

# Sustainability. A concept I genuinely believe in, but a word I do not trust

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## Summary

Sustainability. A concept I genuinely believe in, but a word I do not trust. A word that seems to have lost currency, the more that it is used. Perhaps my cynical nature has been accentuated by the context within which I live. A context in which the language and discourse of 'Development' and 'Aid' is powerful. A context in which people speak in capitalised issues. Water and Sanitation, Gender Mainstreaming, HIV/AIDS. Of course these issues are of critical importance, but they seem to have gained a holy status that cannot be questioned. Their importance and relevance is performed daily, in NGO offices across the city.

To me, in this context, the issues I have been asked to consider (sustainable living, relationship to food, new models of living) have a reference to a certain relationship between North and South, Underdeveloped and Overdeveloped, Rich and Poor. Because whilst these are undoubtedly global issues, it is arguable that they emanate from a specific space which is affluent, educated and not in Kenya.

What I propose to investigate is the way in which the discourse surrounding sustainability is performed in Kenya. My idea would be to set up a kind of studio in which representatives from organisations would speak about the way their organisation is working in this field. This is already a performative situation. They would be fully branded in their organisations logos (t shirt, caps etc). However, I would introduce an element of fictionality by mixing these real representatives with professional actors representing fictional organisations. They would also be fully branded in imaginary logos of the fictional organisation. The audience in Berlin would not know which is real and which is fictional, creating a temporary state of limbo in which the viewer would hopefully re-engage and re-asses the nature of the discourse.

## Background

1. A realisation. Since I have been back in Kenya working over the last four years I have never once read about environmental impact, carbon footprints, sustainable living or responsible energy consumption in the newspaper or seen it on the news. These issues simply do not feature in the media landscape of Kenya.

Nevertheless, when I go to Europe, it is these very issues that dominate the imagination of my friends and colleagues.

(Incidentally, I have also never read the words Global Financial Crisis in any paper here)

This realisation made me acutely aware of the extent to which our imaginations are shaped by the contexts within which we live and more importantly, the information that we consume. Global warming, as is embedded in its very name, is not located to specific countries.



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Indeed, speak to farmers all over Kenya and you hear stories of changing weather patterns, unpredictable rains and increased difficulties in growing crops. Kenya even has a Nobel Prize laureate, Wangari Maathai who has worked her whole life to preserve biodiversity and lobby on other environmental issues. So the country is being affected, but the consciousness of this is very different in Europe.

2. An awareness. My practice as an artist is diverse in form, heavily shaped by contexts, but typified by a participatory approach and often taking place in public space. The project which I worked on most when I initially returned to Kenya was setting up a grassroots media collective called Slum TV. This process, and indeed just living in Nairobi made me very sensitive to the symbolic and financial power of the Aid and Development industry which I am increasingly seeing as problematic.

I first became aware of the extent of this power during Slum TV editorial meetings. When brainstorming for ideas the same old issues came up again and again. Water and Sanitation, The Girlchild, HIV/AIDS, Accountability, Governance... What struck me was that these issues were suggested in these terms; as issues, written in capital letters. It was not as if someone was saying, 'lets make a film about the river', the suggestion would be 'lets make a film about Water and Sanitation'... It seemed strange, and led to an awareness of what my friend and colleague Alex Nikolic has termed 'The NGO aesthetic'.

3. A direction. My proposal for the discourse program of Ueberlebenskunst builds on these two elements. On the one hand there is a different consciousness of environmental issues in Kenya than there is in Europe, primarily because of the little representation it is given in the local media. At the same time the predominantly 'international' NGOs, which seem to have a large impact on the collective imagination, do present these issues as being of real importance. What does this mean in terms of local ownership of an international discourse? What are the consequences behind the power relations intertwined with the dissemination of the environmental debate in the space of Kenya. These are the issues that I am trying to tackle.

4. A strategy. This has begun to surface in my more speculative work. Last year I exhibited an installation made of 100 NGO logos, some real, some fake. The idea was to introduce an element of fictionality into the work as a strategy for re-analysing and re-perceiving some of inherent absurdity of the iconography. I insert a selection here.



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By questioning what was real and what was not I hoped to create some distance from the context in which we live in Nairobi. A context which I think is somehow blinding. It is this same strategy which I hope to use in the current proposal. Watching ten individuals present the work of their organisation in the knowledge that some of them are actors, should hopefully make the viewer really interrogate the substance of what every individual is saying. It is a way of re-focussing attention on a debate that

has become so much part of everyday life in Europe that perhaps it has passed into the stage of assumption, and maybe even dogma.

5. A process. The idea is still being shaped, and my critical concern at the moment is how to work with real representatives and actors in this situation without the real representatives feeling ridiculed. This is absolutely not what I want to achieve. I am still trying to resolve this issue.

6. A budget. Is still unclear at this stage. I am still to confirm all the costs involved with the streaming, setting up a simple studio, recruiting, auditioning and hiring some actors, recruiting members of organisations etc. I will confirm this within the next couple of weeks.



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