Sustainable Identities

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Introduction

The global landscape is distressed by conflict and humanitarian crisis in many different corners whilst large overproducing corporations keeps encouraging us to overconsume. Our world is facing significant environmental challenges caused by climate change, whilst we (I) just get more and more lost in our Facebook news feeds.

"All the world's futures" was the theme for the 56th international art exhibition in Venice. "How can the current disquiet of our time be properly grasped, made comprehensible, examined and articulated?" (1) In search for global dialogue, artists were invited to examine possible future prospects. Szilárd Cseke's installation "Sustainable Identities", curated by Kinga German, represented Hungary at the Biennale. In this review, I am trying to associate with the installation as well as grasp the essence of the catalogue published as an extension of it.

Sustainable Identities

The spacious, kinetic installation, consisted of a merge of different contents and forms. Above the viewer's heads, a network of intersecting transparent tubes containing white balls divided the pavilion. The balls were pushed through the paths by fans. In the center a large foil cushion inflated and deflated as if breathing, like a living organism yet also fed by fans. The installation was complemented by sound, made in collaboration between Cseke and Ábris Gryllus, and light.

"Sustainable Identities" builds on Szilárd Cseke's tradition of using simple dynamic parts to engineer images of thought criticizing multiple social, economic and ecological concepts - beyond national and personal meaning. Just as the paths of the balls are definite and constrained by physical obstacles (the tubes and the walls), so is identity construction, as we move through predefined paths in society. Just as the pavilion is possessed by construction, so is our environment. Just as the organism, the foil cushion, we breathe naturally whilst powered by electricity. The exhibition title further suggests the symbolism, in line with Szilárd Cseke's previous work.

In the exhibition catalogue, different "experts" from many different fields are confronted and provoked with the word combination Sustainable Identities, providing us with thoughts and ideas that could be useful in the development of all the worlds futures – interdisciplinary.

Nothing is static

"Immobility does not exist." (2)

In our globalized world perspective changes fast. As humans, we are captured in a specific framework of rules and roles and functions, encouraged to find our identity - as if it's something static to be found inside of us. "Identity seeking is a normative demand" (3). With the camera as a spectator, we fictionalize ourselves, our different ego stages, as a part of every day social media life.

The identity process is complex, based on choices, spaces and constellations – and it is continuous. We are products of our environment - a cultural, political and economical environment inherited from our ancestors, based on and defined by hierarchies built on norms – and we are performing accordingly. Our gender, race and class predefines our identities - "they make us do what we do and let things be done to us." (4)

This system is persistent as we are shaped by our time and place in history (identity pathology?). Through social learning as children we begin to identify ourselves with different forms of behavior and relate to other identities around us. The power of the self has monopoly, but during extensive societal changes, one might have to adapt more actively. "The world itself, or its inner representation - and thus our reaction to it changes." (5)

Despite the common exaggeration of the differences among us, the paths we take in spaces designed for us are predictable - 93 percent of the time according to analyses of mobile GPS data (6). We are constantly commuting – literally, and between thoughts - just like the balls in the transparent tubes, moving within the predefined, with the illusion of freedom. If we can ever be completely free is a big question, but that our choices are based on our circumstances largely defined by external factors is an actuality.

"The concept of sustainability rose out of concerns regarding the exploitation of nature". (7)
As contradictionary as it sounds, the dominant economic system wants to sustain and develop at the same time - "sustainable growth" - a "green economy" that "preserves the economic structure and profit-making capitalist logic of the existing system". (8)

To live during the internet times of constant access means living with constant flow of images, catchy slogans and cliches. We are used seeing eco-images and reading words like sustainability in so many different contexts that they have lost their credibility and almost their point and identity seeking has been reduced to motivational quotes on Instagram.

Conclusion

If we agree on the fact that our environment shapes us, we can agree on the fact that our environment needs to be sustainable in order for our identities to be. We can also agree on the fact that the conflicts and relationships between an accelerating globalized world and individuality creates a lot of confusion.

"Sustainable Identities" might represent an individual with an identity struggle, or a community whose commuters constantly move back and forth between poles – either option is connected to the other. A community with an identity struggle will be populated by individuals with identity struggles, and so it all becomes a circle of events, with no rational focus but turmoil.

Szilard Cseke didn't present us with utopia. He presented us with an associative space of many layers that all together start processes of thought within the viewer - encouraged to analyze questions and issues emerged. With the catalogue as an extenuation and further encouragement, we can devour ourselves in all kinds of thoughts and ideas, allowing ourselves to get confused in order to step outside the next day and feel perhaps equally confused but maybe a little more concerned about our own role in our own and in each other's environment. This is no answer to any struggle, nor are any of the essays in the catalogue, but they gesture towards the future in a well articulated manner.

Creating space for contemplation is essential, and the contemporary art world has the ability to work both as a breathing hole as well as a room for debate. Art is both a tool and a mirror. Despite perhaps never being completely free as individuals, no matter how privileged, one does have the power to (more or less) broaden ones routes of every day thoughts and life. "Sustainable Identities" is not only articulating the current disquiet of our time, it attempts to start a chain of thoughts that might become a chain of events.

"The real challenge lies in altering people's behavior patterns. What is required is a cultural transformation that includes altered values, rules, and habits". (9)

Notes

1. "*La Biennale Di Venezia - All The World's Futures*". Labiennale.org. N.p., 2016. Web. 23 Mar. 2016.
2. Tinguely, Jean, *For Statics (Für Statik)*, 1958 programmatic text for the "Concert for Seven Pictures" in Düsseldorf: Quoted in: Arts/Canada. Vol. 25. (1968)
3. Erős, Ferenc, *Identity Discourses*, p. 59
4. B. Braidt, Andra, *Gender Identities*, p. 58
5. Álmos, Péter, *The boards of identity*, p. 66
6. Barabási, Dr. Albert-László, *Predictable Identities Or Your future is more valuable than your past has ever been*, p. 50
7. Fabényi, Julia, *Sustainability, Identity and the Ratchet*, p.4
8. Gottschlich, Daniela, *Creative confusion as a starting point for reflection and interaction*, p.121
9. Bohle, Stephan: *The Eighth Wonder of the World*. In: Cause and Effect. Visualizing Sustainability, ed. by Sven Ehmann, Stephan Bohle and Robert Klanten, Berlin 2012, pp. 2–3

2-8: La Biennale di Venezia, 2015. *Sustainable Identities*. [Exhibition catalogue]: Ludwig Museum Budapest and the Office of the National Commissioner of Hungary. Available at: http://www.sustainableidentities.com/catalogue, [Acessed 1 March 2016].