

Understanding Transformation as a Possibility

Sandra Knecht in Conversation with Ines Goldbach

Ines Goldbach: For some years you've been working on and thoroughly researching an inclusive understanding and terminology for what in German is called Heimat, i.e. home or homeland. For you this is above all about tastes. Questions of identity are also central, including one's surroundings and origins, among other things. Even if every home is something different and is defined through different things, there are still many elements that can define a collective feeling of home. Can we explore these thoughts in our conversation? I'd like to begin with what brought about our recent conversations: the exhibition Beehave which places the honeybee centre stage, and considers the subject from many reference points and many aspects of the bee. How do bees and even honey play a part in your research?

Sandra Knecht: For starters, I like bees as animals and I especially like honeycomb, which is a perfect product in every regard. I'm also fascinated that there are so many different kinds of bees, very few of which are domesticated. Without these insects some 80% of cultivated and wild plants would not be able to propagate themselves. This is a great service for which I have a huge respect.

I have difficulty imagining a summer without the buzzing of bees, the chirping of crickets and the tweeting of birds. Through their sounds alone they are part of my life. On Saturdays fresh *zopf* bread with butter and honey is a fixed ritual, just like the 'three-minute eggs' from our hens. There's been the recurring ritual of dipping candles in early winter in school, with the smell given off by the melting beeswax, and the rhythm we picked up moving around the pots, the heat on our fingers dipped in wax and the consistency of the candles that would be lit the following Christmas. Yet at the same time other factors increase the intensity, too: the art of Michelangelo, Dieter Roth, Meret Oppenheim, Georgia O'Keeffe, the Kunsthaus Zürich collection and the Opernhaus – all of these are part of my identity and thus also of my home.

IG: What started you working with the term Heimat and your own identity as part of that?

SK: For a long time I worked in social education with young migrants. Identity, home, sex, gender and religion were terms that would crop up repeatedly. All these terms have been

informed for me through this experience, but equally thanks to my own background. They also forced me to address questions of colour and to engage with them more seriously. Then, as I made the decision to focus solely on art, the Arab Spring broke out, which, after initial euphoria, quickly went in the opposite direction.

We experience every day how our political system and cohesion are challenged now, as well as humanity. Through my work with the young people and their families I appreciated how important terms of home and identity are in our lives – but equally how, if you lose this native soil by fleeing, let's say, the self and self-conception re-forms. I came to form the thesis that home and society have to be continually renegotiated. They are no longer simply given as a birth right. That's why it is more important than ever to know who you are and where you come from. I cannot make decisions if I find myself in a space where I have to adopt rigid norms – where transformation cannot be accepted as a possibility.

IG: Making food is central for you. For some time now you've been working with a format titled Immer wieder sonntags (Over and Over on Sundays), in which you regularly cook for about thirty people inside a barn you renovated, devoting each evening to a specific topic. In November, in the context of the Beehive exhibition, you'll devote an evening to bees. Is cooking one such possibility for transformation, in the way you just mentioned?

SK: Yes, cooking offers me a means of transformation. Because the act of cooking is already a transformation. Plus everything I imagine about the individual products and their history, that projection, is transformed once again onto the plate.

IG: During one of our conversations you told me how you were trying out new things with cheese and honey. What is this about?

SK: Bees were domesticated by humans as useful animals thousands of years ago and today they are also deployed in industrial food production. Honey is a product which keeps for a very, very long time and is thus suitable for collection, like wine or schnapps. It is one of the most precious foods we have. The range of different tastes is immense. What influences the variation is not just the year in which honey was made, but equally the season and the terroir.

I experiment a lot with honey, and sometimes also with the combs that I get from the apiarist. My favourite honey comes from a convent in Lourdes in the middle of the Pyrenean forest. It tastes sunny, dark, earthy, of heat and a little bitter.

IG: Today you live in a village in the Basel countryside. Your studio stretches far beyond the building's walls to include your animals (goats, dogs, sheep, a cat and chickens), plants, the countless jam jars in which you preserve what you've cooked and bring together your tastes. And there are the forests and lakes where you collaborate with local woodsmen and fishermen, who will call you, for example, if an animal has been run over and you can use the meat rather than letting it go to waste. Always operating with respect for the nature that surrounds you and the animals. How much does the village come into your work?

SK: The village where I live is very important for me and my work, because it offers what I never had in a city: little irritation, peace and a very beautiful landscape. There is a lot of agricultural production that I can work with. I find nearly all the products that I need for my experiments and for cooking here. I have developed important friendships and a unique network with producers.

The village community is somewhat equivalent to the average Swiss populace. And the architectural aesthetic accords with most villages in flat regions. All the same, the conservatism in such villages means that you are continually observed. As a not entirely conventional person coming from outside, you have to accept very many compromises; and a climate of obligation towards the village community dominates, without the latter being prepared to allow real integration or entertain other attitudes than their own. A system of 'chieftains' who divide the cake between themselves still thrives. Patriarchal structures that have stood the test of time all over the world function more strongly here than in cities like Zurich, for example. It's thus very important for me to consider the society and traditions in which I live and to translate my subjective perception into artistic form.

IG: You're never still, and by now you're well-known in cooking circles, too. But you define yourself – rightly so – not primarily as a cook but as an artist. Where is the difference for you here, or, to be more precise, where do you think the art lies when you are cooking and working with tastes, foods and animals?

SK: My artistic approach to cooking is an attempt to make an experience of my home and identity possible. I want to demonstrate that *Heimat* is not just something comfortable and pretty. Unlike in gastronomy, I'm not interested in being able to repeat what I do or find a balanced interplay of flavours. I try to create a culinary experience of the taste-identities of the plants and animals, as well as of different cultures.

IG: Art can refine perception. The dishes and flavours that you offer seem not only to be about delicious tastes but instead relate more to an entirety, so that it seems logical to also smell earth in a piece of meat. Is this heightening of sensitivities to the whole important to you – or, to put it another way, how can this consciousness empower us today?

SK: Because my monthly meals are always devoted to a different topic, or animal, plant or way of cooking, I place great importance on creating the most coherent taste experience possible. So it may be the case that if, for example, I prepare a deer from the local woods, this comes to the table with its environment and the plants that live there. I often consider what landscape the animal lived in, what it ate and what it needed to be healthy. How can I communicate to the people who eat what I have sensed, and this aesthetic? If I understand 'nose to tail' and 'leaf to root' as more than just slogans but as exciting possibilities for eating, then I understand better what surrounds me, and that the diversity of our plant and animal world must be maintained and encouraged. What good is it to me if what I eat only fulfils the common standard? The more I know about something and the more I can relate to it more than just intellectually, the less I want to do without it. Being able to create the right connections in order to make swift decisions allows me to survive, and not only as an artist. The ongoing experiment in the kitchen laboratory is, for me, an enormously stimulating engagement with the environment and my identity.

IG: To finish, let's come back to the exhibition. The title Beehave deliberately implies the term behaviour. Here the question of what role we individuals want to adopt within society is central. How do we want to behave in relation to nature, the environment and our fellow man? I think these topics are equally essential in your work, particularly in relation to what you've just said.

SK: I read a great deal when I was young and grew up with books like those of Ernst Kreidolf and Tomi Ungerer, the Rössli Hu and *Mein Name ist Eugen*, or, later, with Elisabeth Müller, Jeremias Gotthelf, Friedrich Glauser, Heinrich Böll, Gertrude Stein, Simone de Beauvoir, Luise Rinser, Toni Morrison, Bertolt Brecht, Gerhard Hauptmann, Audre Lorde ad so on. This early literary education, my socialisation in a small village, on farms, at the butcher's and the baker's, doing agricultural service, in the Rudolf Steiner school at the nearest small town, on horseback or on a bike: all of this showed me freedom up close, and to this day it equally defines how I see the world and what is important to me. The idea of homeland as a romanticised, national sanctuary does not interest me. Home is also bitter, unwieldy, rough and sour.

Traditions are a form of knowledge transfer with which we can understand a collective culture and continue it without rigidly insisting things always remain the same. It is an opportunity for artistic engagement with identity.

IG: And including nature in this is vital.

SK: Yes. Like the terms 'renaturing' or 'restoration ecology', in the sense of sustainability, conservation, diversity and care for resources, which I believe are very important if nature is to survive as nature, without turning into an amusement park for consumers.

IG: That involves respectful treatment of animals, of which you have many. What, in your opinion, can we learn from bees and their behaviour?

SK: I think we can learn a great deal from them in relation to improvisation, flexibility and decision-making. A bee colony is an enormously flexible social system. The swarm is extremely fascinating as a construct, continually reinventing itself and thus always in a transitional stage. There are no fixed lines in the life of a bee. And bees are pragmatic. A bee colony is not concerned with hierarchies, functions, or giving and taking, but rather with unconditional, lifelong care through mutual feeding, cleaning, heating and cooling... In the nest the egg-laying queen is the central focus, but she is nothing without her state and will be exchanged by the population when she is no longer up to the high demands of the reproductive process. Without the workers that clean and feed her, she could not live.

IG: That speaks in favour of a high degree of individual engagement, respect for the community and solidarity – which are thus also important elements for a functioning society. Active participation in creating our today and tomorrow is not only something we can learn from bees, but from artists too, right?

SK: I recently came across an interesting study from the University of Göttingen which looked at how artists' brains reacted to receiving or refusing monetary awards. Here is a quote from it: 'Humans possess an invaluable ability of self-expression that extends into visual, literary, musical and many other fields of creation. More than any other profession, artists are in close contact with this subdomain of creativity. Probably one of the most intriguing aspects of creativity is its negative correlation with the availability of monetary reward. While even small banknotes set off significant fireworks of dopamine in dentists and insurance agents, creative brains remained calmer.'

What can be interpreted as incorruptibility and dedication to one's own work also shows, however, that artists should understand themselves more as a community and no longer regard precarious conditions and self-exploitation as normal. For without recognition, a sense of one's own work and commissions as well, mental and physical health is endangered and it becomes very difficult not to slide into yet more precarious conditions. So it is very important to recognise oneself as a part of society and to demand this from society too. Art and culture are the ground on which we stand; we must take care of them, particularly when this world gets crowded.