

Artistic Knowledge Production and Neurodiversity: Visual Thinking between Nazi Heritage, Ableism Debates and University Reforms

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I think in clusters (as maybe all of us do). I think in clusters, and even if it's not certain that this preverbal cluster-thinking can be called thinking at all, it enables me to imagine the single elements—or even the whole structure of argumentation of this performance—within a split second. It is an extremely visually based way of thinking that—if I wanted to show to you the dynamic process in a three-dimensional space which I see before my mind's eye when thinking of this lecture—would probably be demonstrated best with the help of a computer animation. But I'm not a computer. I'm a human interface. And, therefore, using such old school means like sound and gestures instead, it would approximately look like this:

[voice + hand movement]

hm

hmm

Hmm

hm

hmm

hm

What I'd like to do most is to make the same movement with my hand like the witch called Prue from the TV series Charmed, and simply transplant the single aspects of this lecture directly into your heads:

tschak

tschak

Tschak

tschak

tschak

tschak

Or even better, all of them at once:

Hmmmm.....tschak!

Impossible, though. Equally impossible: to show everything that I see in the form of pictures. Further impossible: to express everything that I want to say in words. Therefore I do performance lectures.¹

Dis / Abilities

I am actually not good at talking. Not just one, but even numerous artists were excusing themselves for their lack of verbal mediation qualities as soon as they were handed the microphone to give an artist talk at dOCUMENTA13, the inspiring 2012 edition that focused on a lecture programme almost as much as on the art itself; a phenomenon that even infected a theorist who left a question simply unanswered with the explanation that she wouldn't be able to speculate

in English.

One can assume that hardly anyone drew a connection between that kind of "handicap" and something that took place only a few hundred meters away, the *Disabled Theatre*, a performance piece that was also part of the dOCUMENTA programme, and a cooperation of the artist Jérôme Bel with Theater Hora Zurich and its actors with cognitive disabilities. (Bel, 2012.) No, it is a total "no-go" to compare these two phenomena. Not only out of respect towards the actors' "deficits"—purposely presented as such—that meant a far bigger challenge in daily life than those verbal processing inabilities that visual artists experience when using the “foreign” language of a writing system. From an artistic point of view, the reason for an unawareness of these parallels might have been rather an unconsciously egoistic one: The trauma of the defamation of modern art by the Nazis still feels very present these days in Germany in artistic debates. The privilege of finally being entitled to speak of having an extraordinary observational skill rather than being branded as sick and “degenerate,” as the Nazis called it (“entartet“), has been achieved in too hard a fight in the years of discursive reconstruction after 1945. In other words, this newly gained—respectively re-gained—approach towards the arts is under no circumstances allowed to be related to deviations potentially touching upon the realm of so-called “physiological markers,” as it forms an opposition to these within the history of the discourse on the notion of art.

A victory over the atrocities of an extreme essentialism on the one side, this understanding of artistic production bears still a problematic, the trap of a dichotomic structure that is leading to yet another reductionism: within this construction, which represents the top end of the rise of the individual since the age of enlightenment, the artistic genius represents an ideal, a god-like use of a human body and talents, almost not from this world; whereas disability is a harsh reminder of physiology, of anything mingling too much with the deficits of a *meatspace* reality—and the arts can be quite afraid of that. The reservation of the fine arts in this regard, which

seems to derive from the concern to lose their special status of uniqueness, appears somewhat inadequate if one is familiar with famous accounts like that of Foucault (2007, 2011, 2015) or Agamben (2002). Disabilities, and especially deviant minds, have had a very specific role in society throughout the ages. This, of course, was mostly still a position based on discriminations and—even in societies providing the role of an out-lawed “Untouchable” or a “Sacred Fool”—was not necessarily sparing humans with disabilities from violent deaths, as Agamben brilliantly describes in his analysis of the *potere sovrano*.

From the perspective of the arts, though, the fear of essentialist attributions appears weirdly obsolete nowadays. These no longer pose any more than a purely discursive threat, and by no means a real one as in the 1930s and 40s. Moreover, numerous varieties of what was previously coined as “abnormal” have recently seen a re-evaluation of their formerly marginalized status thanks to activist achievements and the introduction of minority politics into academic discourses. In short: Should one dare to draw a parallel between artistic thinking and disability, those aspects once stigmatized as flawed might meanwhile be even earmarked as value added.

The audience of the *Disabled Theatre* became aware of this when watching the electrifying dance solos that the actors devotedly delivered. When peeking into the spectators’ faces during the preview week, it was noticed that some of the artists deemed “fully functioning” seemed to be watching with yearning looks of subtle envy—a very interesting situation: a rare real life encounter of two groups of art professionals both capable of acts of high art production but being placed at the opposite ends of a social narrative that keeps the hierarchies in our society running.²

³Time for a reassessment of this relationship.

Participation is Key or When King Crip Vogued Captain Ludd Style

If we shed light on the socio-historical background of the concept of “disabilities,” interesting connections become apparent with the emergence of wage labour and its regulation in poor and labour laws. Whereas accounts of laws for dealing with individuals in need have already been delivered from Canaanite, Lombardic, or Byzantine times, the official measurements for relief of the poor were still quite heterogenous on the European continent until the beginning of the industrial revolution and urbanization, from the church to gentry and the rising bourgeoisie fulfilling their duty with various motivations. (Clemens, Dort & Schumacher, 2014.) A decisive moment occurred in the UK, when a social crisis arose after the split of the Anglican church from Rome and the closing of the monasteries that confronted Henry VIII with the necessity to organize the donation of benefits henceforth by administrative management. The famous category of the “able-bodied” was born and experienced numerous definitions and adaptations in a large number of poor and labour laws—from the Tudor Poor Laws in the 1530s up to “HartzIV,” as the fusion of the last stage of benefits for the unemployed and general welfare aid is called in Germany today. Whoever was (is) somehow able to work, had (has) to work. This way “idleness” became a crucial criterion, and the concept of work-shyness became the center for the narrative of unemployment as self-inflicted phenomenon. In context of the ongoing industrialization, this narrative started to replace the model of the hard-working *as god-fearing* member of society. Inclusion has always been fancy, as long as profit could be generated from it.⁴

Many centuries and disrupted disability rights movements later, the emergence of modern communications technologies—not least is the internet—has helped the agglomeration of theories and transgression of barriers caused by the handicap of living in a meatspace reality.⁵ Inspired by Gay Pride, the Afro-American civil rights and the second wave of the women’s rights

movement, fueled by theoretical works on the constitution of "normality" and the increasing medication as a control instrument, emancipation movements in the field of disabilities experienced a decisive upswing from the 1980s, in Germany even from the late 1970s onwards. (Foucault 2007, 1974/75; Zola, 1983, 1972).⁶ Now enabled in a closer-knit exchange, activists have managed to free themselves from being mere study objects. "Nothing about us without us!" is the international motto for shaking off the eternal fosterling status and developing an emancipatory analysis of the notion of "disability."⁷ By replacing the traditional "medical model," an individual and healing-oriented approach, with a social model of disabilities, and promoting the concept of disability cultures, the fairly young discipline disability studies has successfully shown that "disabilities" are not about bodily deviations but derive from the construct of a supposed "deficit." This thorough, gradual peeling of the sociological onion of misprojections even allows for reversing the perspective from "just" researching and empowering a marginalized group to understanding the social majority—an achievement that can be especially credited to the cultural model, as proposed by Anne Waldschmidt (2005). The traditional categorization of the disabled as not being "whole" and potentially "curable," in contrast to other human traits that are a target of discrimination and are regarded as unwelcome and yet not alterable, placed "disability" with an even larger obviousness in the vocabulary realm of "deficiencies." It was then possible to develop a terminological clarity that provides a unique opportunity: the reminder that exploiting an alleged "deficit" for justifying an exclusion is common to all forms of "othering." While civil rights movements have often been stuck in the segregating perspective of identity politics in past years, it is exactly the claim for inclusion from the disability rights movement that might be suitable to help overcome the deep divisions currently existing between them, facilitate the development of a more complex and joint self-image based on a collective view of the shared history of discriminations, and thus, with concerted effort, more effectively demasking the narratives and mechanisms of society.⁸ "Inclusion for all[!]," as activist Rebecca

Maskos charmingly and boldly called her speech at the 2017 Pride Parade in Berlin, seems an appropriately unifying slogan for this purpose (Maskos, 2017).

In Germany and Austria, this very specific case with its still quite recent killings of an estimated 100.000 patients in the so-called “t4-Aktion,” the infamous Nazi “euthanasia” programme, people with disabilities often find themselves in a strange nirvana between discriminated, forgotten, and unsupported on one side and being untouchable on the other. An impressive performative act making this situation visible was carried out by a member of the legendary “Krüppelbewegung” (“cripple movement”) in West Germany, which was mostly active in the 1970s and 80s. It was the movement’s goal to be unexpectedly ungrateful, loud, and angry, quite different than what one had attributed to people with disabilities who had so far been hardly seen in public life or, if so, only in involuntarily passive roles. The provocative slogan of the group for the year 1981, officially promoted as “International Year of Disabled Persons,” was “Jedem Knüppel seinen Krüppel” (“To every cripple his own club”). The activist Franz Christoph took this motto to an extreme, which should get him into the history books of German politics. At the “Reha Messe,” the trade fair for rehabilitation technology in Düsseldorf in 1981, he slapped Germany’s Federal President Carstens publicly with his crutches. In a captivating account of his attack and the motivation that drove him, Franz Christoph later dissected the relationship of structural violence and misappropriated resistance, and pointed out the “stifling” “climate of gratefulness.” 170 years after the shamelessly complacent letters of the Luddites and four years before Donna Haraway’s “oppositional,” “pervert,” and “non-innocent” Cyborg entered the stage, Christoph signed as “bitter, recognition-craving, psychiatric ward-worthy, criminal, and particularly unappreciative cripple” (Christoph, 1981; Haraway, 1995, 1985)⁹ Yet, his deed remained fully unprosecuted. Very much different— as an anonymous article in the same edition of the “Krüppelzeitung” [“cripple magazine”] complained—from the equally public slap that Beate Klarsfeld, a German-born journalist famous for investigating and prosecuting Nazi

crimes together with her husband Serge, had landed in the face of German Federal Chancellor Kiesinger 13 years earlier. In an accelerated procedure, she received the maximum sentence of one year which she only escaped thanks to her French nationality (Anonymous, 1983). Christoph wasn't even sued.

The reason for this is intuitively and easily comprehensible, and yet worth a closer inspection. The still widely-spread idea of “disability” is a fear causing, negative scenario, a dystopia totally opposing the life concept of the majority of people. Disability is considered worse than death: social death. A person with disabilities is therefore regarded as so pitiable that the common belief is that, in an awkward equation, one has to at least free such a person from the responsibility of their own actions. As society leaves people with disabilities alone with their problematics on a structural level, the overall feeling of guilt produced in such cases of individual confrontation is a paradox. A relief from this is sought for by a belated “redistribution” of their suffering so-to-say, is the example of leaving such a deed like Christoph's attack unprosecuted. The consequence of taking the guilt away from the aggressor with a disability, though, is a further humiliation: The incapacitation of this person before the law.¹⁰

Outsiders and Agency

The Mad & Disability Pride Parades make a beautiful example for a rising awareness of the collective history of individuals experiencing exclusion. These alliances deserve a special acknowledgement in Germany and Austria due to their common background as a victim group in the Nazi era, when the Nazi ideology striving for a purification of the “Aryan race” deemed them equally “unworthy of life.” In the so-called “Aktion T4,” operating on the basis of commitments to institutions for the disabled or psychiatric units, primarily those were targeted who had physiological or cognitive peculiarities. But individuals who had undesirable aberrations in relation to character traits, sexual preferences, or overall social behavior were hospitalized and

killed as well. This included, for instance, difficult teenagers, disobedient and sexually “too active” women, addicts, or simply people suffering from psychological crises, which upon reading their biographies sound like biochemically reasonable reactions to social and financial distress: presumable burn-outs due to excessive labour or mental break downs due to unemployment or precarious living conditions. (Kolar, 2011; Paritätischer & Wohlfahrtsverband, 2018).

The latter group, in turn, overlapped with what Nazis coined as “Asoziale” (the “anti-socials”). Regarded as such were homo- and transsexuals, prostitutes, panderers, “habitual” criminals, work deniers, beggars, welfare recipients, homeless people, migrant workers, travellers, Sinti and Roma, as well descendants of marginalized impoverished groups that were also subsumed as “gypsies” despite their long re-achieved sedentariness, and thus were collectively regarded as “anti-social” by birth. With specialized arrest waves called “Arbeitsscheu Reich” [“work-shy Reich”] leading to an imprisonment of approximately 10.000 people in 1938, general numbers of those prosecuted as “anti-socials” reached an estimated 70.000, of which 35.000 are thought to have been killed. (Allex, 2015; Wissenschaftlicher & Dienst, 2016). The overlap of this category with victim groups murdered under the Nuremberg Laws make it difficult to quote exact numbers.¹¹ But another aspect might be a similarly important factor: The victims have never been fully redressed, since inquiries into the subject and fair trials against the perpetrators have long been suppressed by both West and East German authorities and even other victim groups (Opfermann, 2010, 2016). Both the historic and present-day individuals defamed as “anti-social” are still vilified as annoyances, as ZAiD, the Central Council of the Anti-Socials in Germany, criticizes, so that to many their discrimination still seems legitimate. (Zentralrat der Asozialen in Deutschland, 2015.)

With this in mind, it falls into place that the Mad & Disability Pride Parades are aiming at a cooperation with non-disabled critics of a profit-oriented concept of society. Within these contexts, “disability” and “madness” are accepted as a “queer” and thus positively deviant cul-

ture. Thanks to the coincidence with the topics of current artistic debates, this is an emerging field in which not only subculture, but all kinds of artistic –and possibly slow, at first sight inefficient, anti-logic, or simply culturally divergent—“tendencies” can be read in context of the research on “otherness.” This unifying criterion allows hope for a productive exchange between representatives of different categories of “the other”¹², while the dominating notion of art still remains, in terms of a scale of normality that places the inextricable unity of high art and the artistic genius on the paramount, opposite pole of what is branded as a lack of skills and abilities.

Since the notion of art has shifted from the imitation of nature to the interpretation of it, it is dominated by the idea of a free, autonomous subject. A claim that we have encountered numerous times since the attacks on the “Charlie Hebdo” magazine in Paris in 2015 is that the assumed core aspect of Western existence is strongly related to the idea of agency, and creative self-expression is considered the epitome of intellectual achievements of post-enlightenment. Atheism = freedom of speech = reason is the little-thought-out formula. Unfortunately, it ignores that meta-social narratives can be rehearsed in a religious-like way, and that the firm belief in the existence of a free will—a feature granted, of course, to anyone joining the club of atheism *automatically*— might actually corrupt a thorough research into it. “Even Richard Dawkins lives more by faith than by reason,” cultural theorist Terry Eagleton jeered in his devastating review of Dawkins’ book *The God Delusion* (Eagleton, 2006, p.). And it was exactly the European governments whose heads of state had just been marching hand in hand—like in an awkward modern crusade—for the right of self-expression after the attacks, whom the PEN Club shortly after had to remind us that they were taking actions that effectuate an undermining of the freedom of opinion. (PEN International, 2016). In short, the rational-autonomous-subject-formula is a figure of thought that, despite its initially beautifully humanistic intent, reveals at second sight a set of collateral damages the correction of which is much-needed.¹³

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

It becomes obvious, why the famous “House of Artists” at the Art Brut Center in Gugging, Austria, a former mental asylum turned into a specialized psychiatric institution focusing on patients “with special needs and artistic talent,” is fully ignored by the dominating contemporary art debate in the German speaking art world: The “painting patients” are not accepted as fully consciously acting authors of their works, and their works therefore are not considered *real art*.

The production of art has to be a purposefully directed project, after all it is as product of a consciously acting subject, the ideal case of the *conditio humana*. More precisely: Art should distinguish itself by what the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1987) called “connectivity” [“Anschlussfähigkeit”], a feature that marks the adaptability to theoretical debates.¹⁴ Artistic subjects existing parallel to society, such as the artists in Gugging, therefore are not of any interest, their motifs and subjects are not of relevance to prevailing academic debates. A seemingly unreflected coming-into-existence of any product of self-expression is only accepted in such cases where it contributes to the research interest of cultural scientists. A good artist is—to put it bluntly—an ingenious laboratory rat that delivers illustrations of the topics which theorists (the meta-artists) are into. “Gardening the unconscious” seems to be the motto to this strategy: *Let’s go pick a little bit of image material*.

An interesting example in that context, as it reveals the current shifts within the notions of art and theory, was recently provided by the well-known Otolith Group (Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun) with their project *Medium Earth/ Who does the Earth think it is?* that was shown in Berlin in 2014 as part of the “Anthropocene” cycle of Haus der Kulturen der Welt. The artist group collected faxes that had been sent to the US geological survey by “sensitives,” as they call them in reference to Bruno Latour (2013), individuals who believe to be able to anticipate earthquakes thanks to magic powers, respectively a special sensitivity. Parallel to an almost

clinically clean and reduced presentation of these faxes, next door in a separate room, the video installation *Medium Earth* was presented—the real art work of the real artists so-to-say. While I usually appreciate the work of the Otolith group, especially due to their (just like here) exciting choice of topics, their approach this time appeared highly problematic to me. The theoretical contextualization of the work was introduced in a workshop and an artist talk, and was undoubtedly elaborate. Its visual and structural realization raised issues. Even the way that drawings are presented in context of the famous “Prinzhorn” collection—a huge archive at the University hospital of Heidelberg with works produced by individuals with “exceptional psychiatric experiences” as they put it, mostly filed under “outsider art”—grants a greater extent of authorship to their contributors than the Otolith Group did in this case. Furthermore, the pseudo-neutrality with which the exhibits were shown was reminiscent of the infamous way that Charcot, a pioneering neurologist at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris in the 1870s, presented female hysterics. Just as in former times, emotions were outsourced by men, thanks to the invention of gender specific illnesses like hysteria, or projecting the inability to control emotions onto women and the lower classes (Showalter, 1993, Kessel, 2000). Nowadays, it seems, it is the artists who are outsourcing sensitivity. A bizarre climax of a development ongoing since the 1500s described by Foucault (1961) as an exclusion of anything not fully graspable by intellect: an uncanny marriage in which the formerly other side of reason (art) succumbs to the dark side of enlightenment (logocentrism) that results in a new form of obligatory, perpetual self-consciousness so hyper-rationalist that even technological singularity looks lame in comparison.¹⁵

On Thinking in Images and Reading of Surfaces

Taking alternative forms of knowledge and the potential of their contribution to academic research seriously requires a profound mapping of the much-debated peculiarities of artistic thinking - a task which, of course, *cannot* and, for the sake of the freedom of the arts, *should* never be

fully achieved.¹⁶ Still largely uninvestigated, despite the current hype around the topic, remain especially its aspects touching the cognitive realm. For achieving this task without falling back into stereotypes, introducing the term “neurodiversity,” and applying a line of thought which is connecting [dis/ability] – [neurodiversity] – [alternatively gifted] to the field of visual arts appears to be a productive approach.

And yes: artists *are* capable of logical thinking. But this is sometimes hard to see at first sight, as their works often do not simply reproduce topics already existing in academic debates. In such cases, artists do not have the opportunity to refer to a discourse that has been generated within a universe of written and spoken language, including an already tested set of terminologies. In consequence, many artists have to develop and provide a discursive context for their own work, a task which might make them appear not widely read at first. For example, they process “data worlds” in their own way. They¹⁷ potentially memorize experiences entirely in the form of images / movements / sounds, etcetera. For many artists, deliberate encounters with aesthetic surfaces are a full, valid form of *reading*, which may take place in an utterly preverbal form. What is often neglected or even denied by many scientists from the humanities is that reason, logical thought, and literary language are not interdependent. The pre-verbal is not equal to the pre-conscious. Therefore, the fact that many artists dislike, or have difficulties following artistic debates, does not mean they are not intelligent enough to understand complex texts. It might simply be that every sentence provides them with a small firework of associations, which is extremely inspiring, but also time consuming. A further problematic, that many art students are confronted with when expected to read texts for seminars, is that their “headspace” –the space unfolding before the mind’s eye when processing a thought—is so intensely occupied with research questions that each attempt to put a different, additional *subject* into the center of this imaginary screen becomes extremely difficult.

On the contrary, when artists generate text themselves, they often deal with a situation where

each thought has to be “dragged“ one by one from a world of the symbolic and pushed into the world of literary language. This is especially the case, if it is a text about their own work, and if this work is dedicated to a topic that doesn’t relate to an existing academic debate, but to a phenomenon still undiscussed in theory. The transference between these realms is an extremely demanding, time-consuming process that seems to be very similar to what Temple Grandin (2006, 2009), the famous “highly functioning” autistic with a PhD in biology, reports about her own everyday perception problematics: Her thought processing is of an entirely image-based, associative and non-linear kind that functions like a VR computer programme and enables her to organize her thoughts into groups without any use of verbal language. It is only for communication with the outside world that she translates this scenario with a pool of words from the field of written language that was arduously accomplished.¹⁸

For these reasons, artists sometimes prefer to stay silent or stay away from academic debates. They are fully aware that the level of complexity and quality of their pre-verbal thoughts can only be transferred to written language with such an immense expenditure of energy that it wouldn’t allow them to have enough time remaining for their art production. Given these conditions which a large number of artists are confronted with when writing – writing press infos, writing applications, writing essays for a seminar, or writing in academic language to enable their presentation to become part of conference proceedings, and so forth - often means a torture not comprehensible for outsiders.

Non-outsider Art and Neurodiversity in Times of the “Bologna Process”

While Deaf people, thanks to their concept of "Deafhood"¹⁹ as a culture, have been able to positively re-occupy their otherness and achieve the recognition of sign language as a minority language in many countries, a comprehensive concept of culture for those with “neuroatypicalities” in relation to visual thinking has yet to be established. Whereas it is questionable for

multiple reasons, if such a project can and should be considered at all²⁰, it would be certainly difficult to claim, given that its traditional playground is not only the stigma of dysfunctionality but also, almost worse, an area that is already occupied as an ideological battlefield for idealizations. In this warzone—better known as the art world—the current development rather goes in the opposite direction. An institutionalized expulsion of neurodiversity from the universe of knowledge ennobled with university insignias is taking place, ironically, now that the debate about the special features of "artistic knowledge production" has entered center stage.²¹ Art academies have so far been the only safe academic haven for unusual forms of research and in particular for students without a baccalaureate but with "special aptitude," as many of the examination regulations (still) confirm. But whereas the positive outcome of the recent reforms are the wide open academic gates of the art schools for students from theory programmes— which does indeed trigger a new, exciting crossover culture of text and image—the very same doors are gradually closing for “extraordinarily gifted” individuals without A-level qualification. While the new, theory-skilled part of the visual art students enjoys, from their point of view, more experimental, practice-based approach rather than scientific methods, and is often dangerously mistaking it for a larger freedom with less need for precision, the increasing “schoolification” as a result of the so-called “Bologna Process”²² often bears strange fruits, a problematic change for the more traditional type of art students. For example, since the university reforms in Austria in 2002, the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna obliges students to attend more compulsory theory classes before the intermediate exams than philosophy students at the Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich formerly needed in order to be admitted to the exams for the full “Magister” degree (the discontinued equivalent of the M.A.).²³ This gives reason for concern if the designers of the new curricula are aware of the needs of prospective artists at all. This is actually hard to imagine, given that these decisions—which de facto mean an end to “barrier-free” studies for artists with predominantly visual thinking—were mostly supported by those who saw the

reorganization of the curricula as an opportunity to help incorporate previously ignored, but important issues such as subcultures, identity politics, anti-discrimination, or post-colonialism into the discourse of academic art. A certain basic understanding of "weird" feelings, behaviours, forms of self-expression, and their *raison d' être* should therefore actually be self-understood.

So how could it happen that precisely because of the most appreciated recent opening of the academically endorsed notion of art, which swaps the boring old dictate of the sublime elitist for the much more fun quotidian groove of identity-rocking pop cultures, there is now the danger that these voices will be lost.

This is a question that every professor, lecturer, staff member, or ministerial employee involved in the design of curricula for higher art education should bear in mind. A detailed answer to this complex question must be performed elsewhere.²⁴ Yet to be answered as well is the question how this could be dealt with without falling back into stereotypes, or with accidentally disengaging from a vivid notion of art for which changes, expansions, and adaptations are inevitable and, even more so, vital and productive. Applying the concept of neurodiversity on “non-outsider art” is a powerful, supportive tool for this expedition, which—contrary to certain fears I am confronted with—does not exactly run the risk of re-mystifying art production or leg-working anti-scientific despotism: It actually helps save artistic thinking from the danger of misappropriation by anti-intellectualism, and has a good chance to prove to be the long-awaited means that finally comes to rescue the artistic genius from that lonely, boring top-end of ableism – *come on down! Neurodiversity pride for all!*

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Notes

¹Introduction used for my performance lecture series “I’VE SEEN MY BODY ELECTRIC or How Subcultural Is My Body Intelligence?” Stuhldreher (2004-2010). For an English transcript online version see Stuhldreher (2005). For a modified printed essay version in German see Stuhldreher (2006). Cf. endnote 18.

²The Berlin newspaper Tagesspiegel criticized that attempts to embrace Bel’s piece by calling it amiable or authentic would actually be a condescending act of “kitschification.” (Wildermann, 2013, p.) The 2013 Berlin “Theatertreffen” dedicated a symposium to the question: “Disabled people on stage – artists or exhibits?” (Bugiel, Degener & Radtke, 2013, p.).

³Julia Häusermann, an actress with Trisomy 21 from the ensemble of Theater Hora, received the highly renowned Alfred Kerr Award for emerging actors at the 2013 Berlin Theatertreffen for her performance in Bel’s piece. (Wildermann, 2013.)

⁴The researcher and activist Rebecca Maskos reports that not only the German government, the World Economic Forum, or companies like Mercedes and SAP are crediting themselves with the term “inclusion,” but that often people with disabilities have adapted to a neoliberal world view and are pointing out their productivity in order to avoid a comparison with recipients of social welfare – an attitude that was exploited by the UK government for a recent re-evaluation of the entitlement to disability benefits (Maskos, 2017).

⁵A most recent example for the self-empowering potential of online meet-ups is the “Disability March” project which was founded in relation to the “Women’s March” in the US in January 2017 and provides online contingents for those unable to participate for reasons such as “mobility issues, caretaking responsibilities, and inability to find or afford transportation and housing,” as the website names as examples. (<https://disabilitymarch.com/>, retrieved June 20, 2017).

⁶Notably Irving Kenneth Zola and Michael Oliver, both sociologists with disabilities, are to be mentioned here as co-founders of disability studies in the US and the UK respectively in the 1990s, (Zola, 1983,1972; Oliver, 1990). The “arrival” of disability studies in German-speaking countries, especially in Germany itself, was much more recent. It was only in 2001 that the idea to form a working group for implementing disability studies in German academia assumed shape during a conference which accompanied the exhibition “Der (im)perfekte Mensch” [“The (im)perfect Human Being” (Seidler, 2002). It was preceded by a very active disability rights movement, which resulted in promoting disability studies in Germany with a focus on self-determination and ending segregation, establishing them as highly political issues. (Koebsell, Waldschmidt, 2006).

⁷Apart from the official timeline, everyone related to disability studies probably has a personal understanding of what the key moment for the rise of disability pride was, depending on their own dis/ability, country, culture, community, generation etcetera. Tied to bed large parts of the day for several years, with my actual physical range being quite limited in relation to the opulent artworks I created in my imagination, analyzing everything I saw on TV remained the only powerful action that I could take while binge-watching the pain away. The simultaneity of my first encounter with the famous “Cyborg Manifesto” in 1998 (Haraway, 1984) and the daily encounter with the CGI-enabled influx of fantasy and sci-fi figures on screen in the late 1990s did not only make me realize the latter could be classified as cyborgs as well. Their posthuman body conditions, their fusion with machines, their alternating physical fitness, their often limited operational radius, the discrepancies between their outward appearance and actual inner self, their loneliness, their need as well as ability to develop highly individual survival strategies, and their potential to question mainstream concepts of physical boundaries, body functions, and identity: All this pointed to how much being a cyborg and being disabled have in common – and made me wonder why cyborgs were seen as “cool” while people in wheelchairs were not.

⁸“Perception Geographies,” an artistically structured symposium which I conceived and hosted in 2002 for the Munich Media Forum as a first encounter of media theory and disability studies, was inspired by this perception. (Kiss, Korte & Länger, 2002). The campaign motto chosen by Channel 4 to advertise the 2012 London Paralympics, “Meet the Superhumans,” also played on that aspect, yet in a debatable way. (Channel 4, 2012.)

⁹Cf. Endnote 1

¹⁰“Luddism” is the name of a wave of labour protests in the early 1800s in the UK, coined after their likely fictitious initiator Ned Ludd under whose name bold announcements of impending attacks on factories were signed. In my lecture at the DSAE conference, as well as in an earlier, German version of this text, I pointed out in more detail the parallels between the intentions as well as the misperceptions of the historic luddites and the looters of the uprising known as 2011 London Riots (Stuhldreher 2017).

¹¹An exception to the mechanism described here are people with illnesses from the psychiatric field. They get regularly blamed as responsible for their condition, are regarded as “probably not trying hard enough,” and often hear they should “pull” themselves “together.”

¹²While the main deportation of Jews did not start before 1941, criminal records with offenses as small as traffic violations were used as justification to arrest Jewish citizens in context of the concerted actions against the so-called “anti-socials” (Gruner, 2002). This juridical trick cannot be pointed out enough in relation to the rising danger of Orwellian surveillance states: In times where every action is mirrored in a digital universe, the opportunities to find legitimation for measurements against individuals of unfavoured population groups increase exponentially.

¹³Such alliances give hope in view of the current controversies surrounding identity politics, in which many protagonists find themselves trapped in the dilemma that a temporary “strategic essentialism,” as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls it (Spivak, Landri, & MacLean, 1996), can indeed create solidarity and self-empowerment, but has also led to fragmentation among civil rights activists whose concerns are actually very similar. Cf. Endnote 16.

¹⁴This part was written in 2015 before “post-truth” and “alternative facts”—both declared “non-word” of the year 2016 and 2017 respectively by German linguists—appeared as actors on stage and nourished a breath-taking backlash of the quality of political speech into times before reason and scientific standards. (Burack, 2018; Stephan, 2016.) As if the struggle for a critical exchange with new developments wasn’t generally exhausting enough for artists and intellectuals, we now also need to babysit a form of arbitrary opinion that we believed to have grown up long ago

¹⁵As contrast to this, compare with “Wir forschen selbst!” [“We do the research ourselves!”], the motto of the German working group for disability studies which places the international disability rights slogan “Nothing about us without us!” even more specifically in the field of knowledge production (Seidler, 2000).

¹⁶I regard the re-diversification I am pursuing here as something similar to a problematic and—at least temporarily—a necessary method in feminism: When attempting to call for the perceptions of gender-specific needs, it is confronted with the challenge of having to re-itinerate the differences as stipulated by society - compare with the “memetic strategies” described by Luce Irigaray (Whitford, 1995, Donovan) and Spivak’s “strategic essentialism” mentioned above. (Spivak, Landri, & MacLean, 1996).

¹⁷Even though I generalize here for reasons of readability, I certainly do not mean to claim that the problematics which get mentioned are experienced by every visual artist, nor that the list is complete. I assume there are as many versions of these as there are artists or even humans, with a possible clustering and prevalence of certain experiences related to their field of art or favorite type of media use.

¹⁸“I THINK IN PICTURES. Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. . . . I can view it from any angle, placing myself above or below the equipment and rotating it at the same time. I don’t need a fancy graphics program that can produce three-dimensional design simulations. I can do it better and faster in my head” (Grandin, 2006 p.) The self-perception of Grandin mentioned here shows a remarkable accidental similarity to the “intro” that I used as opener for this text and that I start each of my performances with since 2004. Cf. endnote 1 (Stuhldreher 2004-10).

¹⁹The concept of “deafhood” reappropriates the term “deafness” in an emancipatory way and awards the status of a creative, social value to the special communicative skills that people with hearing impairment have developed thanks to their condition

²⁰This text neither aims at victimizing a largely very self-confident and space-consuming group that is often very talented at easily finding ways around a new obstacle anyway, nor does it intend to minimize the suffering and urgent needs of Nazi victims and other minorities still stigmatized today. The quasi identity-political claim for creating an awareness for the special needs of a visual thinker yet is meant to point to a gradual process which otherwise would take place fully unnoticed. One reason for this, as it has already been explained in detail, is exactly a certain incapability of those affected when it comes to participating in academic debates. A second reason is a slow replacement of a certain neurocognitive type of students at art academies of which I could not determine yet, if that is the result of a selection during the application process that is based on personal priorities, or if it is a general shift in neural correlates which are simply mirroring today’s new standards of a web 2.0-style text-&-image mash-up world. In any case, it is a development which soon will make this text obsolete anyway.

²¹This might be a phenomenon specific to the European and even more German/Austrian type of art schools, as to my knowledge art studies in Anglo-Saxon countries were structured already much more school-like and theory-oriented from earlier on. A yet crucial and interesting concurrence with a more universal validity, as, like in a prism, it helps revealing contradictions within the measurements taken and thus uncover also more general aspects of the differences between visual and verbal thinking respectively between practice vs. theory based and artistic vs. scientific methods.

²²“Bologna Process”: The European credit exchange system for enabling student mobility.

²³Own calculations from around 2007 with the then valid curriculum of the ADBK Vienna and with the LMU Munich examination regulations as practiced in 1996.

²⁴I have dealt with this question more in detail in an early version of this lecture that was focusing on the colonization of the arts through the institutionalization of subculture, as I provocatively called it. Held at a conference on popculture and subversion, I theorized in my contribution for the conference proceedings on why theorists teaching at art academies often seem to be afraid of intuition, the – currently - still all-time favourite working method of most artists. (And, yes, this combination means: Houston, we got a problem here.) Cf. endnote [0].

Authors Notes

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reader “Compared to what? Pop zwischen Normativität und Subversion.” [“Compared to what? Pop between Normativity and Subversion.”] (Stuhldreher, 2017.) All translations are my own translations, if not indicated otherwise.

Editorial Note

Portions of this paper have been previously published.