

## **“What we dream of is already in the world.”<sup>1</sup>**

There is a wind tunnel on the roof of the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK).<sup>2</sup> It asks many questions, while also scrutinizing critically the times of early modernist era, when the blast of bullets and high-speed trains fascinated the Futurists in Italy, the Vorticists in England, and *Der Sturm* in Germany. These times characterized by the belief in unlimited progress and growth as well as by the idea of linear time have swayed their influence in techno-affirmative science and an according aesthetic expression. The modernist era pushed forward the speed of life no matter of the consequences or the feral damages involved. Within this momentum Western colonial thought based on extractivist practices and the separation of mind and body reached their peak. Today, looking back we are saying that this have led to a dead end, and point of no return. Today, we seek to unlearn, to degrowth, and to re-connect with people and our surroundings. Therefore, the wind tunnel at the ZHdK is designed for slow wind, known to aerodynamists as “creeping flow,” searching for an alternative route in history.

The wind tunnel was created by the artist and scientist Florian Dombois

## **By Florian Dombois, Helene Romakin, and Berit Seidel**

This is the site for our annual, international, four-day Wind Tunnel Festival since 2022. We invite artists, scientists, and the public to come together and to exchange ideas. Through open rehearsals, we spend time with one another, exploring new insights and moments of connection. The event begins with a dinner with our guests and our team, followed by two days of activities with the public. Free drinks and handmade sandwiches are served to everyone present. The festival concludes with a collective trip to Sils Maria in the Swiss Alps, where we fly sound kites in the worldwide wind alongside our guests as part of Florian Dombois’ research project “Triple Instruments.”<sup>3</sup>

While we have set a series of three follow-up themes for the festivals—*Wind Tunnel Festival* (2022), *Between Parafiction and Parascience* (2023), *Swirling Winds Won’t Center* (2024), *Do You Believe in Social Energy?* (2025)—in the first edition, we addressed general questions about artistic research, including its topics and aesthetics. The second edition explored the prevailing ideas of fiction and science that dominate the discourse and examined how they can be challenged.

as a site for transdisciplinary exchange and as an alternative (and commentary) space within, or better on top of the institution. It was built over the last ten years, step by step, with art students and assistants, first as a provisional lab and then more and more stabilizing on the rooftop. The tunnel is too big to be removed, and at the same time empty inside. As every wind tunnel is a mold, it claims space, but also always provides free room inside. Originally, it was an informal structure that was never intended to exist. Now, it holds its ground, oscillating between integrating into the institution and resisting its regulations. Meanwhile, it even has a room number: 8.CO2.

The tunnel is made from wood, plywood, and plexiglas. It is a circular, return-flow wind tunnel (the "Goettingen model"), with a diameter of 180 cm at its widest section. It spans a horizontal area of 6 x 8 m. Its open test section allows for experiments with laminar wind—turbulence-free airflow—within a 1 x 1 x 1 meter space.

The open test section also provides access to the inner area of the tunnel, where the wind and light controls are housed. This is also where a smoke chamber can generate incense, which is piped into the tunnel for visualizing the wind's flow. Sliding doors provide access to the white interior of the wind tunnel, to its windways, nozzle, engine, screens, and honeycombs.

In the third edition, we incorporated political and global aspects into the discussion. In 2025, we aim to further build our community and focus on topics surrounding resonance and the social energies that connect and influence us.

For each theme the guests are given a carte blanche of format, media, length, and the specific topic they would like to address. We encourage everyone to try out something different and experimental, something that could challenge the established academic and artistic presentation formats. The commons of the events are not necessarily the shared interests of one theme but rather in the ethics of how we encounter each other and the world. This idea we try to communicate and transform in long-term exchange and talks with the invited guests. During the public part of the festival, the audience is cordially welcomed but provided only little information of what is about to happen. We guide them through rhythmic rituals, avoiding any representational moments, so that everyone can go on board within this journey. Sometimes it is left unclear who are the hosts, who is the presenter, and who are the listeners—disciplines and roles, expectations and commitments are fluid and in flux. We share the moment, the experience, the emotions, and the thinking.

There is a certain warmth in the space—a connection between people and their surroundings. The gates are open at first, and they provide a glimpse into two different worlds: the rooftop garden, a retreat space, and the vibrant urban terrace overlooking the city. The wind tunnel is caught in between. Curtains are drawn from time to time, closing the connection to the outside world. Then only the vibrations from a passing train enter our bodies.

When people look from the wooden platforms above, down to the speakers, and the speakers look up, left, right, behind, and in front become all the same. The axes of vision are easily de-hierarchized. At times, it is not clear where the voices are coming from. These are fun moments of confusion. They bring a light dynamic to heavy topics.

It is a constant negotiation, of where the actual stage for the rehearsals is: in the breaks between the presentation, on the platform, inside the wind tunnel, in the garden, or on the terrace? Everything happens simultaneously and is equally essential. The situation encourages the in-between.

Later, there are these moments of care that provide ease, along with the homemade sandwiches with Swiss cheese, thick slices of bread, mustard,



The Wind Tunnel Festival brings together artists, architects, scientists, writers, and cultural practitioners to become a yearly platform for generating cross-disciplinary thinking and production.

Together, we examine methods and strategies of artistic research that resist binary oppositions between canonical objective knowledge and ethical, economic, sensual, emotional, and spiritual experiences and renegotiate the boundaries between disciplines. We interrogate the many strings of various knowledge systems connecting scientific and artistic research to generate new narratives on the basis of sharing and transdisciplinary co-learning. This involves engaging all the senses in activities of making and reflecting collectively, where simultaneities between tacit knowledge and critical practices might stimulate lengthy discussions.

and pickles, the samovar with the black tea, followed by a glass of sparkling wine. The wind tunnel is a space where unpredicted connections deepen over a bowl of borsch. There, we can laugh and cry together.

It is also something about the smell of the incense sticks, which are used to make the wind visible to the human eye, that creates a feeling of coziness. Not quite a room of silence or a rationalized art school... The informality of this space makes the conversations deeper, with no strings but a host of possibilities attached.

It is a space for gradual transformation that is so intense that people later think it is everything they have always believed in. You can't control the wind. Occasionally, it goes in many different directions all at once.

There are so many ambivalences and discrepancies one needs to endure; this feeling comes slowly from the gut. It takes courage to accept the in-betweens, some things on their way but not defined just yet.

Intermittently, worry fills the space that all of this isn't enough to make a change, but then hope from being together might spark more thoughts and crawl out like earthworms after the rain making the ground porous and fertile again.

We seek to cultivate a space and time of reciprocity until the wind tunnel becomes a market space for diverse agendas. We understand being together, exchanging our ideas and practices, building long-term relations as an embodied collective experience, a knowledge system of its own.

We aim to create a candid state of continuous experiment, empathy, and imagination at work. We gamble with uncertainties, which might accidentally go in the direction of our desires.

We urge the rethinking of artistic, curatorial, and scientific research and the moments of its sharing. We seek the energy in, and the power of, personal and subjective situatedness. The wind flows help us to be aware of our own limits and bias and to challenge them through new constellations, avoiding the characteristic traits of authoritativeness.

It takes time, preparation, and commitment to decelerate together with the wind and overwrite the old stories that lead to a dead end. With this in mind, we build a framework in which discussions can happen. We eat and rest together, and we go to fly with the wind.

How do we know what we know? In the wind tunnel, we resist the stasis of stagnant waters and defined forms of Western modernism.



The room is dark, the light is low. Thick molleton theater curtains muffle our sounds. We are inside the wind tunnel lab, and a spotlight illuminates Madafi Pierre. Her voice is both strong and fragile, as she mourns for her mother. “Soufflez moi, soufflez moi!” There are 30 to 40 of us, sitting close together. We can hear our own breathing, and we see our shared tears of sympathy reflecting in the dim light. The acoustics match the size of the room, which is 50 square meters. The vibrations stay within our bodies in form of goosebumps.

Then, we hear a train passing outside. The low frequencies reach us first, followed by the higher pitches—unusual for a black box setting. The smoke lines in the test section stir slightly, following the frontwave of the train emerging from the nearby tunnel. We hear two people deep

Our struggles are so present, sometimes they hurt. We expose ourselves by being vulnerable as a source of creativity and critical thought. We hesitate. We are concerned to find coherent ways to unlearn, to rethink, and to leave our comfort zones. We situate ourselves between sensing, labeling, and comprehending. What is the right measure for this?

Can we really unlearn all the biased thinking that sits so comfortably in our bones? How can we release the energies of informal and subliminal action?

Estoy feliz de que Lizeth Córdoba, una trabajadora social, y Manuel Muyuy Chasoy, un antropólogo del Pueblo Inga de Colombia, estén aquí en persona hoy, después de haberse unido virtualmente desde la selva amazónica el año pasado. Estoy contenta con el continuo intercambio con su comunidad.



in conversation passing outside,  
unaware that we can hear every  
word they say. Only a curtain  
and a roller shutter separate  
us from the outside world.

During the festival break,  
we step outside for a drink  
under the open sky. The bar is  
in front of the lab's entrance.  
People chat in the open air, and  
their sound doesn't accumulate—  
there are no reflections from walls,  
just clear, unencumbered voices. The

sun warms  
our faces as  
we gaze up at  
the clouds.



A few  
weeks  
later, two  
colleagues  
from Graz,  
Gerhard  
Eckel and  
Daniele Pozzi,  
arrive at the  
wind tunnel

with their experiment: a small speaker  
and a microphone, sending receiving  
40 kHz and calculating the  
difference between the sent  
and the received signal.  
To their surprise, the  
wind in our test section  
produces no infrasound.  
The tunnel's wind isn't  
natural, it is laminar.



I am happy that Marine Gigandet and  
Janosch Kirchherr, both architects,  
continue their engagement of walking  
and talking as architectural practice and  
I am happy that you make languages  
flow between English and Spanish.

I am happy that Monica Narula, artist  
from Raqs Media Collective, is here  
today, because she taught me 20 years  
ago, that it makes a difference to say:  
it is not clear what the outcome will be  
vs. the outcome can be an exhibiton or a  
catalogue or a film or a music piece.

I am not happy that Samia Henni, historian,  
exhibition maker and educator cannot be  
here in person. But I am super happy that  
she nevertheless joins us later online and  
make the Sahara sand bring us messages.

I am happy that Madafi Pierre,  
researcher, playwright and artist, left  
Miami. Thorough in thought and witty  
in mind, she can open our hearts with  
laughter and bring us to tears with solace.

But the experiment reveals other sounds, ones that don't come from our controlled wind. We try a fast movement in one corner and hear it arriving a moment later in another. We wait. Again, a train passes, and we hear its front wave in our infrasonic setup. Then, the natural wind outside joins in. An incense stick helps us visualize, what we hear—its curls move with the sound, and its straight lines mark the infrasonic silence. The air feels like water sloshing in an aquarium.

The room is dark, we turn the lights off. We listen to the world. We sit, we stand, some of us lay in hammocks. Time passes. Then, together, we sing a song that brings us to tears. We sing loudly as we open the curtains. We sing as we lift the roller shutters. We sing as the wind flows into our lab from both sides, from the garden and from the city.

I am happy that Helene Romakin is here, and that it is not Tuesday, because Helene is the person that Tuesdays cannot join.

I am happy that Florian Dombois is here today because it means that the university's security services won't.

I am happy that U5 is here because it makes everything a bit more unpredictable.

I am happy that Moritz Ursprung is here, as he took the microphone and spoke out loud.

I am happy, that I am sitting in a room like the one you are in now.

I am happy to hear the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to read this text back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves.

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> "Wind Tunnel," Zurich University of the Arts, accessed November 18, 2025, <https://www.zhdk.ch/en/research/fspt/wind-tunnel-2013>

<sup>3</sup> "Triple Instruments," Zurich University of the Arts, accessed November 18, 2025, <https://www.zhdk.ch/forschungsprojekt/triple-instruments-583068>.

**Florian Dombois** (born 1966, Berlin) has focused on wind, time, labilities, tectonic activity, scientific, and technical fictions. As a professor he teaches at Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland, since 2011.

<http://floriandombois.net/>

**Helene Romakin** is a postdoctoral researcher and curator working at Freie Universität Berlin and the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK).

[www.heleneromakin.com](http://www.heleneromakin.com)

**Berit Seidel** (born 1979) is an artist and founding member of the artist collective U5. U5 opposes the idea of genius and challenges modernist ways of thinking, making and style.

<https://u5.92u.ch>