

**EDITED BY**

**JASPER DELBECKE**

FROM  
THE SCENIC ESSAY  
TO THE  
ESSAY-EXHIBITION.

EXPANDING  
THE ESSAY FORM  
IN THE ARTS  
BEYOND LITERATURE  
AND FILM.

**S:PAM**  
Studies in Performing Arts & Media

**KU LEUVEN**

**fwo**



University  
of Antwerp



GHENT  
UNIVERSITY



CONSERVATORIUM  
CONSERVATORIUM  
CONSERVATORIUM  
CONSERVATORIUM

**HO  
GENT**  
howest

Jasper Delbecke **05** Introduction

## I

Sophia Lohmann **17** The phantasmatic and the real. Navigating the essay's critical potential/playing the devil's advocate

Carsten Junker **25** The musings and mirrors of W.E.B. Du Bois – From an essay collection to the essay plaque

## II

Heidi Liedke **39** Thinking Aloud: the essay on the 21st-Century british stage two case studies

Andreas Fleck **49** First attempt on ~~Schauspielhaus~~ *Schauspielhaus Hotel*: A container for professional dilettante entanglements

Lilly Busch **55** Second attempt on ~~Schauspielhaus~~ *Schauspielhaus hotel*: Dramaturgies of (post-pandemic) assembly

Rubkwan Thammaboosadee **63** Fragments of confrontation: The essay form within micro-protests performed by the working class during the Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand

Giovanni Sabelli Fioretti **75** Hybrid dramaturgies – Three experiences of dancing essays

Mary Szydłowska in collaboration with Mlondi Dubazane **86** *Something, somewhere, under*. Essayistic undercurrents of choreographic making.

Helen Brecht & Jascha Sommer **87** The lecture as an essayistic form. Reflection on the art of the lecture

## III

Carolina Rito **99** The essayistic in the curatorial – Repurposing the politics of exhibition

Giulia Bellinetti **107** *Monoculture – A recent history*: a case-study of the essay-exhibition

Anja Isabel Schneider **117** Essayistic thinking. Alexander Kluge staging *Opera: The Temple of Seriousness* (2019–2020)

## IV

Alice Twemlow **129** Towards a fray of messays: a method-mode in artistic research

Paul Bailey **141** On disciplinarity and legibility, failure attempt

Emily Huurdeman **151** Essaying art: an unmethodological method for artistic research

## V

Christel Stalpaert & Nina Vurdelja **155** *Essayer*: walking as speculative methodology

Lucia Rainer & Sandra Freygart **165** ENTWEDER NOCH. A collaborative experiment on gender-fluidity with and through the essay form

Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink & Anne Karinten Bosch **176** *Ragged Dialogues*

Veronika Darian & Jana Seehusen **187** How to face? A blank spot. Performative exercise #3

*From the scenic essay to the essay-exhibition*, stems from the eponymous conference organized in Ghent from the 27th until the 29th of April 2022. This gathering welcomed international scholars and artists from a wide range of academic and artistic fields to discuss the dissemination of the essay form in various artistic disciplines. This conference differed from former symposia or publications on the essay form because of its focus on the field of performing arts, artistic research and curatorial practices. The written essay and the essay film are established forms of cultural expression in literature and film. Unknown territory however is the way artists, curators and cultural practitioners in other artistic fields are committed to the essay form. Since *From the scenic essay to the essay-exhibition*-conference, this is no longer the case. Scheduled over three days and spread across eleven thematic panels, 42 scholars and artists coming from the field of design, theatre, performance, dance, dramaturgy, installation art and exhibition-making shared how their academic or artistic practice resonates with the form of the essay.

The idea to approach the essay from angles other than literature and film was prompted by an upsurge of theatre plays, performances and artistic practices labelled as 'essayistic' or as 'an essay' developed in the 2010s. A few of these performances were assigned such a descriptor by theatre critics, for example, Michiel Vandevelde's *Our Times* (2017), Julian Hetzel's *The Automated Sniper* (2017) or Jaha Koo's *Cuckoo* (2017). More prominent and interesting is the use of "essay" or "essayistic" by artists in talking about their own productions. Thomas Bellinck, Mette Edvardsen, Anneleen Keppens, Oliver Zahn, Frédérique Aït-Touati, Ogutu Muraya, Hannah Hurtzig, Jozef Wouters or the duo Silke Huysmans and Hannes Dereere are only a few examples of artists identifying (one of) their works or the practice in general in terms of the essay. They use "theatrical essay" (Bellinck), "movement essay" (Keppens), "opera in essay form" (Edvardsen), "scenic essay" (Aït-Touati), "essay-performance" (Zahn), "Memoir essay" (Muraya), "essay/installation" (Hurtzig) to described and discuss their projects. Wouters and Huysmans and Dereere refer to the essay as a method underpinning their artistic practice.

This development observed in the realm of performing arts triggered a genuine curiosity for kin works and practices in other artistic fields – next to literature and film – where the essay has arrived as a seminal form or method. This curiosity was fuelled, on the one hand, by how concepts as 'essay-installation' (Butler) and 'essay-exhibition' (Franke) arrived in the field of visual

arts. On the other hand, this curiosity found support in a renewed interest in the essay form as expressed by the recent body of scholarly work (see Aquilina; Karshan and Murphy; Wittman and Kindly) and a series of symposia organized on the topic. The sum of these developments prompted to reach out to those working on the essay in uncharted fields and establish a dialogue with those with expertise on the essay in literature and film. Although not all contributions to the conferences are included in this publication, those enclosed here are representative of the topics addressed and discussions held during *From the scenic essay to the essay-exhibition*.

The first part of this publication is inaugurated by two literary scholars revisiting some essential traits of the essay about its translation to other artistic forms and today's challenges. In "The phantasmatic and the real. Navigating the essay's critical potential/playing the devil's advocate", Sophia Lohmann questions whether the essay is truly anti-hierarchical and norm-breaking, as it is often described. Today, the essay has become a dominant form in North America, with many female authors engaging with issues surrounding gender, identity, race, and the body. However, some critics argue that this has led to a homogenization of form and style, with many texts being streamlined through creative writing programs and tailored to fit the current progressive zeitgeist without pushing boundaries or being too radical. This evolution raises questions about the critical potential of the essay and its ability to reflect and challenge social norms and conventions. In her text, Lohmann continues to explore the essay's potential for resistance and critiques its epistemic modes and poetic flexibility.

In turn, Carsten Junker explores in "The musings and mirrors of W.E.B. Du Bois – From an essay collection to the essay plaque" the essay form and its potential functions beyond the written realm, using the example of the recently unveiled "W.E.B. Du Bois Memorial Marker" at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Introducing the concept of an "essay plaque" as a form of commemoration that extends the essay's boundaries Junker unpacks the plaque's dimensions, such as its location, formalization of discourse, and dialogic communicative structures, to understand its significance and impact on knowledge production and representation. Through the Du Boisian essay plaque, Junker highlights the ways in which the essay form can be creatively used to shape ideas and experiences.

Part II of this publication encompasses a series of contributions dealing with how theatre-, performance-, and dance productions which were comprehended by the authors through the lens of the essay. In "Thinking Aloud: The Essay on the 21st-Century British Stage" Heidi Liedke explores two recently staged plays – *Sea Wall* by Simon Stephens and *Lava* by Benedict Lombe – in relation to the essay form. Drawing on how the essay functions as a combining element that invites intermedial and intertextual reflections beyond generic limitations, Liedke surveys how the essay mode allows the playwrights to position themselves in the process of writing, creating a playground for the subject, text, and mediality to interact. Using Theodor W. Adorno's "The Essay as Form" as a framework, Liedke explores the societal and political implications of Stephens' and Lombe's plays.

Liedke's contribution is followed by two reflections on the same project. Andreas Fleck and Lilly Busch were both involved as dramaturgs in Schauspielhaus Wien's project *Schauspielhaus Hotel*. For five months of its season, Schauspielhaus Wien transformed its theatre space into a hotel. In "First attempt on *Schauspielhaus Hotel*: A container for professional dilettante entanglements", Fleck elaborates on his experience as a dramaturg with the project *Schauspielhaus Hotel* and expands on how the hotel setting created spaces for interaction on different levels which he thinks in terms of the essay. In addition to Fleck's take on *Schauspielhaus Hotel*, Busch explores from her part the intersection of essayistic and theatrical forms of thought and practice. In "Second attempt on *Schauspielhaus hotel*: Dramaturgies of (post-pandemic) assembly", Busch surveys how the essay serves as a dramaturgical structure for assembling content and people within a theatre dispositif, as exemplified by the *Schauspielhaus Hotel*-project. Busch reflects on her experiences as a dramaturg in this five-month project and notes how the pandemic crisis prompted a reimagining of theatre as a space for communal experimentation and critical reflection on production conditions. The essay form and its capacity to arrange temporary, heterogeneous interactions prove to be useful for exploring these themes.

In "Fragments of confrontation: The essay form within micro-protests performed by the working class during the Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand", Rubkwan Thammaboosadee employs the scenic essay form to navigate and collect scattered pieces of micro protest, and to draw connections between living people and their surrounding contexts, revealing and challenging the non-tangible hierarchical structure of society. Thammaboosadee argues that micro protests played an essential role in highlighting the failures of the government to

manage the crisis and that these protests are a tool to unbury the buried and to give them a more visible status amid the cracked society of neoliberal Thailand.

In “Hybrid dramaturgies – Three experiences of dancing essays”, Giovanni Sabelli Fioretti explores the entanglement between digital media and contemporary dance, and how this is contributing to a new essayistic approach to performance, affecting the representation of dance. Sabelli Fioretti presents three online experiences of contemporary dance, including the Berliner A.Part Festival, the DanceMe platform, and the #Share project by the Berliner theatre Acker Stadt Palast, comparing them based on the post-phenomenological idea of ‘affordances’ by Peter-Paul Verbeek. These digital tools support artists’ self-reflection, challenging the principle of Kantian aesthetic empiricism, which prioritizes the relationship between the audience and the final artistic product, and instead foregrounds the artists themselves.

Mary Szydłowska’s contribution “Something, somewhere, under. Essayistic undercurrents of choreographic making” is a podcast made in collaboration with Mloni Dubazane. In the podcast, made accessible by a QR-code, Szydłowska reflects on a diptych of solo works – *SOAK* and *LEAKS* - emerging from the research she conducted since 2017 on cleaning and maintenance practices in the context of cultural institutions’ spaces. The diptych traced the global shift from cleanliness and order-making towards the regimes of sanitization, encountered during the making process, as pandemic began. It carried out ways of reading spaces through the cleaning as a gesture of care, and (re) writing them through questions about the invisibility of working bodies. In an essayistic form, Szydłowska cruises through cleaning as a terrain, investigating its layered potential, continuity and subversiveness.

Finally, in “The lecture as an essayistic form: Reflection on the art of the lecture”, Helen Brecht and Jascha Sommer reflect on their experience curating a series of knowledge-based performance works in Cologne, Germany, in 2021. They explore the lecture performance tradition, which gained popularity in the early 2000s, and how artists such as Xavier le Roy and Walid Raad subverted the academic format of the lecture to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. Brecht and Sommer question whether recent lecture performances still employ similar critical strategies toward academia and whether the lecture performance is still a productive category to describe contemporary knowledge-based performance works. They share their thoughts on the discussion that took place during a symposium and reflect on how the works were produced, performed, and shared knowledge.

Part III focuses on how the essay form affected how is thought about exhibition-making practices and curatorial strategies. In “The essayistic in the curatorial – Repurposing the politics of exhibition”, Carolina Rito examines the intersections of the curatorial and the essayistic. The curatorial, as Rito explains, is a field of cultural practices advancing new aesthetic articulations and producing knowledge within the realm of aesthetics. Thinking the curatorial through the essay, Rito’s contribution offers new insights into the kinds of formats and practices that the expanded field of exhibition-making can offer to mobilize exhibitionary tools to intervene and produce meaning in a wider cultural field.

Rito’s theoretical reflection is followed by Giulia Bellinetti’s “*Monoculture – A Recent History: a case-study of the essay-exhibition*”, in which she examines how the essayistic form can impact the traditional power dynamics of a museum exhibition. Using the exhibition *Monoculture – A Recent History* as a case study, Bellinetti argues that the essayistic form can reconfigure the relationships between objects, the curatorial voice, and visitors. She also discusses how the exhibition challenges the dichotomy of monoculturality versus multiculturalism, using the philosophical undercurrent of ambiguity to reflect on how monocultures exclude complexity and alternative narratives.

As Bellinetti, Anja Isabel Schneider departs from a concrete case study to discuss how the essay form disseminates in the field of exhibition-making. In “Essayistic thinking. Alexander Kluge staging *Opera: The Temple of Seriousness* (2019–2020)”, Schneider contends that Kluge’s use of the exhibition format can be understood as an actualization of his essayistic thinking, which is quintessentially political and cooperative. The essayistic, according to Adorno’s seminal essay, seeks the truth in its objects and is inherently historical. Schneider suggests that Kluge’s exhibition, which consists of nine stations and incorporates installations, audio and video recordings, films, and stage sets, can be read as a nodal point in his cooperative endeavor to counter opera’s authoritarian stance with a questioning, probing one. Schneider examines in her contribution how Kluge’s use of montage and cross-mapping and speculates on how the essayistic reverberates in the audiences as part of the viewing experience.

Part IV encompasses three contributions of practitioners working in the field of artistic research. In “Towards a fray of messays: a method-mode in artistic research”, Alice Twemlow introduces the term “messays” to examine the essay form as an underutilized tool in artistic research that could be employed to convey the “written, verbal, or discursive component” of a project. Despite claims that

the process is as important as the end product, artistic research often adopts the restrictive conventions of academic writing, curbing experimentation and suppressing stylistic idiosyncrasies. Twemlow uses “messays” as a means to unleash writing’s authentic creative potential, allowing researchers to experiment with different styles and formats throughout the research process.

In “On disciplinarity and legibility, failure attempt”, Paul Bailey explores the tensions between the essay form and the discipline of graphic design. The essay form is characterized by its openness to inquiry, its willingness to problematize, and its potential for failure. On the other hand, graphic design is often tasked with producing resolved and legible solutions for clients, promoting the status quo and excluding alternative and less profitable aspects of society. Bailey discusses how disciplinary methods of manipulation push forward an imposed order of things and promote the erasure of the less orderly, less productive, and less manageable aspects of society. In this context, Bailey examines Chris Lee’s visual essay “Immutable, Designing History,” which aims to challenge the dominant narrative of graphic design’s role in colonialism and statecraft.

“Essaying art: an unmethodological method for artistic research”, Emily Huurdeman’s contribution is 20 min-video of a lecture performance where performance and the essay intersect. Her lecture performance, made accessible by a QR-code, is on the essay as verb and interacts with the different references and perspectives evoke by comprehending the essay as a verb.

*From the Scenic Essay to the essay-exhibition* concludes with a series of collaborative and performative writing experiments. “Essayer: walking as speculative methodology” by Christel Stalpaert and Nina Vurdelja is a collaborative experiment wherein Stalpaert and Vurdelja explore the essayistic qualities of walking as a peripatetic genre. Reflecting on the romantic perspectives of walking as solitude and free-thinking, as reflected in the works of Rousseau, Goethe, Schiller, Stalpaert and Vurdelja highlight the human-centered vision of landscapes and suggest moving from an individual-aesthetic to an ecological perspective by revisiting the social through acts of walking. Walking as an ecological practice, according to the authors, looks closer at *moving together with other bodies*, e.g. walking as being together in an entangled more-than-human corporeality. In their contributions, they expand on walking as an act of re-visiting and a diffractive reading back and forth, enabling textures, contact zones, detours, re-discoveries, and returns to converse with the situated

knowledges and storied places.

“ENTWEDER NOCH” by Lucia Rainer and Sandra Freygartten is a collaborative writing experiment that explores gender-fluidity through the essay form. The authors examine the concept of becoming fluid and the spectrum of trans identity, and how they can be played out across different bodies. The text is composed of three scenarios, one solitary, one lonesome, and one companionable, which describe the different ways in which writing can be approached. The essay is not only a literary experiment, but it also seeks to challenge and disrupt traditional notions of authorship and subjectivity.

A second experiment is “Ragged Dialogues” by Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Anne Karin ten Bosch, seen as an “ode to the attempt,” an ongoing series of attempts that follow hunches, affinities, and curiosities without a pre-set goal or agenda.

The closing contribution Veronika Darian and Jana Seehusen explores the use of blank sheets as tools to resist dominant cultural positions, addressing gaps and blind spots in identity research and cultural politics. The essayistic practices gathered by the authors oscillate between language and image, the poetic and the political, and include questioning the questions of Fischli & Weiss, and marveling at the cutting experience of Lygia Clark. Darian and Seehusen use cutting, quoting, and combining as exercises to prepare an experimental field for their exploratory approach, becoming rehearsals for the essayistic. The essay includes a script and cutting instructions that can be used and applied by others.

*From the scenic essay to the essay-exhibition*, as a conference and as a publication, has shed light on the potential of the essay form in the artistic disciplines of performing arts, artistic research, and curatorial practices. By bringing together scholars and artists from various academic and artistic fields, this conference has initiated a dialogue on the dissemination of the essay form beyond the established forms of literature and film. The essays presented in this publication provide insight into the critical potential and poetic flexibility of the essay form, highlighting its ability to challenge social norms and conventions, shape ideas and experiences, and extend its boundaries beyond the written realm. As we move forward, we hope this dialogue on the essay form will continue to expand and diversify, encouraging new perspectives and approaches to the form.

## REFERENCES

- Aquilina, Mario (ed.). *The Essay At the Limits: Poetics, Politics and Form*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021.
- Franke, Anselm. 2019. "On Fichte's Unlimiting and the Limits of Self-Reflexive Institutions." In *Love and Ethnology The Colonial Dialectic of Sensitivity (after Hubert Fichte)*, edited by Diedrich Diederichsen and Anselm Franke, 12-17. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Wittman, Kara, and Evan Kindley (eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to the Essay*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2023.
- Plunkett, Erin. *A Philosophy of the Essay: Scepticism, Experience and Style*. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.
- Karshan, Thomas, and Kathryn Murphy (eds.). *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

# PART I



Sophia Lohmann

**17** The phantasmatic and the real. Navigating the essay's critical potential/playing the devil's advocate

Carsten Junker

**25** The musings and mirrors of W.E.B. Du Bois – From an essay collection to the essay plaque



## THE PHANTASMATIC AND THE REAL. NAVIGATING THE ESSAY'S CRITICAL POTENTIAL/ PLAYING THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

The essay is often considered the epitome of free form, time and time again described as anti-hierarchical (Good: 187), undisciplined, anti-dogmatic (Adorno: 17), and thus credited with norm-breaking potential (Schärf: 32). This characterization derives both from formal aspects and from the essayistic impulse as a way of thinking and approaching the world. Famously, Adorno wrote in 1958 that the essay is 'the critical form par excellence [...], it is critique of ideology' (42). David Lazar is only one of many contemporary writers and scholars thinking through the essay, assuming that 'the essay has always been a site of resistance' (19). Just what form of resistance, to what or whom? Is the essay critical or its authors? Might novels, poetry, and an infinite range of other works of literature and art not equally be sites of resistance and of critical aspirations?

To address these questions, it is indicated to take a critical look at some crucial aspects of the essay in which its critical possibilities used to be identified and investigate where one might unearth others. Finally, also the desire to hold on to the essay's unquestioned potential should be interrogated.

### THE ESSAY AS FORM

According to Adorno, '[t]he essay does not play by the rules of organized science and theory' (35). 'In the emphatic essay thought divests itself of the traditional idea of truth. In doing so, it also suspends the traditional concept of method' (36). The philosopher wrote this in the aftermath of the horrors and abuses of science committed by the Nazis, and at a time when he worried that the "hard sciences" would eclipse free, independent thinking that was not oriented toward scientific evidence or profit. Today, we seem to be – at least in part – confronted with different epistemic modes, presuppositions, and problems: In times of increasing skepticism and even hostility toward scientific knowledge, in which conspiracy theories and short-cut chains of association pass as arguments in social media, we should at least question from time to time whether meandering, associative thinking and a liberal understanding of truth are *only* and *always* progressive and anti-dogmatic.

Particularly in consideration of some of the outgrowths of the online

essay culture, flourishing for some years, especially in North America, it becomes apparent that - under the guise of poetic or generic freedom - the essay can also be harnessed as a vessel for argumentative short-circuits, unsound polemics or just egocentric, sloppy self-stylizations (Emre, n. pag.). While this is regrettable merely from an aesthetic point of view, it becomes problematic from an ethical perspective when the unruliness of the essay, which is being received as factual literature by readers nonetheless, is made to allow for facts to be fabricated and polished.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the question of episteme and argument, the essay's *poetic* flexibility and, in particular, its indifference to formal rules are often described as subversive. In times of *Regelpoetiken*, narrow literary grids, fixed genre rules, and poetic codes of high-class culture, transcending these surely has been an act of transgression. However, genre-hybrid works are very much common these days, there are – if any – only a few taboos left in literature and arts in general. Genre-bending autobiographical works, and the personal essay specifically, have been experiencing an enormous boom since at least the turn of the millennium. Can a form still hold transgressive potential when the transgression of norms has become hip – and as such oftentimes easily consumable, sellable, part of the establishment?

At the same time we should ask: How many texts actually realize the ideal of the truly free form (not just formlessness), of artistically composed yet flexible figures of thought and daring intellectual exploration? If one looks both at different historical essay traditions and many of today's magazines and essay collections, the argument about the critical form of the essay is shaky not least because so many texts labeled as essays are straightforward, watertight, non-experimental opinion pieces (Wampole, n. pag.).

## THE ESSAY AS AN IDEA AND WAY OF THINKING

Is the critical potential of the essay ultimately to be found primarily in the realm of its ideals and ideas, in a form of thinking and approaching the world? Not every essay is tied to the spirit of “the essayistic” as an abstract concept, a specific

epistemic and aesthetic imaginary. Most prominently, Robert Musil developed essayism as a hypothetical form of life in his essayistic novel *The Man without Qualities*. With Musil, we could conceive of the essayistic impulse as a sense of the possible, for the multiplicity and ever expandable nature of reality, moreover, a ‘conscious utopianism that [...] treats reality as a task and invention’ (16; my translation, S.L.). Implied in this notion is a refusal of the prefabricated patterns of existence, knowledge, language, and the emotional world and, thus, an openness to experiments (Knobloch, 222). Such a disposition and the essay's genuine skepticism paired with intellectual creativity is a plausible base for a critical structure and can surely serve as an aesthetic and quasi-ontological vanishing point, as an exercise in elastic – and utopian – thinking.

This formation or mode circumscribes for the time being primarily the Platonic realm of essayistic ideas. Taking into consideration the actually existing archives, on the other hand, one can gain the impression that the textual materialization of the essay's ideals is rather the exception than the norm. However, most scholars who cling to the idea of the essay as a genuinely antinormative form *do* think about the essay as text – or film, performance, etc. Notably European, and German scholars in particular, tend to take the essay's critical nature for granted without reflecting on the fact that this understanding is partly an abstract figure of thought, specific to their cultural tradition and history of ideas. Often not considered in these theories is the fact that and how essays are determined and shaped by their occasions, the media at hand, and the institutional, cultural, social, and political contexts in which they are written and read. Yet, these are pivotal factors, not only to understand the essay as such but especially, to comprehend its claimed critical potential.

## THE SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF THE ESSAY

The social conditions of production and reception of the essay deserve to be scrutinized with particular attention given a form and genre characterized as highly democratic and self-reflexive. The critical result of such an examination is: For all its cultural differences the essay has been characterized for a long time by powerful mechanisms of social exclusion, as also Carsten Junker emphasizes: ‘For a number of centuries, the essay has served as a framework for leisurely and contemplative thought granted to educated men – a conceptualization of the genre associated with the hegemonic position of white male essayists’ (Junker, 19).

<sup>1</sup> A prominent example is John D'Agata's essay “What Happens There”. Therein, he reported on the suicide of Levi Presley in Las Vegas but ‘manipulated’ the real events in manifold ways for poetic purposes. The correspondence with the assigned fact-checker Jim Fingal about the author's non-chalant approach to facts and the relevance and necessity of the latter in non-fiction, in general, was then turned into the well-received book *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012). See for a critical engagement with D'Agata's essayistic work as writer and editor: William Deresiewicz, “In Defense of Facts: A New History of the Essay Gets the Genre All Wrong, and in the Process Endorses a Misleading Idea of Knowledge,” *The Atlantic*, Jan/Febr Issue 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/in-defense-of-facts/508748/>.

While the marginalization of women writers can be claimed for much of literary history and various genres, there is a specific and adverse constellation when it comes to the essay. On the one hand, the accumulation of various privileges for a long time seemed to be an implicit notion of the genre: the essay came into its own in the patriarchal, aristocratic world of French manners and coincided, not accidentally, with the historical formation of the individual, humanistic subject (Mittman, 95). The assumption of a self-contained subjectivity and the resulting authority of a self/an I speaking directly from and about human experience manifests itself in the essay in a paradigmatic way. Women, non-white people, and subjects that were not part of the educated upper class, though, were only seldomly thought of as one of these subjects.

Moreover, central features of the common understanding of the essay/ist have long been constructed as exclusively male characteristics or privileges. For instance, the intellectual capacity for experimental and critical inquiry, cultural self-reflection, taking positions on matters of social relevance, and the authority of a textual signature. To begin with, and above all, women and people of color have long been denied the *de facto* possibility of becoming these self-conscious, well-educated subjects trained for critical inquiry and alike.

Besides, in fictional texts, the real author often recedes into the background, and women were more likely believed to have the capacity for imagination and fantasy. The essay, on the other hand, is based on the authority and experience of a voice that is heard and acknowledged in the public sphere. Consequently, the classic question of which subjects can speak – and who listens to whom – remains crucial.

We can assume that there have been a number of women writing essays in different cultures and periods of time. According to Renate Hof, a growing number of essays by women were to be found increasingly in the US as early as the 1830s (Hof, 221). Amy Kaminsky identified corresponding tendencies for the South American region even much earlier (113-14). After all, such texts were until the middle of the twentieth century seldomly widely published, were debased as “women’s writing” or erased from cultural memory. Most of them (with a few notable exceptions) have therefore not been included in the canon and historiography of the essay.

From today’s point of view, numerous women essayists have found their readers, gained authority and reputation, and now even seem to be underway to dominate the essayistic genre in Anglophone literary markets. The fact that the women writers who paved the way for this development and maybe came closest

to actually realizing the critically intervening potential of the essay (women who actively appropriated the essay against all odds, used the form to gain discursive agency and “write back” against discrimination; writers in the context of the civil rights movement and feminist movements) were overwhelmingly ignored by the majority of essay researchers is one of the – rather bitter – ironies of the essay’s history.

## THE ESSAY’S MATTER/WHICH ESSAYS MATTER

Michael Hamburger writes that an essay could just as well deal with ‘the origin of the tragedy as with the origin of roast pork’ (290; my translation, S.L.). Truly so, but the content could be expected to be significant as essays are in the vast majority a form of factographic literature that conveys descriptions and interpretations of reality, meaning, and opinions. Are all the essays that convey problematic, biased, disparaging, ideological – or just conformist world views, that are the opposite of *Ideologiekritik*, not to be considered? Besides that, what topics and approaches are suspended in the form?

Until the 20th century, topics commonly associated with the so-called ‘feminine sphere’ were rarely found in essays. The essay has long followed the binary division between rationality, reason, the mind, culture, and the public sphere labeled masculine on the one hand, and emotion, irrationality, nature, the private, and the body, associated with the feminine, on the other. The female body represented the constitutive other or rather the outside of the essay. That does not imply that women are actually more closely connected to the physical but that the epistemic and social fabrication and perpetuation of this connection have kept them – and a crucial form of experience, aesthetics etc. – excluded from the essay.

From the sixties onwards, female and black writers not just made the essay their own but also introduced the female and non-white body into the genre in a variety of modes. Here lies critical potential because many of these texts challenged both conventions of the epistemic genre of the essay, long-standing misogynist stereotypes about the relation of the female body, intellectual analysis, and aesthetics, and hegemonic representations of the body in general. Published were radical feminist essays that fundamentally questioned notions of sexuality, body politics, and social and literary norms, for example by Kathy Acker, and Dodie Bellamy, or outside of the US by Virginie Despentes. We find classical cultural criticism engaging with illness or cultural phenomena connected to the

body, or quasi-pathographic reflections – for instance, Susan Sontag's works on the pornographic imagination, her ground-breaking text *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) or Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980). Subsequently, diverse and often feminist ways of writing about various dimensions of the body emerged; Rebecca Solnit, Siri Hustvedt, and Mary Gaitskill being only some of the more well-known authors.

Today, we see piles of essays that can be read as body-essays, focused on the topics of motherhood, sexuality, race, identity and feminism, queerness, or care work. Here, the potential of the essay as a 'suitable form to represent the reorganization of cultural knowledge' might be realized (Hof, 15; my translation, S.L.). Moreover, through the dramatization of the bodily experience of the world ('leiblich' in the phenomenological notion of the bodily that exceeds the merely physical) and embodied poetics, the essay's emphasis on knowledge gained through experience and the text itself as a space of experience become legible. Here, it is possible to identify not only a shifted representation of the body, but the body becomes a vehicle of knowledge and aesthetic experience, and at the same time is staged as vulnerable, desiring, and being shaped by society. When this happens in new, challenging poetic forms of the essay, as in Claudia Rankine's text *Just Us* (2020) about the possibilities of dialogue in a deeply racist society, the essay a critical form (including content and a reflection on the social conditions under which a text is written) becomes real.

To understand and critically examine both how we arrived at today's social conditions and poetic possibilities of the essay and on whose shoulders female essayists stand today, there are still many female essayists to be discovered. In the second half of the 20th century, for instance June Jordan, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Hortense Spillers, Cynthia Ozick, Janet Malcolm, Annie Dillard, Dionne Brand, or Marilynne Robinson, to name only a few writers from the USA.

If one feels inclined to also cast a critical glance at the contemporary essay landscape, one would have to ask: Is the essay becoming a dominant form? At least in North America, one encounters an abundance of essay writing by female authors, often engaging with issues around gender and/or the body that is steadily gaining in popularity (Eula Biss, Leslie Jameson, Sheila Heti, Sara Manguso, Roxane Gay, Jia Tolentino, Morgan Jenkins, Cathy Park Hong, Brittney Cooper, Kate Zambreno, to name but a few). Do not at least some of these texts seem to be a little uniform in form and style, streamlined through creative writing programs, marketable, and in line with a progressive zeitgeist, but without being too progressive, too radical? What does it tell us about the

critical potential when, often, the good-looking young author is promoted as much as the text; producer and product sometimes becoming indistinguishable? Is this form of personal essay writing becoming part of the constant staging and commodification of (social) identities and opinions in a digitized world, in which the genre of the essay becomes not only a vessel for such commodified subjectivity, commodity feminism, and self-branding – but is itself on the verge of becoming a commodity in the contested realm of the publishing industry; as part of the 'first person industrial complex', the literature of self-referential hyper-individualism (Bennett, n. pag.)?

We will find out in the years and essays to come. The questions and ruminations raised in this essay are not intended to diminish the essay's unique potential but should serve as an invitation to examine and scrutinize it from time to time – case-specifically, considering the form, content, context, addressee etc. of each essay or essayistic practice. The essay's most truly critical potential may lie in its disposition and invitation for self-reflection and self-critique – and this implies the essayist, the readers or audience, and the people thinking about the essay, be it scientifically or artistically.

#### WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Notes to Literature*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Paul A. Kottman. European perspectives. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- "The Essay as Form." In *Notes to literature*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Paul A. Kottman, 29–46. European perspectives. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Bennett, Laura. "The First-Person Industrial Complex." *Slate*, Sept 2015. [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/technology/2015/09/the\\_first\\_person\\_industrial\\_complex\\_how\\_the\\_harrowing\\_personal\\_essay\\_took.html?via=gdpr-consent](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/technology/2015/09/the_first_person_industrial_complex_how_the_harrowing_personal_essay_took.html?via=gdpr-consent) (accessed July 19, 2019).
- Deresiewicz, William. "In Defense of Facts: A New History of the Essay Gets the Genre All Wrong, and in the Process Endorses a Misleading Idea of Knowledge." *The Atlantic*, Jan/Febr Issue 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/in-defense-of-facts/508748/>.
- Emre, Merve. "Two Paths for the Personal Essay." *Boston Review*, August 22, 2017. <https://bostonreview.net/literature-culture/merve-emre-two-paths-personal-essay>.
- Good, Graham. *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Hamburger, Michael. "Essay Über Den Essay." *Akzente*, no. 4 (1965): 290–292.
- Hof, Renate. "Einleitung: Genre und Gender als Ordnungsmuster und Wahrnehmungsmodelle." In *Insenzierte Erfahrung: Gender und Genre in Tagebuch, Autobiographie, Essay*. Edited by Renate Hof, 7–24. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2008.
- "Engendering Authority: Das wiedererwachte Interesse am Essay." In *Insenzierte Erfahrung: Gender und Genre in Tagebuch, Autobiographie, Essay*. Edited by Renate Hof, 209–29. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2008.
- ed. *Insenzierte Erfahrung: Gender und Genre in Tagebuch, Autobiographie, Essay*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2008.
- Junker, Carsten. *Frames of Friction: Black*

- Genealogies, White Hegemony, and the Essay as Critical Intervention*. North American studies 27. Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2010; Zugl.: Berlin, Humboldt-Univ., Diss., 2009.
- Kaminsky, Amy. "Essay, Gender, and Mestizaje. Victoria Ocampo and Gabriela Mistral." In *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*. Edited by Elizabeth Mittman and Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres, 113–30. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
  - Knobloch, Jan. "»Meister des innerlich schwebenden Lebens«. Essayismus bei Michel de Montaigne und Robert Musil." In *Musil-Forum: Studien zur Literatur der klassischen Moderne*. Edited by Norbert C. Wolf and Rosmarie Zeller, 211–35. Musil-Forum Band 35. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018.
  - Lazar, David. "Queering the Essay." In *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*. Edited by Margot Singer and Nicole Walker, 15–20. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.
  - Mittman, Elizabeth. "Christa Wolf's Signature in and on the Essay." In *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*. Edited by Elizabeth Mittman and Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres, 95–112. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
  - Mittman, Elizabeth, and Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres, eds. *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
  - Musil, Robert. *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften: [1. und 2. Buch]*. 1930. Edited by Adolf Frisé. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2012.
  - Schärf, Christian. *Geschichte des Essays: Von Montaigne bis Adorno*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999.
  - Singer, Margot, and Nicole Walker, eds. *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.
  - Wampole, Christy. "The Essayification of Everything." *The New York Times*, March 26, 2013. <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/the-essayification-of-everything/>.
  - Wolf, Norbert C., and Rosmarie Zeller, eds. *Musil-Forum: Studien zur Literatur der klassischen Moderne*. Musil-Forum Band 35. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018.

## THE MUSINGS AND MIRRORS OF W. E. B. DU BOIS – FROM AN ESSAY COLLECTION TO THE ESSAY PLAQUE

For many scholars and practitioners of the essay, it continues to be commonplace to ask, 'what is an essay'? It remains equally commonplace to reply from conviction and experience, 'the form is impossible to define'. A useful and creative way out of this dead-end, for me, is to ask what authors and artists do with the essay, how they explore its potentials and how that can shape ideas of the essay as a form. It has also been immensely useful and creative to consider how the essay has crossed the boundaries of the written realm, where it was originally located, to venture, as it were, into various media beyond text (in a narrow meaning of the term) and to reflect how it can be put to use in other fields such as the visual arts and performance.<sup>1</sup> What impact does the essay have, for instance, in curatorial practices?

An example of the essay form used in a curatorial context, I suggest, can be found in the main building of *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin* on the boulevard *Unter den Linden*. A memorial marker for one of its famous students was unveiled on July 1, 2022: the 'W. E. B. Du Bois Memorial Marker' for the scholar, political activist, and writer William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963). According to Nahum D. Chandler, who published a magnum opus on Du Bois's oeuvre and persona, Du Bois can be considered 'above all a thinker-writer, the producer of formulations of problems for knowledge, notably with regard to matters African American—but not only. For his problematization concerns matters of the human in general' (xvii). Du Bois spent formative years as a student of economics, sociology, and history in Berlin from 1892 to 1894. The plaque on the ground floor of the university main building, created by Berlin-based Haitian-American artist Jean-Ulrick Désert, can be understood to constitute what I call an 'essay plaque' in honor of this important figure in the movement for equality for Black Americans and a leading figure in the Pan-African decolonization movement. The essay plaque serves to acknowledge the life and legacy of Berlin's

<sup>1</sup> The essay conference that took place in Ghent in 2022 took this approach. Its title—'From the scenic essay to the essay exhibition. Expanding the essay form in the arts'—references two such conceptualizations of the essay, that of the 'photographic essay' by iconologist W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) and that of the 'scenic essay' by postdramatic-theater scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999/2006).



Fig. W. E. B. Du Bois Memorial Marker at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2022. Image by Philipp Plum for Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, with kind permission of the artist Jean-Ulrick Désert.



outstanding Black student and at the same time furthers the university's own self-understanding as a leading institution of academic excellence that values diversity (see Fig.).

To approach the idea of the essay plaque, it is useful to consider the following dimensions of the essay. These dimensions play a role in broader discussions of the form and an assessment of its potential functions. They are also relevant when approaching the example of the Du Boisian essay plaque in Berlin; they will partially be considered here:

- the essay's formalization of discourse through material and symbolic means, including material, size, shape, and location,
- the work of the essay at the boundary of discourses,
- the form's location at the interfaces between fact and fiction/art, history and present,
- its position between the public and the private and the personal and the political; further,
- its references to person experience as strategies of (self-)authorization and (self-)positioning, and
- its dialogic communicative structures.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>See Junker.

The essay plaque is both a site of perceptive experience and a place that provides an opportunity to reflect the history and complexity of knowledge production and the positionalities of those included in or excluded from it. The way Désert made use of and arranged different materials and media for his commemorative sculpture is striking: metal, glass, photography, and writing. The visual markers of the plaque include, at closer inspection, a black-and-white photograph of an 1890s class of doctoral students (Du Bois can be spotted in the top left corner), as well as two personal portraits of Du Bois as a young man, under green glass, and as a distinguished public figure, under red glass. The artist decided to arrange these images on a horizontal line suggesting linearity and progress, evoking what Black-diaspora and literary studies scholar Michelle M. Wright has called 'the linear progress narrative' so prevalent in African American

culture (4). Two bent metal plates structure a vertical axis, a brass one on top in which Du Bois's hand-written signature is engraved, and another steel one on the bottom with summary biographical dates. This axis takes up and plays with the motif of an unfolded wooden desktop or exhibition display, referencing Du Bois's collaborative work on the *Exposition des Nègres d'Amérique* at the *Exposition Universelle Internationale* in Paris in 1900. Visitors are thus invited to reflect critically on how objects are displayed, not least in ethnological contexts during the height of European imperialism and the postbellum United States. The color scheme of this essayistic work (green, black, and red) is inspired by the color coding of the Paris exhibition as well as of the flag of Pan-Africanism. If it were not for the artists' explanations of his piece during the unveiling ceremony in July 2022, my reading would not be an interpretation of the essay plaque that goes beyond mere description and observation. The highly polished, shiny surfaces of the glass and metal plates allow those who observe it to see themselves and the university environment mirrored; they become part of the commemorative position which draws Du Bois's legacy into the present.

Before we return to the essay plaque, let us take a step back and examine W. E. B. Du Bois and the role he plays in the history of the essay in general, and of the essay as an instrument of critique in the service of 'The Idea of Black Culture' in particular (Spillers). 'Du Bois, it must be said, was one of the great essayists of the twentieth century,' according to Chandler (3). The year 1903 saw the publication of the groundbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois published this work as a collection of fourteen essays covering a wide range of topics, from racist segregation and the life-threatening living conditions that Black Southerners had to endure in the wake of the Civil War that ended in 1865, to the history and power of African American forms of religion and music. Du Bois made use of the genre of the essay as an instrument of rigorous sociopolitical analysis and cultural-critical intervention.

This prompts a more general consideration of how the genre provides writers with a generic frame, as I call it, within which to address diverse social and cultural questions related to regimes of power and knowledge marked by Eurocentric, white-coded hegemony, including how an intellectual of African origin such as Du Bois could position himself in sociopolitical and epistemic orders on both sides of the Atlantic at the time. I suggest that it is necessary—when thinking about discourses of diversity, plurality, and inequality—to consider the means of a genre such as the essay that formalize such discourses.

The essay, as a form situated between scholarship, politics, and literature/

the arts, is a remarkable instrument with which not least marginalized subjects and groups could raise their voices and establish their speaking positions. Asking about the ways in which particular formalizations of knowledge circulate at a certain time and in a specific context raises a wide range of questions, among them issues concerning the positions from which essayists speak that allow them to make themselves publicly audible and endow what they say with validity. Acts of speaking about racism, among other matters, are obviously contingent on discursive and structural racialization—it makes a difference whether someone speaks from a subject position racialized and gendered as white or Black, male or female, for instance. Moreover, by addressing their audiences, speakers *establish* publics in the first place. In what ways do binary categories impact different subjects' access to genres and the way they use them? Who, for instance, wrote essays in the sixteenth century and who wrote a so-called slave narrative in the eighteenth or nineteenth? Historically speaking, Black men and women in the United States generally had to articulate themselves as enslaved subjects (objects/property) up to the nineteenth century. In order to speak about their enslavement, they had to authorize themselves through white editors. And to give another example: in sixteenth-century France, Michel de Montaigne spoke as a member of the French gentry and influenced the ways the notion of an autonomous subject could even be conceptualized in the first place. Such a concept was linked to a discursive agency that had exclusionary effects: how to interpret the world (i.e., read reality) was a privilege of well-educated men. Influential work on the essay has emphasized that the genre emerged from a 'patriarchal European/white origin' and originated in wealth and privileges (Joeres and Mittman, 12-13).

Montaigne used the form to question established knowledge but at the same time—and this introduces an ambivalence into speaking about the essay—he spoke from a relatively exclusive social position. Taking a huge leap in time and place, we can note that those who do not occupy socially privileged positions, as Montaigne did—groups marginalized on grounds of racist and heteronormative mechanisms of exclusion, for instance—went far to appropriate the essay as a form of cultural critique. A large number of essays were written during times of social change; the North American context in the late 1960s and 1970s serves as an example. These years saw a disproportionately high number of essay anthologies by African American writers who attacked existing power structures and formulated the goals of the civil rights and the Black Power movements. Du Bois's collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, laid ground for and

anticipated such dynamics in the early twentieth century. *The Souls of Black Folk* synthesized different strands of cultural traditions, creating an ambivalent, intense tissue of quotations beyond supposedly distinguishable cultures of knowledge.

Shaped by his observations of the realities in the U.S. around the turn of the century, Du Bois foreshadows in the 'Forethought' of *The Souls of Black Folk* that the twentieth century would be preoccupied with material and symbolic differentiations and forceful hierarchizations along what became the proverbial *color line* relevant to both Black and white readers:

*Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line* (Du Bois 1999 [1903], 5).

The Civil War between the Northern and Southern United States, which marks the formal end of enslavement, had only ended a generation earlier, and during the years of the so-called Reconstruction, racist power relations along a Black/white axis had been reconsolidated. Blacks were excluded from access to political life and educational opportunities and kept in place—outside the bounds of white civic society—through the terror of lynching. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court had declared racist segregation constitutional by passing the notorious 'separate-but-equal' verdict. At around the same time, the sciences passed a similar verdict aligned with a long Eurocentric history of reasoning, the supposition of the evolutionary underdevelopment of people of African descent and the putative progress of white civilization. After 1894, when Du Bois's funding was not extended to continue his doctoral studies at what was then Berlin's Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität (renamed Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in 1949), he returned to Harvard University, becoming the first Black scholar to receive a doctorate from the institution. His dissertation, published as *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, 1638–1870*, focused on the complexity of the abolitionist struggle to end the trade of enslaved Africans in a transatlantic sphere. Looking back at those years half a century later, Du Bois reflected the social-Darwinist dogma of black inferiority he had been confronted with in a course entitled 'Politics' in Berlin (Gates and Oliver, xvii),

a truth he grudgingly accepted at the time because it counted as valid, state-of-the-art knowledge then:

*I can never forget that morning in the class of the great Heinrich von Treitschke in Berlin. He was a big aggressive man. [...] 'Mulattoes,' he thundered, 'are inferior.' I almost felt his eyes boring into me, although probably he had not noticed me. 'Sie fühlen sich niedriger!' 'their actions show it,' he asserted. What contradiction could there be to that authoritative dictum? [...] I could accept evolution and the survival of the fittest, provided the interval between advanced and backward races was not made too impossible (Du Bois 2007 [1914], 50).<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Du Bois's ambivalent attitude toward imperial Germany, see Barkin.

This passage is taken from *Dusk of Dawn* from 1940, an autobiographical reflection subtitled *An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*. Featuring the genre label of 'essay', Du Bois here points to the link between personal life writing and discourse that is so characteristic of the essay genre. In the late 1890s the dominant discourse of race assumed a developmental difference, a discourse Du Bois would de-legitimize in *The Souls* and his other historical and sociological studies by contextualizing it not least in the history of European colonialism and the transatlantic enslavement regime.

In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois connects economic, philosophical, and literary, as well as psychological and religious discourses. The form of the essay allows him to establish a kind of writing that combines scientific, literary, and autobiographical aspects. Du Bois thus shows that facts are always already framed in a narrative perspective. The essays that refer to sociological and historical facts are written in metaphorically condensed figurative language, establishing a coherence among them through recurrent metaphors: there is the metaphor of the *veil*, a cloth or cover that separates Blacks from whites, draws the distinctions of the *color line*, and affects the ways Black subjects perceive reality. Du Bois explicitly addresses his audience, proclaiming that he has left the white world to step behind the veil to make visible a world within it, its religion, its suffering, and the struggle of its people:

*Leaving, then, the white world, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper*

*recesses,—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls' (Du Bois 1999 [1903], 5).*

By articulating collective experiences of Black religious practice, suffering, and struggle, Du Bois points to a sense of Black solidarity. The much-cited concept of *double consciousness* is of central significance in this regard; it refers to an ambivalent realization of subjects who have to negotiate tensions that result from a conflict between external racist ascriptions and internal notions of self-identification that do not agree with those ascriptions.<sup>4</sup> By also addressing a white audience for which Du Bois lifts the veil, he makes them accountable and responsible for the color line. They have to answer to that which Du Bois speaks to them about—to the questions that racism poses.

*The Souls of Black Folk* establishes references between divergent archives of knowledge with respect to both propositional content and form of expression: generally, each essay opens with excerpts from poetry written by a white American, European, or Persian poet<sup>5</sup>, as well as with notations of sorrow songs, African American spirituals that originated in the foundational years of enslavement in seventeenth-century North America. Du Bois dedicates the essay that concludes the collection to this musical genre: 'I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world' (Du Bois 1999 [1903], 156). Du Bois thus establishes a concept of Black Culture that encompasses different (racially coded) traditions, media, and genres, suggesting this might be a concept Black readers should claim for themselves.

As a spokesman for such a concept of Black Culture, Du Bois established himself as an authoritative Black male subject of humanistic education and culture—in German: *Bildung*. Around 1900 he represents and claims for his persona an elitist ideal of bourgeois education that stands in contrast to an

<sup>4</sup> For scholarship on the concept of 'double consciousness' and its possible references to Hegel, Emerson and Herder, see Zamir.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Symons, James Russel Lowell, Lord Byron, Friedrich von Schiller, John Greenleaf Whittier, Omar Khayyám (transl. Edward FitzGerald), William Vaughn Moody, Elisabeth Barrett Browning, William Sharp aka Fiona McLeod (pseud.), Algernon Charles Swinburne, Alfred Tennyson; essay VII opens with Song of Solomon 1:5-6.



ideal of professional training for Blacks in the so-called 'industrial school', as advocated by Booker T. Washington (Du Bois 1999 [1903], 65). Du Bois rejected the latter ideal because he was convinced that it would forward a profit-oriented belief in economic progress that kept Blacks in check. In that sense, Du Bois's concept of culture is also shaped by an impulse critical of capitalism. That critique would become more pronounced throughout his lifetime. In 1961, at the age of 93, he became a member of the Communist Party of the United States of America. The same year, Du Bois, who had advocated for the idea of Pan-Africanism from the early twentieth century onwards, settled in Ghana shortly after the country's political independence in 1957.

How was Du Bois received by his white teachers and German audience? Unlike Heinrich von Treitschke, the social Darwinist and advocate of German colonialism who would not likely have recognized the legitimacy of his Black student's work, the sociologist Max Weber showed great interest in Du Bois: Weber suggested in 1905 that *The Souls of Black Folk* should be translated into German (the book was only published in German translation one hundred years later, in 2003). Weber asked Du Bois to write a sociological essay for the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, a journal Weber co-edited in Heidelberg. The essay appeared in German in 1906 as 'Die Negerfrage in den Vereinigten Staaten' ('the Negro Question in the United States') (Chandler, 194). Another half century later, in 1958, Du Bois's former German university, located then in East Berlin, the capital of the German Democratic Republic, awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor of Economics. After German unification, the American Studies program at the *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin* continues to honor Du Bois by naming a lecture series after him. And now there is the commemorative essay plaque. The unveiling ceremony of the essay plaque in honor of Du Bois shows two sides of one and the same coin of the recent acknowledgement of Du Bois in Germany: on the one hand, Du Bois gains recognition, on the other, there is a dynamic at work in which a dominantly white institution can celebrate (and appropriate) the perspective of a structurally marginalized subject. The representational politics of the memorial plaque and its ceremonial inauguration serves both Black self-empowerment and a white desire for self-aggrandizement. There seems no way out of this contradictory logic.

As I am standing in front of the essay plaque that honors Du Bois and see my image reflected in the polished metal of its steel plate, I cannot help but wonder about the complexities of this dilemma: how do the representational politics of the marker relate to the structural dimensions of knowledge production today?

<sup>6</sup> Given this dynamic, the essay plaque in particular and the essay as form in general is also a subject of investigation in *Contradiction Studies* (cf. Junker and Warnke; Lossau, Schmidt-Brücken, and Warnke).

How does the latter contradict the former?<sup>6</sup> The mirror effect of the plate is an effective artistic—essayistic—means that allows me, a white alumnus of this university, to ponder this dynamic. While Du Bois was never able to finish his studies at this university, it was in the *Senatssaal* in which the essay plaque was inaugurated that I attended the ceremony of my own graduation a century further on

to proceed and pursue PhD work in American Studies on the essay, including Du Bois's oeuvre. It is in the field of American Studies that such questions of accessibility with respect to demographic plurality in scenarios of inequality find resonance. And it is the faculty members and students of the American Studies program at this university who initiated this project of essayistic memorialization in the first place. The plaque results from long struggles over and demands for broadening access to prestigious institutions such as universities. Alina Weiermüller, co-founder of the Black Student Union at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, reminds the festive crowd at the unveiling ceremony of the exclusionary structures of racism that Black students continue to face in an institution such as Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Courageous students like Weiermüller make the university a place of lived debate. In her words:

*If the university truly wants to do justice to W. E. B. Du Bois's legacy, it must go beyond gestures of representation and work towards creating a space where the color line becomes obsolete and diversity is not only welcomed but fostered into a community that is aware of its differences but united in its goal to use these differences to create a more just society (1:12:42–1:13:05.).*

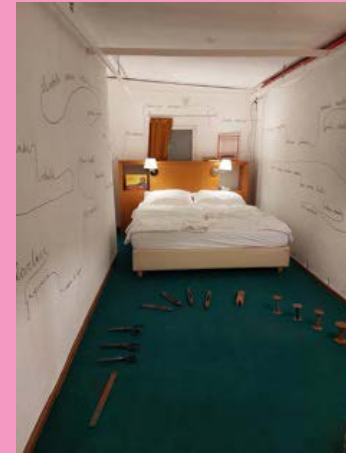
Just as Du Bois used the essay to take a critical position against established forms of knowledge, Jean-Ulrick Désert takes the memorial marker and turns it into an essay plaque. What is powerful about the plaque is that its mirrors reflect literally who is looking, but it also reflects figuratively on questions of power, for instance on who has access to symbolic and material resources. The essay as form, both in its printed and sculpted versions, provides an apt means for critiquing marginalization and exclusion. In the conclusion of my own dissertation, I drew on the critical authority of Theodor W. Adorno, who—in his famous 1958 essay titled 'The Essay as Form'—stresses that the essay's crucial function

is to formalize critique. As he asserts, the 'essay remains what it always was, the critical form *par excellence*' (66). I find this statement too ahistorical and apodictic, and argue instead that the essay is not a critical form in and of itself. Rather, it takes speakers such as Du Bois to turn it into a form of critique in the first place. If it were not for essayists such as him, the essay would not be the critical genre it is perceived to be. It is through acts of speaking and writing and designing and sculpting and curating that writers and artists constitute genres. Du Bois helped consolidate the notion of the essay as an instrument of reflection and critique. Désert does the same in a way that invites collaboration.

## WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W. 'The Essay as Form'. Original German 1958. *New German Critique*, no. 32 (Spring/Summer 1984): 151–71.
- Barkin, Kenneth. 'W. E. B. Du Bois' Love Affair with Imperial Germany'. *German Studies Review* 28, no. 2 (2005): 285–302, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30038150>.
- Chandler, Nahum D. *Beyond This Narrow Now' or, Delimitations of W. E. B. Du Bois*, Durham: Duke, 2022.
- Chandler, Nahum D., 'The Possible Form of an Interlocation: W. E. B. Du Bois and Max Weber in Correspondence, 1904–1905'. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 (2006): 193–239, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41949541>.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*. 1914, Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Du Bois, W. E. B., 'Die Negerfrage in den Vereinigten Staaten'. *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 22 (1906): 31–79.
- Du Bois, W. E. B., *Die Seelen der Schwarzen: The Souls of Black Folk*. Translated by Jürgen and Barbara Meyer-Wendt. Freiburg: Orange Press, 2003.
- Du Bois, W. E. B., *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, A Norton Critical Edition. 1903. Reprint, New York: Norton, 1999.
- Du Bois, W. E. B., *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870*. 1896. Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Gates Jr., Henry Louis, and Terri Hume Oliver. *Introduction to The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Terri Hume Oliver, xi–xxxvii. 1903. Reprint, New York: Norton, 1999.
- Joeres, Ruth-Ellen B., and Elizabeth Mittman. *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Junker, Carsten. *Frames of Friction: Black Genealogies, White Hegemony, and the Essay as Critical Intervention*. Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2010.
- Junker, Carsten, and Ingo H. Warnke. 'Marguerite Stix and the Shell: Notes on Disciplinarity and Contradiction'. *Quaderna*, no. 3 (2015), <https://quaderna.org/3/marguerite-stix-and-the-shell-notes-on-disciplinarity-and-contradiction/> (accessed August 30, 2022).
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 'Scenic Essay', in *Postdramatic Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2006, 112–14.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatisches Theater*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1999.
- Lossau, Julia, Daniel Schmidt-Brücken, and Ingo H. Warnke, eds. *Spaces of Dissension: Towards a New Perspective on Contradiction*. Wiesbaden: Springer, 2019.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. 'The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies', in *Picture Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 281–322.
- Spillers, Hortense J. 'The Idea of Black Culture'. *The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3, (2006): 7–28.
- 'Unveiling Ceremony on July 1, 2022', Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, <https://www.angl.hu-berlin.de/departement/duboismemorial> (accessed August 24, 2022)
- 'W. E. B. Du Bois Memorial Marker at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin', *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*, <https://www.angl.hu-berlin.de/departement/duboismemorial> (accessed August 24, 2022).
- Zamir, Shamoan. "'The Sorrow Songs'/'Song of Myself': Du Bois, the Crisis of Leadership, and Prophetic Imagination", in *W. E. B. Du Bois. The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Terri Hume Oliver, 1994. Reprint, New York: Norton, 1999, 346–64.
- Wright, Michelle M. *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

## PART II



- Heidi Liedke **39** Thinking Aloud: The Essay on the 21st-Century British Stage – Two Case Studies.
- Andreas Fleck **49** First attempt on *Schauspielhaus Hotel*: A container for professional dilettante entanglements.
- Lilly Busch **55** Second attempt on *Schauspielhaus hotel*: Dramaturgies of (post-pandemic) assembly.
- Rubkwan Thammaboosadee **63** Fragments of confrontation: The essay form within micro-protests performed by the working class during the Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand.
- Giovanni Sabelli Fioretti **75** Hybrid dramaturgies – Three experiences of dancing essays.
- Mary Szydłowska in collaboration with Mlondi Dubazane **86** *Something, somewhere, under*. Essayistic undercurrents of choreographic making.
- Helen Brecht & Jascha Sommer **87** The lecture as an essayistic form. Reflection on the art of the lecture.

## THINKING ALOUD: THE ESSAY ON THE 21ST-CENTURY BRITISH STAGE

The essay is everywhere. While it may be too early to say that the essay form has expanded in the arts *after* literature and film, one can identify a multiplicity of developments happening in literature, film and performance at the same time within the same force field for which the essay form functions as the combining element. The essay form indeed invites intermedial and intertextual reflections to think beyond generic limitations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated and increased, I argue, the interest in small, intimate cultural forms. During lockdown, many theatres around the world were forced to shut down for a while, which has put the spotlight on a very powerful skeleton at the heart of performance that has become more and more popular in the last decade or so: the bare bone of a story, the word. The monologue performed via Zoom by one or just a couple of performers gained new prominence, for instance in the work of the Oxford based company Creation Theatre. The word is the first connection between the kind of performance I am interested in – the monologue performed on stage, both virtual and actual – and the essay: they are made up of the same constitutive element. They present unorthodox thoughts, though what an ‘unorthodox thought’ is exactly will need to be addressed first. Their concern is to distil worlds and the fact that such distilled worlds can be encountered more often in recent years on stages all over the world may be, as Simon Stephens has put it, because there is ‘an interest in dramatizing a world that seems to be more atomized and fractured than it has been in the past and subsequently scorched by a need and an inability to connect’ (xxi).

This essay uses Theodor W. Adorno’s framework from his seminal text “The Essay as Form” and tries out its applicability to the genre of the, as I want to call it, essay play on the British stage as exemplified by two recently staged plays: *Sea Wall* by Simon Stephens (2008/2018), and Benedict Lombe’s *Lava* (2021). By looking at both the play texts and the respective performances at the Old Vic and Young Vic, one arrives at a polyphony of truths that become true in their progress(es). In Stephens’ *Sea Wall*, the protagonist’s happy life deconstructs itself against the literal waves of the sea that figures prominently in his narrative and the waves of words that carry it. Lombe’s *Lava* is fuelled the most by an Adornian drive toward heresy when the protagonist grapples

with the experiences she made as a Congolese immigrant to the UK and her fragmented identity resulting from this.

The two solo performances are essay plays both in the sense that they constitute examples of attempts of coming to terms with difficult live events and failing to achieve any totality and in the sense that their performer-essayists with their presentations protest against the orthodoxy of thought by rejecting linearity. In reading both their latent forms as written texts and their manifest forms as narrated essays, the respective elements come together as one through their motion.

## THE ESSAY'S BACKBONE

While the essay has been classified as a 'fourth genre',<sup>8</sup> I argue that such a term is imprecise, as the essay does not have a reliable set of identifiable characteristics. Rather, I use the term 'mode' in order to acknowledge that the essay enables the writing subject to position themselves in the process of writing and creates a playground in which the subject, the text and its mediality can be put into contact with each other. Taking up the etymological root of the word "essay" as an attempt and Adorno's assertion that the essay positions itself against totality and truth (see 1991, 17), I aim to emphasise the flexibility and therefore societal and political implications of this seemingly "light" literary mode. My overarching thesis is that the essay is an inherently paradoxical mode which connects and deconstructs binaries. By connecting characteristics of the spoken and written, past and present, by blurring the boundaries between readers and writers (reading an essay is generating it; writing an essay is to create an experience) and 'original' vs. 'borrowed' thoughts (the topos of the essay writer as not inventing anything new but merely 'reading' other books has been most memorably put by Charles Lamb in "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading" [1822/1833]), the essay emerges as a literary organism that seems to encompass many trends and characteristics of electronic literature and reading and writing in the age of hypertexts and links. It matters to turn to the essay mode now because this kind of writing, as being characterised by searching, sampling and the subjective is a reflection of the ways in which more and more readers compile their archives of knowledge – surfing and searching on the internet.

<sup>8</sup> Lothar Cerny, "Essay", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, eds. Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, Rudolf Eisler, et al. 746-749 (Basel: Schwabe, 1971); Dieter Krywalski, "Essay", in *Handlexikon zur Literaturwissenschaft*, 121-126 (München: Ehrenwirth, 1974); Fritz Martini, "Essay", in *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Moritz Bassler, 408-410 (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1997).

In "The Essay as Form", Adorno defends the essay, quite similar in tone and agenda to P. B. Shelley's "Defense of Poetry" from 1821. He begins by listing all the characteristics for which it has been frowned upon and scolded. For German critics, the essay is unworthy simply because it is a hybrid, more precisely, a primitive, undifferentiated unit made out of science, ethics and art; the form is not independent, they say (even though a look at the history of the essay, going back to the 16th century, suggests that it is as old as or even older than the novel). The essay is not universal and therefore not dependable; it is not a new creation but refers to already existing material; it is childish, determined by hazard, and hence trivial. Adorno's conclusion to this catalogue of supposedly negative characteristics is that the essay does not start 'with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about; it says what occurs to it in that context and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say' (4).

The autonomous choice of where to go and where to end is a central criterion also for the essay plays that I will be looking at in a moment. What, in the eyes of critics, may sound simple, careless and indeed like the behaviour of a stubborn child, is in fact full of great challenges. Just like the trapeze artist can very easily fall off, the essay can very easily fall into clichéd territory and into banalities. The essay, writes Adorno, 'rebels against the doctrine, deeply rooted since Plato, that what is transient and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy [...] The essay recoils from the violence in the dogma according to which the result of the process of abstraction [...] should be granted ontological dignity' (10). What is even more important is that 'the essay invests experience with as much substance as traditional theory does mere categories' (ibid) and it 'does not try to seek the eternal in the transient and distill it out; it tries to render the transient eternal' (11).

The certainty to obtain something akin to certain knowledge is exchanged willingly for a lack of safety. Most importantly, the essay form does not hand a safety net to its performer because its constituting elements and their order are yet to be determined. According to Adorno, they 'crystallize as a configuration through their motion' (13). The early 21st century has seen a growing unease with certain forms of fiction – David Shields has proclaimed, for instance, that we live in an age of 'reality hunger' (Shields) – and it will not come as a surprise that unease is precisely the feeling the essay evokes in those who reject it. With an essay, it seems that the string started with it could go on forever and who wants such a story? Adorno addresses this worry but disperses it as uncalled for because there is after all a sense of unity in the essay, namely between the

object and the theory in connection with the experience that has migrated into the object. In the typically Adornian style which is characterized by paradoxes, he proclaims somewhat impatiently: 'The more it strives to consolidate itself as theory and to act as though it held the philosopher's stone in its hands, the more intellectual experience courts disaster' (11). The biggest gain of an essay is that it grasps for individual moments instead of wanting to capture generalities and totality – 'the essay's innermost formal law is heresy' – and a rejection of orthodoxy (23).

## THE ESSAY PLAY

The essay plays I would like to present in the following take up the notion of coming together in their motion. More precisely, it is the process of thinking aloud that lets their essayists-performers arrive at tentative states of self-knowing, which reject any clear classifications into binaries of any kind. I argue that the following essayistic criteria can be applied to the essay play on stage:

- there is a solo performer/essayist; it is self-centred (positively understood)
- it is unorthodox (topic of choice, no linearity, style and syntax)
- it dismantles binaries
- it generates meaning while unfolding

The two essay plays, Simon Stephens' *Sea Wall* and Benedict Lombe's *Lava*, that I analyze illustrate these aspects. Simon Stephens, an English playwright, wrote *Sea Wall* in 2008. This followed an invitation from the then artistic director of the Bush Theatre, Josie Rourke, to submit a piece 'that could be performed in natural light' (20). While on holiday with his wife, kids and father-in-law (figures featuring prominently in the monologue as well), Stephens developed the idea, and as his friend, the Irish actor Andrew Scott, emailed him on the morning when he started to write it down, Stephens decided to write the play for Scott with his voice in mind, telling his story. It was first performed on 6 October 2008 at the Bush, directed by George Perrin and then again, 10 years later, at the Old Vic when I attended a performance as well.<sup>9</sup> The play begins with a moment of sudden loss, and is centred around 'the hole that grief can blast right through a person's

<sup>9</sup> *Sea Wall*, directed by George Perrin, 18-30 June 2018, Old Vic London.

center' as Laura Collins-Hughes has put it in her review in *The New York Times* (n. pag). Paradoxically, while the protagonist displays all his vulnerability to us, while he shares his utmost fears with us, at the end of the play it is us who feel vulnerable and fragile. The essay play lurs us in, dismantling any binaries between us and them, inside and outside, his story and our stories. When we conceive of performance as disappearing in appearing, to entertain Peggy Phelan's oft-quoted but equally often contested paradigm, this play, takes up the brutality of a sudden disappearance, the side-by-side-ness of existence and disappearance. These aspects are characteristic for the essay too, in being generated in the process and in being annihilated in the process.

Even though the first sentence of the play is about Alex's four-year-old daughter ('She had us, both of us, absolutely round her finger' (3)), he then immediately goes on to remember his father-in-law, their relationship, the things they talked about, anecdotes, visiting him in his 'house in the eastern suburbs of Toulon in a town called Carquerraine. In the south of fucking France for fuck's sake' (5). This visit, his father-in-law taking him to see the sea wall, is interspersed with remembering his wife Helen giving birth to their daughter Lucy. One recurring topic that comes up in the discussions with his father-in-law is whether there is a God and what He looks like. The following passage illustrates this and also exemplifies how the monologue is like an essay that generates its meaning while it is being spoken. It develops a therapeutic effect while it is being told or unspun. The audience takes on the role of audience-as-witness to Alex' testimony:

*He says, 'We don't know everything, Alex. There are some things we don't know. There are things we can't explain.' I tell him, 'Now.' He says, 'What?' I say, 'We can't explain them now but that doesn't mean that they have no reason. It just illustrates the gaps in our knowledge. It doesn't mean we won't be able to explain them one day because I really, because I think we will.'*

*I want to acknowledge something. And it's embarrassing because I know it's something that you will have noticed. There's a hole running through the centre of my stomach. You must have all felt a bit awkward because you can probably see it. Even in this light. Mostly people choose not to talk about it. Some people tell me that they're sorry*



*but that yes, they can see my hole. 'What's that, Alex?' they say. 'You appear to have a great big hole running right through the middle of you' (9).*

The essay play is brutal in jumping to and fro in chronology, juxtaposing happy moments with the trauma at the core of the narrative. In the performance starring Andrew Scott as Alex performed in 2018 at the Old Vic, silence is performed in order to emphasize some aspects of the play text. In one scene Alex is silent for those thirty seconds (roughly) that his wife's beauty took his breath away:

*And she asks me to come into the bedroom because there's something she wants to show me. And I get there and she's wearing this dress. It's a blue dress. With this dropped back. She asks me to tell her what I think. I swear for about thirty seconds I couldn't speak. She looked. Oh. And the idea that I was married to her. And that we had our girl. And this was our life (10).*

The acknowledgement of the blissful happiness this memory represents – a happiness that can only be acknowledged in connection with a long silence – contrasts brutally with that moment which has created the “hole” in the centre of Alex' stomach. The event that his spoken essay builds up to is the completely senseless accident that caused his daughter's death:

*And she's quite close to a little edge of one of the rocks there and what she does is she tries to correct her balance but in trying to correct the balance of her weight she actually puts more weight on her back foot that slips out from underneath her and it's weird to look at because she does fall off the edge of this six-foot-high cliff on the rocks and she falls backwards and cracks her head against some rocks which are jutting out at the bottom of the cliff. I can see it all clearly but I can't really hear anything and it's weird watching it with no sound. Like if the sound's off on the telly it's always a bit strange. I takes a while to register before I turn and swim back to the shore (12).*

The play ends as Helen and Alex are in the process of grieving, finding every sound painful. There is no sense of closure, there cannot be. Yet in grieving – with his audience, through it – in the form of a spoken-out essay, the essayist-performer crucially arrives at a conversation that he has remembered earlier. This time, however, he wants to try it out differently, look at it from such a perspective as if to find new meaning in it. It is an echo of the conversation about God Alex was having with his father-in-law earlier, offering some kind of tentative hope, generating it. In the first version, his hope already became apparent as a tentative assertion that not knowing some things now, does not mean that one will never know. At the end, Alex repeats this hope, saying that he thinks that one day we will [know] (15).

<sup>10</sup> *Lava*, directed by Anthony Simpson-Pike, 2-13 August 2021, Bush Theatre London, also streamed online.

Like *Sea Wall*, Lombe's play, with a magnetic solo performance by Ronk Adékoluejo,<sup>10</sup> begins with a moment of loss and displacement. Benedict Lombe's *Lava* has come out of the protest series created at the Bush Theatre as a reaction to the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

Lombe is a playwright, poet and spoken-word-artist and all of her work is informed by these diverse kinds of writing. Lombe's piece that was part of the six protests posted on the Bush Theatre's YouTube channel is called “Do You Hear Us Now?” and is a powerful yet angry monologue marvelling at the “beauty of blackness” and the hypocrisy of the addressed You who has historically only supported black people in times of crisis and, in times of hashtags, only when a trending slogan would make one's one social media profile appear more woke. Lombe is cynical, but rightly so; she does not use euphemisms, as there is no time for them. She wants to stir up.

*Lava*, which was performed at the Bush in August 2021 and also streamed live to global audiences, thus emerges out of this context but is also tied closely to Lombe's own biography. She describes the process as a very short one, and the writing as one based on instinct and collaboration with the artistic team at the theatre. In an interview, Lombe has spoken of a joyful process and described joy as “lightness, hope, being able to look forward to things, being able to appreciate each other. I think joy means love.”

At the beginning of the play, Lombe's protagonist is thrown onto a bare stage surrounded merely by irregular concrete pillars. She hugs a pillar. She looks around. She takes a deep breath. And starts dancing, shaking all her body parts to H. E. R.'s “Think” which centres around the phrase “Give me some freedom – Think about what you're tryna do to me”. This essay play therefore begins with

dismantling the binary between stasis and movement, death and life, body and air, stillness and silence and noise. The play is about the protagonist's life that unravelled in front of her as she wanted to renew her British passport, a process that should have been straightforward but became anything but: "I followed the thread and it led me back to these places. Places I called 'Elsewheres'. Places I'd grown up and come of age in, places that now weaved in and around each other, threading all the way through to the present. Yesterday and today, wrapping around each other tightly, tying a knot with the smallest opening for tomorrow and meeting us right here. Right now" (3).

The following scene describes the beginning of Benedict asking questions and how here present self stands in friction with her elsewhere self:

*I'm at my parents. It's the weekend. And I'm in the dining room with my Mama. She's sorting through a giant bag of mixed kidney beans, does this quickly, movements becoming automatic. I watch, I listen. There's a kind of musicality to it. The rattle of all the beans, as she scoops them out of the giant bag. Then the sound of each different colored bean landing in their separate designated area, white beans in one bowl, red beans in another. [...] White, red, black and scoop. White, red, black and scoop. White, red, black. Hey Mama. Quick question. How comes my name's missing on all my old passports? Hmm. She makes this sound. Uh hmm. And I know what's coming. Hm. Big girl! So you're just sitting there like that, watching your mama as if those two hands of yours are just for decoration (9).*

The mother then tells her about the brutal genocide of the Congolese people when Congo became a Belgian colony. Among other things, Congolese people had to change their names and her parents gave her a Christian name because "When you find your power in the chaos, however small, no one can take that away from you" (13). This piece of information is the starting point for Benedicte's journey.

*Lava* is multi-medial and thus represents a hybrid text, which makes it very essayistic. It interweaves the protagonist's mother's story about Mubutu, official letters from the British Passport Office, even pages ripped out of the Bible, conversations with friends, Benedict's thoughts. It needs this diverse

corpus of material, as the protagonist-essayist's conflict is one of having an elsewhere at the heart of her being:

*The dichotomy of my relationship with Congo, my motherland. The place of my birth. Mine, yet not mine. We left when I was a baby. Everything I know of her I learned from outside of her. There is no personal living memory, but in its place, a different kind, a memory that runs in my blood. Congo lives on in my Elsewheres. Elsewheres that now started to unravel, started to shift, started to come alive, like she'd set them aflame. Elsewheres that seemed so jarringly different on the surface, but you dig a little deeper, right? You dig a little deeper and you start to realize they were built by the same architect (14).*

Statements like these gain new urgency in the present-day context in which borders and boundaries are being erected again, both of a political kind but also in people's minds. The essay indeed can indeed remind us of our common Elsewheres, can transport thought in a way that is free from prejudices, patterns, rules.

## CONCLUSION

What the two plays I discussed in this contribution demonstrate is a combination of energy and contemplation. When focusing on the stories they tell, these essays are first and foremost still. Stillness concentrates our gaze – both when we watch a play and when we read a text – on the characters whose stories are told and what it is they are in the process of sharing with us. The smallest meaning-making unit of a conversation, the word, attains new prominence. The essay plays bring a new old mode to the fore, namely the practice of thinking aloud, as a way of searching for answers. Rather than arriving at definite solutions, the essay play is particularly suited to create an environment of communal thinking, as the form's seeming spontaneity and imperfection first and foremost unfolds itself in people's imaginations.



## WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W., "The Essay as Form", *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1., ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 3-23, 4.
- Collins-Hughes, Laura, "Sea Wall/A Life' Review: Quiet Tragicomedies of Love and Loss", *NYTimes.com*, August 8, 2019.
- Shields, David, *Reality Hunger* (London: Vintage, 2011).
- Lamb, Charles, [1822/1833], "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading. An Essay". Boston: priv. printed for Herbert Copeland and F. H. Day, 1894.
- Lombe, Benedict, "Do You Hear Us Now?", *The Protest*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wG-qhQhPR8k>.
- Lombe, Benedict, *Lava* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2021), 3.
- Phelan, Peggy, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- Stephens, Simon, "Introduction", *Simon Stephens. Plays: 2* (London: Methuen Drama, 2009), pp. ix-xxii, p. xxi.
- Stephens, Simon, *Sea Wall* (London: Methuen Drama, 2019), 3.

## FIRST ATTEMPT ON *SCHAUSPIELHAUS HOTEL*: A CONTAINER FOR PROFESSIONAL DILETTANTE ENTANGLEMENTS

From October 2021 to February 2022, I joined the team of Schauspielhaus Wien as a dramaturg for a project developed by Tomas Schweigen and his team. For five months of its season Schauspielhaus, a middle-sized theatre with an audience capacity of about 210 seats, transformed its theatre space into a hotel. In reaction to the changing working conditions in the cultural field caused by the pandemic crises, this new spatial and conceptual arrangement was an artistic attempt to rethink and experiment on theatre production on different levels.



*Schauspielhaus  
Hotel* (2021-2022) ©  
Schauspielhaus Wien /  
Giovanna Bolliger

The hotel setting was – first and foremost – a spatial intervention, a walk-in installation, a visual statement, or as I would call it: a new container for artistic interaction. The two set designers Stephan Weber and Giovanna Bolliger created 15 hotel rooms on two floors, occupying the whole stage area of the venue. The hotel foyer in the center of the construction was used as an open event space and the box office was converted into a reception with lobby and a multifunctional sound-studio for an in-house radio station. All rooms were equipped with single or double beds, desks, and TV sets. Even overnight stays for the audience were possible on Fridays and Saturdays either in a hotel room or in one of the 8 Japanese-style sleeping boxes on the theatre's balcony.

The hotel setting moreover created a new workspace or working environment – for the artists involved as well as for the approx. thirty employees at Schauspielhaus. It changed the modes of rehearsing and showing, of planning, curating, communicating, and interacting – not only among each other but also with the public.

From my point of view and as a central thought for this text, the hotel setting was a clash of dispositifs and opened therefore a broad field for new dramaturgical possibilities – but also a lot of confusion. In this first attempt on ~~Schauspielhaus~~ *Hotel*, I would like to look at the theatre hotel as an essayistic container and an experimental apparatus for professional dilettante entanglements.

Saturday, 23rd of October 2021, a usual day in the hotel: two permanent installations by Jesse Inman and Miru Svolikova in room 105 and room 206. Suse Wächter and Lisa Lie invite the audience to join intimate one-on-one-sessions in room 114 and 106. The installation by Hybrid Dessous in room 111 is still open, while the audio-installation in room 204 by Kandinsky is not accessible today, as the room is booked by a hotel guest. The two robots from NESSUN DORMA will show their painting performance in the hotel's event space in the afternoon before a concert by Anna Mabo will start in the same space later in the evening. In the meantime, there is a live-radio-show broadcasted in the corridors of the hotel and the TV-Program shows independent splatter short movies or a decolonial gymnastic program on two different channels.

From the dramaturgical point of view, the spatial arrangement of the hotel is a container in which several processes take place simultaneously and enter permanently into relation with each other. The artistic positions do not only coexist but also refer to each other and create a multidimensional narrative about hospitality, service, community, and possible post-pandemic co-working. The audience is a bit hesitant. Better to sit down in the event space and wait until something is happening? But when does “the show” actually start? Is it allowed to disturb, to just try and open every possible door? Where is everybody and not less important: where am I in this maze of corridors, doors, and secret staircases? Some of the artists / hotel guests sit in the lobby waiting for audience to approach – or should they sit and wait in their hotel rooms for the whole day until somebody knocks? Maybe it's better to ask one of the dramaturgs how this is meant to be. Meanwhile the press department of Schauspielhaus tries to figure out how to communicate this huge amount of ongoing or singular, of slot-based or durational shows, rehearsal processes and tryouts. Excitement and uncertainty are in the air. Both do have their potentials.

The confusion the project evoked started pretty early in the process. When Schauspielhaus changed its front banner into the slogan “from now on a hotel”, neighbors immediately filed a complaint for illegal commercial activity. As Schauspielhaus does not have a valid hotel concession, the building department of Vienna was informed and had a look at the situation. In the end we reached an agreement with the city of Vienna to put the “hotel rooms” under quotation marks on our homepage. From then on, overnight stays at ~~Schauspielhaus~~ *Hotel* were officially considered as events that last until 10 am in the morning. Even for the officials the project slipped into a grey zone between art intervention and hotel industry. Our attempt to stretch the boundaries of the theatrical dispositif irritated categories on all levels and turned the whole institution into an in-between space. A space, to put it with Adorno, that ‘does not let its domain be prescribed for it’ anymore (4).

The overlapping dispositifs of theater and hotel not only created a confusion but more a dissolution of the professional by an infiltration of the dilettante. The team of Schauspielhaus has a great experience in planning an *en suite* theatre program, but none of us knew how to run a hotel. Most of the artists involved were familiar with a theatre praxis mainly based on an open stage setting, but not so much with performing surrounded by five strangers in a small hotel room. The audience of Schauspielhaus Wien is rather used to be seated in a dark auditorium than to explore the whole theatre architecture on their own turns and invade spaces that are usually marked as private. This clash of dispositifs, but also the transformation of the space itself caused permanent encounters of a professional with a dilettante sphere on many levels of the theatrical production.

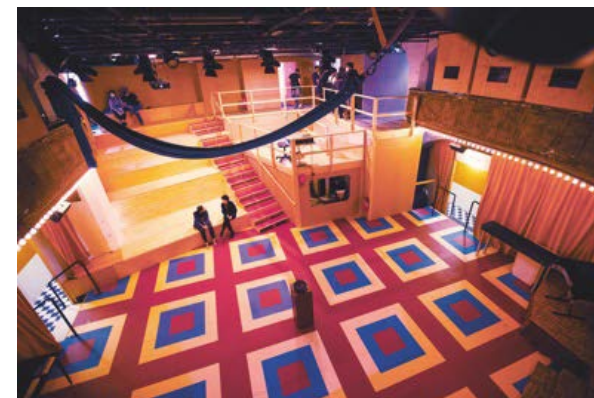
Since a couple of years, I am interested in a concept I describe as professional dilettantism. I consider it as a productive and open dramaturgical practice of self-reflection and trans-institutional entanglements. I'm aware that dilettantism is usually understood as amateurism, non-professionalism or even incompetence. But I use the term in its most positive and empowering connotation possible. I'm referring to a position that comes from the outside of a specific discourse. A position, therefore, that thinks, speaks, and acts without professional knowledge or education in the very specific field of this discourse, but with a passionate interest in its politics or structures. One that is not affected by the epistemic restrictions of a specific field but is able to open new perspectives even if they are professionally suspect or at least unconventional. Essayistic thinking is one of the starting points for this concept. I'm particularly interested in

an approach that acknowledges its limitations to the partial and which finds value in the individual experience. My concept of a professional dilettantism meets the essay in its radical non-radicalism. In – to use Adornos words – ‘refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character’ (9). With a professional dilettantism I embrace a thinking that does not claim to understand its subject in its entirety. But it takes its space (and time) to find out how things could work (or work differently). I call them “Dramaturgien des Seitenblicks”. Sometimes they find a new angle on a problem by looking at it from a different point of experience. Sometimes they don’t. Coincidences, multiple attempts, failure, and openness are always part of the process which therefore favors a highly experimental environment.

A professional dilettantism mainly operates outside an institutional setting but can deliver new and fruitful impulses to the institution. For this reason, it is most important for theatres like Schauspielhaus Wien to provide a nurturing ground for exchange and to open spaces where moments of professional dilettante entanglements can happen. ‘In the midst of institutional alienation’, moments of entanglement can be found, writes Anna Tsing in her book *A Mushroom at The End of The World*. As she continues, ‘these are sites in which to seek for allies. One might think of them as latent commons’ (255). As a conceptual setting the Hotel-project was an interesting attempt to create such a space. The clash of the two overlapping dispositifs theatre and hotel opened a crack into the institutional surface, shook certainties and dismantled accepted scopes of action. It created a fruitful moment of institutional alienation. This alienation offered the potential for a joint reflection on a possible theatre practice and research on the latent commons that are underlying creative theatre work.

And still, as professional dilettantism is thinking in someone else’s domains, it is an active and self-reflective position, which needs to be chosen intentionally to unfold its full potential. Most of the confusion the hotel project caused, occurred when audience and artists suddenly found themselves in a professional dilettante position, without expecting it. This is true at least for some of the artists who just wanted to develop and show their piece without adapting it to another context too much. It is maybe even more true for parts of the audience who just stumbled into the installation without much knowledge about the project or that just wanted to spend a nice evening at the theatre. It also effected those employees of Schauspielhaus Wien who not actively worked on the conceptual process but just had to deal with its consequences – up to the front-of-house stuff for example that suddenly became receptionists overnight, or even the cleaning

personnel. As part of a professional hotel service, they cleaned up the remains of a messy party with jackets all over the place, confetti on the floor, empty beer cans and coke on a mirror. As unintentional dilettantes in a mashed-up dispositif, they removed an installation by Antje Schupp, who reenacted a COVID 19-party in one of the hotel rooms. As a result, this lack of certainty how to act in this environment caused not only a potential for professional dilettante entanglements, but also frustration on different levels.



Schauspielhaus  
Hotel (2021-2022) ©  
Schauspielhaus Wien /  
Giovanna Bolliger

What we as a conceptual leading team of this project missed to establish more, was a common space where a reflection about these confusions, frustrations or even possibilities could happen. We hosted a weekly breakfast as a joint moment of exchange for all present hotel artists – which was very much appreciated. But even this remained a bit too much on a presentation of conceptual ideas than on a reflection of common experiences and needs. All too often artistic processes ended in a battle for resources, for the best rehearsal conditions and the brightest light. Which is comprehensible to a certain degree. Not every stage in an artistic career allows to engage with such a daring and demanding environment. Especially young artists need to be able to afford this uncertainty of trying – particularly with the constant option of failing. As much as we tried to reduce the pressure of premieres and the usual production constraints, other pressures appeared that we didn’t consider enough. The pressure of opening processes too early, for example. The pressure of presenting something unfinished to an audience that is not aware of the project’s status. The pressure of stepping out of your artistic comfort zone. Or the pressure of being in a professional dilettante situation of institutional alienation right in a

moment you just want to work professionally.

~~Schauspielhaus~~ Hotel created a perfect setting to unlearn learned habits. To step out of your own discourse and enter something unknown or slightly shifted. Even though this can be uncomfortable it opens a field for professional dilettante thinking and acting, it opens the chance to essayer. To try. To try and find something new with the professional knowledge from other domains and a dilettante desire to figure out. We experienced a variety of moments where we saw the huge possibilities this space offered. Moments and projects that I didn't speak about in this text – because sometimes a critical reflection tends to focus on the things that were not achieved more than on those that worked particularly well.

What stays with me, is the experience of an inspiring and bold attempt to shake theatrical boundaries just in a time when all kind of certainties are at stake. What just needs to be considered is the precariousness of such a comprehensive endeavor. And that moments of reflection and safe-enough-spaces must be created for all involved.

#### WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W. "The Essay as Form." In *Notes to literature*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Paul A. Kottman, 29–46. European perspectives. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Tsing, Anna: *A Mushroom at The End of The World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.

## SECOND ATTEMPT ON SCHAUSPIELHAUS HOTEL: DRAMATURGIES OF (POST-PANDEMIC) ASSEMBLY

In the exercise to transfer the essay form to theatre practice, the essay here can be understood – beyond written language and spoken text – as a dramaturgical form of thought and as a spatio-temporal structure. Thus, as a specific way of assembling content and people in a theatre dispositif. In a second attempt on ~~Schauspielhaus~~ Hotel, I will examine this five-month project as an essay by and with about 30 theatre employees and more than 50 participating artists.

In her book *In Memory of Memory*, Maria Stepanova describes the notebook as an 'icebox to store perishable memories, a place where proofs and confirmations gather, (...) the material signs of immaterial relationships' (17, my translation L.B.). During the time Schauspielhaus Wien was ~~Schauspielhaus~~ Hotel, I had a digital notebook on my work computer where I noted impressions, anecdotes and happenings, often written down hastily, which at this point seemed to me remarkable and indicative of what we had set out to do as a season project. A few days before the opening, on the 26th of September 2021, it – my icebox – begins like this:

*Tomas [Schweigen, our artistic director] says: In the meantime we are working day and night, many actors have been helping on the construction site on weekends until late at night, painting, laying carpets, etc. It's exhausting, but also quite beautiful.*

## THE THEATRE AS A PLACE OF HETEROGENEOUS ASSEMBLY

The conversion of the theatre was large-scale and the help of the entire, relatively small team across all departments was already required during the construction period. For the duration of the project, the workplace and tasks changed fundamentally for all employees. The theatre was now an expansive art installation with functions and elements of a hotel, but without real hotel concession. The hotel structure was borrowed in order to make art in it. Conceptually, it was particularly interesting for us in its function of offering hospitality and in the tension between the spheres of public and private.

The installation offered links for topics such as service, tourism, wellness and hospitality which the artists could take up but didn't have to.

An exemplary weekly schedule at *Schauspielhaus Hotel* looked like this: in room 110 artist Arthur Romanowski investigated Austrian political scandals in his research project *Dirty Deals and Dangerous Dreams*. From that room, he inspected chat protocols of politicians and accompanied the theatre cleaning staff at their work. At the same time the production team of *Bataillon* around Milena Michalek met Marxist author Luise Meier in a public expert visit during a rehearsal, choreographer Olivia Hyunsin Kim offered a dance karaoke workout from Istanbul via zoom, musician Rosa Anschütz checked in as fictional diva Kimberly Clark. The simultaneity of the projects generated a multitude of possible experiences which were unique for each guest or team member.



*Schauspielhaus Hotel*  
(2021-2022) © Lilly Busch

One can argue that this form of theatre programming reflects the essayistic structural principle of free collage, or the collecting work, *verzamelaararbeit*, as which Bart Verschaffel describes the essay in his text *Het essay als denkvorm* (10). The essay arranges a temporary polyphonic interaction of different subject matters and perspectives. The attitude of the writer towards the selected material, or in this case: of the organizers towards the invited artists and their projects, is at best not appropriating – although of course any selection also means to limit and to exclude something else. Instead of being strictly bound to a scheme, elastic and heterogeneous constellations are produced that always

remain in disorder to a certain extent. If one considers the essay in that sense as something that organizes and at the same time leaves open, that gives space to something without permanently fixing it, then the spatial conception of the hotel shared this characteristic: the theatre space here became the site of a heterogeneous assembly, both in terms of the subject matters brought together, as well as the assembly of different people in the coexistence of the rooms.

## THE ESSAY AND CRISIS

Adorno turned to the essay form in a specific epochal moment of crisis and radical change: In response to the question of how philosophy could still be possible after Auschwitz and what it could look like, he rejected conventional scientific methods and ultimately saw the essay as a form with no alternative. Essay theory often argues that the essay genre thrives and gains relevance especially in times of crisis. *Schauspielhaus Hotel* was indeed confronted with a severe change: as a theatre project, it had to respond to a massive health crisis. The pandemic had led to a crisis of assembly since 2020, to questioning and, at least temporarily, losing shared spaces as well as scenic art as we knew them until then.

Following a period of little (cultural) experience due to the pandemic and lockdowns, the aim of the project was to give a large number of artists space to experiment with different theatre forms in a shared infrastructure, to co-create community experiences and gain new insights into their practice. *Schauspielhaus Hotel* had been conceived as a work and research space. Next to the performance and presentation of scenic works, it also sought to critically reflect on its own production conditions and to consider what a post-pandemic theatre might look like. The project thus contained, in Roland Barthes' words, an 'implicit discourse about itself', it was based on a conscious suspension of theatre's usual structure and work routine (119, my translation L.B.). Familiar spaces became strange, even for the theatre employees, and were explored anew. The intention was to give up control to some extent and to make every corner of the theatre freely available. During the hotel installation, the theatre was open more and longer than usual: from afternoons to late evenings, including Sundays, mostly without pre-scheduled performance times. It was much less predictable than in other times what would happen in the rooms, or how the guests would behave.

Birgit Nübel describes essayism as a 'mode of (self-)critical reflection that



addresses its own preconditions, procedures and limits of representation or textualization' (1, my translation L.B.). *Schauspielhaus Hotel* was an experimental and adventurous project that tried to understand theatre as a place of self-reflexive thinking and learning. An attitude that can be described as essayistic, as a self-reflexive and critical stance is often said to be characteristic of the essay. The author, or in this case the organizers, aim to position themselves within and as part of the subject matter.

## WHO'S IN CONTROL?

Being one of the hosts of *Schauspielhaus Hotel* and critically reviewing my own work structure in the process was a huge, exciting and creative task. At the same time, the already heavy workload at the theatre became even heavier. Working as a dramaturg, the shares of artistic work and administration shifted in favour of administration, coordination and organization. Nikolaus Müller-Schöll argues that dramaturgy is usually understood in theory as

*synonymous for structure, organization, architecture, for control and supervision of theatre in all its forms, but also for the very opposite of these descriptions, for interruption, uncertainty, disorientation, destabilisation and opening up (213, my translation L.B.).*

He describes that dramaturgy, for example, according to the definition by Konstantina Georgelou, Efrosini Protopapa and Danae Theodoridou, also involves

*creating spaces of negotiation, conflict, dissent, loss of orientation, not-knowing, interruption, intervention and imagination, in order to make new social and political conceptions possible (215).*

Müller-Schöll sees these fundamentally different aspects of dramaturgy as two poles: the police and the political, whereby dramaturgy never settles down completely with one or the other. I would say that *Schauspielhaus Hotel* also had its share of both: everything was, from the point of view of the organizing team, in a way always out of and under control at the same time. On the one hand, the entire theatre was resolutely made available, the guests were allowed to feel at home,

to stay, even to sleep in the theatre hotel. As hosts, the team was dependent on the sense of responsibility of the artists and guests, we tried and had to allow for spontaneity and could never oversee or direct all the processes and dynamics. And yet the theatre team always had the upper hand over programming, over the distribution of time, space and resources – it supervised the project. Six weeks after the hotel I wrote the following:

*Although we want to offer an open space, we remain an institution that regulates, distributes and manages resources, instead of the artists negotiating this directly among themselves. My job as dramaturg sometimes feels like that of a facilitator: Coordinating, mediating, spontaneously stepping in for all kinds of things. Or like a permanent festival direction, not at turbo speed, but continuously planning and overlooking a lot of things.*

So can the essay be implemented on an institutional level with the radicalism that is sought or needed? Not without further ado. Even though it was in fact possible to work in a processual and not necessarily output-oriented way within the framework of the hotel, the internalized logics of a work field and the existing constraints of an institution are not simply dissolved by such a project. And finally, every project depends on an audience that it has to win over and that in turn brings its own habits and expectations along. On the 4th of November 2021 my *icebox* says:

*The assumption that an audience is waiting to be taken to the theatre and automatically brings a desire to discover everything there on its own is optimistic. Only people from your own bubble can be taken for granted as visitors. The rest is work, no one knows for sure who "the audience" actually is or how to bind them.*

In order to reach audiences, we soon began to gradually adjust the structure according to its theatre habits again: In the beginning, we only published rough time periods without an exact daily programme, but performance dates with time and duration and a direct link to ticket purchase were increasingly added to almost everything on the website.

Schauspielhaus Hotel  
(2021-2022) © Lilly  
Busch



## PANDEMIC INTERFERENCES

In addition, contrary to our hopes, the pandemic was unfortunately not yet over in 2021 and continued to have an impact on people's behavior in public spaces. During the first lockdown, in 2020, Bojana Kunst described pandemic forms of care and choreography as follows: „Solidarity is measured by the precise respect of the rules and our good feeling arises from behaving in the exact, right way, measured in meters of distance.“

Due to the parallel artistic events in many hotel rooms, the attention of people visiting *Schauspielhaus Hotel* was much less directed and regulated than in a conventional theatre performance. Guests had to orientate themselves and make their own decisions. However, resulting from the pandemic, the attempt to lower the barriers for visitors and to offer them free space met with a fear of places that were too open, or too confined. It became apparent that people had less courage to move around freely. At the same time, it was more difficult for the artists to get attention and accumulate concentration for their projects in this spatial setting than in a frontal stage situation. Furthermore, there were restrictive pandemic regulations: At the end of the year, there was another lockdown in Austria, followed by a curfew that prohibited events after 10 p.m. and thus we couldn't offer overnight stays in the hotel anymore until the end of the project in February 2022. “Is there any happy theatre right now (at the beginning of the third pandemic year?) When will the energy run out to deal with it creatively?”

I ask myself on 30.12.21. The number of visitors declined, while at the same time the attendance of those who came to the theatre was strictly regulated. “No one can slip through the door unseen or unnoticed,” I wrote down at the time.

Five months is a comparatively long duration for a theatre project that offered continuity and the opportunity to learn and adjust things in the process. But maybe it should have been planned for a duration of five years? Communication, learning processes and audience acceptance take time. Maybe the idea was too complex for the period of its implementation. Or the radicality of the implementation too small for the size of the idea. The circumstances were definitely particularly challenging – but when aren't they? In a follow-up talk for our theatre magazine, director, author and performer Arthur Romanowski stated:

*It is an experiment to arrange a place differently, but you are not necessarily changed by it yourself. You find yourself within logics that follow the principle of performance or premiere and that doesn't change from one day to the next. These are structural elements and mechanisms that also have a meaning because they make everyday life possible. An experiment is always an exception to this everyday life, in other words, a restructuring that needs time and space so that one understands: I don't have to stress myself out so much, because this is not a premiere or I am also allowed to fail.*

And yet, despite everything, I argue that in the case of *Schauspielhaus Hotel*, the essay has become visible to some extent as a model for contemporary theatre in a broader sense. The experience and insight gained from this attempt will hopefully continue to shape the future work of everyone involved. Because a main characteristic of the essay, and perhaps its best, is never-ending searching.

## WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland, 'Was ist Kritik?', in *Am Nullpunkt der Literatur. Literatur oder Geschichte. Kritik oder Wahrheit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006.
- Kunst, Bojana, "Letter to the performing artist" <https://www.schauspielhaus.ch/de/journal/18226/lockdown-theatre-2-beyond-the-time-of-the-right-care-a-letter-to-the-performance-artist>
- Müller-Schöll, Nikolaus, 'Polizeiliche und politische Dramaturgie', in Umatham, Sandra; Deck, Jan (eds.): *Postdramaturgien*. Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2020, 209-229.
- Nübel, Birgit. *Robert Musil – Essayismus als Selbstreflexion der Moderne*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006.
- Stepanova, Maria. *Nach dem Gedächtnis*, Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2020 (2018).
- Verschaffel, Bart, 'Het essay als denkvorm'. in: *Figuren: essays*. Leuven: Van Halewyck und Amsterdam: De Balie, 1995, 10-16.
- Follow-up artist talk in the theatre magazine of Schauspielhaus Wien, No. 2, season 2021/22: [https://issuu.com/schauspielhaus\\_wien/docs/magazin\\_02\\_202122\\_einzelseiten](https://issuu.com/schauspielhaus_wien/docs/magazin_02_202122_einzelseiten)

## FRAGMENTS OF CONFRONTATION: THE ESSAY FORM WITHIN MICRO-PROTESTS PERFORMED BY THE WORKING CLASS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THAILAND

*"A burial of a story can be necessary.  
A burial is part of the story. To tell the story of a burial is to unbury the story".  
(From Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!*, ch.8)*

From early 2020 to 2021, I often turned on the television to watch domestic news concerning the Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand. What was presented to me was far from hopeful: a hopeless father committed suicide following his daughter's death due to Covid-19; a young mother ended her life because of the economic stress she was facing; poor people were queuing for free food and donations from the rich, like beggars, as a result of the increasing poverty caused by the forceful lockdown restrictions by the government; homeless people were dispersed all over the city centre streets; a jobless man stole instant noodles from convenience stores to feed his elderly father and was criminalised. When Covid-19 vaccines were not offered comprehensively during the early stages of the pandemic, they were sold on the market as luxury merchandise by private hospitals. Registering for a free vaccine was an ongoing competition among ordinary Thai citizens. There was no 'new normal' as the state promised. There were only more challenges and more struggles for many people, especially the working class in the country. Yet, it was easy to ignore these complexities. Suppose I just turned off the television, abandoned the news, isolated myself in place and ordered takeaway food. In that case, I could protect myself from the ocean of messiness and despair outside. I could browse online channels and consume positive content. Rich Thai celebrities were showing their relaxed lockdown lifestyles, including yoga, cooking, dancing, or anything that made us feel like everything was ok and we would get through this together in the end. But when would the end come? I asked myself. Were we really in this together?

When I turned on the news again, new misery piled upon old; case after case; death after death. Vulnerabilities were presented repeatedly on screen, and the spectacle of loss became the new norm. The media did not hide these miseries. Instead, it fed them to people in a storm of disaster. I came to realise that those disasters highlighted how the government was failing to manage



the crisis. Nonetheless, the time passed, and we were told that everything was getting better and everything would be just fine. The storm of disasters was gradually forgotten.

More vivid stories were queuing up to replace the outdated drama on the news. The loss, the death, the despair, the anger, the confrontation wherein the people – the citizens – who had had to bear the painful cost of the government's mismanagement, were dispersing and floating. They were not deleted nor dissolved. They were fragments.

## BODY AS A STAGE

As exemplified by the quote from Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* at the beginning of this essay, this writing is not solely constituted by means of academic grounding or theoretical framing. In contrast, it aims to act as a field to unbury the buried; to shovel the stardust and give them a more visible status amid the cracked society of neoliberal Thailand. As Theodor W. Adorno suggests, 'the essay does not obey the rules of the game of organised science and theory... the order of things is identical with that idea' (158). In this writing, I use the astonishing flow-and-freedom character of the essay form to navigate and collect scattered pieces of micro protest by the working class during the pandemic in Thailand.

In the form of the essay, written words appear as lively as visuals. The 'scenic essay', a term coined by Hans-Thies Lehmann, is activated in theatrical performance. Actors become a body with agency speaking out their thoughts rather than performing text, and directors act as collaborative performers not just a show conductor. The scenic essay allows practitioners to 'think aloud' rather than being passive vessels (112-114). I use a profound shifting framework to explore dynamic subjects outside the art space of cultural performance. I posit the idea of cultural performance as it relates to everyday cultural practice, whether it is deliberately designed as performance or not. However, I do not merely see this from an objective viewpoint, assuming the events are a social drama with a beginning and end. I instead view the text as a tool that enables us to discover and draw connections between living people and their surrounding contexts, revealing and challenging the non-tangible hierarchical structure of society.

The scenic essay, in Lehmann's sense, is situated within the borders of an art space, and processed within a set of loosely pre-written narratives, prepared to be presented to audiences in a predesigned setting. I, however, am interested

in investigating the essay form in a performance which is, at its core, constituted of the socio-political conflicts and tensions that embody everyday living. The performance is neither conceived from organised aesthetics nor repetitively rehearsed to present it to a limited audience in a designated space, but instead, the narratives are organically delivered and portrayed directly through the body, voice and action. In other words, such scenic essays of cultural performance not only 'think aloud', but also 'act aloud'.

## OPENING UP THE MATTER AT HAND

As mentioned, several incidents featuring despair occurred amid the pandemic in Thai society during 2020-2021. In gathering together these scattered floating pieces, I find the essential role of micro protests. This does not mean that the other incidents and losses in the country are not vital, on the contrary, by highlighting confrontation I aim to archive the fact that people were not submissive even when at their weakest and most vulnerable. This selected writing manifests examples of Thai working class micro confrontations, which come from many cases which appeared on the news or spread virally on social media, but were then left unheard. I call these acts 'micro', because they were not officially organised or planned as flash mobs or protests. Instead, they were conducted by individuals or a small group who expressed their voices amid anger and fear. They reacted spontaneously to the government regulations that directly affected their lives. In bringing these cases into the discussion, I aim to restore and broadcast the collective memories contained in these incidents. Rachel Bowditch and Pegge Vissicaro call performing bodies, 'environments of memory for witnessing, transmitting, and understanding the true memory of a given community' (8).

The following cases of micro protests by Thai working class people are selected because they resonate with the character of the essay form in various ways. As Adorno suggests, a good essay should open up the matter at hand (154). Although these micro confrontations were conducted spontaneously by individual working class people, they highlight significant structural problems in the country, in a multi-layered way. For example, they reveal the government's failure to manage the pandemic, which made it difficult for small business owners and workers. They reflect the dismantled means-tested benefits program and show that many needy people were refused cash benefits. They show how the market-based rationality of neoliberal regulations has allowed capitalists to manipulate the prices of goods in the market.

In piecing these micro performances of confrontation together, I find a link to Aldous Huxley's impression of the essay form, that consists of three stages: reflexive autobiography; fact and surrounding context; and universal themes (5-19). Each performance can be seen as an autobiographical performance. The acts of confrontation were generated from the actors' experiences of anger and fear. We heard their pain and witnessed their suffering through their voices and bodies. Each act reveals socio-political conflict and issues on a larger scale. Reading these acts as autobiographical performance resonates with auto-ethnographic methods, which Robin Boylorn suggests, are 'powerful opportunities to story lived experiences and capture cultural phenomena' (16). Accordingly, each can be bridged under a universal theme of confronting, battling, protesting and challenging authority. By placing these cases together and reading them through the lens of the essay form, this writing (which is written in another language to that in which where the scenes played out) aims to reveal a bridge between the micro incidents and the greater global neoliberal society. The pandemic made visible the many inequalities and divided classes in many countries beyond Thailand where neoliberal governance plays a role. This paper suggests that it is a critical time to address these matters, as the collage of performances manifests the pains and battles of the people below.

## ACTION TO TEXT - TEXT AS ACTION

The essay form is enacted through various types of communication and narration. In exploring the relationship between essay form and cultural performance, this writing does not attempt to expand the borders of the definition, as the essay form, arguably, does not require a stable status. On the contrary, embracing the quality of the essay form as a method is crucial to offer dynamic thought and action directed towards the difficulties and complexities of the chaotic neoliberal era. While many essays are crafted from a flow of thought, before being made manifest in communication such as through writing, filming, recording, speaking, performing or curating, I view the essay form as a flexible and interactive process with currents and flows rather than having an objective framework. Each form simply does not work independently. In my view, the essay could work in tandem with any other form of intervening, transferring, bridging, binding, knitting, mingling or dancing, along with many other means of communication and interactions. By holding the quality of the essay form in this way, I not only find the micro confrontation performance of the Thai working class by themselves, but their bodies feature

as an 'act of transfer', in the sense suggested by Diana Taylor in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, wherein bodies contain knowledge which can be transmitted and transferred to other collective bodies. Not only through physical bodies, I propose, but also through bodies of text and unofficial archives, I call the process of archiving these bodies of confrontation, 'action to text'.

In the following sections, I draw on three specific incidents wherein the Thai working class confronted the Thai authorities, reacting to the government's management of the pandemic. The first is a food stall owner who delivered a monologue to confront a police officer who forced her to close her shop on the spot, when the government announced an immediate lockdown. In the second event, in the southern region, a group of local farmers poured tons of mangosteens, a local tropical fruit, onto a highway in reaction to the sinking price of the fruit due to capitalists' market manipulation and the government's deregulation. The final case is a daily-wage worker who swallowed rat poison in front of the Ministry of Finance building, because the state rejected her means-tested benefits.

Instead of explaining each case as prose or a factual report, as often appears in news narratives, I intentionally present them in the format of a script. The intention of doing so is not merely artistic or aesthetic. I offer a way to archive and retell these stories of small individuals solidly - demonstrating the sense of 'happening' rather than past events. The aim is not to invite the reader to consume spectacles of political drama, but instead to be a part of transferring the actions into cultural memories. I have accumulated information on each incident, which flooded the media at the time, including news reports, text, interviews and video clips, and knitted the scattered fragments into a brief but unique incident, in three separate scenes, underscoring the agency and action of those politicised actors who confronted the authorities in each micro performance.

However, it should be noted that it is impossible to separate out my agency from the following writing. The processes of selecting the details to be told, transcribing, choosing words in translation from Thai to English, emphasising certain actions, choreography, costuming, highlighting the spoken words, creating the titles of the scenes and choosing their order, are all deliberately embodied within my agency. I aim to portray how the Thai working class tried to confront and scream against the Thai authority in their everyday settings during the pandemic. Therefore, I consider the process to be placing 'text as action'. The writing is not isolated from the actual incidents. I believe that it features an action of amplifying and un-burying the small acts of individuals who were left unseen, unheard and unfelt.

**SETTING:**

*In front of a food stall in Ayutthaya, an agricultural and industrial city close to Bangkok. The food stall owner and chef, a middle-aged woman in her early 50s wearing a red cooking apron, is arguing with a young police officer. The police officer is in his official light brown uniform. We see shabby food vendors with a few old dining seats in the background, mostly empty. The owner is accused of opening the dine-in place beyond the suggested curfew time. The police officer explains to the food stall owner calmly and politely how things can actually work out for both sellers and buyers if everyone has a good plan. The food stall owner asks to explain herself.*

The Woman:

You can plan.

But when people finish their job. Does the factory plan for them?

How long would it take until they drive here? Do you have a plan for them?

What does the government support?

The government only keeps asking and asking.

But what can people ask for?

*The police intervene in the Woman's speech, but the woman raises her voice and continues*

Stop! Listen! Let me speak.

I let you speak for a long time.

You have to listen to me too.

You have a salary. You guys have food to eat.

But for the hungry people, what can they do?

How did you solve the problem for them?

You chased them away.

What do you do if people are hungry?

What if everyone is hungry?

We are with the people here.

Five minutes. Ten minutes. One hour. So what will it be?

(The woman shows the police how uncrowded the shop is.)

So how is it? Is the shop crowded?

Is there a risk of infection?

A bottle of sanitiser gel was never provided.

There is only compulsion!

There is only an announcement!

But what measures are there to help people?

Is there any sanitiser gel?

Does the government provide any lunchbox?

Nothing from the government but compulsion!

If you want to order people to do something, you need to plan to support them too!

For Ayutthaya, the authority now only asks for cooperation to follow the curfew, not an order. But the police act like we committed a crime, requesting cooperation without any support.

We have to pay the same rent.

We have to pay the same tax.

When the province ordered you, why did you act immediately?

But when the people asked for something, why didn't you tell your supervisor?

Why don't you tell your boss?

Why don't you tell the governor how the people are?

Because they are submissive here, the whole market, that's why it becomes like this.

But there are people like me who disagree.

(The woman raises her voice.)

Do you understand?

There are people like me who disagree, who refuses to submit the state power, who do not tolerate injustice!

Do you know?

This is a fight of the people.

Because this is the only way I can fight!

**SETTING:**

*In the middle of the road surrounded by woods and mountains, in front of the Subdistrict Administrative building in Nakornsri Thammarat, a town in the south of Thailand. From a hand-held vertical perspective, we see hundreds of mangosteens turning the road to red and velvet. A farmer in his off-white shirt and pants is wearing wellies, inviting the passing vehicles to crush the mangosteens. Yelling with a satirical smiling face, he kicks the fruit onto the road like trash. Another farmer, who holds the camera, starts his lines in his southern dialect:*

**VO:**

Today, mangosteen farmers poured fruit into the middle of the road in front of the Subdistrict Administrative Organisation, because middleman pressed the price, causing the price to fall, meaning it is not worth investing in anymore. Government agencies cannot solve the problem of falling mangosteen prices. I want the relevant departments to come down here and see. We farmers have hired people to harvest them for 10 baht per kilogram. We tried to sell them for 13 baht, but no one wanted to buy them. Because the merchants collectively pressed the price. Government agencies, come here to see.

Do not just sit in an air-conditioned room!  
 Don't waste your days!  
 Don't eat the people's taxes every day.  
 They are living with difficulties.  
 They are tired.  
 Before harvesting mangosteen, you know it takes more than ten years to grow.

**SETTING:**

*In front of the Ministry of Finance, on a humid rainy day in Bangkok. Anyakan Booprasert, a 59-year old woman who lost her daily-wage job amid the pandemic, and failed to receive financial aid of 5,000 THB from the government's programme called "No One Left Behind". The program was designed to aid low-income earners during the pandemic. She is in her black blouse and trousers with a rucksack on her back. Having 15 THB left in her pocket, she visits the Ministry of Finance in protest at the government's inefficient handling. Nobody there can tell her where she should go to appeal. They look at her cynically as if she was a buffoon. Anyakan loses her temper.*

**Anyakan:**

I am going to be homeless at the end of this month!  
 How could the government help me?

*Sitting outside the building, in a state of distress, Anyakan cries her eyes out at the Ministry's entrance gate.*

**Anyakan:**

*(Yelling)*

No one cares about me!  
 No one cares about me!

*Being ignored, Anyakan takes out a plastic bag from her rucksack containing a bottle of rat poison. She swallows a few pills of the poison and drinks some water. She falls to the ground before spewing. A noodle shop owner nearby rushes to check on her.*

**Anyakan:**

*(Weeping and mumbling)*

I will die here.  
Nobody cares about me.  
Let me die here.

*Anyakan passes out. A motorcycle-taxi rider and other witnesses rush to help her. The rider calls an ambulance. An ambulance come take her to hospital.*

### EPILOGUE:

*Anyakan recovered at the hospital. Assistant Permanent Secretary for Finance, and Head of the Office of the Minister of Finance, visited Anyakan and presented a hamper to encourage her. The secretary to the Finance Minister told the media that the money would be transferred to Anyakan's bank tomorrow. It is reported that the delay is caused by technical difficulties.*

## FRAGMENTS FROM BELOW

These events are as dramatic as they are traumatic. The food vendor confronted authority mainly with her voice. Her monologue was the only thing she could use to express her agency against the regime. The fruit farmers put on a spectacle to get the government's attention. While many criticised their actions as they wasted their products, it is important to understand how hopeless they were to destroy their only means of making a living. As a last resort, the woman who took the rat poison used her body and her life to confront an unseen oppressive structure.

As Diana Taylor points out in her book *Performance*, performance allows the possibility for individuals and collectives to become politicised actors of their own social drama. These spectacles of confrontation confirm the agency of the working class – showing how they are left behind in society, but not submissive in their struggles. Their limited resources, coupled with neoliberal governance, allows the market to make profit over people's lives and freedoms and gradually denies their movements. These voices and actions were heard and seen in the media for only a couple of days. The more we are treated as isolated individuals, the easier it is for the authorities to ignore the matters at the core of our lives. As shown in the last case, the government officers visited the woman who took rat poison at the hospital, and reconciled by offering her a 'gift basket', as if this were

the resolution of the play. The next day, she received her benefits transferred to her bank account. In such a scenario, we are told that the conflict was solved, but structural conflicts remain. All that was solved were an individuals' emotions, somewhat addressed, calmed down, and put on a bookshelf of forgotten events.

## UNAUTHORISED EMOTIONS

As articulated in Sara Ahmed's prominent work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, feelings are not objects but a process, in which the affects work at the boundary between the subjects and the surrounding context. Giving attention to emotions allows us to 'address the question of how subjects become invested in particular structures' (12). These micro protests by the Thai working class demonstrate emotions that are not allowed by the regime. The outbursts of anger and fear performed in these scenes contradict the way the government managed the nation's emotions. These emotions were messy, unorganised, had no start or end point, and were decentralised. Amidst the pandemic, fears were reproduced by the government, the way poor people's carelessness caused the spread of the pandemic. While the upper and middle classes had more resources to work from home and stay indoors during the lockdown, many daily-wage workers had to find ways to keep working, due to inadequate state support. Their presence in public caused fear, and they often became the government's target of blame for spreading the contagious disease. Nevertheless, the fears of these poor people about whether they would be able to survive and feed their children were concealed. Therefore, binding these three cases of confrontation in the essay form enable us to encounter unauthorised emotions. They are a flow of collective individuals confronting societal matters with their bodies.

Linking back to the discussion about the essay form, these actions were not organised to be visible like a flash mob or mass protest. These fights were far removed from the written word and happened away from art platforms. I propose that it is necessary to expand the borders of the essay and see it as an inclusive way of navigating societal matters. When many people, especially the working class and minorities, do not have access to adequate socio-economic resources, unlike artists, performers, film-makers, writers, scholars and thinkers, who somewhat have superior resources, we should bind our practices, not just to archive but also to amplify and transfer the voices of the people. These small battles are presented as fragments of personal struggles, collected as a reposit of the collective battle. Imogen Tyler gives an insightful explanation

of how being stigmatised under inequality can be relocated as a way to challenge society, saying 'people's experiences of being stigmatised are a critical source of 'sociological imagination'... and a vital resource in collective struggles against the capture of human lives in the exploitative, dehumanising machineries of capitalism '(18). This is not a way to glorify their actions as if they were heroes. Neither is this a remembrance of their loss. This is part of the battle; a challenge; a fight that we must fight together for a better and fairer society.

#### WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W. "The Essay as Form." *New German Critique*, no. 32, 1984.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Complaint!*. Duke University Press, 2021. eBook, chapter 8.
- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
- Bowditch, Rachel and Pegge Vissicaro, eds. *Performing Utopia*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2016.
- Boylorn, Robin. "Bitter sweet(water): Autoethnography, relational ethics, and the possible perpetuation of stereotypes." *In Doing Autoethnography*, edited by S. L. Pensoneau-Conway, T. E. Adams & D. M. Bolen, 7-18. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2017.
- Huxley, Aldous. *Collected Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1958.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theater*. Oxon: Routledge, 2015, pp. 112-114.
- Taylor, Diana. *Performance*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Tyler, Imogen. *The Machinery of Inequality*. Croydon: Zed Books, 2020.

## HYBRID DRAMATURGIES – THREE EXPERIENCES OF DANCING ESSAYS

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a process that was already underway: the widespread use of digital media and social networks supported many dance practitioners so that they could continue devoting themselves to their artistic practice and feel connected to a broader dancing community. This text poses two questions: (1) How are these tools affecting artistic and dramaturgical processes in the contemporary dance field? (2) How are dance practitioners using digital media to build new storytelling and narrative experiences? The answers will clarify how the entanglement between digital media and embodied arts is contributing to a new essayistic approach to contemporary performance, deeply affecting the mode of representation of dance.

I will present and compare, based on the post-phenomenological idea of 'affordances' by Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005), three online experiences: the 2020 and 2021 edition of the Berliner A.Part Festival, the DanceMe platform, and the #Share project by the Berliner theatre Acker Stadt Palast.

These online practices represent both open relational spaces and artists' journals. On the one hand, they document the creative and dramaturgical processes of the involved artists. On the other hand, these digital tools support the artists' self-reflection, challenging the principle of Kantian aesthetic empiricism, according to which what counts in the end is only the relationship between the audience and the final artistic product. Here, the artists are foregrounded, while the final work takes place in the background, if not disappearing completely.

## DRAMATURGY WITHOUT DRAMATURGS

Before delving deeper into the relationship between essay and dance dramaturgy, it might be useful to provide some insights into how the practice of dance dramaturgy is at work within choreography and contemporary dance. Attempting a definition of dance dramaturgy can be hazardous, for dance dramaturgy is rooted in both the embodied practice of dance practitioners and every single connection – both human and non-human – in which the dance practitioners are immersed. My aim here is to characterise dance's dramaturgical function and to determine which 'principles' (Efrosini Protopapa and Theodoridou, 2003) – rather than which activities – it is based on. Magda Romanska writes the following:

*The concept [of dramaturgy] is being refined as we speak, as verb, skill and function, to include many modes of making meaning. . . . The dramaturg is also the ultimate globalist: inter-cultural mediator, information and research manager, media content analyst, interdisciplinary negotiator, social media strategist. The dramaturgical function is one of a mobile and complex nature and it requires a similarly flexible tool in order to be able to be fully grasped and taken into account properly (14, italics added).*

As pointed out by Romanska, one main function of dance dramaturgy is helping the dance creative process in 'making meaning'. This can be achieved in many ways, such as the following:

- Focusing on the internal structure of the piece and its relation to the outer world: this is the so-called approach of 'micro' and 'macro dramaturgy' (Van Kerkhoven).
- Reflecting on the *positionality* of the creative process: Who are we creating for? What will the role of the audience(s) be? How does our relationship to the audiences look like?
- Editing the single components of a piece, similarly to a film editor, once we have enough material to create a 'whole'.
- Decentralising the creative process in a constant open dialogue between the choreographer, dramaturg (if any!), dancers and performers, light technicians, musicians, spaces, and technologies.
- Archiving the process: the archival function of dance dramaturgy allows for a constant back and forth, a review, and a genealogical approach to the creative process. Where is the process coming from, and where is it heading?

<sup>11</sup>For the idea of the 'ball of tinfoil' as dramaturgical imaginary, I am thankful to my supervisor, Ben Spatz.

<sup>12</sup>Why I refer explicitly to a 'human' being will become clear later on in the paper.

In my own vision and practice of dance dramaturgy, I developed the idea of dance dramaturgy as a ball of tinfoil!<sup>11</sup> This idea highlights the sense of a less clearly organised field in which many things are stuck at the same time, without precise hierarchical organisation; it can be seen as both a methodological approach and the epistemological and political grounding of a dramaturgical practice devoted to inclusiveness and open-ended processes. The ball of tinfoil takes in all the stimuli presented by the dramaturgical environment and does not perform any synthesis; instead, it tries to hold everything together. Everything remains stuck in a specific space of practice; no manipulation is at work – there is only a slow decanting and the reorganisation of matter.

One major question in contemporary dance dramaturgy relates to the presence of an appointed *dramaturg*, meaning a human being<sup>12</sup> appointed by the production who is devoted to all the functions listed above and more.

After the 2003 publication of Myriam Van Imschoot's "Anxious Dramaturgy" (2003), many following dance dramaturgy studies could not escape the question of whether a dramaturg is necessary for dance. As Van Imschoot almost apodictically stated at the end of her article, 'You don't need a dramaturg to achieve the dramaturgical' (65). This notion was echoed years later by Guy Cools: 'You don't need a dramaturg but any artist, especially in the performing arts, needs a dramaturgical practice or a dramaturgical reflection' (113).

Katherine Profeta also wrote on this topic: 'I recognize "the dramaturgical" as a *shared and dispersed function* . . . especially in the early stages, when all company members are bringing in research, posing and proposing questions, offering structural principles and generative games to be tried out and discarded in turn' (12, italics added).

One interesting development of this 'death-of-the-dramaturg' drift within contemporary dance dramaturgy is Peter Stamer's 'performative dramaturgy' approach. According to Stamer, dramaturgy is an artistic practice that happens together with the choreographic event; therefore, this approach is very distinct from analytical and scientific approaches to dance dramaturgy, which tend to perceive dance and choreography as external objects to be analysed (often within the so-called 'third eye' or 'external eye' setting). 'Performative dramaturgy is both experimental and experiential. It's an art form, not a science' (n. pag). Dramaturgy happens in the immanence of dance practice and does not 'administrate sense that is to be applied from outside the artistic process'; it is 'creative by "a physical doing of form from within"' (ibid, n. pag.). Stamer's vision is also critical regarding the necessary presence of an appointed dramaturg,



the work of dramaturgy being more of a sharing process among bodies than the work of a 'single person from outside "who knows"' (ibid, n. pag).

Patrice Pavis, thinking about the possible future developments of dance dramaturgy, advocates for openness, practice-based approaches, and experimentality. 'The next step... would consist in inventing various dramaturgical exercises which might extract and produce meaning "from inside and outside"' (14).

The following sections highlight how the 'ball of tinfoil' imagery, the 'performative dramaturgy' approach and on-line creative tools are linked to an essayistic attitude towards dance performance and how three projects displaying a digitally mediated and online-shared dramaturgical endeavour can be seen as both essays on dance and dancing essays.

### THREE ESSAYISTIC DANCE EXPERIENCES

In recent years, many dance practitioners have started using digital and online tools to create, co-create, share, and archive their dance practices. As mentioned in the introduction, this process was catalysed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the abrupt demand of social and physical distancing. Online, digitally mediated environments for the practice of dance can be roughly divided into three big areas on a spectrum from (1) mainstream platforms (e.g., major and well-known social networks) to (2) project-based creative formats to (3) niche digital environments and tools (e.g., video annotation platforms).<sup>13</sup>

In this essay, I will focus on project-based creative formats aimed at sharing dance practices and processes. Within the three projects I am going to present, dance practitioners and artists render their choreographic processes through video, texts, speeches, and images, posting steps of their research online, and creating a narrative around their practices. Harmony Bench calls this area of artistic experimentation 'social dance-media', as a Web 2.0 development of dance-media, or dance onscreen, arguing that 'the integration of video into social media platforms has enabled dancers and choreographers to create an internet presence for dance', reasserting 'a social priority for dance, which is to say, they reconfigure dance as a site of social exchange and engagement by providing the

<sup>13</sup> For examples of video annotation platforms, see Motion Notes (<https://motion-notes.di.fct.unl.pt/index#>), Research Video (<https://researchvideo.zhdk.ch>), and PM2GO (Ex-Piecemaker), which was created by Motion Bank and is currently under revision (<http://motionbank.org/en/event/pm2go-easy-use-video-annotation-tool.html>).

<sup>14</sup> Harmony Bench, 'Screendance 2.0: Social Dance-Media', *Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 7, no. 2 (2010): 183, 184.

vehicles for sharing and circulating dance'. A vital characteristic of these projects is the following: 'dance should be shared, copied, embodied, manipulated and recirculated rather than preserved for the professional and elite dancer'.<sup>14</sup>

Here, we recognise an early sign of the essayistic character of such dance projects in the challenge to the common opinion regarding the means of dance, the material conditions of dance, and the places where dance practice takes place. What is at stake here is the upheaval of the idea that dance is taking place within rehearsal spaces, within the four walls of a studio. Online sharing processes, at different levels, represent quite the opposite and attempt to disrupt the studio's black box; the idea underpinning these projects is that dance research and dance creation are taking place first and foremost in the dialogical space of the relation between dance practitioners, audiences, communities, and the worlds they live in.

### DANCEME

DanceMe is an internet platform, both desktop and mobile<sup>15</sup>, that was initiated in 2011 and has been serving for eleven years now as a digital tool for choreographic creation. This project represents what the sociologist Erving Goffman refers to as a 'frame'<sup>16</sup> – that is, an interactive context, an area of intersubjective expression which is in some way shared by the participants. The frame is not so much an addition to reality, as a *device* that supports reality. The online platform is therefore a creative device that enables the participants to (1) create an external record of their thoughts; (2) pass from the abstract conceptualisation of an idea to its concrete representation; (3) make thoughts and intentions accessible for personal reflection; and (4) provide a medium through which other individuals can interact, negotiate concepts, and develop new ideas.

The platform has several 'virtual rehearsal rooms'<sup>17</sup> where dance practitioners can show short videos related to a specific creative process. Each artist can open multiple rehearsal rooms, with each room pertaining to a specific work, performance, or research topic. Artists who use DanceMe are free to post whatever might be useful to

<sup>15</sup> Desktop [www.danceme.eu](http://www.danceme.eu) and mobile on itunes.

<sup>16</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1974).

<sup>17</sup> DanceMe, 'DanceMe UP', <https://www.danceme.eu/dancemeup/> (accessed September 5, 2022).



them, without any specific curatorial restraint or direction. Typical posts include rehearsal videos, dramaturgical notes, behind-the-scenes videos, interviews, and short insights regarding creative processes. Users can relate to the research material through either a comment function or posting their own videos into the artists' studios. With this regard, the "rehearsal studio" is being conceived as an open dramaturgical space, where artists and audiences can meet and share practices.

## A.PART FESTIVAL, 2020 AND 2021

A.Part Festival is a Berliner contemporary dance festival organised by ada Studio Berlin and devoted to alumni and students from Berlin's dance education programmes. In spring 2020, the festival had to face the first lockdown in Germany, and the two curators, Diethild Meier and Julek Kreutzer, decided to move the festival online. The curatorial team decided that, instead of showing performances, they would give artists the time and space to share their creative processes. The festival website states the following:

*On this blog, the invited artists post content about their pieces in process -- and thus give an indication of how their creative work is influenced, changed, accelerated or decelerated by the current global crisis caused by the Corona pandemic, but not interrupted. This site marks a space in which artistic work is made transparent; in which it is less about the finished product or a final event than about the inner dialogue with a developing idea; in which new formats for rendering visible and for sharing are given a chance. This is also where a digital memory is created, a contemporary document of an exceptional social situation and its impact on an art form (and on the people who practice it). What is performing art without the physical presence of performers and audience?<sup>18</sup>*

The festival created a WordPress blog, and each artist had their own digital framework. This experience was repeated in 2021 with a more refined concept: the selected artists were paired up in 'tandems', putting the accent on the dialogical space between them. In 2022, the festival returned to its usual offline dimension

at the same time maintaining the memory of the two previous years: the curatorial team decided to invite a selection of the 2020 and 2021 artists to perform – finally – live.

## #SHARE

The Berliner venue Acker Stadt Palast developed this format on YouTube during the first lockdown in Germany. As stated on the project's website: 'In our experimental format #share, artists\* share online their working process at Acker Stadt Palast while engaging with their audience before the actual live performance. This format was created during the last lockdown, when all venues were closed, planned productions could not take place live and the contact between artists\* and audience had to be reorganized.'<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Acker Stadt Palast, '#Share', <https://ackerstadtpalast.de/en/share-1> (accessed September 5, 2022).

Being based on the video format, #Share provided the artists with a rehearsal room and with a technical team of video makers. The videos are professionally shot and edited and show fragments of studio rehearsal interspersed with short explanations in which the artist, in front of the camera, talks about their work. At the end of the video, the artist typically throws a question to the audience members, who can type their answers in the comment section. Like DanceMe, this project is still ongoing.

I think it is worth mentioning that in all three projects, the artists are professionally recognised for their work and are being paid for their online contributions in accordance with local, officially recognised labour agreements (LAFT in Germany and the Trade Union for Theatre Workers in Italy). Funding is coming from third parties or public funders, such as the Italian Ministry for Culture and the European Union (for DanceMe) and the Senate of Berlin (for A.Part Festival and #Share).

In the following table, I compare the main features and affordances of the three platforms. There are obviously some common features among the three, such as the emphasis on the video as the main medium and the openness to a hypothetical audience and online communities. However, the technical differences between the three online platforms contribute to the creation of very different dramaturgical endeavours among the involved dance practitioners. In the conclusions that follow, I will delve into these aspects more specifically and try to underline the essayistic character of these three experiments: essays on dance or dancing essays?

| AFFORDANCES  | A.Part Festival 2020 - 2021       | DanceMe  | #Share                                  |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Webspace   | Opensource – WordPress – blog     | Proprietary app + web platform                                     | Proprietary YouTube – Google            |
| How wide-spread is the platform?                       | Niche                             | Niche  | Mainstream                              |
| Broadcast model  | Tandem one-to-one                 | Studio one-to-many and many-to-many                                | Channel one-to-many                     |
| Access   | Open                              | Open   | Open                                    |
| Subscription (and level of 'protection' of the artist) | Necessary for commenting (medium) | Necessary for any interaction: commenting and liking videos (high) | Not necessary but possible (low-medium) |
| Interaction  | Through commenting                | Through liking, commenting, and posting videos and other content   | Through commenting and sharing          |
| Media  | Text, video, audio, photo         | Video, audio, text as description                                  | Video, text as description              |
| Quality of the videos                                  | Self-made                         | Self-made  | Professionally made                     |
| Video dramaturgy                                       | Free – left to the artist         | Free – left to the artist  | Set by the curatorial team              |
| Setting of the videos                                  | Free – left to the artist         | Free – left to the artist  | Studio/theatre/ rehearsal space         |
| Shareable content                                      | No                                | No   | Yes                                     |
| Comments   | Yes                               | Yes  | Yes                                     |

## CONCLUSIONS – ESSAYING THE METAVERSE?

Well engraved and hidden into the folds of the internet, the three projects presented are, to varying extents, forms of resistance. They resist modern-day social networks' hypervelocity and bulimia, which engulf and digest everything in the space of a finger swipe on the screen of a smartphone. DanceMe, #Share, and A.Part ask the visitor to take a leap into unknown online environments while maintaining a meditative approach to performance. This approach opposes the hyperproductivity that many contemporary dance artists are exposed to and forced into by a system that tends towards a commodification of the performance while providing very insecure labour conditions<sup>20</sup> (Katharina Pewny calls it 'The Theater of the Precarious'). DanceMe, #Share, and A.Part decide to perform the process without any promise of final results. As mentioned above, we assist at a specific tendency in contemporary dance dramaturgy to challenge the form of the live performance. Within the three described projects, this can be reached by postponing indefinitely the very moment of the live presentation and indulging more and more in the path that leads to the final work. In some cases, such as DanceMe and the A.Part Festival, the final work is not even requested or presented. In this state of uncertainty, the first essayistic traits emerge.

As acknowledged by Jasper Delbecke, the essay form 'has evolved from a literary genre to a series of *practices* that includes photography, film and currently essayistic installations and digital platform' (5, italics added). The above-described digital practices and experiences can be seen as essayistic practices, in their fragmentariness, in their foregrounding the subjective 'I' of the artists, and in their disruption and criticism of a petrified, neoliberal vision of the performing arts. Furthermore, Delbecke asks whether '[i]n times of "copy-paste-ideology", where each individual becomes an editor of

their own life story and can share their personal opinions via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram, the essay [can] with its fragmentary, self-reflexive and subjective features still play a critical role' (9). In exploding their creative processes, the dance practitioners on DanceMe, A.Part Festival, and #Share make a specific statement on what dance performance can be and can become, withdrawing it from a canonical 'stage-stalls' dialectic – which can also become a dialectic of power – and setting the performance in a fabulative dialogue with possible audiences. The curatorial team of A.Part Festival states the following:

<sup>20</sup>There has been an overwhelming élan of the neoliberal political and economic forces that – supported by the superfast development of technology – have spread the modules of unrestrained production and consumption all over the globe. . . . It seems that one of our first tasks is to examine how the economic foundation determines our daily work' (Van Kerkhoven, 'Van de kleine en de grote dramaturgie').

As many aspects of our work have become sheer impossibilities -- closeness, sweat, breath, physicality, touch, intimacy, contact -- we are setting on the conviction that 'together is always better than alone', on solidarity, team spirit, and curiosity. In times of increased uncertainty, we set out on a journey with no expectation of a fixed outcome, convinced that artistic practice has a value in itself. What more can we ask for than encounters and mutual inspiration? Come and have a look! Wander around, get lost and get inspired.<sup>21</sup>

How and to what extent these open and hybrid essayistic dramaturgies are pushing the boundaries of the discourse on contemporary choreography is still an open question that interweaves with recent posthuman approaches to performance.<sup>22</sup> Still, it is hard to imagine contemporary dramaturgies and choreographic practices that are not "enhanced" through digital tools. These are expanding, unfolding and fragmenting - sometimes indefinitely like a fractal - the artistic trajectories of dance practitioners. Their final destination is unknown.

## MAYBE THE "METAVERSE"?

However, as the described practices showed, final outcomes are dissolving in a perpetual state of becoming, or better, as Donna Haraway would say, of 'becoming-with'.<sup>23</sup>

### WORKS CITED

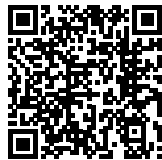
- Bench, Harmony. 'Screendance 2.0: Social Dance-Media', *Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 7, no. 2 (2010).
- Cools, Guy. 'Correspondance and Ekphrasis', in *The Practice of Dramaturgy: Working on Actions in Performance*, ed. Konstantina Georgelou, Efrosini Protopapa, and Danae Theodoridou, Antennae Series, no. 23 (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017).
- Cools, Guy. 'Dance Dramaturgy as a Creative and Somatic Practice', in *Re:search\_dance dramaturgy*, ed. Carlotta Scioldo (Torino: Prin Editore, 2017).
- Cools, Guy. 'Who Needs a Dramaturg!', *Aparte/Arts Vivants, Publication of the Ecole Superieure de Theatre - UQAM, Montreal* (2014).

<sup>21</sup> A.Part Festival, 'A.Part 2021 - Keeping On Dancing Through Times of Physical Distancing', <https://apart-festival.blog/twentyone/>.

<sup>22</sup> "In different ways, posthumanist co-creative practices with thingly matter involve the development of conditions for allowing 'things' to happen.", in Christel Stalpaert, Kristof van Baarle, and Laura Karreman. "Performance and Posthumanism: Co-Creation, Response-Ability and Epistemologies." In *Performance and Posthumanism*, edited by Christel Stalpaert, Kristof van Baarle, and Laura Karreman, 24. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74745-9\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74745-9_1).

<sup>23</sup> [i]f we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism then we know that becoming is always becoming with, in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake.' in Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 244

- Cvejić, Bojana. 'The Ignorant Dramaturg', *SARMA* (1999), <http://sarma.be/docs/2864> (accessed 27 August 2022).
- Delbecke, Jasper. 'Tracing the Essay in Contemporary Performing Arts', *Performance Research* 23, no. 2 (February 17, 2018): 5. doi:10.1080/13528165.2018.1464720
- Georgelou, Konstantina, Efrosini Protopapa, and Danae Theodoridou. 'The Catalytic Function of Dramaturgy: Working on Actions in Choreographic Processes', in *Contemporary Choreography* (Oxon: Routledge, 2017).
- Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1974).
- Hansen, Pii, and Darcey Callison, eds. *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
- Lepecki, André. 'We are not ready for the Dramaturge', in *Rethinking Dramaturgy, Errancy and Transformation*, ed. Bellisco, M., Cifuentes M.J. and Ecija A. (Madrid: Centro Parraga, Centro de Documentación y Estudios Avanzados de Arte Contemporáneo, 2011).
- Pavis, Patrice. 'Dramaturgy and Postdramaturgy', in *Dramaturgies in the New Millennium: Relationality, Performativity and Potentiality*, Forum Modernes Theater 44, ed. Katharina Pevny (Tübingen: Narr, 2014), 14-17.
- Profeta, Katherine. *Dramaturgy in Motion: At Work on Dance and Movement Performance*, Studies in Dance History (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015).
- Romanska, Magda. *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, 1st ed. (Taylor and Francis, 2015), <https://www.perlego.com/book/1623995/the-routledge-companion-to-dramaturgy-pdf>.
- Stalpaert, Christel, Kristof van Baarle, and Laura Karreman. "Performance and Posthumanism: Co-Creation, Response-Ability and Epistemologies." In *Performance and Posthumanism*, edited by Christel Stalpaert, Kristof van Baarle, and Laura Karreman, 1-47. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74745-9\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74745-9_1).
- Stamer, Peter. 'Ten Altered Notes on Dramaturgy (2011)', <https://peterstamer.com/ten-altered-notes-on-dramaturgy/>.
- Stuart, Meg, and Damaged Goods. *Are We Here Yet?*, 2nd ed., ed. Jeroen Peeters (Brussels: Damaged Goods, 2014).
- Trencsényi, Katalin, and Bernadette Cochrane, eds. *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, Methuen Drama (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- Turner, Cathy, and Synne K. Behrnt. *Dramaturgy and Performance*, Theatre and Performance Practices (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
- Van Imschoot, Myriam. 'Anxious Dramaturgy', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2003): 57-68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407700308571425>.
- Van Kerkhoven, Marianne. 'Van de kleine en de grote dramaturgie', *SARMA* (1999), <http://sarma.be/docs/3189>.
- Verbeek, Peter-Paul. *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*, trans. Robert P. Crease, 2nd printing (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

SOMETHING, SOMEWHERE, UNDER.  
ESSAYISTIC UNDERCURRENTS OF  
CHOREOGRAPHIC MAKINGTHE LECTURE AS AN ESSAYISTIC FORM.  
REFLECTION ON THE ART OF THE LECTURE

With this essay, we seek to revisit an event series we curated together with Nina Gojić and Zrinka Užbinec in 2021 in Cologne, Germany. The event series featured eight knowledge-based performance works from ex-Yugoslavian and German-speaking countries.

As curators, we endeavored to review the format of the lecture-performance that was particularly popular in the early 2000s. Artists such as Ivana Müller, Sybille Peters, Walid Raad and Xavier le Roy subverted the academic format of the lecture and blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction in their work. By showcasing eight contemporary knowledge-based performance works, we wanted to bring into discussion whether recent lecture-performances are still dealing with similar critical strategies towards academia, as well whether or not the lecture-performance is still a productive category at all to describe and understand contemporary knowledge-based performance works. To question the format of the lecture-performance, we called our series *Vortragkunst*, which can be translated as *The art of the lecture* or, in Serbo-Croatian, *Um(j)etnost predavanja*.

*Vortragkunst* took place in October and November 2021 in three art spaces in Cologne and gathered essayistic performances and open forms of collective knowledge exchange. The series culminated in a hybrid symposium that gathered showcasing artists, speakers Ana Vujanović and Bini Adamczac, and six “note takers.” The note takers were a group of art students who documented the series in written form and presented their notes as artistic responses at the Symposium.

In this text we will share thoughts based on extracted bits and parts of the discussion that took place at the Symposium. Figuratively speaking, we will sit down at the table once again and try to reflect upon our curatorial work: In which way and under which conditions did the invited works produce, perform and share knowledge?

## PREPARATION

We first want to give insight into the process of developing the series and our reflections on the lecture-performance tradition. In a preparatory seminar at the

Institute for Theatre Studies in Bochum, we raised the simple question, “What was the lecture-performance again?” For us, the most coherent definition was given by the Croatian dramaturg and researcher Jasna Žmak and the Amsterdam-based performing arts theorist, dramaturg, and researcher Konstantina Georgelou (2015). They understand the lecture-performance of the early 2000s as a subversion of the academic lecture – an intervention that unsettles a classical means of transmitting knowledge. Through their theatrical means, these performances were clearly marked as a lecture. In the seminar we looked at Xavier le Roy’s legendary lecture-performance *Product of Circumstances* (1999). Le Roy stood at a lectern, referring to images of cancer cells on a projected screen. He relates the expression of cancer cells to the expression of his body, and the completion of his PhD in biology to his experiences as an emerging dancer. Le Roy throws scientific narratives in conflict with autobiographical ones - a method that has become quite common in the “genre,” as Aldo Milohnić argue (33). The lecture-performance thus establishes the scene of the lecture while subverting its normative dispositive and its telos, namely, the (mere) transmission of knowledge. *We could* elaborate further upon the question of exactly *what* is understood as the performing and the lecturing parts of the ‘hybrid discursive situations’ of the lecture-performance (40). However, as Žmak and Georgelou suggest, ‘let’s not do it like that. Let’s rather discuss performance lectures as they are, as we see and understand them today’ (215).



*Vortragskunst* (2021) by  
Helen Brecht, Jascha  
Sommer, Nina Gojić and  
Zrinka Užbinec © Helen  
Brecht & Jascha Sommer

What shaped *our* understanding of the lecture-performance? How do we relate to the format? Our perspective on lecture-performance is inevitably informed by institutionalized knowledge. Walid Raad or Hito Steyerl were the heroes of our student days in Gießen (Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft) and Bochum (Szenische Forschung) from 2010 to 2015. We watched the videos of the

lecture-performances of the early 2000s again and again and tried to extract a strategy for our first performance works. In our curatorial project, we decided to liberate ourselves from this institutionalized, somewhat historic perspective.

So, what is the lecture-performance of today? Or what could the lecture-performance of this decade be? Do we, perhaps, propose the wrong question? During our research phase we mainly spoke to curators, artists and academics from the ex-Yugoslavian and German-speaking countries. The fact that we approached colleges from the ex-Yu scene is not accidental. Theorists such as Ana Vujanović, Aldo Milohnić, and performance collectives such as Walking Theory from Belgrade or BadCompany from Zagreb have decisively influenced the development of discursive art formats and performative theory. However, during our research we found out that many curators, artists and academics who dealt with lecture-performances around 2000-2010 regarded it in retrospect as a time-contingent phenomenon and lost their interest.

In our scouting process (to which we invited the Croatian dramaturgs and artists Nina Gojić and Zrinka Užbinec), it became clear to us that very few of the works that piqued our interest perfectly fit the aforementioned definition of “lecture-performance,” even if they were labeled as such. Digging into artistic practices of knowledge production, we were confronted with diverse and expanding formats: formats that were no longer formally marked as lectures and that no longer critically reflected the lecture as an academically established form that represents scientific truth-telling. As such, we ask ourselves: has the lecture-performance lost its critical potential in its proliferation? Or do contemporary lecture-performance artists simply employ different strategies? With these inquiries in mind, we decided to emphasize the distance between historical conceptions of the lecture-performance and current approaches. We called the series: *Vortragskunst, The Art of the lecture, Um(j)etnost predavanja*. The German word “Vortragen” (Lecturing) is a literal translation that can also be understood as “carried to the front” (“nach vorne tragen”). Here, some kind of knowledge is carried to the front, is made visible, is embodied, and is shared with others.

The works we selected to be part of *Vortragskunst* were:

- Session 1, 7.10.2021, Temporary Gallery
- Jacob Bussmann: *Sophisticated Songs*
- Tanja Šljivar & Tamara Antonijević: *The Hag Theory & How*

to spin an Endometrium  
Jessika Khazrik: *Pharmakopoeia*

Session 2, 28.10.2021, Glasmoog  
Adrijana Gvozdenović: *7 Anxieties and the world*  
Scripted Reality (Ruth Schmidt, Tilman Aumüller und  
Arne Salasse): *Die Stadt mit der Zunge betreten*

Session 3, 25.-26.11.2021, Kunsthafen Rhenania  
Dunja Crnjanski & Frosina Dimovska: *Taking Time*  
Kiran Kumār: *Epistolary Ancestries*  
Najbolja: *The Best*

## REFLECTION

### 1. The lecture-performance as a tiny shell

At the concluding symposium, Catalina Bucos, one of our note takers, formulated an initial idea as to how we might understand the lecture-performance today. As an artistic response she wrote a letter to Dunja Crnjanski, Frosina Dimovska and Kiran Kumār:

*Dear Frosina, dear Dunja, dear Kiran, today you have compressed all your work in a tiny shell, that we called the lecture-performance. I took note of your performances. I'm supposed to fill in 15 minutes with my words. I will try to use my body as a conductor for your words and thoughts. You put your years of practice into 45 min of performance, I'm putting my night in 15 min.*

With Catalina we can understand the lecture-performance as a compression of a body of work into “a tiny shell.” She suggests referring to the “compressed” body of work as *practice*. The *practices* of our invited works range from card-reading (Adrijana Gvozdenović) to ancestral letter-writing (Kiran Kumār), to taking walks in digital space (Scripted Reality). Common to all is the practice of linkage: the linkage of diverse mindsets and fields of knowledge. They are

practices of creation or co-creation of knowledge. At the symposium, co-curator Nina Gojić specified:

*...what they (the performances) do have in common is their orientation towards practice rather than into finished works that would fit into the logic of projected temporality. All the works that we invited had to be somehow transformed for this occasion. And they do so whenever they participate in contexts such as this one. So even calling them “works” becomes dubious at this point and we go back to the issue of naming once again. I would propose to call them practices for now. Because as practices they do something about the issue of continuity of knowledge co-creation in their arts.*

Oftentimes, the knowledge created through such practices is only available to the performer-practitioner. The moment of public presentation, therefore, demands a change in format. The staged performance does not function as a final form. Rather, it functions as a “tiny shell” that brings shared knowledge into a temporary constellation, always varying from context to context.

As curators, we were unexpectedly confronted with the task of preparing welcoming spaces that would allow people to share knowledge and come together in a non-hierarchical way. What these works demanded was not so much a stage but a space for multiple encounters and connections. For Jacob Bussmanns “*Sophisticated songs*” - Jacob sang texts of the sophists - we built an agora of cushions for visitors to sit on; for Dunja Crnjanski & Frosina Dimovska’s *Taking Time* we arranged seating groups, teacups, and candles to create an atmosphere in which we could reflect together on the precarious temporality of workers in the field of art and culture. And for Adrijana Gvozdenovic’s *7 Anxieties and the world* we designed a setting for tarot-esque card reading sessions, in which participants shared their anxieties as self-employed creative workers, and with the help of the cards developed strategies of resilience.

The emphasis on precarity, in this context, is not coincidental. The question of *how* to deal with precariousness, which shapes the contemporary production of knowledge by artists and scientists alike, is a central concern of many of our selected works. Our co-curator Nina Gojić raised the question:



They (the performances) also invite us to ask what happens to knowledge-co-creation in the arts if it is a context that constantly requires precarious work. Constantly being oriented towards a finish. Where does that knowledge go after the project is finished and becomes public? And what does the public do with that knowledge and what does it do for the continuation of an artistic practice?

## 2. Hiding, Migrating, Spreading of Knowledge

Finally, we would like to tackle the question as to how the precarity of working conditions in the fields of art and science shape the form(s) by which knowledge is presented. We might pose a temporary answer to that question by analyzing the body of invited works. As material for our analysis, we will use notes that visitors and our “professional note takers” took in each of *Vortragkunst*'s three sessions. Our note takers were tasked with transforming their collected notes into an “artistic response” and presenting it at the symposium.

The idea of establishing a practice of notetaking follows our co-curators' call for a continuity and transformation of knowledge. The notes can be understood as traces of the presentations and on the other hand as particles that contain the afterlife of the shared knowledge, stored for a possible future. This compendium of notes appears to us now as a “tool” to initiate a discourse *with* and not *about* the works. In our analysis we will not refer to the presentations directly (so no pictures, no detailed description) but to these notes as processed by the note takers. We understand that this approach might be confusing for those who were not present at *Vortragkunst*, but nevertheless invite you to take the drawings and artistic responses seriously as traces and echoes of the presentations.

On October 7, three performances were presented at the Temporary Gallery. Jacob Bussmann showed his *Sophisticated Songs*, where he interpreted texts of the Sophists with his tenor voice and keyboard. Tanja Šljivar and Tamara Antonijević read their texts *The Hag Theory & How to Spin an Endometrium*, accompanied by a screening of the texts and drawings of Zuzana Žabková and Nik Timková. The Lebanese artist Jessika Khazrik opened up a four-channel performance installation that gave interpretations of the concept of *Pharmakopoeia*. At the symposium our note takers Pooyesh Forouzandeh and David Martinez Morente remembered the three performances on the basis of the notes that were taken by the audience.

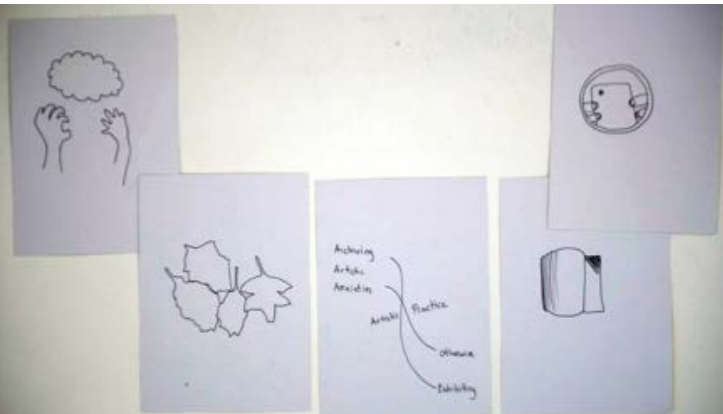


*Vortragkunst* (2021) by Helen Brecht, Jascha Sommer, Nina Gojić and Zrinka Užbinec © Helen Brecht & Jascha Sommer

In their notes, Pooyesh and David inscribed drawings of a singer in various positions, with written thoughts on the ambiguity of sophist philosophy. The note takers describe their difficulty to hear, to see and to understand. With reference to the second presentation, *Hag Theory*, Tamara Antonijević is understood by the note takers as a narrative about an old woman who is neither a caring grandmother nor a wise witch, but simply an old woman, a “hag”. Tanja Šljivar's narration about the uterine disease endometriosis is described as wrapped in dense language that somehow proliferates itself. What remains in the minds of the note takers for Jessika Khazrik's concert-lecture is *Qalaq*, an Arabic term that Khazrik refuses to decipher and instead allows to echo in the room as a sound loop. Following the reading of the note takers, we see that in one way or another, knowledge in the aforementioned performances somehow *hides itself*. It is presented, but it hesitates to emerge, stopping on the threshold of the audible and understandable. It proliferates in utero or resonates, for example, in the sound of *Qalaq*.

On October 28, Rike Hoppe and Félix Zilles Peres took notes on the works *7 anxieties and the world* by Adrijana Gvozdenović, a card-reading session dealing with various anxieties in the art market, and *Die Stadt mit der Zunge betreten* (*Entering the city with the tongue*), a hybrid lecture by ScriptedReality that invited the audience on three virtual city walks. At the beginning of the presentation of their notes, the note takers stated that they have a problem presenting the knowledge produced in the two performances, as it was in one case “too private” and in the other “too complex”. Following the impression of the note takers, we conclude that in the works of Adrijana Gvozdenović and ScriptedReality, knowledge seems to have *migrated*; it inhabits the private and the digital space. In Adrijana's card-reading session about anxieties in art-making and cultural work, knowledge is co-produced by the artist and the participants in informal, personal talks. ScriptedReality, in their hybrid lecture, take virtual walks through a folded Google map. The produced knowledge somehow gets lost

between server request and server response, in the time of the ping. Because of its intimate and dense character, the knowledge in the two performances escapes the possibility of canonization or citation. It cannot be functionalized or translated into a thesis.



*Vortragskunst* (2021) by Helen Brecht, Jascha Sommer, Nina Gojić and Zrinka Užbinec © Helen Brecht & Jascha Sommer

Eva Königshofen and Catalina Bucos each independently responded to the works *Taking Time* by Dunja Crnjanski and Frosina Dimovska and *Epistolary Ancestries* by Kiran Kumār with a letter to the artists. In this way, the note takers share knowledge in correspondence, writing letters to artists who themselves invented an epistolary practice. Dunja and Frosina directly address the audience (mainly working in the arts itself) in the second person, as a “you,” and extend the invitation to be involved in building up an open source glossary of precarious working conditions in art making. Kiran addresses his reflections to his chosen “ancestors” and thus spans a transcendent mental net. By addressing their thoughts to the artists, Eva and Catalina inscribe themselves into open knowledge networks, becoming co-creators of this body of knowledge.

To sum up our speculative analysis: The knowledge production in the works presented at *Vortragskunst* is discordant with the expectations of an “academic lecture.” The “lectures” presented here have no *concrete* subject. Knowledge production remains dark/inaudible/peripheral or migrates into areas remote from academia. It resituates itself in a structure both polyphonic and social.



*Vortragskunst* (2021) by Helen Brecht, Jascha Sommer, Nina Gojić and Zrinka Užbinec © Helen Brecht & Jascha Sommer

The *Vortragskunst* remains precarious: academically speaking, something is always “missing.”

Yes, the works of *Vortragskunst* could be described as essay performances, but we would rather discuss them as “Guessay performances”. “Guessay” is a term invented by the poet and translator Uljana Wolf (2021). Wolf describes the Guessay as “a kind of underbidding of the essay in its attempt to be an attempt.” The Guessay contains the word “to guess”. In past tense “to guess” transforms into: “guessed”, which brings phonetically into play: “the guest”. The works of *Vortragskunst* can be described as attempts that remain in the air. They don’t arrive, and if they arrive, then as a guest, not as the owner of the knowledge.

We posit that our curatorial work itself, the *Vortragskunst*, can be seen as a “Guessay”. In a way it is an attempt at rethinking the lecture-performance, but in this attempt the definition of the lecture-performance remains elusive, constantly seeking a definition it couldn’t possibly – and shouldn’t – reach.

#### WORKS CITED

- Zmak, Jasna and Georgelou, Konstantin, 'Performing Lectures', in: Krisi Monni/Rick Allsopp: *Practicing Composition: Making Practice. Texts, Dialogues and Documents, 2011–2013*, University of the Arts Helsinki, Theater Academy 2015.
- Aldo Milohnić, 'Performing Lecture Machines', in: *The lecture performance*, Kölscher Kunstverein 2009, p.33
- Jasna Zmak/Konstantina Georgelou: 'Performing Lectures', p.215.
- Uljana Wolf: *Etymologischer Gossip. Essays und Reden*, kookbooks, 2021.

## PART III



- Carolina Rito **99** The essayistic in the curatorial – Repurposing the politics of exhibition
- Giulia Bellinetti **107** *Monoculture – A recent history*: a case-study of the essay-exhibition
- Anja Isabel Schneider **117** Essayistic thinking. Alexander Kluge staging *Opera: The Temple of Seriousness* (2019–2020)

## THE ESSAYISTIC IN THE CURATORIAL – REPURPOSING THE POLITICS OF EXHIBITION

### INTRODUCTION

As a starting point for this text, I take the invitation of the conference proposal to elaborate on the essay form – or the capacities of the essayistic – in the arts beyond literature and film. In that way, I would like to bring the essay and the essayistic forms to the emerging field of the curatorial. The curatorial here means the arena of contemporary cultural engagements and articulations (material and immaterial), from production, to display, interpretation and dissemination, not limited to the artwork and exhibitions. The curatorial has emerged as an arena of practice and research where different disciplines, agents, forms, and media come together or intersect (intentionally and unintentionally) to advance new aesthetic articulations through and about the world in which we live. In that way, I want to argue that a new reading of the essayistic qualities of the curatorial can propose new details about the kinds of formats and practices that the field of the curatorial can offer. In other words, I explore in this text the new aesthetic propositions coming from curatorial practices that contribute to a new assemblage of world making – in terms of senses and knowledge. In that way, I also explore the nature of the epistemic capacities of the curatorial, or how the curatorial produces knowledge within the realm of aesthetics that inform and are generated from the forms, experiences, and representation of our political and social lives.

To resituate exhibition, I start by investigating the role of the curatorial and its relationship with the expanded field of exhibition-making. To establish a connection between the forms of exhibition-making and a wider set of exposures, I go on to explain the intrinsic connection between aesthetics and the forms of social and political life. In addition, my argument also asserts that a reflection on the politics of exhibition needs to always consider the modern colonial genealogy of museums and exhibition formats. This network of connections allows exhibition to be actualised in a field that exceeds its traditional formats and the space of the gallery and/or museum. Therefore, it is more appropriate to speak of the infrastructure of the exhibitionary as the network of relations in which exposures take place. In this text, I argue that a discipline in the field of

the curatorial can take up the task of investigating the forms of the exhibitionary outside of the traditional exhibition in order to offer an aesthetic and curatorial understanding of the expanded field of exhibition.

Finally, I explore how the essayistic can help mobilise exhibitionary tools (aesthetic, spatial, theoretical, epistemic) — as a way of intervening and producing meaning — to apply them to the forms and materials that surround us. In other words, I argue that there is an epistemic and cultural potential when bringing exhibitionary tools to a non-exhibition setting capable of generating new modes of production, engagement and interpretation of and within the wider cultural field. The essayistic – as an experimental way of articulating content – will provide a *modus operandi* for the curatorial.

## THE CURATORIAL AND THE EXPANDED FIELD

First, it is important to define some of the key terms I aim to use in this contribution; that is 'the curatorial' and 'the expanded field of exhibition-making'. As mentioned above, the curatorial in this paper refers to the expanded field of exhibition-making and of the artwork. To recognise exhibition-making as part of a wider socio-political genealogy and legacies is also to allow the curatorial to move towards a more open notion of exhibition. Exhibition-making has been tightly intertwined with curating since the emergence of curating as a practice in the contemporary art world. However, curating, loosely defined as the practice of making exhibitions in a museum or gallery setting, has shifted considerably since then (Bismarck, Schaffaff and Weski 2012; O'Neill and Andreasen 2007; O'Neill and Wilson 2010, 2015).

Historically, the debates about curating have articulated its role as a display of selected objects by means of proposing a new narrative or idea. More recently, scholars have argued that curating, as the juxtaposition of art objects and arguably ideas and meanings, has opened the space for a new area of practice to emerge. To this practice, scholars call 'the curatorial' (Lind 2011; Martinon and Rogoff 2013). What is interesting about the curatorial is that it is neither opposed to curating, nor immediately related to the professional identity of the curator. Instead, it is an arena that recognises its legacies in curating and exhibition practices, while bringing the potential of juxtapositions and articulations through materials and ideas to articulate and understand social, political and aesthetic phenomena. In other words, the curatorial refers to contemporary cultural practices, as an active set of exposures taking place

in the complex fabric of social and political forms.<sup>24</sup>

A lot has been said and written about the expanded field of exhibition-making (Martinon and Rogoff 2013). It is important to clarify that the expanded field of exhibition-making is not an attempt to expand the territorial space of exhibitions, as in, finding new and unconventional spaces for exhibitions and curatorial programming. Well-known examples of the latter are the repurposing of former industrial buildings, the use of the public space, as well as off-site projects. Instead, what is at stake in the notion of expanded field is to consider that all the forms of the social, political, aesthetics and ecological are already in exposure to one another. Moreover, in a complex exposure that constitutes the exhibitionary fabric we inhabit. In that way, the site of the exhibitionary frames the multiple exposures of the phenomena in which we live, and, therefore, the curatorial is the practice research of the operations involved in the making-public of these exposures; in the ways in which they are selected, juxtaposed, narrativized, interpreted and left to new articulations (for present and future audiences). In this field, there is no distinction between exhibition space and what is situated outside of it, as all are equally understood as the site of multiple exposures and therefore of curatorial articulations.

<sup>24</sup> To be noted that I have explored these porosities before in Rito, Carolina. "The Infrastructures of the Exhibitionary." In *Exhibitionary Acts of Political Imagination*, edited by Mick Wilson and Catalin Gheorghe. Bucharest and Gothenburg: Vector and PARSE, 2021.

How can the essay form – or the characteristic of the essayistic – offer insights to the aesthetic and epistemic operations of curatorial practice research? Despite the well-known importance of the essay in literature, I focus on the concatenation of the essayistic and the curatorial and what the essay form can offer to the workings of the curatorial. The essayistic has the capacity to push the boundaries of traditional or accepted formats, assembling its components in a novel way, causing meanings to be unsettled and rearranged. Similarly, the curatorial has been interested not only in the production of new assemblages, but also in the structures where those assemblages are made possible with regards to the power structures in which they sit, as well as the new meanings and senses they enact. In that way, the essayistic nature of the curatorial works at the aesthetic and the epistemic level, providing the new formats and aesthetics of knowability.

## TWO POROSITIES: EXHIBITION'S GENEALOGY AND THE WIDER REALM OF AESTHETICS

Now, what are the characteristics of the exhibitionary fabric? How does the legacy of exhibition-making transfer to the multiple exposures of our social and political forms? To understand these characteristics, we need to look at what I call 'the porosities of the exhibitionary', i.e., the conceptual connections between the realm of exhibition and the expanded field of the social and political forms. I focus on two main porosities, first, the colonial foundations of exhibition making and the coloniality of curating, which centres around the legacies of the birth of the museum in the 19th century in Europe and its role in the colonial paradigm of extraction, exploitation and subjugation. Second, I focus on the radical interdependence between aesthetics and the political, which was erased by the colonial divide that separated the arts from life to limit their meanings and make aesthetics operate at the level of representation and abstraction.

As I have written elsewhere, there is no neutral act of exhibiting and no neutral exhibition space (Rito 2021, 47). The genealogy of museums and exhibitions is intrinsically connected to the first European museums and the international World Fairs. Both formats are known for playing an important role in the consolidation of the colonial episteme of racial superiority and ontological differences, which refused to recognise the intellectual and cultural complexity of non-European peoples. The birth of the museums and its exhibition derivatives also came with the formation of disciplines, discourses and colonial paradigms that differentiate peoples, geographies, knowledges, and experiences.

Among the rigorous scholarly work in this field, scholars such as Tony Bennett (1995), Brigitta Kuster (2007), and Wayne Modest (2019) have provided compelling analyses of how the apparatuses of display informed the production, reception and interpretation of art, disciplinary knowledge, historical narratives, and epistemic paradigms. Moreover, these authors have gone on to theorise how recoded and rebranded imperial rhetoric continues to legitimise the ownership of looted objects and memories today. To have a better grasp of how these narratives play out today, there are examples that clearly illustrate these continuities and defeat the arguments that these are "issues of the past". For instance, the heated debates around the claims for repatriation of the Benin Bronzes held in several museums across Europe (including the Horniman Museum in London), and of the Parthenon marbles unlawfully held at the British Museum taken from Athens.

Some of the analyses mentioned above draw upon Michel Foucault's elaboration of the modern institutions of control and discipline, with the carceral archipelago as the central concept (1979). However, while Foucault focused on institutions situated in the periphery of the cities and away from the eyes of the "new citizens", art historian Tony Bennett in *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) inserts the museum within the genealogy of the modern institutions of control and discipline. Bennett provides a compelling analysis of the public museum mapping its formation and early function, as well as its policies and politics. Bennett writes:

*The emergence of art museums was closely related to that of a wider range of institutions – history and natural science museums, dioramas and panoramas, national and, later, international exhibitions, arcades and department stores – which served as linked sites for the development and circulation of new disciplines (history, biology, art history, anthropology) and their discursive formations (the past, evolution, aesthetics, man) as well as for the development of new technologies of vision. (1995, 59)*

The early function of museums and exhibition protocols are still correlated with contemporary practices of exhibition-making, either expressed in the validation of looted objects, the information contained in the objects index, or the main principles of exhibition design (objects, caption, wall text) (Deliss 2020; Hicks 2020). For these reasons, the structures of the forms of exhibition making need to be critically interrogated, while we lay out the exhibitionary as a framework for new modes of cultural and political engagement. Moreover, it is of prime importance to acknowledge the coloniality of "curating-as-exhibition-making", before assigning it a political potential and naively assuming that its aesthetic-political efficacy comes with it by default.

Finally, I would like to explore the second porosity between exhibitions and the expanded field of the social and political forms, i.e., the radical interdependence between aesthetics and the political. In the field of contemporary art, exhibitions are seen as operating at the level of aesthetics (formerly defined according to notions of beauty, style and genre). In *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2014), Jacques Rancière diffuses the artificial division between aesthetics and the forms of the political. For this author, aesthetics does not solely refer to the field of



artistic practices, nor just to the thinking about art and the theory of art. Instead, aesthetics is understood as a domain of social and political life in which the forms of the sayable, the thinkable, and the doable are part of how we experience and make sense of the world. Rancière argues that:

*(...) aesthetics acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity. (2014, 9)*

Rancière goes on to say that the notion of political art is a circular term, since the use of the political to classify the kind of art it refers to is redundant. This is because the ways in which the forms of art are constituted and perceived are always already playing in the field of the political – the forms via which we conceive politics. Moreover, the opposite also applies, the forms of the political are themselves conceived in us via aesthetics. A more open definition of aesthetics allows us to understand that its field is not reduced to the confined arena of artistic forms. Instead, it relates to every single materiality and abstraction of ideas, forms, displays, and experience through which we construct the world.

For that matter, a decolonial reading of the autonomy of the art object and aesthetics locates the separation between art and politics as a construct of the project of modernity, a reading that has been extensively explored by decolonial scholars. According to sociologist Rolando Vázquez, this separation is only possible within the logics of the “colonial difference” (2020). Among the most striking of these (artificial) separations are those between life and the arts; culture and knowledge; human and nature; and the racial and gender divides. This modern division is an artificial separation in the colonial episteme whereby the world is segmented into groups that are set apart and disjointed. This disjuncture is responsible for the establishment of an epistemic and, one could add, aesthetic separation between constitutive elements of the world that, despite radically interdependent, were set apart by the project of modernity. The consequences of the widespread implementation of this artificial divide became even more apparent with the tangible implications of late racial capitalism, the Anthropocene and the devastating impact of climate change. Vázquez writes:

*We refer to aesthetics not solely as the field of artistic practices, nor just as the thinking about the arts. We understand aesthetics as a domain of social life equivalent*

*to epistemology. While the question of epistemology is concerned with the modern/colonial control of knowledge and representation, the question of aesthetics brings to the fore the control of perception and representation. (2020, 7)*

Following on Rancière and Vázquez, aesthetics and, for that matter, the exhibitionary are the playing field of the forms of the sensible. They constitute forms and exposures that cannot be set apart. Instead, the forms of the social and political need to be considered in radical interdependence to one another. Therefore, this exhibitionary infrastructure I had set up in this text exceeds far beyond the spatial and physical limits of the gallery, the curator’s gesture, and the formal display of objects. In that way, the infrastructure of the exhibitionary is the actualised structure of the expanded field of exhibitions offering an ecosystem for the apparatus of display. It is in this ecosystem that essayistic operates, no longer centred around the display—what is made visible—but reassembling the less visible phenomena and unintentional exposures.

## CONCLUSION

In this text, I situated the curatorial in a decentred, and eco-systemic understanding of the exhibitionary, where a network of material and immaterial cultures intersects. What is proposed with this notion of the infrastructure of the exhibitionary is not only a new way of understanding the spatial and political implications of the expanded field of exhibition-making, but also a new discipline capable of engaging with the aesthetic complexities of these exposures. This is why the essayistic capacities of the curatorial are relevant, because they suggest an experimental way of articulating content, capable of reassembling the meanings and the aesthetics of the sensible. In the expanded and porous field of the curatorial, there is a possibility for pushing the boundaries of the familiar formats – vitrines, captions, hanging objects – to different cultural engagements that in themselves provide new modes of knowing and making worlds. The spatiality of this infrastructure is no longer the bi-directionality established between object/spectator, but a multidirectional scene understood as a sequence of continuous exposures of cultural and curatorial interactions, materials and juxtapositions.

To conclude, the realm of the exhibitionary becomes a non-hierarchical

platform where things are set in touch and in exposure to one another, configuring new scenes of display and publicness. These infrastructures are the networks and mechanisms of eco-systemic exposures of forms and materials that constitute our ecologies. Can we mobilise the site and the tools of the exhibitionary to provide new meanings about the complex activities and formations outside of the autonomous space of the arts? Can a new discipline open the field of exhibition to a series of curatorial tools to produce new meanings in a socio-political-environmental scene? This site of enquiry could become an arena of practice research in the Arts and Humanities to analyse and intervene in the field of aesthetics and its politics. A study that would recognise the potential of the plateau of the scenic as a decentralised, relational and in tension set up for the analysis of exposures.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995.
- Bismarck, Beatrice von, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski, eds. *Cultures of the Curatorial*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012.
- Deliss, Clémentine. *The Metabolic Museum*. Berlin: H. Cantz Verlag, 2020.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Hicks, Dan. *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. London: Pluto Press, 2020.
- Kuster, Brigitta. "Sous Les Yeux Vigilants / Under the Watchful Eyes. On the International Colonial Exhibition in Paris 1931." *Transform EIPCP*, Art and Police, 2007.
- Lind, Maria. *Selected Maria Lind Writing*. Edited by Brian Kuan Wood. New York: Sternberg Press, 2011.
- Martinon, Jean-Paul, and Irit Rogoff, eds. *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Modest, Wayne, Nicholas Thomas, Doris Pilić, and Claudia Augustat, eds. *Matters of Belonging: Ethnographic Museums in a Changing Europe*. Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2019.
- O'Neill, Paul, and Andreasen Søren, eds. *Curating Subjects*. London: Open Editions, 2007.
- O'Neill, Paul, and Mick Wilson, eds. *Curating and the Educational Turn*. London: Open Editions, 2010.
- eds. *Curating Research*. Occasional Table. London: Amsterdam: Open Editions; de Appel, 2015.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London; New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Rito, Carolina. "The Infrastructures of the Exhibitionary." In *Exhibitionary Acts of Political Imagination*, edited by Mick Wilson and Catalin Gheorghe. Bucharest and Gothenburg: Vector and PARSE, 2021.
- Vázquez, Rolando. *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary*. Amsterdam: Mondrian Fund, 2020.

## MONOCULTURE – A RECENT HISTORY: A CASE-STUDY OF THE ESSAY-EXHIBITION

### INTRODUCTION

This contribution examines the mechanisms of semantic construction in the context of the essay-exhibition. In particular, this article analyses the ways in which the essayistic form can alter traditional relays of power/knowledge of in museums' exhibitionary apparatus. The exhibition *Monoculture – A Recent History* is taken as a case study of the epistemic-political affordance of the essay-exhibition as a form. After outlining what I consider a conceptual and epistemic challenge of the exhibition, I shall demonstrate how the essayistic form contributed to address such challenge by reconfiguring the relations between objects, the curatorial voice, and the visitors. The notion of 'ambiguity' is finally discussed as epistemic underpinning which infuses this essay-exhibition with a political tenure.

The exhibition *Monoculture – A Recent History* took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Antwerp, Belgium, from September 2020 until April 2021. Curated by Nav Haq, and with curatorial assistance of Ekaterina Varontsova, *Monoculture – A Recent History* spurred from the intellectual desire to revive the debate on multiculturalism by investigating its opposite notion, the one of 'monoculturality'. In the context of this project, monoculture was understood as the 'homogeneous expression of a single social or ethnic group', and the subject was presented through a non-exhaustive selection of case-studies (Haq, 14). Seeking to avoid ideological simplifications, which might identify cultural homogeneity with extremism, impoverishment, and one-dimensionality, the exhibition looked at how the concept of cultural homogeneity can be found across different cultural, social, and ideological spheres. It examined for instance monocultural ideologies, such as National Socialism, but also utopia-inspired forms of monoculturality such as Esperanto and other universal languages, as well as monocultural expressions emerged from emancipatory stances, such as the cultural movement of *Négritude* led by poet Léopold Senghor in Senegal.

The exhibition attempted to question a dichotomous understanding of 'monoculturality' as something opposed to multiculturalism, and to shed light on the ways that even progressive stances or movements - such as identity

politics - could be manifestations of monoculturality for the ways they tend to flatten complexities and neglect alter-narratives and other modes of living. The philosophical undercurrent of the exhibition is the notion of 'ambiguity', as developed by Polish-Austrian psychoanalyst Else Frenkel-Brunswik. In her studies on individual reactions to ambiguous stimuli, Frenkel-Brunswik makes a correlation between individual people's perception, cognitive function, and social outlook (Haq, 17). Departing from this idea, the exhibition stages a space where the experience of ambiguity arises from the aesthetic encounter with artworks and artefacts, and allows a reflection on how practices, values, and ways of perceiving are excluded by the formation of monocultures of all kinds. Ambiguity in *Monoculture – A Recent History* is a philosophical undercurrent, a thematic subject, and, I argue, an epistemic principle of the exhibition.

Developing a critical reflection on the topic of monoculture through an exhibition in a contemporary art museum entails a fundamental challenge which is both conceptual and methodological in its nature. The conceptual dimension of the challenge is connected to the ways museums have historically been legitimised by - and have legitimised - monocultural systems of thought. As is now well acknowledged, through the organisation of objects in their exhibitions, museums have articulated and promoted specific understandings of the world, which were presented as universal truth values. The exhibition *Monoculture – A Recent History* featured the catalogues of some canonical examples of exhibitions that shaped and promoted specific monocultural understanding of the world, such as *The Family of Man*, 1955, the first documenta in 1955, *Westkunst: Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939* held in Cologne in 1981, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* held at MoMA in 1985, and *Magiciens de la Terre* which is considered a response to MoMA controversial project. Catalogues of *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* and the 1993 Whitney Biennial Exhibition, together with artworks such as two portraits of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, are additional elements of the exhibition addressing how representational strategies of museums defines modes of seeing and perceiving.

Mieke Bal argued that 'exhibition is always also an argument' and exposing is a constative act of speech. The emergence of the discourse in the context of an exhibition happens in a field of relationality between the expository agent, the visitors, and the exhibited objects. The relations between these subjects are manifestations of the power relays of the exhibitionary complex, that enable some perspectives to be heard and others to be silenced. The exhibitory agent

- which for Bal is linked to subjects but should not necessarily equated with individual intention - is invested of an epistemic authority that allows to display the objects and contextually implicitly state: "Look! That's how it is!".

Thinking about the construction of discourse in the context of *Monoculture – A Recent History*, allows to foreground what I consider to be a conceptual and methodological challenge of the project. In what ways could a critical discourse on cultural homogeneity be staged in a space where the narration is expression of a single cultural subject – being it an individual or an institutional structure - whose epistemic authority historically has been rarely questioned? Or in other words, how could the exhibition eschew the trap of conceptually 're-enacting Monoculture'?

In what follows I explore how this conceptual and methodological challenge has been addressed through the essayistic form. My aim is to demonstrate how the notion of ambiguity, approached as epistemic principle, played a central role in mobilising the epistemic authority of the exhibition and allowed a proliferation of perspectives and multiplication of narratives. I will articulate my argument according to what Mieke Bal identifies as the three components of the semantic field of the exhibition: the objects of discourse, the exhibitory agent, that is, the curatorial voice, and the visitors.

## OBJECTS OF DISCOURSE

The exhibition explored the many forms of monoculturality considered through the presentation of theoretical constellations of artworks and artefacts. The discourse staged by the objects on display explored the idea of monoculturality in relation to concepts such as nation, language, religion, migration, and others, looking at the ways in which different forms of monoculturality informed historical, political, social and cultural phenomena of the last century (Haq, 14). Positioned in a relation of dialectic exchange, artworks and artefacts resisted any simple interpretation that would imagine the artworks as representing the philosophical ideas embodied in the artefacts. In fact, artefacts in the exhibition *Monoculture* were things to be observed. They contributed to the emergence of meaning through a process of aestheticization of thought. In order to clarify this concept, I analyse the way some artefacts are displayed in the exhibition.

All the books and artefacts in the exhibition are originals or first editions. Their material presence unveils the ways the past commingles in the present

through memory and affects, and the contemporary outlook acts upon the remnants of the past. The materiality of the artefacts in the exhibition suggests a reconceptualization of temporal planes beyond linear models. In case of the books, their value as objects is enhanced by the special manner in which they have been treated in the exhibition. Displayed in niches, exhibited on plinths, or laid in vitrines, and protected by glass or plexiglass, the original function of these objects – that is, to be read - is subverted by a process of aestheticization which transformed them in artefacts to be observed. The process of aestheticization complicates the semantic plane of these objects, by enhancing the double nature of the messages they bear. These books simultaneously bear two meanings: a denotated one, which emerges from the material presence of the object itself, and the connoted one, constructed upon the first and developed according to cultural, social, political, historical, and affective structures. For instance, in case of *For Great Corn!*, a URSS propaganda poster from 1962, on a connotative plane, it refers to the Corn Campaign promoted by Khrushchev in the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s, and to the political, ecological and social consequences of such campaign. On a denotative level, though, a visitor might be intrigued by the aesthetic quality of the female image that triumphantly emerges from corn and livestock products, or by the missing corner and the discoloration of the paper which attest its historicity linking the present moment of aesthetic appreciation to the context where this object was originally produced. The friction between denotation and connotation in the process of aesthetisation of the artefacts in the exhibition *Monoculture* allows for the conflation of the aesthetic and cognitive planes of perception, as described by Nora M. Alter (44-57). The conflation of the aesthetic and cognitive is particularly evident in the propaganda posters of the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL), whose strong aesthetic quality might provoke affective and emotional associations on a denotative plane, which interweave with the historical, social, and political significance of the object on a connotative one.

If artefacts, books, and other objects, becomes object of aesthetic perception, what about the artworks? In *Monoculture – A Recent History*, artworks are read; they are what Mieke Bal defines as ‘thinking art’ (Bal 1999, 44-57). The artworks are not *about* ideas; they don’t represent concepts. They are visual forms of thought with their own independent semiotic status and semantic value. They allow a continuous process of association and dissociation between concepts, memories, and perception. This process is exemplified by Oxana Shachko’s works from the series *Iconoclast*. Traditional at first glance



Monoculture - A Recent History (2021) Exhibition view. Courtesy: MHKA.

for their technique and formal construction, Shachko enriches the Orthodox iconography of these works with modern details, such as dinosaurs, roulette, a rainbow decorating the aureole of St. Georges (Haq, 264-265). These works can be considered provocative, but the traditional elements in their realization pervade them with an ambiguous atmosphere which eschews interpretative simplifications and invites to openness.

It is important to acknowledge that none of the above considerations can be considered absolute in the exhibition. As in other forms of essay, also here the exhibition was a place of multi-layered meanings, nuances, and contradictions. The dialogical display of artworks and artefacts and the hybridity of their status as objects problematize binary categories of representation and contributes to the convergence of cognitive and aesthetic in the exhibition. As in visual essays, also in *Monoculture – A Recent History*, the essayistic form contributes to move across genres and registers and to transgress disciplinary borders, without losing coherence (Franke in Canela). Furthermore, artworks and artefacts in the exhibition are by no means silent witnesses of the narrative construction. They were active agents in a field of relationality, interacting with

the curatorial voice and the visitors; they were participants in intellectual and aesthetic conversations. In what follows, I delve more into the details of these conversations with the analysis of the curatorial voice.

## THE CURATORIAL VOICE

In *Monoculture – A Recent History*, artworks and artefacts were quotations that allowed the curatorial voice to frame the context for the narratives to emerge. The epistemic authority in the exhibitionary complex of *Monoculture – A Recent History* is apparent in the choice of the case studies as well as in the variously broad scope through which each theoretical constellation has been presented. Some constellations were given more space, and thus visibility, as for instance the one addressing the culture wars or universalism, whilst other topics were addressed more as transversal themes or implicit questions across different constellations – as for instance globalization, or gender.<sup>25</sup> In the choice of the theoretical constellations, it is possible to identify another feature of the essay form, in which ‘the objective aim of the inquiry’, the investigation of the concept of monoculturality, ‘is haunted by the subjective character of the research’ (Alter, 45).

Another manifestation of the curatorial voice in *Monoculture – A Recent History* is the organization and positioning of the different constellations in the exhibition space. The section “Agriculture”, for instance, is one of the first constellations visitors encounter in their visit, suggesting a reference to the etymological origin of the term monoculture. Another central constellation was the one dedicated to “Ambiguity”, positioned right behind the “Agriculture”, section in the heart of the exhibition space. The position and the extension of this constellation reveals the importance of the concept, both as a theme and as epistemic principle of the exhibition. It was an extensively researched section, presented through a rich diversity of semantic elements: artworks by Carol Rama, the central *Global Digestion* by Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, the outsider art of Nicole,<sup>26</sup> together with first editions of Else Frenkel-Brunswik,

<sup>25</sup> The culture wars section counted 13 artworks by 8 different artists and 24 artefacts; the universalism section counted 11 artworks by 8 artists and 19 artefacts. The constellation dedicated to religion instead counted 6 artworks by 2 artists and 1 artefact. The theme of gender was approached as a sub-theme of the culture wars although it crossed also other constellations as the one dedicated to the concept of ‘Nation’. The concept of ‘globalization’ emerged through the sections dedicated to universalism, capitalism, migration, and others. Nav Haq, *Monoculture – A Recent History*.

<sup>26</sup> Diagnosed with a mental illness, Nicole was hospitalized in Sint-Jozef in Kortenberg (Belgium) where she developed her artistic practice in the context of ‘creative therapy’, started by the psychiatric hospital in 1963. ‘Monoculture – A Recent History’. (Antwerp: M HKA, 2020), 58-59.

Simone de Beauvoir, Julie Kristeva, Sigmund Freud, Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper. Theodor W. Adorno, author of “The essay as form”, is also present in this constellation as one of the authors of the book *The Authoritarian Personality*, result of a research collaboration between him, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford. This is all but a coincidence. De Beauvoir, Nietzsche, and other the philosophers featured in the ‘Ambiguity’ section, have foregrounded the notion of ambiguity against the ideal of universal truth of the institution of Science (Haq, 24). A similar line of critique can be found in Adorno’s “The essay as form”, where he presents the essay as the form that brings doubt into scientific knowledge, rejecting the belief that the order of things is identical to the order of ideas. In his essay, Adorno writes ‘[the essay] does justice to the consciousness of non-identity [...] in accentuating the fragmentary, the partial rather than the total’ (157) and towards the conclusion of the essay he adds ‘the law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, he continues, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy’s secret purpose to keep invisible’ (171).

It is in the resonance between the notion of ambiguity, the rejection of orthodoxy and in the importance of non-identity in the essay, that the exhibition *Monoculture – A Recent History* unveils its profound essayistic quality.

Another quality of the essay which is apparent in the exhibition is its fragmentation. Philosopher Michael Bakhtin identifies fragmentation as an effect of the act of quoting (Vassilieva and Williams, 12). According to him, quoting is an act of borrowing of discursive habits which brings interdiscursivity in language. In the exhibition *Monoculture – A Recent History*, artworks and artefacts were quotations that brought intersubjectivity into the discourse. The objects were positioned in a general relatedness rather than in a strict opposition of equation. Associations or dissociations were suggested, but not formally mandated. The fragmentation in the display of the artworks and artefacts in *Monoculture – A Recent History* reclaimed the epistemic agency of the exhibited objects and allowed the curatorial voice to stage not just a thought, but a moving process of thought.

## VISITORS

The third component of the exhibitionary complex according to Mieke Bal are the visitors. How did the visitors participate to the conversations staged in the exhibition? How did they navigate the dynamic movement of intellectual



and aesthetic experiences? The first moment the visitors experienced the exhibition *Monoculture – A Recent History* was just before stepping into the museum. Two colten plaques placed in the floor right before the main entrance bore the sentence: “Imagine this museum is a country’ and ‘and in this country there is a museum”. This artwork was commissioned for the exhibition to Public Movement, a performative research body that investigates the relation between the formation of the idea of nation and its cultural legitimisation. As the curator writes in the catalogue, the artwork creates ‘a curious feedback loop (that) evokes the cyclical relations between culture and politics’ (Haq, 248-249). I shall add to this statement that by directly addressing the visitors and by calling them to an active exercise of imaginative thinking, the artwork paves the ground for their narrative emancipation and anticipate the re-configuration of the power-knowledge relays of the exhibition. Moreover, also in this artwork it is possible to notice the presence of fragmentation which, in this specific case, suggests a suspension in the syntactic composition of the work.

As described above, the theoretical constellations and the display of artworks and artefacts created spatial juxtapositions that thickened the layers of meanings of the exhibition. The fragmentary quality and the density of the display precluded forms of authoritarian narration, subverting conventional relays of power/knowledge in the exhibitionary complex. Within the necessary limitations imposed by the Covid 19-pandemic, visitors were left as free as possible to construct their own narrative sequence of images, ideas and objects. This was facilitated also by the exhibition architecture which allowed the visitors to find their own route to navigate the exhibition.

Another symbolic element of the exhibition scenography was the finishing of the walls. Some walls in *Monoculture* presented a finely painted surface, quite common in exhibition scenography. Others, however, showed a bare wooden structure. The unfinished style of some walls refers to the intrinsic ambiguity of the images, objects, and concepts displayed, but also to the truth of non-identity, incompleteness, and the ambiguous nature of the world.

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude I briefly discuss how ambiguity as a conceptual and epistemic principle infused the project with a political tenure. The notion of ambiguity had a thematic as well as an epistemic value. As discussed above, its epistemic affordance allowed a redistribution of the epistemic agency among the different

components of the exhibitionary complex, particularly the ones usually associated with passivity. Contextually, the autonomy intrinsic to the form of the essay, and arguably to the notion of ambiguity, prevented that any of these components, nor any specific truth-projects, could surge to a dominant position (Adorno, 94). Such free-play in the construction of narration is what Rancière believes to be the true political quality of the aesthetic experience, with the power to disrupt established relays of power/knowledge (136).

The essayistic form in the exhibition *Monoculture* created a reconfiguration in the power/knowledge relays between the three components of the exhibition *Monoculture*, that allowed to address the conceptual and methodological challenges underlying this project. This reconfiguration created a dynamic movement of intellectual and aesthetic experiences that interwove objects, visitors, and the curatorial voice. Thanks to the conflation of autonomy and political critique in the central notion of ambiguity, any of these positions could prevail on the others, revealing the political tenure of this project and arguably of the essay-exhibition as a form.

## WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W. (trans. Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford). *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers: 1950)
- Adorno, Theodor W. (trans. Bob Hultot-Kentor, Frederic Will). ‘The Essay as Form’. *New German Critique* 32 (Spring-Summer 1984): 151–71.
- Nora M. Alter. ‘Translating the Essay into Film and Installation’. *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 1 (April 2007): 44–57.
- Bal, Mieke. ‘Double Exposure: The Subject of Cultural Analysis’. (New York: Routledge, 1996)
- Bal, Mieke. *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1999)
- Barthes, Roland. ‘The Photographic Message’, in *Image-Music-Text, essays*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977 (Reprint in: *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982: 194-210).
- Franke, Aselm interview by Juan Canela, *An “Undisciplined” Form of Knowledge*, Mousse Magazine, May 12, 2017
- Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, ‘M HKA Ensembles’ <http://ensembles.org/>
- Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, ‘Monoculture – A Recent History’, M HKA Ensembles, <http://monoculture.ensembles.org/ensembles/>
- Haq, Nav. ‘Monoculture - A Recent History’. (Antwerpen: M HKA, 2020)
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy*. *New Left Review* 14 (March/April 2002): 133–151
- Vassilieva, Julia and Williams, Deane, introduction to *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality, and Technology*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020)



ESSAYISTIC THINKING.  
ALEXANDER KLUGE STAGING  
OPERA: THE TEMPLE OF SERIOUSNESS (2019–2020)

INTRODUCTION

<sup>27</sup> The statement by Nietzsche reads: 'Ohne Musik wäre das Leben ein Irrtum' [Without music, life would be a mistake].

For Friedrich Nietzsche, life was unthinkable without music. German author, filmmaker, and television producer, Alexander Kluge (1932) inscribes Nietzsche's insight into his exhibition *The Power of Music [Die Macht der Musik]*<sup>27</sup> held in Germany as the first iteration of the multi-part project *Opera: The Temple of Seriousness*, conceived by Kluge in collaboration with the kunsthalle weishaupt, Museum Ulm, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, and Stuttgarter Staatsoper, alongside venues in Halberstadt.<sup>28</sup> The exhibition brought together Kluge's latest films and visual works, texts, and interventions, as well as works by invited artists. In his critical investigation of opera, it is of crucial concern to Kluge to think and dialogue together with others, some already long gone.

Kluge's reflection on opera as a collective place has accompanied him throughout his oeuvre. With this we can draw a line from his early prose and films, such as *The Power of Emotion [Die Macht der Gefühle]*, to his most recent work to foreground Kluge's interest in the operatic as a tool to intervene in the social. Here, the concept of cooperation is key. I read Kluge's continuous engagement with opera as quintessentially political. While the exhibition *dispositif* is certainly not new to Kluge, his move to present his operatic work in the exhibition format calls for further research. As such, *The Power of Music* will be my starting point to address Alexander Kluge's recent exhibition making, and the ways his work mediates larger claims about opera as a collective, transdisciplinary field.<sup>29</sup>

Kluge has been called an essayist principally as a filmmaker and theorist. Here, I take Richard Langston's argument seriously that the essayistic 'infiltrates' all of Kluge's work 'regardless of medium' (6). While Kluge's curatorial projects have not yet been explored in terms of essayism, I take this novel intersection as my site of inquiry. Adorno's seminal "The Essay as Form" will serve as a venture point for this research. Reading the exhibition as an actualization of Kluge's essayistic thinking will allow understanding it as a nodal point in his cooperative endeavour, that is, countering opera's authoritarian stance with a questioning,

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Kluge. *The Power of Music. The Opera: Temple of Seriousness* was held at the kunsthalle weishaupt and Museum Ulm, Germany from October 20, 2019 to April 19, 2020. In the exhibition, Kluge's work dialogues with works by contemporary artists: Georg Baselitz, Thomas Demand, Katharina Grosse, Anselm Kiefer, Sarah Morris, Thomas Thiede and Anna Viebrock. It also featured selected works from the Collection Siegfried and Jutta Weishaupt, including collection pieces by Josef Albers and Paul Klee. In 1961, Kluge founded, together with Edgar Reitz, the Institute for Film Design at the Ulm School of Design. The exhibition at the Museum Ulm placed an emphasis on the Ulm Theatre, with which Kluge has collaborated for many years. The overall project included further venues with an exhibition, music, and film project titled *Halberstädter Brennpunkte* at the Gleimhaus and Berend Lehmann Museum from November 10, 2019 to April 9, 2020 in Halberstadt. At the Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, the exhibition *Alexander Kluge. Opera: The Temple of Seriousness* staged a collaboration with the Staatsoper Stuttgart. It was held from May 8 to June 14, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> The exhibition's title *The Power of Music* is a reference to Heinrich von Kleist's 'St. Cecilia, or the Power of Music' (1810). For an analysis of Kleist's short story see Anja Isabel Schneider, 'The operatic unconscious in the films of Alexander Kluge & Khavn De La Cruz' (paper presented at the international conference *On Cinema/2022* for CEEA, Department of Theatre and Cinema, ESAP, Porto, Portugal, April 6–9, 2022), forthcoming.

a probing one.

Indeed, the essay as conceptualized by Adorno resonates in the ways in which Kluge conceives of his exhibition, namely as a form that probes and tests, exposing its object to small variation, 'differentiatedness' being its 'medium' (18). The accent Adorno places on the 'partial against the total': as a form that is 'fragmentary' in its 'open' structure (9). The essay, he writes, 'seeks the truth contents in its objects, itself inherently historical' (11). In what follows, I briefly address *The Power of Music* in its exhibition scenography, conceived in nine stations, which interact and connect with one another.<sup>30</sup> A stress is placed on the disarmament of the tragic event [Stations 2 and 6]. What is more, the historical narratives of music and opera are 'combined with new' and 'further narration of its material' (Christ, 61). This is done collaboratively through installations, audio and video recordings, films, and stage sets. Here, I must confine myself to only touch upon some of the sections and collaborative stagings, in which Kluge's minute films and minute operas [*Minutenfilme* and *Minutenopern*] also starred. In view of this, I would like to proceed by first outlining on how I see Kluge's exhibition indebted to Adorno's seminal essay. I then look at how the exhibition 'thinks' critically in terms of montage. Finally, I end with some speculations on how the essayistic reverberates in the audiences as part of the viewing experience.

## RESONANCES

As with all of his projects, curatorial collaborations included, Kluge opts for a constellative, anti-hierarchic staging of work. His principle is that of montage and cross-mapping. Constellation is key to understanding Kluge's pluriverse, spanning different genres, disciplines, and media. Kluge, it has been noted, brings the real conditions—objective, subjective—into a constellation in that he works with juxtaposition, contrasts, similes. He does not try to pin down thoughts and things conceptually. Instead, he circles them 'associatively' (Streckhardt, 59). Furthermore, specifies Bert-Christoph Streckhardt in citing Adorno, it is about

<sup>30</sup> The titles of the exhibition's stations, as published in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, read as follows: '[Station 1] *Das Drama / Die Leidenschaften / 'Hochöfen der Seele'*'; [Station 2] *Wenn die Oper sachlich wäre / Oper ohne Theaterton*; [Station 3] *Entstehung des Gesangs aus dem Leid / Lamenti / Grotteske Parsifal / Schicksale großer Frauen*; [Station 4] *Minutenopern / Scherenkranzbühne / 'Katzengold und Todeskarte'*; [Station 5] *Oper und Bombenkrieg*; [Station 6] *'Ohne Musik ist alles Leben ein Irrtum' / Denkmal für die unbekannte Oper*; [Station 7] *Prinzip Mündlichkeit*; [Station 8] *Ulmer Wunderkammer*; [Station 9] *'In Ulm, um Ulm und um Ulm herum' / Descartes im Winter bei Ulm / Filme aus dem Institut für Filmgestaltung mit Musik und besonderem O-Ton. Teil II.'* Alexander Kluge, *Die Macht der Musik* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2019), 9, 23, 29, 37, 49, 55, 63, 65, 73 (emphasis in original).

<sup>31</sup> Grosse's stages bear the following titles: *Bühne 1: DIE PROPHETIN*; *Bühne 2: DER PROFIT*; *Bühne 3: PROFITEROL*; *Bühne 4: Scherenkranzbühne* (all 2019).

understanding a 'thing itself' [*eine Sache selbst*] and not just making it fit into some 'frame of reference' in an analytical-reductionist manner (Ibid). This Kluge takes to heart. The essay's concepts, according to Adorno, 'are made more precise only through their relationship to one another,' pressing 'for the reciprocal interaction [...] in the process of intellectual experience' (14). 'All concepts,' Adorno specifies further 'are to be presented in such a way that they support one another, that each becomes articulated through its configuration with others' (Ibid). As he then poignantly highlights, '[b]ut the elements crystallize as a configuration through their motion. The constellation is a force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily transformed into a force field under the essay's gaze' (Ibid). At all points, Adorno emphasizes the autonomy of the various forms of expression, pushing toward other forms that emerge unexpectedly in them, as Kluge's exhibition exemplifies. On how precisely Adorno's essay resonates in Kluge's project becomes palpable in his dialogic cooperation with the artist Katharina Grosse, among others. For the exhibition, Grosse created *Sphinx Opera* (2019) a large print on silk cloth, as well as four distinct stages that are positioned in the interstitial spaces of the exhibitions [i.e. between Stations 4, 5, and 6].<sup>31</sup> Composed of rough wooden slats, these stages have been hewn together to form stands, reminiscent of easels, with a plain white cloth hanging over them (Fig. 1). They serve as stage designs to Kluge's films and projections.



Figure 1. Exhibition view Alexander Kluge. *The Power of Music*, Museum Ulm / kunsthalle weishaupt (2019–2020). Katharina Grosse, *Bühne 2: DER PROFIT*, fabric, wooden stand, hand clamps, wooden slats, stretch film. Courtesy Katharina Grosse. © Photo: Michael Kurz

For Grosse and Kluge it was important that '[t]he pieces in the exhibition [...] interact with one another in a loose relationship, [...] positioned not by author, but instead with their "gravitational force fields"' (Kluge, 62). The works 'cross, dissect the space [...] [h]ow they are installed should "perturb"' (Ibid). In other words: the space must be 'sensed.' According to the collaborators: 'What should arise are CONSTELLATIONS' (Ibid, emphasis in original). As part of the extended montage, the exhibition as constellation, Alexander Kluge projects film fragments onto Grosse's stages. An example being the Medea picture from antiquity projected onto Katharina Grosse's stage 4, the scissor crane stage [*Bühne 4: Scherenkranbühne*]. The Medea picture was also on view in the exhibition as a photographic print on aluminium. 'The atopic link between the stone Medea fragment from 3,000 years ago and the scissor crane from 2019,' Kluge notes, accomplishes 'a TRANSITION in time [...]' (Ibid, emphasis in original).

In "The Essay as Form" Adorno forges an analogy to music in that the essay 'approaches the logic of music, that stringent and yet aconceptual art of transition,' coordinating 'elements instead of subordinating them' (22).<sup>32</sup> For, as Adorno makes clear: Its dynamism the essay draws from the 'constructed juxtaposition of elements' that renders it at the same time 'more static' (22). What is more, 'thought' as Adorno specifies, 'does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts,' for Adorno, and the same holds true for Kluge, 'depends on the density of the texture' (13). According to Kluge, one should not tear through that which presents itself as being complex, such as the spider web. Kluge foregrounds the figure of Arachne in reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, not only in view of his own working principle, but also in the context of forging links to former exhibition projects, such as his exhibition *Pluriverse*, shown at the Museum Folkwang, Essen, in which his film *Arachne, die Spinne* was shown.<sup>33</sup> In *The Power of Music* Kluge picks up the threads, "weaves" incessantly, not only in terms of display [think here of the celestial map that already features in *Pluriverse*, albeit with distinct *Setzungen*], but also in terms of "spinning further" (within the abundance of material on view) the relationship between such concepts

<sup>32</sup> Asked by Ben Lerner about Adorno's 'appreciation or lack of appreciation for film,' Kluge notes: '[...] we actually wanted to write a book about film music together.' Alexander Kluge, interview by Ben Lerner, "Angels and Administration: An Interview with Alexander Kluge," *The Paris Review*, February 2, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> The exhibition *Alexander Kluge. Pluriversum* (Pluriverse), a collaboration with curator Anna Fricke, was held at the Folkwang Museum from September 15, 2017 to January 7, 2018 and in a new form at the Belvedere 21 in Vienna from June 6 to September 30, 2018. Just prior to *Pluriversum*, Kluge collaborated with Thomas Demand, Anna Viebrock and curator Udo Kittelmann on the exhibition *The Boat Is Leaking. The Captain Lied* held at the Fondazione Prada in Venice from May 13 to November 26, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> See Anna Fricke, "Eine Flaschenpost von Alexander Kluge: Protokoll einer Ausstellung," in *Alexander Kluge. Plurale Autorenschaft*, eds. Christian Schulte, Birgit Haberpeuntner and Melanie Konrad (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2022), 37–54.

<sup>35</sup> As Klemens Gruber has noted in drawing up the avantgarde reference points of Kluge's work, such as the formative element of interruption (Brecht), it envisages interrupting the fatality of the course of history. See Klemens Gruber, "Avantgarde / Arrièregarde. Alexander Kluges strategisches Vermögen. Drei Hinweise," *Maske und Kothurn*, 53, 1 (2007): 80.

as constellation and gravitation.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the essay advocates for a form of knowledge acquisition, based on experience. What Adorno conceives of in "The Essay as Form" is a work of orientation. Likewise, Kluge's interest lies in what he views as the capacity for orientation in light of past, present, and future catastrophes. Repeatedly Kluge, as someone who has experienced the bombing of his home city Halberstadt, takes up the theme of war and destruction in relation to opera [Station 5]. At the core of Kluge's project is an attempt to transform the operatic stories, and by extension to transform history with literary and filmic means.<sup>35</sup> To do so, he plays out variations in his search for alternative turns and endings. If in the 5<sup>th</sup> act the opera always ends in a bloodbath, what turn does the plot have to take in the second act to avoid final sacrificial deaths?

## MONTAGE

I would now like to move to what seems to be the core of Adorno's essay. The essayistic thinker, Adorno posits, is one who 'does not actually think but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without unravelling it' (18). Yet, *how* precisely does the essay think and by extension, how does the exhibition think in terms of form/montage? The essay 'thinks in fragments [...] and finds its unity in and through the breaks,' writes Adorno (16). 'The key to Kluge's [...] essayism,' Richard Langston underlines in turn, 'has always been the principle of montage' (6). Through this principle of montage, Kluge not only forges 'cognitive relationships' as Langston notes, but also expands the idea of the constellation into his own aesthetic method of representation. Yet, far beyond the artistic, it proves to be of great epistemological importance, as Kluge notes: 'The individual phenomena that can be observed and described should keep their own life. They are primarily and in themselves not an instrument of a higher context of meaning' (Kluge in Streckhardt, 143 – 144). In the exhibition's dense web of cross-references, we depart from the idea of a closed totality. In view of his multi-part project *Opera: The Temple of Seriousness*, Kluge deconstructs opera. He breaks it down into its elements, only to reconstruct these into polymedial

and polyphonic correspondences. All in all, what we are dealing with here are short, autonomous fragments, loosely staged in the exhibition space (Fig. 2).<sup>36</sup>



Figure 2. Exhibition view Alexander Kluge. *The Power of Music*, Museum Ulm / kunsthalle weishaupt (2019–2020). Alexander Kluge, Sarah Morris, Anna Viebrock. Courtesy the artists. © Photo: Michael Kurz

Furthermore, what Kluge's exhibition project makes clear—and here he departs from, differentiates himself from his mentor and friend Adorno—the focus is not merely placed on the 'thinking mind' but also on 'the sensing body' (Langston, 9). This sensing body is also a body in motion in which physical effort plays a role, as the many diagrams and projected images bear witness of. Without doubt, Kluge's *critique*, as Richard Langston has poignantly noted, is an 'embodied' one (Ibid). It is not only the ear that we come across repeatedly, but also, for instance, the soles of the feet, the diaphragm. Notwithstanding, the ear, for Kluge, is the organ of music and opera as well as of balance. Balance, Kluge keeps insisting, is a form of orientation. It creates relationships.

## ACTIVATION

In *Opera. The Temple of Seriousness* Kluge enquires into opera's historic roots, as well as whether and how its historical material can assert links to the present. In other words, Kluge interrogates the role and function of opera, its contemporary relevance. This means enquiring not only what opera is or was, but rather what opera could be. 'In an intact public sphere,' Kluge writes:

<sup>36</sup> C.f. Christian Schulte, "Opern-Stenogramme," *Maske und Kothurn*, 53, 1 (2007): 13.

<sup>37</sup> Emotion, in the work of Kluge, is not to be misunderstood as some kind of vague feeling, but rather it is about the faculty to orient oneself, to find the way out. See Herbert Holl, Vincent Pauval, Clemens Pornschlegel, "Einleitung: Sinn(e) und Zeit – Kluges Parteinahme für die Gefühle in Anbetracht der Geschichte," in *Von Sinn(en) und Gefühlen*, eds. Herbert Holl, Vincent Pauval and Clemens Pornschlegel (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2018), 13.

*the opera house is part of a counter-algorithm that helps produce a counterpoise to the media's world of algorithms, to the power of the factual, and to the supremacy of the objective. EMOTIONS are the ship and the opera house is the ANCHOR. The real conditions are the storm that is able to ground the ship. When a ship as old as our civilization is propelled toward a rocky coastline, then well-greased anchors that rattle out of their hawsepipes are needed ("The Thin Ice of Civilization", 62, emphasis in original).*

For Kluge, music and the intelligence of emotions represent such anchors.<sup>37</sup> Kluge's work looks at other potential narratives that contribute to mapping and redefining our present in social, political, and economic terms. Here, the stress is on transformation, the exhibition's thematic undercurrent.

What is more, Kluge is interested in those operas of the twentieth century that have not yet been realised. In reference to Kluge's imaginary opera guide "Xaver Holtzmanns Projekt: 'Imaginärer Opernführer,'" Christian Schulte speaks of 'operas of potentiality' [*Möglichkeits-Opern*] that would be suitable to reproduce the experience content of our time (296). I conclude with some thoughts on how the essayistic may reverberate in the audiences as part of the viewing process. The spectator to Kluge's exhibition navigates between different genres and media in a space in which rules and conventions are subject to continuous probing. The exhibition offers a multi-layered narrative with numerous contrasts and breaks that the viewer rubs against. It seems to ask the latter to 'read' the exhibition's pieces, in line with Kluge's operatic works, as sketches for another kind of opera, 'dedramatized' [*entdramatisiert*]: an opera, as Schulte has suggested, that does not seek a culmination point, because it does not rely on linear progression. It is up to the viewer to activate the space, break, interval, or gap between the works (296).

*The Power of Music* is undoubtedly an invitation to question our perceptual habits towards opera, to further our ability to not only create links between the past and present, to observe historical formations and to critically analyse them, but also to further our capacity to differentiate. As Guntram Vogt has argued, Kluge returns the art production to the viewer not in the sense of completing the work, but rather as a form of co-production that he sees has as much to do with self-empowerment as it does with self-regulating one's senses (308). It is this critical activity that Kluge's project seeks to stimulate. Circling back to the

beginning of this text, empathetic statements such as the Nietzsche quote, the exhibition's motto: 'Without music, life would be a mistake' [*Ohne Musik wäre das Leben ein Irrtum*] to be read as a challenge, not as appeasement, represents, as Vogt suggests, only one of the multipolar reference points in this process (Ibid). It is precisely in this sense that Kluge's statement resounds here: '[...] where one begins to be silent, that's where the music starts' [*wo man anfängt zu schweigen, da fängt die Musik an*]. This, in turn, highlights the act of sensing envisioned by Kluge in his continuous exploration into the nature of emotions, the basis for all differentiation.

#### WORKS CITED

- Langston, Richard. "Introduction. The Guardian of Difference. The Essayist Alexander Kluge," in *Difference and Orientation: An Alexander Kluge Reader* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).
- Adorno, Theodor W. "The Essay as Form", in *Notes to Literature, vol. 1.* trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3–24.
- Christ, Hans D. "The Temple of Seriousness / The Thin Ice of Civilization," in *Das dünne Eis der Zivilisation. Oper: Der Tempel der Ernsthaftigkeit.* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2019).
- Streckhardt, Bert-Christoph. "Kluges Konstellationen. Alexander Kluges Fortsetzung der Kritischen Theorie mit narrativen Mitteln," *Cahiers d'Études Germaniques*, 69 (2015).
- Kluge, Alexander. *Das dünne Eis der Zivilisation. Oper: Der Tempel der Ernsthaftigkeit* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2019).
- Schulte, Christian. "Die Räume sind die Nachricht," in *Alexander Kluge. Plurale Autorenschaft*, eds. Christian Schulte, Birgit Haberpeuntner and Melanie Konrad (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2022).
- Vogt, Guntram. "'Ohne Musik ist alles Leben ein Irrtum.' Zu Alexander Kluges Musik-Magazinen," in *Die Schrift an der Wand. Alexander Kluge: Rohstoffe und Materialien*, ed. Christian Schulte (Osnabrück: Rasch, 2000).

# PART IV



Alice Twemlow

**129** Towards a fray of messays: a method-mode in artistic research

Paul Bailey

**141** On disciplinarity and legibility, failure attempt

Emily Huurdeman

**151** Essaying art: an unmethodological method for artistic research



## TOWARDS A FRAY OF MESSAYS: A METHOD-MODE IN ARTISTIC RESEARCH

### INTRODUCTION

Artistic researchers like to claim that the process is as important as the end product. That critical reflection during the journey of discovery is as valuable as any insight attained at the destination. And yet, however worthy this ambition, the written record of this field of practice knows otherwise. Even if myriad variations of modes and genres and formats of writing have gone into the development of an artistic research project, when it comes to dissemination, experimentation is expunged. Findings are made 'explicit', stylistic idiosyncrasies are smoothed over and essaying forays are curtailed, in deference to the perceived strictures of academic writing from a former era of scholarship where the 'writing up' of findings was an activity that took place under duress at the end of a research trajectory.

The artist- and designer-researchers that I have mentored in the Netherlands, for example, often have a conception of academic writing as both an obstacle to be overcome and a restrictive set of gestures to be emulated. 'I felt inadequate', said one PhDArts candidate when we discussed their writing, 'and so I doubled-down on what I thought was the kind of writing expected at such a high level of scholarship' (n. pag).

As artistic research matures, however, and feels less compelled to shore up its insecurities with the sandbags of so-called academic writing, perhaps it's time to shrug off this inhibiting inheritance. Perhaps we can start to support one another in experimenting with ways of writing that are more authentic to creative practice and in writing throughout the duration of the research process. We might even give each other permission to enjoy it.

One of the most thoughtful advocates of artistic research in the Netherlands,

Henk Bergdorff, always knew that when it comes to the ‘written, verbal or discursive component that accompanies the material research outcome’ [...], ‘a double-blind reviewed academic journal will not be the most appropriate publication medium’ (58).

So what is the most appropriate? Of all the writerly genres and dispositions that an artistic researcher might choose to convey the ‘written, verbal or discursive component’ of their research, surely one of the richest in generative potential is the one which, according to William Carlos Williams, aims at ‘multiplicity, infinite fracture, the intercrossing of opposed forces establishing any number of centres of stillness’ or, to give it another name—the essay (323).

The essay, with its dual identity as an entity (trial, short literary composition) and an inclination (to attempt, to weigh, to test the mettle of, to sound the depth of, to set in motion, drive, to draw forth) taps a rich etymological compost of decomposing fragments of Old French and Latin. In the Online Etymology Dictionary, hanging like a low ripe fruit for the artistic researcher, there is even the editorializing addition: ‘the suggestion is of unpolished writing’ (n. pag). The essay, whose mettle has been well-tested in art, film, video, performance, and digital design as *practices*, still has depths left to sound by research.

This paper explores how a defiantly even-more-unpolished variant of the essay might be used to activate writing all along the path of an artistic research trajectory. How it might perform as the site of a non-hierarchical convergence of the capacities of making and musing—an open, pluralist, and responsive method-practice—as ‘unsettled’ in its form as it is in its subjectivity (Alter and Corrigan, 12).

It proposes the term *messay* and the verb *messaying* to signal the meshing of writing as a practice and writing as a material. It is hoped that an elucidation of one instance of how this format-method has been assayed, will contribute to an expanded conception of how and when writing is used in and with artistic and practice-based research (Escobar, xvi).

At The Royal Academy of Art The Hague (KABK) I guide a research group, whose members are teachers and practitioners of design, art and theory. We meet every few weeks in each other’s studios where we discuss our experiments, read texts, write, and think with each other through the doubts, dilemmas and complexities of our individual projects and the methodological or thematic

composite that connects them.

The name of the group, ‘Design and the Deep Future’, acknowledges the need to reckon with design in relation to climate emergency and the social injustices it illuminates and accelerates. To reckon with design in the context of expanded timescales including geological deep time, to confront how the toxic run offs of design products, processes and values sediment into the planetary, atmospheric and biological records for the very deep future.

The 2021 group convened as this climate emergency was worsening, the coronavirus adapting and spreading, and repercussions of the Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movements fomented in Dutch institutions exposing in many (including, quite notably our own), a lack of social safety, transparency and accountability.

Before we could start building individual research projects using the usual formulas, therefore, it felt necessary to pause to ask how we could create conditions for doing research that we considered to be authentic to our practices (as teachers as well as researchers) and to how we were feeling physically and emotionally. Research was not exempt, or even separate, from the injustices being performed and endured around us. Social-environmental crises had been the content or subject matter of our research, but increasingly they were also becoming the context, and context in which it felt necessary to take a position.

We discussed how to cultivate a more robust practice of care in our own research and in relation to one another—how to give each other more time, for example. And, in acknowledgement of the collective and cumulative processes of research, how we might de-author our own projects while holding space for the voices and names, not only of our students and peers and researchers to come, but also the non-human agents we worked with, in what Anna Hickey-Moody has termed

'human-object-space-sound multiplicities' (181).

Part of this challenge was to develop a way of researching and writing together that, as Anna Mann et al have pointed out, does not mean attempting to achieve a single voice, but rather to generate a 'viscous composite', a *we* that 'holds insolvable differences within it (224).

Friday, September 17, 2021, K, V and A

Today we met online via Zoom, and did some timed writing exercises in Notion. We each picked a visual arts research process/concept: Collaging, Displacing, Salvaging. First we wrote for 25 minutes freeform on whatever associations that word evoked, (although roughly in relation to deep time and our own visual arts praxis). At the 25-minute timer we stopped, moved onto the next concept and picked up where things had been left. In the next session we wrote for 20 minutes, riffing off of, and commenting on, whatever aspect of the existing text jumped out to us. One more pass, one more writing session of 15 minutes. Then we "unfolded" our efforts.

The exercise gave us a glimpse of what co-writing can be like (with all its awkwardnesses) at the granular, rather than the merely abstract/hypothetical level. We had to get used to our writing being treated by others as material to build on and with, as well as to disassemble; we had to gain confidence in interrupting, talking back at, and making holes in, the writing of our peers.

K said she tried not to look back at what she'd written before. The process seemed Dadaesque, she said. Especially when she was writing about her own practice of collaging, she felt she was inhabiting the very format of an endless collage. For V, too, the ticking clock and the permission to be messy, prevented the need to look back and self-correct.

By writing through these concepts, new terms rose to the surface for what it was we were doing. So we take forward to the next phase: Riffing, Interfering, Perforating.

Friday, October 1, 2021, A, L, J

L was in the Research space at KABK. A and J were each in their homes. We met on Zoom and did two timed writing sessions of 30 minutes. A *riffed* on Returning; J *interfered* in Collaging; L *perforated* Salvaging. We reconvened, discussed and then set off again: L on Displacing; A on Digesting; J on Salvaging.

Everyone got tired quickly. It's an intense mode of writing. We paused to reflect. So many overlaps and connections. J saw how a collage under pressure could be considered a metamorphosis, like a sedimentary rock.

*K: wow metamorphosis again - I know V is also reading Emanuele Coccia at the moment. We might add something in collaboration here?*

In our post-writing musings today, we realized that our ostensibly distinct essay topics were becoming more and more (pleasantly) confused in our minds and among themselves and that, within an essay, voices were in merging in places.

Just then I remembered a conversation about silence I had had earlier that year with the musician, radio producer and PhD candidate Guy Livingstone. I had asked how his dissertation was coming along and he had said it was still a mess. Just a never-ending sprawl of essay. A *messay*, if you will. I jotted down the word in my notebook. *Messay*...I said. I like that. Can I borrow it one day?

With a diverse range of archetypal progenitors and siblings, including the

archive, the zine, methods of annotation and collage, open source software production, and participatory art practices, the messy surfaces meanings and new insights through the juxtaposition, clustering, sequencing, enlarging, cutting and splicing of images, fragments of video, social media memes, audio files, images, links, text and writing. Because the seam-ruptures between its components are not smoothed over, perhaps the most apt point of reference is Sergei Eisenstein's *intellectual montage*, where the meaning-making is derived from the visible clash between heterogeneous elements.

Author and theorist Jean Ricardou's concept of *mixte* is another reference point. When he wrote *Le Théâtre des Métamorphoses*, published in 1982, he felt that he had found a way to 'combine' the two previously disjointed activities of fiction and theory in one work. In an interview he said, 'Je dis bien "combine" et non pas "assemblé", car ce livre, ce n'est pas un "mélange" (un fourre-tout désinvolte), c'est un "mixte" (une diversité calculée) (22-24).

Jan Baetens sees the *mixte* as a juxtaposition of text and writing in dialectical conversation. *Writing* for Ricardou, according to Baetens, meant words that had an external referent, while *text* was internally and self-referential. In advocating for its use in artistic research—and, in particular, literary artistic research—Baetens suggests that this strategy maintains the tension and difference between two types of writing, but it does so *within one text itself*. In other words, it neither 'creates a diptych out of a piece of creative writing and a sample of critical analysis *nor* tries to invent new ways of writing that merge the two text types and erase or cover up their essential differences'. The *mixte* is collage, therefore, in which the text and the writing 'cannot be superseded in a synthetic reconciliation, appear in opposition to and next to each other. In such a way, the *mixte* does not abolish the differences between creative writing and critical analysis, but neither does it exclude the possibility of their mutual enrichment' (13-22).

Messaging can be done individually or collectively; privately or publicly. It can accumulate commentary and interpretation from collaborator-readers, and change over time. It can be done during a research process to reflexively document experiments conducted elsewhere and with other media. It can record the workings-through of theoretical concepts. But it can also function as the site of experimentation in itself.

The messy is material, a physical construction, which combines the modes and mindsets of making and essaying.

There is an embodied character to writing that is often disregarded, a tactility almost and a phenomenology of writing [...] Most of what we do as scholars is refashioning, often through bricolage, by making novel connections, reconfiguring, reframing, and rearticulating ideas [...] The process evolves through composition [...] To put it differently, all creation is collective, emergent, and relational; it involves historically and epistemically situated persons (never autonomous individuals), and this ineluctable relationality is acknowledged now by designers in the age of "design, when everybody designs," in Ezio Manzini's (2015) skillful title. I suspect that many scholars would agree with the view just sketched of how intellectual making takes place (Escobar v-xvi).

As anthropologist Arturo Escobar conjures it, 'intellectual making' is a desire to write *designedly*, but it's an embodied conception of design, where ideas, interpretations, associations, rebuttals and questions are generated and sampled, modified and mutated and otherwise bricolaged in physical—even visceral ways. Another PhD Arts student, whose practice is choreography, and has found a way to escape the perceived limitations of academic writing, noted, 'When I am writing, thoughts materialize and become gestures on the page, they sweep and they swirl, they crawl and cut. I *want* to "write choreographically"' (n. pag).

Messaging also wants to write spatially. As it probes, connects, negates, dissects, and unravels, it occupies all the territory of a page or screen. Meaning-making happens sinistrodextrally, but also diagonally, in darts and bursts, circularly, in infinity loops. The discursive sequence is amplified or disturbed by correspondences and dissonances between colours, shapes, and gestures that cut across and through the composition (Roes and Pint). Often it leaks out of its container and re-forms on noticeboards and shelves, in the way we use our hands in conversation, in workshops.

(Writing should really have its own workshop: just past Ceramics, and next to the Hacklab, with all its differently geared genres, formats, tools and modes arrayed in their silhouetted positions on the peg board. Here there are

tools for noting, listing, questioning, prompting, scripting, coding, journaling; on the work surface there are samples of librettos, thick description, legal contracts, myths, taxonomies, recipes, captions; and strolling around are instructors eager to discuss the finer points of argumentation, exposition, science fiction, annotation. Messayists would often be found in this workshop, tinkering with a line of code, welding on an afterthought.)

In fact, my research group's messay-making actually began a few months earlier than its metamorphosis into writing. In July 2021 we curated a radio show and a display of the objects and sources that fed our research. For the radio broadcasts, we each chose a student to engage in conversation about how and why we conduct research in, through, and with art and design. Students shared their thoughts on research and gave us advice on how we might best continue our inquiries.

The idea was that as we were talking and mentioning a citation or object, we would be able to indicate it in a three-dimensional assemblage of our individual and shared references, which included: a jerrycan of whale oil, an essay by Mark Fisher, a hunk of plastiglomerate loaned from Museon, a book by Emanuele Coccia, iron ore from Baffin Island smelted with silicon dioxide, a looping selection of scraped digital media, a bag of toxic granite dust, a folder of digital image waste, and a 3-axis Fluxgate probe.

Despite this potential for multimedia and embodied expression, the messay's closest relation, however, is probably the visual essay. Like the visual essay, a messay is not only communicated by its design on the page or screen; it is its design on the page or screen. Decision-making about colour, white space, typography, format, spatial relationships, and mode of dissemination is self-aware and charged with resonance. These visual aspects each play a part in building the argument, not by illustrating it, making it legible or framing an argument, but rather because they are in themselves what is illustrated, made legible or framed.

Friday, October 1, 2021, A

First thoughts/decisions on messays:

*Things are starting to feel unmoored. We need some*

*grounding. Let's each write a 1-2 paragraph scene that is located in a specific time and place (can also include dialogue), a moment, exchange, or event in the research trajectory or occurrence at one of the sites of research practice.*

*Let's not write about the findings of our research, but rather about the process of our research. It is thick description in the sense that it's about what it feels like to be situated in the middle of the experience of doing our research in this particular configuration of researchers at this particular moment in time.*

*Let's write to one another, offering advice, encouragement, reminders. We know each other pretty by now; and can guess at what we might each need!*

*Let's not censor our our doubts and dilemmas; these are also research.*

*Let's stick to, and dig deeper into, the first-person perspective. When does one I end and merge into the next? Does it matter?*

*How legible does this need to be? How should we keep the sense of an idea being developed along a course even as it is being disturbed by an awareness of the whole and the tension between its opposing concepts?*

*How profound does this need to be? How to keep the freshness of our first-person perspectives on a topic and the lightness of touch that comes from a timed-writing space but also indicate there are historical lineages of theory, even layers of our own thought and adjacent practices to acknowledge? Let's experiment and report back!*

Like one of the central paradoxes of the essay that seeks, as author Brian Dillon discusses, the impossible simultaneity of 'exactitude and evasion' or 'the acute and the susceptible', the messay questions at the same time as it conveys its own contribution to knowledge. It posits an argument, but also invites a counterargument.

Through revealing its own structure, it signals its provisionality; there is room for another interpretation on the part of the reader. As such, messaying as a creative act and tool, artefact and communication vehicle, has the potential to mediate between art and design practice and academic research.

Doesn't it?

In later meetings of the research group, as we worked through the formative possibilities of the messay, we became nervous. We began to wonder where its edges might be. Where our own edges might be. We detected echoes of our own concerns in Della Pollock's characterization of performative writing when it 'anxiously crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders' (Pollock, 73-103).

We wondered if we were trying to make a Borgesian 1:1 Map of the Empire, or the ideal book, as Deleuze and Guattari imagined it, where everything is laid out 'on a single page, the same sheet: lived events, historical determinations, concepts, individuals, groups, social formations' (9).

Would that way madness lie?

Was the *mess*- obstructing what we could -say?

If an essay, which according to Dillon (one of the de-facto experts on the topic since his insightful literaria autobiographia, *Essayism*), has competing urges to integrity and disarray, to be a form and a format even in its own process of collapse, what would that mean for the messay, in which the battle between refusing to be complete and still yearning to be legible is even stronger?

Another PhDArts student: 'My personal struggle is in discovering language to express the scaffolding or over-arching structure within which fracture and continuum must co-exist. How can I address the linear and the non-linear together, as a single and relevant form?' (n. pag.).

Whether the messay can contain the fracture and the continuum, and if its form is single let alone relevant, we don't yet know. We do know it can be a site of imaginative exploration for corralling and bringing together 'including that which cannot be joined' (Slager, 82). And it can be a printed, interactive, or

time-based tool for gathering a community around research in an open-ended and welcoming way.

Within the structure of a year, the format of a research group, and in discussion with students, we have attempted to: intuit the material agency of baskets and duckweed, iron ore concentrate and whale fat, meme ooze and time; embrace the research potential of ceramics, web scraping, rehearsals, listening and props; heed the conceptual imperatives of hauntology, poison, migrant identity, fear, and collective authorship.

By iterating in a series of tentative moves, messaying with a bricolage of approaches and concepts salvaged from speculative design, the environmental humanities, new materialism and anthropology, from artistic research, geology, archaeology, and from practices of care, it is our hope that we might still be able to contribute alternative imaginaries to the reservoir needed for the sensory, emotional and intellectual compositing of more equitable climate futures.

By allowing our messays to remain unfinished and doubting with traces of their workings-out and workings-through still visible, their edges left unfinished, we wanted to signal that other 'human-object-space-sound multiplicities', are invited to enter the fray (Hickey Moody, 181).

## WORKS CITED

- Alter, Nora M. and Corrigan, Timothy. *Essays on the Essay Film*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017)
- Baetens, Jan, 'Limits and Pitfalls of Creative Writing as Practice-Based Research', in eds. Corina Caduff and Tan Wälchli, *Artistic Research and Literature*, (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2019), 13-22.
- Borgdorff, Henk, 'The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research', in eds. Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson, *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, (London: Routledge, 2010)
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) tr. Brian Massumi.
- Dillon, Brian *Essayism*, (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017)
- Escobar, Arturo. *Designs for the Pluriverse*, (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2018)
- Hickey-Moody, Anna, 'Manifesto: The Rhizomatics of Practice as Research', Chapter, 9, *Arts, Pedagogy and Cultural Resistance: New Materialisms* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015)
- KABK Research Group <https://www.kabk.nl/en/lectorates/design/kabk-research-group-2021>
- Mann, Ann et al., 'Mixing methods, tasting fingers: Notes on an ethnographic experiment', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Vol. 1.No. 1, Fall 2011
- Online Etymology Dictionary, 'essay', [https://www.etymonline.com/word/essay#etymonline\\_v\\_11631](https://www.etymonline.com/word/essay#etymonline_v_11631)
- PhDArts candidate, unpublished text, September 21, 2021.
- PhDArts student, unpublished notes, October 2021.
- Pollock, Della, 'Performing Writing', in *The Ends of Performance*, edited by P. Phelan and J Lane, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 73-103.
- Ricardou, Jean, 'Lire ce qui change', interview with Bernard Magné, in *Affaires de Style*, no. 3, June, 1983, pp. 22-24.
- Roes, Remco and Pint, Kris, 'The visual essay and the place of artistic research in the humanities', *Palgrave Communications*, Volume 3, 2017.
- Slager, Henk. *The Pleasure of Research* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2015)
- Williams, William Carlos, 'An Essay on Virginia', 1925, in *Imaginations*, (New York: New Directions, 1970)



## ON DISCIPLINARITY AND LEGIBILITY, FAILURE AND ATTEMPT

### INTRODUCTION: ON ATTEMPT AND FAILURE

In their introduction to *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy offer a lineage of, and possible meanings for, the essay. 'The French 'essai', derived ultimately from the Latin *exāgium*, a weighing, could mean 'trial', 'test', 'attempt', 'sounding', 'sample', 'temptation', 'risk', 'apprenticeship', 'exercise' (n. pag.). We've come to understand the essay as a form that does not set out to offer resolute answers. It seeks to open enquiry, to problematize and in some cases to make strange, to disrupt the familiar by loosening habitual connections.

The essay as an attempt, a trial, a test; an exercise, ripe with risk and temptation calls for an approach at ease with the possibility of not succeeding, of failing, but attempting to carry out a project nonetheless. When we think on the established imperatives of graphic design as a discipline, we typically encounter and employ language that describes its function, what it is there to do - to simplify, to offer a resolved solution to a given problem, to package an idea neatly and succinctly for a given market.

An essayistic mode of approach – to openly risk failure – sits outside of the normative terms and imperatives we assume from practitioners operating within the discipline of graphic design. The disciplinary glossary of graphic design typically does not permit a failing approach or sensibility. It prioritises success, stability and resolve. Karshan and Murphy tell us 'Montaigne's essay is the opposite of decisions or resolutions: various, changeable, contradictory, befuddled, staggering, drunk' (n. pag.). If we take Montaigne's essay as 'the model' — a model that sits in opposition to 'decision' or 'resolution' — as something more akin to 'staggering' or being 'drunk', we might then wonder what place does the visual essay have within a discipline such as graphic design?

Following a line of discussion that observes tensions between disciplinarity and legibility, failure and attempt, this text traces instances where graphic designers have employed the visual essay as an instrument to assay alternative imperatives for/from graphic design.

## ON DISCIPLINARITY AND LEGIBILITY

In writing around the implications of disciplinarity, Jack Halberstom alerts us in *The Queer Art of Failure* to the use of disciplines to manage and to regulate, to reproduce and to normalise. We are told 'Disciplines qualify and disqualify, legitimate and delegitimate, reward and punish; most important, they statically reproduce themselves and inhibit dissent' (9). We learn there is a tendency for disciplines to govern and to operate as gatekeepers for acceptable, verifiable, and typically quantifiable, forms of knowledge that are profitable for those in positions of privilege and power.

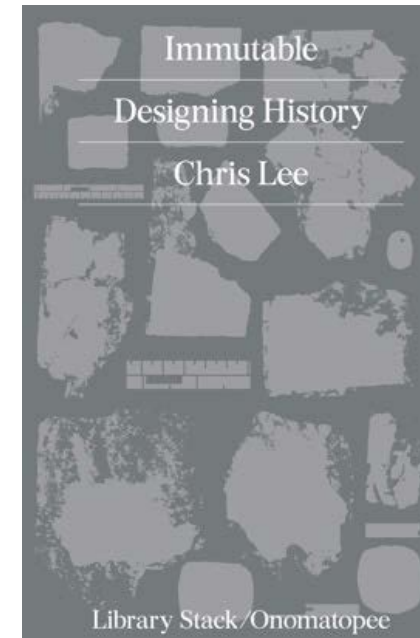
Halberstom points us towards the publication *Seeing Like a State*, by James C. Scott, which by way of a detour, became 'a study of the demand by the [USA] state for legibility through the imposition of methods of standardisation and uniformity' (ibid). Scott proposes:

*Legibility is a condition of manipulation. Any substantial state intervention in society... requires the invention of units that are visible. The units in question might be citizens, villages, trees, fields, houses, or people grouped according to age, depending on the type of intervention. Whatever the units being manipulated, they must be organized in a manner that permits them to be identified, observed, recorded, counted, aggregated, and monitored* (10).

Scott highlights how disciplinary methods of manipulation push forward an imposed order of things and promotes the erasure of the less orderly, less productive and less manageable aspects of society. He argues the disorderly tend to be classified as less profitable and therefore problematic, and therefore side-lined and in time illegible i.e. overlooked, unseen and typically unsupported by the state.

Graphic design is a commissioned practice mostly, where the terms and conditions of a project are set out by a commissioner - sometimes with the designer, often without the designer - to be resolved, realised and made public. It is typically deployed to render society legible, manageable and knowable, by way of documents, signage, digital interfaces, branding and much more besides. These terms, forms and their associated imperatives have become the disciplinary expectation for graphic design, and then also a means to recognise

and regulate those operational within it. It is a practice that is deeply rooted within a service economy, riddled with the burdens and privileges of heteropatriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy and settler colonialism.



Chris Lee, *Immutable, Designing History* (Eindhoven: Onomatopée; USA: Library Stack, 2022)

Canadian graphic designer, writer and educator Chris Lee investigates graphic design's contribution to such drives for legibility in the design and production of documents, artefacts, tools and systems. In *Immutable, Designing History*, formulated as a visual essay, Lee strives to orient 'graphic design towards the vocation of imagining, naming, and remembering beyond the horizons of its role as a managerial, administrative, and colonial instrument' (n. pag). The essay leads us through an alternative historiography of the designed documents 'entanglements with statecraft and colonial(ism/ity)' (Ibid). In the Preamble section of the publication, Lee explains his concern for 'the document' within this pursuit:

*Documents are the quotidian and banal graphic design objects that bear the various ways of knowing*

*and remembering that shape our political and cultural space. Immutable traces the design of documents, and speculates on what it would mean to center it in an alternative historiography of graphic design (ibid).*

Lee's attempts to trace this alternative 5,000-year historiography of graphic design through the careful selection, sequencing and cross-referencing of 'visual notes, references, research and source materials, with extended annotations, captions and aphorisms' (n. pag.).

As we move through *Immutable: Designing History*, we initially observe images that look like history, 'older looking' objects and materials, which we might assume to be lifted from museums and archives. We are invited into a practice of close looking, zooming into the elements that reveal the intersections and overlaps between graphic design with imperatives such as regulation, security and ownership.

Patterns, textures and image treatments are carefully examined to illuminate the intentions and implications of their formal, institutional visual codes. For instance, we observe encoded treatments within currencies serving security requirements, to ward off forgery. We also observe renderings of borders, cables and geo-infrastructures speaking into and shaping digital systems and programmes, to regulate and to claim.

Lee augments this historiography by inserting newly designed documents. Figures 159, 158 and 156 sit within a constellation of related documents concerned with the evolution of the cylinder within practices of accounting. Lee designed and produced a 3D printed cylinder of cryptographic hash strings (159, 158). The 3D printed cylinders pressed into clay tablets (156) produce a texture which corresponds with the textured surfaces we observe in ancient tablets such as figure 155. This discursive document, bridging the technologies of crypto and clay, intends to raise discussion about the stability and durability of information. This notion of (in)stability is addressed directly in the gesture to add 'new' unverified documents to a reading/telling of history. The insertion of Lee's own documents into this historiography invalidates this reading/telling of history as stable, verifiable knowledge. It is knowledge that has not been agreed (read) by the normative institutional systems, such as peer review. In an interview, Lee confirms this is a deliberate act intending to disrupt and complicate the expectations for what qualifies as knowledge production within and beyond institutional metrics and expectations. It is a micro, critical gesture questioning

the legibility and stability of existing historiographies.

Lee states 'no document ever achieves the absolute immutability (nor depoliticization) it seeks, and every document is met with attempts to subvert, challenge or invalidate it'. We observe further attempts to subvert and challenge the document in the treatment of the images throughout the essay. The images are rendered in greyscale, printed on white and off-white paper stock. There is no full colour, photographic reproductions, which we might come to expect if we are to assume the photographic document as a more stable form of evidence, i.e. full colour, full proof. This treatment of imagery reminds us that the image itself is a 'mutable', unstable document. Moreover, it can be manipulated by and through design.

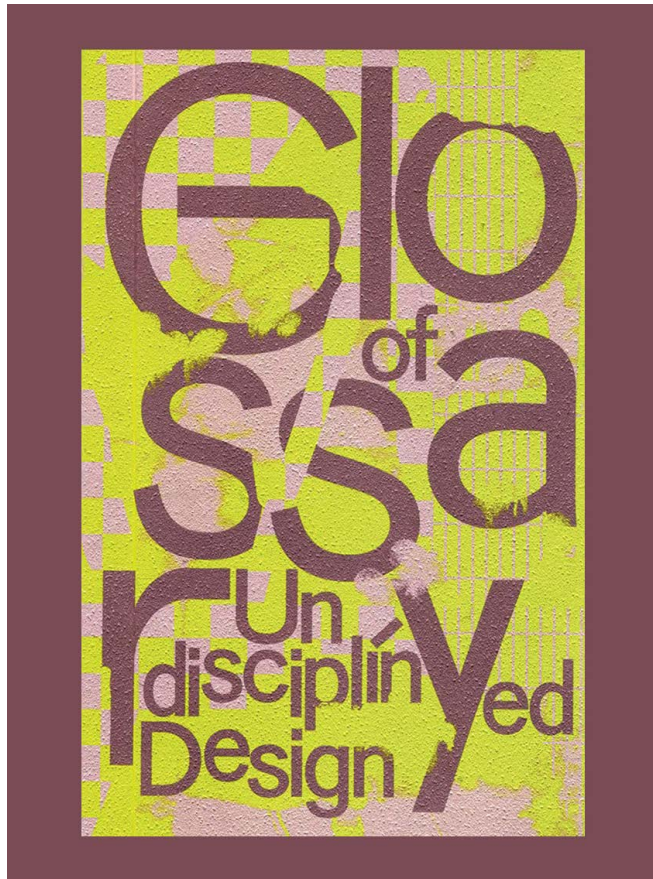
Lee explains that he approached each page as a unit of information, a space to bring documents into relation to suggest particular cross and/or mis-readings. It is a tactic to challenge the linearity and progression of time as a history-telling device. Theodor Adorno, when addressing the flow of thoughts within and through an essay, likens the essayist's ability to craft and weave ideas together to that of a woven carpet. He argues that thought 'does not progress in a single direction'. Instead, the moments of thought are 'interwoven as in a carpet'; their fruitfulness 'depends on the density of the texture' (37). Lee cross-stitches and interlinks. For example, the pagination advances sequentially (1, 2, 3...), whilst the figure numbers devolve (167, 166, 165...).

In the e-book version, Lee employs hyperlinks 'to give some emphasis to the historical "rhymes," echoes, and resonances that reverberate across millenia of documental production' (n. pag). These tactics invite the reader to unstitch the binding of time from the spine and prompt the reader to trace new detours through the images. This is a gesture signalling there is no one way, route or track to read these materials, and therefore acknowledging the construction of the argument as tentative, subjective and personal – tendencies and sensibilities typical of the essay/ist. This desire to allow unresolve is crucial in this essayist mode as he explains, 'Graphic tangents and tributaries herewith, necessarily under-unexplored, leave, one hopes, some space for generative and playful conjecture and speculation, to inspire further study, and debate' (Ibid).

Lee's expression and intention to employ the essay to invite gaps and breaks chimes with a similarly fragmentary approach that Nora Alter refers to in her text "Translating the Essay into Film and Installation". She explains: 'For both [György] Lukács and [Theodore] Adorno, the essay is fragmentary, wandering and does not want to find absolute truths... but rather 'find unity in

and through breaks and not by glossing them over' (47). This tendency to gloss over is where we typically encounter graphic design; seamlessly stitching a coherent, palpable whole from various disparate parts. Lee, like Lukács and Adorno, resists this through his selection and edit of the documents, as well as through the design of the essay.

*Immutable: Designing History*, invites imperatives for graphic design that move beyond demands to regulate, manage and survey society. Lee asks us to consider what is at stake if we, as a discipline, continue to accept the 'legible' histories of graphic design that are narrated without critically considering the role graphic design has to play in maintaining such legible models, for whom and at what cost?



Anja Kaiser, Rebecca Stephany, *The Glossary of Undisciplined Design* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2020)

## ON UNDISCIPLINARITY AND ILLEGIBILITY

Initiated and co-edited by Anja Kaiser and Rebecca Stephany, *Glossary of Undisciplined Design* is a publication project cultivated by a symposium and a series of seminars in design programmes throughout Germany and the Netherlands throughout 2020-21. The project set out to offer 'additional definitions and concepts for the field of graphic design and its current state' with a very deliberate intention to 'happily fail at reinforcing patriarchal imperatives for the field of graphic design and its institutions' (126). A key imperative for the project is to specifically take aim at the restrictive conventions for success in academia. In attempting this, Kaiser and Stephany refer to Halberstam's proposition for a 'radically queer re-imagination of success in discriminatory systems' as a framing device and driver for the project (156).

Kaiser and Stephany opened an invitation to their graphic design students to investigate forms of knowledge production through alternative aesthetic and material processes as an opportunity to undiscipline on their own terms and through their own means. In response, a series of visual essays, authored by the students slither through the publication, modelling a diverse set of non-normative approaches.

In Severin Geißler's contribution to the volume, the visual essay "Failing Queerly", we observe the designer sampling Halberstam's words and rendering them anew through a suite of 'alternative, inefficient and time-consuming methods of visual reproduction' as means to question 'the normative regime of industrial mass production' (35). Geißler's essay attempts 'an approach to design which critically embraces failure as part of the production process of design' (ibid). The visuals are printed using 'weak and unstable' inks produced from cabbage, turmeric and algae – that are liable to fade with time – upon leftover, flawed paper stocks that would not meet industry standards due to assumed imperfections (ibid). There is a tendency towards illegibility in the visuality and sequencing of the image-texts across the pages. We receive fragments, rather than the whole. This illegible approach is one Halberstam acknowledges and supports stating: 'illegibility may in fact be one way of escaping the political manipulation to which all university fields and disciplines are subject' (ibid). Here I think on illegibility as suggestion. In reading Geißler's essay we are aware that the entirety of the Halberstam's proposition is not available through its visual treatment, and that this is conscious. They wish to maintain a distance, to suggest rather than explain in entirety. There is an invitation here to assume our individual faculties

of interpretation, to call upon our own renderings of failure.

Throughout the publication, we observe the essayists quoting the works of fellow anti-disciplinarians, such as Michel Foucault, bell hooks and Halberstam whilst gesturing towards critiques that are as much about the personal and the subjective, as they are about the collective and the disciplinary. There is a palpable attitude of resistance, risk and adventure, threading through the essays in their subjects, visualities and materialities. For instance... "B for Blanketing", by Juliane Schmitt and Juliana Vargas Zapata, calls for designers 'to conspire together secretly (hiding under a blanket)' as a strategy to establish transparency on the social, monetary, emotional and communal value of one another's work (105-107). "M for Metabolic Learning", by Severin Geißler and Kathrin Rüll, printed with algae-based ink on rice paper, proposes food as a graphic medium and social event to acquire and digest theory. "S for Strudelung", by Severin Geißler, Hanna Müller, Kathrin Rüll and Juliane Schmitt, translates Sheila de Bretteville's propositions for relationality into eight collectively produced apple strudles. Whilst participants kept their hands busy with the dough they discussed 'the multi-layered field of work, in which spheres of professional and private life are constantly mixing' (85-87). Hard-work, soft-work, co-work. "Social Media Surrender", by Kathrin Rüll, commissions a bot to collaborate on exploring the implications and tensions of networking our creative persona's through social platforms (221-226).

Throughout this series of micro-essays, there is an active and engaged approach - a consideration for the essay as verb, not noun. Karshan and Murphy observe this risky, resistant attitude in Montaigne's approach also, stating:

*Montaigne plays on the full range of [the word's] possible meanings, to propose essayistic writing as a tentative, risky, and experimental way of rejecting authority and exercising the free-thinking of the author: rather a style and attitude than a form, more frequently a verb than a noun (n. pag.).*

The essay's we've referred to are visual registers of the critical questions the student designers are grappling with, in conversation and in relation with their peers, but crucially by means of their critical visual practices as essayists. They are considerations about the authority observed in the discipline in formation, to be contested and reimaged.

The gesture to invite the students into exercises and attempts to interrogate, challenge and circumvent the dominant, normative disciplinary codes is a powerful and political act. Kaiser and Stephany call into question the design of a discipline itself in a manner that is collective and plural. This series of visual essays, appearing amongst the contributions of many established graphic design practitioners and academics, provide records of disciplinary dissonance. Kaiser and Stephanie's set out to take aim at the restrictive conventions for success in academia. Here success is much less to do with academic achievement, measured in assessment results. Instead, success is evident in their skill in enlivening critical debate through the tools, mechanics and infrastructures of the discipline directly; to assay alternative imaginaries.

## OUTRO

The possibility to fail, as opposed to resolve, that the essay form invites has provided a forum to call out the failings, as opposed to the successes, that these practitioners observe in the discipline of graphic design. Courting failure as a possibility offers a break from the normative, legible practices and opens fruitful paths towards illegibility.

The projects and practices we have referred to are current. They are contemporary. They are adopting the visual essay as part of a suite of other tools within their practices to address inequalities and inconsistencies they observe within established infrastructures, behaviours and institutions. Karshan and Murphy refer to Adorno's suggestions that the knowledge offered by the essay is not that of definition, but experience likening it to when 'someone in a foreign country 'sees the same word thirty times in continually changing contexts' and thus 'will have ascertained its meaning better than if he had looked up all the meanings listed' (n. pag). I take this to mean that our understanding of the visual essay's potential within contemporary critical practices of graphic design is to be accumulative, to be one which we must track and follow as it evolves through practice.

Chris Lee and *The Glossary of Undisciplined Design* team model an essayistic approach that is curious and enquiring, where critical questions spanning the personal, the disciplinary and the public are played out and contested. I believe they are significant 'attempts' in a trajectory towards illegible practices. Whilst thinking of the impact such gestures may have, I am reminded of a metaphor put forward by Halberstom calling for 'a thicket of subjugated knowledge that sprouts

like weeds amongst the disciplinary forms of knowledge, threatening always to overwhelm the cultivation and pruning of intellect with mad plant life' (9). This series of visual essays provoke and speculate with a determined disregard for the disciplinary codes that tend to dominate and overshadow. The essays and essayists may be read as weeds with wild, untamed and unruly roots - ripe for further elaboration, exploration and action.

#### WORKS CITED

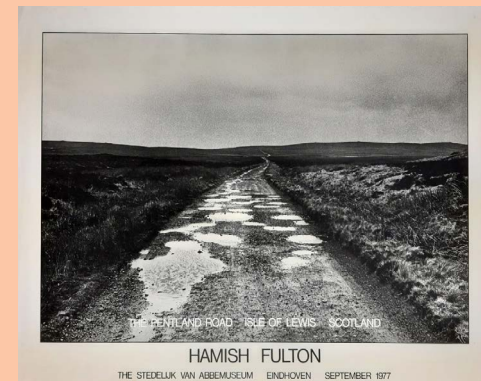
- Alter, Nora M., 'Translating the Essay into Film and Installation.' *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 1 (April 2007)
- Geißler, Severin and Kathrin Rüll, 'M for Metabolic Learning', *Glossary of Undisciplined Design* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2020), 97-98.
- Geißler, Severin, Müller, Hannah, Rüll, Kathrin and Schmitt, Julian, 'S for Strudeling', *Glossary of Undisciplined Design* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2020), 85-87
- Geißler, Severin, 'Failing Queerly' in *The Glossary of Undisciplined Design* eds Kaiser, Anja, Stephany, Rebecca. (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2020).
- Halberstom, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011)
- Kaiser, Anja, Stephany, Rebecca. *The Glossary of Undisciplined Design* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2020)
- Karshan, Thomas and Murphy, Kathryn eds., *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)
- Lee, Chris. *Immutable, Designing History* (Eindhoven: Onomatopee; USA: Library Stack, 2022)
- Rüll, Kathrin, 'Social Media Surrender', *Glossary of Undisciplined Design* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2020), 221-226.
- Schmitt, Juliane and Vargas-Zapata, Julina, 'B for Blanketing', *Glossary of Undisciplined Design* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2021), 105-107.

## ON UNMETHOD





# PART V



Christel Stalpaert &  
Nina Vurdeljat

**155** Essayer: walking as speculative methodology

Lucia Rainer &  
Sandra Freygart

**165** ENTWEDER NOCH. A collaborative experiment on gender-fluidity with and through the essay form

Liesbeth Groot  
Nibbelink & Anne  
Karin ten Bosch

**176** Ragged Dialogues

Veronika Darian &  
Jana Seehusen

**187** How to face? A blank spot. Performative exercise #3

## ESSAYER: WALKING AS SPECULATIVE METHODOLOGY

Forsdick's (2005) account of essayism as a peripatetic genre cultivates a rather romantic perspective on walking - the solitude of the walker, and the free thinking it generates. Rousseau, Goethe, Schiller, Carus, Byron, Macpherson, Nietzsche, Thoreau, ... all reflect on 'walkable landscapes'. They all express the spiritual struggle of the isolated individual with him or herself in the face of the mysterious, sublime, overwhelming or all-encompassing life of nature. And what ideas it brings to them - to us, thinking humans - adventurers roaming the world. This is, in fact, a utility-driven perspective on landscapes: they are beneficial for our mental health. This is, in fact, a very human-centered vision.

*The countryside, still green and radiant, though some of the leaves had fallen and it was already almost deserted, was the very image of solitude and the onset of winter. Its appearance stirred in me mixed emotions of pleasure and sadness which were too similar to my age and my fate for me not to make the comparison (Rousseau 2011 (1782), 13).*

This lingers on in the work of walking artists of the sixties and seventies, such as Earthworks in the US, the Land Art Movement in the UK, and the Arte Povera movement in Italy.

*The luxury of walking lies not in the first place in the leisure or in the paved way one can pleasantly amble over, but in something more fundamental: the margin of free meaning the things we see can have because they can now be looked upon with a gaze that is liberated of the duty to perceive everything solely from the perspective of the potential use or damage to man...*

*The joy of the walker lies in the plenitude of meanings the world gives evidence of. ... He takes pleasure in the things,*

Hamish Fulton. *The pentland road Isle of Lewis Scotland*. 1977. Exhibition poster The Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.



*that they are there and that they are as they are. He simply takes pleasure in the world and in himself in that world, he celebrates his existence* (Ton Lemaire, 2002, 152).

How to move from an individual-aesthetic to an ecological perspective? 'The ecological perspective does not replace the aesthetic, but gives a deeper account of what art is doing, reformulating its meaning and purpose beyond the gallery system, in order to redress the lack of concern, within the aesthetic model, for issues of context or social responsibility' (Gablik Suzi 1992, 8). It is about revisiting the social through acts of walking.

Walking as an ecological practice looks closer at moving together with other bodies, e.g. walking as being together in an entangled more-than-human corporeality. This approach introduces a specific (inter)mediality of moving bodies, where concepts such as *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1980) or *milieu* (Nancy, 1996), as forms of connectedness and sociality, are re-worked in a non-anthropocentric manner.

In order to recognize complex more-than-human embodied constellations of movement, is not only needed to decentralize human cognitive, perceptive and sensuous ability/affordance. More importantly, for it is crucial to critically address legacy of ontological dualism: human-nature, mind-body, subject-object, through the very act of moving together.

In relation to this, through the practice of walking and thinking with the landscape, we question human-exclusive representational rigidity and signification patterns based in language, and move towards affective, intuitive and trans-corporeal as a space for unearthed knowledges and stories of the world in motion. In our video essay, this is achieved by working with affect and thinking beyond the rigidity of representation. In this way, walking becomes an act of re-visiting, a diffractive reading back and forth, therefore enabling textures, contact zones, detours, re-discoveries and returns to converse with the situated knowledges and storied places.

Drawing on Gibson, Ingold elaborates on the wayfaring practices of movement, where 'path is where knowledge is forged along the way' (Ingold, 2011, 149). His interpretation of the state of becoming knowledgeable as thinking and knowing through movement in the weather-world is crucial for understanding walking as an intermedial practice/tactic/technique of mixing agencies of air and ground, and the moving body, or bodies. A walking practice is seen as an act of responsiveness and transcorporeal relating to the body terrain the one moves

upon. Each step is an act of terrestrial response-ability, an ability to respond to what is encountered along the path.

The essayer is carried forward by the indeterminacy of the landscape walked through, a quality which Ana Lowenehaupt Tsing (2015) brings in connection with the creation of more-than-human assemblages. Unknowability of walking expands spaces for the unexpected, uncertain, unknown to emerge along the way. Walking as an act of multispecies encounter, makes space for noticing, deep listening and paying attention. It is listening with our whole bodies, listening to stories under the foliage, thickness of ice or cracks of the pavement. This modality of walking is in a close relation with the skills of attending and witnessing the place, and being in conversation with multiple voices that inhabit it.

## ESSAYER = PERIPATETIC THINKING-WITH

The ecological mode of 'walking the landscape' is exploratory, process-oriented and speculative. Walking-with is a form of undoing and unlearning.

*Walking-with is accountable, (...), a form of solidarity, unlearning, and critical engagement with situated knowledges. Walking-with demands that we forgo universal claims about how humans and nonhumans experience walking and consider more-than-human ethics and politics of the material intra-actions of walking research* (Springgay and Truman, 2018, 11).

To unlearn is to 'engage with marginalized and erased knowledges to bring about new forms of sociability with the other than human' (Hay in Billingham et al.(eds.), 2020,14). It is a tentacular thinking-with companion species while walking. It is a resurgence of knowledge in relationality.

In a peripatetic thinking-with, we are relaying knowledge in creative uncertainty. We cannot proceed with mechanical confidence towards solutions, proceed through what Donna Haraway coined as 'tentacular thinking' (31-34). Instead, we would like to expand her notion of tentacular thinking to a tentacular-thinking-with-things. This means allowing things to emerge as mediators; also, that "things" are allowed to story<sup>38</sup> the place.

<sup>38</sup> I deliberately use the verb 'to story' instead of 'to narrate', as Haraway's concept of a vexed place is building on Thom van Dooren's theory of storytelling, developing "a nonanthropomorphic, nonanthropocentric sense of storied place" (in Haraway 2016, 39; see also van Dooren 2014, 63-86.)





Friedrich, David.  
*Der Einsame Baum*. 1822.  
Oil on Canvas.

First, tentacular thinking does not pretend to emerge from one source of thinking. It is a co-creative thinking 'outside the premises of modernist humanist doctrines' (Haraway 2016, 177, fn 26). A myriad of tentacles is needed, with many appendages, for the art of tentacular thinking. They make 'attachments and detachments; they make cuts and knots; they make a difference' (Haraway 31). What Bohm called 'participatory thought' is such a kind of tentacular thinking: it is 'a mode of thought in which discrete boundaries are sensed as permeable' (Bohm 1996, xvi).

Second, the Latin *tentare* refers to the verb to try, indicating that tentacular thinking is also tentative thinking, in the sense of speculative thinking. As Haraway put it, the myriad of tentacles in tentacular thinking 'weave paths and consequences, but not determinisms; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others' (2016, 31).

Third, the Latin *tentare* also refers to the verb to feel. The etymology of the word *tentacle* hence entails a double meaning, also referring to a tacit 'production' of knowledge. The Latin *tentaculum* refers to 'feeler', indicating that the tentacular are not disembodied figures. As such, tentacular thinking is 'a hugely consequential, mind-and-body-altering sort of commitment' (34).

Bohm referred to the 'proprioception of thought' (1996, 27-29) in tacit knowledge production. In proprioception, the body is provided with immediate feedback about its own activity, for example, our embodied memory allows us to climb stairs or rocks or trees in a confident manner. In a peripatetic thinking-with, in this tentacular-thinking-with, the movement of thought becomes proprioceptive, much as the body does. When we consider our body responding with increased muscular tension, responding to the softness of the moss and the water in a wetland, for example, this provides us with feedback on actual thoughts. We learn that we become cautious when dialoguing with unsteady soil, informed by this muscle tension we become aware of a subtle fear for thoughts that are not part of a designed plan.

But there is more to tentacular thinking when it comes to cultivating an awareness of interconnectivity in a more-than-human world. A tentacular *thinking-with-things* also reminds us of 'the capacity of others as our teachers, as holders of knowledge, as guides' (Kimmerer 2013, 58). And these 'others' might be other humans, but might as well be fungi, trees, algae or a bay. In that sense, tentacular thinking-with-things, or peripatetic thinking-with is also a way of undoing and unlearning anthropocentric habits of thinking.

There are several ways of undoing and unlearning in peripatetic thinking-with:

- to acknowledge other temporalities (e.g. to acknowledge tree time has us slowing down)
- to acknowledge other route markers (such as flight ways - means expanding space / undoing place)
- to acknowledge other biological and social systems (is to acknowledge the functioning of the wood wide web next to world wide web – Merlin Sheldrake)
- it is to acknowledge other stories in multi- storied places

## ADVENTURERS STORYING THE LANDSCAPE

But imagine the possibilities. Imagine the access we would have to different perspectives, the things we might see through other eyes, the wisdom that surrounds us. We don't have to figure out everything by ourselves: there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us. Imagine how much less lonely the world would be (Kimmerer 2013, 58).

### Peripatetic thinking-with forest soil

They (fungi) reshape our ideas of community and cooperation. They screw up our sereditary model of evolutionary descent. They utterly liquidate our notions of time. Lichens can crumble rocks into dust with terrifying acids. Fungi can exude massive powerful enzymes outside their bodies that dissolve soil. They are the biggest organisms in the world and among the oldest. They're world-makers and world-breakers. What's more superhero than that (Sheldrake 2021)?

### Thinking-with wetlands

A bay is a noun only if water is dead. When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans. Trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa*-to be a bay- releases a water from the bondage and lets it live. To be a bay holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mengarsers. But it could be otherwise- become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are words for that too (Kimmerer 2013).

## AFTERWORD

How can our awareness become recursive?

How do we give an account that does not settle neatly into singular narratives?

Imagine...

how differently the soil responds to the walking modalities of our companion species (human and more-than-human)

...in the minefields of past and ongoing wars...

across closed borders or refugee corridors.

Imagine...

how differently the soil responds in an extremely harsh way to our extraction activities ...

Imagine the earthquake, the flood, the erosion.

What about the stories that are heard even less?

What about our response-ability to those?

## WORKS CITED

- Bohm, David. *On Dialogue*. London, England: Routledge, 1996.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Forsdick, Charles. *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Cultures: The Persistence of Diversity*. London, England: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Hay in Helen Billingham, Claire Hind and Phil Smith (eds.). *Walking Bodies: Papers, Provocations, Actions*. Axminster: Triarchy Press, 2020.
- Ingold, Tim. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London, England: Routledge, 2011.
- Lemaire, Ton. *Filosofie van het landschap*. Amsterdam: Ambo, 2002.
- Manning, Erin, and Brian Massumi. *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Being Singular Plural*. Translated by Robert Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. trans. Russell Goulbourne. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011 (1782).
- Sheldrake, Merlin. *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures*. New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2021.
- Stalpaert, Christel. "Tentacular Thinking-with-Things in Storied Places. Parliament of Things (2019) by Building Conversation." In *Performance and Posthumanism*, 195–233. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021.
- Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman. *Walking Methodologies in a More-Than-Human-World: WalkingLab*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. Minnesota: Dover Publications, 1995 (1854).



*ENTWEDER NOCH.*  
A COLLABORATIVE EXPERIMENT ON GENDER-FLUIDITY  
WITH AND THROUGH THE ESSAY FORM

The German expression *entweder oder* (“either or”) anticipates a decision regarding one or the other, while *weder noch* (“neither nor”) acknowledges that a decision can in fact not be made. Taking this into account, *ENTWEDER NOCH* is a collaborative writing experiment that curiously introduces notions of becoming fluid. This experimental set-up with and through the essay form addresses prevailing questions how gender identity can, in non-contested authorship, play out across different bodies within the spectrum of trans.



## PROLOGUE:

### First Scenario: Alone

She is all by herself. Only a white sheet of paper and a computer keeping her company. She has an idea and a plot that she wants to follow. So she begins to write. Skillfully she establishes a text framework. Very systematically. Her thoughts are well-structured allowing her to write her text.

### Second Scenario: Lonesome

She is all by herself. Only a white sheet of paper and a computer keeping her company. Yet, an observation sparks her interest. So she starts writing. She tries to catch the subject of interest, all the while struggling for resonating words. Her curiosity dispreads, but she does not know what kind of plot will emerge. Piece by piece, text fragments individually develop. Her writing invites thinking. The initial description evolves into an own interest that gradually solidifies. Within this writing phase, themes, figures and counterparts diffuse associatively and intuitively.

### Third Scenario: Companionable

Two women live in different cities, but they want to write collaboratively in shared authorship. Together they are interested in trailing away from contested words and sentences, shifting towards ideas of liquid writing instead. Relating to Georges Didi-Huberman's concept of 'the phasmid' (1989) and notions of phasmid thinking, they are triggered by experimental set-ups that inspire moments of de-focusing. De-focusing as an act of phasmid thinking that requires a practice of un-doing or rather re-doing. The latter puts into question what they think they are seeing, which they are, in fact, only seeing because they know what they are seeing (or rather thought and believed they knew).



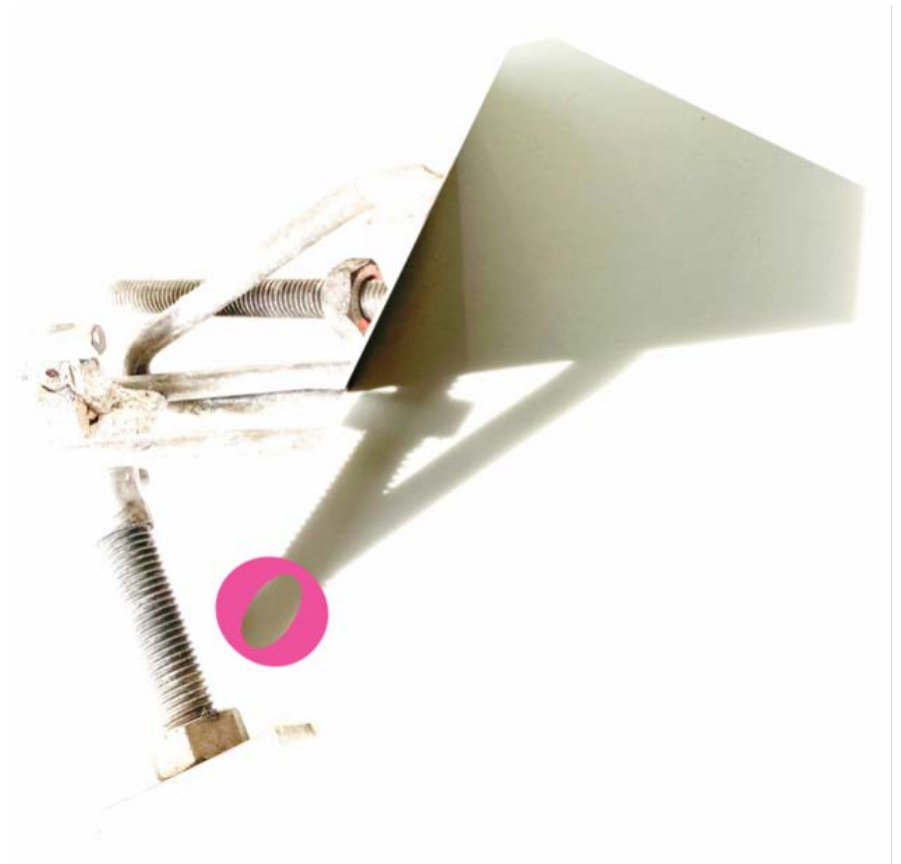
## I. Silver

*I have sexual characteristics that fall into the female category. I have sexual contact with people I would define as being male. Up to now, there has never really been an occasion for me to question my gender identity and a possible changeover. Until today.*

Today they decided upon a rule: Don't think. Just write. So one woman begins writing. Something fascinates her. First silver, then silverfish. She does some research and comes to know the Latin name. *Lepsima saccharina*. Stop. Don't think, just write. She crosses out everything and writes *sugar guest*. The word *I* follows and a first sentence emerges. *I invite the sugar guest in*. What kind of sugar guest? And who is *I*? She stops asking questions and continues. *I offer him chocolate and cake*. A tiny plot evolves. The silver fish is the sugar guest who, in a very odd and peculiar manner, chunters and fascinates her. She sends the short text to her partner. She reads it, is irritated, laughs and is annoyed. She relentlessly crosses everything out that refuses access and focuses on one single detail that catches her interest. She continues writing, feeling the erotic tension. She sends the text back.

The woman reads Georges Didi-Huberman's essay *The Paradox of the Phasmid* (1989). Within, Didi-Huberman describes his own experience at the vivarium, the vivier, at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. While visiting the vivier, he - more or less by chance or maybe also as a movement mirroring fear - steps back. This act of literally stepping back places himself before the evidence that 'the vivarium's little forest was itself the animal it was supposed to be hiding'<sup>1</sup>. An animal that visually engenders anxiety as it 'makes its own body into the scenery which hides it'.<sup>2</sup> This catches her interest. In light, the silverfish scurries away. In hurrying after, the beast grows. What is it hiding? They don't know. They just write.

The text goes back and forth. There is no rush. Slowly its plot becomes self-sufficient and inter-mediate. Writing emerges as a meeting zone where both women experience the act of becoming other. Despite living in different cities, they increasingly engage within each others thoughts. They essay collaboratively through space and time: A practical attempt of constant hide-and-see and continuous sounding, sampling, and disrupting habituality. All of a sudden they find themselves amidst a topic that they, in the beginning, did not know was bubbling under. A topic engendering the spectrum of trans.



<sup>1</sup> Didi-Huberman, *The Paradox of the Phasmid*, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

## II. Slicker

Today, you find this device in front of your doorstep. Why? You have no idea. You didn't order anything. You didn't even know that there was such a thing - that such a device actually existed. Who sent it? Is it a request, a demand, an invitation? Or is it maybe just a misunderstanding? You never really had an actual opinion. But now?

You open the package and then close it again. Open. Close. Just like that. The package is shipped through 'Flexse limited liability corporation'. Strangely, its prominently-placed logo is a multiple-sinuuous infinitude loop. The loop starts to blink the moment you are within immediate proximity. It shifts on the color range between light blue and light pink.

All of a sudden there is a theme. The plot develops further. A tug-of-war between a cowboy-cool slicker and an adventurous woman feeling her way towards her own sexual identity. The slicker: Is he *entweder noch*? Neither male nor female, refusing a decision? An essay evolves within which both women negotiate the possibilities of using a device with which one's one sexual identity can be interchanged. An *I* evolves, but who are you, I?

I am the person who ponders upon fluidity as an expression of non-duality. I am inspired by Karen Chiaroni's concept of 'Fluid Philosophy' (2016) which affirms that humans are 'creatures born into movement and subject to constant flux'.<sup>3</sup> I feel encouraged to 'change the element with which we think'.<sup>4</sup> I feel encouraged to change the elements with which we write. Relentlessly I share words, phrases and sentences. I complement, abbreviate and cross out. I allow for my narratives to follow yours, dwell upon and either stay, or gradually shift away again. I loose myself in-between you and I and am triggered by an extensive search that allows for the supposedly non-imaginable to be conceivably precise and diffuse spaciouly. I discover the essay form as a methodical possibility of constant flux. A possibility to go back and forth between multiple narratives and their heterogenous dimensions of reality. A possibility to dissolve space and time, focusing on my central question: What if?

*What if I was to do it today?*

*What if ...*

*Inside: lots of packaging material, little content. Layer by layer I put the packaging aside. Inside: a chest. Metallic bright purple. About the size of a box of chocolates. Classy. But what the*

*hell? The logo flashes on illuminating*

*'Flexproductive systems'. My eyes latch on to the loop of the logo. A lying eight. Moving back and forth from top to bottom and left to right and back again. I am hypnotized.*

*What if ...*

*I drag myself away. I rummage around in the bottom kitchen drawer for the kitchen scales. I need numbers. Precise calculation tells me that the package consists of a total of 67% packaging material. The actual content merely weighing 33%. I don't stop and find out that within the 2021 international gender census poll, 44.500 gender diverse persons chose non-conforming as their identity word. 33. What if I also belonged to these 33%?*

*You start scribbling. On the inside of my underarm. In the middle you sketch Easter 1991 at your parents' friends house Anne and Chad. Directly underneath you scribble the white albino bunny that you found dead in his box just one day after. The bunny and Anne's coming out directly connected. On the inside of my palm you scrawl the formula: male + female = x. Was that the reason the bunny died? You continue to draw and pull up my skirt. You draw the Argentinean man with whom you tangoed. He was considerably smaller than you, that's why you rested your left temple on his bald head. You felt like a sex goddess. But within which part of your body?*

*I put a big X directly on the bunny drawing and my thoughts wander to Chris. Earlier his name had been Christine. His last surgery was imminent. He had been through years of hormonal treatment. While we tangoed I felt as if I was simultaneously dancing with a man and a woman. My body, electrified.*

While writing they ponder upon the notion of the refracted state of becoming, as conceived by Gilles Deleuze (cf. Bankston 2017). They increasingly correlate their individual body and body relationship with the supposedly unthinkable. What have they been seeing in themselves, which they, in fact, were only seeing because they thought they knew what they were seeing?

*I tear the lid of the box open. Inside: a little silver jewel case. Next to it a recharger and a tiny leaflet that tells me that this device will make it possible to interchange my gender identity. I am told that it is possible to do this multiple times at any rate and any frequency. But who will guarantee that I can rollback my decision? Having feminine parts pulled out of me and masculine parts pushed inside of me. Now.*

<sup>3</sup> Chiaroni, Fluid Philosophy, 108.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

*First I press the one button, then the other one and then both at the same time. The device's control unit adjusts the categories masculine and feminine variably. In the meantime the slicker has made himself feel comfortable in the living room, but this is confusing as the woman does not know if the slicker, the device, or her own gender identity interest her most. She is not even sure if maybe the slicker itself is the device that will guarantee her flex-sexuality. Her own gender*



identity has totally come apart at the seams, transforming the slicker into an element for the creation of liquid imaginary, working itself into the ground of the woman's inner and outer boundaries. Her own gender identity expands into an unforeseeable exploration of the un-defined, bringing her to step into a state of *entweder noch*.

### III. Light-Pink

The women have reached a writing phase that is no longer characterized through processes of intuitive writing. Instead, this phase of their shared authorship includes processes of profound thinking, re-thinking, re-writing, moving on and finally de-tangling the subject of interest from properly muddled up clichés and set phrases. The women are on the lookout and deeply engaged in dialogue. Shared doubt evokes continuous review and re-evaluation, puzzling around, turning upside down, repeatedly questioning, and trying a-new.

*Quickly I pull the curtains shut. I turn on my nightstand lamp and open the jewel case anew. Behind a black subfont is a longish, glossy thing. A lepsima saccharina. One of those little fish moths that hide in the cracks of my bathroom. However, a bit bigger. About as big as a string bean. Slicker, I whisper. All of a sudden the device activates itself. On the one side it glows a light pink, transforms into pastel purple and then light blue. Pastel purple. 50% light pink. 50% light blue. 'Please name your gender identity', a voice asks me. I carefully lift the slicker out of its case and carry it to the living room. I lay it on my couch table right next to the last candy herring. It lasciviously nestles up against this sugary fish. I feel something within. From top to bottom. From outside to inside. I relocate the control unit. It's easy. Flex.*

*Again, the lying eight appears. The color alternating logo illuminates. I take off my clothes. I fumble around and all of a sudden there this light-pink voice, really close to my ear. That thing must have crept up on me. "Exactly", it whispers lasciviously.*

## SOURCES

- Samantha Bankston, *Deleuze and Becoming* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).
- Keren Chiaroni, 'Fluid Philosophy: Rethinking the Human Condition in Terms of the Sea', *Performance Research* 21.2 (2016): 108-116.
- Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Paradox of the Phasmid*, [1989] trans. Alisa Hartz, [http://underconstruction.wdfiles.com/local--files/imprint-reading/huberman\\_paradox.pdf](http://underconstruction.wdfiles.com/local--files/imprint-reading/huberman_paradox.pdf), accessed September 9, 2022.

## PHOTO CREDITS

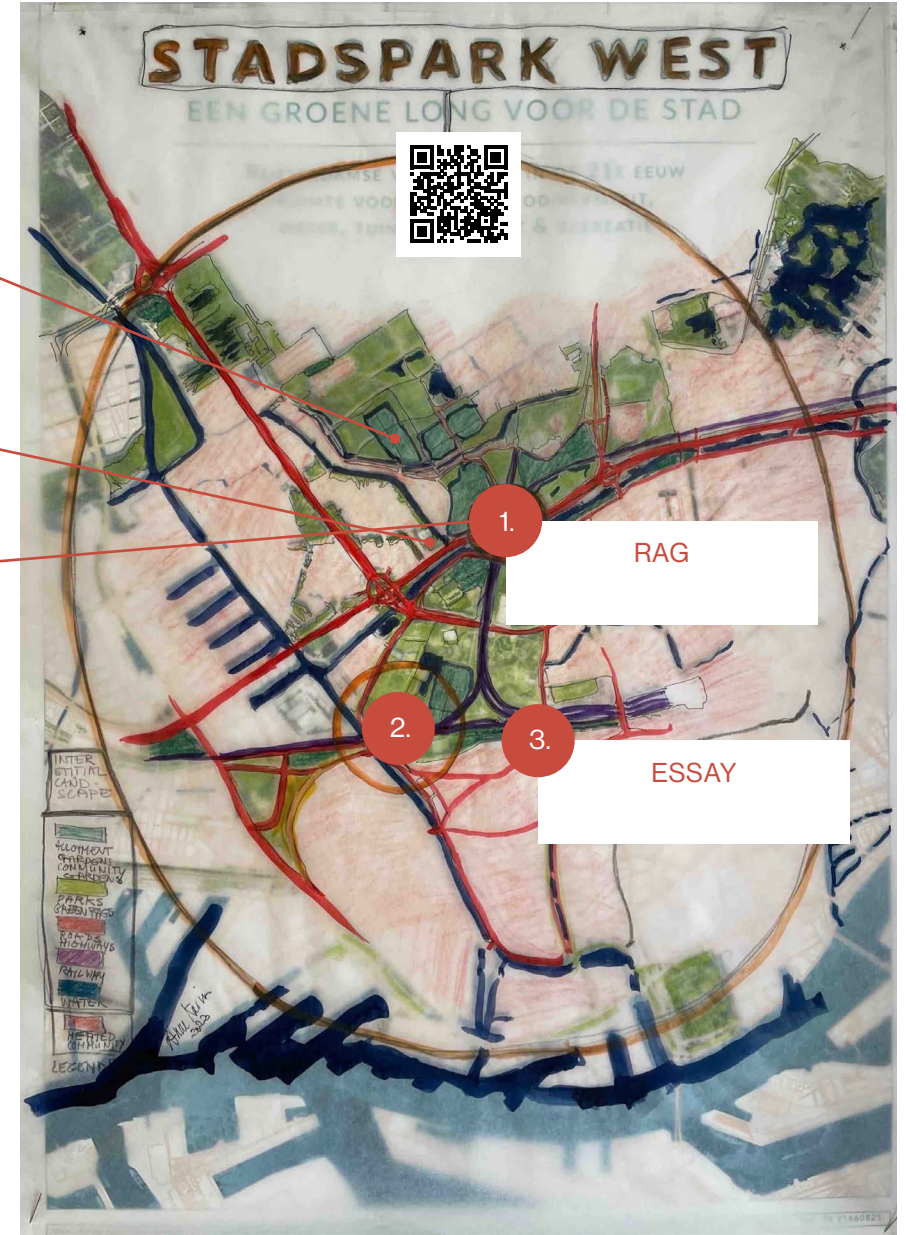
Sandra Freygart



RAGGED DIALOGUES.  
ON COLLABORATION AS ESSAY



1.





## INTERSTITIAL SPACES

Interstitial spaces are left-over spaces that are the result of infrastructural operations. Pieces of land and urban areas get intersected by roads, canals, power cables, railroads, or other spatial interventions that support the logistic operations by which we organize our numerous ways of transport. As a result of those interventions, there are left-over lands on both sides of the canal, road, cable et cetera. Areas that used to be one are now split in two, or even more sections. These separate pieces of land are unintentional remainders. Orphaned spaces. They are often not suited for urban planning, as they transgress sound norms, health guidelines or environmental regulations.

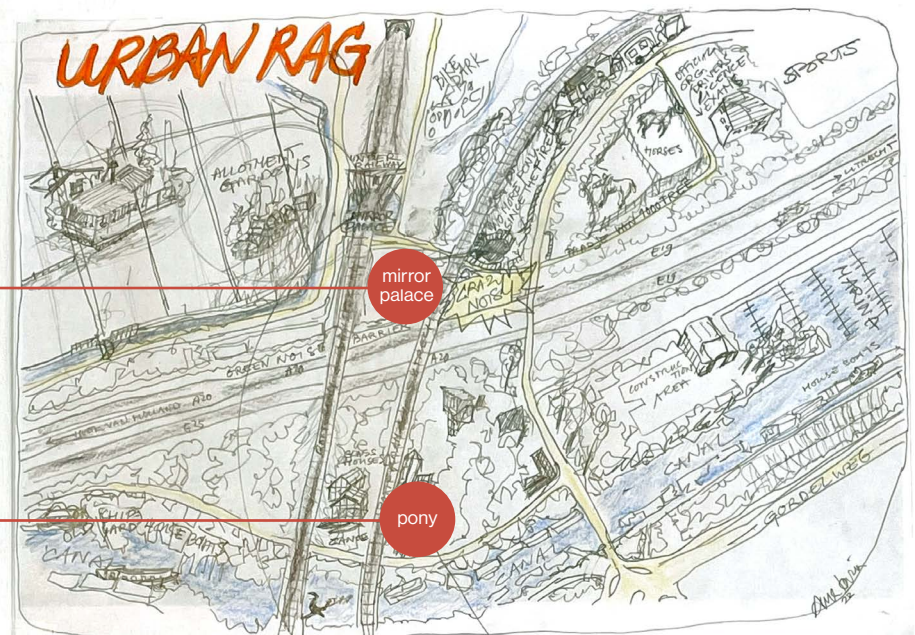
In his essay “Infrastructural Form, Interstitial Spaces and Informal Acts” (2011), landscape architect and urban designer Ed Wall describes how such spaces are newly used and appropriated, often moving beyond outside governmental law, leaving space for formal as well as informal use. Interstitial spaces are used for storing goods, construction materials, for private gardens, for keeping a pony, for taking shelter. Interspersing his essay with excerpts from J. G. Ballard’s novel *Concrete Island*, Wall invokes a space where human and other beings who seem to be lost find themselves to be in the proper place at the same time, as they cannot find their space in regular society. “Informality provides an opportunity for those excluded from formal processes to find presence in the city” (155). Every now and then local communities or groups ‘reclaim’ the lands and re/create and charge these spaces in a playful way.



## DISCOMFORT

Frayed edges can generate discomfort or uncertainty. Ragged spaces may be non-legible, ugly, ‘average’, non-programmed. People often experience difficulty in dealing with unformatted spaces, as we are used to spaces that are formatted, formed and structured. Non-formatted, informal spaces accommodate diversity. Theatre and scenography embrace discomfort as strategy to open up.

#urban scenography #dingen die schuren #non-spectacular #niet alle stukjes zijn de moeite waard hoor!





## STROLLING, SCAVENGING

In *Figuren/Essays* (1995), architecture theorist Bart Verschaffel refers to Adorno and Lukacs in pointing out that the essay starts 'outside itself'. In essence, the essay does not create new things. Things are not drawn from an empty Nothingness, but rather, the essay collects and energizes things that were already dormant somewhere and provides them with a new way of ordering or organizing. This ordering is regarded as a composition or figuration; this is where the 'figure' emerges.

The base layer of thought that sediments in the essay is the act of finding, storing, collecting, gathering, waiting, poking around - until a constellation of words or images emerges, a 'figura' in a theological meaning of the word: a preview or premonition of a thought or idea.

#scharrelen

## THE ESSAY IN/AS COLLABORATION

In *The Hundreds* (2019), cultural theorists Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart write about things on the edge of appearance, addressing affects and situations that are about to take shape due to the attention given to them.

*The Hundreds* is a book of conversations, and a book of collaboration as well. "Collaboration is a meeting of minds that don't match" (5). The book clearly presents two voices, the alternate texts are not direct responses but do resonate with one another. Berlant and Stewart produce in-between spaces, in writing. We do the same, in dialogue. They affiliate with things that are about to materialize, cherishing the being 'on to something', a "staying open to what is in the vicinity," to what resonates in a scene (34).

"*The Hundreds* is an experiment in keeping up with what's going on. Ordinaries appear through encounters with the world, but encounters are not events of knowing, units of anything, revelations of realness, or facts. Sometimes they stage a high-intensity tableau of the way things are or could become, sometimes strangeness raises some dust. [...] If our way is to notice relations and varieties of impact, we're neither stuffing our pockets with ontology nor denying it: attention and riffing sustain our heuristics" (5).

## ON VALUE

What is the value of the essayistic?

*L: There is value in the quality of dialogue, in the open exchange, in the encounter of two autonomous yet affiliated minds - like in *The Hundreds*.*

*AK: It is about openness and the possibility to fully engage with a place or space, to feel connected. For this, we need informal spaces. Yet the informal cannot exist without the formal.*



How can one preserve this essayistic openness for the city, and resist the neat and smooth strategies of urban planning in which many things are flattened, fixed and standardized? A suburb with identical houses and streets throughout the area does not inspire long conversation. A slightly chaotic and obscure shop window, instead, sparks interest. This is where the stories are, here is where life emerges. Such ragged spaces can create a certain openness through which one can feel connected or build meaningful relations with other agents in the ecosystem. Spaces and things that are fully complete(d) do not easily allow for such connections, since they only refer to themselves, they say what they are: I am a suburb, I am a bench, I am a hedge. One does not easily avoid their functionality. One does not get seated on a hedge.

#diversity #cultural diversity

## TAGGING ALONG

“So, you’re writing. You make a pass at capturing something or tagging along. It’s too fast for you, it doesn’t cooperate, but you get something, backing up at the hint of precision, muscling your way in. [...] Thought becomes a little surprised to latch on to something, to arrive somewhere, and still looks around, testing what flashes up a surround” (*The Hundreds*, 46).

## REFERENCES

- Berlant, Lauren, and Kathleen Stewart, *The Hundreds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
- Verschaffel, Bart, *Figuren/Essays* (Leuven/ Amsterdam: Van Halewyck/De Balie, 1995).
- Wall, Ed, 'Infrastructural form, interstitial spaces and informal acts', in *Infrastructural Urbanism: Addressing the In-between*, eds. Thomas Hauck, Regine Keller and Volker Kleinokort (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2011), 145-158.









## HOW TO FACE? A BLANK SPOT. PERFORMATIVE EXERCISE #3

### PROLOGUE

The script printed here is indispensably different from the scenic essay that took place in Ghent on April 29, 2022, performed by the actors J/Blackghillie and V. It is the documentation of something that took place in retrospect and, at the same time, the instruction for something that might still take place in advance.

In our common work we are gathering essayistic practices and resisting figures that circulate between pop culture and discourse, everyday life and academia. This time we focused on blank sheets as tools, that are never neutral, blind spots in the field of identity research and cultural politics. We use them as a starting point as well as a converter in order to prepare an experimental field for our exploratory approach. There we encounter ambiguous figures, that oscillate between language and image, the poetic and the political. We question the questions that Fischli & Weiss are asking (themselves). We perceive the cut as an image in Lucio Fontana's cut paintings. We marvel at the cutting experience of Lygia Clark. We begin to cut and to edit and to scissor – regarding texts and images and Möbius strips...

How do we get through?

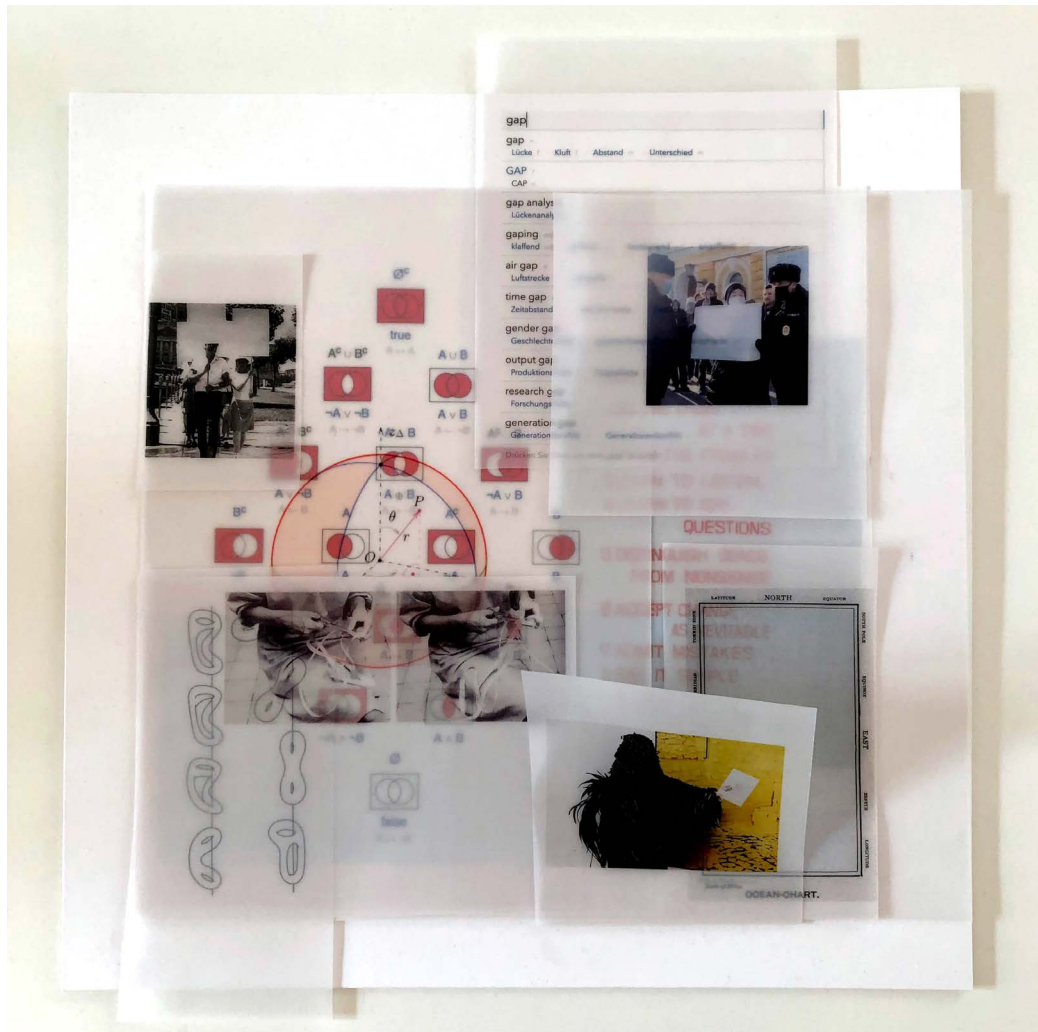
How to face?

We see posters of protesters in a performative action by Anna Halprin, white over and over, on which everyone can project own messages. We recognize them as/in the white poster of a protester in Russia, on which it is better not to project a message in public.

Calling out and outcry.

Pro Testing!

This kind of resistant material turns out to be material of resistance against mechanisms of dominant cultural positions. But there always remain gaps and blind spots in the ongoing, artistically explorative process, also in this, further attempt 'in (the) series'. The white sheet becomes a blind spot becomes a blank space, a canvas, a poster, a shield, a Möbius loop in the cut, taking on an



*How to face? A blank spot.*  
Performative exercise #3  
© Veronika Darian and  
Jana Seehusen



ever new shape in a constant new beginning. Cut, quote and combine become exercising practices for us, cutting instructions that turn out to be rehearsals for the essayistic.

This time there were guests involved, accomplices who helped us with the exercises we undertook, whose exercises we took up and derived further possibilities of practice for other actors. Figures, footage, findings, fragments – they step next to us, constellate (with) us, speak nearby us and we nearby them.

What follows: A manual, cutting instructions, a script released for further use and application, which can also be performed by others.

*The screen in the background is white all over.*

*V stands with a white sheet in her hand in front of the table facing the audience.*

*Blackghillie is sitting in the audience, incognito.*

Voice: «How to face?» an image without an image (of an image)?

Is it even possible to quote an image without fading out the respective reality?

How to deal with an image of a situation that is actually dangerous, meanwhile the image itself provides a cozy distance for us?

Perhaps we have further questions we want to address to the image?

*Blackghillie comes to the table, takes a white sheet and stands vis-à-vis V, who turns to B.*

Perhaps we are not sure about the respective agencies?

Is the image the actor?

Is the image of an image a real actor?

Is the image of an image a re-enactor?

Re-enacting reality?

Covering the real?

How to deal with a blank spot?

*Then the image of a woman that holds up a white sign and is led away fades in out of the whiteness.*

*Exercises during the fading in:*

*V takes a white sheet of paper, holds it up and lets it fall down.*

*B crumples a sheet of paper and throws it away.*

*V takes the thrown crumpled sheet, unfolds it again and hands it over to B.*

*B crumples it again and throws it away.*

*In total three times.*

*Keeping the paper in the hands while speaking the following.*

V: How to deal with a blank sheet?

B: Nothing that is not nothing.

V: A blank sheet turning out to be a powerful sheet.

B: How do I get through?

*Both sit down, precisely.*

*V clicks: Black.*

*B starts the cutting task: «How do I get through».*

V: We take a white sheet of paper, we hold it up and let it fall down.

We crumple it, throw it away, unfold it again.

We take a white sheet of paper, we hold it up and let it fall down.

We crumple it, throw it away, unfold it again.

We take a white sheet of paper, we hold it up and let it fall down.

We crumple it, throw it away, unfold it again.

*B puts the cutting task «How do I get through» aside and takes off her head mask.*

V: We measure distances: from the hand to the paper, the distance to the table, back and forth etc. etc.

J/B: AM I MY SOUL'S SLEEPING BAG?  
WHY DOES NEVER NOTHING HAPPEN?

*V clicks parallel:*

AM I MY SOUL'S SLEEPING BAG?  
WHY DOES NEVER NOTHING HAPPEN?

V: Exercise 1:

*V turns on the series of micro-interventions SPOTS.*

V: «How to face?»

is an exercise.

*This*

is an exercise.

J/B: Who speaks from which perspective and with which background?

When and how is spoken and with whom?

HOW (NOT) TO PERFORM THE GAP?

At this point (of pointlessness)

multifold gaps start to scatter certain terms and understandings:

gendergap, timegap, outputgap, researchgap, generational gap and gap analysis.

V: Attention, please!

*V looks through Lygia Clark's Óculos.*

This

is just

an exercise.

J/B: I AM BECAUSE WE ARE

*J/B puts her head mask back on.*

*B holds up a white sheet/shield of paper.*

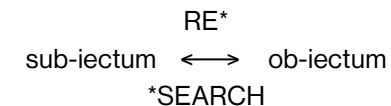
V: «How to face?» is one of the basic questions of research in general and artistic research in particular.

«How to face?» asks not only about the so-called object to be researched, but equally about the so-called researching subject.

«How to face?» refers to the resistance of every object of research, which is always somehow opposed to its research, that throws itself towards the act of being researched (ob-iectum).

«How to face?» likewise refers to the conditionality of every researching subject, which is always already subjected to its respective object (sub-iectum).

*V clicks parallel:*



V: Exercise 2:

«How to exercise?» «-iectum»?

This act of being thrown at or under?

*Black.*

J/B: «How to exercise?»



*V clicks a picture series by Ulrike Grossarth and other exercises by Blackghillie and MacGhillie; we commonly look at them.*

*Black.*

J/B: WERE I MADE OF MATTER, I WOULD COLOR

*J/B removes her head mask.*

J: Übung — V: exercise

J: üben — V: to practice, exercise, rehearse

J: Kritik üben — V: to deal out criticism

J: to deal out — V: austeilten

J: to do without — V: Verzicht üben

J: intensive, repetitive, daily doing without ...

practicing WITH AND WITHOUT –

order

doing research is

V: practicing in-betweenness

J: performing the –

border

*V shows a collection of empty spaces.*

V: What do a public square in Nizhny Novgorod, a map of the African continent from 1861, and the blank billboards in a socially critical feminist essay film have in common?

J: Exercise 3:

«How to exercise?» the *invisible*?

*J makes/crafts a Möbius loop.*

V: One quickly finds oneself on mined terrain in a critical examination of concrete places and spaces, terra (in)

cognita between white cubes and black boxes.

*V gives an insight into the self-observing situation of Rosemarie Trockel's Studio Visit.*

V: Empty spaces and white sheets of paper, blank canvasses and white cubes, no (wo)man's land and white spots on the maps of art and cultural production – and further, hegemonically marked identity inventions: supposedly harmless offers for identification and projection.

J: HOW (NOT) TO PERFORM THE GAP?

*J responds by holding up a sign/image.*

*V invites to Anna Halprin's Blank Placard Dance.*

V: What do a scene with two embarrassed policemen on a public square in Nizhny Novgorod, a cartography of the supposed explorers of the African continent from 1861, and the reenactment of the questioning of subalterns in front of empty billboards in a socially critical feminist essay film have in common?

*V draws attention to the empty billboards that travel through the film The Notes of Anna Azzori / A Mirror that Travels through Time by Constanze Ruhm.*

J: Exercise 4:

«How to exercise?» PRO TESTING?

*V focuses on the cuts of Luigi Fontana's Concetto Spaziale.*

V: We take scissors,  
cut the paper into stripes,  
take the ends,  
and twist them towards each other

OR

we take a blank sheet of paper,  
hold it up ...

OR

let it fall down

OR

crumple it, throw it away, unfold it again, measure  
distances

...from hand to paper, the distance to the table etc. etc.

*V searches for visual echos on the scene of Nizhny  
Novgorod.*

J: HOW TO FACE A BLANK SPOT?

J: Let's take: a never ever blank sheet.

*V clicks when heard within the following:*

*blank sheet*

*blind sheet*

*blind spot*

J: a blank sheet

is a tool

never neutral

always occupied, assigned, taken possession of, and  
appropriated many times over

a blind sheet

is the starting point

the crystallization point

a point of re\*turn

a blind spot

is ...

*V pictures a faceless woman parallel to the «blind spot».*

*Pause!*

V: Identity is ...

... a spectrum.

Identity is a spectre.

Identity Politics are a spectre.

*V clicks when heard:*

Identity is a spectrum

Identity is a spectre.

Identity Politics are a spectre.

*Black.*

J: «How to face?» our blind spots?

J: WERE I MADE OF MATTER, I WOULD COLOR

*V & J look at the figures that are connected, bound together,  
and facing each other in Franz Erhard Walther's Sehkanal.*

V: «How to face?» seeks its form depending on its  
respective vis-à-vis.

This vis-à-vis can be the one to be researched and at the  
same time the one who is researching.

A double bind, intra-actions, cut together, together and  
apart.

«How to face?» designs itself in constellations and in  
relation to each other.

J: «How to exercise?» constellations?

«How to exercise?» a vis-à-vis?

*Black.*

*V begins with the cutting task «How do I get through».*

J: Let's take something really blank.

As the main protagonist, it is also the place of action.

We take a blank sheet.

We take a face.

We take a picture of a face.

We take an empty picture of an empty face and place it vis-à-vis a blank sheet.

Picture this!

*We run through diverse variations and the variation of diversity within an animation from time to sync or swim.*

J: We take the never ever blank sheet.

We turn it into a white piece of paper.

We take a white picture with white stripes.

Cut.

*Short pause.*

*V pauses the cutting task «How do I get through».*

J: We cut a white picture using white stripes.

Cut.

*V clicks parallel: Black.*

J: VON JETZT AN WERDE ICH MEHRERE SEIN

*V finishes the cutting task «How do I get through».*

*V starts again with the demonstration of Lygia Clark's endless Möbius loop cuttings.*

V: interruption  
of identity  
that is the idea

of the interruption  
of identity  
that is the border  
towards which this thought  
moves towards  
borders expropriate  
and supervise  
territories and populations  
the thought of interruption  
interrupts  
even this thought

V: Exercise X:

«How to exercise?» getting through all this?

*Silence.*

*Cutting instructions appear.*

HOW TO FACE?

CUTTING INSTRUCTIONS

ask questions

picture it

quote & combine

with & without order

cut together-apart

attention, please

exercise

speak nearby

pro test

*Silence.*

*We finish our cutting tasks.*

*V helps J/B to climb through  
the paper.*



*V clicks. The image from the beginning disappears into whiteness. Credits. A picture of Blackghillie performing the white balance in front of another picture in an earlier performative exercise fades in.*

*In the meantime, each of us takes a blank sheet of paper. We stand in the position of the beginning vis-à-vis each other. We turn slowly to face the screen in the background that is all over white, again.*

## EPILOGUE & CREDITS

We conduct artistic research performatively, collaboratively and depending on the respective contexts. We force a (self)critical concept of research and knowledge in the sense of a SITUATED KNOWLEDGE, which emerges IN ACTU as well as IN SITU. We understand practice in its theoretical dimension and theory as practice. We think in terms of relationships and constellations. For this we quote, assemble and edit heterogeneous materials, media and voices in SITE SPECIFIC audiovisual, textual and performative formats. POLYPHONY and GLOSSOLALY are possible effects of these approaches.

In this sense, the following images, voices, and figures accompanied us this time: knowbotiq, *Blackghillie* (since 2016) & *MacGhillie* (since 2008) — Lygia Clark, *Óculos* (1968) & *Caminhando* (1963) — Marina Faust, *from the archive box 1990-2008* (2020) — Peter Fischli & David Weiss, *Will happiness find me?* (2003) — Lucio Fontana, *Concetto Spaziale, Attese* (1965) — Ulrike Grossarth, *Wäre ich von Stoff, ich würde mich färben / Were I made of Matter, I would Color* (2014) — Ulrike Grossarth, *Das Unheimliche des Normalen* (1980-82) — Constanze Ruhm, *Gli appunti di Anna Azzori / Uno specchio che viaggia nel tempo* (2020) — *Eine Frau hält ein weißes Schild hoch und wird abgeführt. Szene in Nischni Nowgorod* (BZ 14.03.2022) — Anna Halprin, *Blank Placard Dance* (1970) — Katrin Mayer & Eske Schlüters, *time to sync or swim* (2016) — Eva Meyer, *Von jetzt an werde ich mehrere sein* (2003) — Eva Meyer & Eran Schaerf, *Der Gedanke der Unterbrechung* (2014) & *Flashforward* (2004) & *Pro Testing* (2010) — Quadratur des Kreises — Rosemarie Trockel, *Studio Visit* (1992) — SPOTS (Micro-interventions since 2017) — Henry Holiday, *The Ocean-Chart* (1876) — Franz Erhard Walther, *Sehkanal from the series '1. Werksatz'* (1963–69) — White spots on a map of Africa (1861) —

# BIOGRAPHIES

## PAUL BAILEY

Paul Bailey is an Irish graphic designer, educator and researcher based in London (UK). His practice is made public through exhibitions, publications, performances, workshops, writing, teaching and curation. His work has been awarded and published internationally, acquired by public and private collections, and supported by notable institutions such as Jan van Eyck Academie (NL), Frans Masereel Centre (BE), National Institute for Design (IN), Shanghai Institute for Visual Arts (CN), ECAL (CH) and UAL (UK). He is currently undertaking a PhD in the Arts at KASK, exploring the visual essay as a critical instrument within/through contemporary practices of graphic design.

## GIULIA BELLINETTI

Giulia Bellinetti is PhD candidate at ASCA - University of Amsterdam, where she investigates the epistemic cultures of art institutions in times of ecological emergency. Giulia is also Head of the Nature Research Department at the Jan Van Eyck Academie and was previously Coordinator of the Production Department at the M HKA. There she coordinated monographic exhibitions of seminal artists as well as substantial group exhibitions, among which Monoculture – A Recent History.

## HELEN BRECHT

Helen Brecht lives in Cologne. She works as a text-based artist, and as a researcher at the Institute for Theater Studies at Ruhr University Bochum. She studied at the Institute for Applied Theater Studies in Gießen and is completing a postgraduate course Literary Writing at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne.

## LILLY BUSCH

Lilly Busch has been working as a dramaturge at Schauspielhaus Wien since <sup>2019</sup>. She studied Comparative Literature in Berlin and São Paulo as well as Comparative Dramaturgy and Performance Research in Frankfurt/Main and Brussels, which she completed with a thesis on the essay as a scenic form (of thought) in contemporary dance and theatre works.

## VERONIKA DARIAN

Veronika Darian is assistant professor for contemporary theatre with focus on transmediality and transculturality at the Institute for Theatre Studies at the University of Leipzig. She researches, publishes and teaches, increasingly collaboratively, especially on 'Fremdheitsforschung', theatre of age(ing) and things, biography and narration in theatre, dance and performance, theatre in societies in transformation and scenes of obstinacy.

## JASPER DELBECKE

Jasper Delbecke is a doctoral candidate at research centre S:PAM (Studies in Performing Arts & Media) of the Department of Art History, Musicology and Theatre Studies at Ghent University. His conducted research on the dissemination of the essay form beyond the realm of literature and film was granted in 2018 with the PhD fellowship of Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO). His texts on this subject were published in *Performance Research*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Performance Philosophy* and *Etcetera*.

## MLONDI DUBAZANE

Mlondiwethu Dubazane is a South African sound-design-maker and performer. His sonic practice ranges from composition to composition, but what is consistent and important to him, is to cultivate a sonic world that brings himself and the listener closer. In his day-to-day living he engages in practices of listening to sounds and music that move his insides; as he believes it gives him clarity to where and how he is here, right now, today. His sonic practice predominantly sounds itself through Synthesizers, Drum loops, key-boarding, vocal sampling, experimental engineering and field/live(d) recordings.

## ANDREAS FLECK

Andreas Fleck works as a freelance dramaturge in Vienna. He studied Theatre, Film & Media Studies in Vienna as well as Comparative Dramaturgy and Performance Research in Frankfurt/Main and Brussels. In his thesis the essay as form is the conceptual starting point for a dramaturgical thinking and working that he affirmatively describes as professionally dilettante.

## SANDRA FREYGARTEN

Sandra Freygarten is an artist and art coach (DGFC) focusing on artistic practices within the, non-artistic field. Her recently published articles focus on complementary artistic strategies and artistic agency. ENTWEDER NOCH is part of an artistic research series with her partner Lucia. More info: [www.kunstcoach.de](http://www.kunstcoach.de)

## LIESBETH GROOT NIBBELINK

Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink is an Assistant Professor in Theatre and Performance Studies at Utrecht University and coordinator of the MA Contemporary Theatre, Dance and Dramaturgy. Her research interests include spatial theory, new materialism and performance philosophy. She co-founded Platform-Scenography and is also active as a dramaturg and artistic adviser.

## EMILY HUURDEMAN

Emily Huurdeman is artist, research and educator. Her research revolves around theorizing and practicing essaying. On this topic she has published an academic article and presented at multiple international conferences. She is a video/performance artist and teacher at multiple art institutions. She is also co-initiator of Café Chercher and Mouse Ear Concerts.

## CARSTEN JUNKER

Carsten Junker is University Professor of American Studies with a focus on Diversity Studies at the TU Dresden. His research interests include North American literatures and cultures including Canada and the Caribbean from the seventeenth century to the present, structural violence, genre theory, and theories of authorship.

## HEIDI LIEDKE

Heidi Lucja Liedke is Interim Professor in English Literature at Goethe University Frankfurt. Her second monograph, *Livecasting in Twenty-First-Century British Theatre. Spectacle, Materiality, Engagement* will be published with Bloomsbury Methuen Drama in July 2023. She is the co-editor of a special issue of *Theatre Research International* on "Presence, Politics, Resistance: Tendencies in (Post-)Pandemic Performance and Theatre" (March 2023). Her research is concerned with travel writing, contemporary British performance and, more recently, the essay.

## SOPHIA LOHMANN

Sophia Lohmann is a PhD candidate in Literature at FU Berlin and at the department of cultural theory and history of aesthetics at HU Berlin. Her research focuses on the essay as cultural practice, epistemologies of gender and the body. She studied comparative literature, political science, cultural theory and history. Lohmann is editorial director of the journal ROM Gesellschaftsmagazin and worked previously as freelance journalist and at Haus der Kulturen der Welt.

## LUCIA RAINER

Lucia Rainer is a performance studies theorist, dramatic advisor, and artist researcher experimenting with collaborative methodologies. Her artistic research interrelates diverse narratives and their physicality to philosophical-political discourse. ENTWEDER NOCH is part of an artistic research series with her partner Sandra Freygarten. More info: [www.lucia-rainer.com](http://www.lucia-rainer.com)

## CAROLINA RITO

Carolina Rito is Professor of Creative Practice Research, at the Research Centre for Arts, Memory and Communities (CAMC), at Coventry University; and leads on the centre's Critical Practices research strand. She is a researcher and curator whose work explores 'the curatorial' as an investigative practice, expanding practice-based research in the fields of curating, visual arts, visual cultures and cultural studies. Rito's latest publications include *Institution as Praxis – New Curatorial Directions for Collaborative Research* (Sternberg, 2020), *Architectures of Education* (e-flux Architecture, 2020), *FABRICATING PUBLICS: the dissemination of culture in the post-truth era* (Open Humanities Press, 2021).

## GIOVANNI SABELLI FIORETTI

Giovanni Sabelli Fioretti studied dance and movement in Milan and New York after earning two MA degrees in philosophy. In his research he focuses on the impact of digital media on the dance dramaturgical practice, applying a multiplicity of perspectives to dramaturgical research, such as embodied research, queer studies and philosophy of technology.

## ANJA ISABEL SCHNEIDER

Anja Isabel Schneider is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Castilla-La Mancha, Faculty of Fine Arts, Cuenca and a member of the research group ARTEA. Research and scenic creation, Madrid (<http://artea.uclm.es/>). She has a special interest in transdisciplinary art practices on the crossover between visual arts, performing arts and literature.

## JANA SEEHUSEN

Jana Seehusen is artist and author, works on modes of language and action of the in-between, the third and displacement as well as identity politics. She is doing her doctorate on the essay film as an experimental theoretical format in the field of artistic research.

## JASCHA SOMMER

Jascha Sommer lives in Cologne. He works as performance and media artist, and as a curator of festivals, academy programs and event series. He studied theater & literature at Ruhr University Bochum and Université Paris X as well as media arts at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne.

## CHRISTEL STALPAERT

Christel Stalpaert is Full Professor Performing and Media Art Studies of the Art Studies Dept. at Ghent University (Belgium) and co-director of the research centre S:PAM (Studies in Performing Arts and Media). Her main areas of research are theatre, performance, dance and media art (since 1890) at the meeting-point of philosophy. She investigates how art practices throughout the 20th and 21st century activate awareness and change, generating also alternative modes of activism in relation to environmental and ecological crises.

## MARY SZYDŁOWSKA

Mary Szydłowska is a Brussels based choreographer and performer of Polish origins. Her work feeds on the notions of the peripheral, withdrawn and invisible, followed within architectural spaces, institutional environments and marginalised fields of labour. Her work expands towards sculpture and installations, in which she performs. She holds a MA of dance (2021, PARTS) and in cultural studies (2018, Jagiellonian University in Cracow).

## ANNE KARIN TEN BOSCH

Anne Karin ten Bosch is a critic, curator and coach. She has worked as a scenographer and coordinated the Scenography Department at the University of Fine Arts Minerva, Groningen (1999-2010). In 2012 she (co)founded Platform-Scenography (P-S), curator of the Dutch entries for PQ (2015 and 2019) and currently studies MA Design at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam.

## RUBKWAN THAMMABOOSADEE

Rubkwan Thammaboosadee is a lecturer and researcher at the Department of Performing Arts, Bangkok University, Thailand. Her research interests focus on cultural performance and its relation to neoliberalism. She is an independent scriptwriter, and her writing creates dialogues between the neoliberal socio-economic conditions and their impacts on everyday life.

## ALICE TWEMLOW

Alice Twemlow is a design historian whose research intersects with environmental humanities, museum studies, and artistic research. She is Special Professor in the Wim Crouwel Chair in the History, Theory and Sociology of Graphic Design and Visual Culture at the University of Amsterdam and Design Lector (Research Professor) at Royal Academy of Art The Hague (KABK).

## NINA VURDELJA

Nina Vurdelja is a doctoral researcher at T7 Centre for Practice as Research in Theatre at Tampere University, Finland. Her main interests reside in posthuman intermedia studies and performance ecology; she is studying sensuous encounters and embodied knowledges, and is interested in new ways of thinking and being together.

# COLOPHON

FROM THE SCENIC ESSAY TO THE ESSAY-EXHIBITION.  
EXPANDING THE ESSAY FORM IN THE ARTS BEYOND  
LITERATURE AND FILM.

## PUBLISHER

S:PAM – Studies in Performing Arts & Media  
Department of Art History, Musicology and Theatre Studies  
Faculty of Arts & Philosophy  
Ghent University  
Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 41, Technicum 4/2  
BE-9000 Ghent, BELGIUM

## EDITOR

Jasper Delbecke

## GRAPHIC DESIGN

Laura Broux

2023

With the support of  
The Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO)  
Commissie Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (CWO) of the Faculty of  
Arts & Philosophy of Ghent University  
Research Centre S:PAM (Ghent University)  
KASK & Conservatorium - School of Arts Ghent

**S:PAM**  
Studies in Performing Arts & Media

**KU LEUVEN**

**fwo**

**U** University  
of Antwerp

**GHENT**  
UNIVERSITY

**KASK**

CONSERVATORIUM  
CONSERVATORIUM  
CONSERVATORIUM

**HO**  
**GENT**  
howest

