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POTENTIAL LANDSCAPE

An ongoing collaboration project for the Swiss Artistic Research Network SARN

‘ We have been departing from the similarities and shared aspects of mountain cultures across Europe.

I belong to a Shepherds’ Network from the northern Spanish mountains, which in fact has many aspects in common with the Swiss mountains, in the sense of the evolution of these landscapes due to the same factors and conditions leading to the progressive abandonment of farming activities in the European mountains.

Throughout time, mountains remained a reservoir of knowledge, practices, animal breed and other various forms that are crucial for the transitions of our societies regarding most natural manifestations.

In particular, I think that alpine areas are at the forefront of how climate change will have an impact in farming ecosystems.

In our specific context, we are putting into practice different approaches from artistic research and proposals that aim to contribute and to face these challenges.

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Personally, I come from both the arts and agro-ecology. I also studied rural sociology therefore I started to look upon the socio-cultural dimensions of pastoralism. In the decades of the 60s and 70s, known as 'the big acceleration', pastoralists - as a minority- have started to acquire a broader cultural understanding and thus view their ways of farming as obsolete and residual when mainly associated with a narrative of nostalgic pastoral harmony with nature and so forth.

At the same time, these cultures have been constantly evolving and changing the means to keep the surplus of solar energy that one captures from the summer in form of natural grass, as milk, as well as in the concentration of protein in cheese, achieved by different cultures through the complex biotechnology of milk fermentation and solidification.

It is very important to tackle the question of food sovereignty and the replication of mountain cultures subsistence, based on local resources.

Nowadays, these areas and these landscapes are facing big transformations. Currently there are other uses for the mountains with the increase of rural tourism and the huge pressure of visitors coming to enjoy the mountains and relating to the landscapes as if they were still images to be consumed. Confronted with the dynamic perception of the landscape that pastoralists have, mountains are regarded as a place for production, not solely for consumption. We maybe need to find ways in which society as such starts to look at landscapes with the eyes of the shepherd and starts to understand, for example, what happens when there are more bushes, trees and a vegetation which is replacing the pastures.

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Apart from the fact that there is a loss of hay meadows with rich bio-diverse ecosystems, there is an increased risk of fires in our mountains.

Pastures work as a very efficient carbon capturing system and we have breeds of animals which have co-evolved in these areas for millennia: in our mountains in Spain, we have evidence of pastoralism which date 6000 years.

From the era of transition of the hunter / gatherer in Neolithic times to the chasing of wild boars, humans started herding nomadically, changing between the valleys in the winter to the summer pastures in the warmer months.

The need to reinvent what it means to be a shepherd in the 21st century is crucial. At this point, we also have to consider the importance of new technologies: presently, we are developing a project which we named 'the bionic sheep'. Here, the sheep serves both as a tool that allows the flock to be geo-localised with a GPS system and also to send ultrasound tones in a frequency that repel wolfs. This is a pioneering question as we are now facing the strong dichotomy between the preservation of wild carnivores and the preservation of pastoralism. We think there should be ways to find and develop co-existence, acknowledging the importance and taking into consideration the life of shepherding communities.

In this sense, the question which arises, is one that and considers what precisely is the role and where is the voice of pastoralists in the decision-making processes related to the mountain areas or natural preservation areas.

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We come from societies with an ecosystem preservation concept that denies the agency of local communities and denies pastoralists having a voice, for example, having a say on how to properly make use of fire or how to repair a hut; it denies shepherds gaining access to measures in order to keep their activities ongoing and sometimes, even, there are those that place -lets say- obstacles, or even forbid these cultures to develop.

New pastoralists are coming to the mountains; nowadays, these young people mostly come from the cities, from the art fields and mostly from different backgrounds so therefore, we need to prepare and somehow establish mechanisms of inclusion for the sake of the continuity of the research. In this sense, in 2004, I started the Shepherds' School, which is a social system project for the transference of knowledge and for mutual support.

On one hand we have the veteran shepherds, who are older shepherds, who are holding the knowledge. Frequently, this knowledge would fade away because their sons and daughters would not continue their trade. On the other hand, we have young pastoralists with different backgrounds who do not have the possibility nor access to that knowledge. The Shepherds' School offers them that possibility. It consists of a pedagogical system by which there is a process of both basic learning and fabrication. In a second step, the Shepherds' Council select students and some of them undertake a deeper theoretical training of about one month with different subjects such as mountain ecology, cheese making and the physiology of goats, sheep or cows depending on the species they will work with; later, this theoretical training will be confronted with reality.

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There is a practical module of the Shepherds' School in which the young shepherds stay in the cabin with a veteran shepherd for a period from one to two months when they daily learn to live a shepherd's life, having to go through the difficulties and also the satisfactions of pastoralism.

We should not idealise it, for it is not easy. They are confronted with a very complex environment for mountain areas are hostile environments, they have to coexist with predators and with changes of weather in different grades.

Several youngsters who come to the Shepherds' School don't stay for the training, as they initially kind of look at a Shepherd's life through an ideal gaze, but some of them really do stay and that is also what we are interested in: in fact, what will happen after the training? In that sense, we try to promote a creative investment on the Shepherds facilities, redesigning huts, redesigning the Shepherds gear with new fibers for example and bringing in science so as to preserve this way of life for the future.

There is another aspect that is very important but which is maybe not so much related to the practical side regarding the matter of the shepherd self-perception of the landscape. In these years, we have noticed that, by running the Shepherds' School and by bringing young people from all over the world interested in learning this way of life, that they acknowledge themselves and then recognize, that they have acquired a very valuable knowledge, the savoir faire and ways of confronting difficulties that involve sophisticated forms of, co-ownership, commons, co-management and so forth between different shepherds.

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In that sense, we have now moved a little bit from the pastoralists saying that the environmentalists are against them. To mention another example, once an old shepherd told me when I asked him about 'nature'. He said - Nature? -There was nothing like that back in my days; 'nature' became something we talk about as long as we are disconnected from it. Asking him about nature, was like asking a fish about water.

In these days, there are shepherds who say - I am the true environmentalist, I am the custodian of this landscape, and it's a landscape with that potential. Recently, I organized a shepherds gathering in the mountains and there were people from all around Spain as well as from France. One day, we were running a dynamic exercise that asked them to close and then open their eyes. We asked: - How would you like to see your land, your landscape, and your animals in ten years? The possibility for naming these projections is already breaking the narrative that pleads the notion that we are currently experiencing the death of pastoralism.

We believe that since pastoralism has been going on for so long, it will keep going on. It is our turn now to put our skills, our creativity, our privileges as cultural producers, designers, architects and scientists at the service of re-imagining and reinventing how pastoralism in the 21st century would be.`

Recorded during a brief encounter between Fernando Garcia Dory and Florian Kutzli in Basel, Sept. 2021
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