

## Why we need Hybrid Gardens

On the occasion of the opening of Francesco Mariotti's "Quantenballett" in the Schlosspark in Celle/Germany, June 9th to October 31st, 2000

Francesco Mariotti's "Quantum Ballet" is part of a larger project with the title "Hybrid Gardens". What is that? What is a hybrid garden? And why do we need it?

Let us begin with the question: What is hybrid? The dictionary says: A hybrid is 'a bastard plant or animal'. The word derives from the Latin *hybrida*, which means 'mongrel, bastard'. The adjective 'hybrid' means in biology 'of dual origin, mixed, mongrel-like' and in linguistics 'composed of heterogeneous elements'.

Mariotti's sculptures and installations are hybrid. They are composed of heterogeneous elements, of dual origin, mixed and mongrel-like. They consist of colourful PET-bottles and blinking diodes, and yet they are will-o'-the-wispy fireflies and magical flowers. They are plastic and supermarket and trash and consumer electronics, and yet they are magic and poetry and art. Natural and man-made, organic and artificial, biologically grown and electronically controlled – they are bastards, mongrels, mixed creatures. They are hybrid gardens.

Mariotti is not the only artist recently to have discovered the fascination of the hybrid. Also in the field of music, literature, cultural theory there are people to whom the hybrid is no longer simply monstrous and disgusting. These artists and thinkers produce hybrid art and hybrid thinking, because they experience themselves as hybrids, as bastards. They have discovered the beauty of the beast – and behold, it is their own.

British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie for example has made hybridity quite explicitly the principle of his work. About his novel 'Satanic Verses' he writes: "The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. The Satanic Verses is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves."

As a rule of thumb one might say: Hybrid art does not arise out of nothing, but rather out of an experience of the world I inhabit and of myself as hybrid. The appearance of hybrid art works is a sensitive indicator that today personal and collective identities are increasingly being experienced as hybrid. Why is that? During early romanticism an aesthetics of the fragment arose in the context of the transition to the functional differentiation of modern society. Today we see an aesthetics of the hybrid in the context of postmodern globalization, digitalization and mobilization. Humans, goods, services, information and signs are travelling in large migratory streams on the surface of the earth, in outer space and along digital nets of communication.

This can have bitter consequences: Humans who find no room of their own suffer from homelessness. Signs that find no place for themselves suffer from meaninglessness. That is the dark side of postmodernism. Therefore we need places where those can feel at home whose identities have been whirled around during such migrations of people and signs. Postmodern globalization, digitalization and mobilization will necessarily and increasingly produce hybrid identities: hybrid identities that arise from the intermingling of different cultures, chains of signifiers and lines of tradition.

Francesco Mariotti comes from the Italian part of Switzerland. He grew up in Peru, lives and works in Zurich. There his wife, partly Chinese, manages the best Spanish bookshop in town. When you come into this family, one has to find out first which of their four languages is going to be mainly spoken. This family is no less a hybrid formation than the works which Mariotti assembles. In a world which continues to be defined by an ideology of the pure, the absolute, the autochthonous there is little room for such hybrid formations. Often they are forced to settle for one supposedly clear, unmixed, pure identity – and thereby to give up a part of their selves. Instead we need protected places where we can discover the inner tensions of the hybrid as the wellspring of our inner wealth. But that will only be possible if we do not have to force ourselves into static-neurotic, separated partial identities but rather when we are able to achieve a dynamic balance of our inner plurality. The aesthetics of hybridity perform exemplarily how such a dynamic balance can be possible. Hybrid art shows how fragmentary, incompatible, incoherent elements can arrange and assemble themselves into a formation of *Stimmigkeit*. [The German term *Stimmigkeit* denotes something like an aesthetic fit, but also resonates with the meanings 'to sound good' and 'to be right'.] We need protected places where symbolic experimentation with *stimmig*, i.e. dynamically balanced, hybrid identities becomes possible. In other words: We need hybrid gardens.

#### The modesty of the tinkerer

The artist as hybrid gardener, that is one side of Francesco Mariotti. Something else which I like so much about him and which struck me when I first encountered him and his work is this: that he is what in German we call a *Bastler*, something like in French a *bricoleur* or in English maybe a tinkerer. When I told him that, he smiled and muttered something about modesty. There is indeed a certain modesty about being a *Bastler*. It means working with found material, not quite having a plan of what eventually is going to happen with what one is doing. The *Bastler* tentatively joins this to that and sees what happens next. He is not in control of his material nor does he dominate his environment. He knows that he cannot really control the methods and languages and technologies and discourses with which he works, that they are beyond him. What keeps him working? Is it the drive to play? Is it curiosity? Is it the intuitive conviction that one could do with things something else than what their description offers as rules for their use? Something beyond the manual? But that one cannot know what that is that can be done differently until one has done it? The anthropologist Lévi-Strauss opposes to the type of the *Bastler* (*bricoleur*) another type: the engineer. The engineer is in control. He has learned his craft, knows his machines, his tools, his methods. He has plans. He executes what has been projected. He has reduced to the minimum the unexpected and the unforeseeable and translated it into the structures of the known. He knows what he is doing, and when he is finished doing it he is rightfully proud of the result of his work: a visible and tangible proof that reality works according to the rules which he has been applying in his work all along.

Let us take these two types: engineer and *Bastler*. And let us in our thoughts divide the world: into engineers on the one hand and *Bastler* on the other hand. Then we might see images of men in suits with white coats and yellow helmets, cleanly drawn plans in front of them, supervising work on the construction site and discussing further action with the foremen, while in their minds they already see the perfect integration of form and function of the realized project. On the other hand we see

maybe a somewhat childish older man in the midst of a jumble of undefinable machinery, heaps of electronic scrap, boxes of half-sorted material, ringed round with bizarre formations, staring and contemplating that strange thing in his hands, charmed by its magical mysteriousness, fascinated by its purposeless, fragile beauty. You may already see what I am getting at: There is a peculiar affinity between a tinkering mind and hybrid formations.

Cybernetics expert Heinz von Foerster once remarked that there are only few questions which are in principle undecideable. But the interesting thing about undecideable questions is the fact that they are the only questions which we can – and, indeed, must – decide ourselves. The question 'Am I engineer or Bastler' is maybe one of those undecideable questions which we can and must decide ourselves.

The decision of this question is closely connected with another undecideable question: Am I discoverer or inventor? In other words: 'Am I discoverer?' means: Am I separated from the universe? That means, whenever I look, I am looking as if through a keyhole unto the unfolding universe. On the other hand, 'Am I inventor?' means: Am I part of the universe? That means, whenever I act, I change myself and the universe along with me. Or, in yet other words, as discoverer I regard myself as the citizen of an independent universe, whose regularities, laws and habits I come to discover. When I have discovered them, I can become an engineer. But as inventor I regard myself as participating in a conspiracy whose habits, laws and regularities we invent. As soon as we have invented some, I can begin to tinker with them.

Even if von Foerster thinks that these questions are in principle undecideable, there are good reasons to opt for the side of inventors and tinkerers. Why? Well, one of the most interesting thinkers of our century, Gregory Bateson, expressed the core of his thinking on ecology with the formula: "The unit of survival is organism plus environment. We are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself. [...] The creature that wins against its environment destroys itself." And does not the type of the engineer have the fatal tendency to want to triumph over his environment? Does he not want to triumph over the resistances of reality, the forces of nature, the rigours of weather, the imponderabilities of future? And is not that the mentality which is at the core of the European subject? Whose traces are with us, whether we want it or not?

In the beginning there was the impulse as a weak and fragile, maladapted human being not to be completely helpless at the mercy of allmighty nature. From this initial technological impulse there has grown the triumphant history of the Western mind, which has far exceeded its goal. In the course of the 20th century, beginning with the horrible turn over of the euphoria surrounding DDT into the apocalyptic scenarios of a silent spring, we have realized that we have indeed managed to triumph over our environment in such a way as to endanger ourselves. For, as Bateson says, the fundamental error lies in the assumption that there are separate beings. What really exists is always the unity 'living being plus environment'. When the one suffers, the other also suffers.

The English poet John Donne wrote: "No man is an island, entire of itself ... And therefore, do not send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee". That is the modesty of the Bastler.

The return of the fireflies

At this point I would finally like to come back to the idea of the garden. Garden is an organic metaphor. At first glance it does not fit with the metaphor of the hybrid, for the hybrid is something artificial, something made, rather than something organic and grown. When a cultural identity is said to be hybrid, this stands in direct opposition to a number of conservative or even reactionary organic metaphors. For the hybrid is not the autochthonous, not connected to the earth, not rooted in the home ground. It is not the soil, it is not *ius sanguinis*, it is not *Blut und Boden*. The metaphor of the hybrid garden is at odds with this opposition. It joins the hybrid with the organic. Paradise flowers from PET-bottles, fireflies from electronic diodes - that is almost like a modern version of 'swords to plows'.

Mariotti's gardens evoke the experiences of loss which conservative rhetoric likes to use for its purposes: 'Where have all the fireflies gone?' sounds a little bit like 'Where have the good old times gone? Where are home, community, folk and nature?' And the populist right wing will continue: 'And who is guilty of the loss of home, familiarity, security?' [In German *Heimat*, *Vertrautheit*, *Geborgenheit* – *Vertrautheit* means familiarity, but it also resonates with the meanings of 'trust', 'confidence' and 'long acquaintance', and *Geborgenheit* means security, but it also evokes images of being held and protected and derives from a root word whose meaning is 'to rescue from danger'.] So the populist right wing will use this experience of loss to suggest: 'Who is guilty of this loss if not the homeless themselves, the restless ones, the wandering ones, the driven ones? If everybody were to stay where they are and where they belong, we would not have to fear for our place of heritage. Then there would be no uncomfortable change, no threat to inherited securities, no fear of the loss of time-honoured habits.'

The populist right wing has a good eye for the pathologies of the modern age. They see that modern globalization, digitalization, mobilization brings enormous losses along with its undeniable gains. But often the leaders of this rhetoric themselves have too much invested into the global, the digital, the mobile. They own stocks and participations in global, digital, mobile powers – and therefore they tend to make themselves blind to the real root of that loss. They shift the cause: Instead of acknowledging the ambivalence of globalization, digitalization, mobilization, they paradoxically assign the guilt for the loss of home, familiarity, security to those who have lost exactly that: home, familiarity, security – to the migrants and refugees, to those driven from their countries and seeking asylum, to the wanderers from inner necessity or outer compulsion.

The longing [German *Sehnsucht*] for a return of the fireflies is the longing to re-find home, familiarity, security. And it is more: It is the longing for a re-enchantment of the world in which our materialist nihilism has left all too little room for real magic. It is exactly that which is symbolically anticipated in Mariotti's hybrid gardens: the return of the fireflies, the re-gaining of home, familiarity, security, along with a refreshed, never lost sense for the wonders of the magic, the poetic, the charming.

But Mariotti's *ritorno delle lucciole* (*lucciola*, that is the Italian word for firefly) – and this is the crucial point in which this is so radically different from all populist, retro-romantic bullshit – this return of the fireflies succeeds from the spirit of PET-bottles and diodes, from postmodern supermarket trash and consumer electronics. Not from planting village lindens, founding folk groups or placing pseudo-traditional wood-carving rooms into postmodern glass-and-steel martial business-politics buildings. Many people realize that nowadays we somehow need both: The successes of modern progress and the familiarity of easily comprehensible situations [German

überschaubare Verhältnisse]. Globalization, digitalization, mobilization and home, familiarity, security. The populist right wing, which is growing to increasing symbolic success in Europe, articulates quite clearly that it wishes to reduce global modernization to tribal structures and tribe mentality. Populist right wing, that means: an artificial grafting of tribal mentality onto global developments. They practice the reverse of what the green movement has proposed from its beginnings. For where ecological thinking says 'Think globally, act locally', the populist right wing says 'Act globally, think locally'. To me, that is not too attractive a proposal: a world dominated by global players with a tribal mentality – that sounds scary.

Where I live, in Bavaria, there is a slogan with which the populist right wing tries to make globalization, digitalization, mobilization ideologically compatible with home, familiarity, security. It is: Laptop und Lederhose – i.e. laptop and traditional Bavarian leather pants. The hybrid gardens offer a different slogan. Instead of Laptop und Lederhose the modest tinkerer Mariotti offers a different formula. It goes lucciola und Leuchtdiode – i.e. firefly and diode. Where they say laptop, he says PET-bottles and diodes. Where they say Lederhose, he says fireflies and quantum flowers. I hope you see the difference, when you contemplate Mariotti's Quantum Ballet floating on the pond in the Schlossgarten in Celle on this beautiful summer night. – Thank you for listening.

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