



Sacha Kagan's News and Blog

← Talk in Singapore on March 12th

## Let artists shape a resilient city

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*I published a short opinion piece in "The Straits Times" (Singapore) last Thursday (April 10th 2014). As Singapore newspapers are hard to find for many of us in the rest of the world, here's the text of that piece (I had to keep it very short and fulfill the edit requests of the newspaper... I am also doing a longer article in a book to be published soon by the organizers of the i Light symposium).*

Last month (March) I was invited to give a keynote address on art and sustainability at the i Light Symposium held at the URA Centre in Maxwell Rd. The aim of the conference was to bring together leading thinkers in the area of Light and Art, interrogating art's power to improve society. I had diverse conversations with artists, architects, social scientists and others, on unsustainable development. I visited neighbourhoods ranging from Marina Bay to Bukit Brown.

These first impressions raised my awareness of the specific challenges of urban resilience for Singapore. In particular, impending climate change raises the question of Singapore's "resilience" to serious future crises. Will it survive when the trusted approaches that granted wealth and stability to the island in the past will be severely tested?

The concept of "resilience" comes from the scientific study of how natural and social systems, in the past, have managed (or not) to survive by evolving in response to changing circumstances. Species, ecosystems and societies that have proved able to survive extreme crises share three characteristics:

☐ "Redundancy" or having multiple pathways to doing similar things. Redundancy, however, is severely reduced by efficiency. Efficiently organised societies generally have less redundancy, thereby threatening their resilience.

☐ Diversity, for example, having multiple ways to see the world and express ourselves, as well as multiple ways to learn from experience and transmit knowledge. Cultural diversity as well as biological diversity should be preserved and even increased.

☐ Self-organisation, or the ability of communities, neighbourhoods and groups of people to organise themselves help determine their responses to crises. This goes against the expectation that direction should come from the top. It also goes against the naive expectation that some natural market laws will spontaneously solve problems.

Urban resilience requires the realisation of these three characteristics through a city's fabric. Singapore has a rich cultural diversity, but there is much room for progress concerning the other two characteristics.

One promising way for cities to develop these qualities of resilience is through art. I do not mean the promotion of commercial art or art for art's sake. Rather, the involvement of artists and other unconventional creative people in the process of urban development, to help un-plan our cities. Artists should be allowed to shape spaces where the creative and experimental spirit of the city's inhabitants is stimulated.

Contemporary city-dwellers should be allowed to freely re-imagine possible futures and experiment with more sustainable ways of life. Creative, non-commercial "spaces of possibility" are needed, countering the cancerous growth of malls in the city.

The locations of these spaces should not be government-controlled or pre-designated, as these approaches kill creativity.

Instead, they should be spaces that grow organically from efforts by the different creative, social and cultural communities.

One hopeful example of how artists have made an impact on city spaces comes from the city of Hamburg in Germany. In that city, artists are generally being pushed to market themselves as business entrepreneurs for a short-sighted "creative city",

Many artists and creative folk however opposed that strategy. In 2009, a group of them formed a "Right to the City" network, gathering 100 local groups around one common principle: Urban development should be determined by its inhabitants, not by real estate.

On August 22nd 2009, 150 artists, architects and marketing-experts illegally occupied a group of buildings called the "Gängeviertel", historic workers' quarters in the city's centre. It was not an ordinary "squatting" but an art exhibition and series of events.

The occupiers did not merely protest the plans of the city government and the investor: They put up an elaborate alternative plan to reimagine the place as a centre of culture, complete with work places and social housing, to inject vibrancy into an area dominated by commercial and expensive residential buildings.

For the first time in decades, the city government, which normally evacuates occupied buildings by force within 24 hours, listened to the proposal. Seduced by the artists' vision, they even bought back the buildings from the investor and gave the occupiers a year to finalize their concept. Rehabilitation work started in late 2013. Historical buildings were saved and social housing preserved.

Realising urban resilience through the arts will be a great challenge in Singapore too, but it is not an impossible one. I saw many creative seeds which would need to be encouraged to grow. I saw young people with interesting ideas, designing and making objects, growing their own food.

There are many values of cultural heritage and biodiversity being re-discovered in the historical site of Bukit Brown.

Such sites can become exactly the kinds of undesignated spaces of experimentation and imagination that a city needs.



## About

Dr. Sacha Kagan

☒ Research associate at the Leuphana University Lüneburg, ISCO (Institute of Sociology and Cultural Organization) – or ISKO in German (“Institut für Soziologie und Kulturorganisation”); formerly: Institute of Cultural Theory, Research, and the Arts (IKKK) – Since 2005

☒ Founding Coordinator of Cultura21 International – ‘Cultural Fieldworks for Sustainability’: a network gathering artists, scientists and other cultural practitioners engaged for cultures of sustainability – Since 2007

☒ Founding member of Cultura21 in Germany (Institut Cultura21 e.V.) – Since 2006 (member of the board as vice-pres. since Dec. 2010)

☒ Founding Director of the International Summer School of Arts and Sciences for Sustainability in Social Transformation (ASSiST) – Since 2010

☒ Member of the European Sociological Association (ESA), Research Networks Sociology of the Arts and Sociology of Culture – and Member of the Board of the ESA Research Network Sociology of the Arts – Since 2011

☒ Member of the ecoart collective (ecoartnetwork.org) – Since 2011

☒ Member of the walking artists network (WAN) and of its “Footwork” research group (funded by the AHRC’s research networks scheme) – Since 2013

☒ Former member of the International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA) – 2009-2011

☒ Ph.D (Doktor der Philosophie), summa cum laude, at the Leuphana University Lüneburg (Germany), Faculty of Cultural Sciences (‘Kulturwissenschaften’). Theme: “Art and (Un-)Sustainability”- 2011

Areas of interest

My main research and action area is the transdisciplinary field of “arts and (un-)sustainability”. Some of my other areas of work and interest include the sociology of arts and culture, cultural economics, dance studies, documentary film, sustainability and sustainable development.

CV, Publications and more

Please visit my page on the website of the Leuphana University in Lüneburg, to view my lists of publications, presentations at conferences and a CV : [Click here](#)

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