

Art Initiatives in Fragile and Conflict Affected Regions

Notes for a KOFF roundtable discussion, initiated by *artasfoundation* in November 2016

Introduction

Art initiatives in fragile and conflict affected contexts receive growing attention. A broad spectrum of strategies has evolved, integrating perspectives and skills from different fields, such as artistic production, international cooperation, cultural management, peacebuilding, and humanitarian work. Both during violent conflict, as well as in post-conflict phases, individual artists, civil society activists, international NGOs and governmental actors have gained experience with "good practices" and unsuccessful approaches.

The KOFF roundtable aims at sharing these experiences, in order to discuss and critically reflect on the potentials and challenges of art initiatives in fragile and conflict affect regions among professionals from different "communities" such as peacebuilding, development cooperation, humanitarian work and art.

Art invites us to relate to the world in a special way

In the last decade the international peace-building community became increasingly aware of the catalysing role of artists and art (music, visual art poetry, dance...) in protests against state repression or resistance movements. Scholars and donors then also began to look at activities, which had interested practitioners in this field since longer time, namely artistic responses to post-conflict situations and reconciliation processes. In development cooperation a parallel rise of interest in art-based approaches, particularly for working in fragile contexts could be observed.

In these discussions the term "art" has often been misleadingly conflated with "culture". Thus, within the present, general concern about "conflicts between cultures" or about "strategically harnessing cultural differences in struggles for power" the contours of this evolving, more specific concern with art (or "culture" in a narrow sense) have sometimes been blurred.

In this context I propose to describe the meaning of "art" as an invitation to look at the world in a special way. In everyday life, we often act on the basis of a functional attitude. We strive to use resources, in particular our own time resources, efficiently, and to act providently. Only in special moments do we allow ourselves to enter into a space for the assumption of plenitude where foresight can be put aside and we can allow ourselves to experiment with possibilities. Personal sovereignty is the name of the capacity of human beings to bracket even the most urgent every-day needs and worries and enter into this space. It is the space of laughter, of hospitality, of experiencing beauty. Perhaps it is the space one has to enter for change to happen (even the changes needed for peace-building). This space opens up when we shift to relating to the world in a way, which philosophy describes as aesthetic relationship. What I propose to call "art", then, are actions or artefacts, that invite us to shift to such an aesthetic perspective, actions or artefacts that sometimes even cannot make sense, unless we view them aesthetically.

A precise understanding of the exact potentials, risks and challenges of art initiatives in fragile and conflict affected regions requires a collaboration between experts from several different fields (political science, international relations, peace-building, art theory, art practice...). This might be the reason why, in spite of the growing interest in art-based approaches, there is still too little research and literature about (for a list of initial references see:

www.artasfoundation.ch/de/ressourcen).

But there is also - and this could be reached in a much shorter time-span - too little exchange between practitioners working with art in different regions of the world (people in development cooperation or peace-building who commission or organise art initiatives, and artists or art-educators who implement them). The newly offered further education course at the Zurich University of the Arts (https://www.zhdk.ch/index.php?id=furthereducation_aic) joins a series of small, initial initiatives towards such an exchange, the planned KOFF-round table is another one. The following remarks on potentials and challenges of art initiatives should contribute to this meeting.

Potentials and challenges of art initiatives

Reflecting about the potentials of art initiatives in fragile regions one might try to differentiate according to conflict phases, as done in table 1. Still, while pointing to the wide scope of art-initiatives, such a division of the potentials of art according to conflict phases is very rough, as rough, as - this is well known - is the description of a society in all its sectors by means of a phase-model.

Table 1:

The potentials of art in different phases of conflict

When conflict is latent or emergent, art initiatives can

- ask "hot questions" and make conflicts visible;
- bring people together for discussion and contribute to the activation of a public sphere;
- connect people to act together (in constructive or destructive ways!);
- create new links to isolated population groups or countries;
- give a voice or visibility to ignored minorities;
- open a space for experimenting with new conceptions of self and other;
- offer a realm for (self-)expression, (self-)respect and dignity where economic perspectives are lacking;
- ...

When conflict is escalating, i.e. during direct violence, art initiatives can

- maintain and provide a space of "civilisation" and discussion;
- provide a frame for expressing emotions in a safe way
- invite the „sovereignty of laughter“ (relativising the situation);
- ...

In post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation, and long term peace building art initiatives can

- demonstrate that life is returning in the direction of „normality“;
- create an occasion for diversion and joy;
- offer rituals for mourning;
- provide a space to share/hear different and conflicting (hi-)stories;
- give an impulse to leave a „victim“ status behind and to take initiative;
- initiate group-cooperation and reduce isolation;
- offer an occasion to collaborate for members of (formerly) opposing sides;
- provide form for expressing traumatic experiences (art-therapy);
- lead to potential sources of small income;
- ...

From the potentials of art it is only a small step to its challenges. Those reach much further than the - one is tempted to say - "usual" challenges people from privileged countries face, when working in development cooperation or peace-building. In fact, I will argue below that they can put some of the underlying assumptions of such work in question.

But first one remark: As capacities, potentials of art (as those listed in table 1) need not automatically lead in a "positive" (i.e. constructive or peaceful) direction. Positive directions are quite likely for some of them (e.g. the art's capacity to incite discussion), but for other potentials (e.g. the art's capacity to connect people) one needs to differentiate: Shared aesthetic tastes, or - on a more physical level - shared rhythms have a strong binding capacity, which can easily be used by people in power (be it with "good" or "bad" intentions). From their controlling position (over the microphone, or ... over marketing and media) they can charge this binding force with quality: with a "warm" sense of belonging, which enables inner differences and openness towards others, or with a pressure towards unification and strict in-group vs. out-group boundaries, which ultimately means violence. Thus it has to be part of every conflict analysis for art initiatives in fragile regions to clarify whether a newly forming group has a chance to be lead by "connectors".

It is important to note, that the strong binding capacity of art, that is, its capacity to connect people in the first place, does not work via unification and boundary-drawing. Art actually can serve as a counter-force to unification. Some works of art are able to speak to people over distances of centuries or across cultures

and can give access to many different (but not arbitrary) interpretations. Their precise rhythm, so to say, can host and connect many individual rhythms in one. Rating the quality of works of art is difficult, but I would argue that it has to do with this capacity of holding difference, of connecting people without reducing them to the same. Thus one could say that even if conflict analysis erred and power holders tried to use art for in/exclusion, striving for outmost artistic quality would be the best way for art projects to protect themselves and contribute to peace.

An even more fundamental challenge for art initiatives in fragile regions is related to, what I'd like to call, "the question of intentionality". It is of central importance for art, and via art-initiatives it could also move into the focus of the general discourse on peace-building and development cooperation. I use "intentional" to characterise a process, which starts from a defined state and is oriented towards a pre-given objective. It is a way of proceeding from a place one can identify, towards a result, which can be described beforehand and does not first have to arise out of the process itself. (It is of secondary importance who was the source of this definition of original state and objective.)

In striving for precision and often also in proceeding quite systematically, artistic work is similar to such intentional work according to a given plan. But it differs fundamentally in its logic. Let's take a proto-typical example of an artistic process: It is organised in a way that is able to lead to an outcome one did not know and could not foresee. As such, it is like other forms of research. But other than research processes, which use creativity for problem solving, artistic creativity does not start out with a given problem. It rather begins from an observation or irritation, which attracts the personal interest of an artist, who then follows its different aspects or threads to see where they might lead. Hereby the infinity of possible paths is greatly reduced by the respective personalities of the artists and by certain frames or procedural rules they deliberately set for themselves. These frames, however, cannot be equated to the goal of a plan. When working according to a plan, the goal provides the direction. In artistic work, by contrast, the compass is a physical sensation, which stimulates the intellect. It is a feeling (not an emotion) of coherence and richness, and of excitement (which art theory takes as the criterion for "aesthetic judgement"), a very subjective criterion, which we nevertheless might be able to share.

Intentionality and Instrumentalisation

How can such a logic of artistic processes fit into the intentional processes of peace building or development work, who put much effort into describing the problematic of a present situation and elaborating what better situations should be aimed at? Who even demand for themselves a "theory of change" to explicate why a certain strategy could be useful for leading from a problematic present to a better future -- maybe even to explicate why an art-initiative might have the potential to contribute to this aim?!

When considering the potentials of art (like those listed in table 1) it is easy to imagine that an art project might be successful in contributing to conflict resolution or development, even if (or as long as!) such ends have not been intended by the artists who conducted it. Artists may, for example, in some theatre production in a post-war situation, just have wished to perform again and may have been interested in a certain play, perhaps even a norm-provoking one. Still,

or perhaps just because of this, they may have created amongst the spectators the feeling that "life is returning in the direction of normality".

But asking the other way: can art unfold its potentials for peace-building or social transformation if their realisation via an art project is actually intended?

My provisional answer is this:

Even though artistic processes cannot work according to a logic of intention, the aim of peace-building or social transformation can be built into the above mentioned "frame", within which the artistic process can unfold. Such a frame might be given by the setting in which an art project takes place (e.g. a war-affected village) and/or by the personality and previous experience of an artist. In art projects which I initiate, I try to separate the role of the artist from my frame-setting role as a curator. It is the task of the curator to have a plan, to identify the war-affected context, analyse it, invite "appropriate" artists on the basis of their previous works, and give them some basic orientation. The curator then only interferes in the artistic process if the artists wish a partner for discussion, and otherwise hold the tension between the curatorial intentions that were involved in setting the frame and the art process itself. In this way they try to open a *Spielraum* for unexpected, context specific possibilities.

Spielraum for unexpected, context specific possibilities may be needed for peace building or social transformation as well. Here, where no recipes can be given and models can not easily be transferred from one context to another, the logic of art projects might actually be helpful. It would mean limiting intentionality to the most general framework for action and holding open - in spite of institution's and donor's needs to plan and control - a safe space for experimenting and for following even seemingly irrelevant observations, to see where they might lead: perhaps to peaceful social relations one could not think of before.

Dagmar Reichert, Nov. 2016

The text is also accessible on the
webpage of artasfoundation:
<http://www.artasfoundation.ch/de/hintergrundtexte>