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**ANTJE SCHIFFERS. GREETING IS EVERYWHERE:
SOME CROSS-CULTURAL TALES**

In the course of her career, Antje Schiffers (Heiligendorf, Germany, 1967) has developed a body of work and line of research that are highly coherent in their exploration of different aspects of the rural world and "traditional" economies as places of cultural production. The primary sector of the economy—its management methods, economic scales, formulas for passing on knowledge, the symbolic heritage associated with rural life, the presence and relevance of small population centres, etc.—is undergoing drastic changes that are often viewed as tangential to macroeconomic issues and mainstream economic, cultural or artistic discourses of progress. However, this attitude is being challenged on several fronts. Certain structures have worked and are working against it, several initiatives have been launched, and a number of artists like Schiffers have wrought a corpus of work that emphasizes cultural negotiation, contact, exchange and dialogue, attempting to gain a broader perspective of the opportunity and current relevance of economic and/or cultural peripheries.

EXCHANGE

The cultural and economic heritage of the primary sector has great sociocultural significance, for it represents an important part of the heritage of an entire community in particular and of humankind in general. As public or communal property whose ownership and status are often hazily defined, the balance between preserving this heritage and promoting the supposedly more important macroeconomic areas is precarious, to say the least. This is reflected in the widespread deterioration of cultural heritage and, by extension, in the social and symbolic lack of resources required to protect, restore, preserve, maintain, renew and make it available to both the general public and researchers. The rate of deterioration is truly alarming in many countries, where a short-sighted obsession with rapid progress seems to be running roughshod over an alternative view of the economic and cultural scale descended directly from the time-honoured traditions of the primary economic sectors.

The survival of this heritage is not assured in any country, much less in the so-called developing nations, where the evidence shows that cultural heritage is rapidly vanishing under the yoke of standardization "imposed" by the powers-that-be. The fact is that current protection

policies are too ineffectual and the existing institutional framework is too inefficient to protect, promote and renew the economic and symbolic heritage of production areas considered incidental to the global discourse and frequently associated with the local, in many cases the smallest, most specific definition of the local. The rural versus urban debate is still a crucial part of world culture and, more specifically, European culture, largely due to the global changes now taking place. To a large extent, the generic goal of Schiffers's work is to trigger debates and generate projects based on practices that explore the ideal of the rural in the discourse of the arts and contemporary development, barter and exchange practices and systems that facilitate the redistribution of both resources and knowledge.

There are several excellent examples of communal solidarity and exchange in our past and in many present-day situations. Since the dawn of humanity, every society has produced, distributed and exchanged goods. There are three types of exchange: reciprocity, redistribution and market exchange. These forms of distribution are related to a mode of production (with all that entails in terms of social relationships, techniques, ownership of resources, etc.) and each society has a dominant system of exchange depending on the type of distribution. Different forms of exchange can coexist but one will always prevail over the others, as we find in traditional systems studied by anthropologists: the gift exchange examined by Mauss in his *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, the *Kula* system studied by Malinowski, and the potlatch explored by Boas.

Today these traditional systems of exchange have been replaced by the market, but this does not mean that similar systems of redistribution are not flourishing outside the market. Think, for example, of the community soup kitchens that emerged in many Latin American countries in the 1990s and more recently in Spain as a result of the current crisis, or the concept of "solidarity bartering" that has given rise to a time banking system in different European contexts, where the basic unit of currency is one hour of time spent providing any type of service, from personal care and massages to home repairs. The first and most obvious aim of such practices is to forge interpersonal bonds of solidarity that promote an alternative economic system based on a repository of social, communal and individual wealth which is given value and shared through interaction and trust within a community network.

These exchange systems are based on the premise that each and every person knows how to do something useful that can be shared with others. The rules of time banking stipulate that participants must not only give but also receive, offer as well as need, something we are unaccustomed to hearing in this society of abundance and consumerism, of inequality and increasingly wider gaps, of self-sufficiency and volunteerism. The principle of balancing out the

willingness to offer and need to receive avoids the conventional structure of charitable volunteer work, where some give but do not take and where there is a clear distinction between those in a position of dependency-inferiority and those in a place of power-superiority. Time banks are therefore a good exercise in active participation that allows two people to interact and exchange their services for mutual benefit, an act which opens physical and psychological doors to a greater respect for and understanding of the other. They also represent active, co-responsible alternatives in a society where citizens are often reduced to mere consumers.

The various experiences that fall under this operative umbrella, like the soup kitchens and time banks mentioned above, extend beyond the private realm and acquire particular political significance in contexts plagued by increasingly severe shortcomings. This has happened in several widely publicized cases, such as the alternative economic systems that developed in Argentina during the financial crisis of the 1990s, driven by people's basic need to survive. However, there are earlier, albeit less famous precedents in Europe and the United States. We can trace the concept of time banking back to several European experiments in the 1980s, such as the Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) in the United Kingdom or the Local Exchange System (SEL) and the Movement of Networks for Reciprocal Knowledge Exchange (MRES), both in France. Two experiences stand out as direct precedents of the modern time banking experience: the Time Dollar in the US and the Time Bank in England, which later spread to the rest of the world and aimed to improve the living conditions of society's most vulnerable members, and the first time banks created in southern Europe, especially Italy, most of which were created by communities of women to facilitate work-life balance.

In Spain today we can find many and varied examples of service exchange systems. Some are organized by community and neighbourhood associations as just one of several initiatives to promote self-organization, alternative economics, responsible consumption and better quality of life, based on a humane and sustainable approach to time management. In Madrid we find the Ecologists in Action Barter Cooperative, the Time Bank of the Carabanchel Alto Community Plan, and the El Foro barter cooperative. In Seville the flagship institution is Casa del Pumarejo, which even has its own community currency, the PUMA. Right now these kinds of practices are also being implemented by the city government of Seville, which has been operating its own time bank in the districts of Nervión and San Pablo-Santa Justa for several months now.

Despite their obvious social benefits, such practices often meet with stiff opposition. Following the reasoning of Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Liquid Love*, we might say

that, just as modern nation-states could not tolerate "men without masters" and expanding empires could not accept "lands without owners", so today's markets cannot tolerate non-market markets. The concepts of exchange, mutual assistance and cooperation that underpin interpersonal bonds are apparently very irksome because they do not endorse the production of aggressive, impatient capitalism or the view of citizens as mere consumers that dominates this new millennium.

Consolidating and inventing alternative, more or less formal systems and networks of solidarity and coexistence and ways of managing and spreading knowledge, and recognizing and promoting those that already exist but have been rendered invisible by the prevailing utilitarian ideology—such actions force us to cross certain boundaries, open up new spaces of encounter, seek formulas of communication and make knowledge more accessible. And this is precisely what Antje Schiffers does in many different ways: she travels and comes into contact with other people and cultures, invents roles for herself to make that contact effective, and creates temporary platforms on which she can explore the potential richness of human exchange.

JOURNEY

The exhibition *Welcomes Are Everywhere: Some Cross-Cultural Tales*, hosted by the CAAC in Seville and featuring the work of Antje Schiffers, is conceived as a journey or voyage through the professional career of an artist who works individually, in collaboration with Thomas Sprenger and collectively with Myvillages, an artistic initiative founded in 2003 with Wapke Feenstra and Kathrin Bohm. Her spirit of cooperation and networking is not limited to artists, for she has also worked with many other people, including farmers, ranchers, craftspeople, factory workers and residents of such far-flung places as Mexico or Kazakhstan, where the artist lived for a time.

This exhibition-voyage is adapted, in a kind of refined narrative, to the corridor and different galleries occupied by her works. The sequential arrangement of the show turns the halls of the former Carthusian monastery into chapters of a story about Antje Schiffers's projects and about the narratives and people that have interacted in the course of their production in many different locations.

The presence of foreign or allochthonous elements in what is now home to the CAAC is nothing new; rumour has it that Christopher Columbus is buried in the old monastery, although no one knows for sure and there is no historical documentation to support this hypothesis. But there is an ancient ombu tree on the grounds—planted by Columbus himself, some say, or by

his son, according to others—that testifies to a remote overseas bond with the Americas. That association with the New World and that colonial air is also related to the fact that Seville maintained an intense interaction with all of Latin America and Spain's former colonies because it was the point of departure and arrival for ships travelling to and from the Americas in the 17th century.

This idea of the colonies, the exotic and the relationship with otherness or difference ties in with Schiffers's work. Through her projects, the German artist has interacted with realities that are alien to her and resided in different countries around the world, and this experience has produced a number of works and projects which, when transferred to the exhibition hall, constitute two voyages: a journey through the artist's creations and, through them, an exploration of the places, times and cultures Schiffers has experienced.

Antje has produced wall drawings from time to time, primarily as props that serve to contextualize a project in an exhibition venue or evoke a certain landscape and experience. In the CAAC show these wall drawings, more numerous than is usual in Schiffers's exhibitions, take us on a tour of the different projects she has produced in distant and diverse lands, effectively revisiting those projects and landscapes. At the same time, they constitute a record of the artist's trajectory, but the "documentation" is presented in a way unlike anything she has done on previous occasions.

PROJECTS

This voyage or tour is actually a metaphor for the journey, an important and omnipresent element in Schiffers's oeuvre. Her projects vary widely: some are the product of a specific moment, place and situation, while others evolve slowly over months or years, but all are rooted in the same logic of mobility, travel, contact and exchange. A case in point is *Da wo ich war* (1998), created in the Mexican village of Chicahuaxtla at an altitude of 3,000 metres above sea level. In this project, where the easiest thing is to interpret it in anthropological and ethnological terms, the artist sketched a series of flowers, as if on a 19th-century botanical expedition, which became a vehicle for discovering, communicating and interacting with this Mexican setting so entirely unlike her native Germany. In that same project, she invited the villagers to use her camera and processing equipment and learn how to develop photographs, establishing an exchange of useful knowledge between the local community and the foreign artist.

She used the same strategies in other projects like *Bin in der Steppe* (2002) and *Unsere Frau in Minsk* (2004), creating an exchange strategy that served as the basis for one of her latest

and most ambitious projects: *Ich bin gerne Bauer und möchte es auch gerne bleiben*. Begun in 2007 and compiled in a publication documenting this extensive evolving project, released by the Städtische Galerie Nordhorn to accompany the eponymous show held from December 2009 to February 2010, the work is still in progress today (in fact, it was expanded in Spain in 2012 with the *Campo Adentro/Inland* project) and has become a kind of archive on the reality of agriculture and the rural world in Europe. The procedures involved in the project are very simple: the artist paints a picture for the farmer and he (often with his family) records a video (almost always edited by Thomas Sprenger) in which he talks about running the farm, his past life, the type of work he does today and his hopes for the future.

Schiffers adopted a relational methodology based on exchange for another of her well-known works. *Vorratskammer* was a project developed with Myvillages that aimed to feed the estimated 8,000 people who attended the Über Lebenskunst Festival at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. The pantry-stocking campaign began in the summer of 2010, and soon the shelves were filled with victuals as well as questions, topics, collaborations and discoveries shared by the project team and visitors. Who produces what kinds of food in the Berlin area? What does it mean to be local in a multicultural, cosmopolitan context? Where do animals live and where are they slaughtered? What happens if we have a wet summer and heavy rains drown the crops? Where do the rural and urban worlds meet? Conversations with local food producers led to barter, purchases made at fair prices and even gifts.

Bartering played an important role in the project, though it also involved a significant number of outright donations and market-price purchases. In August 2011, everything that had been collected and prepared up to that point was placed in an enormous pantry at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, a gallery in Berlin. An outdoor kitchen operated throughout the summer, and there were festive banquets, presentations, a barbeque and water and beer on tap. The Vorratskammer Garden House on the rooftop terrace became a gathering place for many of the 80 co-producers and the general public, offering countless conversations, explanations and debates as well as food and drink. Many who showed up would simply sit together, sharing the moment. By the last night of the festival the pantry had been emptied, but the project was immortalized in a splendid publication designed by Kristina Brusa and released by argobooks (Berlin, Germany) and Jap Sam Books (Heinigen, the Netherlands).

ROLES

In order to realize these projects, which rely so heavily on interaction, the artist must play a certain role. Schiffers explored the idea of these quasi-fictional, temporary roles in a project entitled *Wunderbar, sagt Vladimir* (2005), which entailed a swap with Roland Berger Strategy

Consultants: a "strategic concept for the Antje Schiffers company" in exchange for a painting by the artist. However, perhaps the clearest example of this type of strategy in Schiffers's work is *Hauptsache man hat Arbeit* (2003), where she worked for ContiTech as a "corporate artist". Schiffers performed this obviously fictitious job for several months, working for a rubber manufacturing company in the Continental AG Group. During that time she painted murals for several spaces at the company's head office and decorated their booth at a trade fair in Hannover with oil paintings.

Playing these roles has allowed the artist to personally experience displacement, travel and contact with persons or situations outside her comfort zone and the art world. Such roles are very evident in this exhibition because they are essential to the development of the projects installed at the CAAC. The resources she uses, a very special kind of documentation, reveal details about each project, the context in which it unfolded, the people who were involved, the materials produced, the time invested... In short, they describe the trajectory and journey of research and exploration undertaken by Antje Schiffers, who has visited many places and been welcomed everywhere, and who has found something interesting to discuss and share with all of us in each location.

The exhibition *Welcomes Are Everywhere: Some Cross-Cultural Tales* is rather like a tableaux of different works by Antje that attempts to introduce a new display format or make this staged scenario part of the discourse. The show's itinerary reviews the artist's career, but at the same time it weaves a tale or discourse using the plot devices of works, murals, drawings, loans and contributions or video documents to conjure up (a) certain landscape(s) and experience(s). These are "revisited" and simultaneously "recreated" insofar as, beyond mere documentary exercises, they function as elements that spark a debate about crucial issues related to informal or peripheral economies (exchange, barter, rural life, agriculture, etc.) and the contemporary art agenda (situated and contextual practices, exercises in dialogue, relational experiences, experiments in exchange and interaction, collaborative praxes or the social and cultural uses of a certain type of "lowly" information and the status it is accorded).

DEBATES

In the 1970s and 80s, feminist activist and critic Lucy R. Lippard developed an entire theoretical apparatus in an attempt to rid the art world of what she perceived as its social amnesia and anti-historical attitude. Those theories led to a series of artistic praxes that were connected to "life". This immersion in reality and the world had a concrete objective in most cases, as it was understood that the action and effect of such praxes could not be limited to the hermetic framework of institutional venues but instead should focus on creating productive,

expanding loops or instigating changes beyond the boundaries of the art world. In *Mapping the Terrain* (1995), Suzanne Lacy noted how certain artists in the 1970s set their sights beyond the institutional framework, attempting to identify realities outside of art and generate useful, operational artistic praxes within those realities. Perhaps, going back to Lippard's idea, these new forms of art can only be found in social energies not yet recognized as art.

The third tenet of La Société Anonyme's *Redefinition of Artistic Practices* points in the same direction: "'Works of art' do not exist. What do exist are labourers and practices that we can call artistic. They have to do with meaningful, affective and cultural production, and they have specific roles in relation to the subjects of experience. Yet they have nothing to do with the production of specific objects, but rather only with the public impetus of certain circulatory effects: effects of meaning, symbolic effects, intensive and affective effects..."

The idea exemplified by the work of Lippard and La Société Anonyme was part of a radical tendency in the arts which, among other things, challenged the dominant capital and market structures, refusing to perpetuate the inflated production of "art objects" that had characterized previous periods. A new trend of de-materialized, process-based production was posited as an alternative. This approach underscored the importance of contextual work, focusing on concrete places or situations that could be redefined and transformed through processes triggered by artistic action and research.

Such practices, often centred on exchange, interaction and situated, contextual communication, reveal the intersection of disciplines, fields of action, practices and theories where contemporary cultural production is articulated, an intersection that is also the springboard for exploring cultural policies in the context of society, economics or politics. Such dialogical, interactive dynamics were later revived in a trend that scholars began to analyse in the 1990s called "relational art", which attached greater importance to the relationships established between and with the intended subjects of artistic activity than to any particular artistic object. The works devised by proponents of this artistic trend tend to unfold in connection with ordinary activities and settings, making the local context the primary stage of action.

Nicholas Bourriard, former co-director of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, is credited with coining the term "relational art" or "relational aesthetics", which inspired the title of his book *Esthétique relationnelle* (1998) and first appeared in the exhibition catalogue *Traffic* (1996). This practice underscores the fact that art is not necessarily the objects themselves but the meaningful relationships that spring from them and their interaction with people.

These new artistic practices that define the aesthetic, intellectual and, above all, attitudinal horizon of Antje Schiffers appear in her projects and in recurring themes and interests in the German artist's oeuvre, adopting a wide variety of formats and perspectives: informal presentations and meetings, collaborative projects, personal interactions and public debates, collecting or sharing information about farming or culinary practices, repositories of documentary material or food, bartering and many other forms of managing knowledge that were commonplace until fairly recently and today—in the scenario of systemic crisis that defines our times—present themselves as feasible options or alternatives.

CONTEXT

Schiffers' projects suggest new interpretations of the relationship between folk art and contemporary art, or between the autochthonous and the allochthonous, of the work as a commodity, and, in sum, of the problems, hopes and future prospects of traditional craftsmanship, agriculture or animal husbandry in these times of crisis for Europe in general and, in the particular case of the CAAC exhibition, for the region of Andalusia where the museum is based.

Some of Schiffers's works presented here were produced in other places (most of which have already been mentioned here) and unrelated contexts, which means there is a risk that they may not be understood here or viewed as exercises in "cultural skydiving". In order to clarify the nature and logic of those works and connect them to the Andalusian context, the artist has come up with different contextual elements to serve as guidelines for new creations inspired by the CAAC orchard's produce (especially the marmalade made by nuns at the Convent of Santa Paula from oranges grown just outside the museum), the Pickman factory's famous Cartuja ceramics (resulting in splendid cookware with decorative themes from the *Vechtewaren* project), the summer and autumn dishes explained to us by the expert cook, housewife and Seville native Mari Carmen Macías the year before preparations for the project began (which in some ways are very similar to the victuals depicted in Francisco Barrera's Baroque paintings, now held at the Museo de Bellas Artes of Seville), the installation made from odd remnants of a Sevillian processional May cross, or the new additions to the "archives" of *Ich bin gerne Bauer und möchte es auch gerne bleiben*, a project carried out at the Yñiguez Ovando farm in Extremadura and with the beekeeper Juan Antonio García in Cuevas del Becerro (Málaga).

These new creations incorporate common themes and interests in Schiffers's oeuvre and are both opportune and necessary in this age of constant change, as they may direct us to

symbolic and practical horizons that will allow us to overcome this impasse; what we need now are systemic transformations at every level which, like the artist, make humanity the focal point of our endeavours, debates and thoughts. Today it seems that travel, contact, relationship, dialogue, exchange and interaction are more vital than ever if we hope to weather the new and shifting realities of the political and of politics in the broadest, most radical sense of the word.

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