

THE ANTHROPOCENE INDEX

HISTORY

TRANSLOCAL INSTITUTE. INTERVIEW WITH MAJA AND REUBEN FOWKES

2015-12-25

Aleksandra Jach: At the [Translocal Institute for Contemporary Art](#) you are trying to “combine the particular insights gained from being deeply based in one or more localities with the comparative perspective gained by working in more than one discursive context”. I think you share this attitude with many environmental scientists and activists. The difference is that you are working mostly in the ecosystem of global art world. How do you evaluate the potential and limitations of this network?

Maja and Reuben Fowkes: We are concerned with the art world, but we don't see ourselves as working within one closed system, such as the global art world, which is associated with the circuit of biennials and art fairs, but rather inhabit an art world that is part of other systems. We also try to open the art world up to other trans-disciplinary perspectives, as ecology itself is trans-disciplinary and all-encompassing. This often means working at the interstices of the art world and the worlds of academia, science, eco-activism and so on. Both scientists and activists face challenges in seeing beyond not only their disciplines and specific campaigns, but also their geographical contexts. With greater awareness of the interconnectedness of problems on a

planetary scale, there is a growing tendency to relate specific local questions to what is happening elsewhere, and contemporary art has the potential to galvanize these more outward-looking and comparative perspectives.

Aleksandra Jach: How do we implant global knowledge about the environment, ecology, and the Anthropocene into a specific context? What is the role of the audience for you? How do you get feedback from them?

Maja and Reuben Fowkes: One doesn't need to 'implant' global knowledge about the environment into specific contexts, because knowledge about ecology grows and exists everywhere, and helps form an emergent global consciousness, as all communities, indigenous or modern, have a strong understanding of planetary issues. However, it is always interesting to test out new notions, and see what kind of currency they can get in different contexts, and the Anthropocene is a good example of that, as it opens up a new vision about human responsibility for the massive changes to the geology of the planet. In today's digital world, people everywhere can join the debate about, for example, when the Anthropocene actually started, or more specifically, what relevance it has for contemporary art.

In terms of our audience, this depends whether we're talking about an exhibition audience or participants in one of our [Reading Room](#) seminars. In the latter case the feedback is interactive and immediate, while with an exhibition it takes longer for the effects to become visible. Interestingly, we have realized that our 'core audience' is quite young, mostly art professionals at the beginning of their careers, recent post-graduates, and we think it's

symptomatic of the relevance of the issues we're dealing with for coming generations.

Aleksandra Jach: What kind of changes have you observed regarding interest in environmental issues on the part of art and cultural institutions over the last decade?

Maja and Reuben Fowkes: What we have noticed since the first symposium on [Sustainability and Contemporary Art](#) that we organised in 2006 is that the environmental issues themselves have changed, along with artistic responses to them. However, working from Budapest, one cannot ignore the cultural changes of the institutional structures following the political changes, mostly since 2010, and in that context there has not been much progress in terms of either thinking about the implications of ecology for the arts and art institutions, or significant attempts to engage wider art audiences with these issues. It sometimes feels for us working with art and ecology in this locality that persevering with this subject is like Don Quixote's 'tilting at windmills'. On the other hand, on a more global level it's interesting how there's a much greater sense of urgency today around ecological issues, and in particular the accelerating and increasingly visible effects of climate change, leading artists to take an openly activist approach. It will be interesting to see what kind of art activist interventions take place around the last chance [Climate Change talks in Paris in November and December 2015](#).

Aleksandra Jach: Transdisciplinarity is the other trans- word which is close to your practice. For years you have been cooperating with activists and scientists. Can you tell me more about your methodology of work in such collectives? Do you feel any affinity with environmental humanities?

Maja and Reuben Fowkes: YES! Environmental humanities is a paradigm change for academia. One example of our practice in terms of transdisciplinarity is the River School project on the Danube, which brought together artists, anthropologists, scientists, environmental historians, and so on, and where was a real spirit of intellectual generosity and sharing knowledges across disciplinary boundaries.

Aleksandra Jach: Who are your important partners and supporters? Who do you build sustainable awareness in cultural context with?

Maja and Reuben Fowkes: We work with a lot of different art institutions, universities, and non-profit organisations, with whom we share outlooks and have mutual affinities.

Aleksandra Jach: What can we learn from the experiences of 'art and ecology under socialism'? Lately I have read a few essays and books ([Naomi Oreskes/Erik Conway](#), [McKenzie Wark](#), [Jared Diamond about Haiti and Dominicana](#)) in which authors refer to communism or socialism and demonstrate that effective solutions to environmental problems can often be found outside of the regime of neoliberal democracy. What are your thoughts on this?

Maja and Reuben Fowkes: What we can learn from the experience of art and ecology under socialism is different to what socialism might mean for art and ecology. When we [research art and ecology under socialism](#) we deal with 'really existing socialism' and actual artistic practices from the period. It is clear that the socialism that existed in Eastern Europe had no effective solution for environmental problems and was based on the same model of exponential growth and extractivism underlying the capitalist

system. On the other hand, we agree that there is something to be gained from exploring the extension of Marx's analysis of the exploitation of human labour to the exploitation of the natural world, as dealt with in McKenzie Wark's *Molecular Red*, although these contemporary critiques also have a longer history reaching back to the 1960s and 70s.

Maja and Reuben Fowkes are art historians and curators who work out of Budapest and London. They are founders of the Translocal Institute for Contemporary Art, a centre for transnational research into East European art and ecology based in Budapest that operates across the disciplinary boundaries of art history, contemporary art and ecological thought.

Maja Fowkes is the author of *The Green Bloc: Neo-Avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism* (New York and Budapest: CEU Press, 2015) and has a PhD from University College London.

Reuben Fowkes's thesis at Essex University was on socialist realist public monuments in post-war Eastern Europe. They have curated numerous exhibitions, as well as a series of conferences focussing on East European art history through the SocialEast Forum and symposia on Sustainability and Contemporary Art. They publish and lecture widely on the history and aesthetics of East European art from the art production of the socialist era to contemporary artistic responses to the transformations brought by globalisation.

They teach an MA course on Visual Cultures of the Anthropocene at Central European University, as well as running a Seminar on Art and Ecological Crisis at Translocal Institute in cooperation with the Hungarian University of the Fine Arts and the Moholy

Nagy University of Art and Design. Recent projects include the



Experimental Reading Room (2014-6), the River School (2013-15)
and the exhibition Walking without Footprints
(2015-6). www.translocal.org

2015

The interview was realized thanks to the support of the Ministry of
Culture and National Heritage.

