

## 165 Nations in the Bezirk Neukölln of Berlin

### Cultural Work and Cultural Politics in a Multiethnic Community

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#### A. The Arts as Foundation of Cultural Work

I am convinced that the preoccupation with art and aesthetic culture enriches the life of every human being. It doesn't have to be Bach; Rap makes it possible, too, to learn about the dimensions of perception and creativity in ourselves, which let us achieve new potentials to recognize the world in a new way.

As a person responsible for the cultural life of a community of 310 000 people in which men and women from about 165 countries are living and which is hit by poverty and unemployment, I have to know about world culture and its diversity, and I have to consider the specific cultures of social and ethnic minorities, and different generations. The commitment to cultural diversity is also a commitment to consider differences and distinctions. Keeping alive diversity and its potential, is only possible if there is a clear respect for difference free from the pressure of conformity. But sometimes – as we all know – diversity is difficult to tolerate and to manage.

I trust a good deal in arts. It is able to play the role as a manager and as a platform for diversity.

Art in its different forms, genres and (art) languages has the potential to forge links of communication by that diversity of aesthetic possibilities to shape and to express – not by ignoring the conflicts or harmonizing the world in a falsifying way, but by teaching us about each other in a different way and communicate this knowledge. Art offers another language and literacy, art has the ability to use uncommon points of view, to exaggerate, to overact, and to provoke, to transfer perception and recognition to another level, to deconstruct complex situations, to create artificial contexts that offer variations of solutions by playing, by putting one in a different, strange or hostile role, by formulating feelings and results whose verbalizing is impossible for the moment or in general. Last but not least the arts have an important social impact by creating self-expression and self-confidence, especially for those who have difficulty communicating verbally because they now can create and use different expressive articulations than words by which they can better succeed.

#### B. Principles of multi-ethnic cultural activities

Although I am firmly convinced of the impact of the arts, I know that the great social problems of our country and all over the world cannot be resolved by art and aesthetic culture. Nor can the problem of unemployment or the problem of segregation - -the deep rift between poor and rich people-- be bridged by cultural or aesthetic activities. Political abstinence and withdrawal into the ivory tower of the arts would be to agree and accept the inequality of chances and the inequality of possibilities for participation in education and culture.-- It would be an agreement to social exclusion.

Nevertheless, we are not condemned to wait until we have reached a certain level of social justice.

I want to offer some guidelines for the orientation of my work. Reflections like mine have not yet been established in Germany because cultural policies do not yet take into account the realities of people's lives, especially in our larger cities. Germany has realized too late that it is an immigration country. Although the discussion has begun and some cities are well on their way, most of our "Lighthouses", the large

cultural institutions, are still very deeply asleep. In this respect they are cut off from reality.

The guidelines of my work result from long years of practice and reflection in a multi-ethnic poor community:

Cultural politics and practice have to work against segregation: This means acting not only for one social or ethnic group but working to connect and to establish possibilities of inclusion, thus perhaps tearing down some barriers.

They have to care for participation – for “social inclusion”. This is of concern not only in the politics of the German society in general, but also in my own social area. It means participation in our cultural activities in the places where we work. If one really knew how few immigrants in Germany participate in our very advanced and highly developed aesthetic culture one would see the enormous job we have to do.

Cultural politics have to adopt the principle of respect and preservation of diversity, which means variety and distinction, and the necessity of respecting the autochthon, own, as well as the allochthon, different culture.

Activities in art and aesthetic culture can give to men and woman more power, pride, and the feeling of capability, and to fortify them, as it were to make their ‘psychic muscles grow. Everybody who works with children knows about the important functions of positive reinforcement and praise. Everybody knows about the feeling of happiness to have achieved something really great. However, empowerment should not only be regarded as important for the individual, but also for social groups and even for specific sections of cities and regions. We have noticed that in my district. The gained empowerment and force are helping to create more stability in different situations where there is injustice in life.

Art and aesthetic culture can establish communication and achieve an understanding of something by creating it together; verbal communication would be more difficult. In this way the message that is situated outside the regular communication can be communicated and understood. In this sense culture offers a contact zone—perhaps the most important function of culture—affording the chance to create common ground, that is, meeting platforms and locations of coming together, which is the central to the successful realisation of diversity policy.

Cultural work should not be to organize special ways for immigrants or development of special projects of cultural activities. It is much more important to create ways of inclusion for those who do not refuse to be included. This is precisely what all my cultural activities seek: no special cultural activities for immigrants but opened doors with much assistance for access. Immigrants should not be only the subject of special “immigrant programmes”; they are part of our local cultural life and an integral part of our cultural activities. However, this point is a desideratum that can be accomplished only in part. But the idea is at the top of the agenda.

Immigrants should be part of all the cultural practices, producers as well as recipients, subjects as well as objects of the arts. The better we know about the difficulties immigrants have to cope with, the more openly we deal with the diversity of culture and its frictions, the more chances we have to get to common proceedings and developments, and the faster we will succeed in realizing inclusion. So far, we have achieved just the initial steps, and fundamentalism on both sides has set us back. On the other hand, for me, however, it has been important to encourage the ethnic communities to maintain, perform, and develop their own cultural traditions. The main goal is granting participation, dealing with each other, with integrity and respect. This also has to be paid attention to in cultural education: If we take seriously the different backgrounds in culture, the different languages and diverse ways of living of all the immigrants in our society, and if we respect them, then we will

gain their interest. We have to be prepared to allow a debate about the content of our general education and culture. Just as society is changing due to worldwide migration, the content of our cultural education will change. It does not mean – as some of our politicians are afraid of – that Beethoven, Goethe and Dürer will be forgotten; it means that we must think in relative terms. This is the necessary consequence of the development which takes into account the fundamental acceptance of cultural diversity as is written in the UNESCO-declaration.

The most important keys for the future, therefore, are cultural activities for children and younger people, especially since primary school and kindergarten are the only stages of life when we can reach an entire generation at once. At these levels, the children have not yet been shaped by segregation, so we have the best chances we will ever have to reach and to include them. For this reason, an increasing part of my activities have tended toward cultural education of young people, often by means of cooperation between arts and education institutions.

### C. Examples

In the following pages, I will highlight some cultural activities in my district of Neukölln – the remarkable ones rather than the official highlights – which may illustrate how I am accomplishing what my guidelines call for.

#### 1. Récup – on Rubbish of the World

This project tied together arts and education in creativity and cooperation with an ethnic community in a way that worked very well.

The starting point was the fact that Neukölln is looked upon as “Third World” of Berlin, as a refuse dump – just as Africa is often treated as the refuse dump of the world. The connecting topic for us was refuse, the refuse of the wealthy societies, the waste of the “First World”. What could have been more reasonable than to ask for the wisdom of those artists who deal with the refuse – by means of “Récupération”, recycling, and reinterpretation: a special way of young African art. To foster African art in my district makes sense because most of the African immigrants of Berlin live in Neukölln and suffer from the lowest social status in the self-created ranking of the immigrants.

We invited two African artists, who worked for six weeks as artists in residence. One of them, Dominique Zinkpè, installed in a very prominent urban arcade a second “arcade” installation, the “Passage des Emigrés”, made of the well-known red, blue and white checkered plastic bags, which accompany migration all over the world. The other artist, Socrate Safo, together with Neukölln kids created telenovelas – using the mental garbage of the media. Parallel to this work of our “artists in residence,” we ran creative workshops, in which African artists living in Berlin worked with children on the topic “Recuperation”, and on the side they imparted knowledge about Africa and foreign aid. More than 2000 children attended for one or more days and produced fantastic objects. They developed new musical instruments and made music, designed dresses, invented necessary and unnecessary objects, produced superb masques, and, while doing so, they got a new impression of Africans. Both parts of the project were intensively accompanied by the African community with parties, music events, and by offering a social network. In the open space, we presented with the “Passage des Emigrés” intervening, agitating art from the point of view of another continent, a kind of art that was understood by everybody; and it was art that informed, sensitized and called forth creative impulses, especially for kids: The project “Récup” opened minds and eyes to other cultures and larger problems. At the

end we brought together the works of the artists and the children in an exposition, which is now on tour in Germany.

#### Rabababatz on the Hermannplatz

A wonderful musical was born from the cooperation of the “Neuköllner Oper” and an elementary school emphasizing music. The Neukölln Oper is our regional jewel --a very creative independent opera company hovering between seriousness and parody, opera and musical. The name itself, combining “opera” with “Neukölln”, suggests the dynamic and experimental tension of the company's vision. The elementary school was in a deep crisis. The meaning of the stress upon music, orientated on traditional German music education, was no longer clear, because the pupils were completely different from those for whom the curriculum had been developed. For instance, in former times all children had to learn the recorder and to play in the recorder orchestra (besides those few who learned violin). However, the school is located in a poor immigrant quarter, 85 % of the children are of non-German origin and of course their musical shaping is not German, not even European. It was a school of willing but burnt out and very tired teachers. To that school came from the Neuköllner Oper a very professional music theatre director and a dramaturge. Supported in the background by the small opera team, they managed and conducted programs, the process of which seemed to be sometimes very chaotic.

Amazing things happened. The complaining was relieved by doing, cooperation was asked for and given, the school gained energy, all had a lot of fun, the usual, rigid idea of being a “learning-school” disappeared into the background, and the children discovered and developed discipline (otherwise they would be expelled from the production, as happened to one boy). The children experienced that with effort and attention to quality. A wonderful creation can rise out of chaos. The play that they developed was about being foreign, strange, alien – alien kids from another star visit the department store located at “Hermannplatz”, miss their space shuttle and meet kids who have skived off their own school excursion.

The idea of strangeness was topped by the even more strange events : crime, dread of parental authority, disobedience towards the teachers, solidarity. Well known detective gags mixed perfectly together in a crazy musical. A really incredible orchestra was born from instruments of an almost unimaginable diversity. All borders of cultures were erased. Kids became big and powerful and surpassed themselves. Cultural diversity was the main spice in this hot soup of children’s culture. The school gained power for the coming years. Sometimes it is worth while not to moan in a quiet corner but to set an example.

### 3. Good daughters – good sons: Misunderstandings in Community Life

In the context of the unhappy German debate about traditional fundamental values – “Leitkultur” – we started looking for these values in the different ethnic communities in Neukölln. Our research developed into the project “Good daughters, good sons” – starting from the assumption (which proved to be right) that everybody was able to be an expert – as mother or father, as daughter or son. So participation was possible from the very beginning of the project. We identified key values and concentrated on those that played an important role in all the value systems under study. The concepts we found in all ethnic communities were obedience, respect, honour, shame, and tolerance. The concept of ‘shame’ (‘Scham’ in German), for example, has a wide variety of meanings. What ‘shame’ means in one language is probably different from what I, a German, associate with it in mine. And the meanings in non-

European cultures and languages differ more. These differences become visible and touchable, when the different understandings crash into each other in the form of “critical incidents”. These every day incidents became the attention getters of our exposition, a kind of test assembly. With installations, which tried to fix critical incidents, with artistic comments, tools of knowledge (little libraries on wheels) and interactive situations we made our Neukölln key values researchable and able to be experienced. This test assembly was set up and accompanied by a lot of school workshops, contacts with parents, teachers, talks in the communities. The guided tours for the students and discussions at the exposition by “Young professionals” with German and non-German background gained central importance. For the first time in their lives, the young people reflected key values and understood something about their own values, about how they had been shaped by them, and about the diversity of the resulting codices of behaviour. The exposition – which was actually more an activity and research centre – was accompanied by detailed dialogues in the form of talk shows with representatives of our communities on concepts of education, generation- and gender gaps. The necessity for agreement on a concept of democratic cultural pluralism became perceptible clear.

#### 4. “News from Babylon” – a project on languages, books and reading

Usually, multilingualism is regarded as an indication of being well educated and as a key for the future. The multilingualism of immigrants, above all of immigrant children, however, is regarded as a shortcoming, and it is not supported at all – if the languages are Turkish, Polish, Serbian or Serbo-Croatian, Arabic or Russian rather than English or French. No doubt, mastering the German language is required for equal opportunities in the German education system and in professional life. But the condemning of the mother tongue contradicts the UNESCO declaration of cultural diversity, particularly as well-known linguistic researchers have proved the necessity of mastering the mother tongue for learning further languages. Last but not least, it is an unforgivable squandering of resources, if the existing multilingualism of the immigrant children is not paid attention to.

We established in our public library – part of “my” department of culture – a project called “News from Babylon” which deals specifically with the treasure of world culture that the immigrants deliver free to us: the variety of languages. The public library is a very important space for immigrants – in all Germany the libraries are the most used cultural institution by immigrants. But often this institution doesn’t care for them. To make the library a place which responds in an positive way to its immigrant visitors and users, and to signal respect for their home culture, we tried in some different sub-projects to focus attention on the languages spoken in Neukölln. One of the most successful project parts was the so called “tent of storytelling”. With the advice of our communities, we chose fairy tales from 13 different countries, which were illustrated on large plates by 13 artists coming from these countries and narrated by 13 story tellers from these countries exclusively in their language. Today, we can offer stories in Russian, Doulu, Ghanese, Spanish, Japanese, Serbian, Arabic, Turkish, Hindi, Polish, French, English, and German to schools or kindergartens, in a package of one to three languages. The storytelling ability of the narrators, the repetition of certain words, phrases, or verbal formulas, typical in fairy tales all over the world, and the large illustrations, which, like the more well-known Japanese manga design language, are as well typical in different cultures, make it possible for the children to understand a foreign language: so they gain pleasure from the different sounds of language and play with words in different languages.

Because of this, many Neukölln kids know the Japanese word for dragon and power drink or the Russian words for grandfather, grandmother, mother, and father. Although they do not fully understand the content or understand it in a different way, they can ask afterwards and talk about the stories. What is more, the children, who hear their mother tongue in the fairy tale just told are very proud because now it is not them, but others who are not literate.

Another sub-project is the "Treasure of World Cultures": Twelve different communities in Neukölln were asked to name the twelve most beloved children's books in their home country: books which have left their marks on them, books they have wanted their own children to read. It was a long, laborious, but extremely exciting process, which led us to diverse modes of decision making and dealings with books: In the Arab community, for instance, only men decided – our interventions were not accepted, for the decision was regarded as too important to be made by women. In the Russian community, the classic authors like Puschkin and Tolstoi were the main choice. The people from Togo whom we had asked for cooperation wanted to have their schoolbooks in the treasure chest – they had no other books. We organized all these books in their respective language and – if it was available – in German (or at least in English) translation. Some books – like "Le Petit Prince", "Pippi Longstocking" or "Jim Knopf" took part in three or four different languages as translation. We constructed a special transparent "treasure chest," and we had a ceremonial opening with all our partners. Next to the "chest" were all the books – as second copy – ready to be read. They are used very often.

##### 5. Headscarf girls in the Museum of Islamic arts

In the context of the actual developing godparenthoods between cultural institutions and schools as part of renewing cultural education in Berlin, something very fascinating is growing: the partnership between the Museum of Islamic Arts (it is part of our Berlin "Louvre") and the 9th form of a grammar school in Neukölln, the one with the highest percentage of immigrant pupils (75 %). The background of most of the pupils is Turkish or an Arab country. The school was supposed to be closed because of its permanent failures, but a new head teacher has made a completely new school – with the same teachers and pupils as before. His concept is rather simple: Open the school to the town.

The Islamic Museum – on its side – realized that the Islamic Berliners do not know their museum and do not come to visit. For this reason they decided to change their traditional concepts of presenting objects of art out of context and to take seriously principles of contextuality and social inclusion. The museum decided that the new exposition ought to be developed together with and as an experience for young people of Islamic belief. Of course, most of them live in Neukölln. We helped to foster ways of cooperation and to establish a long lasting godparenthood, which means a five-year alliance comprising special forms of mutual responsibility. The opening of the exposition was a important event, for the students as well as for the museum. The purpose of this cooperation was to bring together different competencies as well as interest in presenting and receiving, the – at least theoretical - interest of those who are interested in the matter and those who have beautiful things and want them to be shown and appreciated. To find the right way, the people of the museum wanted look into the heads and hearts of those young people – their future visitors - who have an Islamic background. This is a very unusual step for a top level traditional art museum to take.

The supposedly simple, but actually complicated to organize, cooperation has been working very well. But during the process a “critical incident” occurred, which revealed that its complexity was peppered with traps. The director of the museum invited the youngsters to his office (which is more a hall than a room), described his work, and showed some very precious objects which are kept in his safe. The guests were deeply impressed to listen to the perfect Arabic speech of a German. They had never experienced it before. But suddenly the youngsters grew disturbingly reserved: The Director had taken out of his safe an extremely precious, marvellously embellished Koran and presented it full of pride – as if presenting the crown jewels. But the pupils had learnt in their Islamic religious lessons how to touch and present their holy book and to show their respect. The white gloves of the director and his way of handling the book seemed to them lacking the form of respect they had been taught. They interpreted the director’s grasp as an insult to their holy book. The discomfort of the youngsters lasted some time until the cause of the disturbance was discovered: It took more time for it to be made clear to all that the same object, like this holy book may be sacred in a religious context whereas in a museum it is a valued object of a collection. And the museum people had to think about how to express respect for the object not only as the work of art. For both sides it was a key experience, further example of what cooperation can do.

## 6. Tek-stil

The last project I want to present is different from those projects already discussed in that it has the goal of being more than an enriching and educational cultural activity: if it succeeds, it will may create jobs – work for creative people.

A young artist, architect, and urban developer has opened in an empty shop a studio into which she invites young fashion designers to work. In Neukölln a lot of young fashion designers try their luck in the creative industries and hope to design a new label that will distinguish them and earn them a living. Resurrecting an old Berlin industry, the city is trying to become a centre for the new young creative people, and fashion is part of this trend. The young people work very hard. However, success is seldom.

In our quarter live, as mentioned, a lot of immigrant women without paid work who are skilled in the textile and handicraft fields, especially needlework. They have no professional perspective, they have few connections to other people, and they have no opportunity to speak German or to talk to people besides their family. Integrating them into this project may open a door to earning a part of their living and connecting them with the world.

The woman artist has been trying to match the young designers with the skilled immigrant women in order to establish a new fashion label. In the last six months she has been doing this matching, she has had to overcome a lot of difficulties: The most difficult problem has been the different rhythm of work and the different understanding of obligation on the part of the immigrant women most of whom are not used to working regularly so are not yet able to commit themselves to working in fixed timeframes, even if the frame is a week or a month. In addition, they have difficulty accepting the idea that professional training is necessary in order for them to be fit for cooperation with the designers. The designers, too, have had to accept the different rhythms of the immigrant women—rhythms of families, of motherhood, of powerful traditions. But they cannot leave the rhythm of presentations and fashion shows of their profession and they are bound by the deadlines and fetters of marketing.

We think this process needs time to become fruitful– but time is money, and the project has only enough money for a short time? There are, nonetheless, glimmers of hope. Having come to understand their chance of succeeding with the project, the immigrant women are now willing and able to come to short workshops. It is hoped that this attendance will have a snowball effect. I believe in this project because it fits exactly with Neukölln; we have the potential for it, and it may release new potential. And it is very intelligent, designed with the view of an artist.

The first collection is available – handbags in 30 shapes, all made from the material of the “Passage des Emigrés” – the blue-red-white checkered plastic materials, the different models have names like Bangkok, Birmingham, Caracas, Istanbul, Paris or Tokyo – and they have the spirit of these cities. This collection is a perfect symbol of diversity.

The essential conditions of the Neukölln guidelines

The guidelines of the Neukölln concept include three essential conditions which cannot easily be realized. Nevertheless they have to be always held in mind:

The precondition of cultural participation is that there is social participation. The recognition of increasing social segregation reveals that there are consequences in education and social politics because segregation divides a community into rich and poor parts which are becoming richer and poorer. So it is necessary to pay attention to the problem of participation and inclusion, in the social as well in the cultural field. Dealing with cultural diversity productively reclaims a change of the paradigm: Awareness of immigration as a burden changes to awareness of a profit to be gained from such diversity in the form of cultural resources. Thus what has been understood as a burden becomes rather a pleasure. Germany – as well as Europe on the whole –, more and more shaped by immigration, has to recognize and acknowledge cultural diversity as a resource that in the future also will enrich the arts. That is why it is necessary to understand cultural diversity as an immanent principle of national as well as local cultural life and to provide the conditions for its development. Cultural education and formation is a requirement for inclusion as well as for a future for the arts. Art needs an educated and interested audience, and producers of art in the future. Funds have to be provided for this purpose. But first and foremost, attention must be paid to the importance of cultural education to create a strong, democratic, pluralistic society. It will result in strong, cooperative, self-confident, sensitive, creative people – and this development is exactly what cultural education is/ will be able to foster.

The arts and the artists play a central role in the realisation of the guidelines that have been presented. I repeat my reflections on the great possibilities of the arts: The other language and literacy of the arts, its ability to use uncommon points of view, to exaggerate, to overact and to provoke, to transfer perception and recognition to different levels, to deconstruct complex situations, to create artificial contexts that offer variations on the possible solutions by playing, by putting the actor in a different, strange or hostile role to understand different perspectives, to formulate feelings and results whose verbalizing is impossible for the moment or in general. Last but not least: The arts offer the possibility of a very special, human social impact. Arts can open perception to new worlds.