AMBIVALAND: Sociocultural ambivalence and the aura of Newfoundland

Newfoundland has captivated me since I first came here for an artist residency in 2007 and has inspired me ever since. After being struck by the beauty and majesty of the scenery, I soon learned about the rich and extraordinary history and culture of the place that is situated at the edge of North America, or virtually halfway to Europe. Eventually, “the more that I s[aw] the less that I kn[ew] for sure” (John Lennon, Borrowed Time, 1984), and I was puzzled by a growing number of apparent inconsistencies in historical and personal records as well as in the disposition of the people I met. The resulting tensions within the local culture and society – notably with respect to the individual as well as collective stance regarding the “land” as home, resource and environment – made Newfoundland less of a paradisiac get-away for me but a compelling subject of research instead. Newfoundlanders' relation to their environment is shaped by a multitude of aspects converging on the island, including colonialism, exploitation of common property open access resources, geographic as well as climatic extremes, and particular “Old World” connections.

The objective of my doctoral research project is to develop lateral trajectories of knowledge to better understand the tensions and fissures that, to my mind, characterize the local culture and society. This will be achieved by looking at past and contemporary processes, structures, and phenomena from sociocultural, political and economic arenas. Their interdisciplinary analysis and interpretation, I argue, will reveal patterns and interconnectivities that will make what now appears inconsistent or contradictory (like settler Newfoundlanders' claim of indigeneity, or their attachment to the land as opposed to their support or indifference in the face of reckless resource exploitation) a consistent consequence of past and present circumstances. These insights about the concerted origins of specific patterns of behaviour and mindset, valuable as they may be in their own right, will subsequently also serve to develop and propose site-specific approaches that avoid the generality and reproachful tenor of attempts for change based on single-disciplinary research and make the engagement of a wider public in a critical and productive discourse more feasible. Finally, the methods and outcomes of this project will be applicable to other places or regions sharing central aspects with Newfoundland, like Tasmania, Bermuda, or Ireland.

For the more comprehensive understanding of the incongruities inherent to the Newfoundland culture and society I am establishing ambivalence as a research-lens. Regularly underestimated as akin to ambiguity or indifference, ambivalence is in fact a distinct and enabling notion. Defined as the simultaneous relevance of opposing values and concepts, ambivalence can be extended from a state of mind of a subject to a characteristic of an object, situation, or phenomenon. It manifests itself in a tension that can be paralyzing but bears the potential for stimulation and inspiration as well. Looking at Newfoundland through this lens reveals a wealth of ambivalences manifested as fields of tension between autonomy and dependence, conservatism and experimentation, dignity and powerlessness, (historical) centrality and peripherality, and place attachment and resource exploitation, among others. Together, they create a “Newfoundland aura” in the Benjaminian sense.

To identify and interrelate ambivalences in the Newfoundland past and present, and to arrive at an ambivalently consistent over-all picture of the island, I draw heavily on Foucault's concepts of genealogy and problematization, Charles Sanders Peirce's principle of logical abduction, Gregory Bateson's ecology of mind as well as selected ideas and problems from settler colonial studies. These concepts share an openness to accommodate new perspectives across disciplines and, together, allow for the rigorousness required for the development of new trajectories of knowledge production. They will also inform the evaluation of the field work to be carried out across Newfoundland. The insights and results of the project will be delivered not only in the form of academic articles and presentations, but through photography, video and sound works of varying documentary and artistic character on- and offline as well. The idea is to combine and interweave academia and art to stimulate the eye, the ear and the brain.
Originally from Germany, I am a doctoral student in the Interdisciplinary PhD program at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador with a focus on Humanities, Social Sciences and English since January 2018. My academic background is in Physics. I studied at the universities in Saarbrücken and Cologne and completed my Master's Degree with a thesis in high energy physics at the Saarland University in Saarbrücken in 1996. Since 1995, I have been a member of the German Physical Society. I have held positions as a scientific assistant at the Max Planck Institute for Colloid and Surface Research in Potsdam and at the University of Essen from 1997-1999. Subsequently, finally following an early vocation, I started a career as a visual artist. I was a guest student at the renowned Academy of Fine Art in Düsseldorf in 1999/2000 and completed a training in Multimedia Design at ca.medien.colleg in Essen in 2001.

I have been working as a freelance artist since 2000 and my works have been exhibited in solo and group shows internationally. For the realization of my research-based artistic projects I was awarded numerous grants and awards by international institutions. Not unlike in natural science, the revelation and visualization of genuinely invisible or unseen connections and phenomena is at the core of my artistic work. Using a wide range of media – from photography, video and animation over object art and installation to graphics and sound – my focus is on themes that defy an easy or ultimate description and understanding. The finished works leave space for associations and inspire an engagement by the viewer.

Newfoundland has been the place and subject of my work since 2007 when I first came to the island for an artist residency at the Pouch Cove Foundation. Residencies in Terra Nova National Park (2011) and on Fogo Island (2012 & 2015) followed. Other places in Canada I have been invited to work at include Centre Est-Nord-Est in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli (2008) and Centre Daimon in Gatineau (2010).

Since the start of my artistic career, I have been engaged in artists' associations and initiatives, notably as a member of Berufsverband Bildender Künstler and Deutscher Künstlerbund, as well as a member and board member of Künstlerhaus Dortmund and Westdeutscher Künstlerbund. In 2016, I was elected a delegate of Internationale Gesellschaft der Bildenden Künste (IGBK), Berlin, the German stakeholder for visual artists in Europe. I am committed to advancing the connections to artists' societies in North America and have become a member of the Canadian Artists' Representation (CARFAC) in 2017. Moreover, I have promoted other artists' work by curating thematic group shows and shared my expertise on artistic mobility and cross-cultural artistic practice at conferences and symposia across Europe.

In recent years, my growing interest in cultural and social themes made me wish to put the related humanistic and social scientific research on a solid academic foundation. This wish came within reach when I was accepted into the Interdisciplinary PhD program at Memorial University. Today, I consider my work not as research-based art but as inter- and multidisciplinary research in which my artistic sensitivity, together with scientific structuredness and scholarly open-mindedness, are key ingredients to develop my projects, and visual art is one of the instruments (beside academic and creative writing) to convey my findings.

Newfoundland has become my partner's and my second home in 2016 when we purchased a small old home by the St. John's harbour that we are still busy refurbishing. Visit my photo blog for some impressions of making a new home across the Atlantic: www.rangsch.de/middle_battery.html