

NAIRS - portrait of an idea

NAIRS - early history

The Contemporary Art Center is situated at a height of 1191 m above sea level, in the Lower Engadine valley outside Scuol, which is dominated by the river Inn. The former sanatorium, built in 1912, along with the Scuol Palace Hotel (formerly the Tarasp spa house) and the Tarasp pump hall are of cultural and historical interest, dating back to the early days of tourism in the Lower Engadine. The former sanatorium is ranked among the top 100 buildings in the canton of Grisons worthy of preservation and was added to the list of protected historic sites in 2014.

What began as a private enterprise in 1988, with the motto 'Art needs space and space needs art' (Henry Levy) is today continued in the region with intensified efforts by Fundaziun NAIRS. In the past the debate concentrated on strengthening the impact of the Art Center and helping NAIRS to become a firm part of the Engadine and the canton of Graubünden, balancing the cultural historical roots and 'pure' art in the romance-language area.

In December 2005 Henry Levy (Foundation BINZ39), Jon Plouda (President Pro Engiadina Bassa PEB) and Christof Rösch (artistic director/curator NAIRS) founded the self-contained foundation 'Fundaziun NAIRS'. The idea and finances of this new foundation are carried by:

- canton of Grisons
- Pro Engiadina Bassa (region of lower Engadin)
- Förderverein NAIRS (friends of Nairs)
- private donors
- arts councils and sponsors

The ownership of the house goes to the 'Fundaziun NAIRS', who manages the building and the Artist-in-Residence program, and organizes a wide range of cultural and artistic activities in the house and in other locations as well. The 'Fundaziun NAIRS' gives continuity to the cultural development in the region and strengthens the production of contemporary art on an international level.

NAIRS - the model of a living social society

Up to ten artists from different parts of the world live and work in NAIRS at any one time; most of them are exhibiting on foreign soil. NAIRS creates an interface between public and private areas: Besides being a place for the scholarship holders to live and work, the house is a place to hold exhibitions, a place for locals to meet visitors and a place to discuss questions of art and the cultural identity of the region. Interdisciplinary question-and-answer sessions and discussion of techniques happen daily in NAIRS. The interaction between artists in the house and interdisciplinary discussions and debates on the principles of the valley started by the curator have borne creative fruit. It goes without saying that ideas gained by the methods described do not always manifest themselves as work in the classical sense.

The artists frequently give insight into their work processes at open studios or workshops for schoolchildren. NAIRS is a place where artists from different branches can meet each other as well as other interested parties and the general public.

NAIRS - culture in the mountainous countryside

NAIRS is an oasis in the cultural countryside, enabling discussions between contemporaries. Although contemporary art has been spreading throughout the region with the opening of new galleries in the past few years, the continued presence of an artistic debate of local significance remains our creed: as opposed to the importation of art, NAIRS is instead cultivating new life on the fertile cultural ground in the valley which can be sent out to the world. NAIRS adheres to the existing cultural groundwork in the region which, however, still struggles with a certain lack of self-concept. Due to this fact fundamental questions concerning the relevance of artistic work (and its criteria) are often juxtaposed against a more traditional understanding of art rooted in rural cultural aspects. NAIRS is the ideal spot for a think tank between nature and culture: its links with the place are always in evidence, and it acts as a cultural control center.

NAIRS - 'high' or 'low' is not the question

During the 20th century the idea of 'high culture' caused inflation in art and a museum boom, banishing art to the far corners of city museums: museums as reservations of a threatened 'kind'? It is a truism that art today obeys global (market) strategies and, if it refuses to do this, it will all too frequently be exploited for commercial purposes. Autonomous artwork has become exchangeable. New artistic strategies are currently being developed and tested, but it is rare that concepts such as site specificity, contextual art or social art are more than empty words.

NAIRS offers the chance of setting out on this basis: contextual, participatory and interactive concepts on site are elements in a continuum of measures bound in a cultural environment with the idea of understanding NAIRS as a whole as artistic intervention in the valley.

NAIRS - regional, NAIRS - global

The site itself holds a magical attraction for artists from near and far. Many artists have been working on themes from the Engadine, years after their visit, and they often return. Again and again, it is the unbiased view of creative artists which acts as a mirror. The artists act with high precision in one of the richest cultural landscapes in the Alps. Experiences from global networking and frequently those of urban origins meet in a region with unique resources and potential. Visitors to NAIRS frequently come across works of art, the place they were created, the source of their inspiration and their creator, all at the same time.

A whole cultural saga can develop from this trinity of person-place-work, but 'culture' always begins where people do something particular, at a particular place and a particular time. Statements on a specific situation (including highly individual works in classical and new media) repeatedly question and enrich the cultural environment.

NAIRS - the periphery as chance

The trinity described above likewise hides the danger of proximity, but it also opposes the 'l'art pour l'art pour l'art' effect and accepts what is also called the provinces. These provinces or the periphery become a center and develop beyond themselves, if they take themselves seriously, if they question themselves and allow themselves to be questioned, if they stand alone, building on their own foundations.

Even on a large scale, working hypotheses change little – such as the vision of urban Switzerland with the Alps as a front garden and the predicted catastrophic effects on the structure of the region. The 'satellite view' and its interpretations of a region, which 'always propagate this overview', and prophesy the ruin (because economic exploitation is to be deplored), is only half the truth.

Cultural (self) knowledge and the corresponding preparation for the changing identity of a place – when linked with such visions – have an explosive effect on politics and even economics: despite or because of the continuous building and establishment of huge structures in very different areas of our world, an 'archaeological' method of proceeding seems justified. Not with the intention of mystifying the past, but, on the contrary, the hope of producing a feeling for the present and developing retro visionary concepts, recognising 'quality' and connecting with the future: in the sense of a radicalism which, literally, digs for roots, in order to integrate past and future.

'Perhaps each person's knowledge begins with the perception of his position in the space in which he finds himself' was the title of a place-specific sculptural work at the Istituto Svizzero di Roma in 1999 by the author of this text. If you apply this to the NAIRS situation, and the artists who get involved with the place, the quotation says something about how an individual is linked to a specific place and by the same token, that giving and receiving is required in order to expand one's own artistic resources and recharge the place. I hope that NAIRS will be able to continue to act as a catalyst to bring about these processes.'

NAIRS - the future

The present project 'NAIRS Futur' (the entire restoration of the sanatorium and year-round operation starting in summer 2016) enables NAIRS to achieve the goal of a strengthened presence in the valley.

NAIRS' goal is to be one of the institutions which lead in the formation of cultural-political opinions in Graubünden, is an example of how to communicate contemporary artistic and cultural work, and is unique in how they transmit their atmosphere.

If we can succeed in making NAIRS the critical voice and mediator between the foreign and the beautiful, we would in fact have squared the circle. Utopia? Perhaps. But NAIRS is a special case – and capable of special things.

Christof Rösch, artist, architect, director and curator of NAIRS - 2015