

“MEXICO’S HUSBAND”

Andreas Heinecke, social entrepreneur and creator of the exhibitions Dialogue in the Dark and Dialogue in Silence, refers to himself as “Mexico’s husband”. He visited the country for the first time seven years ago and chose it as a platform to expand his business in Latin America.

BY VANESA ROBLES AND KARLA JUÁREZ

Andreas Heinecke is overcoming the barriers between “us” and “them” by creating exchange platforms that immerse people in worlds very different from their own in order to break down prejudices, communication and understanding barriers that exist across different cultures, and to empower marginalized people. Through his company, Consens Ausstellungen GmbH (Dialogue Social Enterprise), he has proven that the struggle against segregation can become a sustainable activity.

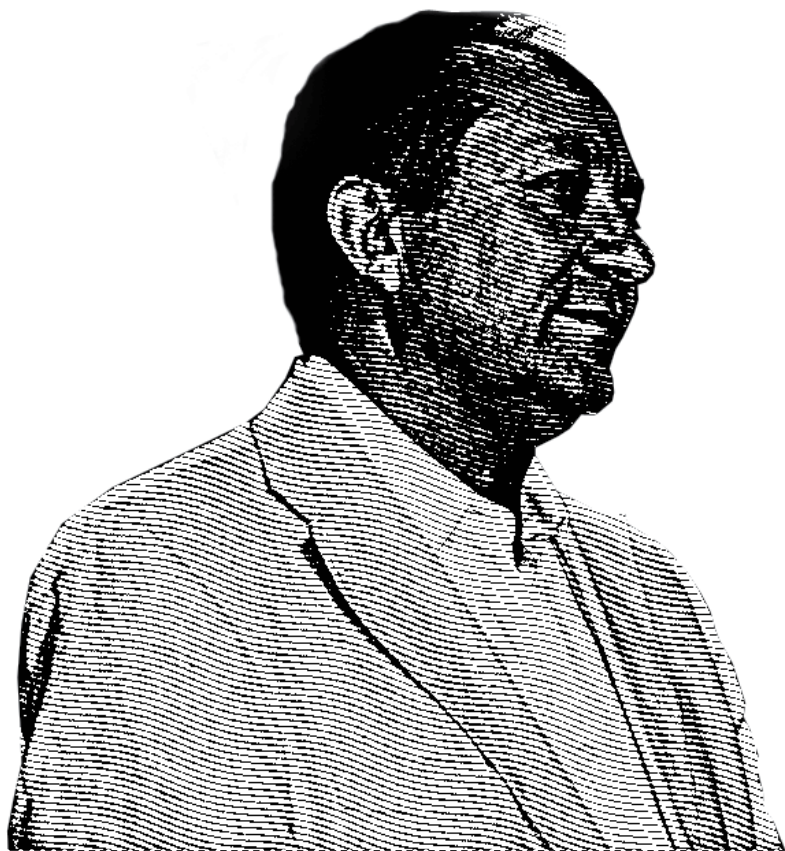
Heinecke’s most widespread platforms are the exhibitions *Dialogue in the Dark* – where participants experience darkness and blind people teach them how to “see” – and *Dialogue in Silence* – where deaf and mute people teach visitors a great deal about communication. Participants in these exhibitions do not see and do not speak in order to fully experience what it is like to be blind and mute, and the negative consequences of discrimination.

Seven years ago Heinecke visited Mexico for the first time to present

Dialogue in the Dark in Monterrey and Mexico City. “I didn’t know anything about the country, with the exception of the clichés. After closing the first exhibition in Bellas Artes [in Mexico City] I decided: ‘this is my country’. I rented an apartment, hired Mexican personnel, started my company here and traveled to the country every six weeks because I was convinced that Mexico was my country and Mexico City was my city,” he remembers.

Between 2006 and 2007, *Dialogue in the Dark* was shown in Monterrey and Mexico City, where approximately 600,000 visitors were registered, a record figure for an exhibition of this genre. According to the Reforma journal, the Popalote Children’s Museum in Mexico City paid 150,000 USD for the rights of *Dialogue in the Dark* for an 8-month period. Presently, the exhibition is being shown at the Trompo Mágico Interactive Museum in Guadalajara, and in a few months it will be transferred to other cities in Mexico and Latin America.

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A SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR BREAKING DOWN PREJUDICES

In 1988, Andreas Heinecke began working for the Foundation for the Blind (Stiftung Blindenanstalt) in Frankfurt, determined to bring blind and sighted together. By the end of that year, *Dialogue in the Dark* had its premiere.

In 1996, Andreas started his own business to spread the idea of *Dialogue in the Dark* (WWW.DIALOGUE-IN-THE-DARK.COM) internationally. After years of temporary exhibitions in museums and festivals, the first permanent exhibition opened in 2000 and has been followed by many more. Together with his wife, Orna Cohen, Andreas also developed *Dialogue in Silence* (WWW.DIALOGUE-IN-SILENCE.COM) in which deaf people provide access to non-verbal communication.

Since the first *Dialogue in the Dark*, there have been exhibitions in more than 160 sites in Asia, Europe, the Middle East,

—Why did you decide to establish *Consens Ausstellungen GmbH* in Mexico City?

I was very moved by the optimism of the people. I did not understand how a city of these dimensions could offer so much friendliness and hospitality. It’s absolutely wonderful.

—Do you still have the same impression?

After almost seven years, my love is a bit more differentiated. I am aware that not everything has the beauty of a nice sunset, but this happens anywhere. It resembles marriage: falling in love is one thing, but staying in love is another issue. I am like Mexico’s husband.

—The usual question: How did you conceive *Dialogue in the Dark*?

The story began in 1929, when my parents were born. My mother was Polish, from a Jewish family, and my father was German, with a definite Nazi ideology. They met after Second World War; they had physical con-

and the Americas. Over 6 million visitors worldwide have experienced what it means to hear, smell, taste and touch things without being able to see them. The exhibition does not inspire pity but instead enables interaction, builds respect, understanding and even wonder – by re-defining “disability” as “ability” and “otherness” as “likeness”.

Dialogue in the Dark has empowered more than 4,000 blind people in 19 countries and more than 130 cities from disadvantaged backgrounds by giving them for the first time in their life the opportunity to showcase their talents and skills. The vast majority of the platform employees had never held a formal job before, and 40% of them successfully gain a job placement with a “normal” company in the private or public sector between a week and a year and a half with *Dialogue*.

tact, and I was born: biology lesson number one. When I was 13 years old, I learned about bizarre social events and began to try to understand what leads society to discriminate to the point of extermination.

Then I worked in a radio station. One day I was asked to train Matthias, a boy who had lost his sight in an accident, as a presenter. I had never met a blind person, and had no idea of what I had to tell him. When I left his home after the first session, I felt embarrassed; I was surprised by his intelligence and self-sufficiency. I thought: if I was so quick to judge, what about other people? I recalled how the Nazis tested their gas chambers with disabled people. The thought of this made me very angry.

I decided to take action against discrimination. One day I received inspiration: we had to invite people with and without sight disabilities to a dark space. It worked, in the darkness people that can see become blind and the blind can see.

—Approximately seven million people have visited *Dialogue in the Dark* worldwide. Why do you think it has been so successful in such different societies?

People cannot imagine that there is something beyond sight; our world is made of images. At the same time, we want to explore things and we feel curious about understanding the limits.

—Is sight a source of discrimination?

Sight disconnects people; we are quick to scan and judge others. We are all the same in the darkness. Furthermore, education and the media manipulate us.

All societies have people to discriminate; many studies have documented this topic. I think that we have to acquire common sense through the difference.

—Generally, people go to an exhibition to see. What are the challenges of museography in an exhibition where the objective is the opposite: to not see?

Aesthetics do not necessarily lie in images. The challenge is to create very rich scenes, with references that people are able to understand and use to create their own images.

Nevertheless, I am not an artist or a curator. I am an incubator of sensations.

—Can *Dialogue in the Dark* be adapted to other types of discrimination?

I am not committed exclusively to blindness; fate introduced me to a blind person, but the exhibition is a metaphor due to the fact that spectators meet people with whom they do not normally have the opportunity of experiencing an open interaction.

Dialogue in the Dark is the metaphor of isolated groups.

—Do you know what happens when the visitors reopen their eyes?

We have a research department that phones some randomly selected visitors, five years later: "Hello, you were at an exhibition where you were unable to see. Do you remember its name?," they are asked. Five years later everyone responds: "Dialogue in the Dark," and 16% recalls the name of his or her guide. We are aware that the experience induces a slight change in people.

—By the way, what happened with Matthias?

He is still handsome and mature; he meditates, smokes quite a bit and is a vegetarian. When he became blind his girlfriend told him: 'Don't worry because I will see for you.'

They were married and after some time, she left him because he fell in love with another woman. He has four children and plays guitar in a rock band.

Matthias is a young 50-year-old. We get together once a year and talk over the phone three or four times per year. Once I asked him what was the last image he had. He told me that he was driving his car when a truck made a U-turn and he realized that there was no way out. I inquired: "What went through your mind?" "Sh...! I didn't change my underwear this morning," he answered." *n*

In 2005, Andreas Heinecke's commitment was recognized by the American Foundation, Ashoka, who named him the first Social Entrepreneur in Western Europe. Andreas aims to create a Social Science Center that will allow people to explore the social side of the human experience; where they learn about the world from other people's perspectives. For example, his blind and disabled employees from all over the world form a global network—they train each other, exchange experience and knowledge, and recognize that many of their needs are global in nature. Further plans include creating the experience of old age, migration, exile, and crime and punishment.

Andreas Heinecke has won numerous special international awards for his work, including:

- 1998 "Stevie Wonder Vision Award"
- 2004 "Best Practice in Universal Design"
- 2005 Named first "Ashoka Fellow" in Western Europe
- 2006 "Deutscher Unternehmer Preis" by the Harvard Business School's Entrepreneurship Club
- 2007 "Outstanding Global Social Entrepreneur" by the Schwab Foundation
- 2008 Nominated as member of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Social Entrepreneurship
- 2009 "Global Award Winner for the best innovative and out-of-comfort-zone event" by the YPO

