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Illusion of Nearness? – Neighbours in Europe

Stefanie Peter: "Awake curiosity about the neighbour"



Neighbours with a Burdened Past: What forms of cultural exchange do Poland and Germany Need? Cultural Studies scholar and Poland expert Stefanie Peter gives answers.

Mrs. Peter, you've been engaged for years in the German-Polish cultural exchange. What has your experience of it been?

When you transport cultures, it's a sensitive process. Different interest must be taken into account. The borders run primarily not between the two countries, but mainly rather between the respective actors: politicians and artists have some differing ideas about what a cultural exchange should do. You have to adjust the rapidly changing needs of creative artists and the more static expectations of politics.

What different perspectives do politicians and artists have?

Artists like best when they're left in peace to work on their themes – themes that they regard as important. In their eyes, politicians have the task of providing enough money for this and giving culture high priority in the political agenda. In addition, artists want to be docked in the international art scene.

Politicians, on the other hand, expect artists to be ambassadors of their country and to represent the national culture. In their view, culture should solve problems. When there are political tensions, they often think: Couldn't we organize a play or an exhibition on this or that question? There are therefore always projects on big issues such as climate change, nationalism and multi-cultural society. Many artists, however, don't want to be used to serve political ends. They often feel that such programs are paternalistic because the awarding of funds is bound up with requirements concerning the subject to which the artist has to subordinate himself.



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"Cultural projects that have to do with remembrance"

So, whereas politicians are bilaterally oriented, artists think globally?

Yes, it's often like that. Especially in German-Polish projects, the bi-lateral interest, the neighbourly relation, is more or less always implicit. The two states were long separated by the Iron Curtain, and there are still historical problems. Confronting the past is therefore still always an issue.



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What role does the Second World War play in the German-Polish cultural exchange?

There are many historically oriented cultural projects that have to do with remembrance – whether literary projects or projects about cities and their history. There is also a number of theater projects that deal with German-Polish history. In his play "Transfer!", the Polish director and playwright Jan Klata took as his theme the forced resettlement of Poles and Germans at the end of the Second World War. Displaced persons from both countries played themselves in their own story.

In other cultural areas such as the visual arts, on the other hand, the bilateral theme hardly plays a role. Contemporary art is internationally oriented. It doesn't have much to do with German-Polish relations. Therefore the bilateral theme alone doesn't work, because culture is more and more about global issues.

What do you pay particular attention to in your projects?

Before you conceive a project, it's important to poll the need for cultural exchange on both sides and include it from the start in the design of the program. You must always remain flexible towards and in dialogue with all the actors and not present them with an uncoordinated project along the lines of the outdated export-import model. You have to find out where the interests of the artists lie on the one side and in what the interests of the institutions consist on the other.



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You have to take a look at what exchange relation already exist. Already existing contacts have to be taken into account, intensified and continually re-initiated. My goal is to encourage a lasting cooperation between artists and cultural institutions. Ideas and initial impulses should give rise to solid and long-term collaborations. I would like to awake curiosity about the neighbour.

Culture beyond the Berlin-Warsaw connection



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How can you do that?

By not focusing only on the Berlin-Warsaw connection, where a lively cultural exchange is already underway. You have to risk going into smaller cities on the periphery, where so far only little or nothing has been done. There you have to do more building up. There's a lot to discover in such decentralized projects. The effort required is greater and the press coverage thinner, but there's often an amazing response on the ground – in the towns and cities.

What do these projects look like?

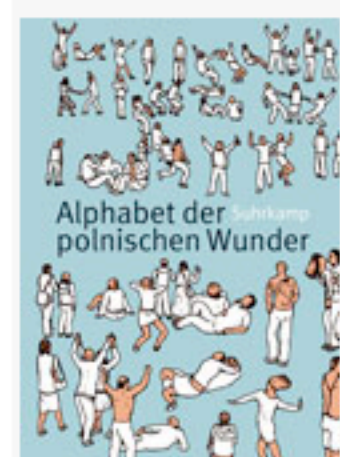
Particularly interesting are local initiatives that cross the boundaries of individual cultural activities. Often they're not even about purely cultural projects. As soon as the population takes part as actors, social aspects come into play. For example, when a hip-hop project is aimed at young people in a prefabricated building block. Such a project can be just as important and successful as a big guest performance at a theater that delights a few thousand viewers in the big cities. The small, longer-term initiatives also bear fruit. But they take longer and require patience.

Moreover, established culture can't be so simply transported from one land to another. There are some large aesthetic differences between Germany and Poland. What's a hit in Poland doesn't automatically work in Germany – and vice versa. If therefore we want to increase our knowledge of one another in a lasting way, we have to develop programs in which citizens can participate on the spot. This works quite well with projects in oral history. Decisive is that both sides want such projects. Then the cultural exchange works.



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Stefanie Peter studied ethnology, African and cultural studies in Hamburg and Krakow, and took her PhD at the Viadrina European University in Frankfurt/Oder (graduate program "Representation-Rhetoric-Knowledge") on the Polish culture of remembrance. From 2004 to 2006, she was artistic director of the German-polish cultural project "Copernicus Office", an initiative of the Federal Cultural Foundation.



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In 2007 she published *Alphabet der polnischen Wunder. Ein Wörterbuch* (i.e., Alphabet of the Polish Miracle. A Dictionary) with Suhrkamp Publishers. She has worked in various cultural projects and writes for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Literaturen*. In 2008 she was awarded the Golden Cross of Merit of the Republic of Poland. Currently she heads the "NRW Cultural Season in Poland" on behalf of the state chancellery of North Rhine-Westphalia. She lives in Berlin and Warsaw.

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