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“Paralysed by the Recycling Paradise”

An artistic exploration of recycling in Addis Abeba
27 May – 6 June 2011

After Tesfahun Kibru, Helen Zeru and I presented the various results of our one-week collaboration at the Goethe-Institut on 4 June, Tamirat Gezahegn from the Netsa Art Village said how nice it is that a recycling artist from Germany should apparently feel like she is in paradise here, in this land of recycling. At first I thought he’d said “paralysed” instead of “paradise” and we all had a good laugh. For there is a bit of truth in that, too: I was indeed blown away and somewhat intimidated by their acumen in the art of recycling.

Ethiopia is my very first encounter with a so-called “developing country.” At first glance, it seemed to me that this megacity was made up for the most part of rural-style one-storey houses with corrugated iron roofs. What is being built can hardly be told apart from what is already waiting to be knocked down. The reigning principle here is that of change and improvisation: nothing is fixed in place, nothing is new, nothing is whole.

Back in 1992, when the DSD (Duales System Deutschland) introduced the Green Dot (Grüner Punkt) system, the recycling of packaging was touted as the solution to all our waste management problems in Germany, even though we already had an efficient bottle return system for beverages, for example. As a result, the Green Dot system eclipsed waste avoidance and packaging return systems. My alternative model, the SBF (“collecting/conserving/researching”) system, takes the “recyclable materials” concept propagated by the DSD to its logical conclusion: if Green Dot packaging really is “recyclable material” that I have paid for, then why shouldn’t I recycle it myself and put it to a new use? In 1998 I carried out an experiment that I called “living according to the
SBF System”: it involved collecting all the sales packaging that piled up in our four-person household, cleaning and storing it and reprocessing it into useful items, which I then integrated into my household. At the time, I was well aware that the resulting “home-made” household items were closely akin to recycled objects in developing countries. As a participating artist in “zur nachahmung empfohlen!” (“examples to follow! expeditions in aesthetics and sustainability”), an exhibition of international positions on the nexus between art and ecology in Addis Abeba this May, I was delighted to have an opportunity, thanks to an invitation from the Goethe-Institut and the Heinrich Böll Foundation, to connect it all up to day-to-day reality in Ethiopia.

Together with my team, consisting of Bushe, my driver, and Helen Zeru and Tesfahun Kibru, two young artists who both graduated from the art college here and are involved in the Netsa Art Village, I collected and documented exemplary recycled objects at the Merkato, a huge open-air market in the centre of Addis Abeba, which features a big recycling section. We put together a collection of 50 objects representing a broad cross-section of hand-recycled product packaging. These objects are household items that have been recycled by hand and are highly prized by a large swathe of consumers. Product packaging has been converted into all manner of items that reflect day-to-day life here: everything from cooking over an open fire and using the bottom of an oil can to do laundry to keeping food fresh without a refrigerator. In a shop in the metalworking lane, we bought a bunch of items made out of tins and asked the shopkeeper (who was a craftsman himself, though he hadn’t made all the objects himself) not only the prices but also where and when the items were made and what they were made from. Helen Zeru captured the situation on camera.

The only inventions of mine that can compare in terms of quality and utility are my handicrafts (i.e. baskets and the like). I lack the requisite technical equipment and manual skills, especially when it comes to metalworking.
Whilst looking through my notes on Addis Abeba to write up this report, I happened upon the following line: “Life is abstract art.” That line was inspired by what Tesfahun did with a gutted refrigerator. In the streets of Addis Abeba, there are big open dumpsters, which form a nexus between private households and the central refuse dump – to which we also paid a visit in the course of our search for recyclables. On the day before our final presentation, after we had made our last purchases at the Merkato, Tesfahun came up with the idea of an artistic action, which we recorded on film. From an overflowing dumpster he retrieved the carcass of a big refrigerator, a large, empty, off-white box covered with insulating foam. The outer casing was missing, as were the entire contents of the fridge, of course. Tesfahun, who always attracts attention in his outlandish recycling outfit, sparked off a whole bunch of questions and discussions with this action at the very lively market. Why on earth would he pick this crummy item, which even here nobody wanted anymore, to be filmed and carted off in a taxi?

Well, he chose the refrigerator carcass as a pedestal for one of his sculptures, which he showed along with the film at our final presentation. The gutted whitish skeleton of a refrigerator displayed in the lecture hall of the Goethe-Institut Addis Abeba as a pedestal, as a sculpture, as an abstract work of art in and of itself, goes to show how the concept of “reusable material” has a far more elementary meaning here than in Germany. In fact the very term “reusable material” is bound to seem a euphemism to German consumers, who are expected not only to pay for the inevitable spate of packaging that piles up automatically in every household, but to make considerable efforts to properly dispose of all that packaging as well. Ever since a deposit was introduced on non-returnable beverage containers, Germany has doubtless had one of the most complicated and highly differentiated refuse disposal systems in the world. The only annoying aspect of it is that this policy, which is mainly geared toward serving industrial interests and yet is so dependent on every single consumer’s doing their part, entails a huge consumption of energy and resources. The kind of direct recycling practised in Addis, on the other hand, represents the antithesis of German practices, and can provide new food for
thought about the German situation, for a more sustainable approach to everyday household items. From now on, at any rate, I'll always remember the wastepaper shop at the Merkato in Addis Abeba, where we bought a kilo of old newspapers, whenever I slide my wastepaper into the slot of the Dual System Deutschland paper bin, a routine that always used to strike me as being rather pointless.