza in the wake of the disastrous flood in Bangkok and the devastating Japanese tsunami the encounter with this opera repeatedly kept coming back to my mind. Are the art communities of the world still to be considered as isolated islands oblivious of looming crises? Recent experiences from Thailand and Japan paint another picture.

Our art communities were among the first to warn of a coming urban catastrophe. At our 2nd Forum of the Urban Research Plaza Professor Dr. Suwattana Thadanti of the Chulalongkorn University Faculty of Architecture warned about a coming flood disaster:

⁺ Dr. Kjell Skyllstad, Professor Emeritus, University of Oslo, Department of Musicology, Norway. Photography credits: Flood images - Bussakorn Binson. Workshop - Alan Kinear. OK Center - Kjell Skyllstad. The Scream - Public domain.

“The extent and duration of flooding is aggravated by the present state of the drainage system which has not kept pace with rapid urbanization. The once extensive system of canals (klongs) draining towards the Chao Phraya River has been filled in to make way for roads. Sewers and the remaining klongs cannot cope with the run off over an ever increasing impervious surface area.”



Figure 1. Surface road in Bangkok becomes a new 'Klong' during the flood.

The warnings were not heeded and in the fall of 2011 the disaster struck. Chulalongkorn University under the leadership of its President Professor Pirom Kamolratanakul at once pooled its academic resources to help flood victims by setting up a Friends in Need Center for Flood Relief and Donation Distribution. The Indoor Stadium became a life saving center for distributing survival kits and flood supplies.



Figure 2. Homemade raft's replaced walking, buses, motorbikes, and cars.



Figure 3. Chulalongkorn University Professor Dr. Bussakorn Binson conducts an art therapy session at a flood relief center. Attendees draw facial expressions from flood experiences & share in group pantomime.

The staff and students of the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts true to their tradition of promoting social outreach likewise went into action to do their part in the relief work. And on November 16, 2011 the University welcomed the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon as an official visitor who came to show the recognition of the world body.

The Urban Research Plaza of the Osaka City University, true to its implementation of urban social outreach programs during the 10th years of its existence, had already initiated similar programs after the devastating earthquake and tsunami of March 2011. In this work the Arts Faculties and the Urban Research Plaza are following a long tradition. Societies in ecological balance have attached the greatest importance to the role of artistic creativity in maintaining their ecosystems. The threats of ecological disaster in many areas of the world I see connected to the neglect and suppression of the role that artistic activities have played in nurturing environmental awareness and promoting adaptive interplay with nature. Throughout the long history of human existence it is through these activities of artistic and symbolic interaction that ecological attitudes have been formed in an innovative process.

As a result, in the artistic manifestations of different societies we find forms that have been modeled in this process thus containing important stimuli for ecological and social reconstruction, for the re-finding of roots and values in times of crisis.

Fifty years ago the eco-movement was (re)launched by Rachel Carson in her book “The Silent Spring” and twenty-five years ago the Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland published her ecological manifesto “Our Common Future,” the United Nation’s report on the necessity of sustainable development. And here we are in 2012, reminding us that the collapse of the Mayan civilization was not caused by outer enemies but by an inner crisis of unsustainability.

We welcome our readers to share with us in this 4th volume of our Journal of Urban Culture Research some models of the unique contribution of the arts community towards urban restoration and renewal, showing the way forward for arts education in the remaining three years of the United Nation’s Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.



Figures 4. From the OK Center for Contemporary Art, Linz, Austria. The exposition communicates the experiences of flooding disasters as told by individuals from cities affected.

The Scream is the popular title of a series of works by Edvard Munch known as the

The Scream of Nature

“I was walking along the road with two friends. The sun was setting. I felt a breath of melancholy - Suddenly the sky turned blood-red. I stopped, and leaned against the railing, deathly tired - looking out across the flaming clouds that hung like blood and a sword over the blue-black fjord and town. My friends walked on – I remained behind – I stood there, trembling with fear. ***And I sensed a great, infinite scream pass through nature.***”

Edvard Munch, from his journal in 1892

