

Fragile Affinities - (re)strengthening international artistic collaboration



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Panel **Focus UK**

Introduced and moderated by Johanna Zinecker (Centre for British Studies, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin), Contributions by Jeanie Scott (a-n The Artists Information Company, London), Joseph Young (Sound Artist, Brighton and Berlin) and Claudia Zeiske (Director, Deveron Projects, Huntly) Followed by a panel discussion and Q&A

„...All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing.“ (Autumn, Ali Smith, 2016, S. 59)

Johanna Zinecker (cultural scientist, Centre for British Studies, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin) introduces the UK panel of the symposium “Fragile Affinities – (re)strengthening international artistic collaboration” with this quotation from the novel "Autumn" by British author Ali Smith. According to Zinecker, "Autumn" gives an impressionistic portrait of the public mood after the EU referendum in the UK - a moment of shock - and at the same time draws the picture of a generation-spanning, truly European friendship.¹ An appropriate introduction to the topics of the conversation: artistic challenges and answers "in the wake of Brexit" and their accompanying cultural dimensions.

Zinecker quotes three potential areas of Brexit's cultural impact according to the Arts Council England, the Arts Quarter and the Cultural Industry Federation: First - changing funding conditions for the cultural sector, both in terms of access to EU funding and of potential cuts in UK funding during periods of economic recession. Secondly - negative effects of a possibly limited freedom of goods and mobility of persons in the future. And thirdly - business and legal issues, such as copyright, or taxation and employment conditions in the arts. Undoubtedly, there seems to be a quite general potential threat to artistic quality coming along with the Brexit, in the face of economic uncertainty and of potentially reduced cultural exchange. But, reminds us Zinecker: Brexit remains a "moving target" as of now. The uncertainty of further negotiation results will only allow us to talk about potential consequences or developments at this symposium.

The majority of the British people may have voted for the Brexit ("leave"), Zinecker continues, but an overwhelming majority of the art industry, of academics, and residents of the country's creative centers voted "remain." The only thing certain after the outcome of the EU referendum seems to be, that the society is divided and that more social cohesion is needed. Since the "leave" vote, the potential power of the arts has repeatedly been invoked for a stronger solidarity in public. Also the importance of culture for identity issues in the context of Brexit has been stressed over and over again – both in the UK and throughout Europe. But of course, resumes Zinecker, this call for the artists carries a certain irony, considering that 90% of the cultural sector, including the artists themselves, voted against Brexit. Wishing for artists to be "healers against social division" blurs the fact that the arts and culture sector itself forms part of this social division, which it should alleviate. Furthermore, until the end of 2017, there was not a single word in the Brexit negotiations on culture (politics). It is precisely for this reason, argues Zinecker as a transition to the following panelists, that it is important to make voices of art and culture heard, and to act up. Since June 2016, many artists have responded both personally and artistically to the Brexit referendum, and have become more involved in the public debate. This can be understood as a politicization of the arts in the UK post referendum.

Jeanie Scott - a-n's "Free Move Create"-Campagne

Jeanie Scott, director of the British artist association “a-n the artist information company”, gives up-to-date figures on the current situation of visual artists in the UK. In the months following the Brexit vote, a-n questioned their more than 22,000 members, together with other partner organizations, about the (potential) upheavals of the “leave vote”.

According to Scott, the vast majority of a-n's members lives in an income situation below the so-called poverty line. A problem not only for the artists themselves, but also for the future of artistic diversity in the UK, if only

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/12/autumn-ali-smith-review> (02.02.2018)

those who can "afford it" become artists or art students and populate art galleries. The reasons for this trend are both economic and endemic: artists have no economic status in the UK, and still it is too often expected of them that they will work for little or no salary.

In addition, Scott continues, the surveys find that more than half of the self-employed artists increase their income with several precarious jobs and thus find themselves in a vicious circle: the more time spent on "other work", the less time is left for artistic activity and the professional and financial development in this field. Last but not least, the total available amount of job offers and budgets for fine artists has shrunk over the last years in the UK: in 2007 - a year before the recession in the UK - there were still GBP 27 million available, in 2016 only GBP 22 million.

Approx. 2,200 visual artists from other EU countries live in the UK these days, contributing to the economy and to cultural offerings, generally with a great interest in remaining in the country. The main concerns are the loss of international mobility and of protection legislation as currently maintained by the EU, for example in the field of intellectual property or for anti-discrimination rights. So-called "Brexit insecurity" has increased substantially: 14% fewer journeys by artists took place between the UK and the EU in this context, 19% report higher labor costs since Brexit, 13% say the Brexit-vote had a negative impact on sales, 8-10% report fewer funds and chances overall.

Scott predicts, all of this could have consequences for the "big markets" also. Even though the UK was still the second largest art market in the world in 2016 (accounting for 21% of the total world art market) and even though this market is far from the reality of most artists, in the end, also this upscale market is dependent on a continuous offspring. Interferences between the various levels of the market clearly suggest that young artists should not have to face unrealistic financial or bureaucratic hurdles. Furthermore, Scott puts forward the thesis: If the professional status of artists were to be officially recognised, the potential to adopt an ESTA-like approach (ESTA: Electronic System for Travel Authorization) to unrestricted travel for an extended period of time for artists and creatives could be possible. There could be a potential role for the International Association of Art (IAA) Artists Identity Card in this.

a-n's polls, Scott summarizes, have revealed a true "loss" due to Brexit in the British artist community. Not only financial worries, but also fear and anger over the outcome of the referendum. Many artists now use their work to examine and understand the national divide created by the vote. Others have guided their activism further into political campaigns.

Joseph Young – „Ich bin mit der Gesamtsituation unzufrieden“

Joseph Young has taken on this challenge and reacted to the Brexit movement quite early on in his artistic work. On the podium of the academy he shows various examples of his work and tackles the matter with humor: under the Twitter hashtag #woofereferendum dogs post political statements and visions for the country and community and under the title "I remoaner", Young covered The Knack's "My Sharona" as a "remain anthem". And as the fictional political figure Guiseppe Marinetti, Young filmed his exchange with "Brexiters" and "Remoaners" in public places. It generally seems that humor and accessibility are the order of the day. Repeatedly there is talk of having to reach the individual people, the voters: "Act local - think global" and "Art must descend from its ivory tower". The general mistrust of the British people towards politicians is being cited by the audience as well as the problem of the downright binary political system in Britain, which apparently leads to less and less political positioning. Young concludes his presentation with a simple and strong thesis on political culture: "There are no conservatives anymore." For Young, the supposedly conservative groups in the UK are already well beyond traditional conservatism. Regrettably, no rational discourse is possible any more with such, in Young's words, "conservative 'collective madness'".

Claudia Zeiske – "The town is the venue"

"Act local - think global" is exactly what Claudia Zeiske pursues with Deveron Projects in Huntly, Scotland. Zeiske and her team are explicitly trying to reach a wider audience than the traditional art audience, their approach is artistic *and* social. Entire communities are explored and activated by their projects. The motto of Deveron Projects is "the town is the venue". Zeiske presents some of the works: the "White Wood", planted in 2015 by the artist Caroline Wendling with citizens in Huntly, with acorns from Joseph-Beuys-oaks from Kassel and limestones brought along from France. Or the project "What If?" (2017) by Manaf Halbouni, devising an alternative Sykes-Picot agreement and staging a different course of global history.² Or Claudia Zeiske's own *home to home* hike in the summer of 2017 from Huntly to her Bavarian birthplace Unterpfaffenhofen: where is home in a post-Brexit Europe?

² Sykes Picot Agreement: the agreement of 1916, according to which colonial interests in the Middle East after the end of the Ottoman Empire were divided between France and England.

All projects address global social issues in a local context and involve the immediate neighborhood in discussions, workshops, events, and activities right in the community. Each time a 50/50 template serves as a basis and starting point for individual projects: art/ community, critique/ empathy, local/ global, ... These are applied examples, of how the arts and artists may go beyond the closed circle of the classical art public.

To reach a public audience directly and, not least as artists, to actively convey experiences and results to the political representatives - these were the final demands on the UK podium of the symposium. The works depicted are all successful examples of the potential of the arts for actively dealing with current challenges. But of course there remains the fear that exactly such projects could suffer the consequences of Brexit in the near future. Such artistic works require a constant flow and exchange between artists, specialists and newcomers from various locations and areas of the world. We shall see how this will all still be exercisable in a post-Brexit UK.