

Florian Dombois

Art with Some T?

A 35-Minute Essay

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1. hic et nunc

This text is written in a book. This book. It was published by the Collegium Helveticum under the joint sponsorship of the University of Zurich (UZH), ETH Zurich, and the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). I am writing for this book. I am not creating a work of art. I am simply writing what I think. What does not appear here in black and white, I did not write. There are no second or third layers of meaning; all that matters is what is

here. And that alone. All meaning is contained between these two book covers. Please do not read anything into it.

2. ETHZ-UZH | ZHdK

The present book discusses transdisciplinary research from the perspective of the *trans*—the *beyond*. It is telling that the arts were not mentioned in the invitation to the conference: “To begin with, it is a highly metaphorical concept using a topical notion to locate science,” etc. Transdisciplinarity appears to be a scientific opportunity. Not an artistic one. Or is it?

As the Zurich University of the Arts is the Collegium Helveticum’s newest sponsor, this certainly requires some thought. Take the following question, for instance: do the arts form a pool of disciplines adjacent to the sciences? Or are they rather found in the *trans*? Are they, in fact, the *beyond*? Or take the following question: do the three institutions—the University of Zurich, ETH Zurich, and the Zurich University of the Arts—form a triangle? Or do ETH Zurich and the University of Zurich form a horizontal axis to which the Zurich University of the Arts is perpendicular, protruding from below? Perhaps you can bear these two lines in mind.

3. Definition of the T

According to Jürgen Mittelstrass, “Transdisciplinarity is research [...] that defines and [...] solves its problems with a view to non-scientific developments, independently of individual disciplines” (original in German).¹ Meanwhile, Klein et al. offer

1 Jürgen Mittelstrass, “Auf dem Wege zur Transdisziplinarität,” in *GAIA* 5 (1992), p. 250.

the following definition: “The core idea of transdisciplinarity is different academic disciplines working jointly with practitioners to solve a real-world problem.”² There may therefore be different approaches from an academic perspective. From the perspective of the arts, I primarily see one commonality: there is a problem to solve.

4. What is a problem?

Everyone has problems nowadays: problems with their work, problems with their lives, and problems with their parents. But this was not always the case. In the past, the problem was a prerogative of academia, signifying a well-defined task of a certain degree of difficulty.³ Not every difficulty was elevated to the status of a problem. The *problem* was particularly considered to be a *terminus technicus* in three academic fields: geometry, logic, and physics. Here, too, the arts are prominent in their absence—and for good reason. Generally speaking, artists do not solve problems. Forgive me my arrogance, but it is designers who are problem-solvers.

5. Etymology of the problem

The Greek word πρόβλημα, προβλήματος comes from προβάλλειν—literally meaning “throw forward.” According to the dictionary,⁴

- 2 Julie Thompson Klein, Walter Grossenbacher-Mansuy, Rudolf Häberli, Alain Bill, Roland W. Scholz, Myrta E. Welti, *Transdisciplinarity: Joint Problem Solving Among Science, Technology, and Society*, Basel: Birkhäuser, 2001, p. 4.
- 3 See Helmut Holzhey, “Problem,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 7, Basel: Schwabe, 1989, pp. 1397–1408.
- 4 Wilhelm Gemoll, *Griechisch-deutsches Schul- und Handwörterbuch*, 10th ed., Munich: Oldenbourg Schulbuchverlag, 2006, p. 674.

the word *πρόβλημα* can be translated in three ways: (1) as a cliff or ledge, (2) militarily: as a shield or defensive weapon, or (3) in the philosophical sense: the academic dispute. Accordingly, we could ask:

If (1) applies, is a problem a cliff from which you must jump?

If (2) applies, is a problem a defensive weapon against unscientific thinking?

If (3) applies, how difficult must a difficulty be before it is defined as a problem? And who determines this? Who decides that a difficulty is sufficiently difficult?

6. Everything flows

In Plato's *Theaetetus* dialogue, Socrates discusses the philosopher Heraclitus and his pupils with Theodorus of Cyrene. Theodorus says: "But if you ask one of them a question, he pulls out puzzling little phrases, like arrows from a quiver, and shoots them off; and if you try to get hold of an explanation of what he has said, you will be struck with another phrase of novel and distorted wording, and you never make any progress whatsoever with any of them, nor do they themselves with one another, for that matter [...]." ⁵ Does this sound familiar? And does it rather apply to academics or to artists?

7. The other

It has always fascinated me that the Greek philosophers managed without a foreign language. As is well known, a specialist language consisting of foreign words was initially developed

5 Plato, *Theaetetus* 180 a, translated by Harold N. Fowler, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 12, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921.

by the Romans, who adopted individual Greek terms and integrated them into Latin. Philosophy without a foreign language: what does it mean for one's thought process when all words are equally familiar? To what do you open yourself if you embed philosophy into everyday language and why do that? Is it autistic or liberating? What does "foreign language" actually mean? And what is *Fremdwort*, a "foreign word," exactly? What a marvelous oxymoron.

8. Verbality

As an artist, I continually find myself struggling for words, such as when I write a text like this one. You will undoubtedly be thinking: "I am no stranger to this problem, myself." But I am not so sure of that. My search for words is not merely hindered by the intricacies of formulating a sentence. It is far more existential in nature. Indeed I also think far outside of language. I have no trouble thinking, but I do not always attach my thoughts to words. Very often I think in sounds, shapes, or spaces. To tell others of these thoughts is therefore already an act of translation, the second step being reflection on the latter. What happens to the meaning of words when their light is scattered through two different media? Can those words still be meaningful?

9. Poetic language

Among the artists, poets and authors strike me as being much like the Greeks. They must create their art with the same terms with which they navigate their daily lives. They express themselves in a medium that is manipulated daily under the dictum of communication, not dissimilar to the Shannon Weaver model: sender—message—receiver. Their sentences are suspected of

only saying what their words signify. And perhaps this is indeed true?

10. Pseudo-problems

Analytic philosophy aims to formulate philosophical problems as precisely and unambiguously as possible. This occurs in affirmative statements or so-called “propositions.” Once you have expressed a problem as a series of propositions, you can subject these to logical, conceptual or idiomatic analysis. The aim of doing this is either to solve the problem or to expose it as a pseudo-problem. Indeed, that appears to be the main thrust of analytic philosophy: to expose problems as pseudo-problems. I have to ask myself: what is a “pseudo-problem”?

11. Non-propositionality

There is an astonishing term in analytic philosophy: *non-propositionality*. The term signifies everything that cannot be expressed in propositions. The other. The outside. Those who do not belong to us: the outsiders. I am a non-propositionalist, and the concept rather strikes me as a form of philosophical right-wing populism. I cannot believe the word. Is it true? Are those who subscribe to analytic philosophy serious? A word for everything that cannot be conceptualized with their philosophy? I am sorry, but in my opinion “non-propositionality” is a blanket term for everything you do not *want* to conceptualize. Foreigners out. Racist armchair philosophy. Intellectual fascism.

12. The propositional and the poetic

If scientists wish to work with artists, they have no choice but to abandon the safety of the propositional. I would assert that there is no art that can reside in the world of the propositional alone.⁶ Indeed, if someone is not prepared to acknowledge the as yet unspoken significance of a statement, they cannot cross over into the *trans* of the arts. I do not mean to say that it would be impossible to compose poetry in a propositional language. On the contrary, excessive sobriety often provides an incredible incentive to read between the lines. Instead I am asserting that an exclusively propositional attitude cannot function as the *beginning* of a cooperation with the arts, but the *end*.

13. Differentiation

Cooperation with the arts requires that you be open to non-propositional thinking. It requires you to abandon the narcissistic rocking chair of certainty in your assertions. You must stand up. You must open the door and leave the house. You must be prepared to think of the space “outside” no longer as “outside” as opposed to “inside,” but as the outdoor space that differentiates the landscape on your doorstep. You must be prepared to acknowledge that the sun may also shine in a non-propositional world. You must be able to accept that this other world should not be defined as the negation of what is already known to you. You must be prepared to abandon language.

- 6 It would be interesting to see whether and how those artists grapple with this problem who still favour an avant-garde line of argument and whose work consists of proving something to be art that was hitherto not considered as such.

14. Barbarism

To the Greeks, a barbarian was someone who spoke unintelligibly—a person who said “bar-bar-bar.” The barbarians were all those who did not speak Greek. And these neighboring peoples were assumed to be uneducated, brutish, and wild. The word “barbaric” still carries these connotations today. I am happy to be a bar-bar. It does not surprise me that some consider me to babble—to be someone who eloquently stammers, who contradicts themselves, and who can therefore not speak properly. I am sorry that I am unintelligible. Even I fail to understand much or many, or even myself at times. Yet to condemn the unintelligible is not only arrogant but also symptomatic of a genuine lack of education. It is this arrogance that tripped up the Greeks—herein lay their hubris. For once, the Greeks got it wrong.

15. Multilingual

If we do not wish to simplify to the point of barbarism, we must learn to differentiate other languages that are foreign to us. This is no easy task, however, even among the verbal languages. Are we even capable of organizing our thoughts around different structures to those in our native languages? Do we not always view the languages of others through the prism of our own? What use is a dictionary when we wish to understand a language? What does “understand” even mean? How much time does it take to get to grips with a foreign language? To participate in the language game of the speakers who, as a collective, keep that language alive? Does differentiation not mean giving up the idea of a word-for-word translation in order to jeopardize your own manner of thinking?

16. Many tongues

We must beware of taking the languages metaphor too literally. At best it can be used to assess plausibility: namely that cooperation between scholars and artists constitutes a highly complex situation whose distinction is found not in the respective jargons but in word usage. Perhaps some speak and others do not? Perhaps the differences run far deeper than we currently imagine? In other words, when we see a tongue move, this does not necessarily mean that anything is spoken.

17. Translation

The language in which I wrote this text is German (this here is a translation). It follows a logic of words and sentences structured around a grammar. If I view sound art through this prism, for instance, I can search for comparability. Does the noise correspond to the letter? Does the soundtrack correspond to the word? Does the sound installation correspond to the sentence? Or have I not been taken in by my native language? Are language and sound art even comparable? And if not, what can a translation between incomparable areas achieve?

18. No problems, no language

Perhaps one can think of art as language, but perhaps that is already a form of subordination. At any rate there is the field of art studies, whose work largely consists of “reading” art. Through this interpretative prism, art could be tentatively understood as a language, and perhaps even as a form of knowledge production, as is *en vogue* in “artistic research.” From the perspective of reception, I consider the epistemic take on art to be legitimate and not implausible. But I see things rather

differently from the perspective of production, as the epistemic assertion is rarely productive. Any artist who attempts to “produce knowledge” with their work must be on their guard. If verbal knowledge pushes ahead of production, the work threatens to devolve into a mere illustration. And that is just one of the problems with this assertion.

19. What is a problem?

Must we always think of research as being fundamentally driven by problems? Indeed, do the sciences not result in many interesting solutions being found before problems are identified for them to solve? And are problems not then designed retrospectively for the solutions? As Theodore Maiman once wrote about his work: “A laser is a solution seeking a problem.”⁷ And why, in fact, do we always seek solutions? Does this not obligate us to passing time, to progress, and to following the thesis–anti-thesis–synthesis model? Imagine a world of solutions—a world in which every problem has been solved, in which there are no more questions and no more tasks to complete. Forgive me, but the thought of a world like this fills me with dread. It would be the end. So why is this the world we strive for?

20. Cuckoo!

When you take aim at a problem, you begin a movement that is expected to end with hitting your target. Boom. Stop. Done. Yet when the problem is removed from the equation at the right time, your arrow can continue sailing through the air. As an

7 According to “Theodore Maiman, who built the first laser, dies at 79,” in *International Herald Tribune*, May 13, 2007.

artist, I am interested in the second scenario. I can work this way by imagining that my work can continue—that my “solutions” are not exhaustive. I also like to aim for a target when I know that someone will remove the target at the opportune moment. Indeed, experience has shown me that when I really hit something, it is typically not what I had initially aimed for. Perhaps removed targets are pseudo-problems? I would love those.

21. Choreography

If you wish to take seriously the fundamental differences between artistic and academic practice, and if you therefore cannot or do not want to agree on a single, shared problem, you can nonetheless spend a long while working side by side. If I am honest, this is the only kind of transdisciplinarity I believe in—perhaps also because I have worked for some time among both science and humanities scholars. I neither believe in shared problems nor shared solutions. But I enjoy strolling side by side—and not necessarily in my *leisure time*. Here too you can do better or worse. Here too you can trigger a great deal through good casting, good timing, and the right environment; you can freely set something in motion. How and when can which people from which disciplines come together at what places to their mutual benefit? What does it make sense to do to achieve this?

22. *Fahrkunst* (man engine)

In the 19th century, mine shafts were so deep that it took a very long time for workers to enter and exit the mines. In the Harz mountains, the mines plunged to 700 m, meaning it would take at least one hour to descend and two hours to resurface. Wire cable had not yet been invented, so it was not possible to build a lift. Then, the *Berggeschworene* (master miner) Georg Ludwig

Dörell saw the *Kunstknecht* (engineer) Lichtenberg using two reciprocating pump rods to reach a higher level, which inspired him to invent the *Fahrkunst* (man engine) in 1833. The man engine consists of two reciprocating ladders that are driven a few metres up and down by a *Kunstrad* (water wheel) attached to *Kunstgestänge* (flatrods) and a rotating *Kunstkreuz* (cross-shaped lever). When a miner switches sides at the right moment, he can cover considerable distances. Depending on the rhythm of the reciprocating ladders, it is possible to enter and exit the mine shaft with ease.

23. *Fahrkunst*: animation

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man_engine

If you imagine these ladders as disciplines, they do not have to move far to allow for individual scholars to cover significant distances.

24. The new

Newfoundland was discovered by John Cabot (Giacomo Caboto) in 1497 and was dubbed “newe founde islande”—new for Cabot and new for Europe. The other is always the new. And that is exciting, as it allows you to learn of something beyond your former limits and enter the *trans* space. Let’s change perspective a little: let’s assume the people who lived in Newfoundland would have considered Cabot and his people to be the new, as for them the Englishmen came from “new-found-land.” By labelling someone as “new,” you demonstrate that you are ignorant, and this ignorance is very often perfectly symmetrical.

25. Topography

The term “trans” is a relative statement of place meaning “beyond” or “across” from my own here and now. It always depends on where I am speaking from. And perhaps we therefore have to regard this “beyond” not as stable, but as a time-limited concept. In recent years with my working group—composed of an equal number of artists and humanities scholars—I have come to understand the man engine as a change of media and genre. We met and worked together once every four weeks—constantly alternating between a humanities-based approach and an artistic approach. This naturally always put half of the group at a distinct advantage, as they were very familiar with the relevant disciplinary environment. At the next meeting, the advantage was held by the other half of the group. This practice was not merely about getting to know the “other” area and discovering what might be of use in one’s own work; it was also about observing how others and oneself operate within their own or an unknown territory.

26. Time

If we define transdisciplinarity not from the perspective of a *terra incognita* but as a process with which to confront your own to the unknown, there are several implications—not least that time becomes a central factor. It is then also no longer simply a question of what, but also of how. It becomes a question of creating conditions under which you can dwell both here and there. And you must also plan in enough time for the change-over and a period of familiarization, time during which you can observe the others and “steal” their ideas. And that is ok, provided that you steal from the other discipline and translate it into your own.

27. Openness to unforeseen results

It is not my job to coax scholars into giving up their problem-based thinking. However, when you view research as “a process driven from behind,”⁸ as described by Thomas Kuhn and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, this begs the question of how anything really new can emerge if you always have a goal in mind? What is so sexy about a well-defined problem?

28. Articulation

As an artist, I do not have to deliver solutions; instead I produce works and make them public. I use the term “articulation” to describe this aspect of my practice. With an exhibition, I articulate from a particular disposition to a specific time and place. It sometimes feels like crystallization in an oversaturated solution. And it is always a matter of what I consider to be the best possible articulation for that given moment; here and now it must be right. Generally speaking, it is not repeatable. But this is why it is always something new—and indeed the more I change myself, the newer it becomes.

29. In the arts

In the past, the fine arts were considered spatial arts and music was considered a temporal art—as in the example of Lessing’s 1766 study “Laokoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry.” In the 20th century this approach was solidly under-

8 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Trouble with the Historical Philosophy of Science*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 14. Quoted from Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Historische Epistemologie. Zur Einführung*, Hamburg: Junius, 2007, p. 90.

mined. The fine arts conquered all possible formats and spaces as they developed performance, happening, video, etc. They became also a temporal art. At the same time music conquered all possible formats and spaces as well; developing new notations and with orchestras arranged in space, it left the concert hall behind and created sound art, etc., thus making it also a spatial art. Both became limitless. Today, we can say that anything can be art and anything can be music. As someone who teaches at the MA Transdisciplinary Studies, MA Fine Arts and MA Composition of Zurich University of the Arts, I ask myself: “Do we even still need *the arts*? Or have we now arrived at the singular concept of *art art*?”

30. Discipline

The term “discipline” is partly responsible for this development. Discipline means punishment. Disciplinary boundaries have been continually challenged and undermined by artists over the last 100 years. And each new attempt to define what art is has, in turn, invited further attempts to undermine this definition. Let us therefore set aside definitional limitations and simply accept that there are no limits. This logically means that there is also no longer any notion of “beyond the limit,” and thus the attitude of overcoming limits has begun to lose its appeal. It is boring to claim something supposedly new as art or music. Personally, I am rather more interested in internal limits—the bondage that restricts me within. They do not reduce in number and you cannot simply dispel them or eliminate them altogether; they simply sneak in.

31. When is trans?

Where are the limits and, above all, when are they? What are my personal blind spots, what are the blind spots in my environment and discipline—and where and when do they beleaguer me? And if I turn to face them, where do they escape to next? I believe I have no chance of ever eliminating these blind spots. However, I also feel that not to seek them out, not to want to find them, would drive me mad. Who wants cemented satisfaction? Or a life with a search engine that already knows what kind of answers you want? No, I prefer rather a punishment in the form of a discipline. Rather confrontations with people who think they know what art is, and argument with them. Rather attempt to realize something for yourself and be attacked for it—I know that I am not right, yet to be bogged down in what is wrong would be suffocating.

32. Scientific peer group

There is something that I would gladly steal from academia: the idea of the *peer review*—a concept whereby representatives from a given discipline negotiate among themselves what they deem to be of good quality. Just as in research funding—that of the Swiss National Science Foundation, for instance—other actors in the field are questioned. Doctors are asked what should be researched in medicine. Not medical historians. Not medical critics or patients. The producers of the research, themselves, decide where their search for knowledge should take them next—not the recipients or beneficiaries.

33. Artistic peer group

I know that the peer review process has significant shortcomings—or at least this is what my friends in academia tell me. But look at us in the arts—where the recipients have all the power! For us, art historians at the Swiss National Science Foundation dictate what we should research. For us, art critics and collectors decide which works of art should be valued especially highly, and thus they also influence the awarding of grants, museum acquisitions, and disciplinary prestige. For us, the recipients and beneficiaries of art decide, not the producers. But what would it be like if art was considered from the point of view of the producers? What if we could form some kind of artistic peer group? What if the artist's artist could cut a fine figure? And here I am implicitly advocating a shift in disciplinary terms: one that does not dictate the work or artistic practice, but that is derived from the peer group and its culture of debate. The group of artists who consider themselves musicians could shape music. And the group of artists who consider themselves visual artists could shape the visual arts.

34. Fool

We love the fool for he speaks the truth. And in Tarot his is the first card. He may risk the others, because he risks himself. The fool plays with lives—including his own. Those who discover a gap in reality, from which the ἀ-λήθεια, the unconcealed truth, emerges, is a diabolus—a fallen one. And now the opposite of reproducibility occurs. When you encounter the fool, you must reckon with the unexpected. And this reckoning with the unexpected can, indeed, also mean that you come away empty-handed. And then you find yourself standing there exposed.

35. hic et nunc

This text is written in a book. This book. It was published by the Collegium Helveticum under the joint sponsorship of the University of Zurich, ETH Zurich, and the Zurich University of the Arts. I am writing for this book. I am not creating a work of art. I am simply writing what I think. What does not appear here in black and white, I did not write. There are no second or third layers of meaning; all that matters is what is here. And that alone. Even if it hurts me. All meaning is contained between these two book covers. Please do not read anything into it.⁹

9 This paper was translated by Paul Skandera.

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Summary

Everyone calls for it, but no one knows what the subject matter of this call really is—transdisciplinarity. After a period in which it went from an academic invitation to a demand urgently to be fulfilled, the concept has recently been losing its pull. High time to approach the concept anew and in a new form.

This volume collects prominent voices in the debate on transdisciplinarity in a transdisciplinary manner. Its coincidence of content and form in presenting main papers and critical replies to them from a different discipline allows for a vivid discussion and new insights. These stylistically and thematically divergent contributions are linked by reservations about transdisciplinarity as an allround intellectual weapon and the conviction that its programmatic weight could be regained by approaching the subject from the margins—transdisciplinarity where it breaks down, fails, comes to an end. Unravelling transdisciplinarity's contours by clarifying its limits.

Keywords

epistemology, interdisciplinarity, knowledge, history of science



**Hartmut von Sass
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Harald Atmanspacher,
Andrea B. Braidt,
Elisabeth Bronfen,
Florian Dombois,
Sabine Maasen, Marco
Meier, Jürgen
Mittelstrass, Hans-Jörg
Rheinberger, Christian
Ritter, Christoph
Schenker, et al.

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DIAPHANES

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