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invisible elephant
that remains
overlooked
reflective documentation

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Staging the Invisible Elephant that Remains Overlooked
Reflective Documentation

Part of the thesis project “Staging the Invisible Elephant that Remains Overlooked“
submitted by PhD candidate Verena Miedl-Faißt

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Vienna, January 2026

Declaration of good scientific practice

Name:

Thesis title:

I hereby declare, that I have independently written/produced all parts of my reflective documentation of my thesis in accordance with the principles of good scientific practice and have not used any sources and aids other than those indicated, that this reflective documentation has not yet been submitted in any form for evaluation, neither in Austria nor abroad, and that this version is identical to the online submitted and assessed version.

Date Signature

This is for Florian. There is no thought we have not shared.

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Abstract

Im Rahmen meines PhD-in-Art-Projekts “Staging the Invisible Elephant that Remains Overlooked” erkunde ich die Möglichkeiten kollaborativen und ko-kreativen Arbeitens mit Kindern als gleichberechtigten Partner*innen – aus meinen Perspektiven als Künstlerin, Workshopleiterin, Lehrerin, Tante, neuerdings Mutter und erwachsener Freundin. Im Zentrum stehen die Schnittstellen, Spannungen und Synergien zwischen künstlerischer Forschung und pädagogischer Praxis.

Die Arbeit erstreckt sich über den Zeitraum 2017–2025 als offener, reflexiver Prozess, der auf projektbasierter künstlerischer Praxis, dialogischen Begegnungen und reflexivem Schreiben beruht. Ergänzend dienen Leseerfahrungen in unterschiedlichen Literatur- und Wissenschaftsgebieten als Resonanzräume, in denen sich Erkenntnisse verdichten. Wiederkehrende Themen sind das Zusammenspiel von Struktur und Freiheit; Fragen geteilter Autor*innenschaft, Verantwortung, Repräsentation und Ethik in ko-kreativer Arbeit mit Kindern in unterschiedlichen Kontexten; sowie die Möglichkeiten und Grenzen künstlerischer Forschung „auf Augenhöhe“ im schulischen Zusammenhang – insbesondere im Umgang mit pädagogischen Herausforderungen, die durch digitale Technologien, soziale Medien und künstliche Intelligenz geprägt sind.

Im Kontext von artistic research verstehe ich Ambiguität, Widersprüchlichkeit und Subjektivität als methodische Stärken. Ich rücke Transparenz, Verletzlichkeit und das transformative Potenzial von Missverständnissen in den Vordergrund und entwickle Vorschläge dafür, wie wir uns in einer komplexen Welt neu zueinander in Beziehung setzen und gefährdete Demokratien stärken können.

In the scope of my PhD-in-Art project “Staging the Invisible Elephant that Remains Overlooked”, I investigate collaborative and co-creative work with children as equal partners – from my perspectives as an artist, workshop leader, teacher, aunt, recent mother, and adult friend. The intersections, tensions, and synergies between artistic research and pedagogical practice form the core of my research.

Spanning 2017–2025 the work unfolds as an open, reflective process grounded in project-based artistic practice, dialogical encounters, and reflective writing. Additionally, reading experiences in different literary and scientific fields serve as resonant spaces in which insights take shape and intensify. Recurring themes include the interplay of structure and freedom; the negotiation of shared authorship, responsibility, representation and ethics in co-creative work with children across different contexts; and the possibilities and limitations of conducting artistic research “at eye level” within school environments. I also examine the potentials that artistic approaches offer in addressing contemporary pedagogical challenges related to digital technologies, social media, and artificial intelligence.

In accordance with the principles of artistic research, I understand ambiguity, contradiction, and subjectivity as methodological strengths. I foreground transparency, vulnerability, and the transformative potential of misunderstanding, and I propose ways in which we might relate to one another differently in a complex world and strengthen democracies at risk.

Contents

Ohara Donshu
Blind Men Appraising an Elephant
1800–1850
(Brooklyn Museum)

Before We Begin

My artistic research explores collaborative and co-creative work with children as equal partners – through the lens of an artist, workshop leader, teacher in various school contexts, aunt, (recent) mother, and adult friend. The intersections, synergies, and tensions between artistic research and pedagogical practice form the core of my thesis.

The framework of my PhD in Art (2017–2025) is an open-ended, reflective space for my questions, aims, struggles, and longings. The three-part reflective documentation offers different approaches to sharing my findings:

Book 1 presents a reflective account in the form of a chronological selection of projects and works from 2017 to 2025, accompanied by documentary, explanatory, contextualizing, questioning – and at times questionable – textual work.

Book 2 is a collection of dialogues I conducted with colleagues from the ZOOM Children's Museum on artistically working with, relating to, and being a child. These interviews serve both as manifestations of and reflections on my artistic research.

Book 3 is a reader comprising partly pre-published texts I produced in the scope of or in relation to my PhD studies.

Each book is preceded by a "Field Guide" explaining and summarizing its respective structure and approach.

There are recurring questions and dynamics that have emerged throughout the research: the interplay between artistic motivation, pedagogical intention, and personal longing; questions of artistic form and quality, structure and freedom; questions of authorship, responsibility, and ethics in co-creative work with children; and the potential – as well as the limitations – of such practices in institutional and public school contexts. In light of recent developments and experiences, I also elaborate on how my approach can offer ways of addressing the challenges posed by digital technologies, social media, and artificial intelligence in pedagogical settings.

In addressing these matters, I clarify my position and articulate my contributions to the intersecting fields of artistic research, pedagogy, and (participatory) art.

First and foremost, I make a disclaimer: this is artistic research, concerned with matters that elude the grasp of hard science. The invisible elephants live between the lines. There is no single research question or hypothesis to be tested, no clear-cut findings. The reason to go on is sometimes more longing than logic. Insights take unusual shapes. Misunderstanding must be accepted – and even transformed – into a special kind of force. Frayed and blurry edges offer something to hold on to. Objectivity is impossible; radical subjectivity is an asset. Love is not a bias, but a superpower.

Conventional scientific methodologies are shaped by clearly defined rules and criteria aimed at ensuring validity and reliability. I choose to break many of them – deliberately and with care. Rather than providing verifiable facts, I seek to remain present with ambiguity, to work with the uncertain, the unresolved, the contradictory – those aspects of experience and knowledge that are often excluded from more rigid epistemological frameworks. I can follow the imaginative, sometimes unruly ideas of children; we trace

creative threads that, in other contexts, might be dismissed as silly, boring, outrageous, or even monstrous. In doing so, I hope to offer propositions that would otherwise be inaccessible – on how to relate with and within a complex and endangered world, and thereby massage the fascia of resilient democracies – and to enrich both pedagogical and artistic contexts.

I am aware of at least some of the concomitant pitfalls and intend to face them as well as I can. Most importantly, I strive to be as transparent as possible in my reflections, finding ways to share my findings instead of withdrawing into a private language. Doing so implies a high level of personal exposure, risk, and vulnerability – though I try to be careful and discreet, not only for myself but also for collaborators and others close to me. I hope neither I nor they will have too many regrets.

Moreover, I recognize that such exposure may also cause discomfort for the reader. Still, I ask you to attune yourself to this experiment. You can trust in my sincerity – but not in my objectivity. I may change my mind without devaluing what I thought before. I need you to switch on your mesopic vision, read between the lines, trust misunderstandings if they prove meaningful, mistrust overly clear statements, and take unguided glimpses of thought seriously – if they offer a thread you can follow. But always remain conscious of where we're at.

The title "Staging the Invisible Elephant that Remains Overlooked" may still require some clarification. At the beginning of my project, I used the term "white elephant." That may have been more accurate, because what I am talking about is not always invisible – but it certainly isn't simply "white" (if at all, then only in the additive sense of mixed color stimuli). The common idiom refers to something clearly perceivable by everyone that no one dares to address. My elephant herds, I believe, are similar – but less obvious, more reclusive.

Scientific standards would probably demand pinning them down like an old-school entomologist would do with a butterfly. But I've taken the liberty of watching them alive – like Jean-Henri Fabre, the first behavioral entomologist, did with the insects in his Harmas. Behavioral science for invisible elephants. Perhaps much of artistic research could be described this way. So this may not yet say much about what I am actually working on, what I deem important enough to be staged worthily.

In the following reflective documentation, I try to be as precise as possible, seeking words for my aims, methods, and questionable/question-worthy findings.

But I must acknowledge that I am like one of the blind monks asked to describe an elephant they have never been able to see. One grasps the tail and says, "Sure enough, an elephant is like a snake!" Another touches its side: "No, it's like a wall." A third, feeling the foot: "No question! It's a tree trunk."

What I can aim at is to embody as many assiduous monks as possible – understanding as much of the elephant as I can, while being aware that most of it will inevitably remain overlooked.

Jean-Henri Fabre

Seemingly unlikely, the entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre is an important reference for me – although you won't find many literal quotes from him in the following thesis. In my BA thesis, however, I proposed Fabre as the first artistic researcher avant la lettre. (cf. Miedl-Faißt 2020) His courage to focus on what was, at the time, considered an unattractive research subject – so-called "ugly critters" – with attention, love, and poetic force did not bring him immediate success or recognition. But in the long run, he became known as the founder of behavioral science. He observed his insects alive, tried to understand their behavior, imagine their motives, empathize with the absolute 'other' – while being conscious of the impossibility of doing so and, perhaps most importantly, find language for what he saw.

My work with children is, of course, not comparable to that of an entomologist – kids are not bugs. But that caring and tender way of relating to the world, and of sharing that relation with others, is something I find deeply inspiring. Especially within pedagogical contexts, it offers profound insight. So I'm crawling through my artistic Harmas together with my young co-creators, trying to share their perspectives, join their excitement about what can be discovered and cared for, what is often overlooked – and collaboratively develop forms and language to once again relate back to the world.

Manifesto of Artistic Research

Within artistic and academic contexts shaped by competitive capitalism and patriarchal dogmas, I have found some breathable space in the contested yet still relatively open field of artistic research. I strongly relate to voices such as those in the Manifesto of Artistic Research by Silvia Henke, Dieter Mersch, Nicolaj van der Meulen, Thomas Strässle, and Jörg Wiesel, who argue for a distinct mode of artistic thinking:

"In opposition to causal verification, to deduction or generalization, it behaves in a tangible, touching way towards its objects. It accords and considers, not to ambush these objects but to acknowledge and accept them, and thus to show their incomparability and vulnerability, and to show what remains unsatisfied by art." (Henke et al., 2020: 62).

Serendipitous Relations

Anne Dufourmantelle

"Gentleness shares with childhood a kind of natural community but also a power. It is the secret lining, or where the imaginary joins the real in a space that contains its own secret, making us feel an astonishment from which we can never entirely return." (Dufourmantelle, 2018: 3)

William Kentridge

If the motives, methods, and approaches are different, then of course the findings and insights will take different shapes as well.

Explaining the approach of "The Centre for the Less Good Idea" – founded by William Kentridge and Bronwyn Lace in Johannesburg – Kentridge himself puts it this way:

"The decisive moment in the art history of the twentieth century is the point at which collage — that natural technique of the studio and the very essence of artistic practice — comes to the fore. Suddenly, collage is no longer a hidden technique (one cannot trace how Caspar David Friedrich painted his tree), but becomes central. The audience is now invited to understand collage not as a mere artistic technique, but as a kind of truth: as an acknowledgment that we make sense of the world by constructing it out of different fragments; and that making sense of the world is something we do — something we are capable of — rather than something that simply happens to us as the world presents itself." (Kentridge, 2018: 28, translated from German by the author.)

My focus here is less on collage as an art historical phenomenon, and more on what Kentridge says about our way of 'making sense of the world'. In my own words: misunderstanding something means understanding something else.

Please Follow Me

This first part of my reflective documentation chronologically showcases the practice-based projects I realized within the scope of my PhD in Art Studies. The reflective text was written retrospectively in 2025 and traces an Ariadne's thread of questions alongside the development of my research.

Beginning with a **Prologue** rooted in the mid-1990s, I attempt to weave my own childhood experiences into these reflections, alongside the artistic path that has since led to my current questions.

The **Videoprojects 2017-2018** were a series of works I realized as a guest artist at several public schools in Vienna, in co-creation with school classes and in close collaboration with their teachers and artist colleagues.

Nirual refers to the years since around 2020, with a main focus on the early Covid period. My dear nephew (born in December 2013) and I embarked on a very close and intense artistic journey, made possible mostly through video calls, as we live far apart.

Between 2020 and 2022, I participated in **The Octopus Programme** – an international, guided research-based educational programme. The experiences and encounters I was gifted with in that context inspired, encouraged, and challenged my work.

In 2022, I formally entered the school system and began working as an art teacher at a public grammar school in an affluent Viennese suburb. The chapter **Grammar School** reflects on my attempts to transfer my understandings of artistic research and co-creation into the institution.

One year later, my partner and I left the city and moved to a village in Upper Austria, where I began working in a **Middle School**, teaching arts, crafts, and digital literacy. The experience, as one can imagine, could not have been more different.

The **Epilogue** returns to the evolving relationship and collaboration with my nephew, who has now nearly outgrown childhood. We met and reflected on the work we have created together – some of it dating back to nearly half his lifetime ago – and elaborated plans for the final exhibition in January 2026.

Looking ahead, there is also something completely new: on April 4th, 2025, I, against all odds, became a mother to a wonderful baby son. There is a new relationship to the world – one that I suspect will be hardly comparable to any other, possibly (though not necessarily) transforming everything I have thought, done, and written about my relationship to and co-creation with children so far. This will undoubtedly also influence the way I approach my role as a teacher after maternity leave.

Concluding my PhD endeavor, I am required to create an exhibition that shares my artistic practice – a particular undertaking, as "my" practice is always densely woven into collaborative and co-creative situations. The final part of the Epilogue offers some general thoughts on how I will approach this mission.

I am searching for an integrative approach that thinks art, pedagogy, and science together as interwoven fields of practice and knowledge. The reflective text is therefore not an exhaustive documentation of individual concepts. Rather, it focuses on specific aspects that I remember being particularly concerned with at the time, and that I can expand upon in describing the respective projects. Each of these subchapters is headed by a corresponding question. The questions are not directly answered in the text but are meant to open up a field of dialectical interplay. Browsing through them should offer an overview of the spectrum of interwoven aspects I have been concerned with.

Sections marked with a grey background contain the projects' key data and credits, as well as project announcements such as those written for the schools' annual reports. I decided to include these texts because I believe comparing them with my reflections highlights some of the ambiguities, subjects, and questions I am addressing.

Sections marked with a rose background present literary references that I weave into my reflections to contextualize and clarify my thoughts.

The book concludes with and index of my **Misleading list of Certain Learnings (Ongoing)** – a manifesto of brittle insights and challenges I want to proclaim.

Prologue

My hen barn, just before it disappeared.

How can I make the transient world my home?

Hen Barn

Meeting Myself as a 10 Year Old

My grandfather helped me carry out the things he had stored in the old hen barn, tucked away in the farthest corner of the farm grounds – mostly old planks and peasant tools that had been sitting there for about twenty years, ever since he had, with some remorse, retired from farming.

After that, I remember sweeping away decades of dust – again and again and again. The first sweeps brought up satisfying heaps of dirt that I could shovel into a bucket and carry out. But even after dozens of diligent sweeps, the broom would always gather small grey piles on the grey concrete floor. After a full day of sweeping, I decided to befriend the remaining dust.

I remember the smell of that dust, mingling with fresh paint and the old carpet from my grandparents' parlour, which Grandpa had fitted into the small room. That way, I could even vacuum with a real vacuum cleaner and then lie on the floor, looking up at the ceiling – just like in a real living room. I rummaged through the rest of the old farm, looking for furniture and decorations. I painted the frame of the opaque glass-tile window facing the neighbouring farm in bright blue, matching the blue curtains I had found in the attic of the residential house. I never found out what lay behind that window, but I loved the afternoon light as it fell onto my small table, couch, and carpet.

Throughout the winter, it was too cold to stay in my little private retreat, but spring and early summer felt endless – when the dark wooden beams of the surrounding barns soaked up the sun, and I began building a porch, a terrace, and a flowerbed.

As my hen barn seasons flew by, I started to realize that those summers might not be eternal – just like the lives of my grandparents, and with them, the existence of the old farm. Much to Grandpa's regret, neither my uncle nor my mother had shown any interest in taking up farming. Those moldy corners in the horse stable, the powdery remains of woodworms, and the rusty rakes, troughs, and pitchforks gradually changed – from adventurous props into harbingers of transience and loss.

I understood, and I tried to act: being a sensible child, I didn't ask Grandpa to inherit the whole farm. I just asked for that little corner with the hen barn. He laughed and said, sure enough. He even signed a testament I had prepared. I tried to be as serious as possible but got no serious reply. I understood that I was locked into the sphere of play, and there was no way to bridge that gap. What I didn't understand then was that it wasn't a lack of respect or love for me as a full-fledged person, but rather the painfulness of reality that made him prefer the soothing fantasy of my infant legislation.

sweeping old
floors keeps
conjuring up new
piles of dust.

"The Books" – Fine Arts Thesis Verena Miedl-Faißt 2013

How can I treasure brittle strands of relation?

The Books

Happening to Become my Diploma Thesis

Some fifteen – or rather twenty – years later, I had reluctantly learned to accept that one cannot stop time from passing, no matter how good or bad it is, nor prevent things from changing – sometimes in ways I wouldn't appreciate. But on top of this loss of infant might, play had ceased to be an excuse for my misunderstandings. Although the world hardly ever followed my rules – later not much more than earlier – I was now being held more and more responsible for what I did, thought, said, or made.

I studied fine arts because I thought that within the arts, one could make up one's own rules and decide how to invest one's lifetime to the farthest extent. Not that I had any idea about the artistic milieu or cultural-economic realities – nor did I care much. I was looking for ways to relate, and I felt that artistic means were the most useful to approach confusing realities. Actually, I was looking for playmates – and found them at ZOOM Children's Museum. Not only among the children, but even more so among my artist colleagues there. But although I felt it was the most relevant work I had ever done, within the university, that "childish stuff" didn't count as serious work. I felt entangled and disoriented in realities that didn't feel like my own, so I moved to Iceland for a year – simply because I thought an island with not much on top would be a good place to disentangle.

That turned out to be true, though it left me quite lonesome at first. But after some months of dark polar winter, the barely setting sun brought along some very particular encounters. Among them were Abdi and Nico. We spent four weeks together at the SIM artist residency in Reykjavik. They were cool, confident hipster-artists from New York City, living in a gay relationship – so I couldn't have been more surprised when they liked me, even said things like: "I love the way you work!" I fell in love with them – with their trustful and loving partnership, their confident identities as artists, and above all, the warmth of their embrace. I was heartbroken when they returned to NYC. How could I hold on to that strand of connection that had felt so good and stable – no matter how unlikely a lifelong friendship or ongoing contact might be after such a short encounter? Once again, I wouldn't be able to freeze that moment of magical time we had shared. I was seeking a way to treasure it – and still let go. Abdi was a photographer, and on all our excursions through lava fields, glaciers, and black-sanded beaches, he kept photographing his love, Nico. And as I was in love with his loving gaze, I kept taking photos of them while he was doing so. From that little series, I made two copies of a small booklet titled So Good to See You, sent one to New York, and kept one for myself – so I could hold on to that fragile strand of connection whenever I longed for it. This turned out to be a reasonable method – one that made the passage of time, of life, and of loved ones more bearable. So I began creating a series of such booklets, treasuring particular but transient moments and encounters. Each booklet was dedicated to a specific person – or sometimes a place or a moment or a non-human creature – and it was important that this particular vis-à-vis would be able to catch and hold the thread I had tossed over. Beyond that, I didn't care much about broader reception. I had come to understand what a rare and precious thing it is to relate deeply to just one other person at one particular moment in time – and that such a bond was worth far more than the excitement of any anonymous audience.

if you can’t hear
yourself speak,
go disentangle.

but hold the lines.

Leslie Jamison

“If every relationship is a collaboration “– two people jointly creating the selves they will be with each other – this collaboration can sometimes feel like tyranny, forcing the self into a certain shape, and it can sometimes feel like birth, making a new self possible.” (Jamison, 2020: 226)

The US writer Leslie Jamison, mainly known for her book The Empathy Exams, has been influential for me – both in form and in content. Her writings about the (mere possibility) of empathy have resonated strongly with my reflections on co-creation. As a non-fiction writer, the encounters she seeks in her research, the interviews she conducts, always become co-creations – she could not write her texts without the information, thoughts, and reports her interlocutors are willing to share. This, on the one hand, raises ethical concerns I recognize as very close to my own. Even though she can try to be as transparent as possible, the people she writes about become objects of her research; their very personal and intimate stories become her material. Sometimes it is hard to say whether they can truly give their informed consent to being published in this way. There is a power gap, made even more problematic by the fact that her relation to those people – and her own experiences shaping the way she empathizes with what she is told – deeply affects her findings. She cannot be objective. She faces this fact with awe-inspiring honesty, continuously sharing, explaining, and questioning her thoughts and deductions.

Leslie Jamison is therefore another literary reference for me, one that is difficult to pin down to a single clear-cut citation. But the quotation I chose, as I understand it, summarizes her general approach to relating to others: making not only intimate relationships but every encounter a collaborative endeavor – leaving both parties, and the world in between, transformed.

Hartmut Rosa

“Whenever we resonate with another human being, a book, a song, a landscape, an idea, a piece of wood, we are transformed by the encounter – although of course in very different ways.” (Rosa, 2020: 34)

The sociologist Hartmut Rosa calls this form of collaborative encounter resonance. He proposes a resonant relationship with the world as an aspirational ideal, offering ways to cope with the contemporary challenges of an endangered planet and collapsing democracies. In his theory, the basic problem is that the capitalist system depends on eternal growth – or, more precisely, can only remain stable through constant acceleration – while resources are finite, and both the world and humanity are running out of breath (cf. Rosa, 2022: 13f).

A resonant relationship with the world is characterized by four dimensions: affection, self-efficacy, transformation, and uncontrollability. One is touched by what one encounters; the encounter is reciprocal; self and other are changed; and – perhaps most importantly – this moment cannot be forced (cf. Rosa, 2018: 28f).

My artistic as well as my pedagogical approach could be described as a search for an impossible methodology: one that seeks to find and encourage such resonant relationships within the world, while tracing and sharing both routes and detours along the way. Rosa himself has extended his theory into the pedagogical realm, describing the aspirational school setting as one that enables resonant encounters (cf. Rosa, 2016).

On the one hand, I attempt to describe hands-on examples of what this might look like. On the other hand, I also suggest that – as is mandatory for a resonant relationship in Rosa’s sense – such a relationship must be reciprocal. This means not only that the teacher needs to be open to transformation through the encounters that take place in the classroom, but also that the school itself must be changed by each and every child who enters the building and the system.

I am convinced that working with children can teach us a great deal about how to deal with the uncontrollability of the world – since control only comes with age. A baby does not even know where its body ends and the world begins. Everything is resonance, or it is not. Thus, I would argue that moving towards an infant perspective as an adult can help us to discover ways of engaging joyfully with what remains uncontrollable.

“Do you still remember the first snowfall on a late autumn or winter day, when you were a child? It was like the intrusion of a new reality. Something shy and strange that had come to visit us, falling down upon and transforming the world around us, without our having to do anything. An unexpected gift. Falling snow is perhaps the purest manifestation of uncontrollability. We cannot manufacture it, force it, or even confidently predict it, at least not very far in advance. What is more, we cannot get hold of it or make it our own. Take some in your hand, it slips through your fingers. Bring it into the house, it melts away. Pack it away in the freezer, it stops being snow and becomes ice.“ (Rosa, 2020: 1)

Videostill from
“Der Baum und das Notenblatt“
by Petar and Verena Miedl-Faißt
at ZOOM Animated Film Studio Vienna
around 2019.

How can I interweave brittle strands of relation?

Der Baum und das Notenblatt

Working in the Animated Film Studio at ZOOM Children‘s Museum

But such singular coincidences don’t build a strong network of relationships that can sustainably withstand existential solitude. I grew frustrated with the hermeticism of my private bonds. I longed to share what I had found – to weave strong threads from those many brittle strands.

At ZOOM Children’s Museum, I experienced many special encounters. In fact, the job itself was to create inspirational sparks – and sometimes, the animated film studio became a fireworks display of imagination. I began working there around 2009. The museum had been founded in 1994, largely by artists who built a space with and for children. The animated film studio offered a unique interface for creating hand-drawn stop-motion animations with large groups of children and a professional sound studio. I became part of the most inspiring, diverse, and interesting team of artists, musicians, scientists, and filmmakers I had ever met. I felt truly and deeply in the right place.

We produced thousands of films and sound experiments, which were published in the ZOOM website’s archive. And honestly, I don’t remember a single day in those early years when I didn’t enter the studio lighthearted and full of anticipation. Things changed – as they, alas, always tend to do – and after more than twenty years, this beloved and fantastic team mostly fell apart. (The reasons are manifold and go beyond – but certainly don’t exclude – what I’m trying to explore here.)

Of course, we had an educational mission toward the children: promoting media literacy, supporting personal development, self-expression, conflict resolution, teamwork, and so on. And of course, this “service” for the children had to be prioritized. But what made a workshop truly special – at least for me – was reciprocity. Sometimes, constellations, processes, ideas, and moments were so unique that none of the participants – neither artists nor children – could have been replaced. Together, we developed ideas and experienced moments of artistic exchange that were inseparably tied to that specific constellation of people, place, and time – offering a glowing new strand of connection to each other and to the world that hadn’t existed, or at least hadn’t been visible to us, before. To me, these were moments of ideal artistic collaboration – or rather, co-creation. I left the studio just like the kids did: with glowing cheeks and a pounding heart.

I longed to share that excitement. But the artistic products drowned in the mass of workshop output, and placing them on a different stage raised a whole bouquet of issues. Most of all, those sparks of magic and inspiration could hardly be transferred by simply watching those flickering fragments of children’s drawings – hastily put together and published after just 90 minutes, no matter what…

some trees
love music sheets
very much.

Videostill from “Inside Me“

How can the infrastructure of the school system be utilized, while pushing aside the disruptive forces of institutional stress, to let an inspiring mycelium of relations grow between kids and artists?

video

Inside Me

AHS Kenyongasse (Grammar School) / Filmarchiv Austria

Although I loved ZOOM, I began looking for ways to push the limits of such artistic co-creation with my dearest artist colleagues and with children.

I realized that the school infrastructure actually had many advantages: School classes are – if not to an ideal extent, still – more diverse and heterogeneous than most voluntary constellations of people in other, later stages of educational, professional, or private life. Bringing together all those different mindsets, needs, and dispositions offers the best chance to “train the muscles” of a resilient democracy. At least, if there is sufficient space and time for such complex processes, and if performance pressure does not reduce the pedagogical impact to merely normalizing and levelling all skills, talents, thoughts, and aims. There is – if not to an ideal extent, still – an existing infrastructure and established routines that make it possible to work with larger groups. There are – if not to an ideal extent, still – well-trained teachers who know their students and are willing to work with and for them. Thus, I started looking for funding and project partners to establish a more ambitious form of artistic co-creation at school.

Together with Michaela Götsch, a dear friend and artist teaching at AHS Kenyongasse, we developed the project “Yes, It’s Magic!” in collaboration with two classes from her school, a group of teachers, and Filmarchiv Austria, which was hosting an exhibition on the history of the moving image at the historic Metrokino Kulturhaus (“Kino.Magie – Was geschah wirklich zwischen den Bildern?”, 6/10/15–30/03/16). The students had some preparatory lessons on film and, of course, an excursion to the exhibition. But our main aim was to use the medium as a catalyst and a space of possibilities for a free collaboration of 59 students, supported by a photographer, a musician, myself, and their teachers. Over the course of several project days, we tried to establish a space for individual artistic expression that would feed into one collective piece. After producing a collective soundtrack, the visual material emerged – without a script or an assigned topic – in different workshops focusing on light, sculpture, performance, and text, all based on the shared audio. The result, which the large film team named inside me, was shown both at school and at the historic Metrokino Kulturhaus, together with an exhibition of props and installations from the film.

Of course, we had elaborate workshop concepts, but I do not want to go into details about timeframes, tools, or individual stories. Rather, I would like to summarize the aims and issues that shaped later projects and my PhD endeavor.

Looking back, we thought a great deal about how to enable self-interest-driven involvement for all participants. Students are accustomed to always having clear tasks and being told what to do. If there is no clear task but multiple options – or even the need to develop individual ideas – this can create a vacuum that requires time and endurance to overcome. Probably the most important thing is that teachers, workshop leaders, or other (involuntary) “authorities” do not become nervous or feel the need to force action.

To foster a positive dynamic, we conducted a preparatory workshop for the teachers involved, explaining our approach. During the project days, there were no other classes scheduled, and compared to usual timetables, we had a lot of time. The students could move freely between workshop set-ups, and there were

also break out areas with drinks and snacks. And, of course, being an artist from outside the school – not a teacher – helped immensely to overcome problematic school dynamics.

As far as we could tell, it worked out very well, and the students were very excited about their product – quite eerie and quite professional-looking. It was at once uncanny and intimate. The students knew they had invented these images, but they would never have written such an experimental script. It was not one director's idea but a filmic mycelium in its own right.

The reflection and exchange afterwards, therefore, felt very important. We scheduled an extra workshop to discuss the process, the outcome, and the option of public presentation. We wanted everyone to feel comfortable with the common work being published, and everyone involved was to be named and credited as they saw fit. What we did not expect was the long-term impact: emotions and thoughts that surfaced later on, which the students could not grasp or did not want to express immediately in our short reflection workshop. The other artists and I were gone after the scheduled project time, but the students continued to talk about the project, their doubts, and even fears concerning "what they had done." This was quite challenging for the teachers, who had not been responsible for the concept and who were just as surprised as the students by what had happened. I felt remorseful about not being able to accompany this process in the longer term.

Another struggle we faced was collaboration on the institutional level. Although the opportunities and general openness of Filmarchiv Austria were amazing, we were not part of the officially curated program but "just a school project." Communication proved tricky, and it was difficult to achieve the level of professional recognition we were aiming for. In the end, we celebrated a worthy premiere with moderation, live performance, and a professionally screened DCP – but only thanks to heaps of extra private effort, plus a good deal of persistence towards people who clearly had not been prepared to take us as seriously as we expected.

I think one of the core paradoxes of my aims appears here: I am looking for unprejudiced encounters and collaborations based on reciprocal openness, curiosity, and the will to engage artistically, no matter whether one is a child or an adult, a professional artist or an amateur. I am convinced that such co-creation can yield insights that are otherwise inaccessible. These insights should be shared and received in the same unprejudiced way – as artistic expressions of artistic research – which can only produce knowledge if taken seriously. But the crucial issue is that being taken seriously also means being exposed to the risks of unforeseeable artistic processes and to the mercilessness of an anonymous or professional audience. As a professional artist, I must be able to handle such risks and take responsibility, consciously or not. Children or non-professionals, however, cannot be expected to do so. Sharing workshop outcomes within the safe framework of art education or school works like a filter, protecting participants from misunderstanding – but also from being taken seriously. As a professional artist, I cannot take the products from projects with non-professionals out of that niche and pretend to share authorship equitably – and thereby also give away responsibility.

To illustrate: some years ago, I successfully obtained the boatmaster's certificate for whitewater rafts. From that day on, I would be held responsible if I went rafting with people without such a certificate – no matter whether I told them or not, whether I steered the boat or not, whether an accident was actually my fault or not. Simply because I should be able to anticipate, judge, and control.

In a similar way, working within the pedagogical field carries an a priori set of expectations and responsibilities that can create a safe space (in the best case) but also one with slightly biased and limited artistic freedom.

If I want artists to become involved with their full professional identity, the framing of the outcome must be professional in a way that I can hardly impose on children, students, or non-professionals in general. Not because the process and the outcome could not possibly be just as interesting, inspiring, and insightful, but because it can be too dangerous for them to leave the sphere of innocent play.

Within my PhD in Art, I challenged this edge from various sides, and I dearly hope that neither I nor my co-creators will ever regret it.

Inside Me – an eerie story about the fear of loosing oneself.

Vienna 2016/co-creators: Maria ABDEL MASSIH Anjitha ANDIVEEDU Architha ANDIVEEDU Eren AYDIN Erik BALKA Das blauflammige Onigiri Gävin-Montgomery DE VILLA Patrick ESTRADA Abanoub GERGES Barbara GERGES Antonius HANNA Katharina HEGER Matthias HOLZER Sandra MAATOUK David MAJKIC Christine MONTALES Antonette OALIN Lyndon-Alexander PANGANIBAN Benjamin PISCHEL Cherland POSADAS Tian POZGAJ Stojan RIKIC Sebastian ROZ Simon SCHUH Grigory SYTNIK Mark TADROS Anushka WITANACHCHI David WOJCIECHOWSKI Qiqi ZHENG Sara ANDIC Anni CHEN Veronika EISTERER Nadine EL GARHY Sheryl FARAG Arne GHOUKASIAN Katja HAUMER Buse KAYA Isabella KOKORIC Ivona LOVRIC Dunia SOLIMAN Angela SOSIC Melisa AYDIN Lukas BALICKI Dinh DANG Marie-Claire EGLHOFER Florian EMATHINGER Moritz FRÜH David HEINDL Veronika KUCZEWSKI Alexander LACIUK Paul LOTZ Robert LUGERBAUER Denis NEDZIBOVIC Teresa PREISSINGER Ömer REYHAN Sandro SPIELBÜCHLER Bünyamin UYAR Terin VALOOKARAN
partners: Michaela Götsch, Ines Stiedl, Nicole Hofer, Katharina Müller, Katharina Goessinger, Sonja Mallinger (AHS Kenyongasse); Tomáš Mikeska (Filmarchiv Austria); Klemens Koscher (video); Oliver Stotz (sound)
supported by: KulturKontakt Austria / culture:connected

The project has been awarded by projekteuropa. It has been presented at
InSEA Regional Conference Vienna 2016 and at
3. Internationalen Symposium Kulturvermittlung in St. Pölten (NÖKU).
InSEA publication on the project:
IMAG # 5. InSEA Publications. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24981/2414-3332-5.2017.5

Videoprojects
2017-2018

How can a project structure be established that relies on organizational and financial scaffolding, so the actual focus can be set on individual questions, possibilities and relations?

Poster announcement cinema screening

Being a Foreign Artist at School

I considered Yes, It's Magic! a kind of pilot project, hoping that the amount of time invested in funding applications and institutional struggles could be reduced – compared to the actual artistic work with students that I was truly interested in – by creating organizational and financial structures that could be reused. Therefore, I planned a series of projects similar to Yes, It's Magic!

The basic concept was always to work as an external artist with school classes and, over the course of several intensive project days, produce a collective film work based on a collaboratively created soundtrack. Depending on the individual groups I worked with, I invited artist colleagues to offer workshops focused on approaches that matched the students' interests.

I did not want these projects to become pedagogical or artistic "services" that schools or students would have to pay for – since I was hoping for reciprocity at the collaborative level, and of course I did not want to work only with privileged students. So I looked for public funding, which turned out to be very difficult. Although always endangered by political shifts and economic cuts, the Austrian subsidy system seems comparatively well resourced. Yet ambitious artistic projects within school contexts proved tricky: All art or film funding programs were categorically ruled out as soon as schools were mentioned. And for school projects, there was hardly any extra money outside the hermetically sealed budget.

The only real option was Kultur:Kontakt Austria, which was explicitly designed to support artists working in schools. They were very helpful and enabled what I was able to realize – but the money they provided was and still is dispersed in the form of micro-grants, following a radical scattershot approach. I had to write extensive individual submissions and reports, sometimes just for €200, in the best case for around €1,500, and even had to pretend to realize dozens of separate mini-projects although I was actually trying to fund a larger framework.

I do not know if I overlooked some hidden "pot of gold," but I was not able to set up an economically sustainable structure to establish these co-creations with school classes as my main artistic practice – as I also had to make a living myself and wanted to ensure fair pay for the other artists involved.

Nevertheless, I realized a series of projects that became the basis and starting point for my PhD endeavor, and I tried to publish them in a worthy manner through a cinema screening I was able to organize with the support of Michael Stejskal (Filmladen Filmverleih) at Votivkino in Vienna. The auditorium was packed – not because the projects had sparked the public interest I had wished for, but because so many students were involved that they filled the space to see their own work on the big screen – and, involuntarily but attentively, watched the films of the other groups as well.

trying
to cover more
than one hole of a
watering can

is not sustainable.

Videostill from “Mamilahpinatapai“

How can the modes of co-creation with professional artists, teachers and students/children be differentiated in appreciative yet equitable ways?

video

Mamihlapinatapai

AHS Krottenbachstraße (Grammar School)

Just after Yes, It’s Magic! I collaborated with Verena Lassnig – again, a dear friend, artist, and teacher at another grammar school in Vienna. This project involved a much smaller group of students – 14 instead of 59 – and no other teachers were involved. This made it possible to spontaneously adjust the process, from materials to film locations, together with the students. Only for the sound workshop did we work with Oliver Stotz, who had already been part of the pilot project. I knew Oliver through ZOOM, although he had not worked there as a workshop leader. I very much appreciated his artistic ability to create rousing sounds and musical ideas from almost anything. He had mostly worked behind the scenes of performances that – as I thought – gained a particular strength through his contribution. Since in our video projects the soundtracks held the entire project together, their quality had to be as sustainably engaging as possible. Moreover, I saw an advantage in the fact that he did not consider himself a pedagogue, while nevertheless holding pedagogical work in high respect. I explained to him that he should not worry too much about a workshop concept or about communicating with the students – I would always be present to support him. He should simply contribute his artistic and technical abilities and treat us as any other professional “client.” Over the course of several projects he was involved in, we developed a well-functioning mode of collaboration: He never worked with the entire group, but instead conducted short and intense recording sessions with a maximum of five students. It was important that everyone had the chance to record at least some small buzz, mumble, rustle, or bang, and that the students could always recognize their input in the final product. Without compromising the children’s artistic sovereignty, he shared his skillful artistic magic, building acoustic narratives, catchy melodies, and rousing beats from these fragments, and connecting the consecutive groups by attentively listening and responding together with each new group of students. Depending on what was available on site, we worked with beautiful instruments – exploring a grand piano or a double bass – as well as with the unexpected acoustic potential of arbitrary findings in the school’s broom closet. Although I deeply value working in teams with pedagogically experienced artist colleagues, I particularly enjoyed the collaboration with Oliver, because he did not divide his professional identity into “pedagogue” and “artist,” but simply carried out these experimental missions to the best of his ability.

A film about MAMIHLAPINATAPAI, following Wikipedia “a look that without words is shared by two people who want to initiate something, but that neither will start“.

Vienna 2017/co-creators: Negar ASADI Carolina CHRISTOFFER Kariem ELSAEDI Laura FRANK Lola GILJON David KÖHLER Sophie KOLTSCHEV Katharina PAYER Canan RAMAZANOGLU Silvia RETTINGER Mathias SCHNEIDER Dario STOHLAWETZ Lukas URCH Nicolas WEISS
partners: Verena Lassnig (BRG 19), Oliver Stotz (sound)
supported by: Bundesministerium für Bildung, KulturKontakt Austria culture:connected, VotivKino

Videostill from “The Cringe“

How can I respond when students use their freedom not to shape the project, but rather to test my boundaries or provoke a reaction – without abandoning the idea of co-creation?

video

The Cringe

AHS Kenyongasse (Grammar School)

The second collaboration with AHS Kenyongasse was again arranged through Michaela Götsch, but she was no longer teaching there. Thus, this was the first project in collaboration with teachers I didn‘t know beforehand – and they didn‘t know me resp. what to expect.

I was clamped together with a young teacher new to the school and the process became quite conflictual. In the end, this person did not want to be involved or named anymore and another teacher – credited as project partner – stepped in.

AHS Kenyongasse is a catholic private school, although I didn‘t perceive any particular conservative bindings impartet by the directorate. For “Yes, it‘s magic!“ we were able to work on the school‘s beautiful theater stage. For the second project though, this space was not available and we moved into the school chapel – a huge bright space, towered by a tremendous wooden crucified Jesus.

To invite the children to get involved, I had produced picture-postcard sets with photographs I had made, each motif only once. Each student was invited to choose one set, consisting of a colour-print, that he or she could keep, and a black and white print of the same motif asking for a wish on the backside. Those “wishes“ could be returned to me, leaving it open if the kids would like to articulate a personal wish, some wish for me or some wish very practically addressing our upcoming collaboration. This way, I was hoping to start the project not by asking something from them, but by offering a personal gift – as individual as it can get, if an adult stranger meets a group of students for the first time.

Afterwards, we started as already tried and tested, with Oliver and the recording sessions. Mostly, those sounds turned out quite uncanny. I think, this is simply because noisy, scratchy, dissonant sound happening is more likely than some harmonic, soothing melody. And moreover it is an archaic instinct to be alert, if there is any sound without clear origin and explanation. So most of the videoprojects have some horror-movie-tendency. But this one turned out particularly creepy.

So when we met in the school chapel for the first time, sitting together as a large group beneath the huge crucifix and listening to the thrilling yet rather horrific sounds, it didn’t surprise me too much that the students came up with some quite gruesome ideas. I hardly intervene in such situations, because I want the kids to understand, that this was actually their project and I would just be trying to help them realize the ideas they came up with and chose to follow. To be honest, I mostly trusted the dynamics, that the scariest plot would dissolve a little, due to either a lack of time and abilities or – and that was more the case in those projects – I would try to make them go so much into details, that actually intense images could evolve, but the cheesy and gruesome cliché horror plot would not become too manifest in the end. Once we actually started working, the students would mostly get involved with an idea and forget about competing to be the most provocative and dreadful.

Not so much in this case. I think, what hampered the dynamics was that the students could sense, that there was some lack of trust between their teacher and me. My project partner was actually scared by what this project turned out to be, sitting in the corner

with earphones plugged in and trying to be as non-involved as possible. Some of the kids were sorry and would therefore be rather held back, some enjoyed their might and tried to push the situation ever more to the edge, trying to ask for things I finally couldn‘t allow or support. The process turned into a powerplay that I found no real exit for.

I think the group was somehow proud in the end, because the film turned out to be quite intense, but everybody knew it was at least partly just pushed to the edge by some and therewith not what it could have been in the sense of an inspired co-creation. The collaborating teacher asked to be taken out of the credits, probably fearing consequences from the directorate or even the superordinate department of education. And lacking an actually involved contact person, nobody encouraged and took the group of students to the screening at Votivkino – which I felt really sorry about.

I‘m not sure if I would act just in the same way again or what could have been a game-changer in that project. But it has been showing quite convincingly, that a trusting atmosphere is a conditio sine qua non for such a process – not only concerning the children, but everybody involved.

If I withdraw from a leading position, others will probably try to step in – that‘s just basic group dynamics. But to what extend can I just endure such a process and make more prolific dynamics prevail – even risking to fail; or must I, at least at some point, take the responsibilty as artist/teacher working with non-professionals/students and perform a leading, protecting and guiding position – and does this necessarily mean failing at least in some way, too?

A brutal story about a psycho, unrequited love and a monster.

Vienna 2018/co-creators: Abanob ASAAD Alejna KACAPOR Alper ASIK Anna SCHREFL Benno SMELY Berk KAI TAN Danijel NEDZIBOVIC Elijah GONZALES Hadis RAHIMI Jana BAYOT Lenard-Pete DOTE Lexi CAPATE Marco KOLESIC Mikhail ENGOYANTS Nina JOKIC Nura GHARAHSHIR Peter HERLIK Pia-Alice STELZL Simon GALLA Stefan POLESNY Zeliha KALDIRIM / Wien 2018
partners: Andrea Weissenbacher (AHS Kenyongasse), Letizia Werth (painting), Oliver Stotz (sound)
supported by: KulturKontakt Austria / culture:connected

power plays
are boring.

Videostill from “Der Schatten des Bösen“

Does the gaze of the public on co-creative products need to be directed?

video

Der Schatten des Bösen

Integrative Lernwerkstatt Brigittenau (Inclusive Middle School)

Working with the Integrative Lernwerkstatt Brigittenau was meeting my approach somewhat better: ILB is a public middle school with an inclusive approach. The children are taught in multi-age classrooms, some of them living with visible or invisible disabilities, and they are used to a more equitable interaction between each other and between teachers and students. Moreover, my project partner, Karolina Kras, was a former colleague from ZOOM Children‘s Museum.

The school, located rather centrally in Vienna‘s 20th district, has a beautiful “satellite” in the woods of the Danube floodplains. We were allowed to use that space and the surrounding nature for our workshops. To my surprise, the children were not too excited about that place. Getting there by train and on foot was quite time-consuming, and, of course, it was nothing special anymore for them. Still, they were quite involved and excited about the project. Challenging in this constellation was, for me, and in this case, the musician and sound artist Werner Möbius, to anticipate the abilities of the individual children. Of course, again, they should work as independently as possible – and they knew the place way better than we did. But it was hard to guess just who could be left strolling through the undergrowth with a sound recorder and who‘d get lost. Who could work near the water, maybe not incessantly observed, and who needed more support and protection? And even more so: who could be asked to take care of another, and to what extent? Either we were just fortunate, or we figured out quite well – at least, nobody got lost or was harmed.

But the question of how, and in what way, some of the children needed more protection than others, and how to reconcile such protection with artistic autonomy, continued to occupy us. Here is one example: one girl, obviously with Down syndrome, was very involved and claimed some sort of main character for herself. She said she was a mermaid, but she would not act as you‘d expect a 10-year-old to play “Ariel” or the like, but positioned herself on different natural stages she found, standing there straight and singing a hardly understandable song. Of course, that was quite a powerful image, but her role became more the one of an uncanny, unsettling, and ghostly appearance than a magic mermaid. Actually, from an artistic point of view, much more interesting, and the other kids happily involved that appearance in their creepy story. But was she conscious of and happy with that role? Were we showcasing her condition in a disrespectful way by staging her like that? And how must we assess these questions when the film would be shown in public?

I came to terms with myself, thinking one will hardly find clear answers to these questions, but it is part of the potential of the arts to find answers that can stand such ambiguity – probably only by remaining ambiguous themselves, though.

Be aware of the “Schatten des Bösen“ –
if you‘re scared, you‘ll fade away!

Vienna 2018/co-creators: Aisha, Aurora, Chiara, Estella, Theo, Jonas, Annemarie, Armin, Liam, Lilith, Antonia, David and Maja
partners: Karolina Kras (ILB), Werner Möbius (sound)
supported by:
KulturKontakt Austria / culture:connected

not

all mermaids
can swim.

Videostill from “Der weiße Schatten“

How can individual ethical and political convictions be reconciled without exploiting a powerful position as teacher-like adult in a co-creational process with students?

video

Der Weiße Schatten

BAfEP 10 (College for Early Childhood Education)

BAfEP 10 is a high school where the students are not only doing their A-levels, but at the same time complete an apprenticeship as kindergarten teachers. Alas, and hardly surprising, although the school is meant to be open to everybody, there were only girls in the class I was working with. As with all the other groups, they came up with a horror-movie plot. And the most horrific thing they could think of was being a bride abandoned by her ~~broom~~ groom. The resulting images actually tell a more complex story. The protagonist escapes from the cage of societal norms and expectations, letting her inner monster break free. At least one could read it like that. Working with others inevitably confronts you with other perspectives, opinions, values, political positions, priorities, etc. Basically, this is not a problem; but negotiating such frictions with artistic means is what enables motion and transformation, if the conflict can be tackled in a fair, respectful, and constructive way. But working with teenagers obviously sometimes confronts me with struggles, concerns, or opinions that I perceive as something simply to be overcome, as superficial or immature. Such a perspective, of course, hinders unprejudiced negotiations at eye-level. Although my aim is a reciprocal relation with the people I am working with, I cannot deny having a pedagogical impetus: I want the kids to develop the ability to perceive, think, judge, and articulate themselves maturely and autonomously. I want them to be able to respectfully negotiate their concerns, to be conscious of their privileges and impairments, of their democratic rights and obligations, and their responsibility within human and non-human ecologies. And of course, I do have strong opinions and reservations against all forms of injustice, populist, opportunistic, or patriarchal propaganda, and social disintegration. Despite, and at the same time because of, this educational aim, there are points where I feel obliged to stop negotiating opinions and just unequivocally say: “This is wrong.” Every pedagogical approach implies some sort of “I know what is good for you,” some sort of placing oneself above the other. Thus, a pedagogy at eye-level is basically a paradox, and claiming such a nonhierarchical approach as a teacher or workshop leader is necessarily dishonest. This is another manifestation of the ambiguity within artistic co-creative processes in pedagogical contexts: to be honest about one’s own convictions without succumbing to the temptation to preach, to manipulate, and to abuse one’s inevitable position of power as teacher, artist, and adult.

Vienna 2018 / co-creators: Chantal BAUER Jessie BAUMGARTNER Jasmin DIEWALD Lisa-Marie FALTNER Selina FINDEIS Sabrina GLATZL Selina-Marie HEINE Sabrina KLETZENBAUER Kathrin LEBENSORGER MAIER Vanessa Marianne MOTLICEK Sarah Elena MUHR Fitesa PIRKUQI Sabrina POLSTER Isabel RUBITZKO Natalie RUPPITSCH Cansu SAGLAM Nicole SASSMANN Sarah-Sophie SCHATZER Michaela SCHIMPF Sanela SISIC Lisa STARSICH Katharina THEUERMANN Julia TOTH Anna TÜRKE
project partners: Eva Ehler (BAfEP 10), Oliver Stotz (sound), Sabine Marte (performance)
supported by: KulturKontakt Austria / culture:connected

if the cheese
is good,

the mouse can
have a good time
in the trap.

Videostill from “lost names / ءاقدصأ انعمچ (alle freunde)

How can it be ensured that every co-creator is able to follow, understand and consciously influence the common process without adopting a position that is too directive?

video

Lost Names / ءاقدصأ انعمچ (Alle Freunde)

AHS and NMS Glasergasse (Grammar School and Middle School)

In April and May 2018, this project, in collaboration with a gymnasium and a public middle school, was realized. Nicole Meeßen was teaching arts at the gymnasium, and her friend Regina Steidl was teaching several subjects at the middle school next door. Although so close, the situations of the students were very different – not only because it was a gymnasium and a middle school, but in particular because the group that Regina Steidl brought in was a separate class for refugee children who had just arrived in Austria and hardly spoke any German.

Realizing one co-creative project with such very different groups was a special challenge. Our plan was to do separate sound workshops but to try to interweave the recordings from these sessions. Afterwards, and still separately, I built huge kites with both groups, adapting a workshop concept by the artist and kite builder Anna Rubin. The idea was to create kites that would function like huge sculptures or masks, somehow referring to the common sounds. For the final shooting of the joint video project, we planned a day with both groups together on the Danube Island, where we would listen to the collective sound piece, fly and film the kites, get to know each other, and see what happened. Afterwards, we had planned two editing workshops, again separately for each group.

The sound artist Werner Möbius and I only realized on site at the middle school that we actually could hardly speak with the mostly Syrian kids, as none of us spoke Arabic. A microphone is always slightly intimidating, but as we could hardly explain anything, those children were particularly brave when they finally dared to record something. One of the boys did an impressively long Arabic rap – we had no idea what it was about, just realized it was long, the other kids were moved, and it was difficult to continue the workshop afterwards. In the following days, through the school, we could contact Wasiem Mourad, a teacher from Syria working at another Viennese school, who translated the rap for us, and we found out that the song, about the Syrian war and the singers‘ lost childhoods, had actually been produced with kids in a refugee camp in northern Lebanon. (See online video available at: https://youtu.be/efw_83be_C8?si=izbwsFpqI7tB-wN-w [Accessed: 11 November 2025])

The rap was almost as long as all the other sound experiments together and, of course, something completely different. Bringing things together into an outcome that all the children could identify with was tricky, as we could not discuss things with the Syrian kids, and the Austrian kids were quite overwhelmed by the heaviness and foreignness of the other children‘s contribution. The common day on the Danube Island was still fun – although the kites were a bit too heavy to fly and there was no wind at all. The two groups did not really mingle, but they perceived each other benevolently and curiously. During the editing workshops, the kids had the opportunity to add some animated bits to bridge the otherwise fragmentary material. The final product obviously turned out to be more heterogeneous and enigmatic than the other videos, but I think the kids were as proud and, at the same time, as irritated as the other groups.

Vienna 2018 / co-creators: Aleksandar LATINOVIC Ben ERLWEIN Clara PAULUS Elias MATHIASCHITZ Fabian ZEHETNER Filip TOMAC Floria FRASS Frieda RIEF Gabriella LOVRINOVIC Isabella RUISS Joudi ALGHARIB Julius ZAUNER Konstantin POLKE Kristina SHUHAR Lara FEHLMANN Leonhard VORABERGER Lina WEIDINGER Lino STOCKINGER Lisa BACHINGER Lorenz SEHER Marko MITROVIC Milan KONRAD Mohamad BRIM Mohammad HAJI BORGHOOTH Moritz SCHRÖDER Mouhamad HUSSEIN Nashat NAMET Paula BECK Philipp MÜLLNER Sedra HAJI BORGHOOTH Shahad ALABD ALJABUL Sophia CICHOCKI Teba AL FAWAZ Tobias ECKELBERG Valentin SCHÖNBAUER Xaver SCHREMS
partners: Werner Möbius (sound); Regina Steidl, Tanja Luszczak (NMSi Glasergasse); Nicole Meeßen (Erich Fried grammar school); Wasiem Mourad (translation rap)
supported by: KulturKontakt Austria / culture:connected, Bezirk Alsergrund
Special thanks to Anna Rubin, Irmgard Bebe, Verena Brabec and Saya Ahmad!

if too much paste
weighs
down the kite,
it won’t rise.

but we can hang it
from a tree
and let it dance
with the wind.

Videostill “Waldfilmtage“

How can artists and children be engaged in a seriously artistic playful encounter?

web-documentary

Waldfilmtage

AHS Krottenbachstraße (Grammar School)

“Waldfilmtage”, the second collaboration with Verena Lassnig at Krottenbachstraße, was the luxurious highlight of this series of workshops. Supported not only by Kultur:Kontakt Austria but also by additional funding from the municipal district and some contributions from parents (without actually paying myself), we were able to expand space, time, and artistic input to the maximum possible extent.

We implemented our project as an optional subject that students from several age groups could choose – meaning that the participating students were motivated and engaged by their own decision and will. Some of them had already been part of the group that produced “Mamilahpinatapai”.

Still, we were eager to overcome institutional dynamics that hinder encounters as much as possible. We thought that the best way to free ourselves from everyday worries and performance pressure – for both artists and students – would be to meet on neutral ground and have as much time as possible. Thus, we tried to set up a kind of artist residency. We found a beautiful setting in Croatia, where two artist friends of Verena Lassnig were running a place that would have perfectly matched our needs. However, releasing the students from school long enough to make such a journey worthwhile was not possible. Instead, we booked a place normally offering “farm holidays” somewhere in Upper Austria for four days in April 2018. They promised to provide not only accommodation but also conference rooms, barns, stables, and nearby woods that we could use as working locations.

We were joined by three additional artists: performance and media artist Sabine Marte, sound artist Werner Möbius, and my partner, scenographer, technician, and art educator Florian Miedl-Faißt. The basic concept was that the three of them would offer inspirational workshops in the mornings and afternoons, each related to their particular skills and focuses. In between, we would meet all together to share what was happening in the parallel groups, aiming to inspire one another and interweave different strands of work. Most of all, however, we hoped that unforeseeable things would emerge during the undefined and open times and spaces in between – at the campfire, during lunch breaks in the sun, or while going for a walk.

Originally, the plan had been to weave one single film from all the results, but the outcomes turned out to be so diverse that it would have been a pity to reduce them to a single timeline. I ended up visiting the school almost every week for the rest of the semester to help the students work on the material, editing various versions of what could be.

Overall, the “Waldfilmtage” were a great success and worked out just as we had hoped – almost. The greatest disappointment, of course, was that it became clear this would not serve as a pilot project to be continued, since all the funding was exceptional and I was essentially working for free.

The other struggle – perhaps more relevant to this discussion – concerned my co-artists rather than the students. I had invited dear friends who were well-disposed toward me and my project. We had been working together for years, and I did not expect any difficulties in the collaboration. Yet at certain moments, it became tricky: they knew this project was very important to me and that I expected them to “take it

seriously". Working seriously as artists with children, without a clear pedagogical mission or topic – artistically exposing oneself while maintaining pedagogical responsibility – turned out to be more demanding than I had realised. Engaging in open artistic processes always requires a willingness to take certain risks. This becomes easier when one can rely on the professionalism of one's artistic counterparts. Yet asking someone to engage their professional identity in the wild and potentially unsettling process of identifying with a young, relatively unformed, and carefree group of teenagers is, in fact, quite a lot to ask.

Vienna 2018 / co-creators: Darin LOVRIC, Katharina PAYER, Canan RAMAZANOGLU, Natascha BISCHOF, Dominik HAUER, Lilian KILPATRICK, Esther LINTON-KUBELKA, Carolina CHRISTOFFER, Kariem EL SAEDI, Kira SCHMUTH, Olivia SERGI, Ognjen UGRCIC, Jakob WURDAK, Anand BAYANJAV, Emil FRAUENDORFER, Emily KURAS, Isabella ROTH, Lea TLAPA, Fiona GARTLGRUBER, Anna KAPAUN, Lena SCHÖNTHALER, Fanni ZEKERT
partners: Verena Lassnig (BRG19 Krottenbachstraße); Sabine Marte (performance); Florian Miedl (scenography); Werner Möbius (sound)
supported by: KulturKontakt Austria / culture:connected, Bezirk Döbling

the forest is
dark at night for
everyone.

Between Us and Me

In Search of a Suitable Context

One morning in October 2018, I hosted a screening of this series of video projects at the Votivkino – a well-established art house cinema in Vienna. Many of the students came, as far as their teachers brought them, and of course, they were quite excited to see themselves and their work on the big screen. Some parents, a few friends, and several of the participating artist colleagues came as well, so the event was actually well attended. I could have been happy, but I remained somehow unsatisfied.

Just as I had felt locked into the sphere of play as a child, I now felt locked into the sphere of the educational context. We were not part of the official cinema programme; there was no external audience that might have come out of genuine interest in our work. It was the kids themselves, plus people attending for amicable reasons or out of a sense of obligation. And I am not sure how many of the students would have shown up if it hadn't been during a normal school day – if any. Even if they enjoyed the project, they had not participated from the beginning out of intrinsic motivation but because it took place at school, and there was, in fact, no way out.

With my artist colleagues, it was a bit similar. Most of them had been fulfilling a job I had asked and paid them for – or, at times, doing me a favour. But, at least it seemed to me, it hardly became "theirs", and therefore not a real co-creation.

For the teachers, I was the guest artist, realising a project they were more or less involved in, but mostly they were something like my clients. At the end of the day, it was my project, and somehow, I was not able to sustainably create the "we" I was longing for.

I had involved so many people and had tried so hard to build a space where this multiplicity could co-create, to stage this big encounter and make its potential bloom. But at the Votivkino, it was me holding the microphone and answering the Q&A – and I felt exposed, wrongfully taking the stage, and lonely.

In the context of my PhD studies, when I showed my work during colloquia, I encountered reactions ranging from friendly curiosity to almost aggressive resistance. I tried to present the videos as what I intended them to be: the outcomes of co-creative processes that a professional audience would take seriously. However, it was difficult to find a "context" for what I did – one that would provide grounding and orientation for such discussions. I had the impression that seemingly related contexts such as pedagogy, art education, participatory art, or art brut and outsider art either did not take my young co-creators and our work as seriously as I wished, or labelled the work in ways that prevented a discussion on equal terms. Moreover, I was collaborating with artists who were definitely not "outsider artists". Focusing on the media we used – such as sound, video, or performance art – was too broad to provide a meaningful framework, particularly since I tried to keep the possible approaches within the projects as diverse as possible.

So I wrapped the video projects in poetic reflections through which I attempted to convey what I was searching for. Yet these mostly did not clarify, but rather obscured, what I was struggling with.

Apart from these content-related issues, I was also frustrated because I did not succeed in finding allies to build sustainable financial and organisational scaffolding for my projects. With a heavy heart, I realised that I should close this chapter for the moment and move on. Looking back, I think I understand the obstacles I couldn't overcome a little better now.

I was busy building spaces for co-creative encounters and stages to be taken co-creatively. I was excited about what could happen if everyone – children as well as artists – would jump into this experiment and make it their own. I expected them to make individual contributions that would bring something exciting, unexpected, and otherwise inaccessible into being. I asked them to take the risk of exposing themselves in a context they had not really chosen. And, in fact, many of them engaged fearlessly and wholeheartedly.

Of course, I tried to make it a safe and comfortable space. But I now realise that I was very held back myself. I thought I had to keep the stage open for them and did not want to claim the foreground. I saw my artistic role as one of inspiring and enabling others, but in retrospect, I must admit that I did not dare to expose myself in the same way I asked them to. I was hiding behind the projects, behind the kids, behind my co-artists. I tried to negate any visible artistic contribution on my part, or at least claimed that I was merely helping the children realise what they had in mind – despite the fact that they would never have initiated such a project on their own.

So, in fact, I was asking a lot while denying any artistic risk myself. Why, then, should anybody else take it for me? I assume that, apart from all the parameters beyond my influence, this might be at least part of the reason for my frustrations – both concerning the projects themselves and the reception I was unhappy with.

While things may seem somewhat dreary at this point, I hope it is becoming visible in the videos and in my previous reflections that this series of projects brought valuable experiences – both for me and for my co-creators. However, this is not meant as an affirmative press release but rather the opposite: by tracing back the trouble, I want to make visible what made me move forward.

Accordingly, let me return in time to a moment when I could not yet grasp what I was describing above. As I tried to make sense of my experiences and continued working – self-employed as well as precariously pseudo-employed – in art educational contexts, I felt somehow thrown back to the start of my PhD journey.

I realised I was becoming better at what I was doing and saw tremendous differences in the quality of the work being done in the field. Yet I grew increasingly frustrated that such quality was rarely acknowledged, let alone remunerated. Sometimes, even people with incredible experience, sensitivity, creativity, and artistic virtuosity in co-creating with children did not claim recognition for their work: it was "just a side job", not "real art".

On the other hand (and of course I am generalising), those identifying with it as their main profession – often in higher positions – struggled with issues of self-confidence, as they did not see themselves as fully-fledged artists, were often afraid of artistic processes, and sometimes even prevented others from doing the artistic work they claimed to be responsible for. Meanwhile, others were content to leave it that way, as their main focus was officially on their next "real" exhibition or performance.

This more or less institutional bickering, often running beneath the surface, was a major part of my motiva-

tion for pursuing a PhD in Art in the first place. I wanted to bring this particular form of artistry out of the shadows: on one hand, the work my artist colleagues and I were doing to enable artistic processes with children – this specific form of anticipation, of thinking through a medium or material, of communication, empathy, and openness to serendipity. On the other hand, I aimed to make visible the unique works that sometimes emerged in co-creation with children or were created by the children themselves.

These two qualities should not be confused – doing so would either locate artistic quality solely in the adult work, rendering the children interchangeable, or, conversely, attribute the co-creative outcome only to a child's "talent", motivation, or mere coincidence.

I wanted my colleagues to stand up for our competence – not only, but also, in terms of career development and remuneration, which I believe we deserve. Having the same position, the same influence, and the same salary as a 19-year-old summer jobber after 20 years of experience brings not only financial struggles and a lack of recognition but also few opportunities to participate in sustainable and profound institutional processes.

I was frustrated by all the projects that seemed deliberately kept small: those in charge knew they could not handle more without relinquishing some power, and those who could have handled more preferred to invest in their "real" careers.

Then suddenly, it was spring 2020, and the unimaginable – the first lockdown – brought most of Vienna to a halt. I must admit, apart from abstract anxieties and closed parks, I personally have rather positive memories of those first weeks of exploding spring, silence, and sunlight in our living room. I was not alone but living with my partner in a beautiful apartment. We had no children to worry about, no jobs in the healthcare system, we were not high-risk patients, and the actual Covid numbers were still quite low. In short: we were able to await what would happen next in a comparatively carefree situation.

The directorship of ZOOM Children's Museum had just been taken over by Andrea Zsutty, who, with impressive determination and courage, had employed all the freelance artists instead of leaving us to face unemployment. This decision caused major turmoil within the institution – for reasons I cannot elaborate on here – but for the time being, it kept us relatively safe within the welfare system.

Museums, universities, and schools were closed. The work I had left to do was reduced to a mostly enjoyable minimum that still gave my days some structure and provided a bit of social interaction – albeit in a then-unfamiliar remote form. My life became radically decelerated, and – somewhat similar to my time in Iceland – I felt detached from the issues I had been struggling with.

Of course, I am referring to the first lockdown, when it was still unimaginable how much worse things would get, when one was still tempted to hope that this collective experience might be strengthening, even inspiring, rather than divisive. There was a certain naïve hope as birds took over the airports, no cars filled the streets, and people supported each other in neighbourly solidarity.

Screening at Votivkino

i am one
and I am many,
but I can

never be only.

Nirual

How do you express your love to a pre-linguistic child that is not your own?

Mei Schdi
me ist mie
ausdem ond
Gfalen
My voice has fallen
out of my mouth / moon.

by Nirual Kenabru
Photo © Ann-Katrin Urbanek

How I Found My Main Research Partner

I have always had a strong desire to have children and parenthood as a natural part in my life, but after some romantic teenage love affairs I had been without a long-term partner throughout my 20s. In 2013, by the age of 28, I met my since-then partner F. , but of course we wouldn‘t start a family right away – not foreseeing, that it would become as difficult as it was later on.

Just in the wake of our fresh relationship, my younger sister confided to me, that she was pregnant with her first child. She and her partner involved me quite willingly to become a very close aunt for little L. and I tried to be there for them with all my soul. So in those very first years, I travelled a lot between Vienna and Bavaria, where they were living. To me it felt like L. and I were deeply connected from the very beginning and it was difficult everytime I had to travel back home to Vienna or see them leave after a visit. I kept being anxious, his young mind would forget me in between our visits, as four or eight or twelve weeks feel like eternity if life in total has hardly been longer, but he never did.

L. was an incredibly sensitive young soul, and we had videocalls obtaining closeness even in pre-linguistic times. I always had cashews and cranberries at hand: sitting in front of the webcam we would both snack them synchronously, getting close through that common sensual moment.

And our friendship became ever closer, as he started to speak. Child language learning is always fascinating, but I was particularly intrigued by L.‘s will to tell stories from his first syllables on. I remember our first conversation very well: We had just arrived at a holiday apartment, where our families would spend a week together in Slovenija. He was about 1.5 years old, excitedly circling through our accomodation. There was a big terrace and walking out there, he blinked towards the sky, where a little white cloud was slowly passing by. He pointed up and said “Olke!“ – his word for “cloud“ (“Wolke“ in German). Shortly after it was nighttime and he went to sleep. In the next morning, we went for the same walk through the apartment, he ran towards the terrace-door, jumped out, looked up to the clear blue sky and said: “Olke weg!“ – “Cloud gone“. That was the first story he told me, the first moment of relating through finding language for our parallel perceptions to be collated.

I was spellbound watching his gaze, his movements, his delicate interactions with the world he had just arrived in. I tried to imagine what he saw, heard, thought, felt and wished and I tried to share his gaze, tried to relate to him, tried to get to where he was as much as I could. Living far apart, we had to find ways to get close just through our minds, as I couldn‘t just cuddle him as you might intuitively do. I wanted to make him feel my love and care for him, but I also wanted to join him on his adventure of relating to this world from scratch.

Very soon, I was not only fascinated by imagining how he might experience moments we shared, but also by his very individual reactions to those perceptions, his genuine and creative bits of articulated worlding, of actively relating, of transferring and connecting experience and thoughts. I considered those insights particular in a way that would be inaccessible otherwise and realized, that I was not just trying to be a loving aunt, but he actually had become a research partner.

cashews and
cranberries make
a good poem.

“Trouble is an interesting word. It derives from a thirteenth-century French verb meaning “to stir up,” “to make cloudy,” “to disturb.” We – all of us on Terra – live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response. Mixed-up times are overflowing with both pain and joy – with vastly unjust patterns of pain and joy, with unnecessary killing of ongoingness but also with necessary resurgence.

The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places. In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.“ (Haraway, 2016: 1).

Donna Haraway proposes an understanding of being in and with the world that does not separate humans from other species or entities, but emphasizes that we all live in constant symbiosis. She frames this under the notion of the Chthulucene, an alternative to the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, in which beings are recognized as inextricably entangled. To “stay with the trouble” therefore means not to escape into fantasies of salvation or apocalypse, but to practice responsibility and care within the messy, unfinished present.

Yet these ideas could hardly be further from realization in human reality. There is “human” and there is “nature,” and almost everything humans do seems to rely on this separation. But is it not profoundly implausible that one species on this planet should be fundamentally different from all the rest? Particularly as we know how interwoven our bodies are with other life forms, how closely related we are to other species. How is it that we consider ourselves more important, more intelligent, and more relevant than all the others? I even doubt human intelligence, since it does not seem capable of recognizing the interdependencies and responsibilities in which every being on earth is entangled. Out of sheer arrogance, we continue to destroy everything on which even our own existence depends. A persistent human weakness lies in our limited capacity to truly recognize and value the perspectives and needs of others – of fellow human beings, let alone of other forms of life.

How can anyone be truly empathetic toward a monarch butterfly if they do not even consider the perspective of a young member of their own kind as worthy and relevant?

Donna Haraway

I believe that children can be powerful teachers, showing us new ways of relating to the world – even in Haraway’s sense. A child’s way of encountering new forms of life and modes of living day by day is necessarily immediate and unreserved. There is not yet too much past to burden them, and thus not too much sorrow about whatever the future might bring. That makes children both troublemakers and builders of quiet refuges in the best sense; they cannot help but act and react here and now. Seen through Haraway’s lens, this capacity is not naïve but exemplary: children embody a practice of “making kin” in the present, weaving connections across boundaries of generation, species, and role. If we do not teach them to subdue and dominate “the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth,” but instead foster their natural curiosity and empathy, we can join them on the adventurous path of growing into the world anew – rather than sitting alone on our adult and supposedly detached throne.

jungle-sea bees
speak only as a
swarm.

each knows
but
one word.

From my booklet for L.

What do you see?

Ich wünsche Dir schöne Geschenke im Winter.
I'm wishing you beautiful gifts in winter.
Und schöne Schmetterlinge und Hasen in tot, die man anlangen kann.
And beautiful butterflies and rabbits in dead, which one can touch.
Sonst die ganze Welt in ganz ganz schön blau.
Else all the world in all all-beautiful blue.

Early Exchange

Establishing a Bond

We had our very first common world-observation when he was a baby, only a few months old. We stayed the night at my mother's house and in the early morning, my sister brought him to the room where F. and I were sleeping. L. had just been feeded and was happy but wide awake, so we could easily give an extra portion of sleep to his sleep deprivated parents. We lay him in between us. He had a huge cartwheel-like pacifier in his face on which he sucked and smacked while his eyes were curiously wandering through the room. F. had a sip of sparkling water and we only realized by L.'s captivated gaze, that the water's bubbles and swirls had caught some first sunbeams, slanting in through the window, turning the banal plastic bottle into a firework of blinking lights. For at least 30 minutes, the three of us lay on our backs, F. and I taking turns in swaying the bottle as long as our arm muscles would let us, and we admired this unspectacular spectacle, mesmerized by each others mesmerization.

Shortly after that, when I was dearly missing my little friend, I went back to my tested cure of heartaches and made a little booklet for L. with pictures of a bottle, that I shook below the golden leaves of an autumnal linden tree. I made two copies again, one for L., one for me. Of course, it was at least as much a gift for myself as it was a gift to L. – and it worked out only in a limited way, as he was not yet able to really receive it. I don't know if this second booklet still exists and I'm wondering if I should weaken my self-imposed rules in this case and print it again for L. when I feel he can actually rejoice in such gift.

When he was three years old, he asked my sister to send me the poem (on the left) via sms. I was moved to tears. I had spent days creating toys for him, had tried to inspire him, had tried to understand what he saw, thought or wished for and get close by all possible means. And of course he had answered by accepting and joining my play offerings. But this was the first time I realized that he consciously moved towards me inside this sphere of poetic play, that he had thought of me although I was far away and he had actively reached out. He cared for me and expressed this in the most individual, artistic and poetic way.

don‘t
underestimate

the stale rest
at the bottom of
the bottle.

Text and image from our project “Ismya“

What can I give to you?

“...Luring Dino jumped to the side in shock and could hardly believe her eyes:

Those two brave men weren’t fighting a wild dragon – no, they were fighting each other because neither of them wanted the other to claim victory over the great Isyma!

Isyma, who still had the best view of the spectacle, was delighted: It had been ages since there had been such a wild show outside her window! With her fiery snout, she popped herself a bowl of popcorn and settled back into her lookout.

Fritz, the Knight of the Dragon, and Rudolf the Pirate were barely recognizable anymore! All you could really see was a giant pink cloud of dust, from which a sword, a piece of knight’s armor, or the pirate’s hat would occasionally pop out – only to vanish again in the swirl of the battle....”

Ismya

Finding Freedom in the Stories We Invent

For his fifth birthday, my gift to L. was to write a book together. I brought some noble-looking hardcover clip-folder, paper, pencils and some pink shiny cardboard I had found, so we could start right away. From the cardboard we cut out the title: ismya. Wondering what this could mean, it turned out to be the name of a pink dragon lady.

I asked him, who or what should play a role inside our story, and all the usual suspects of a childrens‘ book appeared: There was Fritz the daredevil dragon knight and his horse “Lockende Dino“ (“Curly/Alluring Dinosaur“), some fire brigade, Rudolf the Pirate, a somehow queer wolf called Rolf, who actually longed to be a dragon, as well as some smart little mole-dwarfs – just to name a few.

We took notes about how the story should go and in the meantime, when I was on the train back to Vienna or just after a videocall, I formulated the story and wrote our book. The next time we met or spoke, we printed the text and put it in the folder, so I could read it to him like a “real book“ and we discussed how to continue. It was a lot of fun, I think for both of us. I dearly enjoyed writing the book – I did not consider this a piece of art, there was no audience but L. and me and we both joyfully dived into the world we made up. And from chapter to chapter, it became more and more specific and individual. L. understood, that in our story, we could move to any direction that pleased us and if there was a problem, we would invent the solution. And I did not just provide a framework, as I would in any professional context, but I allowed myself to just jump into the story as he did, to contribute ideas and shifts and elaborations on the sketches we had written together. I even did some illustrations, which I‘d never consider artistically or technically anyhow considerable, but that was irrelevant: I had fun painting them and L. was overly pleased to see what we had both made up being visualized.

After some months he all of a sudden declared: “You know, this story is actually old now. We should start something new!“. So we wrote the end for Ismya and for his next birthday, I brought five printed versions that I had ordered from a self-publishing-company, so we could give them away to our readers – my mother/L.‘s grandmother and some of his friends. We were both very proud.

when a story is old, begin another.

Ursula K. Le Guin

“Nobody can do anything very much, really, alone. What a child needs, what we all need, is to find some other people who have imagined life along lines that make sense to us and allow some freedom, and listen to them. Not hear passively, but listen.” (Le Guin, 2016a: 44)

I suppose we all suffer from our conscious mind, which separates us from one another and expels us from the Garden of Eden. The way back – the way of overcoming existential solitude – lies in finding reassurance that we are not alone by reconciling our experiences and thoughts with those of others. If you see what I see, then we are probably together in this. And if we imagine something together, bring into existence something that has not been there before, we create a materialized bond that can never be broken.

There is something particularly magical about bonding in this way with a child. It feels a bit like outwitting the loss of time – re-entering one’s own childhood and leaving a trace of one’s old soul in the child’s young heart.

Octavia Butler

“‚And those who leave – Toaht and Akjai – you’ll never see them again?‘

‚I won’t. At some time in the distant future, a group of my descendants might meet a group of theirs. I hope that will happen. Both will have divided many times. They’ll have acquired much to give one another.‘ ‚They probably won’t even know one another. They’ll remember this division as mythology if they remember it at all.‘

‚No, they’ll recognize one another. Memory of a division is passed on biologically. I remember every one that has taken place in my family since we left the homeworld.‘

‚Do you remember your homeworld itself? I mean, could you get back to it if you wanted to? Go back?‘

His tentacles smoothed again.

‚No, Lilith, that’s the one direction that’s closed to us. This is our homeworld now.‘“ (Butler, 2022: 89f.)

The extraterrestrial species called the Oankali in Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy have no need for language, literature, or art. They join one another through their tentacles, transmitting experiences, thoughts, and emotions without mediation. Humans, however, remain bound to words, images, and sounds. Until an Oankali ship passes by, we (as artists) must continue to weave our fragile transmissions – trying to touch one another across the gap that separates us.

Photo by Nirual Kenabru

Skype with L.

How can we be close?

Der Bär aus dem Dschungelmeer

Nirual Takes Over

The next story was meant to be about the “Bär aus dem Dschungelmeer“ – a rhyme in German, something like “the bear from the djungle-sea“ in English. From the very first sentences, I realized things had turned into something completely different.

Our first session for this story took place online, just after the first Covid lockdown began. L. asked for privacy – the laptop was placed beneath his duvet and the door had to be closed. Then he began to whisper: “Die neue Geschichte muss leise geflüstert werden, bedrohlich, wo viel Wind dabei rauskommt.” – “The new story has to be quietly whispered, threateningly, with much wind coming out.” What he told me afterwards was – in my opinion – of unique and genuine poetic force.

He articulated philosophical reflections on being in and relating to the world from the perspective of a six-year-old. He offered an explanatory model of the world that I considered as fragile as it was strong – something no adult could ever express.

He found words to describe what I understood as a deep awareness of existential solitude – for example the image of running oceans flowing over shady grounds, ceasing to exist as individuals and merging into one being once they collide. They will be one forever, but they lose their ability to walk.

He reflected on language, writing, and death – just before learning to read and write himself: the animals populating those oceans lie down on the ocean floor to die, where they become letters. But there is only one being able to read these messages – a bear living atop a hollow tree filled with honey. For anyone else, these writings would be either too big or too small.

The human understanding of dimensions, whether temporal or spatial, is radically challenged: there are three hundred trillion bees, each as small as a bacterium. They live, compressed into a tiny bucket, forming a spiky ball behind the universe. They can overcome that distance in the blink of an eye, but sometimes they move as slowly as a bumblebee asleep.

There is a strong dependency between species: the bees provide honey for the bear, but they need him to bring them back home by bouncing their ball down from his tree. Such dependency and interspecies care does not come without threat and eeriness: the bees have stings as long as one of L.’s hairs and as hard as granite, so they cannot be touched. They are also individually very strong, but can only speak, function, and live as a swarm: each bee knows only one word.

I realized I could not – as I had done before – mash up L.’s words into some cute children’s story. I felt artistically challenged: I wanted to contribute equally to our co-creation. Framing it as a sweet magical fantasy would have been easy, but it would not have done justice to his literary ingenuity. I wanted to respond in an artistically equal way. And I wanted to handle this poetic voice in a way that would also protect it from being belittled by whichever audience might encounter it. I thought these delicately expressed thoughts contributed a perspective that questioned any understanding of being in the world from scratch.

But sharing this intimate conversation was not an option and would have undermined its meaning. I did not want to push L. onto a stage – this is the first

instance in which I publish a screenshot of a videocall, and thus a picture of him at that time. Of course only after asking his permission – something that, now that he is 11 years old and more distant from that moment, is some-what easier.

I wanted to keep our intimacy protected and really just share the poetry that might be of genuine interest for a public audience. This interest should not be deceived by the cuteness of little L., his sweet giggles and high-pitched voice – and least of all by any child clichés I might (consciously or unconsciously) project onto him.

So, at first, I transcribed our chats meticulously. Next, I cleared the text to preserve only the pure gems of his expression. I am aware that, regarding the question of my "artistic methodology," it would have been more telling to show our process: my asking, our misunderstandings, our various attempts at understanding and being understood, of inspiring and gently moving forward. But my interest was not to analyze my educational, participatory, or communicative concept, but to elaborate a co-creative piece. To do so, I tried tenderly to remove the alluring cuteness that could blur the view of its artistic quality – without bending it – in order to voice this particular child's perspective without faking "adult art."

What I gained was a poetic piece of text, and at first I did not know what to do with it. As mentioned above, there was no need to add further words, and my poor painting skills were no real option. But I wanted to provide a framework – something that would both open up and somehow protect his thoughts. So I decided to build an atmospheric sound space around his words, sometimes intersecting, sometimes forming a background, sometimes gently expanding the literary space. And of course I recorded the text as he had defined it: in a whispering voice.

To involve him in shaping the audio as well, I put together a Fóley kit for him and – also online – we did recording sessions of sounds that we later used in the piece. As a pre-schooler, L. was never particularly interested in drawing, painting, or bricolage. His imaginations were so precise and perfectionist that he was never satisfied with any visual outcome. Working with language and abstract sounds suited his disposition much better: the gap between conception and form is implicit there and therefore not a problem.

In a back-and-forth game, we enjoyed each other's misunderstandings. He explained his ideas to me as precisely as possible, while I tried as assiduously as possible to understand and then explain back what I had understood, asking questions to further develop our poetic worlds. More often than not, noticing a misunderstanding made us laugh and opened up new threads of thought that would otherwise have been inaccessible.

Working with sound was similar: we recorded small noises and, once detached from their material origin, listened closely to discover new, "wrong" meanings. Like Fóley artists, we created acoustic spaces where we could meet despite living far apart: the flap of a rag becoming a heartbeat, L.'s breath a thunderstorm, a dripping tap a stalactite cave…

Fóley-suitcase for L.

public colloquium 2020

audioplay with subtitles

Fóley session via Skype

the gap between
you and me

is the reason why
we‘re not alone.

Mariella Greil

Claire Bishop

“The audio piece ‚Der Bär aus dem Dschungelmeer‘ by Verena Faißt and her nephew L. is a magic pearl fostered in the depths of the walking oceans. It invites the listener into a world full of wonders – or, one could say, into a wonderful land – where mole dwarfs dig their way from story to story, weaving a complex poetic fabric made of whispers about honey rain and otherworldly, charming creatures. The sound work is spacious; it leaves room for resonance and is artistically articulate, especially in its silences. It has the witchery to gently touch and tickle my childhood memories in a sensate way, tenderly opening up the imaginative world of a young, wise soul. My favourite line remains: ‚No bees, just honey.‘

If this applied to academic contextualisation, I could agree with Verena Miedl-Faißt in situating her “invisible elephant” research alongside the writings of Donna Haraway, Jean-Henri Fabre, and Rachel Carson. Yet since we live as artist-researchers in a land with bees – and butterflies that float or sting (as Muhammad Ali knows) – I would encourage her to deepen, articulate, and argue the critique of the discarded areas of potential contextualisation. In this short explanatory excerpt, I am not yet convinced. There is value in knowing one’s ancestral chart, which – from my perspective at least – undoubtedly includes fields such as socially engaged art, pedagogy, and participatory art. I wonder what the (hidden) agendas are in dissociating from these fields. Is it to prove the uniqueness of the research? To claim a space that is taken as it is, without judgement? Is that ever possible – or why shapeshift into posthumanist philosophy? Or is it all always already a game? What happens when the elephant becomes visible? And why can intimate moments not be shared?“ (Greil, 2020, unpublished review)

Mariella Greil wrote this beautiful review of my presentation during one of our public colloquia. The first part was sweet as honey, the second stung like a jungle-sea bee. I actually tried to detach my practice from what is called participatory or socially engaged art – and sought contextual anchorage in less obvious contexts. And of course, I struggled to argue such a stance. I never wanted to hide from or withdraw in the face of possible criticism. But maybe that is not the whole truth: not on my own behalf, but certainly when it came to my beloved nephew. I could hardly endure any critique concerning his work. In this sense, Mariella was right: I sought serious reception, but at least subconsciously I would always protect my young co-creators, of whom I was so proud, against critical judgment. This lack of critical distance is actually a classic issue in participatory art, as even Claire Bishop writes about her struggles when working on “Artificial Hells” – her historiography of the field:

“The more one becomes involved, the harder it is to be objective – especially when a central component of a project concerns the formation of personal relationships, which inevitably proceed to impact on one’s research.” (Bishop, 2012: 6)

There seems to be a general problem concerning the reception and criticism of participatory art, as “socially collaborative practices are all perceived to be equally important artistic gestures of resistance: there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of participatory art, because all are equally essential to the task of repairing the social bond. While sympathetic to the latter ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyse and compare this work critically as art, since this is the institutional field in which it is endorsed and disseminated, even while the category of art remains a persistent exclusion in debates about such projects.” (Bishop, 2012: 13)

I think – at least in my perception – one can compare such a common, uncritical approach to participatory art to a mother’s (or loving aunt’s) gaze: I remember thriving on basic trust that my mother would always love and encourage what I did, as she loved me unconditionally – something I am deeply thankful for. But I also remember a certain frustration, even as a child, when I felt that it actually didn’t matter what the drawing I made for her birthday looked like: she would always be moved to tears, and I suspected that she might not be able to perceive whether I had achieved something particular or not. My mere intention of making something for her – or just the fact that my drawing was a creation of her beloved child – was enough.

Again, in Claire Bishop’s words: “(…) the status of the artist’s intentionality (e.g. their humble lack of authorship) is privileged over a discussion of the work’s artistic identity. Ironically, this leads to a situation in which not only collectives but individual artists are praised for their conscious authorial renunciation.” (Bishop, 2012: 23)

I think this tendency is what led me to “hide” behind my co-creators within the video projects. In order not to be suspected of instrumentalizing the students I was working with, I insisted on precisely such a form of conscious authorial renunciation. Yet I suppose that such a stance actually has the opposite effect: true co-creation can never occur if I do not expose myself on the same stage, alongside my co-creators. “Providing a stage” inevitably remains a paternalistic act.

But moreover – if participatory art is judged only with an uncritical gaze, there is an understandable urge among professional artists (even those realizing participatory projects) to separate their non-participatory art from what results from participatory processes – as, if lacking such good intentionality, one needs to compete through other qualities – which, in art contexts, obviously and commonly concern artistic form. I suppose that, to ensure such distinction, artefacts from participatory projects are often shaped and framed in a way that deliberately presents them as “not really art” – to be looked at, if at all, benevolently: No curatorial decisions are made based on the actual artistic form of the results; everyone involved must be included, and the higher the number of “participants,” the more credible and legitimate the project appears. Neither the individual artistic thought and expression is given an appropriate frame, nor is any collective piece carefully shaped and realized.

Thus, such a benevolent, uncritical gaze actually runs the risk of downgrading and disguising not only the artistic qualities within the process, such as “making social dialogue a medium” (Bishop, 2012: 22), but also counteracts the proclaimed ambition of taking the participants’ contributions — arising from individual artistic thinking and practice — seriously, or even causes them to fall short of their potential. Thereby the work is actually deprived of its agency.

In my own projects the collective piece – whatever medium or form it may take – is the shared focus. It embodies the insight gained together in the only truly shareable

way. The collective artistic articulation is the very purpose through which these temporary constellations of "we" become manifest. I don't play at making art; I want to make art together – sometimes through play. The resulting artefacts are not interchangeable, just as the constellations of people who create them are not. Yet the artistic qualities of what is shaped together can differ as much from one another as from any other form of artistic expression. Thus, even if I were to find a context in which I could wholeheartedly position "my" artistic research, it could never serve as a reliable source of suitable criteria for critically engaging with the individual projects. In fact, every co-creative project exists within its own context, depending strongly on the situation, on who my collaborators are, and on what we are actually striving for together.

The challenge I see is rather to find a framing — a "Haltung", an approach to co-creative work with non-professionals — as well as ways to share such work that, on the one hand, bring its artistic qualities and agency to their full potential, while, on the other hand, not compromising the work of professional artists — neither those involved nor artists in general.

On my way to the development of a contribution to the intersecting fields of art, pedagogy and research in that sense, I keep on the track of my subjective methodology and try to understand my ambivalent relation to what is called "participatory art": What is connecting me to the field but also making me withdraw? A good starting point therefore seems to be Claire Bishop's definition, on which she based her book:

"A definition of participation in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material in the manner of theatre and performance. (...) The artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term project with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or 'beholder,' is now repositioned as a co-producer or participant." (Bishop, 2012: 2)

I am rather familiar with the context of fine arts, so I am not entirely sure what the concept of material describes "in the manner of theatre and performance," but I feel a strong emotional reaction to this sentence. In my self-critical understanding, I never conceive of my co-creators as material. They are not subjects of my research. I even try not to see them as "participants" – or, in a school context, as "students" (although, of course, these role patterns and the responsibilities they entail cannot, and should not, be fully dissolved).

Rather, they are equal counterparts who contribute what I alone could not. Each collaborator is irreplaceable (or at least this is my aim): what L. and I did cannot be transferred to just any other artist–child relationship. Nor did he qualify as my artistic vis-à-vis by belonging to some minority or particular group. L. is simply L.

And the reasons why we worked together are the same as the reasons one chooses any collaborator: because we complement one another, because there are common interests, sympathy, good vibes, love. Our material is the world itself and the opportunities it offers to relate. We converge through poetic means, finding threads of all kinds that we can weave into something new together – something that could not exist without us.

My artistic education provides me with tools and skills my young co-creators do not have. We necessarily need each other to do what we do. This may result in "finite, discrete objects," sometimes even "commodifiable products," or in brittle, ephemeral traces with unclear beginnings and endings. My collaborators are not my audience either; but together we seek an audience, sometimes more, sometimes less. Addressing an audience elevates our play into something meaningful: someone should understand – or maybe misunderstand, and thereby understand something else. Who this audience is cannot be predefined but is always situational: sometimes fellow researchers, sometimes the art world, sometimes the micro-public of a school community, or just someone's little brother.

I can relate to the conception of an artist as a "producer of situations" (Bishop, 2012: 2). I perceive, anticipate, and try to think through tools and materials through the eyes, hearts, and hands of those I work with. Sometimes we truly explore things together that I have no knowledge of, but most of the time I suggest tools or media that I can handle. Photography, for example, is the medium in which I am professionally trained. I find that I need my skills and experience even more when someone else is going to take the picture than when I take it myself: I must anticipate what my partner might see, be capable of, and want; I prepare and explain just enough to avoid frustration – while leaving space for co-creation.

What guides me is a stance that combines artistic curiosity with pedagogical responsibility. This double movement of openness and care also shapes my practice concerning ethical questions of sharing authorship with children. As equal co-creators, their voices must be taken seriously while at the same time being protected from the risks of exposure in professional art contexts.

In this sense, I feel at home rather in the overlapping fields of artistic research, aesthetic education, and what might be called resonance-based artistic pedagogy: practices that seek transformation through encounter without dissolving the boundaries of responsibility. With Hartmut Rosa (see also p. 21), who coined the term "Resonance Pedagogy," a resonant relationship is shaped by openness to affection, to the uncontrollable, and to transformation – but also by self-efficacy and responsibility: the capability to actively respond (Rosa, 2018: 38f).

I am trying to respond also to Mariella's critique and to position myself within a field to which I am obviously connected. I know I am not the only one struggling with questions of shared authorship, with the ethics of working with children, with the tensions between structure and freedom, and between artistic and pedagogical quality.

You cannot choose your family – so of course I am related to the named fields; but you can choose your friends, your heroes, and your muses. Sometimes bringing contexts into unusual or seemingly nonsensical correlation can yield the uncontrollable findings I am after – or, as it is put in the "Manifesto of Artistic Research":

"Aesthetic practices map out non-scientific epistemologies by drawing their form of knowledge not from syntheses but rather from the sensuous relations of non-predicative conjunctions in which their insights merge and coincide." (Henke et al., 2020: 39)"

Manifesto of Artistic Research

sometimes
benevolent

is another word
for lazy.

it is lonely
between contexts.

“A few years ago, I called two friends of mine, a couple, and asked Basil, who answered the phone, what Adrian, the other friend, was doing. Basil said: ‘Oh, um, Adrian is doing a tree search. He’s doing a tree search right now.’ And I thought: ‘What is a tree search? I don’t know what a tree search is.’ This unsettled me a little, and then suddenly I thought: ‘Ah yes, of course, tree search – that’s an internet term. You start with a word and follow its branches into different directions, you follow a sub-branch, and so on. That’s a tree search. You can refine the search in different ways, and – of course, of course I know what a tree search is.’ At the end of our conversation, I asked Basil: ‘So what is Adrian actually searching for?’ And he replied: ‘What do you mean?’ I said: ‘Well, you said he’s doing a tree search.’ To which he said: ‘No, I didn’t say that. I said he’s making a T-shirt.’ What happened in that moment – because it is a moment – is that an anxiety arose: the fear of not understanding the world (or this word); and a panic that triggered an imaginative leap to close the gap, to jump over what we don’t know” (Kentridge, 2018: 57f., translation from German by the author.)

Within the framework of “The Octopus Programme”, (see also p. 99f) I had the opportunity to visit “The Centre for the Less Good Idea” in Johannesburg, founded and co-directed by William Kentridge and Bronwyn Lace, together with artists from the neighborhood.

Even before going there, I already admired Kentridge’s way of speaking about making art and “Making Sense of the World” (c.f. Louisiana Channel, 2014) – and perhaps the “tree search” anecdote illustrates why I can relate: embracing the “Less Good Idea”, the misunderstanding, and making the gap itself prolific is what I would call artistic curiosity.

William Kentridge

What I did not expect was that my experiences at the Centre would also feel like finding home in my search for the caring dimension of co-creation. Our group of Octopus fellows was invited to participate for two days in a large workshop where around thirty artists gathered and entered moments of artistic and collaborative ignition. The situation was, in fact, competitive: producing a project under the patronage of William Kentridge is of course a major opportunity for emerging artists in South Africa.

Yet the atmosphere was imbued with mutual artistic trust, courage, and care. This may partly reflect a mindset somewhat different from the Central European academic context I am familiar with. But I also believe it is due to the approach of the Centre itself: its main aim is to support the artists working there, to enable their extraordinary artistic force to bloom – not to produce branded “Centre productions,” and certainly not to serve as a William Kentridge factory.

With great attentiveness, all unforeseeable artistic processes are documented from the very beginning through to the finished work. When artists develop individual productions in smaller groups, they are provided with space, equipment, and support, but are free afterwards to take their works elsewhere – having in hand a beautiful and professional documentation, but, as far as I understood, no restrictions in presenting them on outside stages. They are cared for so that they can care for each other, and for collaborative moments of artistic magic.

Yet they do not stop there or linger in those comfortable moments of resonance. Rather, as Kentridge put it during our stay: “this is where the hard work begins” – to trace back the uncontrollable magic and find ways of bringing some of it to the stage, to make it shareable.

Translated into my own practice, this is what distinguishes my artistic research from other school projects or simply well-spent playtime with children I am related to: I try to co-creatively make those special moments shareable, to find an artistic form that allows others to retrace the otherwise inaccessible moments of sense-making I encounter with children.

if you want to be a
good artist,

be generous.

BA-project 2013:
Vinyl cover “Rapsak rüf Ytrapretsnom“

Where can we go?

Rapsak rüf Ytrapretsnom

Working for a 1-Person-Audience

L. and me kept making things and exploring the world together whenever we could. I was intrigued by what we found and longed to share it. It felt like the core of poetry: ephemeral glimpses of being in the world, grasped in a Socratic dialogue. But who was our audience? Who could receive our articulations in an appropriate way? Our family was biased by parental love and concern, far stronger than any artistic interest. I tried to find stages and resonant spaces within art and artistic research – wherever I could access suitable contexts. But those contexts, which I myself struggled with, were definitely inaccessible and actually uninteresting for L. I could not even seriously ask him for permission to publish anything there, because no matter how hard I tried to explain: how could he imagine what I was talking about?

Just before his fifth birthday, L. had gotten a little brother – whom he adored. The newborn had to “put his big brother to bed” and, being of a patient nature, endured his brother’s endless cuddles. This little brother, too young to be spoiled by family affairs or competition, became our perfect audience for the moment. Still during the first Covid lockdown, when we could not meet and children as well as adults were bored and unsettled by the strange situation, we met online to build a monster-party mobile from clay for little brother K. I made some characters in Vienna and L. created others at his home in Bavaria, assisted of course by my sister. I sent mine by mail, and they were united above K.’s bassinet. Since we were already immersed in storytelling, each monster received a name and a short description.

In addition, we spent some of those long lockdown days sending each other sound riddles back and forth. We made “field recordings” in our living rooms, and the other had to guess the origin of the captured sounds. Of course, well-invented guesses were at least as welcome as the “correct answer.” Close listening thus became an important part of our shared time. With sound waves touching the other’s eardrum, our families found closeness in the distance. And when we finally met again in person, after far too long, listening together helped us reconnect quickly and easily.

During one of my visits in real life, L. improvised a melody on the family piano. He was not trained in any way, but being a sensitive and audiophile child, he did not just make noise: he followed the line of keystrokes, the sharp beginning of each note blending into the fading sound of the previous tone. It reminded me of a child’s way of drawing, when (as my friend Diego Mosca once put it) consciousness does not indicate where to go, but rather the pencil traces a new track of consciousness on the go. Reflecting the circling mobile and our by then elaborate practice of storytelling, I used this short piano improvisation and wove an audio piece around the short texts about the mobile’s characters. As with his words, I did not alter his melody or apply any effects; I simply tried to crystallize and interweave what seemed meaningful, resonant, and poetic to me. To find the right form for this co-creative piece, I made two vinyl samples – as I considered this a more dignified format than a bodiless digital file. Moreover, I could keep one for myself and give one to L. – as I had done with my printed booklets – instead of publishing it to an anonymous audience.

After a close discussion and a plea for his permission, I included this work as part of my final thesis for my Bachelor of Education.

Anna the Fang-Filer

Anna the Fang-Filer always lives
somewhere different.
Sometimes under a tree,
and sometimes in the water.
The Fang-Filer is made entirely of liquid metal.
As soon as something enters the liquid metal,
a layer of metal around it hardens.
That's how Anna the Fang-Filer
made the shovels for the mole-dwarfs.
Since then, the mole-dwarfs have been friends
with Anna the Fang-Filer.
Anna the Fang-Filer eats only rowanberries.

Hansi, the Star Acrobat

Hansi is a monster.
He lives on the sun.
And he's as fast as light.
Hansi eats the wrong sunrays.
Because the sun is actually like a circle
with rays spaced evenly all around.
And Hansi eats the ones
that stick out the wrong way.
In his free time,
Hansi is a star acrobat in the deep-sea circus.
His special trick is to coil himself up on a rope,
then spin really fast
and make the rays inside his belly
shine as brightly as possible.

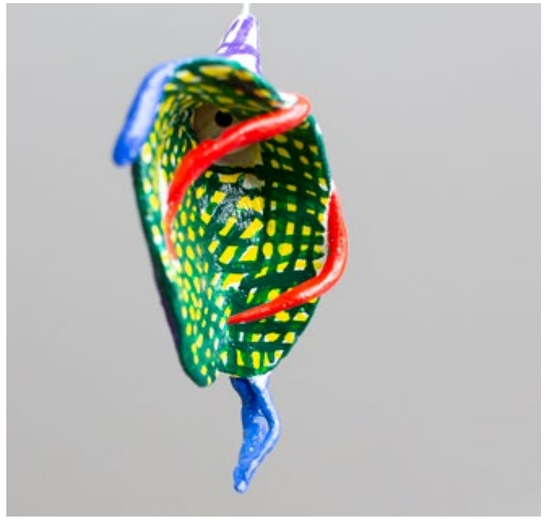
**White Arthur,
the Yellow-Blue-Checkered Fire-Breather**

The Yellow-Blue-Checkered Fire-Breather
is yellow-blue-checkered. His fire too.
Everything White Arthur burns is
yellow-blue-checkered afterward.
White Arthur is a water animal
but he can also be on land.
He lives alone.
But it can also happen that he has a female
and his children at his side.
At first, the children look like a giant coronavirus.

Most of the time,
White Arthur lies like a ray on the ground
and waits for his prey. When he then blows,
a lot of yellow-greenish smoke appears.
He mainly eats seagulls.
With his smoke, he startles the seagulls.
Because of that, they stop flapping their wings
and fall into the water, and he can eat them.
Mmm, tasty!

White Arthur lives in the Red Sea,
which is not red at all.
But White Arthur leaves behind red sweat.
So when he sweats a lot, the Red Sea is red.
During whale hunting, White Arthur starts sweating.
Every second, 300 liters of sweat come out.
The older he gets, the less color he has,
because he sweats out the color.
Often, starting at 30 years old,
he is completely see-through.

For whale fighting, he lies on the ground,
and when a whale swims above him,
he flips around in a flash and grabs it.



Then he turns back into the mud with his prey
and presses it in
and makes a cross over it with his claw.
That way he knows that there is prey of his.
One only knows how big the claws of White Arthur
are, because pieces of the whales sometimes wash
ashore. By their scars you can see
that Arthur's claws are one kilometer long.

In his free time, White Arthur flies a round.
But he cannot fly – he sucks in seagulls
just under the surface of the water
and then throws lots of lassos.
Then he lets them fly back up
and flies along with them.
The seagulls then scream:
"Let go, you giant tentacle!"
But it's not a tentacle at all, it's a lasso!

The Trunk-Tuber

The Trunk-Tuber is not in the underwater circus.
He lives in the air –
because he has an invisible propeller
that allows him to fly.
With his trunk, he can suck up plankton.
So he always goes into the water to eat.
His swimming friend is Hans Sunbeam Lightning Fritz.

The Two-Sausaged Sausager

The two-sausaged sausager sausages his sausage
onto his sausagey sausages. You old gurscht!
The two-sausaged sausager lives on a bacter,
which is as big as a blue whale.

Hans Sunbeam Lightning Fritz

Hans Sunbeam Lightning Fritz,
also called Tangle-Pillar-Fritz,
is the best friend of the Trunk-Tuber.
Together they have a hobby:
long-distance swimming.
They swim (or actually dive) to visit
the Circus-Spinner Drehberg
and steal a few cranberries from
his underwater cranberry island.
Hans Sunbeam is also a member
of the underwater circus.
His trick is that he spins himself around a pole
with his silver ball
and then whirls around like a propeller.

The Gold-Blue-Yellow Coconut: Spherical Heinz

Heinz is actually as small as an atom.
He always wanders
from drinking glass to drinking glass.
In every drinking glass, there are trillions of hundreds
of gold-blue-yellow coconuts.
That's why L. drinks so little.

one

can be a good
audience.

The Palace of Mansa Musa – painting by Nirual Kenabru

How can I hold you?

The House of Mansa Musa

It was night when they disappeared.
The palace of Mansa Musa
walks, hops in place.
But from the inside, it looks like it's standing still.

Behind it lies the enchanted city.
All the houses are empty.
They dance, but never touch.

What does "enchanted" even mean?
I always thought it was sort of magical...
Just deserted. Suddenly so deserted.

The book says that suddenly everyone was gone.
Some believe it, some don't.
The houses never leave the city.
Except for one, which circles the border.

Nobody knows where that could be.
With God, you also don't know where he is.
In the sky or where.
Or if he even exists. I don't know.

I mean, I don't know if I believe in God,
but I believe I do.

The sun dogs stayed behind, then flew to the sun.
But when they were on the sun...
They're also a bit enchanted,
suddenly they couldn't fly anymore.

But the sun dogs don't walk on foot,
but move like the houses in the city:

Two hops and then one spin around themselves,
two hops, spin around themselves,
two hops, spin around themselves.

The castle sets the rhythm for the dance.
They dance on a thin layer of water.
And it splashes.

The control is the flap on the oven.
They are powered by the fire.
Every year a fire dog comes and lights a new fire.
Then it's just a small flame.
That would be enough, but would soon go out.

The mechanism is the secret.

If they touched, there would be a house accident,
Boom crash fadaboom blumm.
Those who want to come together repel each other.

The water is fresh water.
Soda without flavor.
The trees in the city unfortunately died
because of that.
Their roots couldn't absorb real water anymore.

Everything got all mushed up..
Mirror-smooth sugar water surface.
Sludgy like ice.

The houses leave only small gaps,
but it splashes anyway.

long stings
make cuddling a
challenge.

Lockdown after lockdown passed, and we continued meeting online. Sometimes I brought something I had found interesting – like newly published images of the sun's surface – or he brought something, such as a painting of the Palace of Mansa Musa that he had made with his father.

At first, I did not realize that Mansa Musa was not L.'s invention. When I later found out and researched the background, I hesitated: could we use the name, or should I somehow weave in the original story of Mansa Musa, king of Mali? Yet our conversation was so meaningful without it that I found no place for it. Instead, I struggled to process the dense material that had emerged.

There was a time when I was particularly moved by L.'s words. They touched me in ways I could hardly explain – as if they grasped a longing deep within my own soul that I could not express, shaping ideas that perhaps he himself could not fully comprehend. The texts from that period, however, were not his favourites. As he told me in the summer of 2025, Ismya still was the most exciting project for him – the book which, to my understanding, was the least poetic but the most playful and childlike. It was lighthearted. We giggled constantly while inventing the story.

The "new stories," the ones not to be spoken aloud, carried heavy loads of death, solitude, and dystopia: crustacea sending final messages by becoming letters in death – with no control over whether their words would ever find a reader; sundogs dying paw to paw, fading into starlight; deserted houses, longing to touch but forever trapped in a mechanical theatre among dead trees on a pavement of tasteless lemonade. Where is God? Who writes the stories we can believe in?

It became increasingly difficult to handle our work with both adequacy and care. The more relevant it seemed to become, the more intimate, fragile, and vulnerable it also felt.

I tried to continue working with sound and audioscapes, but there was no "prompt to whisper" included, and I have no trained voice; I am not a singer. Whenever I read the text aloud, it always sounded to me like L.'s aunt reading a children's book – which felt wrong.

I asked my friend Sabine Marte, a performance artist and singer with a strong, decidedly unchildlike voice, to record the Sundogs and the Mansa Musa texts for us. She did, and gave me all the recordings, including every attempt and failed version. It was strange to hear her powerful voice reading our intimate, delicate text. I was not sure whether it was good to give it such strength, or whether I felt protective of our intimacy. I tried to build an audio piece around it – but it was never finished.

When I listened to those recordings again with L. this summer (2025) – after several years – we realized that the text itself was enough: no extra sounds were needed. The fragile meaning of the words seemed to grow with every new voice and every attempt we heard. Now, at eleven, L. was able to read the text himself fluently (something that would not have been possible when we first created it), so we made a new recording together.

Sundogs, new recording 2025

"What first-person narratives have done for literature and in general for human civilization cannot be overestimated – they have completely reworked the story of the world, so that it is no longer a place for the operations of heroes and deities upon whom we can have no influence, but rather a place for people just like us, with individual histories. It is easy to identify with people who are just like us, which generates between the story's narrator and its reader or listener a new variety of emotional understanding based on empathy. And this, by its very nature, brings together and eliminates borders; (...) What we are missing – it would seem – is the dimension of the story that is the parable. For the hero of the parable is at once himself, a person living under specific historical and geographical conditions, yet at the same time he also goes well beyond those concrete particulars, becoming a kind of Everywhere Everyman. When a reader follows along with someone's story written in a novel, he can identify with the fate of the character described and consider their situation as if it were his own, while in a parable, he must surrender completely his distinctness and become the Everyman. In this demanding psychological operation, the parable universalizes our experience, finding for very different fates a common denominator. That we have largely lost the parable from view is a testament to our current helplessness." (Tokarczuk 2018)

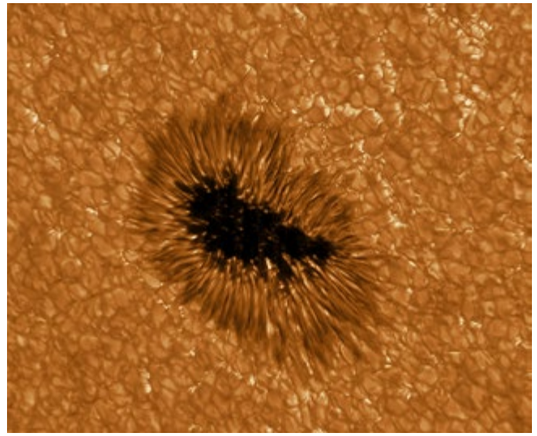
Olga Tokarczuk

Ursula K. Le Guin

"Relationship among all things appears to be complex and reciprocal – always at least two-way, back and forth. It seems that nothing is single in this universe, and nothing goes one way. In this view, we humans appear as particularly lively, intense, aware nodes of relation in an infinite network of connections, simple or complicated, direct or hidden, strong or delicate, temporary or very long-lasting. A web of connections, infinite but locally fragile, with and among everything – all beings – including what we generally class as things, objects. [...] Poetry is the human language that can try to say what a tree or a rock or a river is, that is, to speak humanly for it, in both senses of the word "for." A poem can do so by relating the quality of an individual human relationship to a thing, a rock or river or tree, or simply by describing the thing as truthfully as possible. Science describes accurately from outside; poetry describes accurately from inside. Science explicates; poetry implicates. Both celebrate what they describe. We need the languages of both science and poetry to save us from merely stockpiling endless ‚information' that fails to inform our ignorance or our irresponsibility." (Le Guin, 2016b: 6f.)

misunderstanding something

means understanding something else.



© Leibniz Institut für Sonnenphysik (KIS)

What is the right voice to speak this tale?

Sundogs

This, luckily, is long gone.

120,000 sundogs have overwhelmed the monster.
Using a bludgeon of cold sand.
One can witness the sundogs on the sly,
stealing sand from sandpits.

This, luckily, is long gone.

There is a black hole, which is a lake.
The lake is not liquid.
Lavafalls roundabout.
Someday, the lake will be gone over the lavafalls
and has-been.

This, luckily, is long gone.

There is a monster with tentacles of light, hard
enough, one can sense it.
In any case, it is wicked.
And as big as half the world.

This, luckily, is long gone.

The monster moved on to the sun;
to cart cold water into it,
so the sun grows cold
and we don't have her on earth no more.

Bluewater-Fritz spits on to the monster
through his water-side.
The fireside obviously doesn't help.
Thus he hopes to gain some time.

This, luckily, is long gone.

The monster pours water into its cave
and wants to burrow through the sun,
thus, just a thin seam will remain.
Therefore it needs to keep the entrance
to its cave as small as possible.
If accidentally it enlarges its entrance,
water will drain off again.
If it is wet and then walks on to the sun,
it creates a hole wherever it goes.
That is why the Bluewater-Fritz wets it,
so that it can not return to the sun for a while.

This, luckily, is long gone.

One can see,
how bludgeons were put over the cave.
The monster needs air, just a little.
It takes at least 20 hours,
until it does not have enough air anymore,
if there is as much air inside as in a soup bowl,
that has been tumbled over.
And the monster is quite bad at burrowing.
His cave took a year.

This, luckily, is long gone.

The air has been sucked out a little, with a pump.
Then leaves have been put over
–on the sun, they are fire-impervious and quite firm–
and nailed down with huge nails.

This, luckily, is long gone.

The monster suffocates inside his cave.
It can not tear the leaves apart.
Namely, the leaves are 10 kilometers thick.

This, luckily, is long gone.

Afterwards, they withdrew the nails out of the sun.
And plugged the cave with leaves from earth.
Then, the sun has been blazing even brighter
for two months.
Because those leaves burnt so vigourously.

This, luckily, is long gone.

The monster of light became fervor.
Like, when we die, we' become earth.

This, luckily, is long gone.

Maybe, someday the sun might make a cold ring.
Then the fervor will die down.
If fervor from the sun goes down,
it is becoming sand.
And this sand is going through the atmosphere
as chunks of sand and turns into a falling star.
All creatures, dying on the sun, turn into falling stars.
For example, there are sundogs.
Falling stars from sundogs one can identify
because sundogs always die paw to paw.
Thus, two falling stars will fly next to each other.

This, luckily, is long gone.

But they do reenact this every year.
On the first day of spring.

This is why summer is always bright.

(Miedl-Faißt & Kenabru, 2022)

at our studio

How can we go on?

Himmelsschaukel

Advantages and Disadvantages of Coming Back to Real Life

The lockdowns, luckily, were long gone and traveling became easier again. But during my visits to Bavaria, with parents, siblings, and friends also asking for their share of attention, our time together was no longer as exclusive as it had been online beneath the duvet. To continue our particular journey and remain focused, I set up a temporary studio in the former hair salon my great-aunt had bequeathed us. Yet in the post-Covid reality, with school obligations for both of us, my visits were still infrequent, and we rarely found longer stretches of time to immerse ourselves in larger projects. On a few afternoons we experimented with lino cuts, monotype prints, and larger paintings, but we never reached the same intensity as in our deep-dive online dialogues.

No longer locked down, L. also increasingly found other things to do than spend hours on Skype with his old auntie. And so it happened that the last story – about a swing shooting you into the sky and onto a planet made entirely of whipped cream – remained unfinished. Perhaps that story had simply become obsolete, as the swing actually existed: on a beautiful walk along the Lech River we discovered it at the edge of the woods, its ropes tied high into a tall tree. Swinging there almost feels like flying above the water's surface. We had each other – in real life – and the swing was there: no need to escape and meet in our other worlds.

exhibition view of our space capsules at “The Octopus“, Angewandte Interdisciplinary Lab 2022

How can we share?

These are our drafts for a perfect space capsule. Features:

- Intake capacity: 2-5 persons.
- Positioned approximately 1 meter above the ground, allowing for example to make a puzzle underneath.
- Boarding from underneath through a lockable port.
- No visible windows.
- In the centre: Gimbal with a cup of warm honey-milk (so nothing spills while swinging).

One Meter Above the Ground

Drafts for Our Space Capsule

As our artistic endeavours had become more and more “particularly lively, intense, aware nodes of relation” (Le Guin, 2016b: 6), and as I increasingly began to reflect on and involve them in my artistic research – ultimately my PhD – the urge to share our mellifluous, meandering findings kept growing. Yet even though it was just the two of us – no institution involved, no legal obligations, no rigid framework – the questions of how to transparently share authorship while at the same time protecting the child from public exposure were no less complicated.

At school or in the museum, there is always an obvious public from the start. The scope and aim of such encounters are clear. One knows where an artistic process and its outcome begin and end, and the relationship is defined – be it teacher–student or visitor–workshop leader. In contrast, L. and I simply spent time together as aunt and nephew, and at some point things emerged that – at least to me – seemed to transcend such familiar bonds. For him, however, it could hardly be clear when or why I suddenly considered something relevant — for us, or, even more so, for a distant and unimaginable audience he could not possibly conceive of.

There are general ethical concerns around such issues, even legal ones framed in copyright, guardianship, or children’s rights. But honestly, my greatest worry was that one day L. might resent me for anything I had shared.

So I tried my best. I asked for his consent regarding every glimpse I wanted to publish. I translated every presentation I gave in English into German for him, explained each word, and tried to involve him in every decision. But of course, in the end I must live with the risk that his perspective will change over the years, and that as a teenager or adult he might say: What were you thinking?? Asking a five-year-old for such consent is, in truth, absurd.

A more reasonable way of addressing these challenges was to resolve them within the artistic form. Most directly, for example, by using a pseudonym he chose instead of his real name. This artist name he gave himself allowed him to be fully credited while protecting his personal rights and ensuring that he could later disconnect himself from our projects if he wished. (Usually this issue is dealt with by using only children’s first names – but in that case one might just as well write “arbitrary child.”)

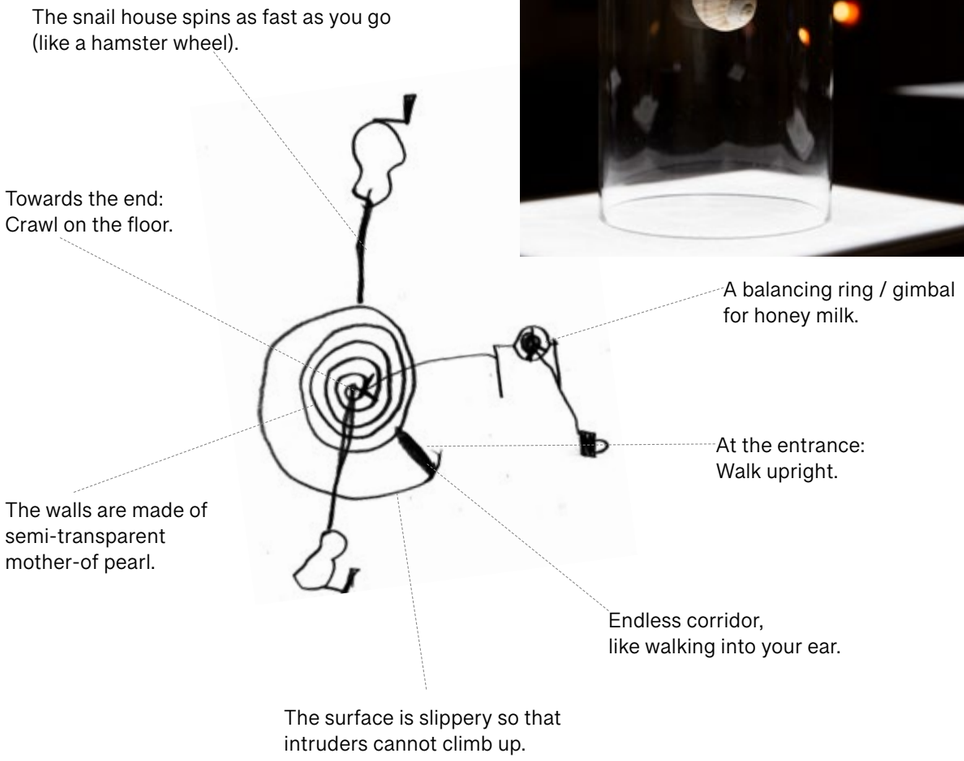
Another strategy was to find artistic forms that did not rely on him being directly seen or heard. Instead, I sought formats that would incorporate and transmit what was genuinely of artistic interest, rather than falling prey to my own love for the sweet child – which of course would bias not only my judgment but probably that of any external viewer when it came to the artistic quality of the work.

And last but not least, I always tried to consider not only my audience but also L.’s – his family, friends, and (future) schoolmates.

Still, the question remained: how to frame our body of work in general, for example within the scope of my PhD defence?

L. grew older and, to me, seemed somewhat wistfully (though perhaps this was just my projection) to leave

what it sounds like inside



behind his magical stage. Yet just before he leapt into the role of a sensible and rather rational schoolchild, we conceptualized an exhibition architecture for our work: the “Drafts for Our Space Capsule.”

We needed a form of protective encapsulation: a space that would serve both as display and as shelter – for us and for our work. Plus, L. insisted that he needed a treehouse. So we set out to design something that could be sustainably useful for both of us.

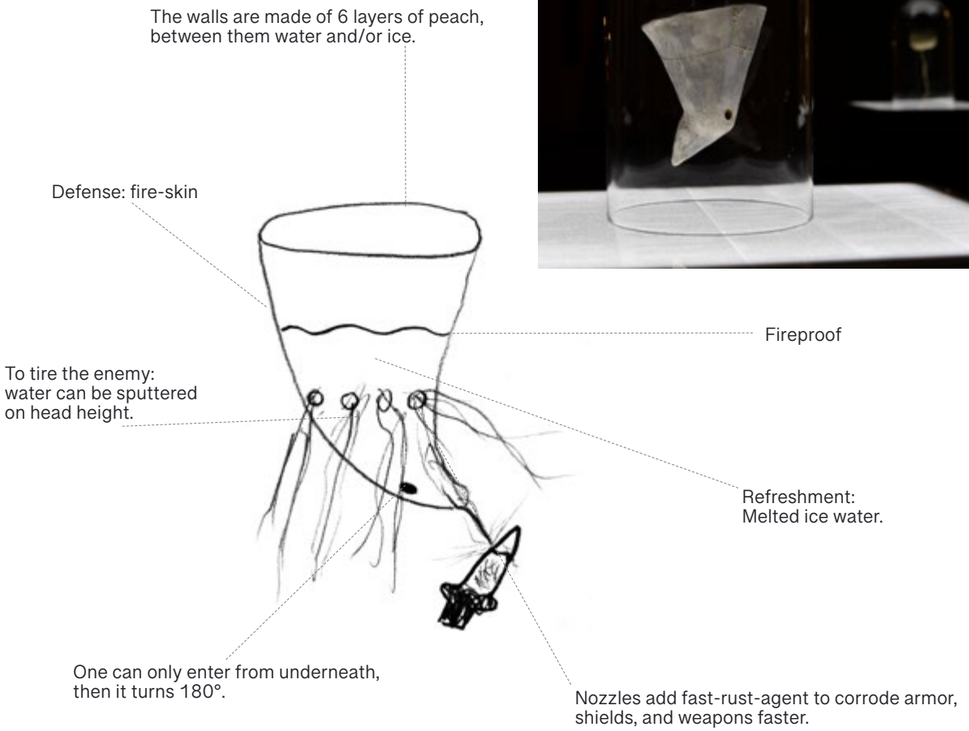
Continuing with what had worked so well before, we met online and began by searching for objects that could inspire architectural drafts. We decided to pretend we could build anything, and I promised – sincerely determined – to remain as true as possible to our utopian ideas when realizing our plans. To start with, we found a snail shell, a ball of cord, a pear, a clay incense smoker L. had made with his father, and a piece of fruticose lichen. We used these objects as “ready-made architectural models” and imagined and sketched what they would look like if enlarged to a walk-in, human scale, what special features they might include, and what they would sound like from the inside.

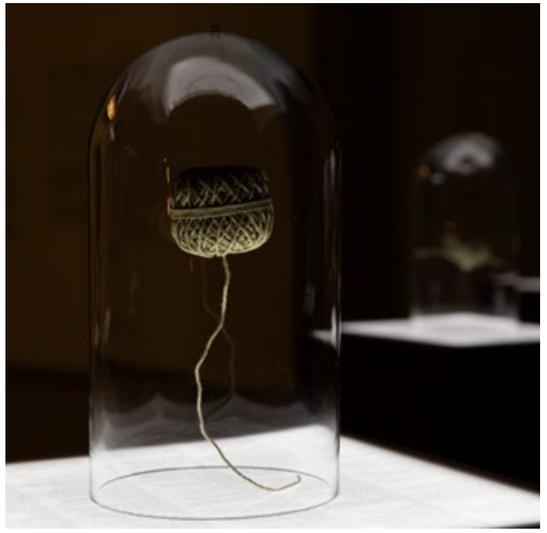
This case study became a beautiful body of work in its own right, and we were able to exhibit it twice, curated by Başak Şenova: first in Vienna, within the final exhibition of “The Octopus Programme”, and later at Zilberman Gallery in Istanbul in the group show “Sarmaşık Ivy”. They are also included in my PhD presentation.

From the exhibition catalogue “Sarmaşık Ivy”,
curated & edited by Başak Şenova at Zilberman Gallery Istanbul 2022:

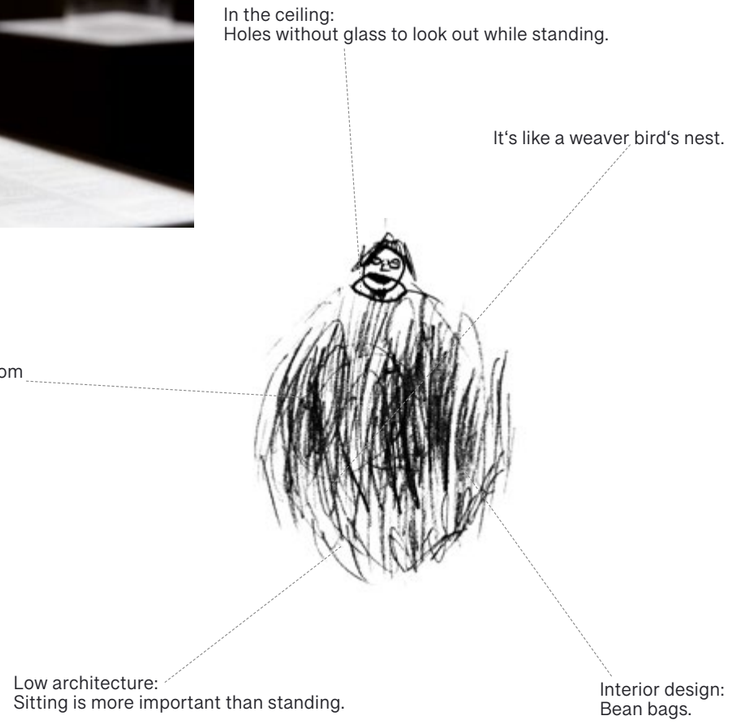
(…) Centrally staged in the main gallery is a stunning installation on methods of relative perception and states of uncertainty, entitled One Meter Above the Ground: Drafts for Our Space Capsule (2022). The artists Nirual Kenabru and Verena Miedl-Faißt, who are part of the Viennese Octopus Programme, present five everyday/botanical/fossil objects encapsulated in glass and floating in space, devoid of gravity, movement, and function: a snail shell, a ball of cord, lichen on branch, an incense smoker (clay), and a (ceramic) pear. Objects with drawings on light boxes underneath grant sketchy insights into the object’s architecture, horizontally or vertically sliced, including amusing visual remarks. The drawings are accompanied by handwritten bilingual commentaries in the boxes’ corners. Architecture, poetry, and a specially composed soundtrack create a specific performative poetry of spatial relation for each of the objects, undoing the central perspective, calling for a way of reading all around the object, even upside down upon the object’s demand. No way to grasp object and poetry at once. The fourfold texts include object descriptions and instructions how to act, move, and proceed with this object as well as how to enter it, how to exit it, what to do with it, warnings included. (…)
(Bruckstein Çoruh, 2022: 12)

what it sounds like inside





what it sounds like inside



what it sounds like inside

Two lichen branches are secret levers.
They open a door. Mark: A molded spot.

Some branches are
fragile – danger of
falling into the abyss.

The walls inside are made from fresh leaves,
and if you touch them, they turn into soft pillows.

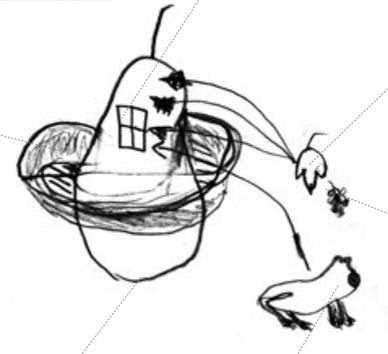
Deep down there are
petrified maple leaves.

what it sounds like inside

Window (not visible to passersby).

Additional blinds:
Ivy branches overgrow
the windows.

It has a balcony at half height.



Red grapes
(indoors only).

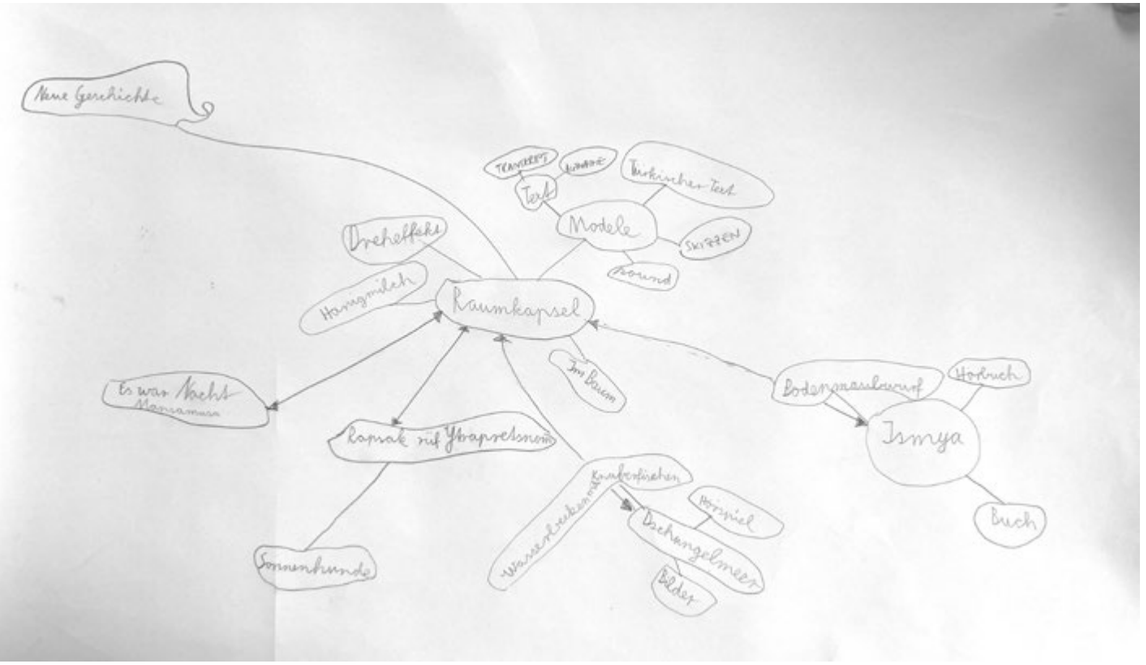
Spiral staircase can be lowered/raised
(for boarding and disembarking).

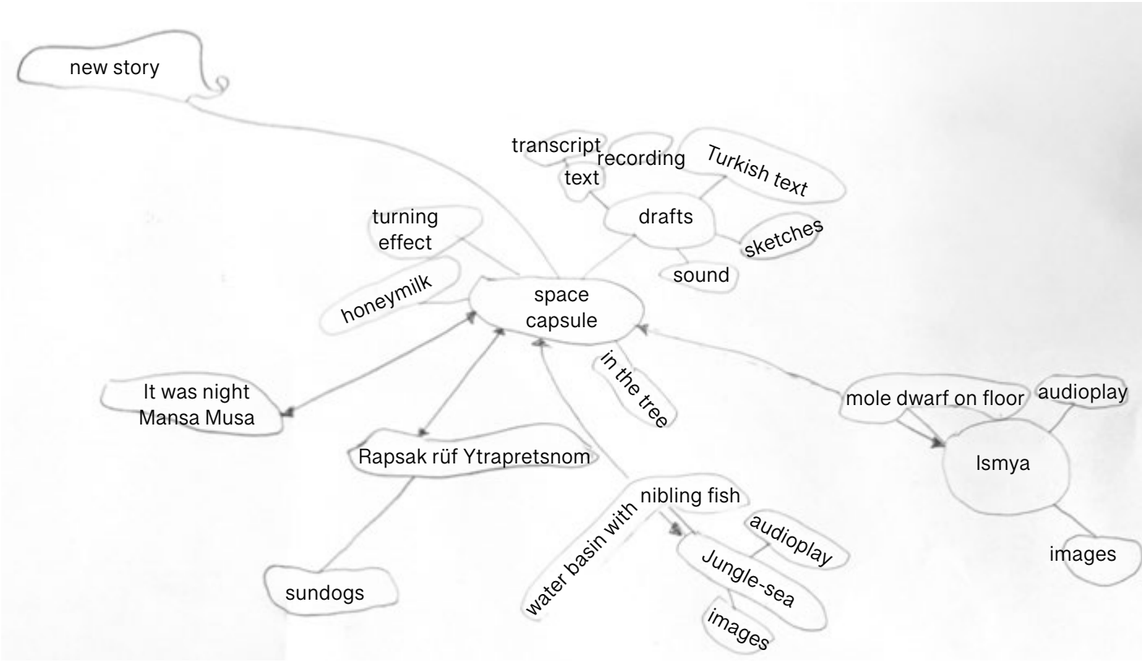
A parrot who imitates the owner‘s voice and a frog live on the ivy.
There is a melody in the frog‘s ear.

a shift in
height changes
perspective

not what is
to be seen.

Planning the Exhibition (1) / Mindmap

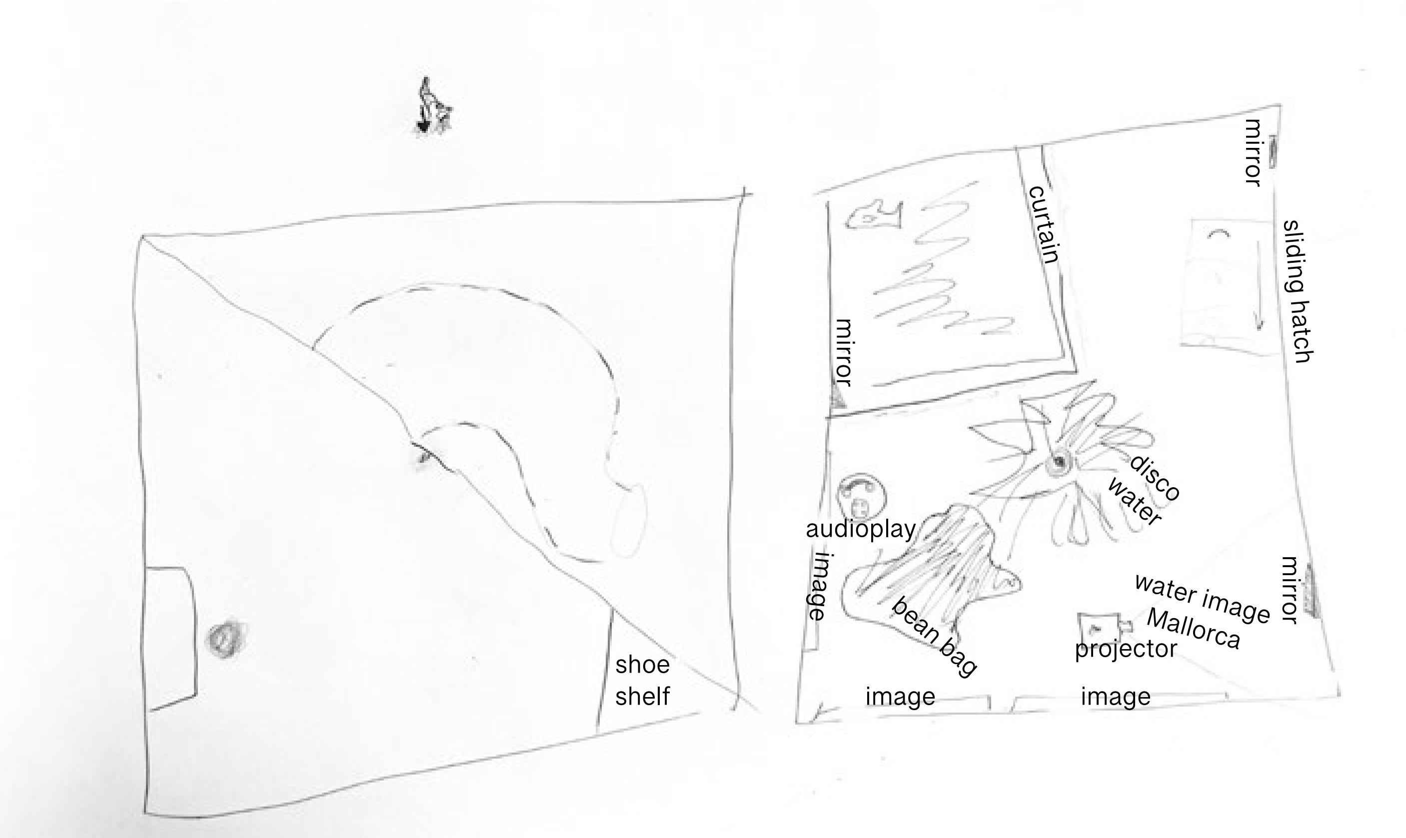




Mindmap for our exhibition, ca. 2022

Together with the “Drafts for Our Space Capsule”, we also developed fairly detailed plans for the big exhibition inside it. It was obviously intended not merely as an object, but as a real piece of architecture – housing all our work.

Floor plan for our exhibition, ca. 2022



The chosen draft was the snail shell. It was designed to wind upward into the tree in an elegant curve. Just below, we planned a shoe shelf to protect the mother-of-pearl surface. Leading up to a second floor, there would be a sliding hatch – echoing the snail's operculum. Entering the actual exhibition space, one would be immersed in the jungle-sea: a large water basin filled with nibbling fish; projections of the sandy ocean floor, photographed during L.'s holidays at the Mediterranean and sent through space by a series of mirrors; a beanbag for comfortable seating; an old telephone playing our audio pieces; a moving disco light to mimic sunlight underwater; and – not to be forgotten – little mole dwarf figures, seemingly digging through the ground at several spots.

I seriously tried to find ways of building the walk-in snail shell, floating one metre above the ground, slowly turning as one entered, with a honey-milk gimbal at its centre – functioning as a display during my PhD exhibition in Vienna and later to be transferred to L.'s garden as a treehouse. L. spent several days with us in Vienna, and together we built models and chose a tree at Rustenschacher Allee, where it was meant to be installed for the exhibition. In the meantime, L.'s father has built him a wonderful treehouse – without gimbal, without rotation, and without Fibonacci spiral; just square, but truly existing.

I am a little disappointed in myself for not having been able to build our space capsule for and with L. in time. I had hoped not only to inspire his imagination

Model of a model of a model…

but also to find serious, adult ways of realizing something that an adult would not invent but a child could not build. I couldn't build it either – lacking the time, the skills, and the budget. But even though we have not reached utopia, what we found along the way was still rewarding. Still – not that I am actually seeking an ambitious career as an artist anymore – but if I were, then for the sake of having the chance to realize our daredevil plans: with reasonable budgets and, above all, with teams of builders, carpenters, ceramicists, tailors, space and marine engineers, architects, plumbers, metalworkers, woodworkers, electricians, painters, geologists, glaziers, precision mechanics, writers, illustrators, textile experts, musicians, gardeners, entomologists, pyrotechnicians, aquarium builders, and sound technicians – all joining our adventures and helping to develop and bring into being what we could otherwise only – or not even – imagine.

love is my
superpower.

The Octopus Programme

Filmteam in Tunis in front of B7L9 , photo: Başak Şenova

video “Herbs and Flowers“ from Tunis

Growing More Hearts and Brains

I first met Başak Şenova as a reviewer during a presentation at the Centre Research Focus (University of Applied Arts, Vienna). She invited our group of PhD-in-Art students to join some of the online events and seminars taking place within the framework of “The Octopus Programme”. I was truly excited by the inspiring artists and researchers involved, and when Başak asked if I would like to formally join the programme, I eagerly accepted. It can hardly be overstated how important, inspiring, and – above all – encouraging the Octopus became for me. Some of its direct effects are visible in this reflective documentation: for instance, the exhibition of our perfect space capsules within the programme, or the project A Museum for Métlaoui, which I organized together with my fellow Octopus participant, Bochra Taboubi. But the tentacles reach much further – into my references as well as into my most intimate thoughts.

For the programme’s publication, I wrote the following text about my experiences, summing up this adventure as best I can:

Becoming Octopodical
(or Intertwined in Tentacular Love)

Writing about the Octopus Programme feels like becoming one of the blind monks asked to describe an elephant – an elephant with many brains and hearts. It is said that Octopi don’t take good care of their little ones and are forced to be very autonomous from the beginning. Maybe that’s the reason for their many hearts, so they don’t feel alone. Anyway, my Octopus had already overcome a pandemic adolescence and some troublesome early stages when we met. I didn’t know much about this friendly monster, but I was electrified: There were amazing young artists from all over the world sharing what they were concerned with and working on trustfully – as though a zoom conference could ever offer something like a safe space. The Octopus was strong enough to hold this.

I couldn’t grasp what the structure or the aim was from the beginning, but I saw relations emerge – between artists, countries, institutions or first and foremost: people. It was about making interesting, caring friendships – not concerned with taking professional advantage from each other in the first place, but concerned with sharing, caring for each other and thus finding places none of us could have reached alone.

The Octopus took me in to one of the most exciting artistic adventures I have experienced so far: At the “Centre for the Less Good Idea” in Johannesburg (South Africa), we were able to join the initiating workshops for their Season 9. We witnessed and partook a truly mesmerizing collective artistic process, realized by masters of presence, tuning their bodies as musical instruments into a polyphonic choir touching all of us in the very deep.

The Octopus left Johannesburg and I had grown into one of its tentacles. I felt very connected to the other people involved, although I realized, the deep-sea monster also troubled some oceans and stirred some foggy grounds. I was having an amazing time, but I also

had very comfortable grounding to stand on and get involved as I saw it fit. In less privileged situations, those wild rides were probably somewhat more dizzying.

Some weeks after Johannesburg, I joined a trip to B7L9 at Tunis. Although potentially similar to the "Centre for the Less Good Idea" in what the institutional vision seemed to be, this experience couldn't have been more different. Instead of meeting a vibrant group of professional artists, I felt warmly welcomed by a vibrant group of kids of all ages up to early adolescence. Supported by my dear Octopus-friends Mariem Koudhai and Bochra Taboubi, I joined the children on a wild filmic adventure through the backyards of their neighborhood. The premiere of our fast-forward-co-creation was a blast!

In only some months' time, the Octopus had become a beloved, inspiring and enriching part of my artistic life. With its end coming nearer, my wrench was tempered by the Octopus coming to Vienna for the final exhibition at AIL – bringing some of its spirit to familiar surroundings.

As I said in the beginning, I feel like the allegoric blind monk not able to tell which acetabuli of the big Octopus Programme I could get hold of compared to others – but I personally want to take the chance of this publication to thank Bochra Taboubi, Sofia Priftis, Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga, Maarit Mustonen, Kim M. Reynolds, Els van Houtert, Eser Epözdemir, Sophia Bellouhassi and Mariem Koudhai for the unforgettable time we were sharing in Johannesburg, Tunis and Vienna. I would like to thank Bronwyn Lace and the "Centre for the Less Good Idea" for one of the most memorable artistic experiences I could ever live to see. And of course, I would dearly like to thank Başak Şenova for daring and bearing and holding and not taming the Octopus – and making all of this possible. (Miedl-Faißt, 2024: 237f.)

Links to website of the Octopus Programme:

Artist video Verena Miedl-Faißt

"Duologue" – Exhibition at B7L9 in Tunis

"Translations" / Journey to South Africa

"the Octopus" – Exhibition in Vienna

The Booklets

the good ones
have stone
collections

but know
one can never
own a stone.

Grammar School

Teaching at a grammar school

After some 15 years, I left my dear ZOOM Children's Museum in 2022 and started teaching at a large grammar school on the outskirts of Vienna. I was hired particularly because of a special subject called "Arts Lab", which the school was proud to offer: in 9th grade, certain project-based classes were scheduled, and my former projects seemed to predestine me for the job. The director seemed genuinely pleased with my application, and I confidently believed my experience could be fruitful for this next step in my working life and research. After the intense projects as an external artist and the intimate work with my nephew, I was eager to become acquainted with the perspective and possibilities of being a teacher inside the institution.

Most of all, I was excited about the prospect of working with groups of students over longer periods of time – instead of just passing through for a few project days. I looked forward to trying out things I had never had the time for in other contexts. And I appreciated not having to worry constantly about my financial situation and instead having a budget (or at least the possibility of organizing one) to invite other artists to work with me.

From the very beginning, though, one of my biggest regrets was being alone in class: one teacher, many students – particularly since a school lesson is short. Evenly distributing 50 minutes among 25+ children means less than two minutes of focused attention for each per week – what a contrast to my endless chats with L.! But then, paradoxically, a school year is very long when it comes to holding an arc of suspense – as opposed to a 90-minute workshop.

My beloved team at the Animated Film Studio had already been dwindling before I left, and I dearly missed that unique constellation of working together – playing off each other in a friendly and inspiring atmosphere, and having the backup to really focus on individuals when needed.

I had hoped to find some fruitful exchange among my new colleagues, and I also hoped to recreate parts of my old team constellation by inviting former colleagues to run workshops in my classes with me.

I knew I would have to get used to a new kind of role. I tried to prepare myself for situations where my vis-à-vis would not be as positively excited as the children coming to the museum. I was aware that the everyday nature of school was the flip side of being able to work together over a longer period. Still, I felt uneasy at the thought of no longer being "Verena," but instead becoming "Mrs. Miedl-Faißt."

I did expect that the students would not perceive me as a badass artist, and I thought I was fine with being "just" their art teacher. What I did not expect, however, was that at times I would feel like I was no longer a person at all: In the end, I was almost relieved if I was at least called "Mrs. Professor" instead of "Mr. Professor". Whereas I knew 180 students' names within a week, some students were not only too indifferent to remember my name (first or last) but didn't even bother to consider whether I had any gender identity at all. I was just the Other.

These dynamics were reinforced by the wealthy, conservative milieu in which the school was located. Once, on the train to school, I overheard a group of teenagers discussing their French teacher. They obviously liked her and thought she was nice, competent, and qualified. Yet they wondered aloud: Why doesn't she have a real job? If the French teacher was already considered pitiable, what did that imply about the art teacher? Unsurprisingly, my colleagues in arts and crafts – though friendly and competent – were, at least in part, very frustrated, each one "cooking in his own pot," as the saying goes.

All the more, I tried to bring former friends, colleagues, and people from outside the school universe into the school. Even before the school year started, I had organized an artistic research project in cooperation with ZOOM Children's Museum ("The Symbuddy Project") and another project involving an artist residency with my Octopus friend Bochra Taboubi from Tunis ("A Museum for Métlaoui"). For each of the many classes I had to teach, I had planned projects that I thought would keep us joyfully occupied for at least the whole year.

All of this could have been a blast – and at times it was. But mostly, it was incredibly exhausting. I thought: if only I had a team and more space; if the groups were smaller; if the students were used to engaging in projects they were invited to co-shape at their will; if they were accustomed to tasks without clear rights and wrongs; if thriving in a creative process, making it their own, and enjoying developing things together was considered a success of any relevance – things would be easier. Then again, I felt my job was to improve all these factors: extend the school format with extra workshops. Apply for funding. Invent more or better artistic inducements, as individually appealing as possible while still functioning for everyone. Care more for each and every child, while becoming ever more resilient to their sometimes repellent behavior. Foster confidence and interest-driven engagement. Get involved with all my soul while not taking things too personally.

I'm not sure anyone can truly resolve this knot, but I couldn't. Even though the school was actually rather privileged – everyone spoke my language, and the majority of the students came from sheltered backgrounds – I was about to burn out after only one year. The focus on performance, efficiency, and a deeply capitalist and patriarchal value system was so antagonistic to what I envisioned that I felt like a micro-Sisyphus in the desert.

Still, there were sparkling encounters. Still, I believe some of the children enjoyed and benefited from our work together. Still, I miss some of them. And still, I learned a lot – and I am trying to invent a teacher identity that makes it possible to exist and thrive in this system without surrendering to values too contrary to my convictions. I want to attune myself to the positive opportunities, bend the framework where necessary, and work in a way that is sustainable enough to survive – happily.

Note:

I have written the texts "from the school's annual report" about "The Symbuddy Project", the "Arts Lab", "A Museum for Métlaoui" and the Stop Motion projects in German and translated to English for this reflective documentation.

Hartmut Rosa

In his chapter on education, Hartmut Rosa describes school as fundamentally influential for how one relates to the world:

“Wenn ich die Schule als Konstitutionsgrund für Weltbeziehungen beschreibe, dann meine ich damit insbesondere, dass sich in ihr die Art und Weise herausbildet und verfestigt, in der Subjekte der Welt beziehungsweise den Dingen, Menschen und Ereignissen der Welt begegnen.“ (Rosa, 2022: 418)

School either fosters “dispositional resonance“ or “dispositional alienation“ (cf. Rosa, 2022: 418) – that is, a stance that confidently expects a resonant relationship with the world, or an attitude shaped by the expectation of boredom or disappointment when encountering something new. Rosa – consistent with much pedagogical theory – emphasizes the crucial role of the teacher. If school fails, becoming a “zone of alienation“ (cf. Rosa, 2022: 409), there is no resonant relationship between students, teacher, and subject. Successful teaching, by contrast, fosters school as a resonant space: the teacher is enthusiastic about their subject, caring, and accessible; the students are excited by the subject, trusting and open to a resonant relationship with both teacher and subject; and the subject itself appears meaningful and challenging for both teacher and students (Rosa, 2022: 411).

Rosa even argues that in contemporary pedagogical and didactic discourse – shaped by an overemphasis on autonomy and individualism – the teacher’s role is unjustifiably reduced to that of a mere moderator or facilitator of know-how, while students are expected to decide for themselves what they want to learn and how they want to relate to it:

“Dies unterschätzt aber meines Erachtens die Bedeutung eines als erste Stimmgabel, das heißt als Inspirator und Impulsgeber, fungierenden Lehrers (…)“ (Rosa, 2022: 414).

I can clearly relate to Rosa’s definition of what school should be: a resonant, trustful space where everyone is eager to be transformed by new encounters, instead of a space of boredom, fear, and alienation. Obviously, it is advantageous – indeed essential – that the teacher is passionate about their subject and positive toward their students, and that the students feel safe and have already had positive experiences of self-efficacy.

But Rosa‘s account also risks making it too easy to blame teachers when school fails. Being a tuning fork is uplifting – if one strikes a well-tempered sound box. But if there is no sound box, because the classroom is overcrowded with bodies, hormones, conflicts, expectations, and smartphones, then a single tuning fork cannot produce resonance. Especially if students are not accustomed to a tuning fork that requires them to resonate, but only to teachers entering the room with a ghetto blaster of one-way lessons in efficiency and demarcation.

John Dewey

“Craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be ‘loving’; it must care deeply for the subject matter upon which skill is exercised.” (Dewey, 1934/1980: 47f.)

Love, in almost every professional context – particularly in the sciences and in schools – is considered a bias. Love is never evenly distributed: one will always relate more to some than to others. Love makes one vulnerable and susceptible to manipulation. Love undermines any attempt at objectivity.

Yet in the arts, as in pedagogy, love is both a condition and a superpower – despite all its risks and pitfalls. Of course, I am not speaking of romantic love, but of a gentle attentiveness, an intrinsic interest and care for children, as well as for any “world-bit” one encounters through artistic thinking and making:

“[…] Tenderness personalizes everything to which it relates, making it possible to give it a voice, to give it the space and the time to come into existence, and to be expressed. It is thanks to tenderness that the teapot starts to talk. Tenderness is spontaneous and disinterested; it goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling. Instead it is the conscious, though perhaps slightly melancholy, common sharing of fate. Tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering and the effects of time. […] It appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our ‘self.’” (Tokarczuk, 2018)

Olga Tokarczuk

Pedagogical as well as artistic work requires all the senses: an attunement to the other, an openness to being affected and moved. This entails a high risk of failure, of exhaustion, of being wounded. Nobody can reasonably expect a teacher responsible for 300 students per week to attune to each of them in this way, to open up and be so vulnerable. But what is the alternative? The solution cannot be simply to surrender, put on armor, and cultivate alienation in order to survive.

If school is to become more of a resonant space, as Hartmut Rosa suggests – and as I strongly agree – then the framework itself must change. The entire system needs to be rethought in the most fundamental way. Teachers cannot remain teachers if they are to fulfill this task. They must be allowed to become friends, companions, fellow travelers – and they must not be left alone in doing so.

if you want to
be fair,

don’t hide
love or pain.

Symbuddy Waldblumenheinzelmännchen NILA

How can we relate although you are so many?

research catalogue exhibition
"The Symbuddy Project"

The Symbuddy Project

An Artistic Research Project at School

Donna Haraway

"Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means "making-with." Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. In the words of the Inupiat computer "world game," earthlings are never alone. That is the radical implication of sympoiesis. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it." (Haraway, 2016: 58)

From the school's annual report:

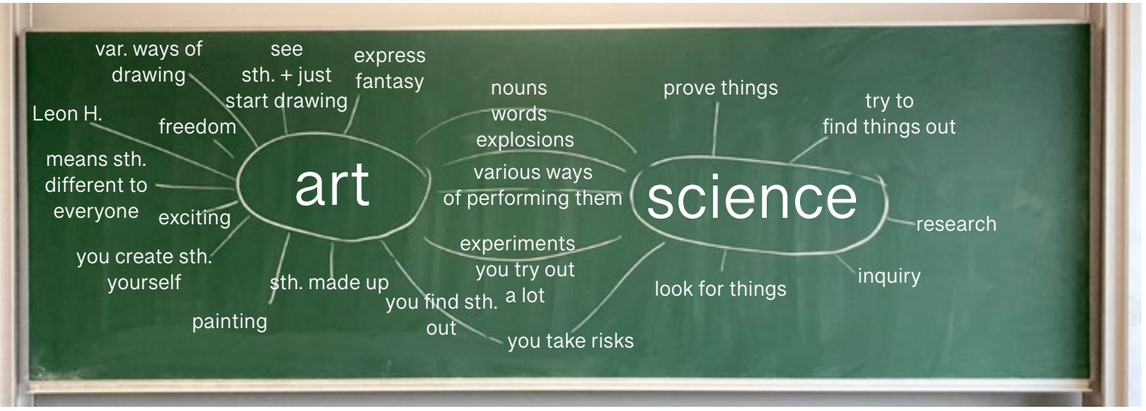
"The Symbuddy Project" was an artistic research project in cooperation with the ZOOM Children's Museum, which approached the serious challenges of our time with childlike confidence and daring. Artistic research can engage with matters for which concepts and ideas are lacking. In the Symbuddy Project, this meant asking what kind of image of humanity does not locate us outside of nature, but rather in a loving entanglement with everything that exists.

After all, who is supposed to help people out of their mess? Hardly the machines they have taught to calculate instead of to know. To run instead of to live. Perhaps it would be better to ask ants how to live in harmony with their environment, or to learn from trees how to whisper to one another, or to take lessons from clouds on how to tower. You can only find what you are able to imagine. In the Symbuddy Project, new threads were spun to connect with the world.

Together with the artistic researcher Verena Miedl-Faißt (their art teacher) and the artist and art mediator Michael Simku, the pupils from 1a, 1d, and 1e set out in search of fantastic yet possible worlds and (re)discovered models of living together in planetary solidarity. Always at their side were the non-human "Symbuddies", which combine the special abilities of earthly fauna and flora. Unfortunately, "Symbuddies" do not exist. So the project team had to invent them – or become Symbuddies themselves. As part of the project, the musician Oliver Stotz, the anthropologist Matthias Herrgen, the dance educator and performance artist Waltraud Brauner, and the evolutionary biologist and philosopher of science Johannes Jäger visited the Symbuddies at school.

The research process could be followed at www.symbuddy-project.org on the Research Catalogue of the Society of Artistic Research and was featured throughout the summer semester on the homepage of the ZOOM Children's Museum.

On June 19, 2023, a final project presentation and discussion with Johannes Jäger and the Symbuddies took place at the ZOOM Children's Museum.



What “art“ and “science“ meant to the children of class 1d

For me, the Symbuddy Project was the first and foremost attempt to bring my artistic research, the Children’s Museum, and my friends and colleagues into school – and since it was truly a large-scale project by school standards, it worked out to quite a far extent. I was scheduled as the arts teacher for three classes of 5th-graders, who together became a huge research team. Thanks to additional funding, ZOOM Children’s Museum was able to commission the Symbuddies along with the concept I had developed together with Michael Simku. The funding covered his participation in 18 double lessons throughout the school year, as well as the involvement of guest artists who offered several additional workshops, culminating in a panel discussion as the final presentation in the ZOOM foyer. In addition, I received a budget to create and maintain our online exhibition in the Research Catalogue.

This project certainly required a lot of extra effort, but in return I had colleagues with me almost every other week. During the lessons I held on my own, we nevertheless continued our Symbuddy endeavors. In fact, I transformed the arts classes into this artistic research project for the entire school year.

When I met the children for the first time and announced our special adventure, we began by creating a mind map of what “art” and “science” meant to them. I explained why I was convinced that they, as children, would be highly qualified co-researchers: because they are used to relating to new things every day, and because they were experts in making “Unfug.” According to the Manifesto of Artistic Research, this kind of “Unfug” is a core quality of artistic thinking:

Manifesto of Artistic Research

“Kompositionen sind – wörtlich – »Zusammen-Stellungen«, Montagen oder »Fugen« ohne explizite Regeln, die nicht auf Identitäten abzielen, sondern die Inkompatibilität der Elemente, ihre buchstäblichen »Unfugen« mitpräsentieren. Deshalb sprach Adorno von der Kunst als einer »urteilslosen Synthesis«, die bestenfalls »sprachähnlich« sei, aber denjenigen, der sie »als Sprache wörtlich« nehme, chronisch in die Irre führe.“ (Henke et al., 2020b: 40)

The English translation lacks an important part of the polysemy in the German word creation “Unfugen”:

“Compositions are combinations, montages, or ‘splices’ without specific rules, not focused on identities but instead co-presenting the incompatibility of the elements, their nonsense. Adorno thus spoke of the art of a ‘synthesis without judgment’ which is at best ‘similar to language,’ although those who take it ‘literally as language’ would be chronically misled.” (Henke et al., 2020a: 40)

The German word “Fuge” means fugue, but also gap, joint, or seam. The verb “fügen” means to join or to fit together, but also to comply or to submit, or, if used impersonally, to signify that something happens serendipitously. “Unfug” (nonsense) is a junction that does not make sense: a fugue that does not offer refuge, does not submit itself, but keeps you challenged and requires the active act of bridging a gap.

Anton Zeilinger

“30 years ago, when journalists asked me what can this be used for, I said, I can probably tell you this is not good for anything. We just do it out of curiosity. (…) In the beginning, I had no idea how to realise the things I wanted to do. This came slowly, it took years. What to me is my most important experiment is entanglement of more than two particles.“ (Zeilinger 2022)

Each child received a high-quality sketchbook to honor individual ideas, perceptions, curiosities, and sketches. They were allowed to use it at will and at any time – but they had to handle it with care and were not allowed to tear out pages, erase anything, or use it to play Battleship.

From the very beginning, they organized themselves into research groups. They were free to choose the size of their groups – some as large as seven or eight children, others preferring to work alone.

Each team, however, received one additional member: a Symbuddy. I explained to them what Symbuddies are – not merely fantastic creatures like unicorns, but symbionts of earthly critters whose special abilities would be of great advantage in facing questions and challenges that humans alone could not answer.

To determine which Symbuddy would join which team, each researcher first chose a totem animal: a real creature with a special ability that could be useful, such as flying (eagle), cracking asphalt (dandelion), changing color (chameleon), or surviving in outer space (tardigrade). The Symbuddies then emerged as beings that combined all these special abilities into one.

When Michael Simku joined us for the first time in the classroom, the children introduced themselves together with their totems. Afterwards, each research group received a package of research equipment: a bag containing magnifiers, rubber bands, pipettes, test tubes, zipper bags, tweezers, and cotton wool. These bags were tagged with the names of the respective research groups, and in a nearby park we searched for potential body parts for the Symbuddies.

In the following lessons, the research teams assembled their Symbuddies in the form of collages, using what they had found in the park along with the large pile of leftover materials I had discovered in the school’s basement. When Michael Simku returned for the second time, he brought professional recording equipment and conducted extensive interviews with the teams about their Symbuddies: what they could be asked and how they might be able to help humanity. We were occupied with the development of these creatures for several weeks. Since the classrooms were too small for five research teams to discuss, be interviewed, and work in a concentrated manner, we spread out into other classrooms and the hallway.

Once the Symbuddies had been well integrated into the research teams, Oliver Stotz visited for small sound workshops during which the individual languages of the Symbuddies were invented.

Thus incarnated, the next step was to find potential housings where the Symbuddies could live in harmonious flatshares with their research teams. Therefore, we built elaborate architectural models of these housings, and in the continuous interviews with Michael, the teams explained their concepts.

A Symbuddy being born

Besides, the children were busy making PowerPoint presentations on their Symbuddies (very popular), building the Symbuddies and their housings in Minecraft, or working in their sketchbooks – Symbuddy-related or not.

Accompanying the project, we kept a research diary. This log, including a contribution by visiting anthropologist Matthias Herrgen, is available in the Research Catalogue in both German and English.

Towards the end of the project, dancer and choreographer Waltraud Brauner offered an additional workshop in the afternoon. The participating children discovered how their Symbuddies moved and how it felt to embody their Symbuddy on a physical level.

The final event was a panel discussion at ZOOM Children's Museum. The evolutionary biologist and philosopher Johannes Jäger prepared the panel with a group of children who were willing to participate and hosted the presentation, where he discussed the Symbuddy inventions from an evolutionary perspective. The video of this panel is also available on the Research Catalogue.

Symbuddy-experiments

Dance workshop with Waltraud Brauner

The Symbuddy Project was loud, chaotic, fun, and very inspiring – at least to some. But to my regret, I hardly had any time at all to immerse myself in the sympoietic inventions: when Michael or one of our guest artists or scientists was present, they took care of the truly inspiring part, while I had their back – managing the other 20 students, who more or less had to work independently, as I was busy resolving desperate art-scientific disputes and cleaning the (newly renovated) school building after occasional Symbuddy explosions. Even more so during the weeks when I was alone with the students – especially since the children were spread out over several spaces. I was constantly bending my duty of supervision and quite relieved after each lesson if there were no injuries or other inadvertent traces.

It was quite challenging to maintain an arc of suspense in these in-between weeks, as basically every child, or at least every research team, developed their own project – more or less successfully. At times, it turned into more of a debate club than an arts lesson, and many children worked hard on developing their skills in constructively negotiating ideas and opinions. What to do if voting for the Symbuddy's name only produced animous decisions? Voting again and again wouldn't help, and kicking opponents out of the team was no sustainable solution either. (For more reflections by the children and their Symbuddies themselves, see our Research Diary.)

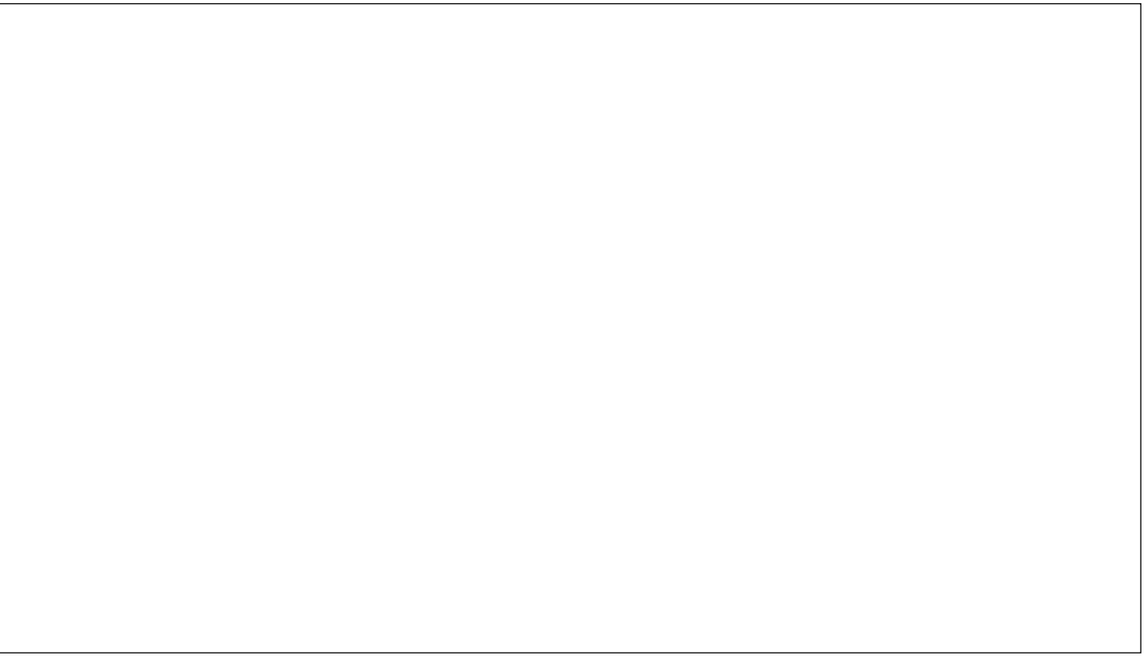
Nevertheless, I was happy to see that most of the children, for most of the time, were quite enthusiastically involved (at least by school standards) – not only in the beginning, but actually throughout the school year. Towards the end, I increasingly prepared them for the event at which our findings would be publicly shared. In line with my aim of equal co-creation, I placed great value on considering their audience by showcasing the Symbuddies at the school's open house and additionally transcending the school setting through our public presentation at ZOOM Children's Museum.

Early in the year, I started planning this event, carefully considering the school calendar. I could have scheduled a school event on some morning – but I did not want a mandatory event. Instead, I tried to motivate my research teams enough that they would come voluntarily and bring their parents and friends. In agreement with the school administration, we scheduled the event not in the last week before summer break (when every day was already filled with special activities), but the week before, when the schedule was still more or less normal. And in fact, quite a large part of the students were highly motivated and even joined the voluntary preparatory workshop with Johannes Jäger.

I don't want to conclude my reflections on this big and beautiful project with an account of frustration, but I was incredibly frustrated when I realised that a teacher colleague had planned a trip to an amusement park on the very day of our panel discussion – ignoring the project her class had been excited about throughout the year, ignoring the flyers we had printed, the email invitations, and – perhaps most annoyingly – the fact that our event had never made it into the official school calendar, simply because it was not a "school event".

I don't want to blame this individual teacher, although I was personally very disappointed. Rather, this incident illustrates that a school is simply too large an institution to genuinely relate on an individual level. But a positive note to end with: some of the children organised a parent shuttle and still made it to our event, which turned out to be crowded and beautiful. The video documentation of the panel discussion is available online in our Research Catalogue exposition.

naming is the hardest thing to agree on.



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What shall I do, if the group I‘m supposed to work with, does not appreciate or even openly rejects, what I understand as the core aim of a co-creative project?

The Arts Lab

Struggling with Expectations, Apparent Freedom and Group Dynamics

From the annual report:

The ArtsLab offers special opportunities but also special challenges - although the setting does not change, suddenly everything is different: the double lesson on Thursday afternoon begins and ends with the school bell, the classroom does not change and, as always, a school class finds itself facing a teacher. And yet there is suddenly a great deal of freedom: no curriculum, no exams, no guidelines. Dealing with this freedom becomes a challenge: How do you develop an idea with twenty-four people? How do you find a common denominator that - although everyone can agree on it - is not boring? How do you deal with the incredibly long time span of a school year, which is always divided into equally short Thursday afternoons? And where does the motivation come from when the pressure to perform at school, which otherwise sets in when in doubt, is removed? There was a lot of discussion in the first half of the school year: What is art anyway? Why is “selling something” not yet an artistic idea? And what is even possible on a Thursday afternoon?

Separate working groups were formed in the first semester: There were writers who worked on scripts, seamstresses who produced personalized fabric figures as key rings for the class, candles were cast, teacher caricatures were created as stickers and drawings were made for an animated film story. This time could therefore be described as a long warm-up phase for a necessary new start in January: the group wanted to take on the challenge of a joint project in the second semester after all. It turned out that the class‘s respectful culture of discussion had its pitfalls: there were lots of great ideas, but if not everyone was enthusiastic straight away, these ideas were immediately discarded. Getting involved in something that only grows bit by bit from many different ideas and contributions and that nobody can quite foresee because it is a joint work was not an easy exercise for many. Nevertheless, the class can be proud: In the second semester, the 4fal created an entire world.

The class was once again divided into teams according to the interests of the individual pupils. There were illustrators, scriptwriters, actors, costume designers, sound designers and editors. Each team worked freely - the only requirement was to produce “puzzle pieces” that related to some other puzzle piece that had already been created. No one was “allowed” to invent an overall plot. Places were drawn, sensually described and set to music, roles were worked out and equipped with great costumes, wishes and conflicts. The process was based on three project days in the Königsleitn theater village in Litschau, where the individual pieces of the puzzle were finally put together at the end of April, an exciting plot was developed and the film was shot. The 4fal were not only supported by Verena Miedl-Faißt, but also by their class teacher Renate Weimann in Litschau, as well as by cameraman Klemens Koscher and theater teacher Johanna Jonasch as part of special workshops.

At the Long Night of Talents, not only was the film product shown, but the work was also embedded in an exhibition of all the works created during the ArtsLab. This meant that the jointly created world could not only be experienced on the screen, but actually entered.

To my great regret, the screening claimed in the annual report did not take place at all, although there would have been a lot to show.

The “Arts Lab” was something I had expected to be smooth sailing. The school regarded this special subject, offered in the eighth grade (for 13–14-year-olds), as a unique selling point of which it was very proud; and the “curriculum” seemed to align perfectly with my goals: the class was intended to enter a co-creative process of their own accord. We had an entire school year to work together, with no predefined framework we needed to fit into. And the class, moreover, had a reputation for being fun, talented, and highly motivated.

But it turned out to be an incredible struggle and – despite being successful in many ways – strangely frustrating for both the students and for me.

But let me start at the beginning. Before our first meeting, I had heard suspiciously little about previous “Arts Lab” projects. All I knew was that some groups had produced plastic-bead jewelry to sell at the Christmas bazaar – and, to be honest, I thought: Well, we’ll do more than that.

Since I didn’t know the group yet, I thought it would be good to take some time to tune in. I asked each of them to draw a wish on a 15 × 15 cm sheet of sketch paper – a way of introducing themselves and contributing to a collective set of artistic intentions for us as a team. The exercise worked well and was enjoyable.

However, after that first session, the group quickly became nervous and impatient: “When do we start?” they asked. So I said, “All right – what shall we start with?” If there had been a concrete plan or idea within the class that they were eager to pursue, I would gladly have supported it. But the only thing resembling a common goal was: “We want to sell something at the Christmas bazaar” – without any idea of what that might be.

So I decided we should open things up a bit more and held a brainstorming session on what art can be. The results ranged from drawing and painting to theatre, music, street art, fragrance design, and even “Is It Cake?“ – a Netflix series featuring cakes that look like every-day objects.

With this broader foundation, I tried to moderate a discussion that might lead to a project idea. There were genuinely fun, unusual, and even performative suggestions.

Among the more memorable ideas was a plan to seriously propose bringing a live tiger to school – writing letters to the headmaster, considering what would be required, and exploring how such a thing might be legally and practically possible. I immediately thought of this as an ambitious, socially critical project that could open up multiple avenues for reflection. Obviously, they had heard about the radical performance by the Centre for Political Beauty – the German activist art collective that, in 2016, brought a live tiger to Berlin and provocatively invited refugees to volunteer to be “eaten” by it as a protest against EU migration policies (see Zentrum für Politische Schönheit, n.d.).

At that point, however, a tricky dynamic began to unfold. The group didn’t know me, nor what I could offer them; they only knew that I was the teacher – in a subject whose only given premise was that they were supposed to decide what to do, not the teacher. So my role, as it turned out, was mostly to serve as the point of opposition.

The problem was: they couldn’t decide on anything themselves – except that it shouldn’t be what I approved of. Even when an idea sparked genuine interest, the moment I said, “Good idea!” or “Okay, what do you think – how could we approach this?”, the idea was instantly dead. Yet they would still look at me expectantly, waiting for me to solve the stalemate.

They lacked the ability – or rather the motivation – to actually get something going; to develop an idea together that wasn’t just a one-liner attributed to a single idea-giver and immediately acceptable to everyone, but something that could evolve through a process of negotiation – which, admittedly, is no easy task. My role, as I understood it, would have been to support them in achieving this, yet their opposition to anything coming from my side blocked every attempt I made. And in the end, ninety minutes on a weary Thursday afternoon in an ordinary classroom do pass – even if all you do is sink comfortably into the dead end of collectively agreeing to reject whatever the teacher suggests.

After a few weeks, their class teacher asked if I would join them for a few project days at the Theater- und Feriendorf Königsleitn, and I agreed – hoping that getting to know the students in a different setting might help ease our struggles.

The “Theaterdorf” is beautifully situated by a lake. The students were accommodated in comfortable holiday apartments. A large tennis hall had recently been converted into professional rehearsal rooms, complete with a big green screen and – best of all – a spacious attic filled with an inspiring collection of theatre costumes and props.

Over the course of three days, the class participated in a theatre workshop led by theatre pedagogue Johanna Jonasch. It was bittersweet for me to watch them working eagerly with “not-the-teacher.” At the same time, it was slightly painful to see how trusting and appreciative their relationship was with their class teacher, who had known them since their first day at school and taught “ordinary” subjects such as German and Music.

It was wonderful to see good work being done and to observe the students in such a positive and creative environment. Yet I felt strangely out of place. In the past, it had been my role to show frustrated teachers how lively, motivated, and inspired their “bored” students actually were. And now – almost without noticing – I had become the frustrated teacher.

Despite all better hopes, these project days did not break the deadlock in the “Arts Lab,” and all of us became increasingly frustrated. It was, quite simply, boring.

A few weeks before the Christmas bazaar, I finally gave in and made what could be called a tautological top-down decision: I said, “All right, until the bazaar, let’s stop trying to work as one big group. Form smaller teams based on your interests, and create whatever you’d like to sell at the bazaar.”

Not surprisingly, they didn’t end up selling anything. Some made DIY candles ordered from Amazon; others sewed rather charming little keychain figures, drew pictures, or wrote short texts. I kept my distance and tried not to interfere – since, to my great regret, my involvement usually proved more disruptive than helpful.

Consequently, I also handed over the task of grading their own work. Each student wrote a reflection on what they had done and the grade they believed they

deserved. Naturally, they all gave themselves an A (1). And although I hadn't explicitly asked for feedback on my teaching, many of them added that it was actually my fault that there were so few results – I simply should have been more strict.

At the start of the second semester, I told them, "All right, that was frustrating for all of us – let's try something different. You asked me to be more strict, so I've decided that we'll make a film together."

First, I explained, this was something I actually had experience with and could truly support them in. And second, filmmaking was ideal because it offered endless possibilities for individual contribution: we would need actors, scriptwriters, set designers, costume makers, sound engineers, photographers, animators – and more. There would be something for everyone.

Relieved to finally be freed from the burden of endless, fruitless negotiations, they went along, muttering their agreement.

But almost immediately, resistance resurfaced. They just wanted to film with their smartphones, use templates, and do what they always did. I, however, felt responsible for ensuring that they actually worked on something meaningful – something slightly more ambitious that would engage them in a process lasting longer than half a session. So I tried to raise the level a little, or rather, to create conditions that might eventually surprise us and lift our Thursday afternoons out of sleepy, grumpy boredom.

To motivate both them and myself, I invited my friend, cinematographer Klemens Koscher, to our class to share insights from professional film production – how such a process unfolds, and what needs to happen before the record button is pressed for the first time. He brought along some fascinating making-of material from a chase scene he had filmed, and the students were mildly interested. (A few even seriously told me, in an apologetic tone, that it was really nice – but, actually, what could they possibly be taught, or what should they ask, since they already knew everything?)

In addition, I got back in touch with Johanna Jonasch, the pedagogue from Litschau they had previously worked with. I invited her to lead another workshop focused on our planned film project, and I organized a new set of project days – returning to Litschau to use the facilities and, in particular, the impressive costume collection for our film shoot.

This way, it was clear that we wouldn't just be filming something random in the school hallway, but instead preparing for an actual shoot towards the end of the semester in Litschau. They were excited about the place – and, of course, the prospect of another trip sounded fun. So once again, they agreed, albeit mildly.

I asked each student individually what they would be interested in doing within the scope of our film project. This quickly resulted in five clearly defined working groups: playwrights, actors, illustrators, cinematographers and sound designers, and costume makers.

In the following session, I brought a specific task for each group: the writers were to invent a character with a problem and/or a wish; the sound and camera group was to find a sound that suggested a particular setting; the actors were to explore how to perform an emotion; the illustrators were to draw objects that could be cut out and animated; and for the costume makers, I brought Japanese paper for quickly sketching costume ideas.

All the groups soon began working with real enthusiasm. By the end of the session, they presented their results to one another.

For the next session, I brought follow-up tasks that connected the different groups. The illustrators were to draw the scenery suggested by the sounds created by the sound designers. The actors were to perform their chosen emotion in the role of one of the invented characters. The writers were to describe several possible settings, while the sound designers were to find ways of recording sounds that matched the illustrated objects.

The costume makers had begun creating a beautiful jellyfish costume, which the writers and actors were asked to incorporate into their work. The costume team, of course, was also encouraged to develop costumes for the other characters.

As I had worked in other projects before, I tried to get them to dig deeper into the details and resist the temptation of jumping too quickly into a plot. From session to session, I encouraged them with targeted tasks designed to help them develop their ideas further. They kept protesting against this approach, feeling that they were losing time – waiting for the "real start" – while, in fact, they were already working continuously, developing rich storylines, complex characters, and interwoven plotlines.

But at last, the Arts Lab afternoons began to live up to their name. The students were writing, rehearsing, recording, editing, sewing, colouring, and drawing – and I was genuinely looking forward to our film shoot.

I packed two suitcases with equipment: my (private) professional camera and audio gear, a range of materials, and everything the students had produced during class. Still muttering, they boarded the train with me, and I had to beg for help carrying the luggage – literally at every step. When I asked who would volunteer to assist, not a single one moved. Arriving in Litschau, I was frustrated and exhausted, but I tried to stay in good spirits and bring the project to a positive conclusion.

We had a large room that served as our editorial office. We laid out the drawings, sketches, writings, and everything the students had prepared, taking a close look – a kind of survey of all existing material.

Next, we created storyboards for all the micro-scenes that had been developed in parallel throughout the semester. From these micro-scenes, each student chose the ones that absolutely had to be included in the film – and finally, in a very focused session, we linked and wove them into a coherent storyline.

The students worked together remarkably well, and again I thought: Wow, we've finally broken through. The entire compound of the Theaterdorf was at our disposal. We were filming in our editorial office, outside by the lake, at the bar, using the green screen to integrate the hand-drawn elements, and of course thriving in the attic full of costumes and props.

I rushed through the days, moving from group to group, helping to realize the ambitious plan. And we succeeded – really well! Just before leaving, we managed to watch a surprisingly polished rough cut of the project. Everyone was happily excited – for a moment.

Then came our wrap-up and feedback session. Almost everyone seemed content and proud of what we had accomplished, and of the time we had spent together. Until one student resurfaced the supposedly resolved conflict: If we had started earlier, we could have done

so much more – this is actually embarrassing. That single comment managed to shatter everything we had built.

Although I was deeply frustrated – as I admitted – I tried to offer positive feedback: to tell them how well they had worked, how remarkable it was that they had truly co-created this film, how dense and engaging the story had become, and how special it was that they had genuinely co-authored a piece of art. For a moment, it seemed that some of them wanted to hold on to a positive conclusion – but the constructive energy was gone.

Exhausted and drained, I returned home. It felt as if I had given everything I could: time, experience, mediation, support, (good) energy, had succeeded by the skin of my teeth – and yet still completely failed.

Shortly after our shoot in Litschau, there was the school's big "Long Night of Talents" – the event where I had planned to proudly premiere our film. To prepare for the screening – possibly combined with an exhibition of all the materials they had produced – I had scheduled several Thursday sessions. But when I returned to class, expecting to plan this final presentation, the students confronted me once again with refusal rather than engagement: the lead actors, who had been most eager to play the main roles, declared that they would not allow the film to be shown – they were dissatisfied with their performances and with the overall result.

We discussed it again. Some students were clearly disappointed – they had stepped back, taking on roles behind the camera even though they would have liked to act, and now those they had given the floor to were rejecting the work and denying them the audience and recognition they deserved.

I tried to mediate the discussion and argue in that direction, but – as before – my voice didn't count, or worse, was counterproductive. So I said: All right, maybe we should vote. If a large majority really doesn't want the film to be shown, so be it. But if it's only a few, then we should find a way to adapt the film so that everyone can agree – rather than dismissing a whole semester of work.

To my perplexed astonishment, the anonymous vote was unambiguous: there should be no public screening at the "Long Night of Talents". But the already difficult situation was made even more challenging. That very afternoon, our class was visited by a group of primary school children and their teacher – there to get an impression of the exciting Arts Lab the school was so proud of. The small children sat at the tables with curious eyes, while the defiant teenagers hid behind them. I took a deep breath and tried once more to handle the situation as best I could.

I said: All right, you've decided, and although I deeply regret this decision, I have to accept it. But this is the Arts Lab – and making art is a form of communication. If there is no receiver, no audience at all, it ceases to exist as art. (One could certainly debate this position, but that's what I told them as a given.) So if your audience is not the visitors at the "Long Night of Talents" – then who should it be? You must decide, even if it's only a single person.

Eventually, we reached an agreement to organize a private screening for invited guests – a few of their teachers – for whom they then wrote elaborate invitation letters. They were, with good reason, actually somewhat proud of the result; yet we were once again caught up in adolescent insecurity, the same problematic deadlock that had haunted us all year, and in power plays among the students that overshadowed

what could have been a truly collective process.

My impression was that the hardest part for them was accepting the result precisely because it could not be attributed to a predefined plan or to individual authorship. None of the students who had aspired to peer leadership could claim to have defined the plot or shaped the outcome more than the others – nor could that authorship be attributed to me as their teacher. Each had to share a part of the responsibility, and they struggled with the intangibility of such collective authorship.

I thought of how they constantly took selfies: they didn't simply photograph moments they wanted to remember, or things that visually interested them – the act was about recognizing and reaffirming themselves in relation to others, with each of the hundreds of images they took on their smartphones.

Our film didn't function like a selfie; it was more like a group portrait – taken from many perspectives at once. I suspect that was what unsettled them.

students and
teachers are
actually human,

but tend to forget.

Exhibition view at Belvedere 21

How can an open co-creative process create understanding, respect and possibly even prolific ideas for very foreign and distant living conditions, issues and challenges?

A Museum for Métlaoui

Fossil Inventions and Palaeontological Friendships

I have always been close to school contexts – working with school classes, teachers, and within comparable institutional settings.

Yet what was truly new to me was the "closed circuit" I entered when becoming a teacher at a school. At ZOOM Children's Museum, although our team was fairly stable, people came and went, pursued other projects, and travelled. There was constant input from outside – guest artists offering workshops, collaborations with other institutions, often internationally. And even though we worked with school classes every day, it was always different schools.

At school, however, I encountered colleagues approaching retirement who had themselves attended this very school as children, completed their teacher training quickly, and then – throughout their entire working lives – had never left this one institution again. This way of living and working was alien to me, or rather, downright frightening. I didn't know how to relate to such a closed system.

For my own peace of mind, I was eager to stay connected to friends as far removed from the school context as possible – and I was thrilled that we could organize "A Museum for Métlaoui" with my Octopus friend, Bochra Taboubi. On rather short notice, I reached out to Philomena+, a small gallery connecting "artists and architects from the WANA region (West Asia and North Africa) with the local art community in Vienna and vice versa" (cf. Philomena+, n.d.), to submit a proposal to the "culture:connected" program (OeAD). Thanks to this initiative – and to the personal commitment and generous support of Christine Bruckbauer from Philomena+ – Bochra was able to travel to Vienna for a short residency. She visited us at school and held workshops with two classes of 12–13-year-olds as part of my lessons.

Bochra introduced her artistic methods to the children, and together they produced material for an online exhibition on the Research Catalogue (cf. Miedl-Faißt & Taboubi, 2023), which Bochra and I curated. Only online – but still, through this project, my students collaborated with students in Tunis, who had worked with Bochra in a similar way.

A serendipitous highlight of this collaboration was that Philomena+ was exhibiting at Belvedere 21 as part of "On the New – Viennese Scenes and Beyond" (cf. Belvedere, n.d.). They had transferred their exhibition space to the museum for the duration of the show, and as they presented our project there, the students – together with Bochra Taboubi – had the opportunity to exhibit their work at Belvedere 21. There, we organized a special event, celebrating and presenting the project. We had a small buffet and a guided tour through the exhibition.

Once again, I hoped for greater engagement if visiting their own exhibition at this prominent museum was not a school event, but the students should come voluntarily, be proud, and bring along family and friends. (This required quite a bit of additional communicative, practical, legal, and of course unpaid effort.) I even went to the train station near the school to pick up students who wanted to come but couldn't be accompanied by their parents, and brought them back afterwards. Many of the students came – and so did some parents – but for the school itself, the project was not an official event and, as such, irrelevant. No headmas-

ter, and hardly any colleagues, showed up. I hope at least some of the students realized how special this project really was.

Although the importance of alternative learning environments is constantly being emphasized, school has a strange leveling effect: everything implemented within the school context becomes ordinary – more of a task than an adventure. At the same time, to be considered relevant at all within school, things have to become school events and must submit to school rules: what is relevant is mandatory, and what is voluntary is merely leisure. When the institution declares something important – such as participation in “The Long Night of Talents” – it becomes meaningful within that frame. But if something happens slightly beyond the grid of what is officially recognized as “school,” and within school as “important,” it easily gets lost in the sea of – at best – “just class.”

Although I myself did care deeply, I can hardly resent anyone personally for this. School, as a “closed circuit” in which students and teachers spend such a large part of their time and lives, is so overloaded with social interactions, relationships, responsibilities, tasks, and sensitivities that – in order to remain mentally and physically sane – one probably has to rely on the given structure simply to keep from losing track.

From the annual report:

A Museum for Métlaoui
Fossil Inventions and Palaeontological Friendships

In collaboration with the philomena+ gallery and with the support of the OEAD, the Tunisian artist Bochra Taboubi was invited to Mödling for BE lessons on the initiative of Verena Miedl-Faißt. In a virtual exchange with a group of young people from Tunis, the two classes 3ar and 3br worked on an artistic research project on the fossil collection from Métlaoui (TUN): the historically important finds have been in Paris since 1900. The local museum was burnt down during the Tunisian revolution in 2011. Hardly anyone knows about the fossil-rich layers of earth in the region, which therefore remain unexplored. Instead, the landscape is characterized by phosphate mining - with highly problematic consequences for people and the environment. The region is torn between its colonial past and current geopolitical interests.

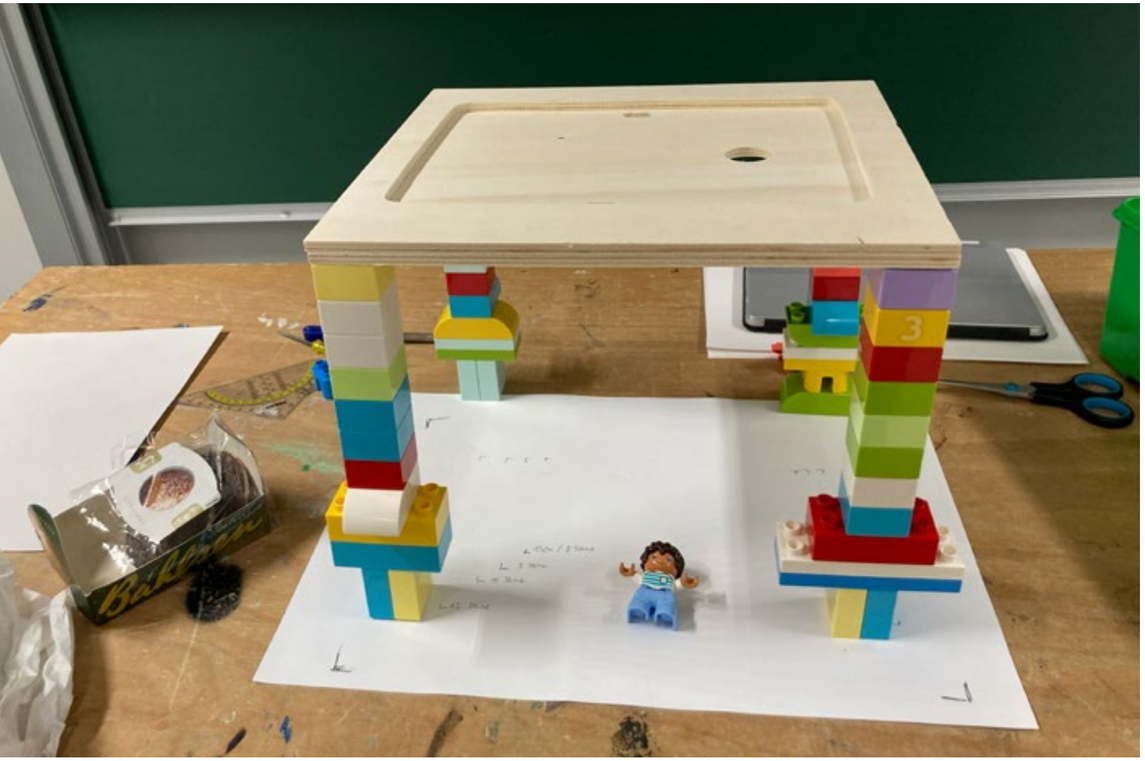
In her drawings, Bochra Taboubi develops fantastic chimeras of the fossil finds from Métlaoui. In this way, she attempts to reinvent the past, to give the traces a tangible form. After a temporary exhibition in the old church in the village, she has set herself the goal of building a museum for Métlaoui again. But how do you build a museum that powerful people don‘t want and whose most important collection has been lost?

Verena Miedl-Faißt is not only the BE teacher of classes 3ar and 3br, but as the founder of “Unsichtbare Elefanten - Kunstverein zur Förderung unwahrscheinlicher Kollaborationen”, she is also an expert in getting seemingly hopeless processes off the ground. And children (like artists) are experts in dealing with imponderables and confidently putting together apparent nonsense. This is not always helpful, but sometimes it is.

As an immodest think tank, the 3ar/br pupils developed visions for a new museum for Métlaoui in their BE lessons. They thought, talked and acted together - not only in spoken language - but above all by drawing, looking, admiring and showing together. The work-in-progess with the works of 3ar and 3br can be viewed at www.a-museum-for-metlaoui.site

From April 18, 2023 to May 12, 2023, the project with the students‘ works was presented very prominently at Belvedere21 (Arsenalstraße 3, 2030 Vienna) as part of the exhibition “PHILOMENA+ @BELVEDERE21 / Über das Neue. Viennese scenes and beyond“.

it’s hard to make
school recognize
something that
isn’t part of school.



Developing an affordable tablet-stand for animation in the classroom

How can the use of low-threshold animating techniques in schools help foster openness for the co-creative development of ideas and narratives, and support the active and competent use of digital media as a collective tool?

Stop-Motion Animation at School

Transferring Experiences to a New Context

Already during my teacher training, I found it quite challenging how broadly spread the skills and crafts were that one was expected to master and even teach. The way I had been working independently – and also at the animated film studio – was actually specialized in animation, sound, and photography. As I have already reflected earlier in this documentation, in order to offer and mediate one's skills in a way that enables transformative co-creation, one needs to master their medium even more thoroughly than when working alone.

At school, I am officially qualified – through my Bachelor of Education – to teach both fine arts and crafts. As such, I would ideally possess the skills of a painter, graphic artist, cinematographer, photographer, ceramicist, wood sculptor, tailor, weaver, architect, bookbinder, printmaker, and so on. I still don't quite know how to meet my own standards when it comes to teaching all the different skills I am supposed to cover.

Anyway, the medium I feel most experienced with – also in an educational setting – is stop-motion animation. Before entering school, however, I would hardly ever conduct a workshop with more than seven children on my own, simply because we thought it was not possible to do so in a meaningful way.

At school, I found myself in the luxurious situation of teaching classes equipped with tablets for every student, and I even managed to secure a school license for the professional version of "Stop Motion Studio" – the app I had used most frequently. Still, accompanying twenty-five students as they each produced an animation on their own seemed impossible. In my experience, it is essential to work alongside them, at least at the beginning – until they have understood the importance of not moving the camera or backdrop, of maintaining consistent lighting (especially avoiding one's own shadow), and, most importantly, of breaking down movement into as many micro-steps as possible. Otherwise, there's a plot for ninety minutes of film and only five still images in the end. To address this, I developed a new concept for working with such a large group – and since the children were quite skilled and at least some of them very patient, it worked out surprisingly well.

But before we could begin, I had to solve an equipment issue. With just a tablet and the app, it's still very difficult to produce a satisfying animation. Equally important as the device itself is some sort of tripod to keep the camera as stable and at the same time adjustable as possible. Buying sturdy tripods – strong enough to hold large tablets – plus lights for an entire class would have been far too expensive for a school budget.

This challenge led to a great collaboration within the otherwise rather solitary school environment. Together with my colleague Peter Girsch, we developed a prototype for a tripod with an integrated light. The headmaster agreed to cover the material costs, and we were able to build a series of fifteen stands – enough to work with a whole class.

Once the setup was complete, we also offered a workshop for other teachers on how to implement this setup not only in arts and crafts, but also across other subjects. About fifteen colleagues participated (it was classified as required elective professional development). The group was genuinely enthusiastic, as it

provided a practical, simple, and creative way to use the tablets that everyone was expected to incorporate into their teaching – all while keeping the focus on hands-on, physical activities.

Apps used to produce stop-motion animations are actually quite basic. There's no need for cheesy templates or effects – you create every effect yourself and essentially just take photos – many photos – while observing how the most fundamental illusion of moving images comes to life.

I used our setup for smaller, individual projects with the Symbuddies, but mainly for larger projects with two classes of 13- to 14-year-olds. I decided to try co-producing one film per class, divided into several scenes that could be produced in smaller groups. This way, I hoped not to lose oversight and to keep motivation high – since producing a coherent story requires quite some effort and patience.

The first stage, which I have always liked best, was inventing the plot together. In this case, we consulted the "Krakel-Orakel" ("Scribble Oracle") to determine what kind of film we were going to make. We asked: Where is the film set? Who is the protagonist? What does he or she want? And who is antagonist or friend?

Each "oracle consultation" required three performers – a "priest," an "oracle," and a "scriptor" – plus the rest of the class to interpret the oracle's message. The oracle sat with eyes closed in front of a tablet connected to the projector, pen in hand (it also worked on the old-school blackboard). The scriptor whispered each question into the priest's ear, who then drew it with a finger on the oracle's back. The oracle transferred what they felt onto the tablet – or with chalk onto the board. Afterwards, the scriptor asked the class what they saw and wrote down the collective interpretation as the oracle's answer. After successfully consulting the oracle, the group was tasked with incorporating all its sayings into a single storyline.

In the following session, we developed a storyboard together, which I sketched on the blackboard. Once the plan was complete, the students divided into working groups, each taking responsibility for one part of the storyboard.

In one of the two classes, the process of inventing the story was particularly remarkable: the oracle only came up with terms referring to memes, (online) games and codes, at least I should not know (and I didn't). I took careful notes of all those words and coming back in the next lesson, I told them, that I did my homework: I had researched all the mentioned terms and would now give an account of the glossary of our film production. If I had gotten something wrong, they of course should correct me. That was not only fun, but also had the advantage that I could, first of all, make sure, that I wouldn't support anything harmful or somehow seriously problematic, while still going along with "their" prompts and that secondly, the whole class was "on board" without individuals having to expose themselves by admitting that they didn't know the codes either. After clearing the grounds in this way, everyone was eagerly involved in inventing the (quite dadaistic) storyline and the whole class worked enthusiastiically through weeks on the common movie.

Both animation projects were screened during the Long Night of Talents and one of them even at the "SWIFT Coding Challenge", some big event, where many students from other schools got to see our work. As the children were partly copying comic characters that are protected by copyright, I am not allowed to publish the result here.

From the annual report:

The Surface tablets that all first, second and third grades received as part of this school year's digital device initiative are great tools. However, actively using them rather than just operating them is easier said than done.

One inspiring way of using them that promotes sensory experience of the world rather than suppressing it is animated film production, e.g. with the Stop Motion Studio app.

Verena Miedl-Faißt brought many years of experience in working with this app to the school. Together with Peter Girsch, tripods were built, which are essential for making animated films, and teachers of other subjects were also introduced to the possibilities of animated film production in the classroom as part of an internal school training course (SCHILF).

Classes 3ar and 3br are implementing two great best-practice projects and have achieved something truly extraordinary: In each case, the whole class worked on a joint animated film over many weeks in BE lessons. This is really something special, because they managed to develop and realize a joint story as a large group in collective authorship! The classes wrote, drew, animated and set the entire film to music as a team.

Only in Ohio. Back to the backrooms! At the SWIFT Coding Challenge

After the "scribble oracle" had spoken, a wild plot about a cursed flower store, a scheming alien named Möy and a dramatic chase unfolded in the 3ar - because everyone wants to rule Ohio, but (almost) no one escapes the backrooms! Fortunately, the work "Only in Ohio. Back to the Backrooms" could be presented on a large stage: On May 31, the SWIFT Coding Challenge organized by the Vienna Department of Education took place. Hundreds of schoolchildren took part, gaining their first game-based experience in the field of coding/robotics and working creatively with digital tools.

The 3ar didn't just take part in the various workshops - together with their BE teacher Verena Miedl-Faißt, they also led animation workshops for the other children. Meanwhile, their film "Only in Ohio. Back to the Backrooms" was shown in the cinema there and celebrated its world premiere!

Snail of D.U.T.Y. - Fart with consequences

The 3br also developed a boldly fabulated film work through persistent teamwork - including overcoming all unavoidable crises. The apocalyptic story of a snail whose fatal fart gives birth to an evil angel with a tablet and a good Alf leads to nothing less than the end of the world, which crashes into the sun.

Both films were ceremoniously presented at the Long Night of Talents.

if in doubt, ask the krakel-orakel.

Draw-and-run output

How can creative blockades be overcome, and the delight in playfully exploring unexpected artistic adventures be nourished?

Drawing Challenges

Prompts One Cannot Google

Deepening my worries about my lacking skills, the school subject “Arts” is most commonly referred to not as “Photography” or “Animation,” but simply as “Drawing.” And I had hardly any serious drawing practice. My colleagues worked with quite ambitious but rather classical methods – bringing objects for still-life studies to class or setting other exercises that prescribed theme, technique, and material. The results were usually twenty-five more or less identical images on standard A3 sheets – some more, some less well executed. Proper work, but no surprises.

To encourage more interest-driven and individual work, I quite early on put together a first set of “Drawing Challenges” – A5 cards that I planned to further develop and expand over time. Each challenge addressed a specific topic – for example: drawing three-dimensional objects, conveying spatial depth, drawing human faces, or very basic abstract exercises. Each card included a short explanatory text and some visual examples. My idea was that the students would come up with their own ideas and use the guidance provided only as support for realizing them. They could either sketch and practice in their sketchbooks or create more elaborate works on larger sheets of paper.

I discarded those first cards rather quickly. I’m not sure any of them were ever read all the way through by a single student. If the students bothered to do anything without a more concrete prompt from my side, every one of them would – before even putting pencil to paper – ask: “Can I please Google? I need a reference.” Some of them were actually astonishingly good at copying images, mostly manga or comics. But as soon as the reference was taken away and they had to draw from the three-dimensional world around them – or from imagination – the results looked like a toddler’s first attempts at holding a pen. Of course, this was frustrating for them, and they couldn’t understand why they weren’t allowed to copy, since the copied results were so much more satisfying and skillful.

Worst of all, they hardly seemed to enjoy the act of drawing itself – the purposeless joy of leaving a trace on paper. And, obviously, many of them had hardly done any drawing as children.

I tried to explain to them, at least theoretically, that the most difficult part of drawing is translating something from 3D to 2D. Copying an image was fine, of course, and also required skill, but it skipped the truly difficult part. And when one only aims to reproduce someone else’s visual idea as precisely as possible, one’s own perspective and thoughts can hardly emerge.

But such discussions were, obviously, not very fruitful. Since my first attempt with the “Drawing Challenges” had required quite some effort with zero positive effect, I decided to approach it differently – more playfully, and in a way closer to my own artistic approach.

I started formulating short prompts – one-liners that would hopefully be fun and inspiring but, above all, impossible to “Google.” I printed these prompts on blank postcards, quite small, in the space where you’d normally find the photo credits. I produced a set of sixteen such cards, each printed a hundred times. The idea was that the children could choose cards they liked at any time, repeat challenges as they wished, draw on the front, and actually use the cards as postcards (see p. 137). The only rules were: they should

invest at least ten minutes per challenge, and erasers were forbidden. If someone really liked a challenge or was inspired to a larger project, they could, of course, realize that on a bigger scale.

The younger children especially loved these challenges and were even enthusiastic about inventing some of their own (see p. 138).

The higher the grade, though, the more school logic set in: prompts were not meant to dive into – and possibly even enjoy – but to accomplish as quickly as possible. The ten-minute rule was often boldly ignored, and sixteen prompts – which, if done one after the other and taken seriously, could have filled almost an entire school year of art classes – were used up within half a lesson.

I kept working with such prompts, though mostly no longer using them all at once. Sometimes I also tried some challenges collectively, like the “draw-and-run challenge” (see photo, p. 133) – ideally suited for an overexcited group of first-graders: each received a small sheet of sketching paper to place on their sketchbooks and a thick colored crayon (not least for saftey reasons). The task was to walk around the schoolyard – not running, but as fast as possible – and draw the person in front of them from behind. The idea was to overcome the perfectionist urge to copy digital images and instead revel in movement, color, and trace.

Other drawing challenges aimed to foster the joy of drawing itself, such as drawing with chalk on the blackboard. One game the children really loved (though quite challenging for me) went like this:

I collected one word from each child, written on a small piece of paper, and put them all into a hat. I drew one word after another and improvised a short story that I told them aloud. The moment a child recognized their word, they would stand up, come to the front, and draw an illustration matching the story on the blackboard. When the next child came, they took turns and continued the collective board drawing.

All these attempts to relieve the children of the pressure to create perfect simulacra worked quite well in that sense. The next, or rather the other step, however, was difficult: to move beyond the stage of scribbling, to enter into a dialogue with pen and paper, to allow oneself to engage in the aleatory, playful act and then see what emerges – and to work with it. To develop some-thing further without becoming frustrated if the result did not exactly match the plan, but instead respond to one’s own trace – that was hard to achieve. And for me, it remains an open challenge to find ways of enab-ling such a reciprocal process.

The following citation is an excerpt from a foreword by Anna Freud for “On Not Being Able to Paint“ by Marion Milner. In this text, the reciprocal movement between allowing oneself to dive into the unknown – without getting completely lost, yet taking breaths of orientation through finding terms, distance, and perspective in between – is compared to a psychoanalytic process:

“The amateur painter, who first puts pencil or brush to paper, seems to be in much the same mood as the patient during his initial period on the analytic couch. Both ventures, the analytic as well as the creative one, seem to demand similar external and internal conditions. There is the same need for ‚circumstances in which it is safe to be absent-minded‘ (i.e. for conscious logic and reason to be absent from one‘s mind). There is the same unwillingness to transgress beyond the reassuring limits of the secondary process and, to accept chaos as a temporary stage‘. There is the same

fear of the ‚plunge into no-differentiation‘ and the disbelief in the ‚spontaneous ordering forces‘ which emerge, once the plunge is taken. There is, above all, the same terror of the unknown. Evidently, it demands as much courage from the beginning painter to look at objects in the external world and see them without clear and compact outlines, as it demands courage from the beginning analysand to look at his own inner world and suspend secondary elaboration. There are even the same faults committed. The painter interferes with the process of creation when, in the author‘s words, he cannot bear the ‚uncertainty about what is emerging long enough, as if one had to turn the scribble into some recognisable whole when, in fact, the thought or mood seeking expression had not yet reached that stage‘. Nothing can resemble more closely than this the attitude of haste and anxiety on the analyst‘s or patient‘s part which leads to premature interpretation, closes the road to the unconscious and puts a temporary stop to the spontaneous upsurge of the id-material. On the other hand, when anxieties and the resistances resulting from them are overcome, and the ‚surrender of the planning conscious intention has been achieved‘, both - painter and analysand - are rewarded by ‚a surprise, both in form and content‘. It is at this juncture only that we meet the essential difference between the analytic process and the process of creation.

The legitimate result of analysis is the inner experience of formerly unknown affects and impulses which find their final outlet in the ego-processes of verbalisation and deliberate action. The creative process in art on the other hand ‚remains within the realm in which unknown affect‘s and impulses find ‚their outlet, through the way in which the artist arranges his medium to form harmonies of shapes, colours or sounds‘; whether deliberate action is affected or not in the last issue, the main achievement is, according

Anna Freud

Marion Milner

to the author, a joining of that split between mind and body that can so easily result from trying to limit thinking to thinking only in words.“ (Freud, 1957: xiii-xiv)

The “spontaneous ordering forces” are precisely what children are systematically taught from their first day at school. To enable a genuinely creative process, these forces must be unlearned – or at least suspended – as described in this text. But it is a twofold movement: not simply letting go into chaos, but being able to perceive surprise, to move within the unknown, to “come to terms,” and to let them go again – be it visually, socially, or verbally.

I think I have reasonably achieved the first part: loosening reason and playfully engaging in experiments. Elevating such a process to the next level, however, is a different challenge. Factors like time, trust, space, the teacher’s skills, social dispositions, sympathy, mood etc. can support or hinder this. Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn’t. But, generally speaking, I have not yet found a clear, nameable, and reliable method to foster such forward movement – one that balances between mind and body, sense and sensibility, aleatorics and intention. Coming from another angle, this aim resembles the impossible methodology of “creating” resonant relationships within the world (see p. 16). Still, I suppose that is precisely what it’s all about – at least a toenail of my invisible elephants.

No.1: Take a deep breath. Scribble randomly as long as you exhale. Look for something recognizable and complete the drawing.

No.2: Draw a monster with your “weaker“ hand. Add to the drawing with your “stronger“ hand.

No.3: Draw an ABC made of stick figures.

No.4: Draw a face with your eyes closed.

No.5: Draw an animal dressed up as a human.

No.6: Draw the taste of gummy bears. Do NOT draw gummy bears or fruit.

No.7: Draw an ice-cold fire.

No.8: Draw a flower meadow in the moonlight. Make sure to use the right colors!

No.9: Draw the shadow of your favorite animal.

No.10: Draw an undiscovered deep-sea fish.

No.11: Draw a spiderweb with a hammock function.

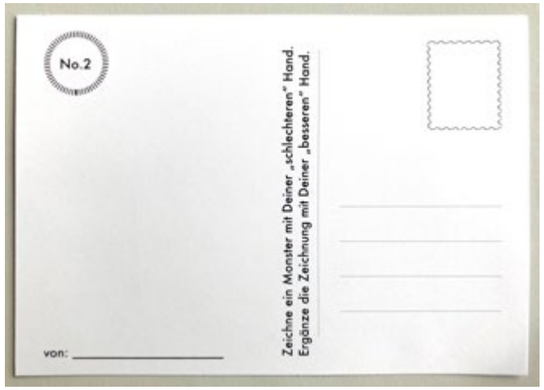
No.12: Draw a water surface.

No.13: Draw a dripstone cave.

No.14: Draw a long-haired cat. Try to make one line for each hair in the fur.

No.15: Draw a cloud crocodile.

No.16: Close your eyes. Let someone draw on your palmwith their finger. Transfer what you feel directly onto the postcard with a pen.



never trust

ugly schoolbooks
and bad copies.

Middle School

Teaching at a Middle School

After one year of teaching at a “grammar school“ near Vienna, my husband and I left the city and moved to a small village in Upper Austria. I had always considered it a major advantage of teaching that there are jobs available even outside metropolitan areas. And since we both love trees, water, birds, bugs, and mountains, we decided to try life in the countryside.

As there was (and still is) quite an acute teacher shortage across the country, it was fairly easy to find a position close to our new home. I could even commute by train within twenty-five minutes, and we managed to live without a car for more than a year (alien to neighbours, students, and colleagues alike).

The new school, beautifully situated next to the river Ybbs, was not a “grammar school“ but a middle school, with students between ten and fourteen years of age. As a “Bildungszentrum“ with an attached primary school and a college for social work, it was not particularly small – but compared to the large Viennese schools I was used to, it felt rather homely. There were two classes per grade, and the teaching staff at the middle school comprised around twenty people. At my previous school, I hadn’t spoken to every colleague by the time I left again – but there were five art teachers who had all studied at an art academy. At my new school, I was the only one with such a background.

I should add that only a few years before I began teaching in 2022 – namely in 2019 – the Austrian legal framework for teachers had been completely restructured. Before this reform, the training systems for lower and upper secondary teachers were entirely separate: those teaching at a “Pflichtschule“ (mandatory school), including middle schools, were required to attend a “Pädagogische Hochschule“ (College of Education), whereas teaching at a “grammar school“ required a university degree. As a result, graduates of art academies typically taught at “Gymnasien“ (which were also better paid), and teachers at middle schools rarely had any specific artistic education.

As part of the Bologna reforms, the “Pädagogischen Hochschulen“ (Colleges of Education), the universities, and the art academies were all converted to the bachelor’s–master’s system. Naturally, the same degree must now qualify for the same level of teaching. Since 2019, every new teacher has essentially had the same contract (the “Pädagogischer Dienst“), regardless of whether they teach at a middle school, “grammar school“, or any other public school (cf. § 38 (1) of the “Vertragsbedienstetengesetz“ 1948 (VBG), Republic of Austria, 1948). Thus, I hope that in the future I might meet more artists teaching art at middle schools. Because all the while, I actually enjoyed teaching at a middle school more than at the “grammar school“: the students were less shaped by pushy performance ideologies and therefore (at least in part) better companions for my playful art offerings. Some even said they looked forward to our lessons or regretted when our time was up – admittedly, those were my personal highlights and not everyday occurrences.

I also learned to appreciate teaching crafts (at the “grammar school“ I had only taught art). First of all, crafts were actually more highly valued at a school where students would ideally continue their educational path through an apprenticeship. The school had well-equipped workshops for textile and, above all, woodwork. By contrast, the art lessons were held in a cramped classroom, using the meagre remnants of materials the children had brought from home: cheap, crumpled paper, worn brushes, and almost empty, murky watercolour sets rattling around in huge, battered cardboard boxes, which they placed on their small desks between piles of books, water bottles, and homework from other subjects.

But the greatest advantage of the craft lessons was that, for safety reasons, the classes had to be split in order to use the workshops – and for some groups, I actually had the rare luxury of working with fewer than ten students at a time (instead of 25 or more).

Before starting at the new school, I had also expressed the wish to focus my fifteen teaching hours on as few classes as possible. I hoped to build stronger relationships with the students if I saw them more frequently and didn’t have to spread my attention across too many individuals. At middle schools, it is still quite common for teachers to teach various subjects, even without formal qualification. Although I find this practice rather problematic, I agreed to teach some German (as an assistant teacher) and “Digitale Grundbildung“ (Digital Literacy), which I felt comparatively qualified for – and, to my delight, those classes were also split into smaller groups.

As I had wished, almost half of my teaching load was actually spent with a single class of twenty-three thirteen-year-olds. I had hoped to connect the different subjects – and to some extent, I did – but in fact, each lesson was quite different. In three units, I accompanied the German teacher, who was not particularly interested in co-shaping the lessons. I merely assisted, often without knowing what my colleague had planned – admittedly relieved not to have to prepare three lessons a week in a subject outside my expertise.

In art, I taught the entire class, although during the first semester only for one unit per week, directly after a double lesson in their main subject, German, where I had just been the “real teacher’s sidekick.” Within those fifty minutes, it was nearly impossible to get anything done (the students seemed to treat it as an extended lunch break), and I was looking forward to the second semester, when it would be two units – which, however, did not necessarily work any better, as the dynamic remained the same.

In addition, I taught crafts, with the class divided into two groups – one of seventeen boys and the other of six girls. (Because sports lessons had to be gender-separated, those same groups were kept for the other subjects that required splitting.)

During the second semester, I also had two weekly units of Digital Literacy with the small group of six girls. Needless to say, working with them was a walk in the park (at times literally) compared to ensuring the survival of seventeen boys in the wood workshop. But overall, my hope of building a stronger relationship with that class was, to a considerable extent, fulfilled.

Additionally, I taught the girls from the parallel class in Digital Literacy during the first semester, two groups of slightly younger girls (around twelve years old) in crafts, and a mixed group of the youngest (around eleven years old) also in crafts, a class of fourteen-year-olds in arts in the first semester and both groups of their parallel class in crafts during the second semester.

Generally speaking, I resolved to keep my teaching somewhat simpler – to make it sustainable in the long run. I didn’t start with ambitious monster projects but instead tried to draw on what had worked on a smaller scale – and, even more, on what was already there:

How can the use of low-threshold animating techniques in school foster basic (media) literacy and even democratic awareness?

Animation workshop with Diego Mosca

(Digital) Literacy

Coming to Terms between Virtual and Actual Life

As stop-motion animation had worked well at my previous school – and since I believed it could incorporate almost any subject – I planned to use it again. This time, I approached the equipment issue a bit differently: the middle school students had iPads, and the free version of Stop Motion Studio worked well enough on iOS. I began adapting the prototype stands we had developed at my former school but mostly got through the year with improvised solutions (large glue clamps, for example) and my private tripods.

In the first few units, after some initial tuning in, I explained my approach to artistic research at school to all of the groups – telling them that I was genuinely interested in what we could discover and invent together (perhaps even more than in teaching them something I already knew) – and that I wanted to share our findings because I believed that what we were doing could also be of interest beyond school. For that purpose, I created expositions on the Research Catalogue to collect, document, and present our ongoing work. Mostly, I did not actually publish those expositions in the end, because it seemed to me that the children neither understood nor cared what that would have meant – and so the effort of collecting consent forms and explaining to parents something that was, for their children, irrelevant did not seem worthwhile.

From the beginning, I noticed a significant difference in this regard: the children at the grammar school might not have been particularly impressed by such statements about being my co-researchers, because they were already quite self-assured and mostly came from academic households. Of course, what they said and thought mattered – at least in contexts they could imagine and relate to. Artistic research may not have seemed especially relevant to them, but they were, to some extent, motivated by the idea of entering a public sphere – of being heard rather than merely listening.

At middle school, however, I fear that most of the students hardly understood how what I was trying to do with them differed from their regular classes: I encountered a fundamental lack not only of digital but also of general media literacy and basic democratic education. They had little understanding of the various spheres of public life – their relevance, thresholds, and distinctions – something the students at the grammar school simply grew up with. As I observed during the German lessons, hardly any of the middle school students had ever consciously looked at, let alone read, a newspaper (aside from the free ones where one can hardly distinguish edited articles from advertisements). Not only did they have no notion of current politics – many didn't even know what the word politics meant. Universities, research, science, or anything referred to as "high culture" seemed to them entirely out of reach – and equally irrelevant. There was TikTok and YouTube – whose algorithms decided what they saw.

I know this may sound harsh and overly generalizing, and I apologize if I am doing anyone an injustice. The middle school I was working at was surely not a "high-need school." Although some of the children were already looking back on short but troubled lives and were living in state care, most came from at least economically fairly sheltered backgrounds, and as I already mentioned, the atmosphere at school was caring and positive. Thus, I had not expected the difference concerning the ability and opportunities for

social participation and inclusion between the two schools to be that startling – largely due to an overall lack of media literacy, reading comprehension, and a stunning lack of awareness of societal structures in general. Some of the students indeed faced particular learning challenges and might not have been able to grasp such contexts on a purely cognitive level.

But for most of them, I am quite sure this was not a nature but a nurture problem. There was simply no such awareness around them that they could have absorbed. I hardly met any parents, so I could not form a well-grounded impression; but, for example, they often did not bother to reply to my messages – whether I was sharing something positive we had achieved or addressing an issue that required attention. It seems to me that they simply did not feel addressed. In contrast, communication with parents at the grammar school was positive, appreciative, and reliable. At middle school, neither the students nor their parents seemed accustomed to being asked anything. The students, it seemed to me, had therefore never developed any motivation to ask questions themselves, to discover things out of intrinsic curiosity, to thrive on experience and learning opportunities, to articulate thoughts, argue with arguments, or rely on their own understanding.

During my first semester teaching Digital Literacy, I was trying to figure out what I was actually expected to do in this subject. On the one hand, there seemed to be overwhelming curricular targets (rather vaguely assembled depending on whom I spoke to). Above all, there was the competent use of all Microsoft Office applications, followed by safe internet use, distinguishing reliable sources, programming, building computers, fixing the school printer, understanding artificial intelligence – and never using ChatGPT. All this while some students seriously struggled to memorize their login credentials for the school PCs and could hardly distinguish whether they were looking at a desktop application or a web browser – let alone recognize the difference between a website, Google results, or AI-generated summaries.

So I decided to start where they actually were and asked them what “digital” meant to them, what kinds of digital devices they used, and what media they consumed. The unanimous answer was: smartphone, many hours per day, mostly “watching” TikTok and YouTube. Only a few played games. I was not yet too surprised by this result. But I was completely stunned when they literally had no answer to my seemingly obvious follow-up question: “What do you watch on YouTube or TikTok?” It was not that they didn’t want to tell me – the atmosphere was friendly, and I think they liked chatting with me. But their way of watching videos online was simply not comparable to how I thought one does that. They could not name a single YouTuber, channel, or even individual video they liked. They never opened the app to look for something in particular but just let the algorithmic stream blur their minds.

Remembering from my previous teaching experience that their favorite activity had been making PowerPoint presentations (with crazy transitions, of course), I gave them what I thought would be a simple first task – perhaps enough for two weeks: I asked them to think of one specific online thing – a website, a channel, a video – that they wanted to present and recommend to the others and prepare a short PowerPoint presentation about it. This turned out to occupy them for the rest of the semester – partly because they were not as familiar with PowerPoint as the grammar school students had been, but mostly because the prompt itself was so alien to them. It took me a while to understand that this really wasn’t their fault: apps like TikTok

are designed to keep children passively consuming and becoming remotely controllable ~~subjects~~ objects. They are not tools to be used; rather, they use their users – turning everyone into both a source of data and manipulable tools themselves. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to share a specific piece of content from TikTok – especially when leaving one’s account and device. Creating a PowerPoint presentation about something from TikTok was therefore genuinely challenging, and I barely managed to help them even once they had finally found something they wanted to show.

Thus realizing where we were at, I barely knew where to start. How could I raise awareness of the power of the companies they were completely absorbed by and at the same time enable active and skillful use of (partly) exactly the same applications, when the children lacked the very basic terms needed to reflect on such matters? At that point, I decided to stop struggling with things none of us really enjoyed and instead returned to what I was good at: making stop-motion animations with them. And this was not merely the easy way out.

Of course, after producing one animation with Stop Motion Studio, we were still far from fulfilling the overwhelming curriculum the world confronted us with. But it offered learning opportunities at the necessary basic level – the kind one can hopefully build upon, no matter how digital industries continue to work with us: How does reality become a digital image? How does that image relate back to reality? How are illusions – starting with the moving image – created? And how is a story told? One might argue that the children are constantly taking photos with their smartphones – so what’s the difference? I think the difference is that when taking selfies, they don’t look – they simply reperform learned gestures and poses. If they look at the result at all, it’s only to check whether it corresponds to what a selfie should look like, or what they should look like in one. But they don’t translate space into image by deliberately choosing frame, perspective, and moment.

In cut-out animation, that is absolutely essential. The illusion only works if nothing is visible but the illusion itself: using a green and a blue sheet of paper can create a vast horizon stretching over a green meadow. But if the surface of the school table flashes into the corner, it’s just paper. If a cut-out horse is meant to graze on that meadow, it will only come to life if, from frame to frame, only the horse changes its position. If the horizon jumps up and down or shadows flicker between frames, there is no horse, no meadow, no illusion – only crumpled paper and random photos.

The – as I suggest – truly special part is that while creating a digital illusion, one must be deeply attentive in physical space. The app on the smartphone is only used to take photos, watch the result, and perhaps delete frames if necessary. The children are used to offloading any responsibility onto digital tools: handwriting legibly – unnecessary; pictures can be photoshopped – or better yet, just Googled. Templates and digital effects stylize and idealize everything, masking imperfections and making anything handmade appear awkward or incomplete. Thus, they are deprived of the opportunity to genuinely create and discover their own means of expression in a non-flat-reality, on more than 7x15 cm, with all senses and their body in relation to other bodies, present in a surrounding space. In stop-motion animation, agency lies literally in the children’s hands. Although simple, the magic becomes physically tangible – literally in their hands. At the same time, the alluring spectacles they are used to passively consuming (and sometimes mistaking for active creation) lose some of their manipulative power, rather than being merely dismissed.

fund humans,
not tablets.

digital literacy is analog.

A creature from “Chicken Dicken Masala“

Teaching Arts at a Middle School

Working on Common Grounds

I was convinced that my approach to teaching art was equally suitable for any child, no matter what needs, skills, or expectations were at play. The headmaster of the middle school warned me not to expect too much – this was not a grammar school. I told him that I was actually looking forward to working with groups less immersed in the logic of performance and competition, and that I was sure to find good partners among the middle school students. And I did – but there were other challenges I hadn’t expected.

First of all, the groups were far more heterogeneous. In the same class, there were smart teenagers and dreamy, introverted children, some very focused, some always tired, some fluttery like a moth at a light bulb, some angry, some sad, some constantly sick, some very cool, some sympathetically odd, some slightly unsettling. Of course, all these types – and more – can be found in any school class or larger group of people. But at middle school, I perceived these differences more intensely than at the rather segregated grammar school. Actually, I would still consider that an advantage – but it did not necessarily mean that the children had developed a high degree of tolerance or empathy (at least not all of them). If they were too different, they would simply ignore each other as much as possible – live and let live, without crossing paths too often. If one let them do so, that was fine – but co-creating something like a collective storyline for an animated film became quite difficult.

In the class I taught the most, I tried to frame all our efforts within such collective “worlding” – for which I also created one of the Research Catalogue exhibitions. We again started with a “Krakel-Orakel” and somehow managed to cobble together a Surrealistic story about a fish-head shoe living in a house in some magical woods, a ball that accidentally killed the fish-head shoe when rolling over in the sewer into which it had fallen, a walking word, and a heaven of Chicken-Dicken-Masala – whatever that means. (I tried to find out!)

Although I have not explicitly sought consent to do so, I would like to publish this Research Catalogue exposition here. Strictly speaking, this is incorrect – but as the group was quite proud of our web presence, and since no personal data are involved, I dare to do so, because I believe it serves well as a comprehensible trace of our fragmented yet collective process – its heterogeneity, shared grounds, and struggles. I cannot credit the authors by name, as I wish to protect their data, but I hope I may be forgiven for publishing this piece of collective work in this way (see excerpt and link on p. 151/152).

What becomes visible is for example how we tried to combine writing and drawing. In their German classes, they had been asked to write inner monologues. Within our project, we wrote inner monologues for the characters appearing in our story. The drawn figures populating the exposition had been prepared for a stop-motion animation. I had originally planned to involve the whole group again in one larger film project, but it turned out that the inventors of the fish-head shoe would simply ignore the magic horse at the heavenly spring in the woods, and those invested in Chicken-Dicken-Masala were not particularly keen on any ball story. Thus, things kept their fragmented character. Whenever we talked about one part of this strange world, the rest of the class would drop out and lose any thread of connection.

To still keep everyone involved, I created individualized drawing challenges for each of them over several weeks. I tried to observe their individual humor, interests, and capacities, and wrote and printed personalized prompts (see examples on pp. 153–154). I wanted them to feel seen, heard, and challenged – in the best sense – while always connecting their work back to the collective story, to show them that their individuality was part of, and complemented, the bigger picture.

The next thing I hadn't expected – besides the challenge of such diversity – was that drawing, bricolaging, and building things were even less naturally part of what the children would do (or had done when younger) than at the grammar school. It was genuinely difficult to find something satisfying to do with a fourteen-year-old who could barely draw a stick figure or hold scissors correctly. So how do you even start?

To value them individually – and their artistic voices (even if they didn't know they had one) – I again gave each of them a high-quality sketchbook at the beginning of the school year. I gave it to them as a gift (I actually bought them myself, which of course is not sustainable), but it was important that this little book was different from a regular school notebook with cheap paper that they had to buy in stacks. I wanted them to identify with their sketchbook. As before at the grammar school, I didn't tell them what to draw or write in it; they could use it at any time, at home or at school (of course, in agreement with the other teachers). But they had to treat it with respect, and were not allowed to tear out pages or erase anything. I announced that I wanted to look at the books at least once per semester, but they could decide when to hand them in. If they wanted to keep certain pages private, they could simply clip them together with a paper clip.

I had done the same at the grammar school, where some of the students had filled several of these little books. Some had only scribbled a few lines, but I replied to every sketchbook that was given to me with a personal letter, including some positive, encouraging feedback. At the grammar school, this was quite a lot of work, and I suspect that I spent more time with some of those books than their actual owners. But I thought that, following the law of conservation of energy, if I invested enough encouraging energy, it had to yield some result. Admittedly, this again is not sustainable for a single teacher with limited energy resources and hundreds of students. And it didn't always work. But at middle school, it was even harder to establish a sense of respect for these sketchbooks – and I hardly ever saw any of them again (except for a few lying on the floor, crumpled and empty, except for footprints).

I realized that treating all students as co-researchers actually meant first igniting and then accompanying twenty-five highly individual creative and artistic processes at once. This was already unmanageable at the grammar school, but at least there I could assume that every child would be able to carry out my basic prompts. I "only" had to develop projects that everyone could somehow relate to or find interesting. At middle school, I sometimes planned projects that were simply too complex, frustratingly overwhelming at least some of the students. If I had had the capacity to help every individual, it might still have worked – but obviously, that's impossible with a group of twenty-five.

For example, I planned a stencil project with the oldest students (around fourteen years old). I thought they should be able to try something a bit more complex – and I had tested it with my little nephew, with great results. To tune in to the project, we watched the Banksy documentary. We discussed – and rather superficially touched on – topics such as what could be

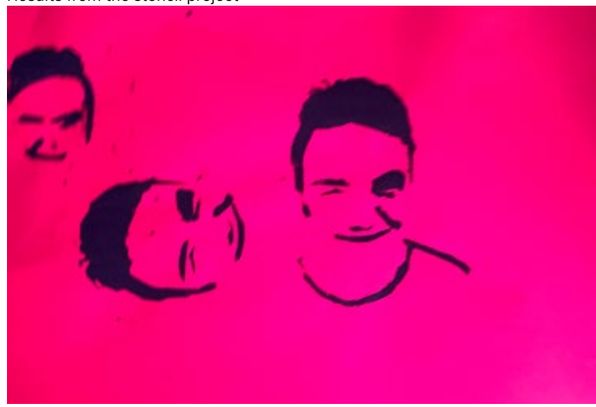
called "art," what motivations there might be for making art, how activism, protest, and "illegal" street art are related, and why calling something "art" does not automatically legitimize breaking the law. Afterwards, I explained the stencil technique to them. I brought overhead transparencies. As a first try, I asked them to draw simple shapes on paper, transfer them onto the transparencies, cut them with a craft knife, and use those stencils to print on paper, using small sponges and liquid paint. Some of them already struggled with that part – and, in any case, they neither enjoyed the printing process nor understood why they shouldn't just draw directly. They didn't start experimenting with the shapes, as I had hoped and encouraged, but were done after producing a single print, wondering why they had to spill so much paint.

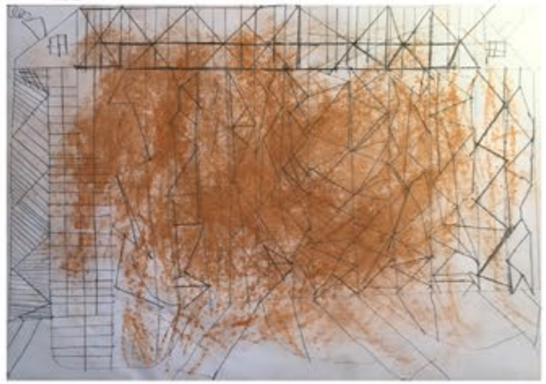
The next step was to take photo-portraits of each other, which we then converted into black-and-white stencil templates on the computer (using filter effects in Microsoft Word – as I assumed this program would be available to most of them). We printed the black-and-white images on the school printer, and I provided black and white pens so they could rework the templates, avoiding "white lakes" that would fall out when cutting. This proved far too demanding for most of them – and, admittedly, it requires quite some spatial imagination and visualization skills. In the end, there were no T-shirts, bags, collages, or whatever I had originally envisioned. Out of breath, some managed to produce a single print – mostly in black, since the template had been black – and again wondered why they should invest all this effort when the school printer could do a much better and easier job. Some never got to cut out a stencil at all, but we framed it as a success to have at least abstracted the photo-portraits into black-and-white, stencil-like images and created some collages from the digital prints and the simple shapes we had made earlier.

This group of students was really friendly, polite, and motivated, and I was more than sorry that this project turned out a bit messy. After each unit, I missed my train home because it took me so long to sort the materials and carry the equipment back to the cupboards and shelves that were at my disposal – because we needed every minute during class to achieve at least somewhat satisfying results individually.

If the group had been half as big – so that I could have provided more individual support and tailored adjustments – and if we had proper workspaces that I could have prepared, instead of just shoveling the materials into the classroom right after the previous teacher had left, this project could have been a much more successful experience for all of us. That means, as so often, it was not the task that was too difficult for the students' skills and abilities, but rather that the implementation of the project in this form was barely possible under school conditions. Thus – of course, I can reduce complexity, requirements, and ambition, but in the end, this comes at the expense of the students. I would much rather change the circumstances.

Results from the stencil project





WASSERBALL

Ich bin der **Wasserball** und ich verbringe gerne Zeit im Abwasser-Kanal." (rollt auf Fischkopf zu, denkt sich: "Woaaaaa es tut mir Leid! Das ist mir aber zu schnell gegangen. Ohje, hab ich ihn umgebracht? Bin ich jetzt ein Mörder?"

Dap du Dap die du. Ein angenehmer Tag im Schmutz. Gar nicht so viel Kot wie erwartet... Wieso wohl so viele Deckel offen sind? Wo bin ich eigentlich... oh verdammt, ich kann nicht mehr bremsen. Egal! Ohhhh! Kacke, da lag wer. Hehe! Der fünfte heute. Wie wäre es, nochmal drüber zu fahren? Ich mache es einfach! Das ist lustig. Das war doch Fischkopf. Der sieht aus als so ein Typ den ich kenne

Ich heiße ich Jeffrey Bella

Oh Mann... Es tut mir so leid, dass ich den Fischkopf überrollt und umgebracht habe... Ich wollte das gar nicht, aber ich war so schnell und konnte mich nicht mehr stoppen... Das Gefühl, als ich über ihn rollte war so komisch es fühlte sich so ungut an... Ich hoffe, mir passiert das nie wieder... Ich fühle mich wie ein Mörder das ist schrecklich.... Aber wie konnte das überhaupt passieren? Ich darf doch gar nicht so schnell rollen... Ich lerne aber aus meinen Fehlern, darum roll ich nie wieder so schnell... Es

SCHNITZELPOMMESKETCHUP

"Ich spawn mich mal in den Kühlschrank von Fischkopf!"

Ah hier ist es zu warm ... ich spawn mich in Fischkopfs Kühlschrank ... Ah hier ist es gemütlich ... aah das Haus bewegt sich ... höre ich da Gehwort ... was wohl was anders ... Das Haus steht still!

So! Wo ist denn der Fischkopf? Ich spawne mich mal in seinen Kühlschrank. Endlich! Ich sehe an seiner Kleidung, dass er jagen war. Wird er mich finden? Ich denke, er wird mich verpeisen. Er hat anscheinend nichts schießen können. Jetzt hat er mich entdeckt. Oh nein!? Wo bin ich gelandet? Achso in seinem Bauch. Aber jetzt flutsche ich mit einigem anderen verdautes Essen aus ihm. Oh jetzt lebe

WALDHAUS

Das **Waldhaus** ist ein **Haus** im **Wald**.
Das **Waldhaus** arbeitet gerade.

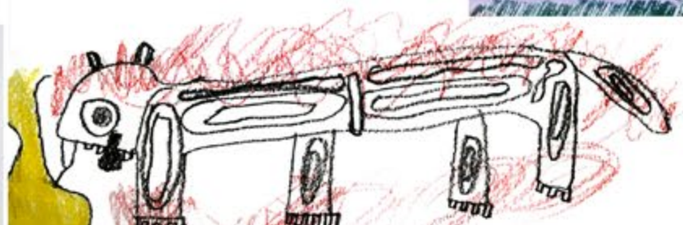
research catalogue
"Chicken Dicken Masala"

Ich habe sehr Durst! Wenn ich im Wald doch irgendwas zu trinken finden würde?
-> Trinkt vom Himmelswasser

DAS PFERD

Eines Tages kam ein **Pferd** names **Huhn** im **Wald** vorbei. Es hatte Durst und dachte sich: "Ah hier ist ja ein Fluss mit einer **Flüssigkeit** drin!" und es war Wasser. Es trank die Flüssichkeit und fühlte sich auf einmal so kräftig. Das Pferd fühlte sich so kräftig, dass es überall herumrannte. Das Pferd rannte sogar in die Stadt. Plötzlich kam ein Auto und fuhr es zusammen. Das Pferd lebte mit einem gebrochenen Bein im **Wald** wunschlos glücklich.

Wann geht es los... Ich möchte endlich von den Profis gekickt werden... Wer spielt denn... Es spielt Barca gegen Real Madrid...wer spielt denn dort... spielt bei Barca nicht Messie und bei Real nicht Ronaldo... wann geht es wirklich los.... endlich nimmt der Schiedsrichter mich in die Hand... wer wird gewinnen... gewinnt Real oder Barca.... In der ersten Minute gibt es einen Freistoß... werde ich fliegen... oder in das Tor geschossen... wird das wehtun oder nicht... wer schießt den Freistoß Real oder Barca.... Messi schießt ihn.... Aua, der Schuss in die Mauer tat weh... ist es ein gutes Gefühl zu fliegen.... wann werde ich im Tor liegen, jetzt oder beim Elfmeterschießen... das werde ich hoffentlich erfahren... in der 10. Minute wurde ich gegen die Latte geschossen, das tat voll weh... gleich darauf flog ich in die Mitte wegen einem Eckball.... dann flog ich über das Tor... 10 Minuten später... flog ich gegen den Pfosten....



Individualized Drawing Challenges

T.:
Draw a fantasy bird cloud full of colorful feathers.
(At least as big as your hand.)

L.:
Draw a Chicken Dicken Masala.
(At least as big as your hand.)

M.:
Draw a stage for the Fishhead rapper.
(Cover the whole page!)

A.:
Draw the frightened face of the “Walk Word”
when it realizes the Fishhead is gone.
(At least as big as your hand.)

V.:
Draw Tomatohead dressed as a chicken!
(At least as big as your hand.)

J.:
Draw a chicken that’s in love with Fishhead.
(At least as big as your hand.)

A.:
Draw a friend for the inhabitant of the Sky-Water-For-
est. (Big enough to walk between your trees.)

R.:
Draw a guard dog for the forest house.

L.:
Draw a goal for your soccer player.

N.:
Draw a place in the Chicken Dicken Masala Heaven
where Fishhead has a date with Chicken.
(Cover the whole page.)

H.:
Draw a friend for your fish.

F.:
Draw the cash register for the
“OachkatzlschwoaffishheadshoeTM store.”
(Big enough for your shopkeeper to fit in.)

E.:
Draw someone who only ever eats Leberkäse.
(At least as big as your hand.)

J.:
Design matching sunglasses for the AirKatzl7.
(At least as big as your hand.)

H.:
Draw your fantasy bird flying large in the air.
(At least as big as your hand.)

T. S.:
Draw the portal guardian.
(At least as big as your hand.)

P.:
Draw one good person and one evil person.
(Each at least as big as your hand.)

N.:
Draw Fishhead’s shoe full of fries-banana-ketchup.
(At least as big as your hand.)

T.
Draw a Chicken-Dicken-Masala angel.
(At least as big as your hand.)

J.:
Design a dress that matches the FireFish2000.
(At least as big as your hand.)

O.:
Draw a ketchup bottle.
(At least as big as your hand.)

S.:
Draw a Chicken-Dicken-Masala lightning bolt.
(At least as big as your hand.)

M.:
Draw Jonesy disguised as a chicken.
(At least as big as your hand.)

T.:
Draw a chicken cloud.

L.:
Draw a microphone and speaker.
(At least as big as your hand.)

M.:
Draw a Fishhead rapper.
(Cover the whole page!)

A.:
Draw the Fishhead without mouth and eyes,
so the separately drawn parts can be placed on top.

V.:
Draw a throne for the Chicken Temple Priest Chicken.
(At least as big as your hand.)

J.:
Draw the “Walk Word” from the front and from the
back. (Make it the right size to fit next to the fridge.)

A.:
Draw an inhabitant of the Sky-Water-Forest.
(Big enough to walk between your trees.)

R.:
Draw the forest around the forest house,
including the drain.

L.:
Draw a soccer ball for your soccer player.

N.:
Draw a close-up of the door to the forest house.
Cut out the door so it can be opened.
(Cover the whole page.)

H.:
Draw the sky-water spring where your fish lives.
(Cover the whole page.)

F.:
Draw the OachkatzlschwoaffishheadshoeTM store clerk.
(At least as big as your hand.)

E.:
Draw the best Leberkäse sandwich in the world.

J.:
Draw a stylish model wearing FireFish2000.
(At least as big as your hand.)

H.:
Draw a fantasy bird that lives in your trees.
(Cut it out so it fits among the trees.)

T.:
Draw the staircase behind the portal.
(Cover the whole page.)

P.:
Draw the tax office.
(At least as big as your hand.)

artificial intelligence
is only dangerous
if there is not

enough creative
intelligence.

How can a female teacher like me (she/her) cope with the surplus of women and the lack of queer or male role models in the pedagogical field and overcome stereotypical stances towards certain techniques ?

Inside “Leberkas Pepi“

Teaching Crafts at a Middle School

Activating Material and Individual Potential

My approach to teaching crafts was actually not so different from the art lessons: I tried to ignite inspiration and make the students create things they had invented themselves, with more or less given materials and techniques. But within the scope of the crafts classes, this worked much better – because there was more space, fewer students, and thus more time.

In particular, the workshop for Technisch Werken – mostly a wood workshop – suited my practice quite well. There was an empty cupboard and a lot of leftover materials from abandoned craft projects lying around. There is a popular online store for craft supplies, specializing in school needs. They sell affordable basic equipment and materials, but also many craft kits – very popular among my colleagues. These kits come with strict instructions to be followed exactly, producing almost identical results – just more or less finished and more or less accurately executed – such as toy trucks, bottle openers, simple robots, or Easter decorations. These craft kits are (at least some of them) well designed, and the children probably learn how to read manuals and use a hammer, saw, file, and sandpaper. But they do not set goals for themselves, develop ideas, or find individual solutions – and they are bored.

The advantage for me was that there was a lot of material lying around that nobody used or missed. After sorting the pieces of plywood, slats, boards, metal, screws, nails, wire, and paint neatly into boxes and shelves, it magically turned from annoying rubbish – or worse, failed and discarded projects – into boxes of opportunities. The students’ eyes began to glow when I showed them the filled cupboard, telling them that all this material was at their free disposal.

The class I spent most time with also spent most of their time with me in this workshop. With the tiny group of girls, this came close to an ideal studio situation (I will reflect on this a bit later). But it felt slightly as if I had to earn that easy time by coping with the seventeen boys in their crafts lessons. Still, they too thrived in the wood workshop.

Before working in a very open way, I started all my crafts groups with a fairly structured kite-building project. I followed the methods and workshop concepts of the wonderful Austrian artist and kite-maker Anna Rubin – resulting in highly individual, yet always beautiful and functional kites. I think there are few things more uplifting than seeing and feeling something one has created with their own hands rise up into the sky.

Afterwards, I asked each group what they had done previously in crafts and what they would be interested in doing together. I told them that I was no master in any of the possible fields – as a teacher can never master everything they are supposed to teach – but that I was good at improvising and learning together. Unfortunately, it feels a bit predictable, but all the boys wanted to build houses or cars. Trying at least to open up what was preconceived as a “house” or “car,” I asked the large group of boys to build models that could be used as backdrops for our animated film, set in their crazy chicken world. They formed small teams or worked individually as they wished, drew sketches, listed all needed materials, and presented their plans to the group. Their material requests were actually quite realistic, and so – to their great surprise – I could provide what they had asked for. They started to work – and remained enthusiastically absorbed by their “houses” for a large part of the school year.

Most of them used a wooden base plate, on which they patiently built brick buildings out of miniature bricks. One of the models looked like a prefab house, though quite elaborate, with a garage, staircase, and pool; one was a black box with a big window and a cash desk – the "Oachkatzlschwoaffischkopfschuhgeschäft." Another was a Leberkäs store (the only one made of cardboard), and one was a complex two-storey model of a forest with a sewer below. They found out how to build stable walls from bricks or how to mount thin plywood or cardboard walls on the base plate, how to mix plaster and produce a smooth surface. They used the band saw and drill press, and tried out various joining methods such as gluing, nailing, stapling, and clamping different materials – wood, cardboard, paper, fabric, and more. They found different ways to construct stairs, windows, and doors – on different levels of complexity and functionality. They designed light concepts for their architectures, soldering simple electric circuits and installing small LED bulbs.

As long as there were enough miniature bricks, as long as their plans worked out satisfactorily, as long as it wasn't time to clean up or deal with other inconveniences, as long as there were no conflicts and the night before had brought enough sleep – at least on average – everyone enjoyed those hours in the crafts workshop. But as soon as there was a problem, things became difficult: If there was a conflict within the group, I had a hard time being heard when trying to mediate. If the solutions they came up with didn't work – like trying to make a 5×5 mm, 50 cm long wooden strip stand on its narrow edge and support a platform on the opposite side with only a drop of glue – I had a hard time being heard when trying to help. If the floor had to be swept at the end, I had a hard time being heard that kicking the dirt under the neighbour's table was not the idea – and that men, too, could use a broom.

Not only because of these discussions about dustpan and broom, I can't help assuming that my struggle to deal with the boys-only group was at least partly a gender issue. The segregation into "boys" and "girls" anyway felt anachronistic to me, as did the separation into "textile" and "technical" crafts. But this was quite natural to most of the students and colleagues, as it had simply never been different. At least it was no question anymore that both groups would be taught in both craft subjects.

When I told the headmaster that I was a bit worried about the occasionally messy lessons with the boys in the workshop – not least for safety reasons – he sent one of the three male teachers to support me. My colleague entered with considerable masculine authority – and the boys fell silent. I was not overly pleased, because naturally, the effect only lasted as long as he was in the room, performing his authority. Once he left and I did not fill the authoritarian vacuum he had left behind, trouble resurfaced. The boys did not resolve their conflicts, see why sweeping was necessary, or suddenly appreciate my hints toward possible solutions for their construction issues.

Likewise, it was hardly possible to move beyond simply letting them do whatever they wanted, as they would not adopt any new task or challenge. Whatever I suggested, they asked for bricks and kept building miniature walls. It worked quite well as long as I let them be – but, similar to some experiences in the "Arts Lab" – any intervention on my part was difficult. At the grammar school, this had not been so much a gender issue – and it was the same for the whole group. There I rather faced a general opposition toward the teacher, breaking free as soon as I, representing "the teacher," loosened the authoritarian screws in favor of a more equal, collaborative setting.

At middle school, this opposition was not as distinct. But I think all the students at middle school actually suffered from a lack of male – let alone queer – role models. At the grammar school, there were (annoyingly) conservative gender stereotypes at play – but at least there were as many male teachers as female ones. At middle school, the headmaster and three colleagues were cis-male. All the other teachers were cis-female – and I could offer nothing else myself.

What I tried to do was involve friends and artist colleagues who offered different role models – or rather: together with me, exemplified ways of encountering each other in a non- or at least less-stereotypical, respectful, communicative, and collaborative way. For example, I was able to invite my dear friend Diego Mosca for an animated film workshop that we held together in a very well-established, mutually inspiring, and harmonious way – with both of us taking on both the cliché-"female" tasks like being empathetic and caring and the rather cliché-"male" tasks like handling the big camera.

Moreover, I of course tried to empower shy girls to also naturally use the band saw and pillar drill – and boys to naturally use needle and thread. Generally speaking, though, it was easier to excite the girls about the wood workshop than to excite the boys about textile classes.

During the summer semester, I was teaching the parallel class of those I had done the stencil project with, in textile crafts – again, boys and girls separately. I told both groups that I was no tailor or specialist in textile crafts, but I tried to open up their understanding of what one could do in this field beyond identical embroidered doilies and potholders. I gave a short introduction on smart textiles, fashion design, and fabric sculpture, and then asked them – if we could do anything (as I had told L.), if we had the skills and media to do absolutely everything we could think of – what would you try to do?

Of course, one might say that this is not a sustainable approach, as encouraging unrealistic projects may only foster frustration. But I wanted them to dare think beyond what they were used to. Most of the girls planned to make bombastic ballroom dresses (just one designed a bag for her dog and had her grandmother sew it). I told them that I myself by far did not have the skills to realize their ideas (mostly pictures they found on Instagram) – but that we could just go for it and see how far we could get. They agreed, and it was actually quite wonderful: In the first units, I brought rolls of thin but strong Japanese paper that actually felt a bit like fabric when crumpled and reopened (the same paper Anna Rubin had suggested for the kite workshops). The students built paper models of their dresses directly on each other's bodies. After fitting the paper with masking tape, I asked them to open up the dresses with scissors and try to flatten the paper shapes – not by crushing them, but by making small cuts. This way, they realized that their bodies were not flat but three-dimensional – and thereby, through a multi-sensory experience, understood the process of creating a flat pattern from a three-dimensional shape. In a next step, we tried to derive the sewing patterns from these hands-on templates.

By that time, it turned out that one member of the school's cleaning staff was actually a tailor. After helping me repair the sewing machines before class, I asked her if she'd be available to give some professional input for those complicated dress projects. She was eager to join – and gave invaluable support. I was able to at least symbolically pay her, as the headmaster of the school appreciated our collaboration. I also tried to get some extra funding for her through Kul-

tur:Kontakt Austria (the program through which I had invited the other colleagues), but as she was not an “official artist,” that was not applicable to her.

Within the group of boys, things were again a bit more difficult. They appreciated, at first, that I would not make them produce potholders, but they could hardly be persuaded to come up with a better idea – or rather: they only liked their ideas until the moment they actually had to start working. This group, too, was very heterogeneous. I was told that two shy, friendly, and motivated boys were outright bullied and tormented by some of the others. I rarely witnessed actual incidents during my lessons, but the dynamic overshadowed our time together, and it was hardly possible, in the few hours we had, to establish a positive, co-creative atmosphere.

For both groups (boys and girls), I planned a joint excursion to shop for the materials they needed for their projects (or to get inspired if they still didn’t have one). Rosemarie Zemla, the tailor who had helped me out, agreed to join. About an hour away from our school, there is a branch of “Textil Müller” – an Austrian outlet for surplus fabrics, buttons, and other textile supplies. I knew the branch near Vienna – which is quite impressive: huge storage halls with piles and piles of fabric rolls, some beautiful, some not, many ugly but most of them really cheap. A paradise for costume designers, stage designers, and makers of all kinds. But the branch near us was special in its own right. It was called “Der Stoffbauer” – “the fabric farmer” – and in fact, the store was housed in the barns of a rather remote old farmstead.

Our trip was quite an adventure: I had planned to hike there from the next train station, as it seemed like a beautiful 45-minute walk along a small river. But the weather was chilly, and the students were lazy, so we took another bus that should – according to my smartphone navigation – have dropped us only a few hundred meters from the store. And it did – but once we had crossed a field and already saw the farm, we realized that the “bridge” marked on my digital map was actually not a bridge but a rather deep ford. It began to rain, and our time was running short, as we had to catch the only train connection that would bring us back to school on time. Eventually, the store owners and Rosemarie picked us up in their private cars, going back and forth at least three times – and they were fantastic once we had made it into the store. Every single student was seriously advised and assisted, and everyone found what they needed for their projects or discovered one inspired by what was available. Each student’s material was packed in a separate bag, I paid with the school’s materials budget, and Rosemarie took everything back to school in her car – while we walked through heavy rain across some other fields to another train station to catch the only train of the day stopping there. We made it – and I think nobody got sick, but everybody got inspired.

Unfortunately, though, I got very sick and missed several weeks toward the end of the semester. Obviously, the other teachers could not really take over the many half-finished projects, and so many of them fell short of their potential. But thanks to some extra hours when I returned – and thanks to Rosemarie Zemla – quite a few of the projects were finally completed. There were several more or less wearable dresses, a knitted bikini, a small jeans bag, two pillowcases, a sewn flower pot, a sewn Jupiter, a textile phone stand, a fully functioning miniature washing machine in a peanut can, a repaired backpack, and a dog bag.

And one of the students told Rosemarie Zemla in the end, that she was inspired by our project evisaging to become a tailor now.

Building a textile phone stand

buy a fake
moustache and a
novelty belly.

crochet
pot holders.

ambitions can
never be too high

if you don’t mind
changing plans
along the way.

Piece by Sebastian

How does it change the understanding of the role of teacher and student, the preconceived aims, learning targets, conditions and limits, if handicraft classes are transformed into artistic research laboratories?

Crafts Workshops as Research Laboratories

(Mis-)Understanding Together

Basically, I don't encounter a group of eleven-year-olds as much different from a group of adults. Already at the animated film studio, we had observed during the not-so-rare workshops with adults that the dynamics and challenges do not differ significantly. Adults are (sometimes) a bit more polite and motivated, but I assume this is not so much due to their adult personality as to the fact that adults in workshops are almost always there because they have chosen to be. Children, by contrast, are almost always placed in the situation by someone else: hardly any child has independently decided to attend a workshop at the ZOOM Children's Museum, and school is, in any case, always mandatory. Adults in mandatory situations can be just as annoying as children.

And everything else is quite comparable: there are group dynamics, flow, inspiration, issues and struggles in the co-creative process, inter- and intrapersonal conflicts, various levels of skill, courage, experience, and empathy, and a high level of unpredictability. Thus, also at school, my general approach to classes with younger or older students is very much alike.

In all of my classes, I tried to establish a form of research diary. For the more structured kite projects, I also prepared pre-structured worksheets that the children were asked to fill in. I did not hand out instruction or data sheets or make them copy a drawing from the board. Instead, I told them they should take notes that would enable them in some weeks to build a kite for their younger sibling. I offered some scaffolding to hold on to – such as: How do I find the right position for the hole to attach the flying line? What should I keep in mind when taping the bamboo? How do I attach the kite tail? How do I attach the flying line to the kite? But, of course, there is not just one correct answer to these questions. The children were free to write keywords, full sentences, or draw – however it suited their way of remembering best. Translating a practical process into written words or drawings is quite challenging, but simply by trying to do so, they learned far more – on various levels, not just about kite-building – than if I had printed out a DIY instruction sheet they would never look at.

Taking this to the next level – documenting their individual projects in a similar way – overwhelmed us and didn't really happen. For future classes, I would again try to establish a routine of finishing each lesson with five minutes of note-taking about what had been tried, learned, failed, or achieved that day – as I am convinced this is extremely beneficial.

I know that routines and rituals – time to prepare and time to reflect, to tune in and out calmly – would be urgently necessary. But please follow me through a short digression. I just counted. The crafts classes were 75 minutes long (1.5 units). Suppose I had the time to prepare the space and wait for the students relaxed and focused (not a given), and the group had only twelve students (not a given):

- Students dropping in from other classes, picking up their pieces, settling down – 5 minutes.
- Getting together at a big table for an introduction round – 2 minutes.
- Group review (2 minutes per child) – 24 minutes.
- Spreading out and finding what they need – 15 minutes.
- Actually working.
- Finishing current steps – 5 minutes.

- Cleaning up and sorting back materials – 15 minutes.
- Writing in the research diaries – 5 minutes.
- Packing the research diaries and leaving the workshop – 2 minutes.

Obviously, this is no generous calculation, and there is no time buffer for unforeseen conflicts or problems. If I add the minutes for tuning in and out, there are an incredible two minutes left to enter a state of flow and work. Two minutes in which I can walk through the workshop, offer individual assistance, inspire, and enter into meaningful dialogues. Well – what can I say.

Naturally, one had to compromise such beautiful schedules in favor of a few more minutes of actual work – resulting in slightly messy crafts classes and me feeling guilty because the room wasn't really clean and the shelf with the students' work was a mess; because there were issues and conflicts I couldn't address; because there had been slightly dangerous situations; because some students were lost and I had no time to support them; because others had worked wonderfully and I had no time to acknowledge or co-create; because I couldn't say what we had actually done – let alone learned – that day; because I hadn't properly said goodbye.

As I didn't see too much leeway within the lessons themselves, I tried to prepare them as best as I could – not by writing meticulous plans, scripting every minute, or putting together well-prepared input in line with the curriculum. Actually, this is perhaps the crucial difference between providing a crafts lesson and transforming the workshop into an artistic research laboratory – the very momentum that is also artistically the most challenging for me and shifts my role from teacher to co-creator: Ahead of each lesson, I tried to think of every child – to understand where they were, what they had in mind and body, and what they might need – materially, socially, or artistically – in order to be encouraged, motivated, and able to develop and realize their individual ideas. Some of the children quite instantly thrived when allowed to tell a story, develope their own approach, find their own challenges – but not all of them. Quite a few had a hard time getting into any kind of process if there was no clear task – not always out of well-learned opposition, but because they simply weren't used to becoming active in such a way. When I told them, "Look: we have around fifty hours together, we have this space with these machines and tools, and we have a small budget for materials – what would you like to do?" they could neither believe nor make use of the fact that I was actually putting it in their hands to at least co-shape our shared time.

Some just sat silently, presumably hoping I would forget their presence. Others bounced through the workshop like rubber balls – bored within seconds, bothering others, and looking (rather creatively) for ways to disturb and provoke a reaction. To get the ball rolling – not just bouncing destructively – required more than a single kick. It felt more like pushing it uphill: they would either lose their drive again every other moment and fall back into silence, or their energy would lead them astray – like the boy who desperately wanted to build a remotely controlled car out of a single piece of wood – just a piece of wood. Once they had found a glimpse of an individual idea, opening up to share it for further co-creative development was, of course, another difficult step.

Apart from creative blockages, I also faced incredibly different levels of technical and material experience. Some children actually built functioning motor-driven vehicles – meticulously designed and shaped, using the band saw and belt sander, soldering and assembling the electrical parts completely without any need for help. Others tried to hammer screws through a piece of plywood they were holding in the air, or let wood glue drip between two pieces of wood they had already tried to tape together with masking tape.

To be able to support all of them, chiming in at the right moment, I kept a diary myself. I noted observations about each child as carefully as possible – not whether they had behaved well or said clever things I could use for grading, but rather: What had they been preoccupied with? What had they laughed about or been angry at? When had I seen that spark in their eyes? What had they come up with that was surprising, interesting, or new to me? And what should I focus on regarding that child in the next unit? Should I bring special materials, refer to something the child had said before, gently push or pull in a direction, or rather hold back? Should I find a practical solution myself because we hadn't managed to do so during class? Should I remove an obstacle directly – for example, fixing something myself so the child could continue without getting too frustrated? Or was there possibly a connection between two children they hadn't noticed yet – and could I somehow encourage them to engage with one another?

Very important for this preparation and follow-up work were the group reviews I managed to implement at least from time to time. Every child had a moment of focused attention – from me and from the others. They were asked to reflect and articulate their ideas, plans, and struggles – and to understand what the others were working on. Addressing one individual problem in the big group, of course, always offered opportunities to learn and relate for everyone. Each child could feel seen, supported, and relevant – yet also challenged. Of course, such rounds took a lot of time, and the students often grew impatient. But I don't think a single one of those minutes was wasted.

Getting started and cleaning up definitely took too much time, though. Solving this would require more space – or a better organizational structure for the space we had. Yet, the workshop was not my queendom but a shared space used by other teachers as they always had, including some who weren't trained in arts or crafts but simply substituted for someone else and were mainly occupied with keeping the students safe.

Most, if not all, of my colleagues probably observed my work with a mix of mild awe and suspicion, yet they definitely preferred letting the students work on craft kits with clear instructions and minimal supervision. Reorganizing the space would therefore have required meeting their needs as well – without demanding too much extra effort from anyone. Ideally, though, the space would function in the sense of "architecture as teacher," encouraging both teachers and students to take untrodden paths.

automata by S.

teachers should
be octopuses.

Just behind the school building

Six Girls

Almost Perfect Conditions

The more I gained insight into school realities, the more I realized that what I aimed for was hardly sustainable in practice. Teaching a class of twenty-seven students for fifty minutes a week, I have to find a different approach. Entering into deep individual exchange, enabling twenty-seven independent projects under such circumstances is simply impossible.

So I became very aware of the luxurious situation I found myself in with the group of six girls I taught in crafts and digital literacy. With them, I came quite close to my personal school utopia.

As with everyone, we started with the kites. Following Anna Rubin's concept, the Japanese paper is dyed using Shibori – folded in various ways and then dipped into colored ink. Every paper turns out differently; every paper is a surprise – yet one can still experiment and be proud of the result.

With a large group, this (like everything) is quite a challenge: the ink cannot be washed out of clothes and can hardly be wiped off any surface it touches. The wet papers must be thoroughly squeezed out and then laid flat to dry – which is fine if there is a drying rack. But if you have to find free surfaces to cover with plastic film for more than ten students, each dyeing at least a square meter of paper – that becomes a real challenge.

With six kind, enthusiastic girls, it was simply fun. Even more so when they asked for a follow-up project – without me having to push them. Since they had enjoyed the Shibori, they asked to batik something wearable. I wondered what we could make that would result in something more interesting than one-size shirts in dull colors that no one would ever wear except as nightgowns. I brought a long length of thick white fabric and suggested dyeing it and sewing individual bags from it. I didn't bring a ready-made pattern for them to copy. Instead, this became the first project where I tried developing a sewing pattern by creating a model from paper, cutting it open, flattening it, and using it as a template. It worked beautifully — and the girls produced six distinctly individual pieces (see p. 167).

The first session after finishing this project happened to be my birthday. So I brought tea and cake and had them celebrate with me. And I gave a little speech – as one does on birthdays. I told them that I really liked them (which was true) but that I was a bit sad that they didn't really stand together. They were very different, and beyond pairing up two by two, they mostly ignored one another. I said it was my birthday wish that they would support each other a bit more and show some solidarity – without necessarily becoming friends. They were a bit embarrassed, but that was factored in.

Afterwards, I asked them what they wanted to do during the summer term. Since there were so few of them, and we even had four lessons per week together (crafts and digital literacy), we could really do something meaningful. At first, they were a bit stunned – but after a moment, they were thrilled when they realized they could actually define what we would do. They – like the boys – wanted to work in the wood workshop and build house models.

During one of the following lessons, we made a short excursion to the hardware store around the corner. I told them what budget we had left, and they put

together the materials they needed for their projects. They were over the moon, and I could hardly get them out of the workshop on Friday afternoon when our lesson was over.

They all started by building house models – a bit like elaborate dollhouses, furnished with delicate miniature furniture. As the projects evolved, they became increasingly individual — and since the group was so small, I could genuinely accompany each of them throughout their process. One of the girls kept thinking about her model throughout the week, telling me about her new ideas whenever we met in the school hallway. Two others, who loved to sing and had performed a duet in front of the whole school, decided to record their song and produce a music video. They worked completely independently, using my professional camera, shooting scene after scene, and editing it on my laptop with professional software. For one scene, they even involved the whole class as background actors.

One day, we experimented with an old overhead projector, creating beautiful visuals. Another day, we spent time outside by the riverside behind the school — of course bringing a picnic. Some of the girls became completely absorbed in taking macro photos of grass, stones, and water. We used both these photographs and the house models as backdrops for animations, using a green screen — playing with space and dimension as they found themselves inside their model spaces, facing life-size clay figures or as small as ants between blades of grass and giant water drops.

Finally, one of the girls transformed her house into a miniature cinema with a rear projection screen onto which we could project the films we had produced. Painting small wooden cubes black to use as cinema seats, she realized that when she used a lot of paint, the thick body of the wet color formed aleatoric reliefs that beautifully reflected the light in different ways. Those small artworks disappeared once the cheap school paint had dried — but under these exceptionally favorable circumstances, I had the time to share in her delight, admiring all the different small black cubes together.

As mentioned earlier, I was unfortunately ill for several weeks toward the end of the school year. As a result, a large final workshop that I had planned — and for which I had invited guest artists — with the whole class could not take place.

Instead, we were still able to conclude our time together beautifully: my partner Florian and I organized a smaller-scale workshop for the whole class, during which we installed an exhibition of the houses in the school's attic. We painted large-scale backdrops for the houses, one of the girls created an exhibition catalogue, and over the course of a school day, two boys and two girls gave guided tours of the exhibition to every other class.

On the right: The batik-bags

Insert: On Sharing Authorship

As mentioned earlier, my work at middle school was increasingly less geared toward framing co-creative pieces that could be shared and reach an external audience, as I reflected in the chapter on digital literacy. I also gradually moved away from trying to realize collective projects with large groups in favor of enabling projects that were as individual as possible. This felt necessary given the vastly diverse needs, interests, and levels of cognitive and creative potential among the students. Some were already challenged enough “simply” to enter a creative process more or less independently.

Thus, my sharing of children’s work, resulting from different contexts and time spans, must also be approached in a highly differentiated manner — both within this reflective documentation and in my final exhibition (for considerations regarding the exhibition, see p. 225 f.).

I was very concerned about giving accurate credit to everyone involved in the larger video projects, including the external artists, and about presenting them as “total collaborations.” I collected proper consent forms from everyone and listed each student by their full name, unless requested otherwise. At the time, that seemed important; now, however, I occasionally receive messages from individuals asking to have their names removed from my website — for entirely understandable reasons. For me, these projects remain deeply relevant, and I still strongly identify with them — but for one of more than a hundred students, who was involuntarily involved in a three-day project and is now almost ten years older, it is, of course, important to have the possibility to detach themselves.

With my nephew, it was just the two of us — and thus much closer to a true co-creation. I did not frame a project for him to fill with his creative work; rather, we genuinely played and developed everything together, in equal exchange. Therefore, it will always remain very much his work, and I both want and need to credit him properly — though, as he was so young at the time, I still do not know whether he will one day wish not to be publicly associated with this part of his child self. Thus, using an artist name still feels like a coherent solution.

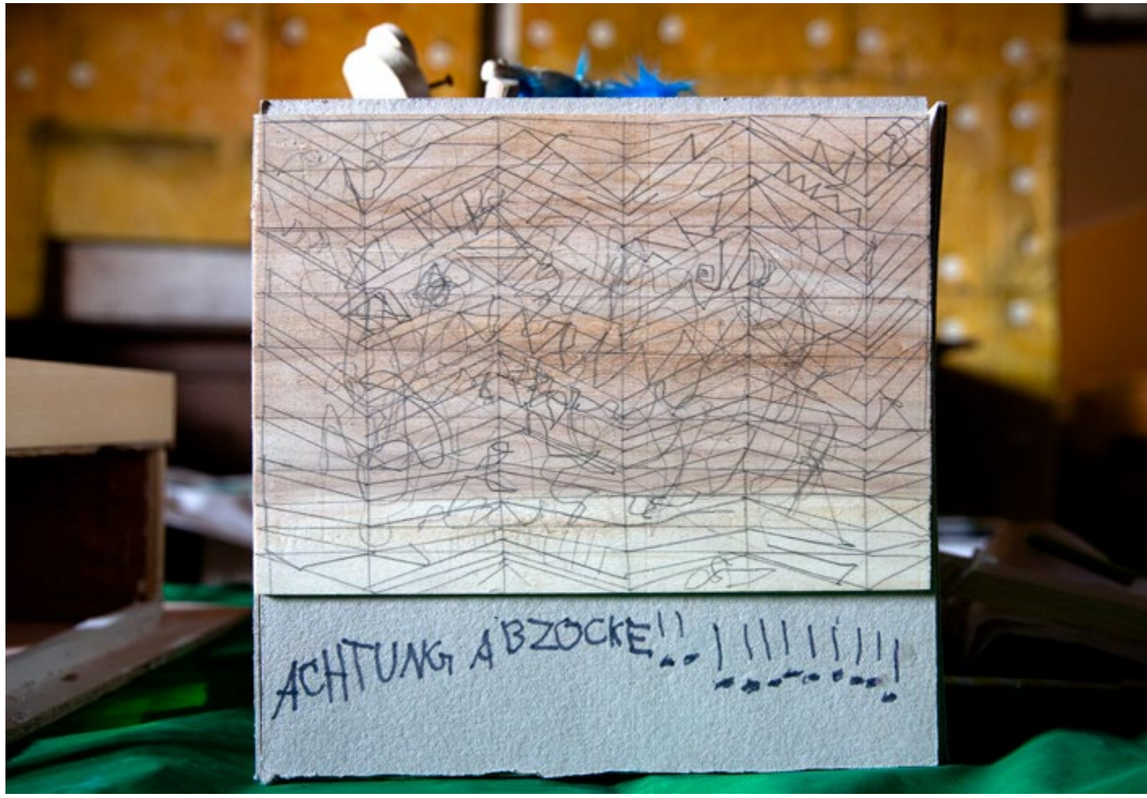
At grammar school, the larger projects — such as the symbuddy project — had a clearly defined framework regarding what should be published. Producing work for the online exposition, the exhibition at Belvedere 21, or screenings during school events was an integral part of the project itself. I again collected consent forms — which the parents were quite used to — and can now share the clearly defined results, crediting the students accordingly.

At middle school, I did not collect consent forms, as I already explained, and the projects were much more individual. Consequently, my artistic co-creative contribution is also less apparent. Rather, the students’ pieces are their individual works. Yet, on another level, they also serve as material traces of my work as a teacher, who was trying to establish a space for co-creation and artistic research — in the sense of gaining insight through artistic experimentation and thinking, through sensual experience and open creative processes. Therefore, I would like to share some documentation of these results as well — fully aware of the problem that I did not ask for consent, as doing so would have been overwhelming and distracting. I am also aware that reflecting on school contexts in such ways could potentially become problematic for individuals appearing in them. Thus, on the following pages I will include some more documentation of the students‘ work without clear credits.

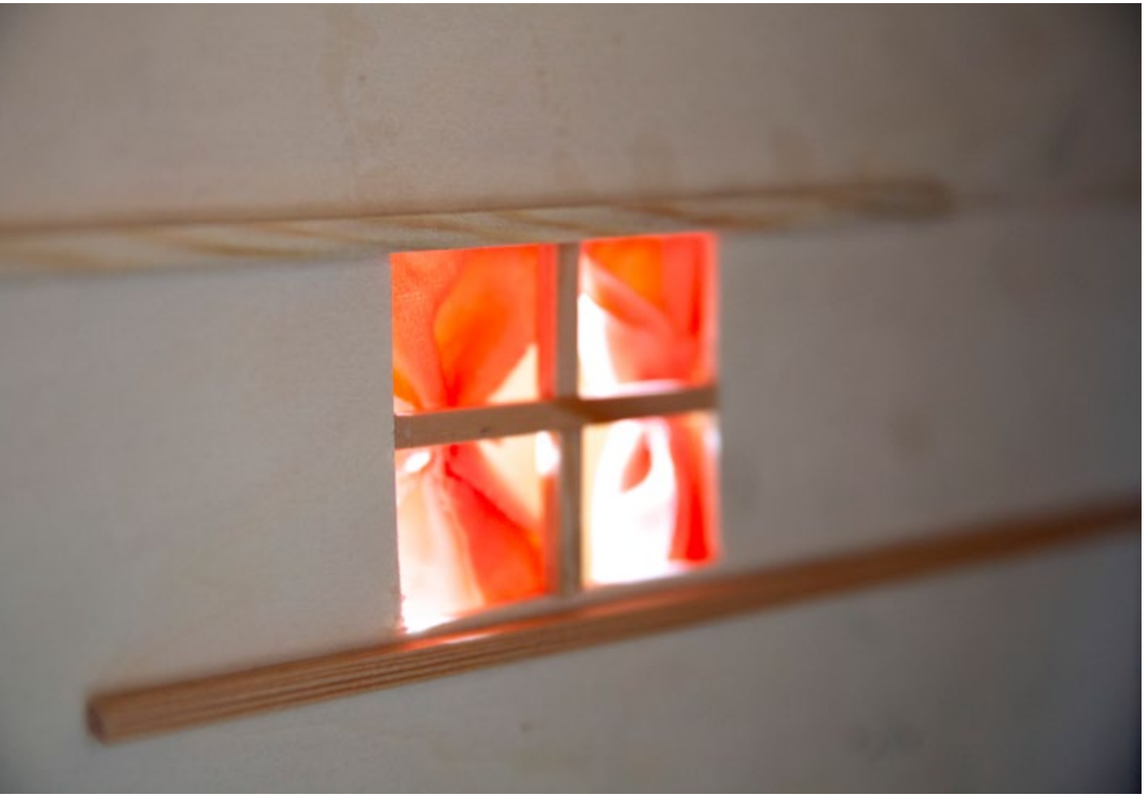
I want to sincerely thank my young collaborators from middle school — I truly enjoyed working with them — and symbolically give full credit to them for their work, hoping they will forgive me if they ever come across it in this publication.

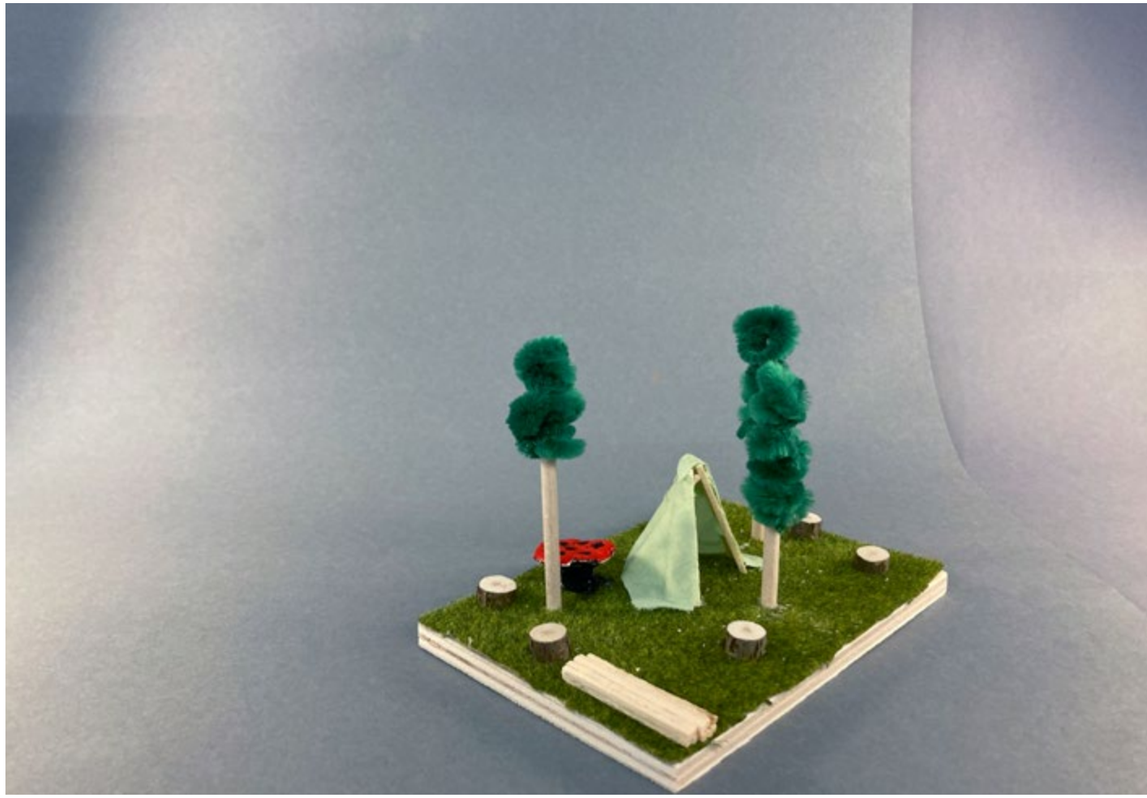
bring cake
and strawberries.

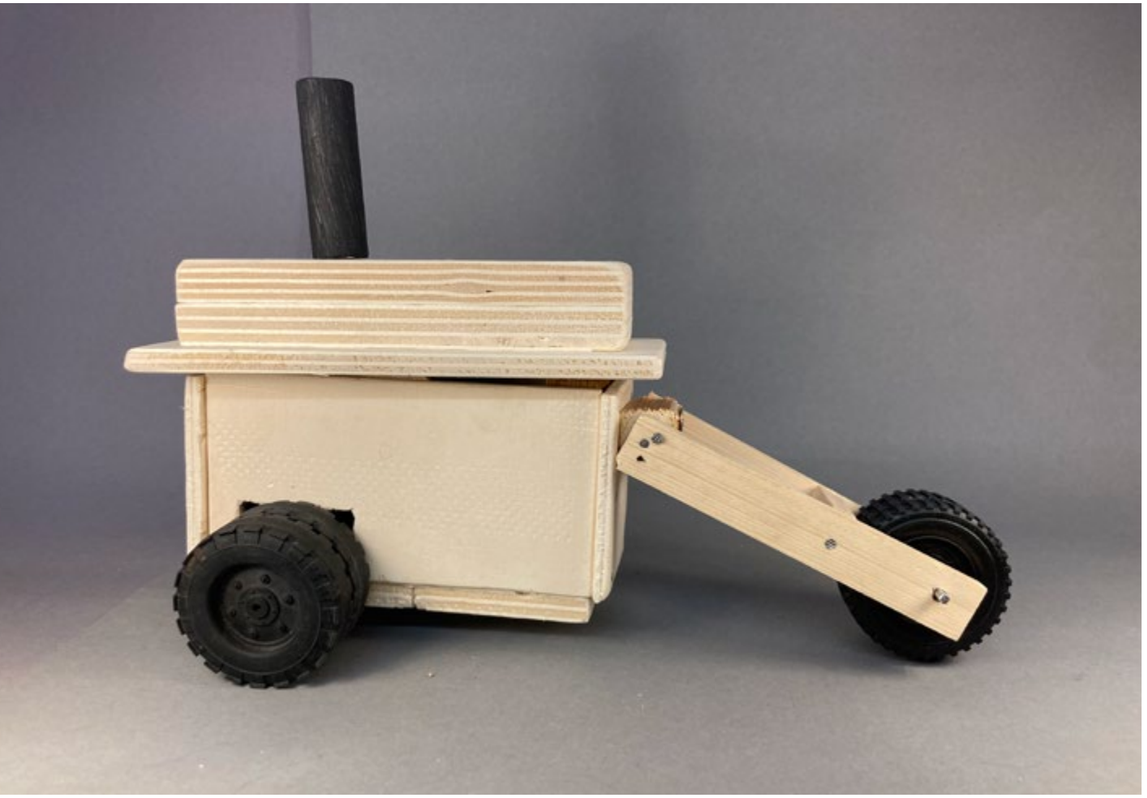

BETTER


ACHTUNG ABZOCKE!!


Restaurant







What resources are needed, and how can an organizational structure look like to invite teacher-colleagues to open up ingrained methods and try something new?

The new “Kustodiat“

Making Space for Art

Working Towards My School Utopia

As mentioned, there were crafts workshops — not fulfilling all my dreams, but still far better than having no art space at all. Most urgently, I argued for smaller groups in the art classes, as they were in crafts — but of course, every teacher would prefer smaller classes, and rightly so — yet resources are limited.

To my great delight, however, the headmaster was surprisingly easy to convince that, at least regarding space and equipment, things could and should change. When I told him about my considerations, he came up with a suggestion only a few hours later. Since we were in the fortunate position of being a semi-private Catholic school, it was possible to allocate some budget for setting up a dedicated art space.

There was not really an extra room available, but next to the physics room there was a small chamber where some space could be cleared for new shelves to store art supplies. The students were not allowed to enter that storage room, since some dangerous chemicals were kept there — that was simply a given. The physics room itself was slightly smaller than the regular classrooms and did not provide any extra storage space, but it was to be transformed into a space dedicated to art and research — and I assumed that dedication alone would already help elevate the relevance of the subject. The main practical advantage was the linoleum floor instead of wooden parquet — obviously more suitable when working with paint, glue, and other things likely to spill.

Regarding the organizational system, I intended to create a structure supporting my approach of a rather free studio situation — one that would allow me to draw out materials and tools as needed on the go, while at the same time functioning for more conventional teaching approaches and for colleagues unfamiliar with art and crafts education.

I therefore developed a color-coding system: Boxes marked with green tape contain simple, basic, everyday materials that anyone can just take out and hand directly to the students if needed — such as watercolors, paper, or brushes. Boxes marked with blue tape contain materials that require some introduction and supervision — things that should not simply be handed out by a substitute teacher unless the teacher has been informed that the students are already familiar with using them and can continue their projects independently. Boxes marked with red tape contain materials and equipment that should never be handed out freely, but only used within specific projects and under constant supervision — because they contain either dangerous, delicate, or expensive items.

Within this structure, I assembled a range of basic supplies intended to encourage the use of various tools and media — not just watercolors and colored pencils. Some leftover materials were already there; I simply sorted and made them accessible. Additionally, a budget was set aside to purchase essential supplies that should always be kept available.

As I was seriously annoyed by the empty boxes cluttering the students’ tables — which were officially supposed to hold their art and craft supplies such as watercolors, brushes, scissors, glue, etc. — those items myself, planning to get rid of the useless boxes and instead provide identical basic tools and materials for everyone.

Excerpt from my Bucket List

Storage and Equipment:
Ivar system (IKEA shelving system)
Castors
Lockable castors
Drying rack
Cardboard crates
Stepladder
Cleaning and Maintenance
Cable reel / extension cable drum
Bucket
Dustpan and hand brush
Broom
Plastic sheeting for tables
Painter's aprons
Light pad
Display cabinet
Paper plates
Paper towels
Cleaning cloths

Tools
Clamps
Stapler (for fabric or wood)
Paper stapler
Hammer
Combination pliers
Screwdrivers
Assorted nails
Assorted screws

Library
Hand library of art books
Online library / Padlet

Paper and Cardboard
Drawing paper A3
White drawing paper A4
Coloured paper
Roll of drawing paper
Japanese paper
Grey board A3

Recycled Materials
Yoghurt buckets
Fabric scraps / offcuts
Old picture frames
Photographs

Cutting Tools
Children's scissors for left-handers
Children's scissors + stand
Cutting mats
Large scissors
Cutters

Adhesives
Spring clamps 40 mm
Paper masking tape
All-purpose glue
Wallpaper paste
Glue sticks

Drawing and Painting
Oil pastels
Box of coloured pencils
Graphite pencils (2B and softer)
Erasers
Pencil sharpeners
Fixative spray
Soft pastels
Charcoal

Painting Materials
Water cups / paint cups
Tempera paint
Paintbrushes (various sizes)
Sponges for dabbing
Watercolour sets

Craft Kitchen
Hot plate
Large pot
Kitchen utensils
Cutlery set
Sieve
Electric kettle
Ink – red / green / blue

Printmaking
Linocut sets
Flower / leaf press
Brayers / rollers
Plexiglass plates for monotype printing
Repair of printing press
Printing press
Linocut handles
Chemicals for cyanotype
Craft foam
Printing ink
Linoleum plates A6

Clay and Modelling
Smooth cutting boards
Clay wire cutter
Modelling tools
Air-drying clay (2.5 kg)
Plasticine / modelling clay

Projection and Light
Overhead projector
Transparent tray for OHP
Slide projector
Slide mounts with glass

Animation Equipment
Spring clamps 60 mm
Vanguard tripod
Repro stand
Tablet holders
3 lights for stop-motion animation
Green mats for green screen
Stop-motion props
Reusable adhesive

Arguing for the budget:
The new curriculum allows for, encourages, and promotes the development of creative, individualized, interest-driven, and skills-oriented learning — especially in the asubject of Art and Design. To make this possible, schools need spaces and infrastructure that enable students to explore individual forms of practice and knowledge acquisition as independently as possible. The new art room is designed to offer exactly that: a well-structured, open space with a clearly organized system. Students will have increasing autonomy to access inspiring and diverse materials, allowing them to acquire, apply, and transfer various techniques, knowledge, and information according to their own needs and interests.

One smaller shelf was mounted on wheels, intended to be loaded before each lesson with the specific materials needed. Additionally, I bought a large drying rack that also fit into the storage room.

Together with this newly set-up space, I also created a new basic structure for my art classes. Unfortunately, I got to try things out only once — then I had to begin early maternity leave. But I summarize my concept here:

Since I had to expect to work with 25 students or more at a time under rather cramped conditions, I set up a strict structure, hoping to enable the greatest possible individual freedom and self-determined work within it.

Basically, the students were to be responsible for finding their own projects — within a framework that allowed me to support them as individually as possible. Basic materials and supplies were freely available, so if a student had an ongoing project, they could simply pick up what they needed and start working within the first minute of the lesson.

In parallel, I would offer a short input of around 20 minutes at the beginning of each class. This could be theoretical, art-historical, or technical in nature, or serve as another form of inspiration — for example, looking closely at, listening to, feeling, or even tasting something designed by humans or by non-human nature. Depending on the group, these inputs could build on one another — if, for example, there was particular interest in a certain technique or material — or remain single, self-contained impulses. Participation in these inputs was voluntary, but each student was expected to take part at least four times per semester. In this way, I hope to create smaller, more focused working constellations, even while teaching the entire class.

Of course, when experimenting, not everything can result in a finished or satisfying piece. To acknowledge this, the students were encouraged to experiment freely, but they had to submit at least three works per semester that they considered complete and well executed.

To keep track of what happened in between — the "less good ideas" (cf. Kentridge, 2018) — they were asked to keep a research diary, allowing me to see whether they were actually engaging in a process. For these diaries, I set up a digital Class Notebook using an application familiar to them. Conveniently, I could provide "pages" with content related to the current input (including links, videos, audio, and images) for the whole class, while each student could work individually in their own section. I could then reply or comment directly in each student's notebook — while each student saw only their own notes. These digital diaries were not meant to replace artistic sketchbooks but to serve as documentation and reflection tools.

For scribbling and experimenting, I again gave each student a paper sketchbook. As additional, immediate inspiration, these sketchbooks came with a first set of drawing and painting challenges they could always turn to if they didn't know what to do (see pp. 203–206).

What the students were most excited about, however, was that I allowed them to listen to music — under very strict conditions (see p. 202). Although allowing the use of smartphones or tablets can be tricky, I decided to permit it, as it offered the students the opportunity to withdraw into a private, concentrated working space — even while sharing a small, noisy room with 25 others.

Rules for Art and Design

- The adjoining room may not be entered.
- I am responsible for coming up with and carrying out my own art projects.
- Mrs. Miedl-Faißt provides inspiration for this.
- I use the tablet only as a tool (camera, microphone, etc.), not to look for templates or "ideas."
- I participate in at least four "inputs" (instructional sessions) per semester.
- I handle all materials and tools carefully.
- I behave quietly at all times and never disturb others.
- I plan enough time at the end of each lesson to clean and tidy up my workspace, materials, and tools thoroughly.
- At the end of every lesson, I write a short report with a photo of my current work in the OneNote class notebook, under the correct date.
- If I was absent due to illness, I note this in the corresponding OneNote class notebook page.
- I submit at least three works per semester for assessment.
- For this, I upload a photo to the notebook page "My Works", including the date, technique, and title.

Listening to music is allowed only if:

- I use headphones.
- I am at my workplace and working independently.
- At the beginning of the lesson, I select a playlist within two minutes.
- No searching, skipping, or changing during the lesson.
- My phone or tablet must remain out of sight.
- When Ms. Miedl-Faißt speaks to the class or directly to me,
- I immediately remove BOTH headphones.
- If any of these rules are violated, the phone or tablet will be confiscated and returned only at the end of the lesson.

don’t

let children work with dull colors, dead brushes and hard pencils.

clean up the classroom.

ban “decorative” plastic items.

don’t use
sticky tape or
pre-installed
plastic frames

to display
students’ work.

Sketchbook Painting Challenges

Mix the color that best matches your mood today.
Use it to paint an entire page.

Paint a cloud crocodile.

Paint a waterfall from behind (a view through the water).

Load your brush with plenty of paint and make three splashes with your eyes closed. Open your eyes, look for something recognizable, and continue working on it.

Invent at least 10 different painting techniques using a brush. (Dabbing, dripping, using only the tip, twisting and pulling, thin lines, thick lines, etc.)

Work only with paint and brush — no preliminary drawing!

Work on each challenge for at least 10 minutes — or longer if you like.

Never tear pages out of your sketchbook.

Sketchbook Drawing Challenges

Draw a monster with your “weaker” hand.
Add to the drawing with your “stronger” hand.

Draw a secret.

Draw a long-haired cat.
Try to make one line for every hair in its fur.

Draw a saber-toothed butterfly and its friend.

Draw your pet filming a TikTok dance video.

Use a new page for each challenge and each attempt.

ERASING FORBIDDEN!

Work on each challenge for at least 10 minutes.

KAS! and HEU!

Kids / Artists / Scientists. Together for Hope and Mischief

Admittedly, a few new shelves and a set of classroom rules do not yet deserve to be called utopian. In my school utopia, the borders of the institution are permeable. The art space is a studio that can also be used outside regular school hours. Everyone entering this studio is no longer a “student” or “teacher,” but a person – or perhaps an artist. It is a place to meet, think, and do together.

In my school utopia, this studio is a place where people beyond compulsory school age – and without teaching obligations – also come together. A space for exchange between children, artists, scientists, and (future) responsible citizens of all kinds. In this utopia, there is no lonely teacher-figure, but rather interesting people coming and going, inspiring and being inspired.

My utopian school studio has octopodian tentacles reaching out into the wider world – into other spaces, architectures, and countries – offering opportunities for exchange and mutual inspiration.

In the summer of 2024, together with my partner Florian – with whom I co-run “Unsichtbare Elefanten – Kunstverein zur Förderung unwahrscheinlicher Kollaborationen“ (Invisible Elephants – Art Association for the Promotion of Unlikely Collaborations) – we developed an ambitious project that could become a vessel carrying us remarkably close to many of these seemingly dreamlike, utopian goals.

We involved and convinced a large number of people and institutions that this endeavor was worth the effort – but in the end, we did not receive the main funding. And I got pregnant. But if you are reading this and would like to step in – we are open to any form of support of unquestionable moral integrity.

On the following pages, I include our draft. I have removed the name of the middle school for data protection reasons (obviously, it is the school I have been writing about on the previous pages).

from our project proposal:

KAS!

Kids / Artists / Scientists. Together for Hope and Mischief

Time is running out, the air is thick, spring has gone quiet. We need space for encounters – and time for connections we’ve so far overlooked. We need ideas that no one can have alone. We should listen to those who don’t know but ask – before algorithms ruin all the questions.

In the project KAS!, the association “Unsichtbare Elefanten – Kunstverein zur Förderung unwahrscheinlicher Kollaborationen“ works with a variety of local and international educational and cultural partners to connect artists, children, and cultural institutions. Through playful exploration and mutual curiosity, the project uses methods of artistic research to foster sustainable, intergenerational, cross-milieu, and possibly even cross-species friendships.

The project is guided by the perspectives, needs, ideas, and approaches of the participating children. The emerging art gangs – made up of children and young people, artists, and scientists – are developing “HEU! – Festival für Hoffnung und Exquisiten Unfug“ (Festival for Hope and Exquisite Mischief). A publication in the form of a children’s book will make the jointly developed methods, experiences, insights, and adventures accessible in a lasting way.

The main school partner is PNMS*. In addition, the college of hospitality and tourism management in Weyer is involved as a secondary school partner. Curatorial guidance for the project is provided by the transdisciplinary working group The ZoNE, while author Barbara Stieff accompanies the conception and creation of the children’s book.

Key institutional partners include Kunsthalle Wien, the ÆSR Lab (Applied / Experimental Sound Research Lab) at the University of Applied Arts Vienna and, in the Ennstal region, the FRIKULUM Association and the Bertholdsaal Weyer.

Like every project, KAS! begins long before its official start – namely, with this very proposal. Already at this stage, we aim to bring the different participants into dialogue and collectively draft a plan that connects diverse ideas and visions, allowing something to emerge that none of us could create alone.

“I imagine that…”

“I imagine that in the afternoon, people will come to continue working with us if we run out of time. I would like people who are into music to come, to write a song with me and Julia, to help us along the way and always be there for us. They should be nice and always by our side.” – Jana R., student.

“I imagine that we don’t just stand there and sing, but express feelings and radiate joy.” – Julia S., student.

“I imagine that we’ll work with artists to create backgrounds. I want to meet someone who can invent computer games – like ‘Save the World’.” – Marvin H., student.

“I imagine that famous people will come to school to build, paint, and sing with us in workshops. It’s really important that we get to do things ourselves.” – Niklas L., student.

“I imagine working closely with children in exhibition spaces and involving them in discussions about spatial design. Through these interactions, I want to spark their imagination and encourage them to rethink and reshape exhibitions by exploring different ideas and perspectives. I want to curate an exhibition together with the children, using an open format that fosters collective thinking and action.” – Başak Şenova, curator, The ZoNE.

“From the new mediation studio of Kunsthalle Wien, a wildly choreographed parade bursts through the main courtyard of the MuseumsQuartier, carrying its messages – with pulsing beats – out into the city. But the city’s borders are not enough for the participating middle schoolers: their journey continues to G*, Graz, and Weyer, all the way to Lake Constance.” – Michael Simku & Martin Walkner, Kunsthalle Wien.

“I imagine that the students, building on the skills they acquire in the field of sound, will later be able to develop and implement independent explorations of acoustic landscapes. These might include not only technical surveys and measurements, but also performative, installative, and sculptural interventions and concepts based on the principles of deep listening.” – Karl Salzmann, Applied / Experimental Sound Research Lab.

“I imagine that someone will notice how, when you overlay the gurgling of the Ybbs and the Enns rivers, a captivating beat emerges. Two of the children become fascinated by the water music and write a song about it, which they record together with an audiophile visitor. ”– Verena Miedl-Faißt, Unsichtbare Elefanten.

None of these visions will likely unfold exactly as imagined – but their overlap, shifts, and synergies allow us to sense what might be possible together.

During Wienwoche 2024, a small delegation of students from class 3b (PNMS*) joined Verena Miedl-Faißt on a detour to meet artists at the ZOOM Children’s Museum, Michael Simku at the Kunsthalle Wien, and Başak Şenova and Florian Miedl-Faißt at the University of Applied Arts Vienna.

Together, they reflected on what artists actually do, who or what curators are, where one might encounter them – and which of these aspects seemed most relevant or interesting to them. Based on these conversations, the project plan was refined, cooperation partners identified, and the visions above formulated.

New Friendships:
Artist-in-Residence Program at the School

In the event that the funding is approved, a call for artists will be distributed as soon as possible through various networks – including the mailing lists of all project partners.

A jury consisting of representatives from the students, The ZoNE, and the Unsichtbare Elefanten will select three artists from the submissions. Each artist will be invited for a one-week residency during the school year. The artists will be accommodated in Weyer, where students from the HLW Weyer (college of hospitality and tourism management) will act as hosts.

Their studio space will be set up in the newly established art room at PNMS*, which they may use freely during their residency.

Incubator Workshop / hosted by The ZoNE

“Our collective The ZoNE is deeply engaged in Knowledge Art – a new form of inquiry that moves between philosophy, science, and art. The opportunity to apply this concept directly as an intervention with schoolchildren is something we find extremely exciting!” – Johannes Jäger, The ZoNE

At the beginning of the 2024/25 school year, before the first residency takes place, a two-day Incubator Workshop will be held at the Bertholdsaal in Weyer. Participants include the selected artists, next year’s class 4b of PNMS*, students from the vocational schools of Weyer, and interested pupils from other classes.

The ZoNE will, together with Florian and Verena Miedl-Faißt (Unsichtbare Elefanten), design and lead the workshop.

Students of HLW will provide culinary support throughout the workshop days, applying their professional training. Shared meals – as connecting rituals – are intended to open the senses and foster readiness to engage with one another and with new ideas.

During these first workshop days, students from the participating schools and the invited artists will get to know each other. We hope this will give rise to fruitful connections, alliances, friendships, ideas, interests, questions, and curiosity – especially about one another. From this open format, smaller and larger collaborative projects and research ideas are expected to emerge.

Open Studio at the School

During the residencies, the artists will usually stay individually (or, if explicitly desired, together) in Weyer. Over the summer break, a new art room will be established at the school (none exists yet). This art room will serve as the artists’ studio during each residency week.

Workshops will take place within the school schedule, while afternoons will be open for informal collaboration beyond regular classes.

Between residencies, this open studio will continue to be supervised once a week by the Unsichtbare Elefanten. This ensures that students can gradually claim the art room as their own studio, continuing to work on individual projects.

Some workshops will be cross-school collaborations, and students from HLW Weyer will be invited to visit the open studio or meet the artists-in-residence at PNMS*.

Students Lead the Artists to Special Places

On at least one day of each residency, students from both schools will choose a special place to take the artist – either with a small group or an entire class. These might be places that matter to them, that they want to share, or that could serve as locations for film experiments, sites for discovery, play, or admiration, or simply spaces where it feels good to be together.

Support by and Relation to Kunsthalle Wien

“Kunsthalle Wien sees itself as a space for the full diversity of international contemporary art. We aim to be open and accessible to all, and therefore work with our partners to create integrative programs that demonstrate how engaging and essential contemporary art can be. Our mission is to bring contemporary art closer to everyone – including those who may not yet have had much exposure to it.

Under the new artistic direction of Michelle Cotton, this commitment is emphasized through co-creation processes. The focus lies on deep collaboration between artists and school classes, who are invited to engage in extended artistic processes to reveal the potentials of contemporary art and stimulate reciprocal creative and intellectual exchange. We also aim to collaborate with decentralized initiatives, thereby contributing to regional cultural accessibility. From this perspective, we consider the collaboration within KAS! to be exceptionally valuable and promising.

Kunsthalle Wien acts as one of the institutional partners in the project – providing not only its newly designed studio space, materials, and financial support, but also serving as a conceptual partner through its exhibitions and workshop programs. The goal is to establish the presence of Kunsthalle Wien beyond the urban context, breaking down barriers, opening institutional spaces, and making them accessible to a broader public.” – Michael Simku & Martin Walkner, Kunsthalle Wien

In parallel with the residencies, art and design classes will include excursions to project partners in Vienna and Graz, as well as to locations selected by the artists.

In the spirit of a “return visit”, the project seeks to blur the boundaries between reception and production, allowing cultural institutions to be experienced as accessible, participatory spaces.

The shared exploration of exhibitions, spaces, and cultural offerings thus becomes an integral part of the collective creative and formative process.

Examples of Advanced Activities:

- In the newly established studio of Kunsthalle Wien, and with the support of the museum’s education and production teams, students will be able to realize projects that would not be feasible within a regular school setting.

- At the ÆSR Lab, small-group workshops within the framework of KAS! will focus on field recording (how to record and edit sounds), deep listening sessions (how to focus one’s hearing, the ethical principles of listening, and the connections that become audible), and sound projection (how to make sound perceptible beyond the use of conventional loudspeakers) Additionally, field recording equipment can be borrowed afterward for projects outside the studio.

- The artists Bronwyn Lace and Marcus Neustetter (both members of The ZoNE) will invite students to visit their studio in Vienna’s 5th district, Margareten.

- During a visit to Kunsthalle Exnergasse, in preparation for Başak Şenova’s exhibition “The Atlas” (opening June 2025), students will gain direct insight into a central phase of the artistic production process.

- In Graz, during a visit to <rotor>, students will get to know another artist-in-residence program and gain a behind-the-scenes look at the exhibition “Sediment” (November 2024), curated by Başak Şenova and Dicle Bestas.

Logbook in the Research Catalogue of the Society for Artistic Research

The traces and results of the many artistic, creative, and – above all – socially connective processes set in motion through the project will be continuously gathered, recorded, and documented.

These “traces” will feed into an online exhibition in the Research Catalogue of the Society for Artistic Research, making the voices, artistic outcomes, and research findings of the participating children and artists publicly and internationally accessible.

HEU! – Festival for Hope and Exquisite Nonsense

As its culmination and celebration, KAS! will conclude with a one-day festival at the Bertholdsaal in Weyer.

“I see this project as an initiative to promote creativity and cultural exchange among young people in Austria. Through hands-on collaboration and mentoring, participants will not only strengthen their artistic skills but also gain deep insights into the creative process and the rich diversity of cultural perspectives.

At its core lies the idea that experiential learning is essential for inspiring and empowering young people. By fostering connections within the artistic community, participants will gain access to a supportive network of mentors, peers, and potential collaborators – and they will also learn from each other. For the adults involved, too, this project represents an ongoing learning process.

This network will serve as a solid foundation for lifelong learning and creative growth. Ultimately, this project has the potential to inspire the next generation of artists, thinkers, and innovators, while nurturing their analytical and critical thinking.” – Başak Şenova, The ZoNE

Curated by Başak Şenova together with a student curatorial team, the HEU!-Festival will showcase the highlights of the shared process: artistic productions and collaborations by all participants that emerged from – or were inspired by – KAS! encounters. These works may be presented in new constellations, recontextualized, and celebrated in a joyful act of being-in-the-world together.

KAS! – The Book

Author and art educator Barbara Stieff will accompany the KAS! project from the beginning and, together with an emerging children’s art-book collective, will conceptualize and develop the KAS! publication.

The book will not merely document and depict the project and its results; rather, it will serve as a translation of KAS! methods – an extension of the shared creative space, an invitation and guidebook into the world of KAS!/HEU!, designed for both young readers and curious adults.

It will connect the participating regions, institutions, and people beyond the project’s duration – to be found in school libraries, museum bookstores, and the private bookshelves of everyone involved.

steal my concepts.

create architecture

for unexpected encounters, not for expected discipline.

make “pedagogy“
a fine art degree.

find a
new name.

Epilogue

How can one deal with the different pace of time and development when working in longer creative processes with children becoming adolescents becoming adults?

L. embodying Edgar from Brawlstars / August 2025

Growing Up but Not Apart

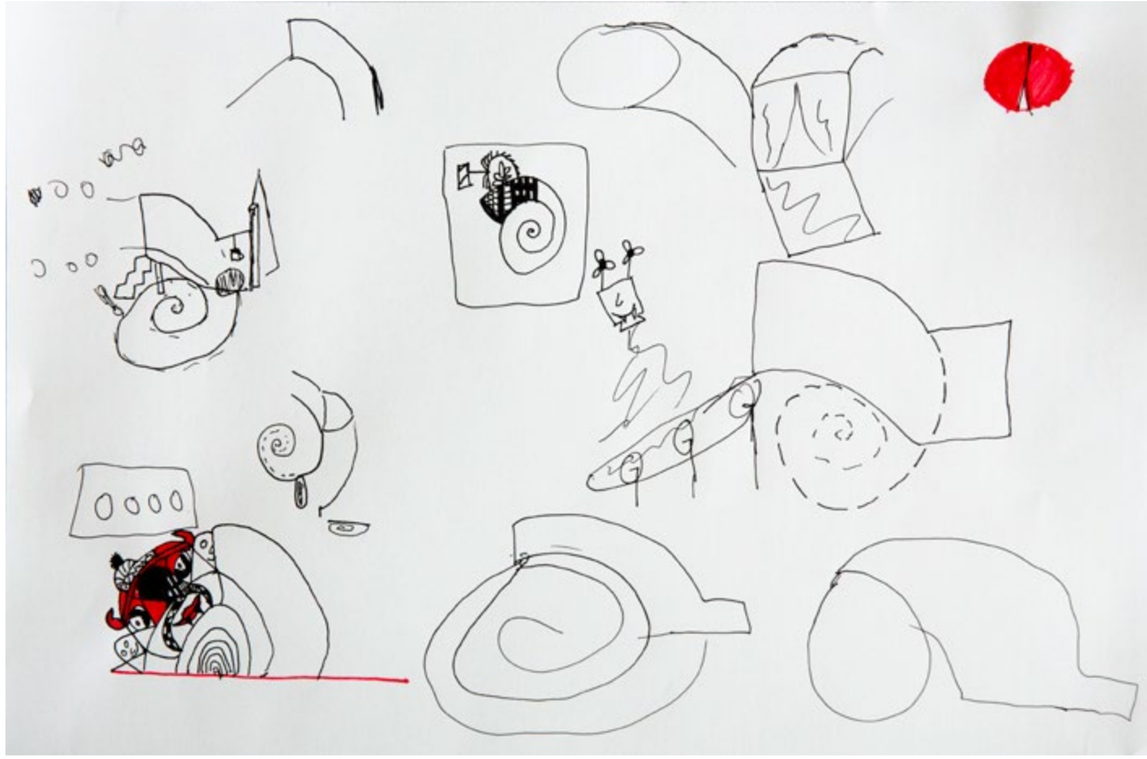
Now, in the summer of 2025, L. is 11 years old. We are still close – yet the time of our intense magical journeys lies about five years behind us, almost half of his life.

On the one hand, I regret the unfinished projects and look back wistfully on the artistic landscapes we have since left behind. On the other hand, it is an exciting chance to revisit our shared past together with the young adolescent – so close to me, yet already distant for him: To my great joy, L. agreed to spend a working retreat with me this summer. Within two days, we revisited all our artistic endeavors, re-planned the exhibition for my PhD defense, and created a portrait of L. as one of his favorite characters from the online game “Brawl Stars“.

I had intended to conduct an interview with L., similar to the ones I have carried out with my colleagues from the ZOOM Children’s Museum – so the audio recorder was running through almost our entire retreat. At the beginning, we each wrote down separately what we remembered most – and these recollections turned out to be astonishingly similar. Beyond that, however, there was little to transcribe: highly focused, snacking on grapes and Pombärs, we listened to all our audioplays. L. remarked that he found the work quite impressive “for a small child” (as if it had not been his own). For the texts that had never become finished audioplays, he preferred the simple reading versions – and we made a new recording of the Sundogs together. But in the end, he said he liked Ismya best – and if we were to resume our storytelling, he would rather continue with that, though in the form of another audioplay.

What turned into a particularly fruitful working session was our new exhibition planning, together with my partner. L. sketched how we could realize the snail-shell idea: constructing only the snail’s entrance, directly adjacent to the large window of the exhibition space at Rustenschacherallee (University of Applied Arts Vienna), where a cut-out spiral would suggest an endless Fibonacci swirl. The honey-milk gimbal would be evoked only through a subtle fragrance drifting from an inaccessible core.

I am deeply grateful that L. and I have thus far been able to carry our artistic friendship from phase to phase. And I am more than curious to see what he will remember and think of our Socratic dialogues over the course of what I hope will be a long and dear friendship, binding us together for the rest of our lives.



Scribbling towards the exhibition

How to relate to the unknown?

Or rather:

What happens if there is no gap?

The old cherry tree that blossomed to welcome our son.

Becoming Mother

I am writing these lines now with a hormonally fogged brain and a newborn on my chest, wrapped in a sour-smelling shirt I haven't managed to change since yesterday. The newborn is not as newborn as I had planned for my first written lines after his birth – he is the easiest, most relaxed baby, yet we are still struggling, as probably every new parent does.

Anyway, here he is – our child. We call him Mio, like in "Mio, mein Mio," the story by Astrid Lindgren. It is not the actual name we have given him (a scandalous thing to do, by the way), but something like his heart-name. The sound of those vowels somehow resonates with the awe I felt from the moment he came into being inside my womb. Mio is no longer a wish or a longing, but an incredibly tiny, irreplaceable human. Such a unique moment in time, incomparable to anything else in my life so far – yet at the same time the most ordinary thing in the world.

I had planned to have all of this written before his arrival – hence the title about the unknown. I wanted to reflect on my expectations, on how we could connect even before his birth. How can one co-create with a newborn – or even a not-yet-born?

I thought the problem would be that we are alien to each other, unknown. I feared I might not be able to relate to him the way I related to L. from the very beginning. And indeed, our relationship is incomparable to that dreamy, mind-driven, longing connection L. and I shared. We would watch a sparkle in a bottle of water and then not see each other for weeks, letting that spark grow ever brighter in my memory. Up until what I called L.'s first poem, I never knew whether he thought of me for even a second once I was out of sight.

This is so different with Mio. Not just more intense – my love for L. and his little brother K. is not relativized in any way. But Mio is always – corporeally – present. I missed him so much before he was here, and now there is nothing to miss anymore. He is so close that there is no gap to be filled with artistic longing. For the time being, our relationship is actually less poetic – because there is no need for poetry. It is all about keeping this tiny body alive and safe and warm; soothing his aches, as if a fragile extension of myself; it is about feeding without drowning in milk, digesting with every cell from toe to eyebrow, and then sleeping in the most improbable positions. About exchanging warmth between our bodies, still remembering the time of being one.

But to be honest, I did not enjoy being pregnant. Although it was, comparatively, no complicated pregnancy, I perceived it as bodily overwhelming and exhausting. But worst of all, I was so anxious he might not make it – that he would remain a longing and leave us again before ever arriving. And even more so, that this would somehow be my fault. I was dearly looking forward to the moment when I could share this responsibility with my partner – giving the baby into his loving hands. And I cannot tell how much I now enjoy feeling that new living bond between the two of us. Although I would love to stop time at the moment he was placed on my chest in the hospital, I also cannot wait to relate anew to the world with him and through him. Already now, I wonder what experiences his brand-new sensory organs create in his brain – this universe that just popped out of my belly. I wonder what his dreams look and feel like. How can you dream if you have not yet seen anything? How are such fresh dreams so startling that they trigger a Moro reflex every other moment? I want to teach him how to speak, how to articulate, as soon as possible – yet I do not want to tell him what to say, because I do not want to spoil what he has to say. I know I should talk to him as much as possible – yet I catch myself repeating silly baby lines over and over, humming the same simple melody for hours on end. I am thankful every time I see my partner, my mother, my sister, my nephews, my partner's family – every human who unconditionally loves Mio, talks to him, touches him, and lets themselves be touched. Then he smiles his random reflex smiles, and I know – that is all we need for now.

Peter Handke

"Kaspar setzt ein.
Er spricht langsam:

Das merken und nicht vergessen!
Das merken und nicht vergessen!
Das merken und nicht vergessen!
Das merken und nicht vergessen!
Das merken und nicht vergessen!
Das merken und nicht vergessen!
Das merken und nicht vergessen!
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Das merken und nicht vergessen!
Das merken und nicht vergessen!
Das merken und nicht vergessen!
Das merken und nicht vergessen!

Seit du einen ordentlichen Satz sprechen kannst, beginnst du alles, was du wahrnimmst, mit diesem ordentlichen Satz zu vergleichen, so daß der Satz ein Beispiel wird. Jeder Gegenstand, den du wahrnimmst, ist umso einfacher, je einfacher der Satz ist, mit dem du ihn beschreiben kannst: jener Gegenstand ist ein ordentlicher Gegenstand, bei dem sich nach einem kurzen, einfachen Satz keine Fragen mehr ergeben: ein ordentlicher Gegenstand ist der, bei dem mit einem kurzen einfachen Satz alles geklärt ist: für einen ordentlichen Gegenstand brauchst du nur einen Satz mit drei Worten: jener Gegenstand ist in Ordnung, von dem du nicht erst eine Geschichte erzählen mußt. Für einen ordentlichen Gegenstand brauchst du nicht einmal einen Satz: für einen ordentlichen Gegenstand genügt das Wort für den Gegenstand. Erst mit einem unordentlichen Gegenstand fangen die Geschichten an."

(Handke, 1967/2019: 31f.)

How can I make one exhibition doing justice to hardly countable particular encounters, co-creations and constellations, far apart in space and time?

Making an Exhibition

But unfortunately, Mio's smile is not all I need for the completion of my PhD in Art: I also need to make an exhibition, sharing my artistic practice. As I have explained and reflected upon in various contexts within this reflective documentation, I want to share – I feel the urge to share – what I have found, what "we" (in all its various meanings) have made.

Finalizing a PhD in Art on co-creation with children, one might expect my young co-creators to be thrilled to take part in this show. There should be a children's committee planning and setting up the exhibition, a panel discussion, guided tours led by children, children working on site. If not – doesn't that seem suspicious? If there are no children present, eagerly identifying with the work I am showing, isn't that a sign of failure in my project? How could I prove any co-creative credibility then?

I wish there were some students sitting on a stage, telling the audience how much they loved and identified with what we did – how they remember every bit of it, how proud they are. But it doesn't work like that.

The video projects are long gone. The fourteen-year-olds of back then are now young adults, studying somewhere, probably hardly remembering what we did during those school project days almost ten years ago. Some might remember, some might have been particularly touched – but it is impossible to tell who they were, and even more impossible to contact them now. Some of them might even find it strange to learn that their film is being screened in this context today. They all signed, and their parents signed as well, confirming that I am allowed to use and publish the films without restrictions. But back then, they only thought of the cinema screening shortly after, a screening at school, and perhaps my website – not of anything like an exhibition now.

With L., it is slightly different, since we are still close and he is actually involved in planning the exhibition. But we have been planning this exhibition several times already. Now, who am I more obligated to – the six-year-old L. or the eleven-year-old L.?

Regarding the work resulting from my teaching at the grammar school and Middle School, I hardly have any physical pieces at hand. As long as we were producing online exhibitions or films, it's fine – but the individual student pieces belong to the students and, I'm afraid, mostly no longer exist, so I only have some photo documentation left. Moreover, as I have already mentioned, I wrote quite critically about the school(s) and also about my, at times, difficult experiences with the students. So why should they be eager to be represented in such a context?

Throughout my PhD in Art, there were countless encounters – some more, some less inspirational and formative for both sides. Each had its specific context, time, and constellation within which a presentation to a very specific audience was possible; a sharing of our insights, of co-created works, of our common mind-space. Afterwards, our paths diverged again, and those encounters cannot be forced back into the present – nor can they be aligned with all the others.

The only common denominator is me. This is what I have to accept, admit, and stand by – even though it might feel strangely lonesome in the context of co-creation. So what, and how, can I share?

First of all, I can share all my pedagogical and artistic reflections as collected in this documentation – which become more comprehensible when linked to the artefacts of the processes I am referring to.

But the pieces, works, and glimpses I still have at hand are more than just exchangeable examples of certain methods and observations, subordinate to the artistic process or pedagogical objectives. They are co-created artistic expressions, distinct and dear to me on a very personal level. Because the encounters they originate from – otherwise fleeting and never to return – have taken material shape and have become somehow, however imperfectly, comprehensible. Through sharing those artistic, material traces I can share glimpses of an encounter, make it relatable again, even though it has already passed. I can actualize it, reclaim something from the loss of time – and weave a tighter net to hold the world, and be held within it.

Roland Barthes

The differentiation between rather interchangeable examples of outcomes from pedagogical or co-creative processes — showcasing a particular technique or an "average student performance" — and the artistic co-creations I would like to share can be compared to what Roland Barthes describes as studium and punctum:

"What I feel about these photographs derives from an average affect, almost from a certain training. I did not know a French word which might account for this kind of human interest, but I believe this word exists in Latin: it is stadium, which doesn't mean, at least not immediately, "study," but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by studium that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in studium, that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the action. The second element will break (or punctuate) the studium. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the studium with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick; this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many points. This second element which will disturb the studium I shall therefore call punctum; for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." (Barthes 1982: 26f)

I would like to create an exhibition that is not only interesting from a professional or pedagogical point of view, but also punctuating — piercing holes that allow glimpses into other moments in time, creating relations between viewers, children, and myself that would otherwise be impossible.

Making the exhibition function in such a way is an artistic and curatorial challenge I have to accept – without being able to relinquish even a fragment of the responsibility for it. Thus, the exhibition for my PhD in Art on co-creation ultimately remains a solo show.

My Misleading List of Certain Learnings (Ongoing)

Sweeping old floors keeps conjuring up new piles of dust.

If you can’t hear yourself speak, go disentangle. But hold the lines.

Some trees love music sheets very much.

Trying to cover more than one hole of a watering can is not sustainable.

Power plays are boring.

Not all mermaids can swim.

If the cheese is good, the mouse can have a good time in the trap.

If too much paste weighs down the kite, it won’t rise. But we can hang it from a tree and let it dance with the wind.

The forest is dark at night for everyone.

I am one and I am many, but I can never be only.

Cashews and cranberries make a good poem.

Jungle-sea bees speak only as a swarm. Each knows but one word.

Don’t underestimate the stale rest at the bottom of the bottle.

When a story is old, begin another.

The gap between you and me is the reason why we’re not alone.

Sometimes benevolent is another word for lazy.

It is lonely between contexts.

If you want to be a good artist, be generous.

One can be a good audience.

Long stings make cuddling a challenge.

Misunderstanding something means understanding something else.

A shift in height changes perspective, not what is to be seen.

Love is my superpower.

The good ones have stone collections but know one can never own a stone.

If you want to be fair, don’t hide love or pain.

Naming is the hardest thing to agree on.

Students and teachers are actually human, but tend to forget.

It’s hard to make school recognize something that isn’t part of school.

If in doubt, ask the Krakel-Orakel.

Never trust ugly schoolbooks and bad copies.

Fund humans, not tablets.

Digital literacy is analog.

Artificial intelligence is only dangerous if there is not enough creative intelligence.

Buy a fake moustache and a novelty belly. Crochet pot holders.

Ambitions can never be too high if you don’t mind changing plans along the way.

Teachers should be octopuses.

Bring cake and strawberries.

Don’t let children work with dull colors, dead brushes, and hard pencils.

Clean up the classroom. Ban “decorative” plastic items.

Don’t use sticky tape or pre-installed plastic frames to display students’ work.

Steal my concepts.

Create architecture for unexpected encounters, not for expected discipline.

Make “pedagogy” a fine art degree. Find a new name.

Always finish your fear up to the very last drop, as long as it’s liquid.

If you cannot see, listen and hum.

Wisdom is not bound to age or species.

Riverbanks make a good flatshare.

If you cannot hear, borrow someone’s ear.

Mud dumplings are the best dumplings.

Be vulnerable and confident.

One needs termites to build a didgeridoo.

Co-creation means standing next to each other, not one behind the other.

If you’re too far to caress, use a sound wave.

Sing with the tongue of your mother’s soul.

There is no artistic cure for artists.

Listen quietly, with all your fingertips.

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