

Academy of No-Gravity

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Abstract

This exchange of letters takes its starting point from our joint teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich from 2014 until 2020 and unfolds across different locations in time and space. The imaginary life of KEC serves as a backdrop to think through some obstacles in institutionalized art education. The text reflects on the method of activating research by means of performative strategies in art education, speculates on future models, and takes examples from nature. It further discusses how certain artistic and activist methods and concepts, such as self-organization, are currently appropriated by right-wing groups. The form of letters allows us to alternate between an actual account, a fictionalized perspective, and a polemic.

Editors note

[Click here to read the German version of the text.](#)

Dear Stephan,

While you absconded to Italy, I headed for the Arctic, got stranded in Krabstadt. There, I spontaneously agreed to work on the development of Krabstadt Education Center. It's nice to be working with an institution that doesn't exist for a change. I could say "doesn't exist yet" but that's not how it is. Whether and in what form KEC has students, teachers, classrooms, or curricula isn't just a question of time and feasibility. These vacancies are already having much of an effect now, since a lot of what makes a school a school in general is happening in the narrative sphere here, so the form of the outline itself is taking on a life of its own. On the one hand you could say KEC is projecting itself into a possible reality of being a non-degree school. On the other hand, facing many of the real possibilities of both self-organized and institutional teaching seems more endurable in the imaginary sphere. But to imagine another place can also definitely mean getting stuck there by design, at first to see how far you can take the idea. The virtual in the sense of a possibility not a utopia, not the digital.

The drawn and animated landscapes, buildings, and figures of Krabstadt certainly constitute a material- and content-specific point of departure that is not random. However, I don't get the impression I have to act like I am part of this fiction at least no more and no less than in an entirely real art school with its own narratives and routines. I noticed that the animated characters to a greater extent demand a perspective from me that I'm not used to: ultimately, anger, humiliation, satire, and exaggeration aren't adequate behavioral modes for seminars and meetings although they are understandable affects that sometimes erupt in the margins of teaching, or even in artistic work. Yet we must ask ourselves whether it is necessary to start a story like that now, of all times.

So that's why we wanted to invite you to help us stitch this vision together as an advisor because there are

overlaps with your research on artist colonies, free universities, academies, and their present promises and/or corporate deformations. More than anything, it makes me think of our exchange on self-organized study and the joint seminars at the Munich Academy, the ones where the game, role-playing, the presentation of research, or the performance parties may also have taken up the function of fictionalizing affects, acting them out and making them tangible. In the “Workers’ Theater” seminar, for example, our starting point was your long-term engagement with the history and present forms of theatrical action/activism we literally raided that particular section of your library.^[1] The students would find out about various historical precursors such as street theater, Agitprop, or artistic cabaret, as well as more contemporary positions such as The Living Theatre, and how different worker, amateur, and artist groups have used theatrical forms as a political tool.

The task was to not only share one’s findings in the form of a lecture but to prepare a physical assignment for the whole class, and by doing so to immediately apply the historical references to their own ideas, physical capacities, and the dynamics of the group. We further started every class by rearranging the room, shoving the tables and chairs aside, and doing some movement exercises. It didn’t have the character of a morning workout, nor were all the students supposed to develop performance skills, and sometimes it was pretty tiresome to carry out this ritual. But it was a displaced highlighting of some habits in the presentation of theories and historical correlations, and what postures you adopt in doing so, who participates a lot and who just a little, how space is used, how the artworks standing around turn into props. In this approach, I have orientated myself more toward conceptual practices: the score, which marks a space in which one can act experimentally, and at the same time a boundary that needs to be challenged. Can you say more about how you came to performative work with students, especially against the background of painting?

All best,

Karolin

Dear Karolin,

How nice to hear from you and from the far north to boot! Are you just sitting on the internet or can you get out a bit and smell the ice, hear the dogs howling, and let the wind snow in your face?

It’s cold in Italy too; the wind is pushing damp through the broken windows because the house is being remodeled. I spent the summer sitting in the shade, staring at one and the same view, enjoying its daily and monthly variations and its deceptive doubles in the artificial pond darting against the mountain range on the other side like a tongue. The swallows always came on time, competing with risky flight maneuvers, plunging fast as arrows onto the surface of the water. Or the bees: they discovered the gently sloping bank as their bathing site. In a welcome break from their drudgery, they stood up to their calves in the surf, prodding water from cracks in the ground. I even saw a bee saving a colleague from drowning; it did tow the one stuck in water, pushing or actually flying it onto the bank. Call me romantic it really tugged at my heart strings!

It’s already gotten to the point that I can only look back on the days at the Academy through this filter. A few yellowed images are coming back, the Monday warm-ups, doing a relay race in the long corridor, the variety evening we put on within 30 minutes of announcing it.^[2] This performance-oriented working method grew, among other things, out of earlier workshops on large-scale painting: the body physically steps into the picture, and the

painted material can become a dressing or an armor for the body, or the construction material of a world in which the body acts. But what you are actually acting and painting can only lay within your own and/or group-specific reach. You investigate the background of these “problems at hand” together and study them for their artistic potential. You slip into a role and try out how it “feels” whether it invites you to identify or not, whether you can re-conceive the role or even the material, or possibly even invalidate them. You performatively appropriate the material you research, you activate it, and you put it to the test by dancing it out. One point of departure for the dynamics of bohemia then and now was an article by Fanny zu Reventlow on a carnival in Munich, but there are other books that got a free-floating embodiment and reinterpretation with the parties.^[3] Then certain “modules” arose from students’ improvised contributions, and those modules could always be varied and re-combined in later performances. I wonder if this could work in a world of transarctic avatars?

So long!

Stephan

Dear Stephan,

I’m imagining you arranging all the books in the shelving unit in your new home on *Lebensreform*, the bohemian, and theater, or do you have new categories?

I had frost patterns on the window here not long ago and got to watch the northern lights shine on them in a spectacular greenish blue. What I particularly enjoy is learning to walk on ice during our breaks. You really have to concentrate when you’re doing it, and balancing contorts us into bizarre poses staged as a shadow play it would be a great dance. But yeah, we sit in our rooms a lot of the time, at our screens, connected online, and it doesn’t make much of a difference where we’re staying. There are different thoughts on how to conceptualize that as it relates to KEC. With the No-Gravity room, a special space for online classes, for example. The room is a calibrated pressure chamber, and the screens are based on e-ink technology. Because the light and temperature are adjusted for distant and multi-locational learning, no one gets online fatigue.^[4]

What’s actually unfolding are conversations with different people on their experiences as teachers at state institutions. It’s often about economic necessity, but also the expectation of more visibility as an artist, and too many compromises. A friend wrote to us:

I am not the only one who tends to forget that teaching at an academy is also just a job. And a lot of people (who are not artists) might not understand why I needed to be reminded of that and I think that’s because they don’t understand how a lot of artists see their artistic work as so closely linked to their life and identity that it is inseparable so of course many of us approach teaching at an academy the same way. And it is easy enough to say that we should just separate the job and the art practice, but that is not easily done in an art world where the academies are a part of the art world and the way you perform as a teacher has an impact on the way you are seen as an artist.^[5]

To find out what form of a (free, fictional?) school would be imaginable, you’ve apparently got to cross a mountain of anger, boredom, and exhaustion. We wondered if we should set up a sort of monastery with a

garden for post-teaching teachers on the undeveloped patch of land next to KEC!

Back to your letter: what you describe as a filter that distances you from the daily business of the art school isn't far removed from the skepticism that dominated your relationship with teaching from the beginning. After all, you dedicated the majority of your time to the distinction between institutional and self-organized academies and how one can exist in the other. In *The Hard Way to Enlightenment* you write on "institutionalized research, in the arts":

In contrast, I see the academy

* as a temporary, improvised and self-organized context of communication.

* academy is not an institution, but an activity. At issue is "making academy"!

It is a form of, if possible, non-hierarchical exchange with persons with similar interests, a process of self-empowerment.

After editing a book on these ideas of the extra-institutional academy and promoting it as a kind of barefooted prophet, I became a professor at the academy in Bergen, Norway, pondering what happens to these institutions if everyone can "make academy" themselves? What are the institutions good for?^[6]

So your skepticism isn't just a polemic against leaden and hierarchically organized institutions, it also arises from the exigence to come together and be confronted with each other in a particular context. It's not just like-minded people who meet up at the art academy anyway! When we suggest a practice here of activating and re-configuring images and texts as both artistic and pedagogical tools, this isn't exhausted in the feeling of immediacy and togetherness. When I think of KEC, the moment it leaves the realm of fiction and enters an actual educational setting whether in an academic or self-organized context with a course on building a world of transarctic avatars, we inevitably have to share authorship with all participants and come up with mutual agreements.

You kept saying that you see a lot of the strategies mentioned above in a new light today, because the political landscape has changed. Can you say more about that? Doesn't the very difficulty of talking about learned structures and discriminatory or historically contaminated imagery/language need a site? Isn't the very work on distinctions to notice and be aware of unreflected revenants in the first place?

Take care!

Karolin

Dear Karolin,

In your friend's comment there are echoes of the question of how far you can keep institutional power from your body. But this power is dual: there is the power of the institution and the pressures to which you are

subjected, but also the institutional power transferred to you and which you are supposed to exercise.

One way out of that is your No-Gravity room! Wow, that sounds really great! Just yesterday, I was reading about the making of the Earthrise photos in a book by Maja Göpel; how the astronauts were floating on the back side of the moon to photograph/map the surface and then, out of the corner of their eyes, they saw Earth rising over the crest of the moon.^[7] What a beautiful metaphor for floating over a field of research and the peripheral view on your own origins!

The performance parties produced this state of weightlessness at times. A safe space that enabled us to float, like avatars, above the ice-cold institutional landscape. These parties were the holes in skepticism. But the latter isn't just mistrust toward the institution and your own role in it, but toward the object of research and the methods employed as well. If I think about the collaborative research on the historical *Lebensreform* (life reform) movements with students, for instance, that was highly problematic material.^[8] It was already clear at the time that a lot of the topics we were researching could also be found on the websites of right-wing groups. But floating on "the dark side of the moon" and a relatively loose, but at the same time critical, ironic, mocking take was still possible then. In the meantime, the right has radicalized increasingly, and now we see the historical parallels at the COVID protests, by which I mean anti-vaxxers, New Agers, and the anthroposophic crowd walking alongside neo-Nazis. A light-footed handling of contaminated material wouldn't be possible anymore right now.

In a lot of the fields I've done work on, right-wing appropriation of content motifs and methods has succeeded. Who has been running the most effective self-organized groups in recent years, who has been occupying the streets and media attention, who has built up a "counter-public?" And evermore, the right wing is grabbing at the university too. It was neoliberals before, now it's cultural conservatives feeling canceled, or the "Identitarian movement" founding "anti-universities."^[9]

In propagating autonomy and self-organization, it was a mistake to assume "anti-hierarchical" and "anti-institutional" meant to be "leftist" per se. And now we'd rather be sitting in the same boat as hierarchy and the institution, because the right wing, esoterica, religion, lies, and irrationality have congealed in such a toxic mixture. People well-versed in a subject, the specialists, those are now the ones I'm much more inclined to follow. Unfortunately, this dilemma is resulting in a loss of trust in artistic methods what remains are didactics and Enlightenment. What used to be taken for granted (and open to critique!) things like rationality, democracy, truth, etc. now has to be defended.

How can you build up a potentially different, but more dedicated position (in teaching/studying) today where once the radical left stood? How are you doing that in Krabstadt?

Stephan



Stephan Dilleuth, *The Pleasures of Now*, 2016, Galerie Hussenot, Paris (c) Aurelien Mole

Enrobed
 (dressed up, in a dress, dressed)
 put in place
 wrapped into a position
 that was just empty
 – vacant –
 Under its protection
 through the long corridors
 in the self-image
 that now clings to me
 Acting from there
 the movements dressed
 unmistakable
 underlined
 as possibility
 – behind, the position –
 and inability
 – the always visible robe –

Karolin Meunier, *Enrobed*, 2014/21 © Karolin Meunier

Dear Stephan,

You've summed up the basic situation culminating in this moment quite well. Making distinctions between artistic-activist means and strategies does, in fact, get more complicated when they're becoming more similar across different political camps, although in substance they want to be as far apart as possible. These societal conflicts are being tested and acted out in dealing with each other at art institutions as well. To come back to a more speculative angle: I would again bring in the agency of the student body or the question of a younger generation as the unknown factor in all educational models. They usually surprise me or have long been one step ahead if they say that didactics are lacking life force and design potential, when we're talking *about* them and not *with* them. Their intervention into the school's and teachers' routines would take on different forms, ranging from controversial discussions to testing the limits of free-floating research time, and (at KEC) to co-authoring the curriculum in the role of an animated figure. So the question remains: How can we still make a difference? Through artistic engagement with concrete material, through playful, precise, open-ended, tangible and not

ideological actions “without passive observers.”

Something that comes to mind in response to your last question, I can only answer as a guest: Krabstadt calls itself a site for the unwanted, where complicated, bothersome, or even neurotic characters and problems congregate people and things Scandinavian countries would prefer to be rid of. So there's no getting around observing the bizarre effects of this exclusion mechanism. Who are these unwanted people? And if they come to KEC, are they students, teachers, support staff, or workshop managers? What can you learn from their perspectives or what do you expect to be able to teach? I would speculate that Krabstadt can't prop itself up on a majority, nor does it want to as long as the majority inscribes good intentions into its curricula that don't pay out in practice. The Dean of KEC said it pretty clearly: “The systemic failures of Nordic institutions to walk the walk and not just talk in regards to diversity, difference and inclusion has led me to refocus our efforts to assemble the most non-humanly diverse teaching body in the history of the Nordic region. At KEC, we actively recruit nature, both flora and fauna, to teach and study.”^[10] But of course it doesn't always run smoothly off the bat. You might remember Arrabbiata, Krabstadt's volcano, and the protagonist from the play. She's an honorary professor at KEC and she had to fight for that too:

Annoyingly, I soon found out that we (the broadly recruited) were treated differently from the human participants and were not offered an adequate study environment. Firstly, they gave me a studio space that was too small for me to fit into, I couldn't even get through the doorway. Secondly, teachers and other students kept wanting to teach ON me and not WITH or FOR me, which was really perturbing. So, I officially filed a complaint with the Dean, who actually listened to what I had to say. They offered me an adjunct position as part of my anger management treatment, but I saw through that smokescreen! Instead, I made them give me an honorary professorship.^[11]

The question of which experts get invited to the table in the first place isn't superfluous today either. Who comes together from different, marginalized, or scattered and therefore specific contexts?

Karolin

Dear K,

I like how you described Krabstadt as a place for the unwanted. It reminds me of Erich Mühsam, the Munich anarchist who may have respected the communist approach at the life reform center Monte Verità, but in summary said you shouldn't leave such an idyllic place to bourgeois esotericists, seekers of salvation, and apocalyptic thinkers, but rather rededicate it and make it a place of refuge:

This is why I wish from the depth of my soul that one day Ascona will become a refuge for released and escaped prisoners, for persecuted vagabonds, for all those who are hunted and tortured, for all those who are drifting without direction as victims of the current social order, for all those who have not lost the dream of living in human dignity among people who respect them as fellow human beings.^[12]

With the underwater outbreak of Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai, the Arrabbiata incident is very timely! Also

because we can't often know what the preferences of a volcano entity are, or how they'll shift upon colliding with an institution. Sometimes, for instance, I've seen with new colleagues how they suddenly abandon all distance to the institution, turning into a cog in the wheel in the blink of an eye. In the case of the volcano, I would have assumed at first that she wouldn't need her own room and might feel most comfortable in the KEC garden without an institutional roof over her crater. After all, she can spew fire and lava to her heart's content there. But now she wants a room for her class? Well, well...

I would like to contribute one more mental experiment to KEC's approach. Fifteen years ago, I was in a city I wasn't yet familiar with. A large part of the buildings and businesses stood empty, like in Berlin around 1990, after the wall fell. And there were signs everywhere, desperate for creative use, offering a year free of rent. Why is it that the international bohemians are still moving to a Berlin gentrified to death, when so many new possibilities really aren't that far away?

That's how the idea for a "first communist art academy in Germany" arose. Adding the word "communist" had a few advantages: for one, setting oneself firmly apart from the state-run art academy scared all the conservative Christians off, and right-wingers too. The polite sticks-in-the-mud and aesthetes with their formalist art-shouldn't-be-'political'-it-should-be-'free' would probably also be put off.

By that choice of name, this academy would enter an obligation to lead a long-overdue conversation oriented toward the future because there has never yet been communism, just a search for it (then as now) first off with the question as to what it could or would have to be in the millennium of resource shortages, climate crisis, hyper-individuation, gender diversity. In the same process, a new society would have to come up with an equally new art; it wouldn't be a new style, genre or direction, but principally take on a completely new role for art. Such a communist academy would have a hard time because of its basic questions though: it would be met with hostility. It wouldn't have any money. But still! It would be trouble, it would be fun!

However, what would we teach? It would be about a real-life sharing economy, in handicraft and housework, both theoretically and practically. It would be about breathing life into a social organism and practical experiments, exploring what role art could play therein. In my mind, this experimental society would probably only exist as an island at first. That's too bad, a double burden, and dangerous it's where every similarly situated case has failed, but in hindsight they were by and large good schools, heating the water as it flowed.

As the state-fed cashier of a Bitcoin petting zoo, I'll get a lot of heat for the word "communism." But I don't care. I never elaborated further on the idea or wrote it down. Because you can't establish an academy like that just by yourself, you can't be a communist by yourself. Ideally, "students" would establish such a learning commune themselves.

When things got tight after the 2008 stock-market crash, someone put it like this: you should regroup your circle of friends so that everyone comes with different yet basic skills for survival. So, "students" could short-circuit the resources of their prior knowledge; their study would follow the course of their needs. From time to time, they could invite temporary guest teachers... they could run simulation programs, they could start living one of those outcomes or at least open a space and perform them. That would be a new start for art too.

Stephan

Footnotes

1. “Workers’ Theater” (Arbeiter*innentheater), a seminar by Stephan Dillemoth and Karolin Meunier, realized with a group of students in the art pedagogy department at the Academy of Fine Arts Munich in 2016–17.
2. The “relay race” was a competition between two groups of eight people, each of whom had to run down the two-hundred-meter-long corridor of the academy and back again. The “variety show”, with different contributions and performance formats is, in its improvised character, actually an “invention” of the workers’ theater.
3. To name a few of the relevant titles here: Fanny Gräfin zu Reventlow, *Herr Dames Aufzeichnungen oder Begebenheiten aus einem merkwürdigen Stadtteil*; William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*; Peter Linebaugh, Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*; Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and The Witch*; Norman Cohn, *The New Earthly Paradise: Revolutionary Millenarianism and Mystical Anarchism in Medieval Europe*; Peter Weiss, *The Persecution and Murder of Jean Paul Marat, portrayed by the acting troupe of the Hospice of Charenton under the guidance of Mr de Sade*; and individual scenes from films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder and science-fiction literature.
4. See “Report from A Student”. In *Krabstadt Education Center: Conflated Places, Learning Pretzel*. Jakarta Biennale 2021: ESOK. p. 5. Available at <https://qr1.be/TMKL> (accessed 2022-03-29).
5. Henriette Heise in a private email exchange with KEC.
6. Dillemoth, Stephan. *The Hard Way to Enlightenment: Dramatization of a Lecture on “The Academy and the Corporate Public”—in two parts—*. Berlin: Revolver Verlag. 2012. p. 25.
7. Göpel, Maja. *Unsere Welt neu denken: Eine Einladung*. Berlin: Ullstein. 2020.
8. Around the turn of the twentieth century, a number of groups were formed that can be subsumed under the term *Lebensreform* (life reform). These part utopian, revolutionary, reactionary, and reformist approaches characterized the most varied attempts to break free from the Empire of the day: the nationalistic, capitalistic, and monolithic Wilhelminian Reich. In view of the development of “multitudes” of parallel conceptions of life, the Life Reform movements were certainly predecessors of today’s “escapist” constructions of identity, formed via lifestyle conceptions. At the time, however, some of these approaches lent a sense of “metaphysical depth” to rising National Socialism. Other groups were, on the contrary, persecuted by the society of the Third Reich, and incorporated or forced into line, which again produced another monolithic homogeneity. Stephan Dillemoth continued his research on the topic with students as part of his guest professorship at the HFBK Hamburg 2003–05. The collaboration resulted in a play and a film, among other things. The research is archived at <http://lebensreform.info/> (accessed 2022-03-29).
9. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identitarian_movement (accessed 2022-03-2).
10. “Greeting from the Dean”. In *Krabstadt Education Center*, p. 10.
11. “Introducing Fairly New Faculty—Volcano’s Statement”. In *Krabstadt Education Center*, p. 14.
12. Mühsam, Erich. “Excerpts from Ascona”. In *Liberating Society from the State and Other Writings: A Political Reader*. Edited and translated by Gabriel Kuhn. Oakland, CA: PM Press. E-book. p. 137.