

staging the  
invisible elephant  
that remains  
overlooked

reader

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In this volume, I have compiled a selection of texts produced in the course of my PhD in art, presented in chronological order. Browsing through this reader may offer an additional perspective on the development and insights of my work.

I have also included texts in which I am no longer fully confident, that in retrospect appear somewhat misleading or unclear, or that were highly situational—for instance, written for a colloquium of individual colleagues. These texts are not specially marked, as it seems evident where I was momentarily at an impasse. At the same time, such detours are part of the process and may still offer loose threads worth holding on to. Some texts take on a more poetic form, expressing a sense of longing rather than addressing a concrete research question. Yet following such intuitive strands of thought was my way of finding language for my questions and related findings.

There are also repetitions: citations that recur across several texts, or that appear both in this reader and again in my reflective documentation or within the book of dialogues—though never in exactly the same context. This, too, is intentional, as it sheds light on how thoughts, convictions, and relations have evolved over the course of my research.

Finally, my BA thesis is included as an appendix to this reader (originally written in German and translated into English here). It further elaborates my understanding of artistic research and contextualizes the reference to the entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre.



Videostill from „Mamilahpinatapai“

## Staging the White Elephant that Remains Overlooked

Abstract for the website of Center Research Focus

Naturally artistic PhD projects aim to empower and validate artistic methods as a way of generating significant insights and knowledge in their own right – independent from traditional scientific methods.

But what, even within the art field, is considered valid artistic practice? When, how and by whom is an artistic process and its outcome acknowledged, received and evaluated as such? Although the art world seems to be an amorphous, shady territory where meaning is unfixed and the rules of expression negotiable, there are surprisingly concrete and in most cases insurmountable limits to this infinity.

I'm not talking about the subject matter – art can break up deadlocked patterns of perception and is able to focus on the blind spots of our society. I am talking about a taboo within the art field itself: The air is getting thinner already, when we can no longer attribute an artistic process to a nameable and singular genius-artist, but multiple authors. Difficulties multiply if the collaborators are “laypersons”. But game is completely over if these “laypersons” are kids or teenagers and the project takes place in a school.

You might find artists working as teachers, whose work is being recognized as ambitious art education. But certainly it will never be acknowledged as legitimate art within the art field – neither the work of the artist-teacher enabling the creative process of the students nor the products it yields. I am convinced that this is wrong.

First of all it is an artistic practice in its own right to enable, inspire and accompany collective creative processes. Of course this has nothing to do with clichéd

art lessons, where students are merely encouraged to copy somebody else's artistic product. But to be rooted in the pedagogical sphere is no contradiction to the claim of being artistic practice. And beyond that, these processes can yield (collective) artistic products that need to be received as such. Discrediting this artistic praxis deprives the arts, discourse and society of exciting and fruitful knowledge.

Thus, within the scope of a PhD in Art, I want to find ways to stage and reflect on the work produced with teenagers and kids as valid artistic products that deserve a place in social, political and artistic discourse as forms of expression by fully-fledged members of our society.

Intertwined with this target, I will further develop and clarify my artistic methods. I will reflect on my role as a professional artist within the pedagogical field and likewise on my positioning within the art field as an artist that is working within the pedagogical context.



Introducing Invisible Elephants  
Reading Public Colloquium at Angewandte Innovation Lab May 2018

Some roar so loud, they leave you dumb, although you hardly understand. But their whisper tickles you down at your stomachs ground and makes you lift your pelvic floor. They take your breath when you're meant to speak but still they know the message. Some make the earth shake like a serious earthquake but leave no visible trace. Some are so big, you find no space, although they aren't even there. On some of them you can ride upon, but your feet won't find the ground. Some carry you over slippery floor, but their weight is the reason for the ice to break. They are the bridge they stand upon to prevent you from trespassing, the ground that you share while being the gap you're lost in. They make things turn around in seconds, make stable trains jump of their rail. Some of them inspire, some really hurt, some push, some pull, some hypnotize, some set in motion, some immobilize. I do not want to push them on stage. They are too big to be forced and to mighty too risk their rage. But I try to invite them to play.

internet, or as I learned the other day, a thunderstorm. But once you find a matching label, they'll make you feel like the tortoise in "the tortoise and the hare". So never try to compete with them – rather accept if they ask you for a dance.

ONE:  
  
The tortoise says:  
I will name you Adolescence. Finally, you've gotten to know the world. You've learned to walk, speak, watch Youtube clips, play, make friends. But then you realize this fucking constant change of the world and of yourself – maybe for the first time in your life.

The hare says:  
Haha, adolescence. Do you really think, this will ever stop?

There is this huge Elephant, you're trying not to fall off. It is a shaking ground you walk on, always in danger to slide down his slippery grey back. It makes you long for handles to hold on, for a stable saddle and stirrups. But you know, that actually the task is to move, to explore, to dare, to jump, to fly. To get rid of handles and saddles. To not only stand but walk on your own feet on grounds you don't even know. To run. Or even worse: To go slow. Attentively. Perceive all the shaking and rumbling and roaring. And then explain the way, show where you are without even knowing how you got there. Because, although you feel so left alone there are so many others. Some of them seem to exactly know what they are doing. But they won't tell you and it's so hard to get just from watching. Because they don't stay in a stable position and you keep losing their track.

Some seem to find reflection in a person, but somehow this costume hardly ever fits. For some you can try names, like ego, intention, system logic and logistics, resistance, obedience, conformance, attraction, sympathy or antipathy, room temperature and oxygen content, furniture arrangement, educational objective, clandestine curriculum, the view out of the window, preconception, sideeffect, social or cultural differences, personal and collective memory, school bell, food, unsaid conflicts, adolescence, psychological dispositions, financial worries, political ambitions, artistic ambitions, career ambitions, said and unsaid rules, religious sensibilities, personal preferences, language barriers, coincidence, courage, lack of courage, social skills, media literacy, media illiteracy, fashion, the

TWO:

The tortoise says:  
It's about patterns. Media-images. Viewing-expectations. Pressure to perform.

The hare says:  
Don't you always blame the system!

Now all around in this shaking blurry world are stable cages. They seemingly do not float and shake. You can sit inside, lock up the door and get carried away by a big Elephant, who knows the way. The only thing you've got to do is to take care, that you don't slip through the cages' grid and fall out. But these cages are tricky. They make you shrink. And once you're small enough, you either can't help to fall out, because you can't reach the grid anymore or you melt into the grid itself.

THREE:

The tortoise says:  
It's about communication as a creative process. Finding ways to articulate. To enter dialogues and polylogues. To negotiate a common position.

The hare says:  
You know tortoise, perception itself is already a creative process. So, there's nothing to hold on.

But what can you do? How can you act within these unreliable constellations? How can you choose the right Elephant to ride on? You need to find ways to connect. To spin threads, that make you reach each other. Thick threads are quite alluring, but from the thin threads you can weave better nets. And on those nets, you can jump together like on a trampoline, each time a bit higher so you get a slightly bigger glimpse of the horizon.

FOUR:

The tortoise says:  
It's about individual backgrounds. About contemporary history that reflects in the constellation of individual biographies.

The hare says:  
But how can you compare a war refugees destiny with the exam stress before some test in math?

While jumping together, there might come up huge, really huge Elephants, that darken the sun and mask the horizon. Elephants, that you don't know, but they are following somebody you're jumping with wherever he or she goes. These Elephants can be intimidating, sad, frightening. They make you wanna close your eyes to make them disappear. But they become manifest on the inner side of your eye lids. They tell stories, that have never been your story, but suddenly they take up all your space. They breath up all your oxygen. They are impossible to pass. They smash the herd of tiny Elephants that had been following you faithfully. There's nothing visible anymore but their impervious, thick, wrinkled grey skin right in front of you, touching the tip of your nose.

So what can you do? You look left and right and see the others baffled faces. They are starting to fade, facing the alien Elephant, lacking space for their own herds. What is to be done? You stretch out your hand and touch the grey wall. You're sensing the bits, that are actually not alien but familiar to you. You get to know the areas, that you can hold on. You meet your own Elephants within the wrinkles of the big one and all together you start to climb up. You give each other a step-up. Or pass through. Or turn around and walk away. Or scream loud enough, so the Elephant will run.

FIVE:

The tortoise says:  
It's the Ego.

The hare says:  
So what?

The thing is, there are Elephants that you actually have taken to your heart. That you don't want to see dissolved or chased away. You want the others to see. To keep. To be aware. To acknowledge. To applaud. To respect. These Elephants sometimes make you petrify. The moment you realize, the others are taking over your big grey mountain, are surpassing the trails you tediously pioneered. But the others forget, that this should go to your account. That moment, your own trails become impassable for you and you become a petrified body part of your own invisible Elephant.

SIX:

The tortoise says:  
This is about participation.

The hare says:  
Hey, this almost looks like art! (Haha, sorry – only tickling the previous Elephant...)

In general, preparing the Elephants' dance floor for others is quite a challenge. Creating moving beats and inspiring sets of instruments, anticipating all the dancers possible improvised step sequences, you in the end might realize you built up a set of invariable cages with dead Elephants inside. The others will either sit in the cage, petting their dead Elephants, or sit in the shady corners of the space, wondering how they could leave the party unnoticed. But if you fear any kind of limiting cage too much, it might happen to you, that

you create an open dancefloor, that doesn't even fulfil its very basic function of being a ground you can step on – so all the dancers just fall or float through the endless space. And as hardly anyone can stand this, they will bring their own cages and hardly come out again.

SEVEN:

The tortoise says:  
Ok, so this is about plans for the unplannable.

The hare says:  
Stop wasting my time. I'm off.

So it really needs courage to dance with the Elephants you don't see and speak to them in languages you have never spoken before. But why an- yhow bother and not just ignore those giant mimosas? If they are not visi- ble anyhow, this should be rather easy. Just hold on to things you can see, touch, rate and evaluate.

But have you ever tried to ignore an Elephant, that wants you dearly to give him a piggyback? Then you should know, why that is not an option. It's not easy to make them walk side by side with you or even carry you, where you want to go. But if it works out, you will get to places, where you will encounter at least glimpses of the idea, what it means to connect your brain and heart with another one's and what unthought of power can be released and made prolific that way.



# Welcome to my aviary!

Internal Colloquium January 2019

„Es war wie der Einbruch einer anderen Realität. Etwas Scheues, Seltenes, das uns besuchen kommt, das sich herabsenkt und die Welt um uns herum verwandelt, ohne unser Zutun, als unerwartetes Geschenk. Der Schneefall ist geradezu die Reinform einer Manifestation des Unverfügbaren: Wir können ihn nicht herstellen, nicht erzwingen, nicht einmal sicher vorherplanen, jedenfalls nicht über einen längeren Zeitraum hinweg. Und mehr noch: Wir können des Schnees nicht habhaft werden, ihn uns nicht aneignen: Wenn wir ihn in die Hand nehmen, zer- rinnt er uns zwischen den Fingern, wenn wir ihn ins Haus holen, fließt er davon, und wenn wir ihn in die Tiefkühltruhe packen, hört er auf, Schnee zu sein.“ (Rosa, 2018: 7)

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I must admit I once participated in one of those tourist whale-watching trips in Akureyri. They guarantee whale sightings, but of course, they can not guarantee that you actually encounter what you are looking for.

So you're getting on this boat. You know, you're a tourist. You know that what you do is actually harming what you admire. You know, you're kind of ridiculous. But the boat has this slight melvillian aura of adventure. You're secretly jealous of the local fishermen, being an authentic part of what is only being staged as a tourist spectacle for you. Still, you hope to get a grasp of something big.

From the very first instant on the boat, you start looking around. You've booked these animal actors, so they should show up soon. Some part of you starts to hope they will just boycott this absurd event and stay

invulnerable and sublime.

But shortly after, there is this slight glimpse on the horizon. Was this a whale's water fountain? Or was it just your figment? No, there it was again. All the other tourists, whom you so dearly wish to be unlike, rush over to your side of the boat. They try to picture the next event on the limits of what is perceptible. They take a lot of lopsided photos of the empty horizon. "Using flash won't help, stupid!" – your mind is occupied by a fictional discussion with your co-watchers.

The boat turns around to get closer to where the animals are supposed to be. Some 200 meters away, a tail fin can be hypothesized. Now, another boat is showing up. The two boats converge to the fictional whereabouts of the objects of desire.

You're now able to distinguish the people on the other boat and stare at the water's surface through their smartphones' displays. The row of sullen faces on your boat is mirrored by an equivalent row of sullen faces on the other boat, blaming each other for having expelled the whales. A couple of minutes later, the ships are heading back towards the harbour.

Slightly seasick, you get off the boat and get yourself some plastic-wrapped tasteless sandwich while the others enter the whale-watching museum, where a huge plastic whale is supposed to show what you've just been more or less close to.

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“[All these ventures], the analytic as well as the creative one [as well as teaching and learning], 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 [all members of a collective creative process – be it an artistic process or a matter of learning in school] to look at [each other and at the] objects in the external world and see them, [oneself and each other] 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 [artists, learners and teachers interfere] with the process of creation when, in the author’s words, [they] 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 [or student’s or teacher’s part] which leads to premature interpretation, [blind fulfillment of an authoritarian task], closes the road to the unconscious and puts a temporary stop to the spontaneous upsurge of id-material, [authentic expression and autonomous interest.]

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‘, [the artists collective, the students, the teacher, the analysand,] are rewarded by ‚a surprise both in form and content‘.

It is the juncture only that we meet the essential difference between the analytic process, the [process of teaching and learning] 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 legitimate result of a learning process is the experience and understanding for formerly unknown parts of or perspectives on the world, which find their final outlet in new possible courses of deliberate action.]

The creative process in art, on the other hand, ‚remains within the realm in which unknown affects and impulses find their outlet, through the way in which the artists arrange their medium to form harmonies of shapes, colours or sounds‘; whether deliberate action is affected or not is the last issue, the main achievement is, according to the author, a joining of that split between mind[s] and body[s] that can so easily result from trying to limit thinking [and speaking] to thinking [and speaking] only in words.”

(Freud, 1957: p. xiii-xiv, [in brackets: changes & additions])

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I once met a dead whale. Now this is not a metaphor. It happened in 2012 very near by Snaefellsjökull, where

Jules Vernes entrance to the center of the earth is located.

Someone had told me there was a stranded whale at Snaefelsness, close to Jules Verne’s entrance to the centre of the earth. It felt a bit awkward, but together with two other photographers, we tried to find it.

Some four hours’ drive away from Reykjavik, there is a small village nearby, the place we’ve been told to go. We stopped at a gas station and asked the guy there if he knew about the whale. He did and explained the way to us. It was rather easy to find. There was a huge lava field below the volcano at the shore. We left the car by the road and found it after only a couple of minutes of walking. We knew in advance that it was about 15 meters long. The sky, the ocean, and the landscape around were so huge that it actually felt smaller than expected.

We were prepared to bear some maddening smell, but it was not that bad. We approached carefully and realized that somebody had brutally cut off the lower jaw. And there was a wound at its belly where the body obviously burst. But still, it was incomparably beautiful and did not at all make the impression of a corpse. The weight of his mass made it yield on the rough surface of the black lava rocks, building small caves with sea-water puddles inside. Below the wound, red blood and white, thick liquid dripped into the puddles, marbling the water and building small stalactites. I sat down on a rock next to it and let my gaze wander over this hugest body I had ever been allowed to come so close.

I felt tears pressing up – not because I was so sad about the death of this whale, but because I felt so honoured and moved by this intimate and corporeal encounter.

At first, I did not know what to do or how to react. Was photography not too much an act of usurpation? But then I found it to be a way to connect.

I did not dare photograph the whale as a whole. Not because it wouldn’t have been possible technically, but rather because it felt pretentious to take a single picture, claiming to depict what I experienced overall. I started to tenderly caress the creature’s surface with my gaze. My fingers did not touch the whale, but I can still remember a haptic sensation of his wrinkles, scars, and the unctuous texture of the huge wound as if it were glowing from the inside.

Spatial logic dissolved, and I was embraced by the presence of this animal being, which itself transcended the borders of its body and became the sea, the sky, and the lava fields.

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“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 studium, 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 actions.

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 conscious-

ness), 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, 1981: 26f)

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I tend to be categorically disappointed after presenting my work. I was told, that this is normal – but for me it's exceptionally true for screenings of my collaborative film work. I don't entirely understand why. To find out a bit more, I will now phantasize the ideal reaction I am longing for:

There is an uncountable amount of people, all dearly interested in what I am going to show because it feels relevant to them.

They are a diverse and heterogeneous mix of kids, adults, art-professionals, amateurs, musicians, filmmakers, photographers, psychologists, teachers, politicians, natural scientists, profilers, kindergarteners, philosophers, craftsmen and people from professional and social backgrounds that I can't even think of, friends, people I admire, people I dearly love, people I don't know, people I will get to know afterwards, people that I can work with afterwards in inspiring, well financed and prolific ways.

They have heard about the way I work and are keen on getting to experience the artistic articulation of the kids I've been working with, because they want to learn what they have got to say. Because they want to get inspired.

The audience is there to watch all the films in a row, because it's obvious to everybody, that the films need to be seen and add to each other.

During the screening the audience is moved. Some cry because of being so touched, some lough, some don't move or say a word but dive magnetized into what is happening on screen. One or two will leave the cinema furiously. (Some weeks after, they will send me a letter explaining their fury, asking for a personal discussion with me and two particular persons out of the film team.)

After the screening, people applaud but stay seated, because they feel the urge to talk about.

Their contributions go like

I hate this.

I love this.

„This is very inspiring because...

is relevant because...

is threatening because...

is affecting because...

is original because...

is uncanny because...

is problematic because...”

„This is showing quite intriguingly to me that our world needs more ... and less ...“

„I am working on similar questions. I've come to the point that...”

„I am a musician and would really like to record an album with you.“

„I am an architect and would really like to build a space with and for you.“

„I am a philosopher and would really like to write a text about your work.“

„I am a writer. I'd like to write a book with you.“

„I am a teacher and I will found a new school. I would really like you to join me!“

„Watching those films is like examining forensic traces. They trigger stories in my mind, but I'm not sure which reality they belong to.“

„I am impressed by how these many voices form a polychromatic choir singing about places I've never been to“ or „places I had forgotten about“ or „places I always thought I was alone at.“

The passages about living and dead whales have been published in „Shadows“, Booklet #5 in the scope of the Octopus Programme (Miedl-Faißt 2022a: 13)



## Welcome to my woods.

Internal Colloquium April 2019

I still like my aviary, but I don't want you to feel caged so today I'll try it with trees and of course there are birds as well in the forest but also branchings and stable columns and invisibly rooted intersections and tryings to grow up to the sky and risks to fall if a branch cracks and you can get lost or find glades or listen closely to whispering beech leaves and singing tree trunks or you can step into mud holes and you can hate those harvesters but like foresters and you can try to watch the trees grow but probably you will fail.

As this is the internal colloquium today, I've brought some small gifts to each of you.

But let me start elsewhere.

I think the problem is, that we are no mushrooms. Being a big mushroom mycelium we would feel perfectly connected just naturally.

But the way it is, we are not. Not to one another and not to the world. That makes us feel lonesome, scared, jealous, greedy, insufficient, lost.

The mostly defective substitute to being connected are our senses – they create some kind of connection. But to be sure that we're not existentially alone, we need to align our perception. But the bad thing is, we can not just plug and play each others sensual information, but it somehow only works through communicative mediation. We'll never get to solve the riddle, but we can get to feel close. And there are few things more uplifting than this.

First gift, to Martin:

The very special feature in their bedroom was, that it

was really dark. And in the very darkness small multicolored moving creatures appeared silently. I was able to catch them with my hand – if I made a fist, they would get stuck in between my fingers and my palm before floating away.

I really like the german term „bewundern“. Actually, I do like it more than the english term to „admire“. Admire is more adult and more one-way. Somehow a passive-aggressive audience-like, distanced judgement.

Bewundern is a bit more careful. And a bit clumsy. It's a bit like „bekleckern“ – you spill out wonder over something, that will throw the wonder back on you. Bewundern is a reciprocal action – it's not taking anything for granted, rather taking what you perceive as a suggestion. Accepting the riddle.

This is to Fabian:

It was a huge factory building. They hung up satin panels all over, covered the plastic garden chairs with white plastic slip covers, covered themselves with huge plastic dresses and there was a giant chandelier. The latter was not bright enough, so they additionally lit the halogen pipes. They all cried.

Bewundernd is kind of the best state you can be in. Kids are very good at „bewundern“. The more adult you get, the less you're good at bewundern. Not because you don't see the marvellous things anymore. It's more, that you rather stop wondering. You know. You know what is a-ma-zing and what not. And this doesn't have to do too much with you. But this way, the things stay closed up for you. You can judge them, admire them, frown on them, but it's getting harder to make them resonate. As long as you're in a state of

wondering, the borders between you and the world stay rather vague and easy to trespass. Everything is one possibility out of many.

Of course you never know what might pass these vague gaps and opened up doors. You never know, where you might end up, loose your way, get lost. That's why it's also good not to wonder alone. Also because the experience of common wonder makes the world a less lonesome and hopeless place. While „be-wondering“ something together, things can not only travel between the be-wondered thing and yourself but also in between the bewonderers.

This is to Barbara:  
It had been snowing a lot over night.

And this is to Rizki:  
Once I dreamt, I was climbing along the cliffs of a steep coast all around the island, but I was not able to enter.

Actually, there is nothing more uplifting and reassuring your own existence in the world than being able to enter a state of „bewondering“ together with somebody else.

When I met my love, the most touching thing for me was our common talent to crawl sideways over stone ledges like small crabs for hours – observing, examining, be-wondering micro canyons, natural drawings, tiny insects, fossiles or whatever was there to be found for us.

This is to Ralo:  
They are small balls, some of them perfectly round, some slightly squeezed, about as big as a tennis ball. They show up in groups of hundreds. At first, they are kind of invisible, because they take over the colour of

the sand. But once it started, you can't stop seeing them!

I think bewondering really can save the world. If you have ever bewondered something, you'll treat it with respect and care afterwards. Same is true for people you have entered a state of bewondering together with – because you feel connected.

I think, this is how art can help in general. Making art for me means making suggestions to enter states of Bewunderung. And by the way, that's the other good thing about Bewunderung in contrast to admiration: Bewunderung is not blind affirmation. If you wonder, you still ask.

This is to Cordula:  
I wonder if one can do something about it then.

This is to Katarina:  
She told me this was really perilous. I could have lost my sight. I think I scared her. This scared me.

So, if Bewunderung will save us, it's important to teach Bewunderung in school. Actually, I think it would be totally fine, if this was the only subject.

Not to make kids learn to do Bewunderungen (as I said, they are good at this anyhow). Rather to make them as the future society „bewunder“ together and therewith get connected. Practicing „Bewunderung“ together makes me recognize and also makes me feel being recognized.

This is to Marie-Claude:  
I like riding on the train through twilight with the curtains open.

This is to Hinnerk:  
One day, he just broke it with a ball. Because he didn't get what it was. Later on, I decided to still like him. Maybe that was a mistake.

For beginners in collective bewonderings, it's hard to wonder the present together, because you're always too late. You never know, if the other one is really looking at what you are looking at. Using for example a camera or a microphone can help: Some sort of recording machine, or framing machine, some kind of marker. You know where to look at. You can relax and let go in wondering.

This is to Bogomir:  
I only understood after being held down by the swirls of the deflecting wall for about 30 seconds, that one actually can drown in white water.

This is to Anna:  
Cover your right eye and look through the left eye. Then cover the left eye and look through the right eye. Then cover the right eye and look through the left eye. Afterwards cover the left eye and look through the right eye. Repeat the same with your left ear and with your right ear.

This is to Charlotta:  
Yesterday I was walking up to Agnesbrünndl next to Cobenzl. There is this section of the path, where sight opens up and you've got this kind of sublime view over the soft Wiener Wald hills with some glimpses of the city in between. I passed a little boy who had just climbed up a tree trunk. At first, he smiled a bit insecure towards his mother, but she said, „it's ok, you can sing!“ And so he lift his walking stick and from all the power of his lungs he started to sing this Lion King Song.

This is to Barbis:  
Be aware of the resonance disaster!

This is to Michael:  
Did you ever consider just to?

This is to Anahita:  
She was trying to make gigantic ice cubes. Maybe it was, because she wanted to prevent the water from leaving her.

The good thing about recorded bewonderings is, that you can put them together with other bewonderings. They will interact and together depict a very special sort of portrait of the established mycelium. And through this portrait, the mycelium can grow.



## Lost

Public Colloquium May 2019

1

Again, I want to read to you. Still, I am trying to position myself and the films I have produced in open collaborative processes together with teenagers, musicians and fine artists in a place that feels right – which I haven't found yet.

I've been writing about them as footprints of invisible elephants, as some kind of resonance-tracker, as collective dreams or rather nightmares or as the mycelium of collective bewonderings.

Now I thought, probably it's not about positioning the films but about positioning myself regarding the films, as they seem quite reluctant and tend to not follow my instructions.

I learned that you can see them from various perspectives. It sounds like a plan to collect at least some of them. Or to phantasize them at least.

But I'm struggling from the beginning. I can not even grasp my own perspective, as it's kind of many.

Then I wonder what the films are really like for my collaborators. I have the impression, they can't tell themselves. Most of the time, they seem proud and scared at the same time.

I guess you can see the films rather clearly with the caring eye of a parent or teacher. Then you'll be concerned about, what the kids learned. What I could teach them or what they taught themselves. You'll be pleased if you recognize the expression of your child but you don't want to see the abyss – because you still

want to believe there is no abyss in a kids soul.

Or you can watch them as a professional artist and filmmaker. You will recognize, that these films have not been produced by professionally trained people – and you will also look for proof for that, because of course you don't want your profession to be compromised. You'll be relieved to find elements you'd find to clichéd to use in serious, adult work. But these elements will somehow hold you back from taking the film in general serious as artistic expression. You question if this can be teenage work, because you think to know, what teenage work should look like.

Or you can see them as my friend. You know, that although the process was so open, there were so many people involved, it is still a very personal work of mine – because I am the link in between all those other people involved. You might try to recognize me – which might work to a certain extend if you know me and my way of working well enough. Maybe you then will want to tell me, that these films are ,almost'...

2

Last time I said, that it's a shame that we are no mushrooms – being connected through some big mycelium would make things easier I thought. And that collective bewonderings can help making a mycelium grow.

In between someone told me: Verena, maybe your life is all about not getting frustrated about the gap in between you and me.

So I started thinking – as you always do, if someone is



telling you something really insightful: No, here she's so wrong! This gap is frustrating. It makes death such an offense and makes humanity phantasize uncouth versions of an afterlife connecting everything and everyone, while resigning the here and now. Overcoming the gap between you and me seems to me the biggest challenge to render some sense into this life.

But then I thought, this person is mostly right so maybe I should just be more thankful for the gap. And actually yes: What a chance, that I am not you. Actually, this is the reason, for that we can be together.

And maybe one needs to get out of one's mycelium to be able to somehow understand it. Maybe actually the problem is not that we are no mushrooms but quite the contrary...

3

F. keeps telling me, I should write a Manifesto. I feel some deep objection against this idea. But looking for something I could cope with, F. suggested Adalbert Stifter's foreword to "Colourful Stones" which is known as the "Law of gentleness" from 1852. This is my translation to English:

„A whole life full of fairness, simpleness. Overcoming the self, understanding, feeling active, wondering of what is beautiful, joint with cheerful, serene longing, I think is big; mighty roars of the mind, ferocious rage, craving for revenge, burning spirit, coveting actionism, tearing down, violently changing, destroying and meanwhile chucking your life out of excitement, I do not consider bigger, but smaller, because these things are mostly the product of singular, one-sided forces like storms, volcanoes or earth-quakes.

We should try to behold the principle of the gentle,

which guides humanity.

There are forces targeting something singular. They take up and spend everything, if it's useful for the existence and development of the particular. They secure the continuance of the singular and therewith the continuance of everything.

But then – if someone is usurping this one thing, that his being craves for and therewith destroys the conditions of being of someone else, then something bigger enrages in us, we support the weak and oppressed, we restore the state in which one person can exist next to the other and follow his or her human path, and when we've done so, we feel satisfied, we feel elevated and more authentic, than we could ever feel as individuals, we experience ourselves as humanity.

So there are forces, that take effect in the existence of humanity as a whole, that should not be limited by individual interests, but rather should be limiting to the latter.

It's the principle of those forces, the principle of fairness, the principle of solidarity, the principle, that wants everybody to live respected, cherished, safe and sound next to the other, so one can persecute his or her path, to acquire love and wondering from his fellows, being taken care of as a gem, as every human should be a gem for every other human.“ (Stifter, 1908: 7)

4

I wonder what it is that makes me prefer working with kids. I think it's the small time implosions vibrating in encounters with the really young. The younger you are, the more time you have on hand. Not only the more time left to live in a banal sense. But also every

minute is more because compared to the total length of your life, a minute is growing shorter and shorter with every minute you grow older. For a one-year-old, one year is a lifetime. For a ninety-year-old one year is only the 90th part of a lifetime. This is why wondering or bewildering with a child can open up something like the opposite of a black hole.

5

Now the following is another excerpt from Adalbert Stifter's "Colourful Stones" – this time from Crystal Rock in the translation of LEE M. HOLLANDER.

...they would not have been able to conquer their desire for sleep, whose seductive sweetness outweighs all arguments against it, had not nature itself in all its grandeur assisted them and in its own depths awakened a force which was able to cope with sleep.

In the enormous stillness that reigned about them, a silence in which no snow-crystal seemed to move, the children heard three times the bursting of the ice. That which seems the most rigid of all things and yet is most flexible and alive, the glacier, had produced these sounds. Thrice they heard behind them a crash, terrific as if the earth were rent asunder, – a sound that ramified through the ice in all directions and seemed to penetrate all its veins. The children remained sitting open-eyed and looked out upon the stars.

Their eyes also were kept busy. As the children sat there, a pale light began to blossom forth on the sky before them among the stars and extended a flat arc through them. It had a greenish tinge which gradually worked downward. But the arc became ever brighter until the stars paled in it. It sent a luminosity also into other regions of the heavens which shed greenish beams softly and actively among the stars.

Then, sheaves of vari-colored light stood in burning radiance on the height of the arc like the spikes of a crown. Mildly it flowed through the neighboring regions of the heavens, it flashed and showered softly, and in gentle vibrations extended through vast spaces. Whether now the electric matter of the atmosphere had become so tense by the unexampled fall of snow that it resulted in this silent, splendid efflorescence of light, or whether some other cause of unfathomable nature may be assigned as reason for the phenomenon – however that be: gradually the light grew weaker and weaker, first the sheaves died down, until by unnoticeable degrees it grew ever less and there was nothing in the heavens but the thousands upon thousands of simple stars.

The children never exchanged a word, but remained sitting and gazed open-eyed into the heavens. Nothing particular happened afterward. The stars gleamed and shone and twinkled, only an occasional shooting star traversed them.

At last, after the stars had shone alone for a long time, and nothing had been seen of the moon, something else happened. The sky began to grow brighter, slowly but recognizably brighter; its color became visible, the faintest stars disappeared and the others were not clustered so densely any longer. Finally, also the bigger stars faded away, and the snow on the heights became more distinct. Now, one region of the heavens grew yellow and a strip of cloud floating in it was inflamed to a glowing line. All things became clearly visible and the remote snow-hills assumed sharp outlines. (Stifter, 1913: 393)

6

So I assume you are conscious about again being hovering with me within my aviary. Hopefully it's less a

cage and more a space of possible common or at least crossing flights, thoughts, vibrations, wonderings, bewonderings, bewilderings.

Maybe you can see them flutter around, my research questions which are...

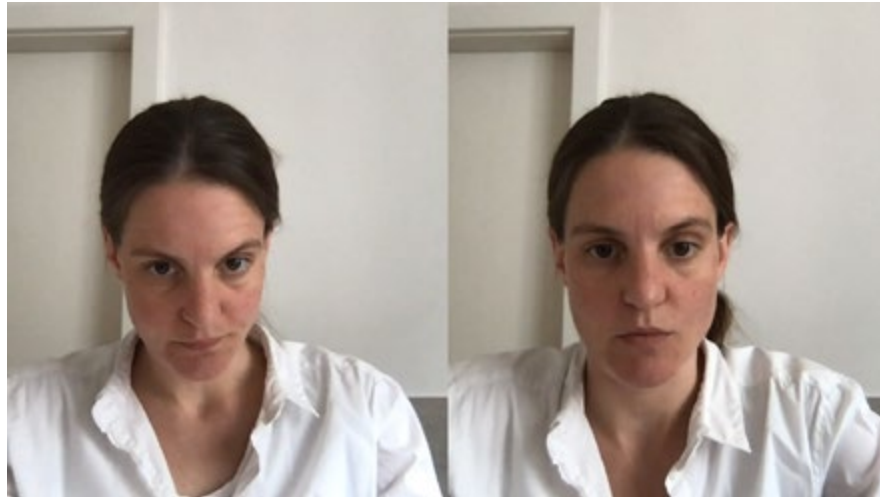
I wonder if some of them are actually too big to ask. Ridiculous to say this could be a “research question”. So big, they are getting banal once outspoken. You might possibly be allowed to claim particular arguments concerning them after a life of having studied philosophy or theology or after having raised 7 children or after having celebrated your 100th birthday (but then you’ll probably have forgotten the question) or after having meditated for seven years in some detached monastery or at least you probably should be male and have some belly of evidence. And glasses.

And on the other hand one can say, these are the questions everybody has to struggle with. Not worth speaking about. How can you fancy yourself having something actual, particular, original, new to say about this.

Anyway. Like could one dare to do a PhD in art and claim: My research question is: What is a good life? What is a human life? What are the responsibilities entangled with being human? What are the responsibilities entangled with not being the only human on this earth? What is the difference between being a tree and a human? What is the difference between being a child and being an adult? What is the difference between things with difference and things without a difference? What is the difference between thoughts and emotions? What is the difference between to be befallen and to experience? What is the difference between artist and audience? What is the difference between teacher and student? What is the difference between things to learn and things to

unlearn? How do we perceive? What is a thought? What is a gaze? Can one see a thought? Can thoughts belong? Are we connected? Should we be disconnected? Is there a link? What happens afterwards? What do you see when you see? Or listen? Or feel? What is the now? How can you think something that you can’t speak? If things can talk to us themselves, do they care about their producers? Who cares? What is it like to be someone else? Can a question be a question if there is no question mark? Can a lot of answers form the question? Can a lot of questions form an answer?

(...)



Screenshot from my Video-Message

## Hello Everybody

Internal Colloquium 2020 during the 1st Covid-Lockdown / Script for Video-Message

Hello everybody! The ditch of a virtually distanced encounter makes me dare to show you a fragile and very personal close-up on a work in progress.

My special force is my personal relation to and my love for the people I am working with.

Establishing relationships that ground artistic collaboration feels like the core of what I am good at and would like to be acknowledged for.

And I am overwhelmed by what is there to be found within these intimate spaces. So I must find ways to share.

My working pattern so far:

1. Establish intimate collaborative situations
2. Explore those newly found spaces
3. Crystallize fragments that to me and my collaborators seem to be shareable
4. Share and speak about those edited fragments.

I am stuck in a dilemma concerning these presentations.

Love is not my special force but my bias, because:  
 1. It is private – nobody else should be bothered with.  
 2. Rose-coloured glasses are bad warrantors for quality.

To admit: This for me is the usp of artistic research: Within classical sciences love is bias and should be cancelled. Artistic research allows me to dig into this special force.

But how shareable is what I am finding there?

Problem 1 (old):  
 Nobody can tell, if our edited fragments are true.  
 Because we cannot listen with the ear of somebody  
 not involved and vice-versa.  
 Would be no problem, but:  
 Problem 2:  
 Sometimes intimacy leaks through, makes the  
 translation feel like a masquerade, and makes people  
 unwillingly get involved into some place they are not  
 invited to. So they are also not willing to get in touch  
 with what seems to be a dishonest façade.  
 Problem 3:  
 It is very hard for me to openly reflect on work in  
 progress, as there are always other people and not  
 seldomly wards involved, whose intimacy and privacy  
 I must protect.

I will now show you, what I am working on right now  
 with my little nephew L..

Obviously now and in the following, I am withholding  
 relevant information, because I must not expose L.. I  
 cannot give you a thorough grasp of our relationship,  
 which is bound within a partly tight net of more or  
 less complicated other relationships, shaping and  
 framing the way, we are able to work.

My sister's family lives in Germany, I live in Vienna. So  
 most of our communication happens through Skype  
 – which makes us somehow strangely prepared for  
 the current situation.

During the past year, L. and I have established a  
 practice of storytelling via Skype together.  
 After having passed the entertaining plains of kid's  
 literature mash ups, L.'s narration became more and  
 more particular. To meet the special quality of his  
 words, I produced an audio piece, which you will hear  
 now. The text I am speaking consists of L.'s original  
 words.

The other week we've had a Skype-date to work on  
 this new project.

We've been working for about an hour. I will now  
 insert an excerpt of our original recorded Skype  
 session. (...)

I did a close transcript of our session and tried to  
 shorten it in a way, that would make his telling a bit  
 easier to understand. Then I recorded the copyedited  
 text and created the following prosecution for the  
 soundpiece. (...)

At this point I would dearly like to show you the  
 Skype video recording of L. listening to what you just  
 heard. By watching him listening, highly concentrated  
 with mouth and eyes wide open and watching me  
 watching him listening 500 kilometers away, quite  
 some part of what is so hard to grasp is getting  
 sensible. But I cannot expose him like that. As a  
 compromise – here is a videostill.

Of course it also would be interesting to analyze the  
 30 minutes before and after our actual “working-  
 time”, when I was trying to prepare a relaxed, safe  
 space for the whole family, so L. and I could work  
 without being disturbed and without him feeling  
 stressed by somebody else's nervousness. And of  
 course, it would open up a lot, if you could see my  
 nephew speaking and acting and if you could see,  
 how we were gently sliding from every day talk into  
 working on our story. But therefore, I would have  
 to ask him and his mother for permission and I am  
 afraid, this could irritate the trusting atmosphere of  
 our future collaborations.

May I now ask you:  
 On the way from the “original skype sequence” to the  
 edited sound piece – what is are gained or got lost in  
 your perception?



Screenshot "Der Bär aus dem Dschungelmeer"

## Dschungelmeer

Public Colloquium 2020 during the 1st Covid-Lockdown / Script for Video-Message (Translation)

My presentation is a collaboration made together with my nephew L.. L. is six years old and does not yet understand English – but I would like to speak with him about what I am saying. This is why I am speaking German with English subtitles.

The title of my PhD in art project is “staging the white elephant, that remains overlooked.”, translated into German something like: I am building a stage for the invisible white Elephant.

I am mostly working in collaboration with kids and teenagers, often in schools. What I'm presumably good at is listening. And creating situations within which the participants dare to fabulate together and therewith create world.

In doing so, particular encounters happen and together things are being created, that seem so precious to me, that I would like to share them with the world outside. But that's difficult: How can experiences, which often are invisible, ungraspable and unpredictable like the proverbial invisible elephant – how can those experiences be made comprehensible, without endangering the therefore necessary grounding of a loving, trusting and safe space?

The scientific resp. artistic references, within which I am finding ways to relate, are hardly the obvious contexts of participatory art, socially engaged art or pedagogy. I can rather relate to questions from within science studies. How do we verbalize/articulate experience? How do we fathom? How do we explain what and to whom? Who is “we” anyhow? Who speaks to whom and who thinks he's right?

Authors like the entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre, the founder of the US-ecologist movement Rachel Carson or Donna Haraway help me, to reflect on my perspectives, practices and questions – even though my praxis is rather not the one of a natural scientist.

In the introduction of her book “Staying with the trouble”, Haraway writes:

„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.“ (Haraway, 2016: 1)

Sounds like a motto. At the beginning of this PhD-programme, I focused on filmprojects with school classes. The most important goal of these projects was, in spite of my role as project leader, in spite of pedagogic and didactic aspects, in spite of institutional bindings – a free, collective authorship.

There was no script, but everybody should at least have the possibility to join as they saw fit. The films which evolved became traces of a specific situation, a unique encounter of a specific group of people at some specific time at a specific place.

But for people who did not participate, this hardly is becoming apparent. I've been trying to understand, what we had done. Which was “my work” and there-





with my responsibility, what has happened why and how, who should be bothered with and who could benefit from. That was terribly complicated. I tried to grasp all the different threads and did a lot of writing, through which I could explain myself and my work more or less.

Now to the project with my nephew L.: Instead of in total 130 students and various artists and musicians, during the last year I've been mainly working together with L.. That is less complicated. It's just the two of us and I love L.. That I like him so much, would be a problem within classical sciences, I would be biased – but within artistic research I am allowed to. I consider this even to be my superpower – L. and me being so close is yielding the ground for our collaboration.

L. lives in Bavaria – so not only in Corona-times, we don't see each other very often – but we are speaking through videocalls. This way, we've been writing a whole book during the past year. Through storytelling, we have been creating a world, within which we're able to be close, even though we're actually quite far apart.

I presume, that on many children's books, maybe even on quite some adult literature, the naming of young co-authors like L. is missing. But I am not only after bringing beautiful new stories into the world while correctly indicating the authorship, but I want to try to share and therewith be able also to reflect on this particular space L. and I have been acquiring throughout our Skypesessions together.

For the last internal colloquium, I imported an excerpt of an original skype-recording. Afterwards, I got quite positive feedback – of course finally one could grasp the way I am working with kids, namely L., which kind of relationship connects us, how we speak to each

other, how things evolve.

But I do not want to publish such an intimate moment and expose L..

This is why this public presentation only contains the shaped product, the way L. and I want to release it or in L.s words: How “the whole world should hear”:

An audiopiece about the djunglesea.

I do hope this audiopiece makes experienceable, where L. and I have taken each other. Where we can meet and linger and be close. A part of the world nobody can take away from us anymore. Never. But we can share.

If it sounds scary, it doesn't mean we didn't have a lot of fun producing the scary moment. But we meant to make that moment scary, not funny.

I spoke L.s text and produced most of the sound, but you cannot divide the product anymore into “my part” and “L.s part”. It is our place.

Here is a short comment from L. concerning our piece:

When asked how L. would tell a friend about our project, L. says:

“It's about a bear who lives in a forest where the seas can flow. And his friends live mainly under water. (...) I made this radio play with my aunt over Skype.”

How can you describe how we came up with it? How we came up with the ideas?

Well, I would put it like this: You have the book Ismya. From this book we got the idea that we could also

make this radio play. That's how I would have said it.“

Do you remember why you thought we should start a new story?

„Well, Ismya was already quite long. But we could still carry on with Ismya actually.

But for now we're a bit busy with Jungle Bear, I'd say. I want the radio play to be about an hour long. Because there are a few radio shows that have two parts or something.“

Do you have any idea who it could continue with?

„I have an idea who could become an important member of the story.“

Aha, so?

„The mole dwarves could dig from story to story.“

Haha, that's great. That's a good idea.

# Das Fliegende Fleuchende Schwebende Kreuchende Wendende Klingende Flüsternde Tastende Summende Hoffende Hörende Hüpfende Hin[...]

Research Week 2020 University of Applied Arts Vienna

Mein Name ist Verena Faißt, ich bin PhD in art candidate. Bisher waren unsere Präsentationen hier meist auf Englisch, heute versuche ich es mal auf Deutsch, but we can switch to English in the discussion of course.

Ursprünglich habe ich Photographie studiert. Zu dieser Zeit konnte ich mir nur schwer vorstellen, wie man Film machen kann, wo schon ein Photo so viel Aufmerksamkeit verlangt. Ich habe dann langsam angefangen, mich dem Bewegtbild anzunähern – meine ersten Filmarbeiten musste man aber sehr genau ansehen um merken, dass sich da was bewegt. Das, was mich aber immer mehr für das Medium Video eingenommen hat, war, dass die Kollaboration dem Medium so sehr eingeschrieben ist. Ein Film ist die Spur eines kollaborativen künstlerischen Prozesses. Durch die Beschäftigung mit Video und Film ist dann der Sound in meiner Arbeit immer wichtiger geworden. So wichtig, dass ich in letzter Zeit die Bilder immer mehr weglasse und vor allem Hörstücke produziere.

Der Titel meines PhD-in-art Projekts ist „staging the white elephant, that remains overlooked“. Die Präsentation heute habe ich ja ursprünglich mit “Unsichtbare Elefanten unter dem Mikroskop” übertitelt.

Hier steht jetzt: Das Fliegende Fleuchende Schwebende Kreuchende Wendende Klingende Flüsternde Tastende Summende Hoffende Hörende Hüpfende Hin[...] Ich halte mich jetzt hier an diesen Text, um nicht verloren zu gehen:

Ist die Nachtigall im Käfig eingesperrt, hört sie auf zu singen. Der registrierte, erlauschte, erinnerte, beschriebene, notierte und mit unterschiedlichstem Instrumentarium wiederaufgeführte Gesang bleibt Übersetzung und wird Interpretation. Deswegen geht die Arbeit nie zu Ende – und das ist (IMHO) der Idealfall für die künstlerische Forschung.

Henke et al. schreiben in ihrem Manifest der Künstlerischen Forschung über das „ästhetische Denken“:

„In Opposition zur kausalen Verifikation, zum Ableiten oder Verallgemeinern verhält es sich seinen Gegenständen gegenüber tastend und berührend. Es gewährt und wägt ab, nicht um sie zu überfallen und auf sie zuzugreifen, sondern um sie anzuerkennen, zuzulassen und damit zur Erscheinung zu bringen, was an ihnen unvergleichbar, verletzlich und auch durch Kunst unabgegolten bleibt.“ (Henke et al., 2020b: 62)

Wohl nicht intendiert, aber die Autor\*innen scheinen damit das Werk des Entomologen Jean-Henri Fabre (1823-1915) zu inaugurieren. Fabre schreibt in seinen umfangreichen Erinnerungen eines Insektenforschers, dass er schon als kleines Kind den noch kleineren Lebewesen sehr zugetan war. Von der Insektenforschung zu leben, war ihm aber lange nicht möglich. So wurde er Lehrer und verfasste Schulbücher. Erst im Alter von 56 Jahren konnte sich Fabre ein Stück insektenfreundliches Brachland inklusive Haus in Sérignan-du-Comtat kaufen. Diesen Fleck, seinen

„Harmas“, verließ er kaum noch und widmete sich bis zu seinem Tod als Privatforscher ganz der Beobachtung und Beschreibung seiner entomonischen Mitbewohner.

Hier ein Ausschnitt über den Kokon der Gelbflügeligen Grabwespe:

„Nur wenige Kokons sind so kompliziert wie ihrer. Außer einem groben äußeren Schlingenwerk gibt es drei deutliche Schichten, die drei ineinandersteckende Kokons darstellen. Untersuchen wir nun die einzelnen Lagen in diesem Bauwerk aus Seide. Da gibt es ein gitterartiges Gerüst, grob und einem Spinnennetz ähnlich, auf das sich die Larve begibt und dort wie in einer Hängematte liegt, um besser am eigentlichen Kokon arbeiten zu können. Dieses unfertige Netz, das hastig gewebt wurde, um als Gerüst zu dienen, besteht aus nachlässig ausgestoßenen Fäden und enthält Sandkörner, Erdkrümel und die Reste des Larvenfestmahls – Grillenschenkel, noch rotgeringelt, Beine, Schädelkalotten. Die nächste Hülle, die erste des eigentlichen Kokons, besteht aus einer filzigen Tunika, hellrot, hauchzart, elastisch und knittrig. Hierhin und dorthin gespannte Fäden verbinden sie mit dem Gerüst davor und mit der nächsten Hülle. Sie bildet einen zylindrischen Beutel ohne Öffnung, der zu groß für den Inhalt ist und daher oben Falten wirft. Es folgt ein plastisches Etui, [...] ebenfalls hellrot, bis auf den unteren, dunkleren Kegel, und sehr fest, wenngleich es mäßigem Druck nachgibt, außer an der konischen Partie, welche dem Fingerdruck widersteht und offenbar einen harten Körper enthält. [...]“ (Fabre, 1879/2010: 98f.)

Als erster Naturwissenschaftler beobachtet Fabre lebende Insekten. Er versucht mit den Tieren zu sprechen und nicht nur über sie. Dabei behauptet er nicht, auf übermenschliche oder geniale Weise einer besonderen Sprache mächtig zu sein. Aber er investiert Zeit

und Aufmerksamkeit. Um den Leser\*innen die Übersetzung seiner Betrachtungen in eigene Vorstellungen zu erleichtern, trifft er anthropomorphisierende Zuschreibungen und spekuliert „über den Instinkt und die Sitten der Insekten“ (Französischer Originaltitel seiner Erinnerungen: „Souvenirs Entomologiques. Études sur l’instinct et les mœurs des insectes“). Seine Anschauung gewinnt Schärfe durch Faszination, seine Sprache hilft, sehen zu können. Trotzdem berücksichtigt er die perspektivische Verzerrung seines menschlichen Blicks, wahrt Transparenz darüber, wo er fiktionalisiert und versucht, die Effekte seiner Präsenz zu reflektieren.

Mit dieser forschenden Haltung, die weniger auf Welt zugreift, sondern vielmehr aufmerksam lauschend und schauend nach Begegnung sucht, ist mir Jean-Henri Fabre ein Vorbild für meine eigene Arbeit.

Im Fokus meiner künstlerischen Forschung liegt aber nicht die Entomologie, sondern die Zusammenarbeit mit Kindern und Jugendlichen. Im Rahmen meines PhD in art-Projekts möchte ich herausfinden, wie es möglich ist, tatsächliche Augenhöhe zwischen Kind und Erwachsener in der künstlerischen Kollaboration zu erreichen und welches Erkenntnispotenzial bzw. welche Abgründe solche Zusammenarbeit birgt.

Zu dieser Frage arbeite ich als externe Künstlerin in freien Filmprojekten mit Schulklassen und als Workshopleiterin im Trickfilmstudio des ZOOM Kindermuseums. In Gesprächen mit anderen Künstler\*innen aus dem Team versuche ich als Teil meiner Forschung zu ergründen, wann und warum ihren Erfahrungen nach die Begegnung mit den Kindern zu „leuchten“ beginnt.

Seit längerem ist aber mein wichtigster Forschungspartner mein jetzt sechsjähriger Neffe L.. In unserem

Gespräch ist naturgemäß Sprache noch nicht selbstverständlich, Klang- und Wortbedeutung werden experimentell erprobt, die Deckungs-Ungleichheit von Gesagtem, Gemeintem, Gehörtem ist offensichtlich, aber nicht beunruhigend. Vielmehr öffnet sich ein phantastischer Möglichkeitsraum für Erkenntnisse – wenn der gemeinsam er-spekulierten Welt mit der gleichen Präzision und Ernsthaftigkeit begegnet wird, wie anderen wissenschaftlich zu beforschenden Untersuchungsgegenständen.

Hauptsächlich erfolgt unsere Zusammenarbeit über Videocalls – unsere Wohnorte trennen 600 Kilometer. Wir erfinden Geschichten und entdecken Welten im Kopf, die wir dann ebenso genau untersuchen und zu beschreiben versuchen, wie Jean-Henri Fabre die Insekten, die er in seinem Harmas beobachtet. Auch im „Dschungelmeer“ – zum Beispiel – gibt es Insekten:

„Die Bienen sind unsterbliche Freunde vom Bär und so klein wie ein Bakter, aber ihr Stachel ist so lang wie ein Haar von mir und so hart wie Granit. Bloß der Bär kann sie sehen. [...] Sie] haben [...] ein ganz dünnes Haus, das aber einmal um den ganzen Wald geht. Um das ganze Dschungelmeer. Und da sind oben ganz viele Löcher drin und jede Biene darf in ein Loch den Honig rein. [...] Um den ganzen Wald geht nochmal ein runder Kreis mit winzig kleinen Bäumchen und genau über diesen Bäumchen schwebt das minikleine Bienenhaus und dreht sich immer so ganz ganz ganz ganz langsam. Die Bienen fliegen mit im Kreis herum und lassen den Honig im Fliegen fallen. Also die fliegen dann ungefähr so schnell, wie eine Hummel während sie schläft. Aber das ist bloß ihr Lager. Die Bienen wohnen in einem winzig kleinen Ball. Die können sich nämlich nochmal viel viel kleiner machen, ungefähr so groß wie ein Achtel Atom. Damit sie sich dabei nicht gegenseitig stechen, machen sie das immer so: Hier ist ein Stachel und hier ist der Körper. Dann kommt

wieder hier ein Stachel hin und berührt den Körper, liegt quasi auf dem Körper und immer so weiter. Bis es so groß wie der Ball ist. Und die äußersten Bienen, die ganz am Rand vom Ball sind, die stecken ihre Stacheln immer nebeneinander aus dem Ball raus, weil sonst wär’s zu wenig Platz. Ein Stachelball.“ (Ausschnitt aus Nirual Kenabru und Verena Faißt: Der Bär aus dem Dschungelmeer, Hörstück 2020)

Zuhören, nachvollziehen, Sprache finden, Verstandenes neu artikulieren, Missverständnisse aufgreifen und produktiv machen – so wird aus dem Raum, der uns trennt, weil immer Unsagbares bleibt, ein Ort, an dem wir einander nahe sein und den wir gestalten können. Raum ist Klang und Klang ist Berührung. Unser Werkzeug ist nicht nur die gesprochene Sprache, sondern alles, was man zum Klingen bringen kann.

Charles Darwin hat angeblich in sein Notizbuch geschrieben: „das Leben eines Naturforschers würde glücklich sein, wenn er nur zu beobachten hätte, ohne schreiben zu müssen.“ (Darwin nach Lepenies 2008: 1125)

Vermutlich erwächst Darwins „Unglück“ vor allem aus der Frustration darüber, dass Beobachtung und Beschreibung eben nie ganz zur Deckung zu bringen sind. Aber ein wissenschaftlicher Anspruch erfordert, es trotzdem zu versuchen. Und die Chance der künstlerischen Forschung ist meiner Erfahrung nach, sich vor dem Spalt zwischen Sprache und Welt nicht fürchten zu müssen. In diesem Sinn kann Jean-Henri Fabre als „künstlerischer Forscher avant la lettre“ verstanden werden.

Und so versuchen auch L. und ich die Räume, die wir gemeinsam erkunden, sprachlich zu erfassen und akustisch zu skizzieren – in der Hoffnung sie damit öffnen und teilen zu können.





## Await What the Stars Will Bring or Moulding the Gap

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Trying to translate L.'s neologism 'versehnt' (adj.), I looked up the etymology of the probably related noun 'Sehnsucht' and its English translation 'desire'. Sehnsucht comes from MHG 'senen' – something like 'painfully longing for'. Desire seems to come from the Latin phrase 'de sidere' – 'await what the stars will bring'. It apparently doesn't have much to do with the German word 'Sehne' for 'sinew', but versehnt sounds like a participle derived from a verbal form of Sehne, with the prefix 'ver-', like in 'verbunden' (bound) or 'verloren' (lost). Rebuilt in English, it would be something like 'for-sinewed'. 'Ich bin versehnt' could be taken literal as: longing has strained criss-crossing sinews tearing and holding my chest together and apart.

### 0. Disclaimer

I would like to invite you to a walk through my artistic research. I'm indwelling the field of the betwixt, the not-yet or the long-gone. Knowledge can assume unusual shapes. Questions can remain a longing. Findings can be ephemeral relations. The projected outcome is situated in the realm of the ungraspable, where 'aesthetic thinking' fosters agency:

„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. 2020a, p. 62)

With this following text, I built a path for us, tracing

back my longing. Please do not expect me to tell you exactly what you will see on the way. Feel free to choose your gaze's direction. It might be helpful to activate your mesopic vision; to consider what the words do show, if you make them shiver, if you see through or only remember them in your back. Convoy me to my findings' habitat; let's await what the stars will bring.

### 1. What I want

One has to be oneself all alone – I've always found that hard to accept. Researching how many people we are currently living on this planet, the internet spits out the number 7.918.159.736. Asking for a number of how many creatures we are in total, including all animals and plants, not even the internet dares to predicate a number. But obviously, "alone" does not exist. Donna Haraway says: "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" (Haraway 2016, p. 18).

I am doing art in order to relate – and to this mission statement, I could relate very well. Although trying to act accordingly, I became doubtful about how one can be 'made kin' to another. Would this not always be intrusive and presumptuous? Having been raised in a capitalistic, post-modern society, I have learned to praise "individual freedom" based on the autonomy of the subject for as long as I can remember as the most precious good I was given; a privilege that I must savour and never compromise. Trying to create relations while upholding my own as well as the others'

autonomy, my aim slowly shifted to finding already existing, ubiquitous entanglements shine, more and more understanding and cherishing my interdependency:

„There are ‘ties that free’: the more the individual depends, the less free [she] is; the more the person depends, the more scope [she] has for action. When [she] seeks to spread [her] wings, the individual constantly comes up against [her] limits, moans and groans, overwhelmed by forlorn passions, there’s scarcely anything left for [her] to do but feel indignation and resentment; when the person stretches out, repopulates [herself], gets some distance, [she] scatters, in the strict sense of the word, [she] shares [herself], mixes, and step by step recovers powers to act that [she] never imagined.“ (Latour, 2021: 88)

Maybe I should clarify: This is not a literature review about, i.e. Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour. But I find a longing akin to mine glimmering through their words; they help to trace and phrase what it makes me do: I try to be present – because if we all are, the present becomes “thick“ (cf. Haraway, 2016: 18); I try to “stretch out“ (cf. Latour, 2021: 88) – to look, listen, sense considerately, and offer some fringes to hold on. I actively, attentively wait, sometimes longer than the moment we share. I let myself be carried along. I try to adopt or at least imagine other perspectives, share choices, find language to express experience. I try to co-create – whether ‘you’ are very young, an old soul, or maybe not even human. I use the term co-creation instead of collaboration or cooperation because it emphasises the co-active making or tending of common world-bits, of meaning and therewith of relations. I presume one always cares for what one is related to; thus, co-creation supports careful handling of the world and all its critters.

„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)

If science helps to understand what things are, poetry helps to understand how to relate to them. The insight one can gain through artistic or poetic research is always intersubjective. Thus, if a poem is “relating the quality of an individual human relationship to a thing, a rock or river or tree“ (Le Guin, 2017: 16), I would suggest that poetry always is co-creation.

“Poetry” in that sense, can imply all sorts of means, tools and media – it is not bound to words. A melody, an image, a conversation, a moment can be poetic as well. Therefore, the term “poiesis” (in the simplified sense of “making something” as opposed to “doing something”) might seem more appropriate for my purposes. But something “poietic”, creative and for-

mative, is not necessarily poetic. A poem, whatever it consists of, actively relates different actors to each other. It becomes an actor itself, continuously transforming and being transformed. Poetry makes human-kind a little bit more like the “Oankali” in Octavia Butler’s science fiction trilogy “Xenogenesis”: The Oankali dispose of sensory tentacles, through which they can connect to each other as well as to any other living being and can communicate and perceive directly without the need of signs or translations. They just become one nervous system sharing pleasure and pain. (cf. e.g. Butler 2022) As long as we don’t develop such organs, we need poetry to be able to understand all our complex interdependencies.

But coping with such entanglement is quite challenging:

„No, really, he [the hero in a novel] can only ease his anxieties by resting his eyes on the moon: for its circling, for its phases, at least, he in no way feels responsible; it’s the last spectacle he has left. If its brightness moves you (tu) so much, that’s because, well, you know you’re innocent of its movement. As you once were when you looked at the fields, lakes, trees, rivers and mountains, the scenery, without giving a thought to the effect your every move might have, however slight.“ (Latour, 2021: 12)

It is a paradox: Realising how dependent we are and how responsible we are for everything that goes wrong on this planet makes being alone even harder to take. Losing our (illusive) independence does precisely not mean getting rid of inconvenient responsibilities:

„And yet, what an evasion it would be to abandon anthropocentrism at the very moment when modernised humans, in their number, in their injustices, in their well and truly universal expansion, are starting

to weigh up the fate of other lifeforms – to the point of being seen, in certain calculations, as the agents of a sixth extinction.“ (Latour, 2021: 106f)

We must remain capable of acting and consciously responsible instead of feeling tangled up in self-pity. But I think experts can help us to work out new ways to relate to the world, and all there is day by day: Children are used to be depending, fearlessly loving and fragile, constantly on the heels of terms and consciousness, yet courageous and almighty. Adults know they are not almighty and have never been, so they hide their fragility, focus on the unambiguous, try to show endurance and resilience.

Obviously, it is beneficial if adults secure daily survival through being adult and caring for the fragile ones. And they can do some things that children can’t do yet. But – and this is the hypothesis my work is based on – it can be agency-expanding to understand children not only as the ones to be taught, educated, and tamed – but as co-creators of present realities. Answering Donna Haraway’s prompt “Make kin, not babies!“, I’d say: “More ooze, less order!”

## 2. How I try

### The Books (prequel to my current endeavours)

Ten years ago, I spent one year in Iceland. After six rather dark and lonesome months, I moved into an Artist Residency in Reykjavik. The days became longer, and I was blessed with some very particular encounters. Among those were Abdolreeza Aminlari and Nico Economidis, an artist couple from the U.S. We spent most of the four weeks together. Walking along the seaside through ever-changing snow and sun, I photographed the two of them countless times while Abdi was taking pictures of Nico. It hurt incredibly when they left. I had



been sipping some of their overflowing gracious love, but they took it all back to New York and left me alone again in the northern cold. To milden my heartache, I made two copies of a booklet with the pictures I had taken, titled so good to see you. I sent one to New York, and kept the other one. It was a gift to them as well as to myself; and a tribute to photography performing a tender gaze.

Following this, I produced a rather extensive series of such two-copied little books. All of them “for” (that is “through” and “to”) other artists, for short-term encounters, for places, for a dead whale, for other versions of myself. They all were materialised relations, co-creations objecting to time, space, and loneliness.

#### Invisible Elephants

I have always earned my living by doing animated film- and sound workshops and working in art education as a museum guide. This is part of my artistic practice, but I also perform a service. People pay to be entertained, educated, occupied. Many of my amazingly talented and inspirational colleagues are seen as and understand themselves as student-workers (no matter what age) – actually pursuing a different career.

That got me frustrated. I am bored being asked, after having held a workshop and leaving a group of people, including myself, glowing, inspired, thrilled: So – what do you actually do? Or: What is your own artistic practice? I decided to search for or create spaces where workshop situations and collaborations with kids and artists would realise the potential I presumed was left unseized. To stage the sometimes mesmerising collective artistic emanations. And to understand and grasp my role in the process better and better – not least in order to make its quality be seen and appreciated.

The Austrian school system is not particularly known for being an institutionalised cradle of artistic freedom, but I decided to occupy as much space as possible and use infrastructure that often lay fallow. The idea was to produce video experiments with school classes that would be radical co-creations, thoroughly woven and coherent but without a script or given topic. Movies like birch tree forests with one big, invisible root system of a collective process, giving as much agency to each individual as possible.

I realised eight such projects. In each case, the starting point was a collectively produced sound piece, afterwards becoming the film’s audio. Every kid would add at least some rustle or knock or bumble or buzz. The sound-artist Werner Moebius and the musician Oliver Stotz helped to make these sound-pieces enthralling and therewith abiding the rest of the process. The visual part then offered almost unlimited possibilities to get involved – which is inherent in the medium of video: Everything visual can become part of the collective piece; even the void, be it resulting from individual opposition and withdrawal or consciously applied as black gaps on the video timeline. Rooted in the sound and supported by me and sometimes other artists involved, the kids developed pictures, performances, choreographies, texts, stage- and light designs, costumes, scouted locations and so on and so forth. All fell into place, as the editing was defined by the previously produced soundtrack.

The projects went incredibly well. The films grew organically and became traces of particular constellations of people, space and time. Everybody involved was amazed seeing the videos on the big cinema screen in the end. But the birch trees grew so well that I got lost in the woods: More than 125 students, around ten other artists, even more teachers – but I felt lonesome. The videos became quite eerie, featuring often

violent pictures the adolescents found foreign and uncanny, although they had made them up themselves. Was it good to stage these films publicly? Would anybody not involved recognise the traces of relation that I saw? Would even the kids perceive the films as glowing collective emanation? Or rather as something merely unsettling? Was it ok to leave them alone with what they/we had done after the end of the project? By being willing to stage and appraise the kids, wasn’t I hiding behind them, pushing them on stage while patronising them? Whatever one does will eventually loop back to oneself – thus choosing to act means accepting to be vulnerable in a certain way. By trying to “give agency“, didn’t I coerce the adolescents to act in systems unfamiliar and conceivably upsetting to them?

If someone gave me money, time, and space, I would (still) love to continue doing and developing similar projects forever because it was so inspiring and exciting to me, and I hope for most of the participants involved. But things did not clarify, rather revealed their twisted and twirled complexity.

#### Welcome to my aviary

I had planned to build my PhD endeavour on those video projects, but I realised that just going on doing video projects with school classes wouldn’t help to proceed. I decided to take a step back and sort things out. The little books I had made in Iceland had proven helpful to find hold through relating to moments, encounters, glimpses of insight. So, I tried to use a similar procedure, sleuthing red lines to find my way through my dizzying woods: Following resonating moments or terms or references, I produced such booklets again, each dedicated to singular threads of thought, not yet arranged or ranked; incomplete.

On my desktop, I organise files (texts, sounds, pictures, videos) of yet nondirectional interest in folders I call ‘Voliere’ – the French/German word for ‘aviary’. I imagine them flying around in there, and each time I pry inside, another snippet will flit by and whisper something new.

Therefrom, presenting my new series of booklets in our group of PhD candidates, I titled this loose collection Welcome to my aviary. I was hoping to enable the others to peer through some window into my fluttering space of thoughts, grasp some thread and relate. To enable this, I dedicated one book to each of my colleagues, taking up some image or idea I had grasped from their presentations. I thought of them as little gifts that would give an idea of how I try to relate. But unasked gifts aren’t always happily received.

Within my short presentation, I had to pull all my yet unsorted red lines together, creating a rather unresolvable knot. And my colleagues found themselves more or less successfully knotted within, caged in my aviary. One of them said – at least – she was touched by my courage to show where I found myself trapped. That was not exactly what I had imagined.

#### Creeping With

I was puzzled. I liked sitting in my aviary. I liked what I did with the kids, and I knew I did a good job, but the how, the what, and the why were so hard to explain and seemed hardly comprehensible.

For quite a while, I had been looking for references in the work of nature writers and scientists, for example, in the work of Jean Henri Fabre. Fabre spent most of his 19th-century-life crawling through his rocky fallow land, following beetles, bees, bugs and everything creeping and crawling around him – instead of

spiking them on needles. His extensive *Souvenirs Entomologiques* became very influential for the development of behavioural science, although during his lifetime, Fabre was struggling with the reproach of being a writer rather than a scientist (cf. Auer 1995: 99f). Instead of taxonomising, he anthropomorphised the insects; not to abuse them as metaphors but to be able to relate to them as a condition to perception and understanding.

Despite my admiration for Fabre – explaining what my work with children has to do with his research could seem a bit farfetched. But:

„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. [...] Compositions are combinations, montages, or “splices” without specific rules, not focused on identities but instead co-presenting the incompatibility of the elements, their nonsense.“ (Henke et al., 2020a: 39)

Jointing Fabre’s commonality with the insects and my take on co-creation, I realise that Fabre, to me, is an exemplary artistic researcher of co-creation (“avant la lettre”, of course). He sincerely tried to picture being the other – while always being conscious of necessarily failing, as in his case, the Other was not even human. Still, he invested inconceivable amounts of time, close attention, and effort to converge to other perspectives (even in a bodily manner by crawling with the bugs and beetles he observed) and of imagination, working unremittingly on conveying his insights through his writing.

I feel very drawn to his way of working, with his effort to go where the beetles are instead of collecting them

in his drawer, waiting hours for some critter’s decision to show up and interact. But working as a teacher or educator, just waiting for kids to show up and interact is a bit difficult. However open and dialogical my concept is, I remain responsible for the bigger scope, for clarifying what can be expected and, at least to some extent, for making things work out. The children’s personal development, their learning, and their agency are what I feel obliged to aim for, regardless of who they are. My personal learnings and insights, if relevant at all, are always related to this prior aim of supporting the ones entrusted to my care.

I must admit, though, that I am constantly looking for moments when my young partners nor I need to fulfil such a given role or task; when I don’t need to define any goal and we can roam side by side through unforeseen places, enabling insights none of us could gain alone.

Artistic research, therefore, appeared as a luxurious space: “The potential of artistic research consists in asserting undisciplinarity, allowing for uncertainty, integrating negativity, and searching for clarity” (Henke et al., 2020a: 18).

But artistic research as fundamental research is risky: You cannot know if all endeavours will yield something useful, insightful, enchanting, or maybe even something disorienting, shattering and dangerous.

Of course, I do not want to lure children or any other collaborator into possibly harmful situations. Therefore, I try to create something like a mobile safe space, which as a professional artist, I can carry, while together advancing to unpredictable grounds. The farther we get, the more we move into unknown fields and the more power it needs to hold such a trustful space lively and open. I anticipate what could possibly hap-

pen next, afterwards and in between and offer protection or guidance in time, if necessary, in a well-dosed manner, without demolishing what has already been achieved.

The most vigorous resource to endure such tension is unconditioned and undetermined relatedness, love. Such bias should be avoided under most circumstances in other sciences and possibly endangers equal treatment in educational contexts. But it constitutes my artistic research superpower.

I find such an approach resonating in Olga Tokarczuk’s acceptance speech for the Nobel prize in literature:

„[...] 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)

#### Being a friend

Trying to grasp and to make understandable, what it is that I am seeking in co-creating with children, I find it helpful to talk to myself as a child. I was not a particularly lonesome child. I’ve had a loving mother, an absent father, caring grandparents, my dear sister, some peers and many trees around.

But I always longed for an adult friend of a different kind. I got furious when I realised that some adults were only pretending to be interested in my endeavours. I was longing for some sort of Peter Pan, joining my childhood adventures, taking them as seriously as I did, but being capable of doing things a child cannot do. Helping to realise fantastic plans, building stuff, or just assisting with endurance if I lost track.

When my first nephew L. was born eight years ago, I decided to try the best I could to be such a friend to him. But I did not expect what a close friend and artistic companion he would become to me.

When he was three, he sent this poem to me:

Ich wünsche Dir schöne Geschenke im Winter.  
/ I wish 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.

I was moved to tears. Since then, we have written a book about a sea-sick pirate, a knight who specialised in spinning fabric for tunics with a curly-haired horse, a lonesome pink dragon, a wolf that longs to be a dragon and miniature omniscient mole-dwarfs digging themselves from story to story. All of them fragile hero\*ines, overcoming what Ursula K. Le Guin named the “killer story” (Le Guin, 1996: 152) and finding affirmation of different kinds.

We made audio pieces about the jungle-sea and its dwellers, with oceans walking over shady grounds and crabs becoming secret letters when they die; about wobbling, spinning, hovering, floating creatures and

critters from other galaxies; bacteria as big as a blue whale, monsters hollowing out the sun, firedogs dying paw on paw; there were trees full of honey and water grounds gloopy like ice; dancing houses with secret mechanics, always close but never touching and a moon made of stardust.

We made animated films that took us to outer space in rockets made of wizened leaves. We've been turning L.'s room into the sparkling kingdom of a jellyfish. We read *The sea around us* by Rachel Carson, examined the sun's surface, recorded mud puddle music and spoke to a fish. Dear L., you gave treasures to me no kingdom could pay, and I tried to find things as precious to give them back to you.

Implying our relation, what we did together, the gifts I made for L. and even more what he gave to me, to my artistic research, to my PhD endeavour, at first seemed to yield clarification: It was just the two of us – not 125 foreign kids, no institution intercalated, no labour contract, no debts and duties.

But I soon realised my dilemmas followed wherever I went: L. and I were just two, but what we did was never clearly framed as a workshop, as something partly public. It had no defined beginning and will – hopefully – have no end. It is always intimate, private, and surprising. Plus, I am not only his aunt, his co-artist, and his friend, but also the sister of his mother, the daughter of his grandmother, the aunt of his younger brother, the sister-in-law of his father and so on and so forth. With all those people and, of course, many more, we both have relations that couldn't be more differing.

If I try to reflect on what L. and I do, the relations to all those people play immense roles. How did I communicate with and involve my sister, making it possible she would trustfully let her young one join me, going to

places that she wouldn't? How do I not lose sight of my dear other nephew, whom I want to be a good aunt for just as well? How do I, often inexplicitly and from afar, anticipate the familiar situation L. finds himself in? Is it helpful for the whole family if L. is occupied for a while or is it rather stressful to set up a skype call for us?

These are rather truisms, but I realised that if I wanted to go deeper reflecting on what I do with L., what we do together, I find myself lost again in birch wood forests of relations even vaster than before. And: There is hardly any thought worse than the apprehension that L. could one day resent me for having published or "used" what we've had together.

Thus firstly, I am working on finding artistic forms with L. that we both agree on and want to share. But it is rather absurd to ask L. for such decisions, so in the end, deciding on what to publish in what way is part of my risk and responsibility. I have to approach imagining L.'s present and future perspectives as well as I can.

Secondly, as a researcher, I am trying to find language and form to make my/our birch tree forest accessible, offering walkable paths, observation decks, ways in and ways out – keeping some areas restricted for privacy reasons or for the danger of getting irredeemably lost.

#### Artists and children

Sitting in my woods again, I tend to still feel lonely. I am L.'s adult friend, but adult friends joining my adventures are still rare. There is hardly anyone stumbling over the same roots and trunks, having the same boles blocking sight, hardly anyone limping with me. Relating being my foremost aim, I'm struggling with the fact that seldomly within academic contexts,

someone seems to be willing to relate. Or is it me, in fact, who can't relate?

When getting lost, lifting one's gaze can help. The stars are far away – and pulling them too close would even be counterproductive because only in constellation with others can they offer orientation. At ZOOM Children's Museum in Vienna, where I have been working for more than 12 years, dozens of inspiring artists have worked with children, mostly throughout their professional biographies. Unimaginable, they wouldn't know at least parts of my woods.

Hence, I now started a book project. My aim is to provide a stage for the amazing artists who have shaped the Children's Museum. I did interviews with 12 colleagues so far, but we did not primarily speak about the museum. To start with, I asked them: What would you do if you would get to spend time with yourself as a child for one afternoon? Where would you take yourself? What would you ask or tell or show yourself?

In all the conversations, we got to some sort of initial art moment in childhood that, in diverse manners, related to what my colleagues pursued as professionals and what they thought and sought. For example, one would build spaces to hide and protect his peers, another collaborates with the sea by drawing in the sand, another was thrilled by a painting of flowers that flies mistook for real, yet another would build little bombs in order to create holes.

I am fascinated by how a person becomes visible through its individual and gradual creation of thoughts while speaking (thinking of "Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden", the famous essay by Heinrich von Kleist). Thus, I would like to just publish those conversations in full length. But of course, no one would ever read, and my colleagues

wouldn't be very pleased either.

Instead, I need to find a narrating voice, retelling those stories, that will grasp the particular voices of my colleagues and open up this sparkling spectrum of kinship between art making and relating to the world as a child or with a child. As I am also rather an amateur in writing, I might do what amateurs (people who love) can do best: I want to write letters to my colleagues, mirroring the spaces our talks opened up for me.

#### **3. Misleading list of learnings:**

I am convinced that the knowledge gained in artistic research cannot be named and listed. It lies in the process, its fluid methodologies, and in the making that can obtain and provide agency. Its strength is rather showing than telling. But if I tell, maybe some will look, so I can show, and what is seen might be handled with care. So here is my doubtful list of certain learnings:

1. Misunderstanding something means understanding something else.
2. Co-creation means standing next to each other, not one behind the other.
3. Be vulnerable and confident.
4. Wisdom is not bound to age or species.
5. The good ones have stone collections (but know, one can never own a stone).
6. Love is my superpower.
7. If you cannot see, listen and hum.
8. If you cannot hear, borrow someone's ear.
9. Always finish your fear up to the last drop as long as it is liquid.
10. The gap between you and me is the reason why we're not alone.

## 0. Post Scriptum

Publishing a text is like writing a letter into the blue, leaving me waiting for your answer. Unfortunately, I don't even know your mailing address, but I hope my words will still be well received.

REPOSITION is an anonymously peer-reviewed publication – so to my great delight, I have already been provided with two densely filled pages of review text, one in German, the other in English. The idea of a peer review is to consider the reviewer's critique to improve the text before publishing. I am very thankful for the considerate feedback and would like to answer those letters. But I am not allowed to get in touch.

Therefore, I couldn't resist starting imagining the persons behind the text. Please excuse my wild attributions in the following – any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental:

In my mind, the German reviewer is a woman working as a philosopher in an academic context. She is a very considerate and empathetic person, with a cabin on some ocean's shore, who, in between reading and writing, likes going for long walks, incorporating the ever-changing colour of the sky into her thinking. Somehow, I imagine she could have written those lines by Rachel Carson:

„One stormy autumn night when my nephew Roger was about twenty months old I wrapped him in a blanket and carried him down to the beach in the rainy darkness. Out there, just at the edge of where-we-couldn't-see, big waves were thundering in, dimly seen white shapes that boomed and shouted and threw great handfuls of froth at us. Together we laughed for pure joy – he a baby meeting for the first time the wild tumult Oceanus, I with salt of half a lifetime of

sea love in me. But I think we felt the same spine-tingling response to the vast, roaring ocean and the wild night around us.“ (Carson, 2017: 15)

Obviously, I feel very kin to her and also well received when she writes:

„Bearing on life and revealing of realities through 'making art' positions the world of aesthetics at the right point: Inside of the art-creating human entity, within social encounter, intersubjective spaces... instead of within art 'itself'. A beautiful project. [thank you!, note VMF]. The project's premise lies in the tension between experiencing contingency ('One has to be oneself all alone') and an articulatory interpretation of the animal social, which is to be resolved through active making kin (Haraway). The focus lies on infantine competences, that refer in a fully positive way to the Anthropinon, namely the human capability to actively create one's relation to reality – in the scope of the presented project, the author is looking for means and ways to uncover and maieuticly foster such abilities.“ (Excerpt from review, translation, E. & O.E.)

I would also like to thank her for suggesting the reference to Nietzsches 'Holy Yea!' as an existentialist-anthropological grounding for my appraisal of working with children:

„Innocence is the child, and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-rolling wheel, a first movement, a holy Yea. Aye, for the game of creating, my brethren, there is needed a holy Yea unto life: ITS OWN will, willeth now the spirit; HIS OWN world winneth the world's outcast.“ (Nietzsche 1999)

I am no philosopher, and for the time being, I can just use this as a beautiful poetic reference. But going further, I think I would tackle “Innocence is the child,

and forgetfulness“ (ibid.). In my experience, adults still tend to deny that children's souls can be abyssal – and to abuse them as a screen for their lost and romanticised insouciance. I try not to do so.

As she suggested, I also peeked into Helmuth Plessner's Levels of Organic Life and his Law of Mediated Immediacy. I totally agree that I am struggling with shifting from the individual observation to the general and with the question of how my insights can and why they should be made accessible for anyone out of reach. Akin to this, the question is whether any structured way of finding new young co-creators exists, not only relying on serendipity and young wise souls appearing in my life. Plessner's thinking is therefore added to my shelf of yet unread but already inspiring books.

The English reviewer feels a bit more distant. I imagine him to be a city dweller, either baldheaded or, if available, wearing a curly and well-trimmed crown of hair. He is very established and cross-linked within academia. He has an artistic background but is very sceptical if the term 'artistic' is used as an excuse for not meeting scientific criteria. He is very good at writing proposals.

Summarising my approach, he endowed me with the term 'methodical vulnerability/uncertainty'. This sounds good, although 'vulnerability' by itself is not what I aspire to. But I am convinced that the admittance of being fallible, doubting and courageously in love is the necessary condition for methodically finding ways to relate.

## 0. Post Post Scriptum

I must admit, meanwhile, I have learned that the excerpts I received had been written by three reviewers – two male, one female. But I have become so fond of my imaginary responders that I decided to keep hold of them for the time being.

Right before giving this text out of hand, I have been talking it all through with L.; fortunately, he is no imaginary nephew but a very focused and thoughtful reviewer as well. He said this is now ready to be published.

Thank you for reading, and all the best to you!

Verena



## Kunstbände

Reflexionen im Rahmen meines PhD in Art zur Begegnung mit Kindern  
als Freundin, Künstlerin, Lehrerin, Forscherin und Lebewesen.

in: Barbara Putz-Plecko: Heterotopien des Künstlerischen: Lehren als künstlerische Praxis.

Da ist ein schwarzes Loch, das ist ein See.  
Der See ist nicht flüssig. Ringsum sind Lavafälle.  
Der See wird immer höher.  
Irgendwann läuft der See über die Lavafälle  
und ist weg.

Da ist ein Monster aus hartem Licht.  
Licht, das man spüren kann.  
Die Tentakeln sind am heißesten.  
Auf jeden Fall ist es böse.  
Es ist ungefähr so groß wie die halbe Welt.

Nicht erst seitdem ich Lehrerin bin, frage ich mich, wie das andere machen: Mit unverbrüchlicher Gewissheit und in Windeseile beurteilen, was richtig und was falsch ist. Was zu tun ist. Was immer schon war, was bleiben oder gehen soll, was anzustreben, was abzulehnen ist. Wenn ich nur einen kurzen Blick in die Nachrichten oder auch nur aus dem Fenster werfe, glaube ich nicht, dass irgendjemandem zu trauen ist, der solche Sicherheit behauptet. Allzu klaren Wahrheiten, Zuschreibungen, Erklärungen, Urteilen haftet oft der betäubende Geruch von Populismus, Manipulation und Gewalt an.

„Der Druck des herrschenden Allgemeinen auf alles Besondere, die einzelnen Menschen und die einzelnen Institutionen, hat eine Tendenz, das Besondere und Einzelne samt seiner Widerstandskraft zu zertrümmern. Mit ihrer Identität und mit ihrer Widerstandskraft büßen die Menschen auch die Qualitäten ein, kraft deren sie es vermöchten, dem sich entgegenzustemmen, was zu irgendeiner Zeit wieder zur

Untat lockt. Vielleicht sind sie kaum noch fähig zu widerstehen, wenn ihnen von etablierten Mächten befohlen wird, daß sie es abermals tun, solange es nur im Namen irgendwelcher halb oder gar nicht geglaubter Ideale geschieht (...) Die einzig wahrhafte Kraft gegen das Prinzip von Auschwitz wäre Autonomie, wenn ich den Kantischen Ausdruck verwenden darf; die Kraft zur Reflexion, zur Selbstbestimmung, zum Nicht-Mitmachen.“ (Adorno, 1970: 95f)

„Das Prinzip von Auschwitz“ ist der Abgrund aller Menschlichkeit. Dieser Abgrund ist nicht Geschichte, ist nicht vergangen, ist weder zuzuschütten noch aufzulösen. Wer die fragilen Demokratien schützen will, wer möchte, dass Menschenrechte mehr sind als eine schöne Utopie, wer sich wünscht, dass Menschen in guter Beziehung zu Mitmenschen und Mitwelt leben, der muss die Widerstandskräfte gegen diesen Sog trainieren. Es ist die damit wichtigste Aufgabe der Schule, als demokratisch legitimierte Erziehungsinstitution, den Kindern und Jugendlichen genügend Kraft und Urvertrauen zu vermitteln, um die Komplexitäten, die Widersprüchlichkeiten und Widerstände in der Welt auszuhalten, damit umzugehen und darin trotzdem handlungs- und gestaltungsfähig bleiben. Gefühlte Ohnmacht lässt verzweifeln, erkalten und die eigene destruktive Macht unterschätzen.

Dass konformistische Dressur nicht zu solcher Autonomie führt, ist in aktuellen kompetenzorientierten Rahmenlehrplänen angekommen. Aber dennoch bedeutet institutionalisierte Erziehung – selbst im besten Falle – zwangsläufig eine Reduktion von Kom-



plexität und bringt das Besondere, das Einzelne, das Andere unter Druck.

Darin sehe ich die große, vielleicht unlösbare Aufgabe aller pädagogischen Berufe: Wie kann ich als Lehrerin, Künstlerin, Wissenschaftlerin oder einfach nur als Erwachsene, zugleich meiner Verantwortung gegenüber der Gesellschaft, mir selbst und den individuell mir anvertrauten Kindern gerecht werden? Wie soll man Kinder vorbereiten auf eine Welt im Wanken? Wie unterrichtet man den Kantischen Mut, sich des eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen und die Fähigkeit, Konflikte auszuhalten und auszuverhandeln? Wie vermittelt man Vertrauen in demokratische Prozesse und gleichzeitig ein Bewusstsein für die Fragilität derselben? Wie das Vertrauen in die eigene Urteilskraft und Kritikfähigkeit? Wie soll man weder schockstarrend resignieren noch in rasendem Pragmatismus Augen und Seele verschließen?

Donna Haraway schlägt mit einigermaßen glaubwürdiger Überzeugung vor: "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". (Haraway, 2016: 18) Die Fähigkeit, „sich verwandt zu machen“, kann man nicht unterrichten, so wie sich „Liebe nicht predigen lässt“. Aber über gemeinsam gemachte sinnliche Erfahrungen, über gemeinsames Denken, Ausdruck- und Sprache-finden, das vorsichtige Abtasten von Ambiguitäten können Verbindungen aufgezeigt und damit eine bewegliche, aber sichere Verortung im Weltgefüge begünstigt werden. Eine solche Form des Abgleichens von Wahrnehmungen, bei der Rezeption, Reflexion und Produktion fließend ineinander übergehen, liegt auch der Künstlerischen Forschung zugrunde. Dieses „ästhetische Denken“ erfordert besondere Methoden, die sich zu denen anderer Fachbereiche grundlegend unterscheiden:

„In Opposition zur kausalen Verifikation, zum Ableiten oder Verallgemeinern verhält es sich seinen Gegenständen gegenüber tastend und berührend. Es [das ästhetische Denken] gewährt und wägt ab, nicht um sie zu überfallen und auf sie zuzugreifen, sondern um sie anzuerkennen, zuzulassen und damit zur Erscheinung zu bringen, was an ihnen unvergleichbar, verletzlich und auch durch Kunst unabgegolten bleibt.“ (Henke et al., 2020b: 62)

In unterschiedlichen pädagogischen Konstellationen und Kontexten habe ich versucht, Kindern in solcher Weise als künstlerischen Forschungspartner\*innen zu begegnen.

Ob ich dadurch eine bessere Lehrerin im Möglichkeitsfeld des Schulsystems geworden bin, sollen andere beurteilen. Aber ich glaube, eine bessere Spielgefährtin und Freundin für Kinder, Künstler\*innen, Wissenschaftler\*innen und manchmal auch nicht-menschliche Mitwesen geworden zu sein. Und ich bin überzeugt, dass das für Schule als Miteinander-Leben-Lernen in diesen ‚unruhigen, verstörenden Zeiten‘ (Haraway) eigentlich die entscheidendste Qualität ist.

Im Rahmen meines PhD in Art versuche ich, meine Einsichten nachvollziehbar zu machen. Der Fokus liegt auf der Analyse meiner sehr persönlichen Beweggründe, Wünsche und Fallhöhen. Ich denke, auch wenn das unpraktisch und schwer kompatibel mit einem auf Objektivität und Allgemeingültigkeit ausgerichteten pädagogischen Ausbildungssystem ist: Verantwortliche pädagogische Arbeit ist immer Beziehungsarbeit mit zumeist überfordernd vielen Anderen. Die einzige Konstante, an der ich arbeiten kann, bin ich selbst. Das zu exponieren ist manchmal unangenehm, nicht immer hilfreich und vielleicht schwierig zu rezipieren. Aber eine Pädagogik, die dem Allgemeinen, dem

Einzelnen und dem Besonderen gerecht werden soll, muss in genau dieser Weise herausfordern.

Das Monster ist auf die Sonne gezogen,  
um sie auszuhöhlen.

Um innen drin kaltes Wasser herzuschleppen,  
damit die Sonne kalt wird  
und wir sie nicht mehr auf der Erde haben.“

Es muss den Eingang zu seiner Höhle  
möglichst klein machen.  
Es schüttet Wasser in seine Höhle  
und will sich durch die ganze Sonne graben,  
so dass nur noch außen eine dünne Schicht ist.

Wenn es den Eingang versehentlich vergrößert,  
läuft das Wasser wieder raus.

Am Beginn meiner PhD-Reise rief ich für mich selbst das Ziel aus, den hierarchischen und patriarchalen Strukturen, die Schule wie Kunstbetrieb prägen, zu begegnen, indem ich eine radikal kollektive Autor\*innenschaft mit Schüler\*innen anstrebte. Als externe Künstlerin arbeitete ich mit Schulklassen an Videoexperimenten ohne Regie und Drehbuch. Wir entwickelten Soundstücke zu denen bewegte Bilder wie düstere Mosaik wuchsen. Es entstanden aufregende, unheimliche Filme, die anders kaum zu erdenken gewesen wären und es war mir ein Anliegen, diese Werke auch außerhalb der Schulnische sichtbar zu machen: Im Rahmen von Screenings in unterschiedlichen Programmkinos in Wien wurden die Filme öffentlich präsentiert. Die Schüler\*innen waren gleichzeitig stolz und irritiert vom Ergebnis: Sie hatten diesen Klängen ihre Stimme gegeben, hatten die Bilder erfunden – trotzdem waren die Filme für sie fremdartig und teilweise erschreckend. So sehr ich versucht habe, mich gestalterisch zurückzuhalten,

keine Inhalte vorzugeben, nur zu „ermöglichen“: Ich habe eine Struktur und eine Bühne bereitet, auf die ich die Jugendlichen nicht gerade sanft gestoßen habe. Sie hatten – wie so oft in schulischen Zusammenhängen – keine Wahl: Selbst der totale Boykott einzelner beeinflusste die Gesamtdynamik, nahm damit Einfluss auf das gemeinsame Werk und alle freiwillig oder unfreiwillig Beteiligten scheinen – sofern sie sich dagegen nicht aktiv gewehrt haben – als Urheber\*innen in den credits auf.

Was die Jugendlichen im Rahmen dieser Projekte erlebt haben, ist glaube ich sehr unterschiedlich, teilweise hoffentlich inspirierend und selbst im Falle einer für einzelne ärgerlichen Erfahrung gar nicht so relevant, wie ich befürchtet oder vielleicht gehofft hätte. Aber ich habe gelernt: Kinder und Jugendliche als Ko-Kreator\*innen ernst zu nehmen funktioniert nicht, indem ich alle gestalterische Verantwortung abgebe, sondern im Gegenteil. Geteilte Autor\*innenschaft bedeutet, auch auf der künstlerischen Ebene selbst teilzunehmen, sich zu exponieren, verletzbar zu machen. Selbst zuerst auf die Bühne zu steigen, die man gerne teilen möchte. Als Künstler\*in, die mit Kindern arbeitet oder als Lehrer\*in kann ich das Risiko der Autor\*innenschaft nur sehr behutsam abgeben und nur dann, wenn meine Co-Autor\*innen das überhaupt wollen.

Immer, wenn das Monster aus Licht Wasser  
aus dem Buchenlaub-Universum holen möchte,  
bespuckt es der Blauwasser-Fritz  
mit seiner Wasserseite.  
Die Feuerseite bringt ihm natürlich nichts.  
Dann kann das Monster für eine Weile  
nicht auf die Sonne.

Nach den monströsen, aufregenden und verwirrenden Videoprojekten versuchte ich ein anderes Extrem. Die

ersten Lockdowns hielten mich und meinen damals noch sehr kleinen Neffen in unseren Wohnungen gefangen. Dank Videocall und einer Bettdecke über dem Laptop trafen wir uns flüsternd in phantastischen Welten von so philosophischer und poetischer Kraft, wie sie nur in genau diesem Moment der verhinderten Nähe möglich waren. Zurückgeworfen auf gerade erst ge- und manchmal erfundene Sprache als einzig verfügbarem Medium, waren unsere stundenlangen Gespräche ein Parforceritt auf der Suche nach Ausdruck, gegenseitigem Verstehen, der Erschaffung einer gemeinsamen Welt und damit Nähe.

Warum ist da dieser tiefe Wunsch, mit Kindern in Verbindung zu sein? Für Kinder da zu sein und gebraucht zu werden? Ich wünsche mir eigene Kinder, seit ich denken kann. Leider konnte ich bisher keine bekommen und die Wahrscheinlichkeit sinkt naturgemäß rapide. Genauer betrachtet ist der Wunsch doch ohnehin egoistisch – make kin, not babies (Haraway). Die Welt steht am Abgrund, es gibt viel zu viele Menschen und mein kleines Leben ist sowieso mehr als ausgefüllt. Trotzdem klafft da eine schmerzliche Lücke. An der Oberfläche gibt es gesellschaftliche Normen, denen ich bei aller Reflexion nur schwer entkomme. Meine Mutter hat mir vermittelt, dass meine Schwester und ich das Wichtigste, Größte, Beste, eigentlich einzig Relevante in ihrem Leben sind. Das war zwar schön, aber eine Steilvorlage für ein Leben und eine Identitätsfindung ohne eigene Kinder.

Ich denke aber, der Sehnsucht dieser besonderen Verbindung mit einem anderen Lebewesen liegt etwas noch Fundamentaleres zugrunde: Ich bin hier und bald wieder weg und das muss ich ganz alleine sein. Die einzige Möglichkeit dieser existenziellen Einsamkeit ein Schnippchen zu schlagen ist es, Verbindungen zu anderem und anderen zu suchen, die die Grenzen des Ichs aufzuweichen vermögen:

„There are ‘ties that free’: the more the individual depends, the less free [she] is; the more the person depends, the more scope [she] has for action. When [she] seeks to spread [her] wings, the individual constantly comes up against [her] limits, moans and groans, overwhelmed by forlorn passions, there’s scarcely anything left for [her] to do but feel indignation and resentment; when the person stretches out, repopulates [herself], gets some distance, [she] scatters, in the strict sense of the word, [she] shares [herself], mixes, and step by step recovers powers to act that [she] never imagined.“ (Latour, 2021: 88)

Ich glaube, ich suche solche Verbindungen in der Begegnung mit Kindern. Auch wenn es keine Nabelschnur ist, die uns verbindet oder je verbunden hat – Kinder sind daran gewohnt, von anderen abhängig zu sein. Das ist aber kein Problem, sondern eher Grundlage ihrer Allmacht: Im bestenfalls vorhandenen Urvertrauen, umsorgt und geborgen zu sein, ist das kindliche Hier und Jetzt offen dafür, in die Ferne zu schweifen, sich zu zerstreuen, sich mit der Welt und anderen Wesen zu vermischen und darüber immer mehr Handlungsfähigkeit und Vorstellungsvermögen zu gewinnen. In Zeiten großer Ratlosigkeit in Anbetracht der Katastrophen des Anthropozäns gibt es wenig Heilsameres als ein resilientes Vorstellungsvermögen: Ich mache mir ein Bild, ich handle entsprechend dieser Vorstellung, gelange aber zwangsläufig immer zu einem zumindest abweichenden Ergebnis, was den Raum des Vorstellbaren aber nur erweitert und mir erlaubt, dem neuen Standpunkt entsprechend, wieder zu handeln:

„Was uns in solchen Momenten erhält, die sich in all den Proben und Improvisationen ereignen, ist letztlich, dass es Momente der Offenbarung sind, Momente, in denen wir plötzlich die Möglichkeit einer Verbindung sehen.“ (Kentridge, 2017: 67)

Das ist glücklicherweise lange her.  
Man kann sehen,  
wie Keulen über die Höhle gestülpt wurden.

Im Jahr 2022 begann ich, tatsächlich als Lehrerin im Schuldienst zu arbeiten. Meine erste Stelle fand ich an einem großen „Elite-Gymnasium“ in wohlhabender Gegend. Mit einer halben Lehrverpflichtung unterrichtete ich gut 200 Schüler\*innen – dreimal die fünfte, zweimal die siebte, einmal die achte und einmal die neunte Schulstufe in „Bildnerischer Erziehung“. Innerhalb weniger Wochen kannte ich sie alle beim Namen. Manche der Kinder verwechselten mich dagegen bis zum Schluss mit anderen Lehrerinnen.

Ich war es gewohnt, im Team zu arbeiten – daher ahnte ich, dass mir der Frontalunterricht im Klassenzimmer nicht gerade liegen würde. Ich organisierte entsprechend für jede der sieben Klassen eine ganze Reihe an Sonderprojekten in Kooperation mit verschiedenen Institutionen und Künstler\*innen – in erster Linie, um nicht allein zu sein. Die Großteils aus reichen, konservativen Familien stammenden Kinder hatten Idealvorstellungen von Leistung, Effizienz und Selbstdarstellung derart internalisiert, dass sie all meine künstlerischen Spiel- und Beziehungsangebote sprichwörtlich und manchmal tatsächlich in die Ecke pfefferten. Waren noch andere Künstler\*innen im Raum, konnten wir ihnen zumindest Vorleben, wie man freundschaftlich und wertschätzend miteinander arbeiten kann. Um die zwei größten Projekte kurz zum umreißen:

Im symbuddy-project, einem künstlerischen Forschungsprojekt im Auftrag des ZOOM Kindermuseums, haben wir versucht, neue Fäden zu spinnen, um sich mit der Welt in Verbindung zu setzen. Zusammen mit Künstler\*innen und Wissenschaftler\*innen bildeten die Kinder der ersten Klassen (5. Schulstufe)

Forschungsteams und (er-)fanden nicht-Menschliche Teammitglieder – die symbuddies. Ähnlich Donna Haraways Symbionten vereinen symbuddies unterschiedliche Fähigkeiten und Kompetenzen der irdischen Flora und Fauna. Mit derart posthumanem Support suchten wir nach fantastischen, möglichen, lebhaften Welten und stellten in einer Online-Ausstellung im Research Catalogue der Society for Artistic Research Modelle des Zusammenlebens in planetarer Solidarität vor. (symbuddy-project.org, Miedl-Faißt & Simku, 2023)

A Museum for Métlaoui war eine Kooperation mit der tunesischen Künstlerin Bochra Taboubi. Im Rahmen einer eigens organisierten Residency bei philomena+ (Wien) arbeitete Taboubi mit den beiden siebten Schulstufen. Métlaoui im Süden Tunesiens ist der Fundort einer riesigen Sammlung paläontologischer Schätze. HeutzutageprägtverheerenderPhosphatabbauLeben und Landschaft in der Region. Der fossile Reichtum ist in Vergessenheit geraten. Bochra Taboubi möchte das ändern und dafür ein unabhängiges, hybrides Museum errichten. Aber wie baut man ein Museum für eine verlorene Sammlung, ohne Standort und Unterstützung? Schüler\*innen aus Tunis und meine beiden Klassen der siebten Schulstufe arbeiteten als künstlerischer Thinktank an einer gemeinsamen Utopie. (a-museum-for-metlaoui.site, Miedl-Faißt & Taboubi, 2023)

Die Ergebnisse des Projekts wurden im Rahmen von philomena+@the Belvedere 21 präsentiert. Zu dieser prominenten Ausstellung kam ein einziger Kollege aus der Schule. Das symbuddy project hatte seinen Höhepunkt im Rahmen einer gut besuchten panel discussion im ZOOM Kindermuseum. Der Evolutionsbiologe und Wissenschaftsphilosoph Johannes Jäger diskutierte mit den Kindern ihre evolutionären Spekulationen. Zu dieser über ein halbes Jahr hinweg ange-

kündigten Veranstaltung kam gar niemand aus der Schule.

Mit den anderen Klassen erarbeitete ich ähnlich aufwendige Projekte. Die intensive Arbeit mit den Kindern war aber aus Sicht der Direktion und Kolleg\*innenschaft offensichtlich bloß schmückendes Beiwerk. Das übertrug sich natürlich auf die Kinder und erschwerte mir die Arbeit ungemein: Was nicht mit Druck und Drohgebärde eingefordert und als klar umrissener Task effizient zu erledigen war, war für viele Kinder kaum vorstellbar. Sich auf einen offenen kreativen Prozess einzulassen, Arbeit zu investieren, ohne das Ergebnis exakt vorhersehen zu können, Ideen gemeinsam zu entwickeln anstatt nur „in den Ring zu werfen“, Schönes im Unerwarteten, im Fremden zu entdecken, ein kreatives Risiko einzugehen – das schienen für viele unmögliche und – fast noch schlimmer – sinnlose Anforderungen zu sein, die nicht einmal im Nachhinein als Erfolg oder schlicht Erfahrung anerkannt wurden. Diese Kinder haben vermutlich nur qua ihrer Geburt schon heute und noch viel mehr in Zukunft ungeheuerliche Gestaltungsmacht – und verweigern es, aktiv zu gestalten, sich ein eigenes Bild zu machen. Noch viel mehr verweigern sie die gemeinsame Gestaltung eines Prozesses und verwechseln „Abstimmen“ mit Demokratie. Das macht mir Angst.

Natürlich wäre es ehrbar und nachhaltig, diese Kinder ästhetisch, sozial und in ihrer Beziehung zur Welt zu erziehen. Ein Jahr lang habe ich mein Bestes gegeben. Länger hätte ich nicht durchgehalten.

Aus dem Monster aus Licht, wurde Glut.  
Wie wenn wir sterben aus uns Erde wird.  
Es könnte sein, dass die Sonne mal  
einen kalten Kreis macht. Dann geht die Glut aus.

Seit dem Herbst 2023 bin ich Lehrerin an einer eher kleinen, weitgehend inklusiven Mittelschule in der niederösterreichischen Peripherie. Die Berufswünsche der Kinder in der vorigen Schule waren Kampfpilot, Anwältin, Architekt oder Ärztin. Die Kinder an meiner jetzigen Schule träumen davon, Friseurin, Kindergärtnerin, Floristin, Bauer oder Automechaniker, ganz selten Bäuerin oder Automechanikerin zu werden. In fast jeder Klasse findet sich mindestens ein Kind, das aufgrund grauenvoller Vorkommnisse nicht mehr bei seinen Eltern leben kann.

Die Schule hat insgesamt knapp 200 Schüler\*innen. Es begrüßen mich alle – auch jene, die ich gar nicht unterrichte – mit meinem vollen Namen. Im Gegensatz zu meiner vorherigen Schule begegnen mir diese Kinder als Person, nicht nur als austauschbare „Frau Professor“. Und sie lassen zu, dass ich ihnen ebenso als Individuen begegne, nicht als anonyme Masse mit Störfaktoren. Das klingt so selbstverständlich – ich hätte gedacht, jeder\*jede wünscht sich, als einzigartiger Mensch wahrgenommen zu werden. Die Kinder am Gymnasium schienen sich dadurch eher bedroht zu fühlen.

Keine\*r meiner neuen Kolleg\*innen hat eine künstlerische Biografie. Sie unterrichten vor allem je ein „Hauptfach“, die „Kreativfächer“ laufen nebenher und es wird sehr gerne auf Bau- und Bastelsätze zurückgegriffen. Erfreulicherweise hat aber (bisher) niemand etwas dagegen, wenn ich das anders mache. Zuallererst habe ich die über Jahre angesammelten Überreste frustriert aufgegebener Bausätze eingesammelt und in einen möglichst anregend sortierten Materialfundus verwandelt. Meine Arbeitsaufträge an die Kinder sind so offen wie möglich gehalten – sie dürfen auf diesen Fundus zugreifen und eigene Ideen verwirklichen. Das eingesammelte Werkgeld verwende ich, um individuell notwendige Materialien zuzukaufen. Ich versuche





zu beobachten, zu verstehen was die individuellen Pläne sind und wenn notwendig unterstützend einzugreifen. Die Kinder wissen dann, dass es sich um ihren eigenen, für mich nicht vorhersehbaren Plan handelt und erwarten nicht, dass ich die perfekte Lösung parat habe. Im gemeinsamen Tun sammeln wir Erfahrungen und tasten uns voran. Auch wenn das manchen zu Beginn schwerfällt, im Endeffekt sind die meisten mit großer Begeisterung dabei. Die Kinder entwickeln im direktesten Sinn Mut, sich des eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen. Sie erdenken eigene Lösungsansätze und vielleicht das Wichtigste: Sie machen die Erfahrung, dass die Ergebnisse nie dem ursprünglichen Plan entsprechen, aber so individuell, einzigartig und gleich an Würde und Wert sind wie die Kinder selbst.

120 000 Sonnenhunde haben das Monster besiegt.  
Mit einer Keule aus kaltem Sand.  
Der Sand kam von der Erde.  
Man kann die Sonnenhunde heimlich beobachten,  
wie sie Sand aus Sandkästen klauen.

Auch wenn ich von sehr konkreten Erfahrungen berichtet habe – dieser Text ist natürlich keine klar umrissene Zusammenfassung eines PhD Projekts,

auch keine umfassende Auflistung von best-practice Beispielen künstlerischer Pädagogik oder Portfolio meiner abgesicherten Werke und Erfolge.

Das Fruchtbare an der künstlerischen Forschung ist für mich, dass ich Zweifel, Irritation, Bedauern und Angst, aber auch persönliche Beweggründe, Affekte und Begierden nicht verstecken muss. Das bedeutet natürlich ein persönliches Risiko – aber was habe ich schon zu verlieren. Die fransigen, brüchigen Ränder meiner Gedanken sind Beziehungsangebote. Schlimmstenfalls bleiben diese unbeantwortet. Aber treffe ich auf ein Gegenüber, das den Mut aufbringt, mir seine eigenen Fransen entgegenzustrecken, entsteht eine Verbindung, die unsere Bruchstellen zu dem werden lässt, was uns zusammenhält und weiter bringt. Dann sind wir weniger allein.

Abbildungen 1-3: Verena Miedl-Faißt, Ohne Titel © Verena Miedl-Faißt 2024

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The following text formed part of my Bachelor thesis for the teaching degree and was supervised by Univ.-Prof. Dr. phil. Ernst Strouhal at the University of Applied Arts Vienna in 2020. Between 2017 and 2020, I completed the teacher training program in parallel with my PhD in artistic research, with both courses of study fruitfully enriching one another.

I have chosen to include this work in the present reader, as it elucidates my approach to artistic research and sheds light on the – at first sight perhaps enigmatic – reference to an entomologist in the context of artistic research with children.

Originally written in German, the text has been translated into English (with some AI assistance). Literature available in published English translations is cited accordingly. German-language works without an official English edition have been translated by me, as indicated.

**Abstract:**  
„Fleuchende Erkenntnis. Über Jean-Henri Fabre (1823-1915) als künstlerischen Forscher“ showcases the entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre (1823-1915) as exemplary artistic researcher avant la lettre. Fabre’s oeuvre is positioned within the modern antagonism of science and art/literature, approached through the reception history of Georges-Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle* and Carl von Linné’s taxonomy. The text aims at a historiography of the debates circling around artistic research.

**Note (2025):** The approach presented here is clearly Eurocentric and informed by a predominantly male historiographic perspective. Within this limited framework, however, Jean-Henri Fabre appears as a modest figure who challenged the hegemonic positions of his time. This should become evident in the text.

Elusive Knowledge  
Jean-Henri Fabre (1823–1915) as an Artistic Researcher

1. Extinction Is Boring

Amid the raging catastrophes of the Anthropocene, identifying with the human species no longer seems particularly appealing. But in *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway urges us not to despair – but also by no means to become indifferent:

“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.” (Haraway 2016: 1)

In other words: there are things a human being can neither understand nor change; it seems necessary, despite all non-availability, to take responsibility and to find a better way of being in the world and with the world. Quite simply because we have no other chance – except perhaps to go extinct. But at least Peter Licht suspects: “Aussterben ist langweilig/sowas, das macht man nicht/damit kommt man weiter nicht.” (Licht 2003) [Translated by the author: „Extinction is boring/That’s not the kind of thing one does/That won’t get you anywhere!”]

Haraway suggests that we should preferably „symbiotically“ link up with other species (cf. Haraway 2016: 8). In „The Camille Stories“, the last chapter of *Staying with the Trouble*, she sketches the utopia of such a symbiosis of human and insect.



Fig. 1

I’m not sure whether the point is more to strengthen appreciation for “the Other” through identification with other species; or rather to lighten the burden of responsibility for the catastrophes of the Anthropocene a little by, for example, wrapping oneself in a bit of the white vest of the endangered monarch butterfly (cf. *ibid.*: 141). In any case, the “becoming-with” of human and insect remains speculative. But there is a role model, someone who came quite close to a “chthonic being” – Haraway’s ideal of an entirely earthly becoming and passing away: For Jean-Henri Fabre, the “beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the minute,” lavishly equipped “with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair” (*ibid.*: 2), were perhaps as near and as foreign as his fellow human beings. It seems to me that he came quite close to a “symbiotic” way of life:



Fig. 2

“In your company, my crickets, I feel the life, the soul of our clod of clay, quiver within me.” (Fabre in Auer 1995: 211, translated from German by the author.)

Of course, that sounds somewhat high-flown at first. But if, like Fabre, you have spent the greater part of

your life lying on your belly in the dust, patiently seeking exchange with hymenopterans, spiders, beetles, and all the other crawling and creeping things, then – so I think – you’re allowed to say so.

## 2. Entomology and Literature

Jean-Henri Fabre was born on December 21, 1823 in Saint-Léons – a small place on the southern edge of the French Massif Central – into poor circumstances. In his extensive *Memories of an Entomologist* he writes that even as a small child he was very much devoted to even smaller living beings. But initially it was not possible to make a living from entomology. So he became a teacher and wrote schoolbooks. Only at the age of 56 could he purchase a patch of insect-friendly wasteland, including a house, in Sérignan-du-Comtat. He hardly ever left this spot – his “Harmas”<sup>1</sup> – and, as a private researcher, devoted himself entirely to observing and describing his entomonic co-inhabitants until his death on October 11, 1915.

He did not retreat solely into an intimate dialogue with “his” insects, however, but also sought to put his subjective observations into words and to share them:

“Others reproach me for my manner of writing, which is not solemn enough – let us say, not academically dry. They worry that a page that can be read without fatigue is not always the expression of truth. If one were to believe them, it would be impossible to be thorough without being obscure. You, all you insects, armed with stings and armored with elytra, take up my defense and bear witness to the intimacy in which I

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Henri Fabre called his land “Harmas.” According to Wiktionary, the term harmas derives from the Occitan *ermás* and the Latin *eremus* (wilderness, fallow land). Beyond that, the term appears – at least online – only as the proper name for Jean-Henri Fabre’s estate.

live with you, the patience with which I observe you, and the conscientiousness with which I record your actions. I give no learned formulas, but report exactly the facts observed, neither more nor less, and whoever questions you after me will receive the same answers.” (Fabre quoted in Auer 1995: 99f., translated from German by the author.)

Observing closely is one thing; finding precise language for what has been observed is another challenge. Charles Darwin was an admirer of Jean-Henri Fabre<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps, alongside his own experiences, he even had Fabre in mind when he noted: “the life of a naturalist would be happy if he had only to observe, and not to write.” (Darwin after Lepenies 1976: 1125, translated from German by the author.)

Jean-Henri Fabre was confronted not only with the hurdle of a research object long judged rather unattractive, but as a scientist he was also forced to defend his style of writing. His texts seem to satisfy literary rather than scientific standards – but why describe with fine words what only a scientifically cold eye can behold without horror?

The twentieth century posthumously provided Fabre with company among entomologically versed literati: Ernst Jünger kept a collection of around 40,000 beetles he had caught himself (cf. Kußmann 2018) and

<sup>2</sup> Darwin cites Fabre’s findings on the digger wasp in „On the Origin of Species”, in the fourteenth chapter on development and embryology (Darwin 1899, online version). Fabre, in turn, wrote about Darwin after his death: “This chapter should be dedicated, in the form of a letter, to the famous English naturalist who now rests in Westminster Abbey, a few steps from Newton’s grave: Charles Darwin. I was obliged to report to him on the results of some experiments which he had prompted me to undertake in our correspondence; this obligation was most agreeable to me. And although the facts, as I observe them, diverge from his theories, I nevertheless feel a deep veneration for the nobility of his character and his sincerity as a scholar.” (Auer 1995, ebook edition, Chapter V “Magnet,” final paragraph, translated from German by the author.)

Vladimir Nabokov also made a name for himself as a lepidopterist – he worked in the entomology department of the American Museum of Natural History in New York and himself discovered twenty butterfly species (cf. Ingold 2001).

For the two hunter-researchers mentioned, the fascination of hunted, impaled, prepared, ordered, and named insects arises from their function as quarry: Nabokov found “in nature [...] the gratuitous delights that [he] sought in art” (ibid., translated from German by the author.) and drew satisfaction from the “triumphal act of naming” (ibid.) when discovering previously unknown species. “Jünger interprets [the] decision to hunt beetles ... as a sign of sovereignty, through which the hunter simultaneously enters a different order of time, compensating ‘time loss’ with a gain in ‘duration’.” [...] Yet the duration, as Jünger sees and pursues it, cannot be had without death. It is the price that must not be named.” (Penke 2018, translated from German by the author.) Neither Jünger’s beetles nor Nabokov’s butterflies survive their examinations. They become passive (because dead) objects of investigation for the artist-scientists. Fabre, by contrast, dissolves the differentiation between subject and object. He tries to interact with his subjects of study in their specific temporality, to speak with the insects rather than about them.

This difference in investigative approach to the world manifests itself not only in direct dealings with the living beings studied – but also in the literary result. For Nabokov, the beguiling lepidoptera are not least an inspiration for metaphors and imagery. Thus “the ‘nymphet’ Lolita is equipped with various butterfly features and is implicitly associated with the ‘nymphalids’, one of the most widespread families of butterflies” (Ingold 2001, translated from German by the author.). Ernst Jünger even sees direct parallels bet-



ween specimen and collector, corresponding to his primarily aesthetic judgment of insects. The beetle hunter, he says, is more steadfast, less temptable, and harder than the easily seduced, flighty butterfly collector (cf. Rüdenauer 2020).

And with Jünger too, the entomological inclination leads to imagery. In his war-glorifying novel „Storm of Steel“ (1920), for example, tanks are said to move like clumsy giant beetles (cf. Rüdenauer 2020).

By contrast, insects assume a more emancipated role for Jean-Henri Fabre: instead of hunting them, Fabre follows the animals. He sets fewer traps than he offers the insects lodgings where he can observe them well. They seem to decide for themselves whether to reveal themselves to him or not. In transcribing his entomological insights, Jean-Henri Fabre draws on all his literary resources, working at language in order to describe the insects. In comparison with Ernst Jünger and Vladimir Nabokov, Fabre even much more clearly makes anthropomorphizing attributions. He voices subjective reflections and sometimes fantastic-seeming hypotheses. But Fabre does not process the results of his investigating gaze into allegorizing prose; rather, his images are tools to enable an aesthetic (sensory) imagination of his entomological observations. In doing so, he reflects on his perspective and makes it transparent.

“And then, my dear insects, if you cannot persuade these good people, because you do not have the weight of the boring, then I will tell them: You cut the animal to pieces, and I study it while it is alive; you make of it an object of horror and pity, and I make it something to grow fond of; you work in a torture chamber, I observe under the blue sky, to the song of the cicadas; you subject the cell and the protoplasm to reagents, I study instinct in its highest manifestati-

ons; you research death, I research life.” (Fabre in Auer 1995: 100, translated from German by the author.)

### 3. Jean-Henri Fabre as Artistic Researcher

Fabre’s descriptions are so precise, and proved so relevant for the development of behavioral research, that they can hardly be dismissed as “unscientific.”

Science, literature, and art (in my view) ideally share a common interest: They attempt to understand and explain the world better – in order thereby to enable a better being-with-the-world as a human, in Donna Haraway’s sense. Of course, very different means and methods are employed, which accordingly have very different possibilities, potentials, and limits. But even if the connection between art and science may sound to some ears about as possible and probable as a symbiosis of human and butterfly, there does seem to be potential in it.

What this potential might be is hard to grasp – probably because it is located exactly where experience remains fleeting, intangible, and unavailable.

Fabre was not the first naturalist who, in the search for knowledge-giving verbalization, struggled with the supposed incompatibility of literature and science: the work and reception history of the *Histoire Naturelle* of Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and the classification system of Carl Linnaeus can be seen as the x- and y-axis – or perhaps rather the zero point – of this antagonism.

The spectrum of discussions has not become any smaller since then. However, since the early 1990s – arising more from the visual arts than from literature or the natural sciences – artistic research has established itself as an independent field of research.

What artistic research can or should be is highly disputed. What, in the current, in many respects aporetic debate, hardly appears is a historicization of the problem. I would therefore like to propose understanding and describing Jean-Henri Fabre as an exemplary hands-on artistic researcher *avant la lettre*, and thus to attempt an approach to the potential of a connection between science and art.

### 4. Jean-Henri Fabre between Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and Carl Linnaeus

#### 4.1. Less Eternity, More World

Paul Valéry captured with great elegance the “pickle” Fabre labored over all his life: „Was man nicht festhält, ist nicht. Was man festhält, ist tot.“ (Valéry 2017: 80) [Translated by the author: “What one does not capture does not exist. What one captures is dead.”] The butterfly sits on the blossom only for a moment. To grasp it in detail in that second seems nearly impossible. A photograph, as well as the prepared corpse of a butterfly, makes it possible to contemplate and describe its form at leisure and with precision – but only its dead form. The essence of a butterfly, however, is characterized primarily by its fluttering. In the end, an immobilized butterfly perhaps functions better as a Rorschach test than as the object of lepidopterological study.

And perhaps the best thing that can happen to a research subject is, in any case, to find out something about oneself through the study of “the Other”:

“‘Studies on the instinct and manners of insects’ is how Fabre subtitled his ‘Memories’. How wonderfully old-fashioned ‘manners’ sounds and at the same time how ‘human’. For the description of these beings so fundamentally different from us, as if they were merely unknown peoples whose manners and customs are



Fig. 3: Jean-Henri Fabre in: Auer, 1995: 64

not entirely foreign to us after all, constitutes much of the charm of his *Souvenirs entomologiques*. His studies are sustained by an unflagging amazement at the miracle of life that these winged, armored, or furred beings reveal to him, the entomologist: ‘The insect shows us life in its inexhaustible variety. It helps us to

decipher a little the darkest of all books: the book of our self.” (Nettling 2020, translated from German by the author) So writes Astrid Nettling in a review of the tenth and final volume of „Erinnerungen eines Insektenforschers“, published in German for the first time in July 2020. The undertaking of getting to grips with life in its elusiveness is doomed to fail – or as the phenomenologist Max van Manen says: “You’re always too late in grasping the now.” (van Manen 2014) Ernst Jünger’s beetles are as dead as Vladimir Nabokov’s butterfly specimens. They move only through the ordering, grouping, sorting hand in the collector’s sense. The nightingale in the cage ceases to sing. The recorded, overheard, remembered, described, and re-performed song, using all manner of instruments, remains a translation with an unavoidable translation error. If one possesses faith in a Creator who stands above all errors, who had something in mind in creation and – be it vengeful or benevolent – acts infallibly, then one can probably live quite contentedly with such human inadequacy without becoming overly nervous.

With the Enlightenment, however, these unquestioned convictions were lost. Maturity rather than pious fear of God was required in order to explain the world and to locate human beings – or increasingly the individual – within it:

“How do we acquire knowledge? What is right, what is wrong? Are we nothing but machines, programmed by genetics and chemistry? Or do we have free will? Or do we perhaps only think we have free will? Where do we come from? Where are we going? These questions were posed again and again, sometimes playfully, sometimes philosophically. There is no doubt that this path, begun by the Enlightenment, of pressing and endless questioning about the nature of the human being and the motive forces of human action meant a radical rejection, or at least a distancing from the

classical doctrines about the human being, his duties, and his destiny that had been preached for centuries as the only truth in the confessions and catechisms of all Christian churches.” (Porter 1990: 89f., translated from German by the author.) Essential to this ‘new’ encounter with the world is precise observation, one’s own experience as a prerequisite for gaining knowledge – empiricism – which presupposes a strict separation of observing subject and observed object. If, however, one lives only in the waiting room of a hopefully better – or at least not much worse – afterlife, it may be advantageous not to perceive the here and now too precisely.

If the hope for or fear of an afterlife increasingly falls away, there is nothing left but to take a close look at what is there – quite literally under the magnifying glass. And the closer one looks, the nearer, but also more diverse and unfathomable, appears what is to be seen. Thus the claim to be a “universal scholar” was soon unmasked, in the bright light of the Enlightenment, as a pious wish. Since the eighteenth century, the different possibilities of gaining knowledge have differentiated more and more into highly specialized branches of science. For the researching mind it seems difficult to accept that it is indeed possible to explain (parts of) the world, to map it, to measure it, to construct systems, to describe, to admire – but that the “ultimate cause of nature and its properties” (Kirchner, Michaelis: 442, translated from German by the author.) remains beyond reach. Hence in the great encyclopedias of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries one finds a whole series of descriptions of “physico-theologies” that sought, through the observation and study of birds („Ornithotheologie”/“ornitho-theology”), stars („Astrotheologie”/“astro-theology”), thunder („Brontotheologie”/“bronto-theology”), or fishes („Ichthyotheologie”/“ichthyo-theology”) – that is, by means of the developing natural sciences,

which made the existence of God ever more improbable – to prove that very existence after all (cf. e.g. Pierer’s Universal-Lexikon 1857).

This longing for a power that has everything under control and can somehow deal with the unfathomable for humans seems to have something to do with the relationship of science and art – their incompatibility as well as their mutual attraction.

Science and art make different mistakes in attempting to grasp the world – and avoid different mistakes. The hope of achieving something by bringing both “dimensions into a common cultural space” (Lethen 2013: 42, translated from German by the author) that remains hidden to each alone was and is close at hand.

But since the origins of the modern concepts of science and art in the “saddle period” (“the phase of transformation from Old Europe to the ‘modern world’,” Langewiesche 2016, translated from German by the author) in the eighteenth century (thus named by the German historian Reinhart Koselleck), it has apparently been rather rare to actually unlock the potentials of bringing the two “dimensions” together.

Rather, they seem to weaken or almost exclude each other. In „Erweiterung des Atemvolumens. Über die notwendige Reibung von Kunst und Wissenschaft“, Helmut Lethen even argues for a strict separation:

“Without separation of the arts from the sciences and the standards of their institutions, there can be no friction. Art and science are not separate domains but rather two dimensions in a common cultural space. The field of tension between these dimensions must be maintained with all our might. For in every contact between the two spheres one arrives at the certainty of their great difference.” (Lethen 2013: 42, translated



Fig. 4: The peacock from Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle des oiseaux*



from German by the author.) And yet, time and again, there have been and are artists/scholars who can be assigned to neither one “dimension” nor the other.

#### 4.2. Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and Carl Linnaeus

Wolf Lepenies describes the genesis of the antagonism between literature and science by means of the career and reception history of a handful of paradigmatic authors and scientists of the eighteenth century in his book of the same name (1988). The following sketch of the two ur-protagonists of the dilemma, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and Carl Linnaeus, follows Lepenies’ argument.

Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, was a star author of the eighteenth century; his *Histoire Naturelle* was an absolute bestseller for many decades. In the process “he belonged to the last naturalists who could increase their scientific reputation because they also found recognition as authors; he is the first whose standing declined because he was allegedly too much a man of letters and too little a scholar.” (Lepenies 1988: 63, translated from German by the author.) Buffon was an aristocrat, favorite of Louis XV, member of the Académie française, a self-confident naturalist – and a remarkable stay-at-home:

“Fifty years of his life, he wrote proudly, he had spent in his study, in a tower of the Burgundian Montbard, where he dictated his extensive work.” (ibid.) For Buffon, the description of natural phenomena, not their systematic classification, was paramount. “Style” played an outstanding role: “Le style est l’homme même,” he formulated in his inaugural address to the Académie française:

“To have style is not a question of talent, but rather of

effort; style is the order and movement one knows how to give one’s thoughts. To write well requires important subjects and compelling reasons to occupy oneself with them; there is no acceptable style that is independent of the insights and opinions it expresses. The style of a writer and scientist becomes beautiful only through the truths it proclaims.” (Buffon after Lepenies 1988: 65, translated from German by the author.) Buffon thus emphasized the challenge not only to gain “insights” but also to “express” them, to find language, to understand, and to explain. This reflection on what today would be called the “presentation of scientific findings” (cf. Lepenies 1988: 66) seems up-to-date – but his critics accused him of confusing style with truth. The “style buffon” was, they said, pompous, garrulous, and actually boring because it brought no new insights, only hymnically overwhelmed (cf. ibid.: 67, 72). On the contrary, it was even dangerous and harmed science, for Buffon wrote in a style “that cannot be imitated without identifying with the thoughts and convictions of its author. Impressed by Buffon’s periods, one will strive to write as he does, and in the effort at stylistic mimicry will not advance natural history as a field by a single step.” (Condorcet after Lepenies 1988: 69, translated from German by the author.) The eulogy to Buffon by the French philosopher and politician Marquis de Condorcet in 1790 was obviously no longer very laudatory. His habitus as a noble scholar, who put on golden cufflinks to write, was still en vogue under the Ancien Régime – but with the French Revolution at the latest, reverence for such gestures was lost (cf. Lepenies 1988: 76). “The naturalists of the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary epoch” (ibid.: 71, translated from German by the author) saw in the simple pastor’s son Carl Nilsson Linnaeus “a more suitable patron of natural history” (ibid.). Actually, after his elevation to the nobility in 1756, his name was Carl von Linné, but an aristocratic title was no longer a desirable distinction for an upright scientist – thus his

adherents stuck with the bourgeois form “Linnaeus” (cf. ibid.: 71). Linnaeus/Linné spent his life (1707 to 1778) mainly in Sweden, whose provinces he explored on several expeditions. He became famous for his taxonomic classification system, which continues to shape biology and botany today.

Buffon regarded the “nomenclateur du nord” (ibid.: 71) and his fixed systems as his antipode and adversary. At the latest with the founding of the Société d’Histoire naturelle in 1790, whose goal was “the enforcement and dissemination of the Linnaean method” (ibid.: 70, translated from German by the author), “the results of natural history were measured only against Linnaeus,” as Lepenies writes: “his classifications supposedly corresponded to reality so exactly as if he himself had been present at creation.” (ibid.: 70, translated from German by the author.) His style was considered “natural,” in contrast to Buffon’s “artificial” manner of writing. The Marquis de Condorcet also wrote a eulogy for Linnaeus, and praise evidently came more easily to him here than with Buffon. In Linnaeus’s work “many ideas [are] expressed in few words” and “significant truths in a style at once noble and simple” (ibid.: 72). The greatest hallmark of quality was that one could not “read” his work at all, but only “study” it – thus it must be of particular scientific importance. His language did no violence to nature; it was expressive, precise, rich in images, and rhythmic (cf. ibid.). Linnaeus was a model ur-empiricist: he did not sit only in the study, but conducted investigations, observed closely, and thus developed his strict classification system. Only: the closer he looked, the more clearly, bit by bit, emerged what Darwin later wrote in his notebook: “Man is no exception.” (Darwin in Lepenies 1988: 50, translated from German by the author)

[I imagine it like this: humans are nothing better than, for example, a beetle. Yet God created humans – and



Fig. 5: Sketch from Linnaeus’s diary: Lapp carrying his boat.

then, presumably, everything else – in his image. So perhaps there is a beetle sitting on the cloud and not a bearded old man. That must be hard to accept for believers of any denomination.]

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg took this in stride in the eighteenth century: “God created man in his own image – that probably means man created God in his.” (Lichtenberg 2000: 73, translated from German by the author) – but Linnaeus, for all his worldliness, secretly struggled with the theodicy problem. Judging by the unpublished letters to his son, including a collection of cases adduced as evidence of divine retribution (*Nemesis Divina*), he did not have a cheerful life:

“If you wish to be happy, then know that God sees you ubique. [...] Trust no one in the world; tomorrow he is your enemy. [...] Listen, say nothing; injure no man’s name nor honor.” (Linnaeus after Lepenies 1988: 13f., translated from German by the author.)

While Buffon did not waste much time actually experiencing “phenomena,” dictating in his study, Linnaeus was always in search of experiences that confirmed his system – and thus perhaps experienced only what





Fig. 6: Linnaeus on the Swedish 100-krona banknote

fell within the (more or less consciously) set bounds. Both seem to have preferred to avoid experiences that could have called their models of explaining the world into question. That, however, is not something one can accuse Jean-Henri Fabre of. Questions to which he could find no clear answers seemed to interest him most of all.

### 5. The Memories of an Entomologist as a School of Perception

Fabre's *Memories of an Entomologist* are too extensive to do them justice here. In what follows I will concentrate, by way of example, on a chapter about the yellow-winged digger wasp. From it I wish to draw out individual aspects and relate them to the positions of Buffon and Linnaeus.

Jean-Henri Fabre would probably also have been a good filmmaker – no surprise, given the mobility of his subjects. In any case, his capacity for empathy benefits not only his investigations but also his readers when he leads up to the protagonists of the chapter with a humming, warm, honey-scented “establishing shot”:

“It is at the end of July that the Yellow-winged SpheX tears the cocoon that has protected her until then and flies out of her subterranean cradle. During the whole of August she is frequently seen flitting, in search of some drop of honey, around the spiked heads of the field eryngo, the commonest of the hardy plants that brave the heat of the dog-days in this month. But this careless life does not last long, for by the beginning of September the SpheX is at her arduous task as a sapper and huntress.” (Fabre 1879/1916: 59)

The carefree but alas so quickly passed youth of the wasp, who exchanges the security of her cocoon for the glittering, sweet heat of life – these attributed states of a tiny insect during the dog-days are not sober scientific hard facts. Nor are the commonalities of her nest with a cradle, and her identity as miner and hunter, unproblematic; but Fabre helps the entomologically uninitiated reader to perceive his subject at all, creating empathy and thus interest. On soil thus prepared, he demands time and attention:

“One must observe such a settlement for several days to form an idea of the restless busyness, the hecticness and jerky movements of these industrious miners.” (Fabre 1879/2010: 75)

To translate a sensory impression into an idea requires experiences on which one can draw, impressions that can be activated. As a human being, unfortunately, one possesses only the experiences of a human. Seeing insects as if they were “merely unknown peoples” (Nettling 2020) – in this case “industrious miners” – thus simply serves as an exhortation to look (to learn to look).

“But here, with a loud buzz, comes a SpheX who, returning from the chase, stops on a neighbouring bush, holding in her mandibles, by one antenna, a

large Cricket, several times her own weight. Exhausted by the burden, she takes a moment's rest. Then she once more grips her captive between her feet and, with a supreme effort, covers in one flight the width of the ravine that separates her from her home. She alights heavily on the level ground where I am watching, in the very middle of a SpheX village. The rest of the journey is performed on foot. The Wasp, not at all intimidated by my presence, bestrides her victim and advances, bearing her head proudly aloft and hauling the Cricket, who trails between her legs, by an antenna held in her mandibles. If the ground be bare, it is easy to drag the victim along; but, should some grass-tuft spread the network of its shoots across the road, it is curious to observe the amazement of the SpheX when one of these little ropes suddenly thwarts her efforts; it is curious to witness her marches and countermarches, her reiterated attempts, until the obstacle is overcome, either with the aid of the wings or by means of a clever deviation. The Cricket is at last conveyed to his destination and is so placed that his antennæ exactly touch the mouth of the burrow. The SpheX then abandons her prey and descends hurriedly to the bottom of the cave. A few seconds later we see her reappear, showing her head out of doors and giving a little cry of delight. The Cricket's antennæ are within her reach ; she seizes them and the game is brought quickly down to the lair.” (Fabre 1879/1916: 66f.)

She is exhausted, she lands clumsily, her work is difficult, she is disconcerted, she tries and fails, she solves her task cleverly, she emits a cry of joy. That is a story one gladly follows, a protagonist with whom anyone can identify. But as much as the wasp's state may be mere speculation that holds the reader's attention – Fabre observes precisely and describes the insect's behavior objectively and accurately.

In the process he reflects on the effects of his presence

and the perspectival nature of his report (unlike some ethnologists). The limits of facticity remain transparent; speculation serves the graspability of an image.

“(…) at the moment when the SpheX is making her domiciliary visit, I take the Cricket left at the entrance to the dwelling and place her a few inches farther away. The SpheX comes up, utters her usual cry, looks here and there in astonishment, and, seeing the game too far off, comes out of her hole to seize it and bring it back to its right place. Having done this, she goes down again, but alone. I play the same trick upon her; and the SpheX has the same disappointment on her arrival at the entrance. The victim is once more dragged back to the edge of the hole, but the Wasp always goes down alone; and this goes on as long as my patience is not exhausted. Time after time, forty times over, did I repeat the same experiment on the same Wasp; her persistency vanquished mine and her tactics never varied. Having demonstrated the same inflexible obstinacy which I have just described in the case of all the SpheX-wasps on whom I cared to experiment in the same colony, I continued to worry my head over it for some time. What I asked myself was this: Does the insect obey a fatal tendency, which no circumstances can ever modify? Are its actions all performed by rule; and has it no power of acquiring the least experience on its own account? Some additional observations modified this too absolute view.” (Fabre 1879/1916: 72f.)

Fabre records an interaction, a game: sometimes he acts and the insect reacts, sometimes he reacts to the behavior of the wasp. He tries to speak with the insects and not only about them. In doing so, he does not claim, in a magically superhuman or ingenious way, to command a special language. He invests only time, attention, and – as far as possible – empathy. He uses his hypotheses, fictions, and attributions to give

his observations a frame, in order to be able to see at all – not to prove that he is “right.” Even if the active exchange, the communication with the insect, is to a large extent fiction, this fiction, in my view, is nonetheless an expression of respect for life, for the other species, in the Harawayan ideal.

“The murderess soon makes her arrangements. She places herself belly to belly with her adversary, but in the opposite direction, grasps one of the threads at the tip of the Cricket’s abdomen with her mandibles and masters with her fore-legs the convulsive efforts of his thick hinder thighs. At the same time, her middle-legs hug the heaving sides of the beaten insect ; and her hind-legs, pressing like two levers on the front of the head, force the joint of the neck to open wide. The Sphex then curves her abdomen vertically, so as to offer only an unattackable convex surface to the Cricket’s mandibles ; and we see, not without emotion, its poisoned lancet drive once into the victim’s neck, next into the joint of the front two segments of the thorax, and lastly towards the abdomen. In less time than it takes to relate, the murder is consummated ; and the Sphex, after adjusting the disorder of her toilet, makes ready to haul home the victim, whose limbs are still quivering in the throes of death.[...] No, if a fertile imagination had allowed itself free scope to invent a plan of attack at will, it could not have contrived anything better ; and it is open to doubt whether the athletes of the classic palestra, when grappling with an adversary, boasted more scientific attitudes.” (Fabre 1879/1916: 77ff)

Murderesses with cruelly perfect plans of attack, the faces of opponents twitching in the throes of death, straightened clothes, a venomous stiletto, and gladiatorial schools: in Fabre, insects are not only romantic heroines but also fearsome warriors with terrifying murder techniques. Not only in the description of the

peaceful flower meadow but also in the description of deadly combat one could, for all the precision in describing bodies, processes, forms, and movements, forget that Fabre is not speaking of humans here. Unlike an “apology of crime,” such as the Marquis de Sade derived from a naturalistic social doctrine (cf. Lepenies 1988: 39, translated from German by the author), it seems here as if Fabre’s *Memories of an Entomologist* were rather holding up to humans an entomological mirror: gladiators were forced to perfect killing – for the amusement of the rulers. The digger wasp kills better – but not for entertainment; rather for provisioning her brood:

“With her, the dirk is not a show weapon, unsheathed to satisfy revenge : revenge, the so-called pleasure of the gods, but a very costly pleasure, for the vindictive Bee sometimes pays for it with her life ; it is an implement for use, a tool, on which the future of the grubs depends. It must therefore be one easy to wield in the struggle with the captured prey; it must be capable of being inserted in the flesh and with-drawn without the least hesitation, a condition much better fulfilled by a smooth than by a barbed blade.” (Fabre 1879/2010: 83f)

“To produce this paralysis the Hunting Wasps employ precisely the process which the advanced science of our own day might suggest to the experimental physiologists, that is to say, they injure, by means of their poisoned sting, the nerve-centres that control the locomotory organs. [...] Despite the appearances that might make us think otherwise, the Crickets immolated by the Yellow-winged Sphex are no more dead than the Weevils pierced by the *Cerceris*’ dart. [...] the Sphex-grubs, which live for less than a fortnight before shrouding themselves in their cocoons, are certa” (Fabre 1879/1916: 80f)

The deciphering of the paralyzing procedure of the pemphredon would likely have been hard to achieve with Buffon’s desk method. Whether Linnaeus could have made such an observation can only be speculated about – but the suspicion suggests itself that his fear of God would have clouded his gaze when contemplating such monstrosities.

Fabre, however, (mostly) succeeds in allowing himself to be neither deterred by horror and disgust nor carried away by the magic of wonder. Rather, his gaze gains sharpness through fascination; his language helps one to see. Like a brilliant art mediator he describes the cocoon of the digger wasp:

“The egg hatches after three or four days. A very delicate wrapper tears asunder; and there lies before our eyes a feeble grub, transparent as crystal, a little attenuated and as it were compressed in front, slightly swollen at the back and adorned on either side with a narrow white thread formed of the principal trachean ducts. The frail creature occupies the same position as the egg. Its head is, so to speak, planted at the very spot where the upper end of the egg was fixed; and all the remainder simply rests upon the victim, without being fastened to it. The grub’s transparency enables us readily to distinguish rapid undulations inside it, ripples which follow one upon the other with mathematical regularity and which, beginning in the middle of the body, spread some forward and some backward. These fluctuating movements are due to the digestive canal, which takes long draughts of the juices drawn from the victim’s body.” (Fabre 1879/2010: 86f)

Buffon and Linnaeus do recognize that contempt for insects might be worth reconsidering. For Linnaeus, in keeping with his time and logic, nature is divine revelation for humans:

“To the maintenance of the natural equilibrium all species contribute, including low and despised ranks of living beings such as insects, in which the perfect mechanism of God-created nature perhaps reveals itself most clearly.” (Linnaeus after Lepenies 1988: 31, translated from German by the author)

Thus what makes the despised insects a bit more worthy of esteem is their perfect submission to God’s plan. And Linnaeus attempted with his system to decipher the divine plan – in the end he credits the insects with the fact that they follow his classification system correctly. Perhaps, though, they do so only because he does not look more closely. Buffon’s entomological gaze, by contrast, is thoroughly worldly and, above all, anthropocentric:

“Many of the [insects], indeed, are venomous and harmful; most of them appear to us, at first sight, unclean and repulsive. All this instills in us a kind of disgust. But are there not countless families of insects that serve the human race to the most obvious advantage? And how many benefits could we not still derive from a host of other genera if we took more careful interest in their manner of life and their natural constitution? – The knowledge of insects? [emphasis in original] – What entitles us to deny it to them?” (Buffon 2008/1749-1803: 1082, translated from German by the author)

But it does not bespeak deep interest when “the insects” get not quite three pages in the whole *Histoire Naturelle*.

To this day insects are perceived as those living beings that are most foreign to humans and thus uncanny. The designation of a person as a “parasite,” “freeloader,” or “tick” is an expression of deep contempt. Such linguistic dehumanization of groups of people often

leads to horrific genocides.

Fabre achieved what Buffon merely claimed: he presents the larva of a digger wasp, otherwise perceived only with disgust – or not at all – as a living gem – sensitive, sentient, graceful, and sublime. But he does not confuse style with truth; language and style are not ends but teaching aids in the school of perception:

“After devouring the last Cricket the larva sets about weaving its cocoon. The work is finished well within forty-eight hours. Henceforth the skilful worker, safe within her impenetrable shelter, can yield to the irresistible lethargy that invades her, to that nameless mode of existence, neither sleep nor waking, neither death nor life, from which she will emerge, ten months from now, transfigured. Very few cocoons are so complicated as hers. It consists, in fact, in addition to a coarse outer network, of three distinct layers, presenting the appearance of three cocoons one inside the other. Let us examine in detail these several courses of the silken edifice. There is first an open woof, of a rough cobweb texture, whereon the larva begins by isolating itself, hanging as in a hammock, to work more easily at the cocoon proper. This unfinished net, hastily woven to serve as a builder’s scaffolding, is made of threads flung out at random, which hold together grains of sand, bits of earth and the leavings of the larva’s feast: the Cricket’s thighs, still braided with red, his shanks and pieces of his skull. The next covering, which is the first covering of the cocoon proper, consists of a much creased felted tunic, light-red in colour, very fine and very flexible. A few threads flung out here and there join it to the previous scaffolding and to the second wrapper. It forms a cylindrical wallet, closed on every side and too large for its contents, thus causing the surface to wrinkle. Next comes an elastic sheath, distinctly smaller than the wallet that contains it, almost cylindrical, rounded at the upper end,

towards which the larva’s head is turned, and finishing in a blunt cone at the lower end. Its colour is still light-red, save towards the cone at the bottom, where the shade is darker. Its consistency is pretty firm; nevertheless, it yields to moderate squeezing, except in its conical part, which resists the pressure of the fingers and seems to contain a hard substance. On opening this sheath, we see that it is formed of two layers closely applied one to the other, but easily separated. The outer layer is a silk felt, exactly like that of the wallet which comes before; the inner layer, the third layer of the cocoon, is a sort of shellac, a shiny wash of a dark violet-brown, brittle, very soft to the touch, and of a nature apparently quite different from the rest of the cocoon. We see, in fact, under the microscope that, instead of being a felt of silky threads like the previous wrapper, it is a homogeneous coating of a peculiar varnish, whose origin is rather singular, as we shall see. As for the resistance of the cone-shaped end of the cocoon, we discover that this is due to a plug of crumbly matter, violet-black and sparkling with a number of black particles.” (Fabre 1879/1916: 94f.)

A structure of silk, a spider-web-like scaffolding like a hammock, then a delicate tunic, connecting threads to the next envelope, a case of compressed layers of silky felt and dark-violet, brittle lacquer, rounded and ending in a blunt cone: Fabre’s admiration for his object of study tends (mostly) not toward narcissistic flights of language, but toward sensuously precise poetry. His description of the three-layered construction, the forms, the different degrees of elasticity, the various surfaces and coloration, the functional modes of the digger-wasp cocoon sound like a gospel of bionics. But Fabre was also a child of his time, and at times his description slides into preaching:

“You pretty SpheX-wasps hatched before my eyes, brought up by my hand, ration by ration, on a bed of

sand in an old quill-box; you whose transformations I have followed step by step, starting up from my sleep in alarm lest I should have missed the moment when the nymph is bursting its swaddling-bands or the wing leaving its case; you who have taught me so much and learned nothing yourselves, knowing with-out teachers all that you have to know: O my pretty SpheX-wasps, fly away without fear of my tubes, my boxes, my bottles, or any of my receptacles, through this warm sunlight beloved of the Cicadae; go, but beware of the Praying Mantis, who is plotting your ruin on the flowering heads of the thistles, and mind the Lizard, who is lying in wait for you on the sunny slopes ; go in peace, dig your burrows, stab your Crickets scientifically and continue your kind, to procure one day for others what you have given me: the few moments of happiness in my life!” (Fabre 1879/1916: 105)

He speaks like a divine creator to his flock, as if he had created the insects in his harnas, his Garden of Eden – merely to please him. With people he perhaps had a harder time. The insects could not defend themselves against his affection or – in my imagination – responded with a pleasant indifference.

Nevertheless his work bears witness to an honest respect for all life. “You have taught me so much and learned nothing yourselves, for you know without a teacher everything you need to know!” For all his anthropomorphizing of “his insects,” Fabre is perhaps one of the first naturalists at least to try to adopt another perspective and to overcome anthropocentrism – not by denying that he is human, but by attempting, from a human vantage point, to see, interpret, and understand the non-human for its own sake – and to share what he has discovered. What I have once observed so closely, what I have perceived, whom I have listened to, what I have shared and with which I have identified myself – I cannot meet with indifference. That this

was also Fabre’s conviction is evident from his dealings with children and his teaching methods, which he applied both as a schoolteacher and later as the teacher of his own children. “He trusted their curiosity, their natural spirit of research, answered their questions, made them his collaborators” (Auer 1995: 221). For example, he writes about his little son Paul:

“My diligent hunting companion knows like no other at his age the secrets of the cicada, the grasshopper, the cricket, and above all the dung beetle, his great joy. At a distance of twenty paces, his sharp eye distinguishes the burrow of an insect from accidental mounds of earth. His sensitive ear hears the fine chirping of the grasshopper, which for me is only silence. He lends me his eyesight, he lends me his hearing; in return I give him the ideas, which he attentively gathers, looking up at me with his big blue eyes. Oh, what a marvelous thing is the first blossoming of the intellect; that beautiful age in which guileless curiosity unfolds, investigating everything! And so little Paul has his aviary, where the scarab shapes his brood balls; his little garden, the size of a handkerchief, where beans sprout, often pulled from the earth to see how the root lengthens; his small forest plantation, where four oaks rise just a hand’s breadth high, still armed at the side with their nourishing acorns. That brings variety after the dry grammar, with which he also manages quite well.” (Fabre quoted in Auer 1995: 221, translated from German by the author.)

Fabre rarely derived moral insights from his observations. Rather, he applied his own moral convictions in order to enable and expand for himself, for his children, and of course for his readers a perception and imagination of the non-human. It can, of course, only be benevolently assumed that after the horrors of the genocides of the 20th century he would no longer have written sentences like “stab your crickets



Fig. 7: Digger wasp on our balcony

scientifically, and preserve your kind” (see above) so casually. But the attitude expressed in Fabre’s oeuvre seems hardly susceptible to ideological misuse in the sense of an unrestrained Social Darwinism: Jean-Henri Fabre’s writings enable empathy with “the Other.” He is a teacher of listening, perceiving, remaining curious – and thus his *Memoirs of an Entomologist* become a lesson in respect for all that is not “I.”

## 6. Conclusion – Bringing the Incomparable and the Vulnerable to Appearance

The starting point of this work was the question of where Jean-Henri Fabre is to be located in the spectrum between art and science, and what the potential of artistic research in his sense might be. My aim was to historicize the current debate in this way. The difficulties in attempting to “symbiontize” the advantages of scientific and artistic work have changed little since Buffon’s first critics – yet the risk is once again

being taken more often. Since the early 1990s, “artistic research” has tried, at least partly successfully, to establish itself as an independent field of research.

The field, however, remains disputed and contested – as always. Silvia Henke, Dieter Mersch, Thomas Strässle, Nicolaj van der Meulen, and Jörg Wiesel describe in their *Manifesto of Artistic Research. A Defense Against its Advocates*, published in spring 2020, the dilemma of the relationship between art and science, and the difficulties of positioning artistic research from a contemporary perspective.

Buffon and Linné are not mentioned, nor Jean-Henri Fabre and his insects. Yet Henke et al. seem unconsciously to inaugurate Fabre’s work when they write about “aesthetic 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. 2020a: 62)

Scientific thinking seems incompatible with such a claim: a strict separation of subject and object is, in the sense of scientific integrity, not to be questioned. Yet with Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle – insofar as that can be understood by a non-physicist – the impossibility of such a separation of subject and object seems even scientifically proven. Still, the illusion is upheld that the researching subject must stand above and independent of its object. That this illusion is fatal is becoming clear at breakneck speed: humans over- and underestimate themselves at the same time, both individually and in globally networked societies, when they still fail to recognize that their access to the

world has grave and irreversible consequences – for the world, and therefore also for humans as part of this world.

Jean-Henri Fabre demonstrates a different attitude toward his object of study – very much in the sense of Henke et al. If “artistic research” succeeds in functioning as a corrective in the attitude of the sciences toward their objects, and thus in humans’ approach to the world, then its perhaps most important potential becomes evident. Life escapes in every moment. Whoever wants to discover something about it must learn to fly along.

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## Figures:

Figure 1,2,7:

Find: Florian Miedl, photo: Verena Faißt

Figure 3:

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Figure 4:

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Figure 6:

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