

CON_TEXT at Lettrétage: manifest hominis fabri & Ink in Milk

At Berlin's self-proclaimed young Literaturhaus, "literature" is a broad term.

CON_TEXT is a new event series at Lettrétage showcasing interdisciplinary approaches to literary readings as collaborative artworks in their own right. The twenty participating artists—ten writers and ten artists from other fields—were invited to a speed-dating seminar of sorts to form pairs. Over the course of 2017, each pair of artists will spend one week in the Lettrétage workspace to create a collaborative literary artwork.

On January 27th 2017, poet Cia Rinne and artist Gernot Wieland open CON_TEXT. Rinne begins by reading a short German poem of aphoristic sentences written on index cards, thoughtful and vulnerable in tone. A discussion among different voices from the same source questions the speaker's observations about subjects including technology, manual labor, and gender. Rhythm features strongly in Rinne's work as one question flows into the next and meanings transform over the course of multiple rephrasings of a thought.

Rinne writes in French, German, and English, allowing a poem to be guided by sounds as much as by content. She believes that readers who don't speak all three languages can enjoy her poetry based on these rhythmic aspects. Her appearance and voice have a soft, wispy quality.

The most overtly collaborative portion of the evening sees a dialogue between the artists across a long table. Slides showed drawings and diagrams illustrating various schools of philosophy from Plato to the present day, each of which is directly or indirectly hashed out between Wieland and Rinne, who take turns speaking to each other in the roles of soul and body, body and world, world and God—to name only a few. Questions are raised and alliances formed around dependency and imprisonment and the tyranny of the body over metaphysical parts of life.

After this conversation piece, Wieland reads *Ink in Milk*, a winding short story that begins in an autobiographical tone. A first person narrator remembers the grade school classroom where he was sent to stand in a corner alone and first became aware of his body in relation to other bodies. One day a classmate comes to school wearing his mother's lipstick. He is reprimanded, eventually institutionalized and later diagnosed with schizophrenia. These events are illustrated by slides of diagrams of the classroom as seen from above.

Wieland stresses his piece's non-performance nature by speaking before and after the reading about what might happen if he were performing this piece—which he isn't. This disclaiming move would normally irritate me, but Wieland's eyes are so wide and earnest that it's hard not to take him seriously, not to view his note before and after the work about how his body would perform the work if he hadn't chosen not to perform it as an urgent aspect of the piece.

The narrator moves out of his grade school classroom to talk about his uncle, who lives in the same village and mimics crystal shapes with his body in order to relieve sorrow. The uncle's

understanding of the crystal as a movable healing structure to be embodied and disseminated is the clearest part of the evening in my memory. The narrator's uncle performs crystals on all occasions. Wieland shows stick figure sketches of his uncle's contorted body, often outdoors as the family watches in rigid curiosity. The uncle even ventures out into pastures to imitate crystals among grazing cows and sheep, to relieve their sorrow. This story and its accompanying illustrations complete the evening's comical edge: the audience begins to laugh. Our laughter grows from amused to joyful as the narrator begins performing crystals together with his uncle. The family and soon the entire village join in; people lay down their daily work to imitate crystals for hours, days, weeks on end. Empirically productive activity is forsaken in the name of "nothing but standing to represent something."¹ Searching for positions that best embody crystals as "complex objects of longing" becomes the people's full time occupation. Under the uncle's spell, the village undergoes a fluid transformation from a place where a young child who dares to transgress gender norms and may or may not be mentally ill is ostracized and institutionalized, to a space imbued with magic where people feel free enough to hold still in self-sculpted attempts to physically harmonize with emotional currents coursing through them. Repetition stops and all energy is directed towards performing "objects of longing loaded with meaning and memory,"² or towards a newness that comes from deep inside.

Here my laughter turns from joyful to nearly tearful: the crystals morph from a strange habit to a transformative art-ritual of creative healing. I am moved by the notion that a physical imitation of a fractal shape could spread like an infection and provide relief from the repetitive & oppressive structures of daily survival.

Eventually the village's empirical resources run out and people are forced to return to a socially acceptable rhythm of productive school- and work life. The narrator grows up and moves to Berlin. His coming of age involves a chasm between worlds that sprout from intuition to blossom in the mind and the hard facts of history in the physical world.

The final scene of *Ink in Milk* sees the narrator mountain climbing. Forgetting that he is attached to the rock with a security hook, the narrator slips and falls into nothingness, briefly anticipating death. He thinks of crystals and Freud's ideas of the psyche as a space similar to the churches of Rome. The story ends on a resigned but uncontrollably curious note with an imagined glimpse of what a life not dominated by language might look like and what it might feel like "if the subject could speak its own language."³

After the reading Wieland stands up once more to recite his "if I were performing this piece" notice. This time he directs his earnest stare at an audience member rather than at Rinne.

Rinne finishes off the evening by reading from a big clipboard where her poem is pasted in DADA style on a photograph of what appears to be the interior of a living room--from my seat at

¹ Wieland

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

the left end of the front row I can make out heavy fabric and soft upholstery. “Les choses parlent,” she says, reminding us that language doesn’t only stick to human life. Then: “What is lacking in people happens between them.”

The ray of light filtering in through the subject’s opaque inner walls is further strengthened: there are ways out, even if they don’t last long. Objects may not be as life- or languageless as they appear. In fact, in Wieland’s work, objects appear as something like poses of matter that we may attempt to mimic with our bodies in order to influence our own emotional/mental states for the better. In one evening we have been taken from a soul that bounces off of its body-prison’s walls to bodies that use their object-like nature, their tied-down-ness to the earth, to work from the outside inwards by replicating structures grown deep within the earth itself. The pose itself, often interpreted as a submission to immobility, here becomes a consciously performed act that metaphysically liberates the performer.

Although harmony was a major thematic presence within the work, it was somewhat lacking as a defining trait of the evening as a whole. At this installment of CON_TEXT I got the feeling that Rinne’s timid demeanor--her poetic statements sounding a bit like questions even when formed as grammatical certainties--hesitated to harmonize completely with Wieland’s more forceful vulnerability. Wieland appeared certain of what he wanted to say or ask while Rinne’s work was more brooding. Only at the end did her airiness stabilize as she read the final words of the piece. Although the two artists clearly enriched each other’s practices, it was hard not to leave with the impression of Wieland as the leader of the group. Perhaps this sense of leadership from one side would be less jarring if the pair was less heteronormative and initiative had not been emanating from the masculine male artist.

I was left with questions about collaboration in the arts: must a true collaboration always involve equals who perceive each other as such? And how can equality be cultivated in the relationship between two people working collaboratively? Is it a true collaboration when one artist maintains the upper hand, even (or especially) if he does so unconsciously? To be fair, I think that in the context of CON_TEXT, Rinne’s apparent disadvantage stems from the nature of her artistic practice as much as if not much more than it does from her gender. The audience was presented with one artist who is a poet and does not consider herself a visual artist, and a second artist who considers himself a visual artist but who, he tells us after the show, is considered a writer by some of his peers. Because Wieland’s conceptual and performance work so often involves writing, Rinne appears to have been faced with more unknown territory than her interdisciplinary collaborator. It’s not hard to imagine Wieland, a gifted writer who has long worked in the performance lecture format, guiding the way for Rinne, the poet, to expand into new artistic space.

Lettréage forces the two artists into a Q&A directly following the performance. I learn a bit, which helps, but the artists hate it and I feel for them. Wieland says that he draws because some absurdity can’t be translated into language, and falls silent shortly after.