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Preface

The reflections gathered here center on the question of how we, as artists, can — and wish to — challenge each other. It is the second part of our trilogy of “recipe books” on artistic research in the context of an artist PhD group.

We define “challenge” as critical encounters among peers — ^acollaborative examination of our work under conditions of intense proximity among artists. Our starting point is a concept of research formulated by Florian Dombois as an alternative to the notion of “research as knowledge production”²: research as a practice of *sharing, challenging* and *im-*
contributing to *parting with* one’s own field. This approach shifts the focus from the outcomes of research to its agents — communities of artists and their formats of exchange.³

Our own experience ^{has} lent this publication a sense of urgency. Despite our best intentions, we found that challenging one another is far from easy within a group like ours.⁴ (How something works often shows up most clearly when it doesn’t.) Situations of overwhelm and emotional intensity gave rise to an urge to reconstruct their origins and consider

1 The first booklet was published in 2021 as *Formate des Teilens/Formats of Sharing*. See: https://www.zhdk.ch/file/live/68/6853f89ac23deb6bda5e56313ddc1e498c4169bb/formate-des-teilens_2023_e.pdf

2 Cf.: Florian Dombois: *Art with some T, Who how and for whom, The Venice Obligations*. jar-online.net. 26/05/2022. <https://doi.org/10.22501/jarnet.0055>

3 This shift is crucial, not least because it frees art from the demands of scientific rigor and affirms it as a discipline in its own right. At the same time, this approach is not opposed to the sciences; on the contrary, it offers them a welcome new space for reflection.

4 The formerly 7-person artist group “Der zu teilende Teil”, led by Florian Dombois, is affiliated with the Transdisciplinary Artistic PhD Program at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK), in cooperation with the University of Art and Design Linz. See: <https://www.zhdk.ch/en/research/fspt/der-zu-teilende-teil-8788>. The group conceptualizes its PhD work as an open-ended journey, as a shared quest of all the participants for more adequate spaces of collaboration and exchange, in which a variety of artistic positions engage in mutually rewarding encounters.

them from a different perspective. This in turn led to a desire to establish some firm commitments within this zone of delicate sensibilities, to develop and test some viable formats — and to make these tangible both to ourselves and others.

Format — we use the term to describe a situation, an architectural setting, a configuration in which something can unfold. For the processes that we call ‘challenging’ (Forderm) to unfold constructively, certain preparations and decisions are required. For example: What will we discuss? What is up for negotiation, and what is not? What should the conversational setting be? (See, for instance → Behind the Screen). Does it even need to be a conversation, or can we think of other approaches? (→ The Letter → Meddling). How nervous, or anxious am I and what about? Is it the right moment? (→ The Wrong Moment / → Enduring the Unresolvable). Are those present even the right audience for my work? (→ My Peer is Here). How can we protect ourselves from being hurt? (→ *Letting Go* / → The Joke is on Us). Is having a thick skin desirable? (→ In Praise of Thin Skin). And so on.

We believe that artistic work thrives on resonance, context, and encounters with fellow artists. Without a reaction from peers, art — in the broadest sense — falls flat. In professional life, such spaces for critique are becoming rare. At openings or after a performance, artists are either simply congratulated, or people talk about other things. Friends are benevolent critics; after all, life in the biotopes of art is hard enough. [western-privileged self-pity!!]

We believe that discussion about art and its quality is essential to art itself. Engaging with our own propositions and assumptions, shared critical reflection and sustained interrogation of the work we produce — this is the fertile ground in which our practices continue to grow.

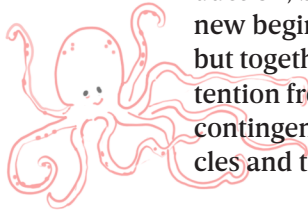
But how can we offer to challenge and critique one another, without falling into the trap of judgment and eval-

hü??
uation? We suspect that if we take art criticism as our model, the process of making art will be increasingly obscured. Once a judgement falls, the case is closed. But we don't want to close anything; we want to keep making art, keep thinking, keep searching. As artists, what interests us is continuation. We want to carry forward all that we've stirred up and set in motion, to keep treating open wounds and open questions. (→ Art or Not-Yet-Art). This is the work ^{what} we do as artists.

might

that focuses on reception not on art making

too sentimental!



We don't regard "the work" or "the thesis" — nor its discussion and evaluation — as the end point of poetic production, but as an intermediate stage, and therefore always a new beginning. We do not only evaluate what already exists, but together we imagine what might become. We shift our attention from the firm and solid to the potential of emergence, contingency and shifting ground. We look for the many tentacles and tendrils that a work extends to connect with others.

End = Beginning

But back to this publication: there are written and spoken formats, formats at different ^{scales?} speeds and magnitudes. And in between, a proliferation of precise imprecisions. The texts move toward or away from one another, sometimes intersecting and on occasion covering the same ground. Some may well be ^{blind alleys} dead ends. You understand: it is provisional. An invitation to engage with the ^{claims / ideas} propositions set out here, to fill in the gaps, to continue the work. The unceasing poetic work on the world.

May the discussions grow heated and the energies spark until they shine.

I think there are so many other adjectives for this...



Art or Not-Yet-Art

The presentation and joint discussion of work is an art school classic. This setting gives artists an opportunity to rehearse the impact of a finished piece and receive feedback from peers. Often, this means facing the full force of collective judgement. Which is unfortunate, for we all know that with a judgment, the trial comes to an end. The court stands as the verdict is spoken, to ensure everyone leaves afterward. We, however, want to stay. We want no guilty parties, and we do not even wish to know what is true. We don't want a closed case.⁵

Our artistic research is therefore also about art that is not yet finished — what we call “not-yet-art”.⁶ The work in progress can be more valuable to us than the masterpiece.⁷ For we don't intend to write a history of art. We do not need

- 5 Nor does everyone need to gather around the work like it's a crime scene; there is no reason not to experiment with other arrangements and game plans. For example, we might separate the place of presentation from the place of interrogation (cf. Florian Dombois, Eran Schaerf: Palaver. Bern/Berlin, 2008). To avoid unnecessarily slipping into a defensive position, it may be helpful to create a distance between the author and the work (→ Behind the Screen). The conversation about the work does not even need to take place orally; it can also articulate itself in other media (→ The Letter). ~~Etc.~~
- 6 Cf. Florian Dombois: “Formats of Publishing”, in *The Wind Tunnel Model. Transdisciplinary Encounters*. Zurich, 2017, p. 197
- 7 Moreover, the very notion of the “work of art”, the traditional “oeuvre”, is itself up for nuanced discussion, as an art world trope that has repeatedly been subject to critique over the past hundred years. It is hardly a coincidence that various artistic movements from Dada to Fluxus sought to destroy the monumental pretensions of the concept of the “oeuvre”: the unique, complete art object ascribed to a singular creator. This is reflected in language: In German, for example, the word “Arbeit”, simply meaning work, increasingly replaced “Kunstwerk”, which has all the above connotations of uniquely crafted value. In English, while “work” is still current, “piece”, “practice” or “project” are now themselves established terms to replace the traditional “artwork”, while “oeuvre” has largely fallen out of use. Our own research approach therefore also supports a reconsideration of contrasting artistic traditions and energies.

handy
useful
crafty terms

Shorten!
:

Deconstructing
the myth of
the masterpiece

Can art be
touched?
Or isn't our
touching so?

8

new monuments, nor artistic geniuses. We would rather understand (which in our case means: not fully understand) art as being in a state of unceasing transformation⁸; we wish to honour the artist by carrying on their poetic energy and giving it fresh form in a new context.

And so, N begins to rearrange E's installation while we sit in the gallery. This happened on a sunny midday in March 2021. Surely E intended her exhibition just as it was, and the work is perfectly good just as it appears to us: as a proposition. But we are always tempted to engage with a proposition. We bring along the tooth of time and take pleasure in ravaging every assertion of form. We believe we're allowed. We're allowed to engage with the thoughts and works of others, to put our spin on them, to keep art — and ourselves as artists — alive and in motion. We know the work it took to give it form. That is why we are already at it again: continuing, probing the possibilities and variations that remain, while laughing at our refusal to let it go. (→ The Joke Is on Us)

- 8 “No thing, no self, no form, no principle is safe; everything is in a state of invisible yet unceasing transformation. There is more of the future in what is unstable than in what is solid, and the present is nothing but a hypothesis that we have yet to overcome.” Robert Musil: *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, ed. Adolf Frisé. Hamburg, 1978, Vol. 1, p. 249–250. [own translation]

isn't there anything
more contemporary?

9

Meddling

other title?
"hands-on" "lend a hand"

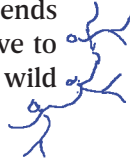
Spoken language is at times a thread that, instead of leading out of the labyrinth, entangles us deeper within it. That is why we sometimes prefer to say nothing, to do something instead. We challenge the work of others by means of intervention.

We turn upside down, we take away, we add, we mix in. We use tools and devices in unintended ways. We play ping pong on the printing press, swap sections of text around, stick a little flag in the hand of a clay sculpture, add a ribbon to the string of a sound kite, we redirect the light. We are dilettantes in the work of another, who perhaps curses silently: "You have no idea how...!"

with care Gestures have the potential to tease out things that words never bring up. Each gesture becomes part of a non-verbal communication.⁹ And in this unfettered play, a new possibility sometimes blossoms, an idea that its creator may never even have considered.

is it always playful?

Even now, the (strongly male-coded) figure of the "artist genius" is often still celebrated in the arts: the trope of the artist who creates "from inside himself", an autonomous subject ruling over his work. (→ More than I). The market reproduces the demand for a distinctive individual who lends the work its marketable aura. Fortunately, we don't have to operate within this logic. We are free to let our art be a wild tangle of forces.



in my experience this works much better if it is playful, i.e. with rules or a manifesto.

9 And we might assume that nonverbal communication stimulates the "metaphorical capacity of the mind", as André Breton remarked somewhere about the *cadavre exquis*, N recalls – but they can no longer find the passage.

My Peer Is Here

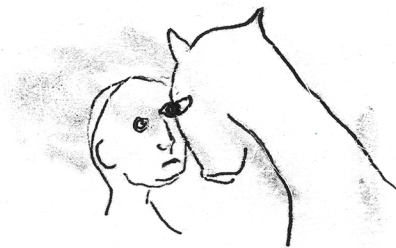
By peers (from the Latin "par" = equal) we mean people who are alike: In what they do, in how they do it, or why. In the tools they use, the lenses they see through, the things they collect. What occupies their thoughts, what makes them wonder, or weep. In the questions that have been snapping at their heels for years.

Delimiting this zone, tracing these kindred spirits, is central to our PhD. Who are my peers? How do their thoughts and actions flow into mine, and how can my work, in turn, be of significance to them? How can our practices and attitudes, our questions and creative decisions, build upon each other?

like-minded colleagues / companions

It is this community of peers (and not the art historians, cultural critics, curators, gallerists, collectors, commissions, juries and the like) who should be assessing the value of our work in the context of artistic research. It is to them that we speak, in their hands that we place whatever emerges at the end of the PhD. As a gift – something to unpack, unfold and use on their own terms.

A contribution to the field, a ball tossed into the air for our peers. The game and the rules are theirs to reinvent. An unfinished weave, into which other fingers may twine their thread. A challenge that will keep the peers thinking (and acting) for a long time to come. *give the peers much to ponder and to do.*



Beyond Question

When we interrogate each other's work and dig deep, when we challenge one another, feeling out the weaknesses and sometimes pointing a stern finger at the blind spots, we always do so within the protected space of artistic research.

It is not up for debate whether a PhD project is (good) art. We have already touched on why the unsuccessful and unfinished can be particularly interesting in our context (→ Art or Not-Yet-Art). While we discuss, judgments doze on the windowsill in the morning sun, licking their fur. What matters to us is a *contribution to the field*, the potential for development, all the tentacles a work extends to link with others. (→ Foreword)

This shifts the perspective: from the consolidated "work of art" toward the process, from the complete to the open, the as-yet unformed, and the frontiers of possibility.

That we acknowledge and respect each other as artists is beyond question. (We occasionally need to remind ourselves). We can rely on this foundation, build a nest on it and hatch our eggs.¹⁰

yes, we have to leave our narcissism behind

HOW TO BUILD TRUST?



10 Indeed, we propose to regard the thesis, the "oeuvre", as "oeuf" (french for 'egg') whose contents only begins to fledge and perhaps take flight because of the involvement and support of our peers.

Behind the Screen

The folding screen, also known as a room divider or *paravent* (French: "against the wind"), is a collapsible, portable wall used to redirect drafts, protect against sparks from stoves, or to create privacy or partition within a space.¹¹ From China — early finds date back to around 200 B.C. — these room dividers made their way to Europe, where they protected the intimate spaces of the nobility, who would dress or attend to private matters behind a screen.

A paravent can be used to simulate the absence of the person being challenged. For those doing the challenging, this seeming absence often makes it easier to freely identify and articulate criticism. It dampens the emotional sparks. With the creator concealed behind a screen, the work must stand on its own feet (→ Letting Go). The creator steps aside and practices their listening skills. Freed from the pressure of an immediate response, they have space to gather their thoughts, let the stir settle, and reflect on the comments they overhear.

Hearing others speak about our own work can, however, make any of us blush, turn green, or worse. Behind the screen, our vulnerability is shielded from the group's gaze. The mask of fear can be removed without shame. Historically, folding screens were often decorated with beautiful fabrics or artistic paintings. That might be fitting here. By the way, the person behind the screen should be allowed to request a drink.

For some, the inability to intervene even produces a state of inner relaxation — like being playfully bound.

The healthy exercise of forgetting my ego

NO COMMENT

11 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folding_screen, accessed 31.8.2025

Letting Go

For all our passion and emotional entanglement with our work, we must not forget that in the end, the artistic thesis must grow independent from us, become an autonomous entity whose meanings we have no claim on. Its effects will slip beyond our grasp, like a child come of age. Or a turtle returned to the wild. ~~At the right moment~~, we must let it go.

escape
our control

LIKE
FREE
WILL?



It will chart its own paths in the inner worlds of its recipients, sliding down convolutions of the brain we never anticipated. It will speak with a voice that no longer resembles our idea of it; it will know things that we never imagined.

UNCAN-
TIONAL

ready
to
transform

The drifting apart is unavoidable. Let's take a deep breath; it is also a blessing that we can be estranged from our own work and change sides. That we need no longer identify with it as creators, but may instead encounter it as recipients, seeing it with fresh eyes — and be surprised. (Did I really come up with that?)

yeah!

~~And the turtle just keeps on going, taking another bite of leaf.~~ well...

"How much of me remains in my work?
How much of my work remains in me?"
- Nelie Tüller

After

Sometimes the heart of the matter only comes up after the presentation. When the brain's pastures have been grazed bare, and the panting horses are back in their stalls. While rinsing the coffee cups at the end of the afternoon. While strolling to the station in twos or threes. When the pulse no longer races, the knees feel steadier, and the air smells of linden trees. Over a spontaneous Aperol Spritz in the evening sun by the river.

Paul
Valéry?

In these moments, all that was said suddenly appears in a different light. Thoughts flow back and forth between us quite effortlessly. The ears are soft and receptive, now that the hard hat has been removed. (*Ah, that's how you meant it!*) And perhaps something else will come to mind as we watch the swallows darting across the sky. Of which we'll later say that it had more of an impact than all that came before.

Sometimes we wonder: why didn't we just skip the presentation and be at ease together instead? But it couldn't have been otherwise. *We had to come to this point.*¹²

Breath in, breath out.

¹² James Baldwin in *Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris*, directed by Terence Dixon, 1970.

online??

Right
The Wrong Moment

We shouldn't overlook that in the life of anyone under review, there are moments that are unfavourable and hardly conducive to critique.

It is unfavourable, for instance, to cast sudden doubt on M's thesis late in the afternoon, during the final fifteen minutes of the meeting, with a slice of rich chocolate cake weighing in our bellies. Especially since he is about to moderate a discussion with a guest. And even more so when the thesis is about to be submitted. It is also ill-advised when the child is sick at home, or T is going through an existential crisis, or J hasn't slept for two nights while outside someone is wielding a leaf blower, or the news about *a failed project or the election results in Amerika*

*Or an underactive thyroid
or family worries*



In these moments, being challenged can be overwhelming. And when we're overwhelmed, depending on our personalities, we either harden or dissolve, neither of which supports the development of the work, *as we know from experience.* It is the responsibility of the group to remain attentive, to sound each other out, and to seize the right moment when it arises.

If someone feels that they are being challenged at the wrong moment, they should let the group know in time. For example, by waving their hands wildly, or by loudly shouting an agreed safe word, such as "Worcestershire Sauce!"

In any case, everyone is called upon to increase the chances of a successful critique and to reflect on set and setting before discussing the work itself. What questions do I have for the other? What exactly is up for discussion today? What is not? How does the work I am presenting relate to my long-term trajectory? What conditions must be met for me to expose myself to critique? How much time do we have? Who is moderating? Do I just want to listen, or take an active part? And so on. *Thinking together is such a joy!*

THIS IS CLASSIC (D)M PRESENTATION WHERE DYNAMICS ARE ADDRESSED BEFORE PLAY

Palaver

When we try to put into words where our mind is at, whether we're coming or going, drifting or standing still. When our thoughts are tangled like a ball of yarn, but as we talk, we start to unravel a thread without knowing where it will lead. When others pick up that thread, warp and weft it into something new — a blanket, perhaps, on which we unexpectedly find ourselves sitting and understanding, seeing a pattern. Or when everything we thought we had understood suddenly gets muddled by the words of others, and we lose our thread. This is what we call palaver.¹³

In contemporary German, *palavern* (as a verb) tends to carry a negative connotation: a long-winded, pointless conversation that goes nowhere and achieves nothing. In other regions and ways of thinking, especially in many African cultures, the word carries a more hopeful meaning: palaver describes a gathering in which the members of a community discuss important matters, make decisions, resolve conflicts, or simply reinforce social bonds and get to know one another better. In large parts of Africa, holding a palaver is considered a sign of good manners, a fundamental attitude — especially when the issue at hand is of great importance. Often it takes place in the shade of a designated palaver tree, for instance under an old baobab.

Our baobab tree grows wherever we happen to be: queuing for kebab during a lunch break, on the train home from a symposium. For it is not always clear when a palaver begins and when it ends.

too confusing & really?

traditions of thought

What is our fundamental attitude?

???

I like the designation of a space

WHAT WHERE WHO?

It follows a logic we do not fully understand, bound up with opposing forces: when we feel secure, convinced we know exactly where things are headed, it can trip us up and leave us in unfamiliar territory. But when we're very lost, the palaver can take us by the hand and lead us out of the labyrinth.

The palaver is also a room of opportunity, where the constellation of people can act and the complexity unfold.

WHY PALAVERN IF YOU ARE NOT LOST?

"... as long as you don't lose the joy in the absurdity of the situation, there is no reason to worry!"



¹³ Cf. also the spatial concept of critique suggested by Florian Dombois und Eran Schaerf in *Palaver*, Bern / Berlin: Kunsthalle Bern, 2008

On Attitudes

Sometimes, when A doesn't understand B's work — or even thinks it's "bad" — the reason is not inconsistency or lack of quality in B's work, but rather that A and B operate with different assumptions about what an artist does or doesn't do. Their frameworks of how and why the work or the words matter, of what "art" is, or can be, or wants to be, and how it can, should, or even must relate to "the world" (the market, politics, one's own well-being and perceptual apparatus, etc.) are incommensurable.

Especially in interdisciplinary groups, we should remember to take account of what informs our perspective: what experiences and frames of reference are we drawing on? What ^{basic ideas} core principles and apparent certainties does our critique stem from? We should learn to value such fundamental differences when we come across them, because they push us to abandon our trenches and think in broader contexts. They help us uncover our blind spots — and that's a good thing for art.

In short: the porcupine's world is not the turtle's world.¹⁴

14 Cf., among others, the concept of "situated knowledge" introduced by Donna Haraway in *Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, 1988. Situated knowledge implies that knowledge must always be understood within specific social and historical contexts. It emphasises recognizing the diversity and partiality of knowledge production and research methods and rejects the idea of "universal truth" in favour of multiple, contextual perceptions shaped by different social and cultural perspectives.



20

is
too
out

Basic attitude
not fixed but
out of curiosity



Fig. 1. Paul Noth, in *The New Yorker*, 12 July 2012.



21

Advocatum Diaboli

In the Roman Catholic Church, the devil's advocate (from the Latin *advocatus diaboli*) is the person appointed during the process of beatification or canonization to gather and present arguments against the candidate. He is "the spirit that denies"¹⁵, whose job is to poke holes in the case.¹⁶ His counterpart — the so-called *advocatus angeli* — then seeks to refute the objections of the devil's advocate, so that sainthood can ultimately be conferred.¹⁷

Maybe try out other roles as well?

→ The figure of the devil's advocate can also be adopted in PhD groups as a method of rhetorical role-play, to discuss a dissertation that's approaching completion with heightened intensity and from multiple perspectives, thereby preparing the candidate for its defence. [Wearing costumes to get into character is of course permitted.]

more joy!

Assuming a position (merely) for show makes it easier to express thoughts and observations one might otherwise hold back — or not even consider. It allows us to sidestep the group's need for harmony and the self-censorship that comes with it. *lets dance!*

Following the discussion, the group reflects on which arguments proved persuasive, and which did not. And after that, it's best to knead some bread dough together.

?? why?
because it's nice

15 See Mephisto in Goethe's *Faust I*, V. 1338 ff.: "I am the spirit that denies. / And rightly so, for all that comes to be / deserves to perish wretchedly." (translation by Walter Kaufmann, 1961).

16 During the discussion of the beatification of Pope Pius X, for example, the *advocatus diaboli* uncovered that he regularly took snuff tobacco.

17 The *advocatus angeli*, on other hand, was able to prove that the pope's tobacco consumption was ordered by his doctors for medical reasons.

More Than I

The PhD years are an opportunity to spread our inner monologue to several voices. After all, the self is not a fixed entity, but a polyphony of sometimes conflicting viewpoints and demands. *wrong metaphor!*

As with any good ensemble, we should negotiate benevolently with our own inner chorus. This also helps us to practice dealing with criticism by others. On the inner stage, we can let the voices appear one after the other¹⁸ in full costume: prosecutor, defender, theorist, practitioner, romantic, pragmatist, coward, clown, fighter and so on. Even when something inside us resists or tightens, we should give them all a fair hearing. Perhaps one of them has spotted a weak joint in the PhD structure, raising a doubt that might otherwise have surfaced later, under the spotlight of the defence?

A self resulting from peers, feelings, memories, hopes and other factors

"A PhD is also about cultivating a healthy kind of schizophrenia," says the Vice-Rector for Research. *who? where?*

or a healthy humbleness

"Sometimes I believe that of all the voices within me, my own is the weakest," complains T. *!*

18 Experience suggests that the performance is better staged consecutively, to prevent an overwhelming cacophony.

The Letter

When we try to talk about someone's work, it can happen that the essential thing remains stuck on the tip of the tongue. Or that sentences leap around like flying squirrels from tree to tree, turning into hasty formulations and fuzzy ambiguities that leave us deeply unsatisfied afterward.

precision
takes time

Writing down a critique can help us to articulate vague ideas more precisely, to explore the right words, images, and nuances (→ The Review). In a letter for example.

The recipient, in turn, then gets to choose the right moment for receiving the critique (→ The Wrong Moment). For example: sitting by the lake watching the swans. Stroking a cat. Or just before heading out to exercise. This gives critique the space it needs. Like tadpoles in a pond. It circumvents the urge to blurt out a defence, since there's no one around to hear it. And after all, it's not about defending; it's about expanding our ways of thinking together, tinkering until the work improves, so that we all benefit from it. Because we don't make art just for ourselves.

yes!!!

PRINT STAMPS
& WRITE BT

In Praise of Thin Skin

Why did I get angry when E said my text was fickle? Why did my hands go damp and shake when F asked where I'd gotten that from? Where did the bullet of critique hit home? What's going on there? Why do I suddenly feel so existentially threatened? (After all, it was only a joke ...)

Those who know their way around the forest of their own wounds can walk through it without jumping at every snap in the undergrowth. Those who understand their own emotions know their importance and their power, and that they rarely thrive behind thick armour. Those who acknowledge their weaknesses can strengthen their bones without losing flexibility. ^{yes!}

To be an ^{human being!} ~~artist, to make art or to show it~~, you will always need a good balance of confidence and vulnerability. (Can this be practiced?)

with people who understand toughness and love gentleness

→ But: having thin skin is also a privilege of those who are not forced to toughen up...



The Joke Is on Us

When we no longer know where to turn, when everything becomes too much, when we feel like crying — then we laugh. :-)

Which one?

A dictionary offers up the following definition: “Humour (from the Latin *umor* = liquid, bodily fluid): cheerful composure in the face of the shortcomings of the world and of human beings, and the burdens of everyday life; a light-hearted serenity that enables people, in difficult situations, to smile at their own weaknesses and those of others and to maintain their courage.”

Humour produces a kind of double vision. It is an effective and uplifting tool for self-reflection, allowing us to uncover blind spots or to give voice to the unsayable. “It is a protective spell that permits us to pass through all mirrors,” said Duchamp. A way of entering the emotional realm without being swept away in the narrow gorge of the ego.

Where?

Quietly and unexpectedly, a joke can express the serious and the profound. It can gently lay its finger on the wound and make the unbearable bearable. It is unsurprising, then, that humour becomes more relevant in times of crisis. Laughter is a surrogate response to a situation that is essentially unanswerable yet still demanding, an unexpected expression of resilience in midst of weakness. “Out of sheer powerlessness, the essential void of the self is suddenly charged with force,” explains humour expert Christiane Voss.¹⁹

To joke is to ride a magic carpet across the abyss of despair. To joke is to carry a lantern through a dark forest. To joke is to hold a thread leading out of the labyrinth, to keep the monstrous on a leash. In midst of our laughter, the ghosts stay behind bars and lose their terror. A joke is a bird in the hand, an airbag, a parachute.

¹⁹ Christiane Voss: “Die Kunst als Witz des Lebens. Zur ästhetischen Anthropozentrismuskritik von Witz und Humor”, in: Christiane Voss and Lorenz Engell (eds.): *Mediale Anthropologie*. Leiden (NL), 2019. [own translation]

- Telling dad jokes is talking a lot of risk

and to let
our
diaphragms
swing freely



you can never be wrong with an joke?

The Review

or: the world-making
force of language

itatic!
To realize that what I am thinking is not necessarily
what I want to think, I must write it down.
(Source forgotten, perhaps Susan Sontag)

It can be a fruitful exercise to engage with a selected work by a colleague through writing about it.²⁰ With the prospect of writing a review in mind, we train ourselves to look more closely, to listen more deeply, to feel more sharply. When it comes to texts, we speak of *close reading*.²¹ We wish to extend this to *close listening* and *close viewing*.

The aim of our reviews is neither judgment nor interpretation²², but to find ways of exploring and engaging with the work. (Much like when sketching a flower, dissecting a frog or dismantling a radio, we suddenly became aware of the complexity of things? Yes, perhaps something like that.) Writing a review is a form of reference, of relation, of participation. "The act of trying to write about what surrounded me made me part of it," the writer Paul Auster observed. — source?

The purpose of a review is to find a language. That also involves finding out what we truly think or feel – why a work repels or attracts us – through the act of writing: to play with words like they're ingredients in a chemistry lab or a witch's cauldron, until suddenly something emerges

that feels "right," something that contains our experience, but perhaps also calls it into being. "For language itself [...] shapes perception [...] and can help detect gaps for reinterpretation. [...] It multiplies the conceivable versions of reality and undermines the very idea of determinacy."²³

if close viewing leads only to a written review i'm not sure
what if it stays in the medium?

to think
it further

our language?
the artist's language?

20 The genre of art criticism written by artists is rich and well worth reading. One paradigmatic example is Bob Dylan's *The Philosophy of Modern Song* (2022). As the title suggests, Dylan develops an entire philosophy based solely on a close examination of 66 specific songs.

21 *Close reading* is a term from literary studies referring to the careful interpretation of a passage of text – that is, a precise form of reading that traces details, nuances of meaning, and linguistic characteristics. It involves "the detailed analysis of the complex interrelations and ambiguities (multiple meanings) of the verbal and figurative components within a work." (Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 1999.)

22 See also "Against Interpretation", in: Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 1966.

23 Monika Rinck, "Poetische Korrekturen", in: *Champagner für die Pferde: Ein Lesebuch*, Frankfurt am Main, 2019. [own translation]

<< We Let Us Work >>

This is a playful format of allowing others to contribute to a concrete problem of one's own practice and in turn to take part in the thinking and working processes of others.²⁴ This approach avoids explanation, presentation, palaver, to focus on immediate experience instead. Together we might add to N's research into specialist headgear, scatter sand into Ms printing press or (re)combine the image and text fragments in T's stagnating thesis until an unexpected cohesion emerges.

By opening the fragile and tentative space of production, by sharing the confusion and uncertainties in the process, things begin to shift. By participating in the work of another, we can challenge them, to expand their limits, turn things around, ramp up the intensity — or, if we are not careful, we can undermine, torpedo or sabotage. This format rests on deep trust. All involved must prove themselves worthy of it. And sometimes friendship and respect demand an unexpected gesture which, if chosen with care, can be deeply revealing.

It is crucial that the person who gets this gift is well prepared to say where they want help.

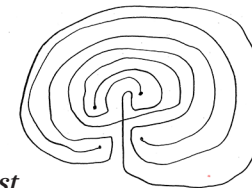
24 See also: *Formats of Sharing*, FSP Transdisziplinarität, 2021.

→ Link?

Enduring the Unresolvable

In order to find your way, you must become lost.
(Nigerian proverb)

The way is awkward &
not forward!



Doing a PhD in the arts can mean taking the time to get lost. Time for alert hesitation, a curiosity for dead ends and forking paths — beyond the art world logic of production, unimpressed by the economics of truth-seeking and problem-solving in the sciences. A PhD, as we understand it, can mean straying from the path in a forest of questions: to pause, to listen, to lose sight of the goal altogether. To lie down on the moss beside a mushroom with no strategy in mind — “to slow down and to sit in the tensions (...) to sit in the unknowingness²⁵ (...) to stay with the trouble.”²⁶

For sometimes the answer is the undoing of the question, and the solution merely an extension of the problem. At a time when we are flooded by calls for simple answers, firm opinions, quick fixes and well-executed plans, perhaps it's best for us [artists] to seek complicity with the unresolvable.

And perhaps we find nothing at all, but instead we are found. By a runaway dog, a rabbit, or a mushroom gatherer. And the mushroom gatherer may turn out to be a peer, with something extraordinary to tell. Which we write down. “It is the unforeseen upon which we must calculate most largely,” declared Edgar Allan Poe.²⁷

Sometimes nothing happens for a long time. A very long time. But if nothing happens for a very, very long time, and the forest begins to feel impenetrable, then the group comes and gets you out. You return with something that remains unresolvable. In an artistic PhD, that's entirely possible.

25 Bayo Akomolafe, *These Wilds Beyond our Fences*, 2023.

26 Donna Haraway, *Staying With The Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 2016.

27 Quoted in: Rebecca Solnit, *A Fieldguide to Getting Lost*, 2005, p. 5.

> Page?

How Where are we
supposed to fit all this
into our worldview?



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