Creating Community  
From 28 April to 5 May, participants gathered from throughout Europe for the Culture and Higher Education conference “Europe, Art and Spirituality – Building up an Intercultural Identity” in Tulln, Austria. Interactive icebreakers began to foster the conference community: in the opening game we sought to remember everyone's names and their favorite artists, ranging from Pablo Picasso and Patty Smith to Fyodor Dostoevsky and Paul Gerhardt. Small group and plenary discussions opened the topic, examining role of art and spirituality in society.

Can Art Save the World?  
Alastair Hulbert, from Scotland, gave the introductory lecture on “Art and Spirituality” in European history and culture. His images, ranging from those of Caravaggio to modern day cartoonist Selçuk Demirel, and excerpts from European literature and philosophy over viewed many stages in European history and revealed the penetrating call and challenge of hope for the world through art and spirituality. He challenged all with a quote from an exhibit in Antwerp in 1993: “L’art, peut-il sauver le monde? Can art save the world?” This question echoed throughout the week.

Peter Ciaccio, a pastor from Italy and former WSCF-E Vice Chair, led a session examining spirituality in European cinema through examination of films by Bergman, Fellini, Tarkovsky, Kieslowski in comparison to the spirituality portrayed in mainstream Hollywood productions. The scene of a game of mimic tennis from Michaelangelo Antonioni's film, “Blow-up”, parallels to this search for spirituality – is there a ball? Or not? The answer is up to us.

Oldrich Simek, a Catholic theologian and photographer from the Czech Republic, gave a lecture on “Creative Photographing of God's Creation: The Ethics and Spirituality of Nature Photography” raising questions about role of the artist when attempting to “capture” nature on film: How do the printed images reflect creation? In what way is art a new creation or the reflection of Creation? Questions and discussion examined the responsibility of the artist to nature and Creation, as a creator her or himself.

Also examining the creation of visual images, in a session on “The Right Brain in a Left Brain World” Michael Hanna, from Ireland, showed artwork ranging from prehistoric etchings in caves to modern day art used in therapy. He examined the use of creativity, the right side of the brain, in our fast-paced, business-oriented, left brained world. Using examples from the art gallery in Health Sciences building of University College Cork, where he works, he explained how visual awareness both helps medical students in their observation skills while working, but also serves to foster community, provide healing and rejuvenate the spirit.

Small group and plenary discussions resulting from these sessions focused on the role and responsibility of art and artists in society. How can art change the world, preserve the environment and human relationships, provide healing and dialogue in our globalised world?

Art Misused  
Art can be source for both positive and negative change. How do we interpret art and how is it integrated into our daily lives, both consciously and subconsciously? Angharad Parry Jones, the former Gender Interest Group Coordinator of WSCF-E from Wales, led an interactive session on “Life Imitating Art?” examining how stereotypes and confusion of gender in pop culture effect the way we see ourselves and those around us. The resulting discussion focused also on cultural perceptions, as the conceptions of gender roles...
differ between Western and Eastern European countries.

Further exploring the often negative influence of art in pop culture as a force of conformity, participants divided into three groups for a role play led by Max Karrasch on propaganda. As a result, all performed “Propaganda: In Three Acts”. In Act One, one group acted out advertisements bombarding a television viewer who did not have the physical power to turn off the TV. In Act Two, dancers at a party, where all danced freestyle, gradually conformed to the steady drowning beat of the majority, despite the fighting efforts of one to resist. Act Three closed the production; one by one the actors stated, “My name is __________. I am not beautiful”, before forming a collective human statue, inviting the audience to join them, and closing with the statement “But together, we are beautiful.”

Variety of Expression

Participants led many creative workshops which were given throughout the week. Katya Dimitrova and Mariela Draganova from Bulgaria led a workshop exploring the history and technique of icon painting, revealing examples of visual art used in worship. Georgiana Oniciuc and Andreea Gradinaru, from Romania, taught icon painting – the intricate techniques requiring much time, contemplation and dedication. Dzima Bartalevič, from Belarus, led a workshop on maps and Oldrich Simek, from Czech Republic, on an introduction to photography. Joe Nagle, from the UK, led a bible study focusing on pictorial images of stories, using the images to examine the stories rather than the printed text (for example, Rembrandt’s “Lost Son” and Dali’s “The Sacrament of the Last Supper”). He also led a deep listening workshop focusing on the concepts of and the relationship between art and spirituality.

Branching from the visual arts, Elisabeth Zengerling led a meditation session with Taize music. Also using Taize music for inspiration, Kristoffer Moldeus, from Sweden, led a session on interpretative painting. Olha Sinkevych, from Ukraine, led small groups in interpretative dance. Vladyslava Vlasov, from Ukraine, led a short film workshop that ran throughout the week. Dorte Kappelgaard, from Denmark, led a discussion-hike examining how to gather and motivate young people to create similar forums like the conference space back home.

Art of Exploration

For the excursion the participants went into Vienna for a Schnitzel Hunt, and searched the city in groups in order to answer questions on a clue sheet. The hunt gave a creative spin to a tour of culture-rich Vienna – and all groups came up with innovative ways to answer the questions, from photographs posing as Mozart to spelling S-C-H-N-I-T-Z-E-L out on the grass. The quote above the Secession allowed for more serious reflection on the art of the cityscape explored throughout the afternoon - “Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit” (“To the age its art, to art its freedom”). All relaxed with dinner at a local Sri Lankan restaurant before either exploring the lights of Vienna by night or returning to the venue to spend the evening with the senior friends.

Transcending Generations

Running parallel to the conference, WSCF-E held its second senior friends meeting, gathering 20 senior friends from previous generations to brainstorm together about the future of WSCF-E and to support the current generation of students. Together, in small groups, Senior Friends and participants explored art in the Bible through study of passages selected from the Old and New Testaments. Plenary discussions of topics from Genesis 1, the Golden Calf, and David playing music for Solomon to John 1, the poetry of Corinthians 13, and 3 John fueled many discussions about the relationships between art, spirituality, and society.

On Saturday afternoon, three current SCM students, Stephan Anzengruber (Austria), Dorte Kappelgaard (Denmark), and Dzima Bartalevič (Belarus), and two senior friends, Kate Wilson (UK) and Salters Sterling (Ireland), joined in a panel discussion, sharing what WSCF means or meant to them and what were/are the hopes and the challenges and hardships of their generations. The students of today revealed that one of the biggest challenges facing them is the need to slow down. In addition, the importance of community, in the past and today, was strongly emphasised. The intergenerational community, formed during this conference, was valued by all.
Celebrating Diversity

Each morning participants joined in ecumenical worships and each evening they led denominational worships, sharing the diversity of worship traditions with all present. The styles varied, from Taize songs to spirituals with guitars, from liturgies to short story reflection on a scriptural passage. Discussion sessions also focused on the way different religious traditions use art in worship and on how art is used in search of truth.

Further celebrating the diversity of the conference, during the intercultural evening participants shared food, drink, music, photographs, and stories from their home cultures. Focusing on the context of the venue, on the Austrian evening, the hosting committee taught the participants how to yodel and waltz. Throughout the week, discussions and dancing continued into the night.

Looking Ahead

On the last day, participants discussed in small groups how they could take home and apply what they learned at the conference. In the final session, before the farewell party, participants shared paintings, poetry, dances, and a short film created throughout the week. All left after breakfast on Monday, carrying home the challenges of the seminar and the community and relationships formed.

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