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**Review of Karin Mairitsch, Helmi Vent – Lab Inter Arts. Insights into the Performance Lab “Hätte Hätte Fahrradkette” [shoulda woulda coulda].**

Mairitsch, K. (2020). Helmi Vent – Lab Inter Arts. Insights into the Performance Lab “Hätte Hätte Fahrradkette” [shoulda woulda coulda]. Pages: 280; Language: German, English. St. Gallen / Berlin: Vexer Verlag. <https://www.vexer.ch/cms/index.php/verlagsprogramm/147-mairitsch-karin>

**A book as a vehicle for artistic research: About Helmi Vent and the Lab Inter Arts**

The book on the work of the artist, laboratory founder and professor Helmi Vent with texts by her and Karin Mairitsch gives ‘insights’ into the Performance Lab Inter Arts. It bears the title of the film of the same name, *Hätte Hätte Fahrradkette [shoulda woulda coulda]*, and is the result of a multi-year interdisciplinary project at the Cooperation Focus Area Science and Art at the Paris-Lodron University, Salzburg and the Mozarteum University, Salzburg. With this information alone the many elements of precision mechanics which led to the creation of the book have already been invoked: between the arts, between different media, between art and science, between practice and research. The subjunctive in the title as well as the metaphor of the bicycle chain in German are helpful for the precision mechanics of interdisciplinary work. Both introductions in the book rightly take up the title as a reading aid and a reading attitude:

openness to artistic work as a space of possibility and curiosity for the “unforeseen in letting things happen.” This also applies to reading.

Furthermore, the bicycle chain is an interesting object because it keeps you especially busy when it jumps out of its sprocket. It is only when the bicycle comes to a sudden standstill that you realise how essential the chain is. Is artistic research necessary? Is a book accompanying the film necessary? Is a film about a performance lab necessary? Does a book on artistic research cause its automatic gear to jump out? And who needs whatever jumps out of it?

These questions are not asked directly, but the book can be viewed as an in-depth exploration of these topics – and that is its first quality. It is unconditional and does not need any discursive building blocks from popular theories to legitimise itself. And although the book spins a tale of a lot of complicity, closeness and fun at work, it creates friction, addressing serious and extremely complicated issues. It is concerned with nothing more and nothing less than making it possible to experience creative processes which naturally take place within the subject and which can only be seen and communicated under certain circumstances. According to Karin Mairitsch, the “aspiration”, “take(s) root in the innermost depths of every individual and cannot be cut from the self. An aspiration is highly concrete and yet intangible. It is unstoppable and can, therefore, be experienced.”

Not easily stopped and therefore tangible, concrete and yet not graspable? Two questions emerge from these seemingly paradoxical statements. First, if a creative process can be experienced, is it communicable and meaningful – for others? And, second, if it is communicable – by what means? The book seeks answers to both questions, that is its aspiration.

### **The sense of artistic research as aesthetic practice**

Although artistic research has been an academic label for about 20 years at art academies, the question of its usefulness is still being asked, often by the researchers themselves. You can also hear them in the Lab Inter Arts. What is at stake here? To recognise the entire weight of this doubt, it is useful to recall Freud’s embarrassment and defiance of established science when he sought to establish psychoanalysis as a method – knowing full well that the psyche can never be structured like a proper scientific field. If the artistic-pedagogical intention of the Lab Inter Arts is about being ‘connected to the innermost being’ of the individual, this also refers to

the psyche as a creative field. Its instinctual drive consists of joy and sorrow, lust and pain, negation and affirmation and a lot of fantasy. The art educator and psychoanalyst Karl-Joseph Pazzini repeatedly referred to this. “If psychoanalysis can be a joyful science, then it owes that to its confrontation with suffering”, according to Pazzini. Freud as well as Nietzsche worked on the idea that psychoanalysis also has a “serious imprint,” with the aspiration to make room for the illogical, the unrelated, the immoral and even the unjoined in the psyche, and thus also for thinking and speaking. Whether this space can simultaneously belong to science has been a matter of debate ever since.

If the question of the legitimacy of other research, that does not submit to established scientific methodologies today, comes from art, could artistic research with its sense of “differentiation and shaping of intensities” (Helmi Vent) not then also be positioned as a joyful science? In any case, the concern is existential and leads beyond art. Karin Mairitsch maintains “It (i.e. the concern of the artists) can best be compared with a translation that conveys ‘knowledge-worth-knowing’ about and on life in aesthetic manifestations and sensual relations.” It is no longer the attribute art that is important here, but the concept of aisthesis; sensual knowledge. It would be where artistic research as aesthetic practice intervenes and interrupts scientific discourses as well as the everyday worlds of the protagonists – as ‘knowledge-worth-knowing’. It is with this conviction that both authors speak of aesthetic and artistic research in their book. Helmi Vent prefers the term “aesthetic research”: “This term zooms in on the processes of perception (aisthesis: Greek for the perception of the senses), it questions circumstances and modalities, investigates conditioning processes, and the possibilities to sensitise ourselves within the concrete fields of reference.” Be it artistic or aesthetic research, it is always about aesthetic practices, which are tested and also invented in various forms of media and in different situations. Applying aesthetic practices and at the same time opening them up as a means of creating an experience of what is so often called ‘creativity’, is work on the smallest and singular level. This leads to the second question: Can these practices be shown? Can they be communicated?

### **‘Mementos’ of the work in the Lab Inter Arts**

Like the film, the book attempts to not only say (comment, reflect, discuss) this work in the singularity of aesthetic practice manifested in the performances, but also to show it in a thoroughly reflected manner.

To this end, it uses different approaches: documentation, then reflection and analysis of individual performances, and finally the protagonists' testimonies, which do not so much authenticate as extend these cautious analyses. The result is not a method by which the performances are developed, but jumps, turns and ideas that always occur in relation to the unpredictable and unprefigured aspects of the performance. Accordingly, the analysis takes place as an act of approach - as the author Karin Mairitsch carefully notes, both in linguistic and visual form, which receives its imprint from the object itself. In correspondence with this notion, Mairitsch chooses moments and poles of the process in alphabetical order as chapter divisions and calls them 'mementos'. They are what is constitutive for all processes.

Would it be possible to illustrate this with an example? It will at least be attempted here, using the example of a performance that can be experienced as a characteristic of 'liberation'. A short performance for which every moment counts because the physical space of the protagonist is narrowed down to the highest level. She has slipped into a tightly woven textile tube on which she had previously worked for two months without knowing what she would need it for one day. She now squeezes herself into it, with her head completely engulfed as well, can no longer move and hardly breathe. The others have to watch this act of entering one's own confinement to the point of captivity. They react to it without a plan or an agreement, but they have been given scissors. So, it is a little predictable that they will cut the tube open, destroy the tissue and free the imprisoned person. It is not predictable when they will do so, how they will do so and what this imprisonment - the opposite pole of all the openness from which the lab otherwise draws on - actually entails. Is radical restriction, is captivity necessary for liberation to be possible? In the performance this is a question of time and the moment. This also means that a situation generates lightning-fast actions that turn into insight. Liberation is possible, but not without a price. And for the agents of liberation outside and the prisoner inside, it means something completely different and possibly becomes a third thing, a communality, something 'liberating', which can also be transferred to the audience. Karin Mairitsch writes "In this regard, [liberation] becomes a possible pattern of action for and within oneself."

A constitutive part of the work and the book is therefore a moment of realisation, in the sense of making experiences accessible. This is gained by doing and watching, it is formulated in a joint

discussion about the performance, which is a training ground in the truest sense of the word. The documentation of conversations does not suggest that all insights are of equal value. After all, they are always subject to the pedagogical pattern of a master-student conversation, in which Helmi Vent's advanced experience counts and with which she offers an order that combines the divergence, and also the contradictoriness, of experiences, without smoothing them out. While one of the participants is simply confused regarding the destruction of the tube in the performance, another observes (and says) that one does not have to destroy everything in order to free oneself (a part of the robe could have been preserved). A further participant experiences the damage of the cut-up tube as highly regrettable, while the protagonist herself wants nothing more than to animate the audience; setting them in inner and outer motion. Helmi Vent sees the holes cut into the tube as the ambivalent aspect of liberation: "To some, they are wounds and to others, they are a way of slipping through to something new."

This can also answer the question of whether creative processes can be communicated, whether and for whom they make sense. Yes, they can be, if they are recorded and made comprehensible as exercises in aesthetic thinking. Since this is always also about teaching processes, the insights can be synthesised without taking away the validity of the divergent, individual and moreover unresolved experiences and insights.

The procedure of polyphony is implemented in the book in two languages (German and English) as well as on a visual level through the dynamically edited typography, the spatial layout and the use of pictorial works, which are taken from the film documentation and which present themselves like figures from insights gained through mixed media, which in turn creates a figure of aesthetic thinking.

This care and reflexivity turn the book into a quiet but extremely successful manifesto of artistic thought and aesthetic research – it makes sense and is fun to pick up, to look at, read and think along.

## **Biography**

Silvia Henke is a cultural scientist and publicist and lives in Basel. She has been Professor of Cultural Theory at the Lucerne School of Art & Design since 2000, where she heads the theory department. Her research focuses on art and religion, transculturalism and aesthetic education.

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