

# Socializing with people and nature at the Künstlerdorf

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### Introduction

In recent years, the Künstlerdorf Schöppingen has set itself the goal of sustainable and equitable renewal in order to meet the challenges of our time and to keep pace with other residency programs. To this end, a dynamic, iterative process has been introduced, structured with a new program each year. This year's program, "Ecosystem Künstlerdorf - Learning from Nature", is designed to reflect and strengthen the community in the Künstlerdorf as well as its embedding in the rural environment through symbols, such as the ecosystem, and activities, such as gardening. This process was planned to be enriched and observed by an integrative thinking in science and art - and that is how this short report came into being. So, this led us to the question, to what extent the mentioned symbols and activities can actually contribute to community building? And further: what ideas of human-nature relationships are found in the Künstlerdorf, and thus: How the program appears to its members? To investigate these questions, I applied creative methods of geography (Hawkins 2015). These addressed the fellows and the team and consisted in participant observation, various interactions and conversations in the ateliers, narrative walks through the neighborhood, and communal gardening. These resulted in notes, photographs, recordings, and other materials upon which I base my following reflections.

### Sustainability and Community in the Künstlerdorf

First, I would like to frame the themes of sustainability and communities that are central to this year's program. The concept of sustainability was first coined at the international level with the so-called Brundtland Report to point out the scarcity of resources, the limits to growth, and also justice towards future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Since then, sustainability has been loaded with very different meanings. Sustainability research describes two main discursive strands: Ecological modernization and post-growth concepts. Ecological modernization seeks to bring about sustainability by maintaining modern industrial and institutional structures but decoupling growth from environmental damage through technical efficiency. Post-growth concepts, on the other hand, call for social and institutional transformations, the reduction of technology- and capital-intensive production systems, as well as sufficiency, subsistence, and regional economies (see, for example, Henkel 2016). In the latter, the processes taking place in the Künstlerdorf could be classified.

In communities, sustainable living is understood in sociology as opening and securing opportunities for realization while taking into account unequal availability of resources (Grundmann 2016). Thus, enduring sustainability is not a state, but a constantly renewing social practice based on reaching out to one another and trust. Communities that form to realize a particular transformative concern are understood as intentional

communities (Grundmann 2011). These are experimental lifestyles that people can afford in situations of relative prosperity. Participation requires enduring participation, solidarity, and equality, as well as a self-selected form of participation. Initiatives such as community gardens, community supported agriculture, or ecovillages are counted among intentional communities (Christian 2003), and permaculture is often practiced in them. Permaculture is a worldwide degrow movement that is hardly organized hierarchically. Its three ethical principles *Earth care*, *People care*, and *Fair share*, as well as its 12 design principles, are applied not only to gardening but also to interactions: "*The goal of permaculture is to create harmony with ourselves, between people and with the planet*" (Macnamara 2014:1). Permaculture also wants to contribute to transformation: "*Through allowing ourselves to experiment, grow, experience, try, be, live and feel we connect to our authentic selves and make positive change in the world*" (ibid:11). In this respect, it was purposeful that the Künstlerdorf adopted some elements from permaculture in this year's program.

### Design of the renewal process

#### Visions and goals

The Künstlerdorf, as I was told, finds itself in a dynamic process of sustainable and fair renewal. In this, the artists should find an atmosphere that gives them space for self-realization, or in which they can question their own work. This is a safe and protected space in which they can exchange criticism with colleagues, express their uncertainties, and give and receive feedback. In the Künstlerdorf they should be able to follow their own impulses and become artistically active in free and individual approaches, and not through established guidelines regarding the results to be achieved.

The premises of the Künstlerdorf should also be sustainably renovated in order to offer an appropriate quality of stay for our current times.

All in all, a togetherness should be created in the Künstlerdorf. In doing so, the backgrounds and needs should be considered, which result on the one hand from the different temporariness of the stays of the scholarship holders and the permanent Künstlerdorf team, and on the other hand from the diverse origins of the artists. The aim is to overcome inequalities as far as possible, to establish justice, and to prevent conflicts. For this purpose, a common governance model is to be developed. In a kind of code of action, sustainable guidelines and principles are to be worked out, and common values are to be emphasized. This follows the idea that freedom may always be lived within certain limits.

Furthermore, the Künstlerdorf should no longer be an isolated (artists) village within the Schöppinger village, but rather "the village should resolve within the village". This corresponds to the self-conception of today's art to get involved in society and its urgent questions, as well as to the orientation towards the local and the communal for a deep transformation of society. Even more, the potentials of the Künstlerdorf precisely because of its location in the rural area could be worked out.

#### Strategies for implementation

Several regular activities are organized flexibly, which offer structure, and which also offer the possibility of breaking out of them and creating one's own spaces. At the same time, processes that emerge can be linked back to the structures offered. In this way, a continuity helps to overcome the different temporalities of the fellows' stays in contrast to the permanence of the team and the surroundings.

These structures are, on the one hand, the annual programs, each of which focuses on specific areas. In 2021, for example, the "Open Workshop" was offered to activate and open up the Künstlerdorf to the public. In 2022, "Ecosystem Künstlerdorf - Learning from Nature" suggests that things are not to be considered independently but related to each other. These annual programs result from requirements and the feedbacks of the fellows, like the library renovation planned for 2023. In addition, monthly public brunches and dinners are held that likewise encourage exchange with citizens. A weekly potluck dinner is held for the artist village community. These different formats of gathering together provide multiple modes of interaction.

The issue of overcoming social inequities as a sustainability strategy has many dimensions. For example, not all fellows have the same access opportunities when travelling is difficult for political or other reasons. Therefore, in these cases, fellows should already be supported before their arrival.

As far as the premises are concerned, more comfort was provided in the Künstlerdorf. This step was considered necessary, although it was inevitable to create waste. The ateliers were better equipped, and furniture was restored, especially in the common areas. The central kitchen was renovated, so that fellows can now cook together. All these changes had a positive effect on fostering the community at the Künstlerdorf.

Further, a vegetable garden was created in the park as a place for people to meet with each other and with nature. The garden is intended to be a symbol of connection, health, and complexity through its regenerative power, resilience, and diversity. And, although the manner of participation in this garden was not specified in any form, the gardener artist could be found there often, but regularly from 10-12. Conversations or shared gardening with such a "translator" allowed many members of the Künstlerdorf community, but certainly also passersby, to relate to the garden.

#### Limits

Overall, there is a large backlog of innovation and renovation needs. The simultaneity and scope of changes to be made could push staff to their limits. For example, the previous management did not activate the outside area, i.e. the park which is the common area with the citizens. Also, it was thought that higher art creation needs isolation, and that the opportunities of all fellows were equal, regardless of their origin. These views are now considered outdated and are being revised. Another challenge is that the fellows stay for a short time, come from very different backgrounds, and have very different requirements. There may also be communication difficulties, because of the many languages spoken by the fellows. The team should be willing to support and sympathize with these innovations, in the care of the outside area, the renovation of the Künstlerdorf, and the more individual attendance of the fellows.

In the area surrounding the main building, the former sharp edges were changed to soft and permeable borders to signalize openness. Because of that, the Künstlerdorf is more vulnerable now for vandalism or also for expectations that cannot be met. In the interaction of fellows, the team and the Schöppingen citizens, a variety of expectations come together. Compromises are made with the municipality on a daily basis, as it mows the lawn in the outdoor area. This cooperation has a long history, for example, in the past land of the old farms was ceded for the construction of a parking lot as well as a water playground. Currently there is a request for the construction of a toilet in one of the buildings of the Künstlerdorf. Thus, the Künstlerdorf is not autonomous, but strongly connected with the town administration. This can lead to synergy, as with the joint wood chip heating system, as well as to friction. An example

would be expectations towards the Künstlerdorf in its socio-cultural educational role to exhibit all artworks on a regular basis, but these have to be disappointed to protect other priorities. At the same time, not everyone in Schöppingen is likely to be interested in art or in foreign people. Also, due to their very different origins, fellows catch the citizens' interest differently, or have different interactions with them. And they also come with very different expectations of interaction with the outside world themselves. This complex interaction takes place mainly in the outside area, where it is not exactly clear what is public space and what belongs to the area of the Künstlerdorf, i.e. what belongs to which area of responsibility. It is not a goal of the Künstlerdorf to delimit itself and build a protective fence. However, these interactions are very complex, changing over time and with the changing fellows, so their negotiation is an ongoing process.

#### Keeping up with the energizing momentum

The motivation to experience diversity and to work with different people drives the community in the Künstlerdorf to face these diverse and also challenging tasks. The renewal of the Künstlerdorf by the management is welcomed and sincerely acknowledged as a great achievement, despite all the difficulties. Each in her or his role, I was told, should keep up to maintain this renewal attentively and mindfully. The quality of togetherness is another motivating factor in the Künstlerdorf. It is perceived by the fellows as attentive and not hierarchical, and makes communication easy. Certain habits, such as the work-family balance, or even the recycling of waste, are not prescribed but simply practiced. This quality of togetherness fosters sustainability, and some fellows have found in the Künstlerdorf the freedom and security they were looking for.

The garden has undoubtedly contributed to the quality of their stay in many ways. It gives them positive energy in difficult times. Gardening helps them to sometimes enjoy small successes. Or they observe with interest how people interact through the garden. The garden itself was designed in such a way that not so skilled gardeners can find their way to work in it. But as the artist who created the garden is leaving, it is currently considered how the garden will be continued in the future. Incoming fellows would have to learn, or they might not be interested in gardening at all. The discussion about possible strategies was held, for example, during a joint tomato tasting (of the diverse varieties from the garden) and various alternatives for keeping up with the garden have emerged.

But other initiatives are also seen as community-building, such as making available well-preserved clothes from leaving fellows to the next ones. The team also offers very different small measures, such as forming a circle of chairs or encouraging a film evening, in order to observe whether they develop into self-perpetuating activities.

Some aspects are considered to slow down the actual momentum in the Künstlerdorf, such as the accumulation of art pieces and other objects left behind by former fellows. This is not only spatially confining, but also creative, if those works are seen as goals to be achieved. Whereas other fellows were simply of the opinion that this was outdated art and did not belong (anymore) in the Künstlerdorf. Even the garden was occasionally perceived as the work of an artist that did not necessarily need to be perpetuated. Whatever the decision on these things will be, there were different suggestions, for example, that an art or flea market could take place regularly, or that habits as well as knowledge could be transferred through overlapping of the cohorts of fellows.

Whether the offered activities, such as workshops or public events, keep up or slow

down the momentum, was viewed differently. Even though they are working well, they should not become too frequent in order to maintain enough free space for the Künstlerdorf community to develop. At the same time, some fellows reported their satisfaction in leaving something behind for the citizens, such as a work of art or a learned skill. Other fellows even understand such contributions as their civic duty. In fact, there is also a view that organizing joint public activities can at the same time strengthen community building in the Künstlerdorf itself.

Finally, we considered the regenerative power of introspection, that is, being grateful and taking a break. The fellows are grateful for their artistic development and for the fulfilling work environment. Gratitude also referred to the financial support. Many are grateful for being able to look inside themselves and at the same time see how the community is there for each other. Everyone was going through an intense process of becoming and this would lead to intense bonds with each other. This also helps to move forward with one's own work, as does the freedom of not having to commit to completing certain works. A regenerating haven of peace is undoubtedly the garden. People enjoy it, stroll through it, meet for coffee, or help and garden a bit. Many places in the surrounding area are also visited. Breaks are firmly planned, i.e. time capacities are specifically provided for, in order to celebrate with each other despite all the work that needs to be done.

#### Potentials and challenges

##### Location and nature

A prominent feature of the Künstlerdorf is its rural location. In fact, some fellows mentioned that they chose Schöppingen for their stay for this very reason, because they expected tranquility for their work and personal development from it.

But is rural space nature? And to what extent can a Künstlerdorf community be inspired by nature? The contradictory determination of nature in our society is a recurring topic of discussion in our research group. The perception of nature in a landscape (urban or rural) is a complex sensory and biographical process. According to Gernot Böhme (2014), the beauty of a landscape is not to be understood as its condition, but rather as a search for certain things that one takes pleasure in and that are perceived similarly by the community to which one feels a sense of belonging (see also Steinhäuser 2018). Conversations with the Künstlerdorf community also revealed very different perceptions of nature. For example, one individual described experiencing nature as perfect only in the wilderness at one point, and in the next sentence as experiencing swaying grain in late summer. People can situate and project themselves into or participate in the landscape in very different ways. In the following, I would like to address those ideas that emerged in the conversations and observations in the Künstlerdorf from my point of view, and that could stimulate further discussion.

#### 'BETWEEN AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND NATURE RESERVE NOTHING'

As the quote in the title from one of our conversations suggests, the environment of the Künstlerdorf was summed up by some people with the description 'farmland':

*That's why, you already have the feeling, you can't really get lost in nature here.*

In the same vein, Debaise et al. (2015) question the role assigned to nature in our modern and technological society, describing its role as "backdrop for our human projects, with no project of its own" (ibid:168). This is based on an understanding of a universal nature that is emptied of everything that cannot be explained by (scientific) rationality. In the process, according to the authors, treasures of human subjectivity

would be destroyed. For the currently aspired transformation of society, the authors continue, other forms of knowledge should be taken into account, whose access to 'nature' also takes place through the senses. From the fellows' side, I have experienced an echo of these remarks and a rebellion against such reductionism:

*I think there is much more than the ornamental and utilitarian in nature. [...] What I intend with my art, and what seems to me fundamental to bring about any kind of change, is first of all to appeal to the senses and sensitivity in order to find new ways of relating to things.*

Such different ways of knowing are also related to intercultural backgrounds as they meet in the Künstlerdorf. It is with such divergent understandings of agricultural, natural, and cultural landscapes that a study in my doctoral theses is concerned. In an online survey with farmers from Germany and Argentina about a selection of landscape images, it turned out that their own role in such landscapes was judged differently. For the German participants, cultural landscape was the place where the center of their work took place. For the Argentine participants, it was distant places where one spends one's vacation (Steinhäuser and Buttschardt 2019). Thus, the intensively used agricultural landscape of Schöppingen (and their own role in it) was also evaluated differently or not at all by the Künstlerdorf community.

#### NATURE AS A LOVELY PLACE

Lucius Burckhardt discusses different approaches to nature as very individual processes: "The recognition of the lovely place consists in a rediscovery of one's own youth, impressions from the parental home, the readers, stories told by older people, pictures on the walls of the children's room or schoolroom, ideas about favorite books read" (2021:35, translation). Thus, in our conversations, nature was also very often described as a righteousness, a comfort, a place of memory or rest, or even understood as an antithesis to the city. This notion of nature challenges Burckhardt, in which he goes with his students precisely into the cities to discover 'nature' in the cracks and wastelands. Research at our institute is also concerned with biodiversity in the city, which can be greater than in the surrounding arable land. Parks, on the other hand, are designed by human hands as lovely places, like the park around the Künstlerdorf. But it, too, was evaluated differently. Some participants emphasized its quality of stay for recreation and common events, others noticed a certain monotony of grass and trees. A similar conclusion about how much wilderness would actually be accepted by park users was reached in a thesis we supervised (Lilija Martens 2018).

#### NATURE AND THE AESTHETICS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE.

Other participants fundamentally questioned the concept of 'nature' and brought a humane ecology into the conversation:

*I am not interested in nature. I am interested in ecology. A humane ecology of which we are part.*

Such an overcoming of the human-nature dichotomy is central to the concept of the Anthropocene proposed by Paul Crutzen (2002): an epoch in which, with the help of an increasingly extensive use of energy and technologies, natural processes are being transformed on an unprecedented scale. Anthropocene, in the view of the recently deceased Bruno Latour, is not meant to serve as a retrospective description of an epoch, but as a conceptual framework for reorientation and for questioning overcome practices and ways of thinking (Latour 2011). For example, Martin Guinand-Terrin (2016) discusses the aesthetic perception of nature and the sublime that emerged

among long-distance travelers in the mid-18th century against the backdrop of the Anthropocene. In the process, Burckhardt (2021) argues, the Alps, which had once inspired fear, were gradually elevated to the scenic ideal of beauty. Guinard-Terrin points out how now technology can evoke fascination in its overwhelming scale: *"Before embracing the Anthropocene, we must remember that the sublime is only one of the categories of aesthetics, which includes many others as well (e.g. the tragic, the beautiful, the picturesque) based on other feelings (e.g. harmony, serenity, sadness, pain, love, modesty) that may be better able to feed an aesthetic of care, of the small, of the local, of control, of the old, and of the involution that ecological action so badly needs"* (Fressoz translated by Guinard-Terrin 2016:185). This fascination with the reorganization of the relationship between humans and nature under the influence of technology is a central topic for several fellows in the Künstlerdorf and is expressed in their works.

But can one learn from nature? Different understandings of it will raise different expectations. In the exciting variety of understandings of nature raised during my stay in the Künstlerdorf, I interestingly did not receive a single critical statement about what one should not learn from nature. This is surprising, since nature could also have been perceived as unfair, threatening, or cruel. Rather, the periodicity of the seasons, practices of the garden (such as the scything out in the case of the tomato plant or companion planting) were mentioned as learning for one's own life. One person elaborated on the different character of cornfields and pathways (it was the wild and the manicured landscape). What was inspiring here, was said, was the diversity in which nature interacted. This perception of nature recalls Böhme (2014) who argues that sensory perception means participating in the articulating presence of things. And leads us further to Tim Ingold, who sees a meshing of the ways of consciousness and matter as a prerequisite for everyday nature-connected activities and learning: *"To make a living, farmers and woodsmen must join with the ways of plants; hunters and herdsmen with the ways of animals; artisans with the ways of their materials. Production, in such an ecology of correspondence, is about attending to the trajectories of these nonhuman lives"* (2016: 22).

In addition to this entangled connection to nature, the program also refers to it as an ecosystem "Ecosystem Künstlerdorf". Appropriately, Burckhardt (2021) points out that the interpretation of nature as an environment is based on the notion of an 'ecosystem,' that is, a system of natural forces that, when in equilibrium, regenerate themselves sustainably and independently. Such flexibility (for the good) has been mentioned very often as a capability that could be learned from nature. In the geosciences, one is intensively concerned with the question of so-called tipping points from which a return will probably no longer be possible (Rockström 2009). However, ecosystems cannot be imagined without humans in this process, as in the Anthropocene humans are understood as another geological force. Accordingly, nature in the pure form of our imagination no longer exists. Therefore, the question arises: What do we want to learn from what? This leads us back to Bruno Latour and his call to question our ways of thinking.

Looking back on such a variety of approaches, one could also describe the location of the Künstlerdorf as offering the possibility to perceive and represent nature in different ways: wild, industrialized, cultivated, neglected, polluted, short-cut, trimmed... This variety of conceptions of nature was also evident in the destinations of our walks: Places of inspiration, beautiful resting places, small oases, springs under the church, parks with and without art objects, sheltered places right by the house, places of memory, enchanted places, communal places. These places are used and appreciated by many fellows. Even the largely industrialized character of the landscape, the

passing livestock transports, have their effect in that one's own consumer behavior is reconsidered and this juxtaposition flows into the art-making.

### Community building in and around the Künstlerdorf

Not only are the origins and backgrounds in the Künstlerdorf fellows very diverse, all of them described themselves as creating art in multiple disciplines. And all team members expressed their appreciation for art. This shared interest provides a foundation for the multifaceted togetherness. In addition to the community-building strategies already mentioned, this year the garden is expected to contribute. The question now is what kind of community can emerge, and what does this mean for the governance of gardening? Elinor Ostrom and her research group explored the question of collective action in successful cases of sustainable management of scarce resources. According to their observations in many regions of the world, similar rules of behavior evolved, but with the prerequisite that the community gives itself the rules, there is substantial dependence on the resource, and the using community is clearly defined (Ostrom 2000). Thus, this concept is only conditionally transferable to communities such as community supported agriculture, as Luisa Taubermann (2019) investigated in her thesis in a case study in Münsterland, because the dependence of the resource is not given. Something similar applies to the garden of the Künstlerdorf because of the great availability of food in the immediate vicinity.

Communities that form, in turn, to realize alternative life goals are understood as intentional communities, and they form, according to Grundmann (2011), with the insight that collective forms of life enable a way of life that grants the individual a greater sense of relating to one another - and thus also identity. Unlike the communities studied by Ostrom, intentional communities share a lifestyle or a common concern, not a scarce resource. Thus, they cooperate to live certain values or achieve certain goals. Accordingly, the Künstlerdorf could be understood in some sense as a (temporary) intentional community. A clear motivation is the exchange about artistic creation and the interrelatedness described by Grundmann for the formation of one's own identity. Sustainable, alternative lifestyles are also a shared vision in the Künstlerdorf. Anyway, it should be considered to what extent the garden fulfills the condition of being a common concern of the Künstlerdorf community. On the other hand, in intentional communities, according to Grundmann (2011), communality is produced again and again by the actors in concrete processes of exchange and negotiation in everyday togetherness. And here the garden could play a constructive and at the same time a balancing role for an informal togetherness, according to one participant:

*When we work in the garden, there is something between us. We are indirectly connected through the plant. And that means that we become more equal, I think.*

In this respect, the question arises for the Künstlerdorf whether or how it would like to network with other community gardens or other actors in the surrounding area. Or to what extent the garden could be used as a community garden for the citizens of Schöppingen or as an extracurricular place of learning. The garden itself currently has the role of a presence, which sensitizes that and the Künstlerdorf does not want to isolate itself. Because the fact that in the Künstlerdorf live people who are not interwoven with the place and stay temporarily, as well as belong to the higher arts (which may not be accessible to everyone) represents many unknowns and therefore could be a hurdle of interpersonal communication. The garden is intended to break down this barrier between inside and outside.

Opening up, however, is viewed differently; overall, the question arises around

the degree of integrating or drawing boundaries. The spatial boundaries of the Künstlerdorf appear diffuse, as described. The garden was created outside the wall, where a path is frequently used by the general public. I have the mental image of the two former farms, but they are now intersected by public structures such as a parking lot, a meadow (for partying), a playground... and I wonder where the boundaries and responsibilities are. According to Ostrom, this is an important feature for communities to sustainably use a resource, in this case space. And it begs the question of who might suffer from permeability into the Künstlerdorf space and need to be considered. On the other hand, it could be that certain fellows do not want to participate so intensively in village life and traditions of Schöppingen with which they are not familiar or which are too noisy, or which they prefer to avoid for other reasons. These differences are not always obvious from the outside, but this awareness should be created.

#### 'Impulses that the institution could really set'

This further quote in this title leads us to the final, concluding thoughts. Institutions like the Künstlerdorf have the potential of being pioneers of rural areas. This is the role that some artists saw themselves in:

*And I think that solutions can be found in small communities, or they have a certain way of life that is not mainstream.*

I was given many examples of how frugal or anti-growth lifestyles could be modeled. For example, the cargo bike was mentioned. Furthermore, it is suggested to integrate sustainability as a topic into the application process. The garden is often mentioned in this context. One wonders how local residents could also be inspired to work in the garden. In this way, a community around the food produced there could be continued. In individual conversations with passers-by, I discovered that gardening practices from the Künstlerdorf are already being carried forward into their own gardens. The existing network, as it is currently practiced with the Heimatverein and the local farmers, could be supplemented as a co-creation of an Alternative Food Network, such as with food councils, direct marketing or urban gardens. They network for organic gardening, seasonal and regional foods, fair pay, community with like-minded people, or connection to nature (Steinhäuser and Gumpert 2020).

And, of course, the educational potential of the Künstlerdorf as a socio-cultural center that actively engages young people or the Schöppingen village is often mentioned because there are not that many other cultural offerings of that scale locally. Our working group at the University of Münster sees the potential of the exchange between art and science. As I have experienced, both have very similar questions and pursue very similar overall social goals albeit going different ways to get possible answers. Such mutual enrichment could take place through courses, theses on specific topics, or participatory artistic research.

