

zweiundzwanzig/zehn

Illustrierte Blätter 2. Ausgabe Oktober 2005

What if you woke up one day with a herd of cows outside your front door ... ?

Cities are a by-product of industrialisation: densely populated agglomerations, consuming energy & natural resources. They rely on the surroundings for food production, fresh air & water, space and energy. Yet most city dwellers are disconnected from the natural cycle of life: growth – harvest – decay – growth, and often they are disconnected from the ground they live on. As industry has vanished, the citizens have too, leaving behind a social, physical and emotional vacuum. In Liverpool this manifests itself mainly in the poorest parts of town: rows of boarded-up houses and swathes of derelict land.

“What to do?” was the question raised by the international ideas competition “shrinking cities”.

“Why not herd cows on the derelict land?” was our reaction. The proposal was selected as one of the winning entries: Thus “Cow – the udder way” arrived one Saturday in June this year at 2:34 am in Toxteth, one of the most deprived areas of Liverpool. 5 cows, 5 calves, 3 farmers and 5 artists set up camp in the shade of the local church. For 9 days, the cows grazed on empty grassland in the vicinity. This imagery gave these spaces a new reading, demonstrating our idea of a “productive” town, where bare essentials like food are produced among the buildings and streets. Initially we were met with surprise and reservation by the unsuspecting neighbours, later with delight. There was excitement among the kids, support from neighbours, media coverage and joy among the visitors. But there was also stone throwing, anger, theft ... Above all though, there were little stories life tells if you bother to listen:

There was the 13 year old boy, who threw fire bombs at us – a bucket of water brought this to an end. Later, he was beaten up by some older kids. I comforted him, gave him my mobile to call his parents – he said “sorry” and came back most days, helping us here and there and becoming part of our team. He was a sweet lad, quite practical and able with his hands.

A little boy aged 4 came every afternoon. His mom said she had never seen him so calm as around the cows. Usually he was hyperactive, “too young to be on medication”, she said. Maybe it wasn't just medication what he needed?

One woman shouted at us the first morning. She seemed angry, smelled a little of alcohol. Later, she apologised and said she had been a bit drunk in the morning. She became a regular guest on our little “farm”, sharing some of her problems with the women in the team.

As part of our competition entry, we had researched uses for cow dung and shown the result in form of imaginary products – “charcoal for barbecues” made of manure was one of them. An African woman in a colourful dress saw this “product” and said that when she was little, this was exactly what they did at home: use dung to cook.

A couple was stroking the cows – the woman phoned her daughter: “Guess what – cows are grazing in our old back garden!” They had lived here in a terraced house some 20 years ago – now it was a field with amazing views of the Mersey.

Several elderly citizens felt reminded of their youth. They told us that there used to be cows in the dairies in this area, except that then the cows never grazed among houses as they did now. Representatives of the local housing association had never perceived these grass lands as meadows – “seeing the cows, it's obvious” they said.

The last 2 days, a man appeared on a bicycle. Without asking or being asked he started to help, guarding the gate to our compound, giving a helping hand whenever there was something to do. Without much words exchanged, we shared food, gave him beer.

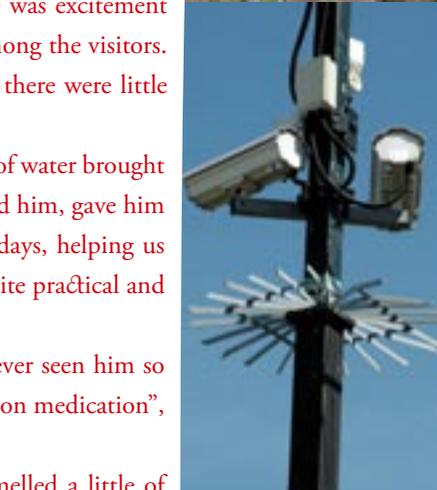
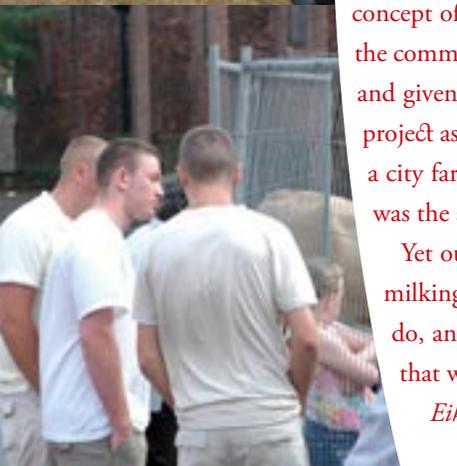
And there was the vicar, her congregation and some neighbours who helped us as much as they could where the council seemed not interested, the police could not do much at all ... and the hundreds of kids, juveniles, teachers and parents, who were happy to know where to find their kids.

The catalysts for this were the cows. They did not judge, seemed happy as long as they could go about their business undisturbed: eating and resting.

In the end, it is difficult to say what to take from this event. Lots of little things maybe, like the stories above. Our hope that the local community takes on our idea and makes it their own proved a little too optimistic. In Toxteth, some people have been unemployed in the 3rd generation. The concept of achieving something through your work does not exist. Maybe, if we did this again, the community could be involved in the preparation. It might have made our lives on site easier and given the community a sense of ownership and achievement. It might have become their project as much as ours. We did ask the local housing association if they could imagine having a city farm in this location. “Why not, if it is financially as viable as housing development” was the answer – so in theory “yes”, in reality “not really”.

Yet our presence showed that there was a demand for such an institution. The feeding, milking and care the cows needed gave the kids a sense of purpose, something sensible to do, and a little kind attention – maybe something they craved. And maybe something that would cost so little, compared to what it could achieve.

Eike Sindlinger



When I texted a friend who had also visited the "cow the udderway" installation in the Dingle, Liverpool, we both coincidentally used the same adjective, „humbled“ to describe how we felt. It seemed an odd word to choose. After all, it is a word that makes you think more of great human struggles or remarkable intellectual achievements than of a reaction to an architecture project or an art installation or even a performance. Why was it that the motley bunch of architects, dancers and farmers who had got together this extraordinary and slightly mad project had induced this feeling in both of us?

The answer, I suspect, lies in the content and the context. The key content was of course, the cows themselves. The context was the inner city of Liverpool. The sight of these large ambling ungainly creatures patiently and serenely living for a week on a few patches of grassland in the middle of a fairly unprepossessing housing estate with (and this was another surprise) a great view over the Mersey was strangely moving. They spent this week displaced but continuing under the care of their young farmer custodians doing what they do best: eating grass and producing milk. This was the creative force unadulterated by the artifice of urban living: a cow, her calf and her milk.

The reason I think it was all so moving was that the local population who had these surprise visitors was, or so it seemed, almost exclusively composed of noisy, assertive and manifestly alive and lively children. So here we had another classic theme: innocence. The stories the kids had to tell and the behaviour (drunken, violent, damaged) of a small number of older residents suggested that they were ripe for the fall.

This, then, was what, for me at least, the performers achieved. They produced a very real and tangible symbol of hope and possibility. The innocence and enthusiasm of childhood in harmony with the basic creative force of nature. This was no simple day out however and we were made aware of the fragility of their creation. There were, I understand, a number of threats and even physical assaults on the organisers. These, though alarming and unpleasant, did provide a dark counterpoint to the bucolic ideal that was trying to manifest itself on the common. This was perhaps a third reason to feel humbled. The fact that these artists and architects stuck with their project night and day for the duration made one feel that they were truly committed to their project and that their purpose was not in any way cynical or exploitative.

There was one final extraordinary event as the group was packing up and saying their farewells. One young lad who had been besotted by the whole event and had alternated wildly between trying to be involved and accepted (which he was) and trying to attack it (which he did) phoned the police and informed them confidently that he had discovered a dead body in the disused school building adjoining the site. Three police cars were tied up for some time investigating his claim. The crowd however stood faithfully to say goodbye to their bovine guests and were not to be distracted. So there it was for us all to see: the struggle between Thanatos and Eros, perhaps even good and evil, played out spontaneously by children and dumb animals. – Pure poetry.

John Moriarty, London.

Cow – the udder way are:

Paul Cotter, Gareth Morris, Heidi Rustgaard, Eike Sindlinger, Ulrike Steven and Susanne Thomas

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www.theudderway.info

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Wenn Sie dabei sein wollen: Die Ergebnisse des Wettbewerbs „shrinking cities“ und andere Arbeiten zum Thema werden vom 26. 11. '05 bis zum 29. 01. '06 in der Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig (Karl Tauchnitzstr. 11, D-04107 Leipzig) gezeigt.

Informationen dazu unter: www.shrinkingcities.com und www.gfzk.de

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