

Conference

# radius of art

Creative politicisation of the public sphere  
Cultural potentials for social transformation



8th-9th February 2012

Heinrich Böll Foundation, Berlin

## Opening speech

by **Barbara Unmüßig**, President of the Heinrich Böll Foundation,

Dear conference participants, dear friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

it is a very special honour to be your host here at Heinrich Böll Foundation's Headquarters in Berlin and to finally welcome you all to this conference.

Yes, I said "finally", and this is to indicate that the conference has been in preparation for a period of almost 18 months. It was initiated by the "radius of art" project office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation Schleswig-Holstein.

This conference is part of the radius project "art-based research/research-based art", which is the result of a cooperation with a number of partners. These are: the Muthesius Academy of Fine Arts in Kiel; the Department for Culture and Further Education, City of Kiel; and international partners such as the project "5533" in Istanbul; the "98 Weeks" research space in Beirut; the University of Ulster in Belfast; the independent study programme Maumaus in Lisbon; and the International Academy of Art Palestine. Their representatives, and also those of associated partners – such as the Professional Association of Visual Artists Berlin (BBK Berlin) – are here today and have been actively involved in different ways in the conference formats. The "radius of art" project has been funded by the European Union and the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures. Thank you all for being here, for your commitments and the lively and fruitful cooperation over the years.

The initial idea to organise such a conference had already been conceived several years ago. The idea was to bring together scientists, activists, and policy-makers who share a transdisciplinary approach and who believe that the integration of art practices of their respective works would create new visions, perspectives, and insights. The idea was born about the time when the

UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions was approved by the UNESCO General Assembly in October of 2005.

Germany was one of the strongest supporters of the convention and I was personally engaged in the discussions here in Germany as a member of the German Commission of UNESCO. One of the Convention's guiding principles is that "the cultural wealth of this world is its diversity in dialogue". But the Convention also emphasises the need to incorporate culture as a strategic element in national and international development policies, as well as in international development cooperation. These principles, among others, inform policies and project support of the Goethe-Institut; the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa); the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit; and the Allianz Cultural Foundation. Along with the Kinderkulturkarawane in Hamburg; the Anna Lindh Foundation in Alexandria; the German Commission for UNESCO in Bonn; the University of Hildesheim's Department for Cultural Policy; and the Robert Bosch Foundation, these organisations have joined the Kiel and Berlin offices of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in preparing this conference: We are all sharing the commitment to make sure that the UNESCO Convention is translated into concrete steps and is more than just lip service.

In addition to what I have just said about the motives of partners in this conference, the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Berlin, with its 29 offices worldwide, has for many years been consistently engaged in the search for pathways of transformation towards sustainability. Twenty years ago, I took part in the first UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro. We need to understand that alongside the social, economic, and ecological pillars, culture is the fourth dimension related to the emergence of cultures of sustainability. Although we recognise this, there have been very few experiments with this dimension that are capable of generating further actions and practices. The UNESCO Convention complemented the UN's Agenda 21 and has acknowledged a central role for culture, but this is not enough. We need policies in support of – and in full recognition of – the cultural potential of art, in particular in social transformation processes. To put it in concrete terms, this means support for artistic proposals responding to contexts of poverty and social exclusion, as well as building collective platforms for the mobilisation of different social players towards public causes such as social integration, effective citizenship, human rights, multicultural dialogue, and social equity.

In June of this year, the international community will meet in Rio de Janeiro – 20 years after the first Earth Summit – to discuss new agreements, treaties, institutional reforms, and to produce new declarations. A small contribution to the missing cultural link is the thematic stream in this conference titled Art toward Cultures of Sustainability. This was conceptualised by a team at the Heinrich Böll Foundation Berlin along with passionate support from the

Cultura21 network – a transversal, translocal platform for the promotion of cultural change and cultural evolution towards societies rooted in cultures of sustainability. An essay titled “Toward Global (Environ)mental change – Transformative Art and Cultures of Sustainability” has been produced as a contribution to this conference and in preparation of discussions at the RIO+20 conference.

We strongly believe that art is not just a means or a medium. Art has an immense potential for social transformation and empowerment within communities. It can support the active process of helping to understand and displaying interdependences between different dimensions of human crisis that lead us on the search for pathways to a post-fossil fuel age, and on to a new era of human development based on aesthetics of sustainability.

It is art in public space, art in the public interest, and art as public interest that we must promote re-occupying and transforming the communication spaces within cities. It is the intuitive and transformative power of art that we need to explore and bring to fruition through the support and acknowledgment of artists works and their projects. Therefore, we will also have to discuss in this conference what type of financial, structural, or institutional support is needed to facilitate international cultural and artistic projects. For years there has been an ongoing debate in Germany over sectoral and departmental responsibilities between ministries, rather than action taken on developing integrative funding designs that can cope with recent developments and trends of the transdisciplinary nature of project designs. This also relates to finance instruments for international art cooperation. But it is not just a problem we face here in Germany. There is also a lack of appropriate funding structures internationally and a lack of democratic participation in their designs. To this point, we hope that the conference will inspire impulses that we can carry into national and international policy-making processes. One concrete idea: A Fund for Aesthetics and Sustainability has been developed and will be presented during this conference in one of the Forums; a print version will be made available for those interested.

This conference seeks to influence the cultural politics of the future. This is a high aspiration. The Heinrich Böll Foundation wants to contribute to its design and, therefore, supports visionaries and pioneers of social and ecological innovation worldwide. Artists are, among other things, special agents in this urgently needed cultural transformation process. Such a paradigm shift implies reforming our ways of learning and acting upon our knowledge of reality.

I have worked for many years on the nexus of continuing crises. After the financial crisis of 2008, I am even more convinced that we cannot leave the world in the hands of experts. We all need to get involved, each and every one of us. Aesthetics is the sum of all our perceptions. It helps us to understand complex

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systems. And we should not be afraid of complexity. This power of perception is not an exclusive realm of art, but should be claimed – reclaimed – by each and every one of us.

This is why the Heinrich Böll Foundation – both on the national and state levels – and all of the supporting partners have come together in the preparation of this conference. Let me summarise: Our mission is to promote cultural policy and funding designs that support art for social transformation processes towards cultures of sustainability; we also wish to explore the potentials of art for the public sphere and the new dimensions of knowledge production that research-based art and art-based research can offer.

I would like to thank each and every one of you for your interest in this conference and for your enduring commitment over the years. Thank you for coming to Germany from 36 different countries to debate, network, listen, practice, and learn over the next two days and – I guess – even nights.

As a matter of principle, I have refrained from the temptation to welcome any of you individually, because it would be an impossibly long list of so many extraordinary people sitting here in front of me. Let me once more express my sincere gratitude to the representatives of all cooperation and support partners of this conference who provided back-up support to offset the costs of this conference and the public evening event as well as travel costs for speakers of the conference.

All of you have mobilised your partner networks to bring in ideas and great contributions to shape the programme of this conference. Thank you all for your intellectual support and for making this conference a success.

I am very much looking forward to all your contributions.

It is my pleasure to invite now Dirk Scheelje, Member of the Board of the Heinrich Böll Foundation Schleswig-Holstein in the city of Kiel, to welcome you and to introduce the format and workflow of the conference.

Thank you very much.