

ABSORBED AND SOFTENED KNOWLEDGE

ARTISTIC RESEARCH FOCUS
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Absorbed and softened knowledge

“You don’t really / have to believe
in yourself, only in your circulation”.

Sara Ahmed. In: *Queer Formalism: The Return*,
William J. Simmons (2021). Berlin: Floating Opera Press.

Prologue

Along my artistic research, an incredibly special species is always by my side: the octopus. A versatile, unadapted/adapted, resilient and above all tentacled octopod. Each tentacle is able to think and feel independently. Lacking a skeleton, fluid, unprotected, solitary, twisted and crooked, everything is sensed and relearned.¹

I am close to the octopus that keeps touching my work, sucking into it and suddenly pulling or pushing away in a completely different direction. A wave-like, episodic merging with the creature that, with hundreds of suckers with their own chemoreceptors on each of their tentacular arms, wants to understand the ambiguity of the world we share. Inherited and normative knowledge cannot be the basis of learning because the octopus does not know the corresponding learning model (e.g., parents). Or as can be taken from Daoism “The assumption that knowledge requires a knower is based on a linguistic, not an existential rule.”² Thus, the shared biographical body grows with each new task and experience that ensures our survival and enjoyment — equally wasteful, groping and imitating. The octopus can be described as (my) methodological friend and at the same time companion in the search for its own expression.

Accordingly, I would describe *tentacular knowledge practices* in my research as follows: Approaching my questions from different directions, thinking queer-feminist intersectionally, contracting and expanding again, scattering and getting lost, dropping claims to truth ___ allowing gaps to emerge and unlearning to relearn. To make myself vulnerable and open up a resonance space, to develop the ability to (re)learn to write and speak out of it, i.e., to develop artistic methods on the material, sonic as well as textual-theoretical level. This speaking, writing and form-finding as an ability to actively form resistance and emancipatory practice, i.e., to negotiate pathologized and taboo themes, concepts, states, affects, theories in my artistic practice. The octopus being helps me to think an amorphous, subjective, unfinished, complex web and to link these “too many” particles according to the logic of subjective experience and the acting forces.

In this context, my core questions are: How do biographical experiences, social origins and traumas inscribe themselves in the (queer) body? How are they connected with each other? What role does personal biography play in this? How do processes of discrimination in terms of class and desire and the resulting emotions and affects become *em_bodied* in bodies? When and where are resistances and bodily resilience formed?

These questions cannot be answered in their complexity; however, I would like to enter into an artistic-research dialogue that allows me to show the ambiguity of concepts and words and to broaden and deepen my queer, critical perspective on power conditions that (de)form us.

Collagen and elastin, cortisol in between

The term and concept of *Em_bodiment*³ (Antke Antek Engel/Institute for Queer Theory), which understands biographical and social experiences as always framed by historical and geopolitical conditions of power, serves as the basis for my research and artistic engagement with my personal experiences, which in turn are situated in a larger social context. *Ver_Körperungen* are never finished, but constantly changing, subjective results. They are fragile, individual, identity-building processes embedded in a system of normative social expectations and institutional power structures.⁴ Individual embodiments inevitably take place within social relations and political and social spaces.

In the search for an individual, my own language, text and form, different *em_bodiments* of knowledge take place that depict the (transfer) process rather than the (art) object itself: Analogous to fascia tissue, which has a distinct ability to memorize and sense of pain and is allowed to tear where it is stuck together and no longer allows flow; and which repairs itself in places where stability and mobility, collagen and elastin, are only present in attenuated quantities. A self-healing process that the octopus learns about when it violently loses a tentacle arm and retreats to save all its energy into the newly growing arm. An experience the octopus has for the first time, trusting the body to initiate chemical processes to produce the repairing fluid.

My search movement: rather a circulation within my frame of reference of biographical, historical, socio-political events and physical affects, emotions and feelings.

But what exactly does this circulating mean, as Sara Ahmed also describes it in the opening quote? Which part of me circulates, bubbles elliptically, in spiral motion, in proliferation, in a permanent *restlessness* [*Unruhig bleiben*]⁵ — a moving and being moved. Perhaps a circulating between beautiful memories of Sprite from a can and *transclasse*⁶ as a proposal for an opening of concepts. Circulating in queer discursive identity space that first had to be discovered. Circulating between remnants of deposited and embodied shock from a time of fiduciary settlement and the past shame of having to speak in authoritarian spaces. Circulating between violent experiences and crises that made the body produce too much cortisol in their transformation and effect over years.

Every connection within my network of biographical knots is fragile and stable at the same time and bound to a complex structure of affects, e.g., shame and fear. Confronted with my class ascent, old patterns and values of the working-class family, traumatic memories of my childhood and youth, keep pulling me into an insecurity that makes my whole being waver. An old shame that rarely makes me blush anymore but makes me raise my shoulders.

Trauma experiences are always collective. While traumatic events are being experienced individually and differentiated, they are thus embedded in a social, political, global-historical system and a consequence of systematic repression and violence, class origin, racism, gender discrimination and other forms of oppression - and precisely for this reason stored in the transnational, intergenerational and collective memory, archived in personal stories. And much has been lost in silence.

Ann Cvetkovich writes in “An Archive of Feelings”:

“Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genre of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monument, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. It thus demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma’s ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral. [...] The memory of trauma is embedded not just in narratives but in material artifacts, which can range from photography to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary but for the fact that they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental, value.”⁷

Trauma thus leaves unusual traces and can open up an alternative practice of knowledge and resistance, away from normative historiography and institutionalised affects.⁸ Similar to the octopus creature that, for example, sprays ink during an escape or attack, which has a hallucinatory effect. The ink trail traces the outline of the octopus and lays a track that is held and moved in the density anomaly of the water, while the actual octopus body has long since disappeared into a narrow crevice, curiously peering out to observe the situation.

Learned grammar and shame

I will try to make a biographical connection: As a child & teenager in the post-reunification period in East Berlin and having grown up with the values of the socialist working-class family, I experienced a very patchy school education during the transformation and takeover of the school system by the Treuhand. That was in the 90s. I filled the gaps with skating in public spaces. On top of that came the loss of both parents’ jobs and their debts, the developing violence due to the loss of the parents’ complete identity within the fragile family relationships, social housing in the slab and then finishing comprehensive school with a poor Abitur [German equivalent of A-levels]. (I was in the dummy year for the central Abitur that was to be introduced). But “too deep sits the learned grammar, which is characterised by a lack of money or education or both. How does one live with this eternal zigzagging between different social worlds and points of view?”⁹.

Until now, I still feel an unchanged shame and insecurity to move naturally in the newly chosen class and to perform knowledge. This shame and the added denial of my own desire and queer identity during adolescence has solidified and multiplied over the years. Releasing these stuck, toxic connections and gaining self-awareness is permanent work, both on a personal level and on a political one. True to the queer feminist motto: *The Personal is Political*.

It is the reparative and healing approach that I want to focus on in my artistic work; at the same time confrontational and subjective, transparent and protective, humorous and playful, speculative and fictional, I am developing a new grammar that is more like an associative movement of thought.

The text structure I choose is an open writing process, a text collage in which I reflexively and in detail link formative years of my childhood and adolescence in relation to theoretical concepts and literary references. In particular, I direct my gaze to the bodily and psychic affects that emerged and constitute my body to this day. Equally important to me are the resistant gestures and actions that seem to be typically “youthful”, but in detail condense the class origins, the experienced violence and the atmosphere of the 80s and especially the 90s post-reunification period.

I also claim that my earlier inline skating phase was not only a survival strategy, but a form of *drag* — a disguise, for example, to playfully confront and criticise the dominant attribution of norms and gender, a first queer expression and a separate negotiation space for the (sexual) desire I had already known at an early age.

In addition, I develop fictional, speculative moments in which I (day)dream and can thus rewrite and change the present state, thus having a more active influence on past biographical events. Daydreaming and mild dissociative states¹⁰ are, as they can be perceived from the outside, remarkably similar and therefore interesting for me in this particular overlap. While one state is naturally part of everyday life, the other is medically categorised and problematised, especially in more severe states, and stigmatised with ‘negative’ affects.

Theorists such as Ann Cvetkovich, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, José Esteban Muñoz and Sara Ahmed, among others, critically examine negative affects such as shame, anger, grief and pain and generally want to abolish the binary between positive and negative affects. Re-thinking the relationship between private experience and social power relations, especially with regard to

queer life, and decoupling shame, anger and grief from pejorative, pathologizing aspects are the approaches of these interrelated representatives of queer affect theory.¹¹

At this point, I would like to refer in particular to the queer theorist and literary scholar Eve K. Sedgwick, who analyses various aspects and modes of reading and understanding theory(s) and proposes *reparative reading* as an innovative approach. In the course of my engagement with queer affect theory and my interest in embodied forms of knowledge, I came across Sedgwick, who has helped me to a great extent to read texts differently and anew, but above all to perceive them physically.

In 2003, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published the essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading. Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You” as part of the anthology “Touching Feelings”. In it, she asks: “What does knowledge do? In what ways is knowledge performative and how can we best move between its causes and effects?”¹² She also distinguishes between a “paranoid” and a “reparative” reading practice. The paranoid reading practice and text form is characterised by suspicion and threat, exposure and the maintenance of an objective distance. Sedgwick criticises the mode of paranoid reading that seeks fixed definitions and truths and wants to claim them for itself. Her critique is not only of the practice of reading (anchored in philosophy), but also of the author’s attitude itself, which seeks to enforce orders and connections within the structure of the text in order to generate truths, and too often imposes a heterosexual logic on the reader. A radical, but also perfectly accurate observation of Sedgwick.

In terms of the reparative mode of reading, Sedgwick suggests pursuing the uniqueness and complexity of the text, making room for unexpected, new thoughts and suggestions, while also noticing sensual as well as bodily cognition – in Sedgwick’s words, “to look at their empowering, productive as well as renewing potential to promote semantic innovation, personal healing and social change” – in a world that seems to be falling apart.

What if, for each text we read, we gave ourselves room for imagination and speculation about what the text content, its language, expression, certain words, definitions, descriptions and created atmospheres do to me as a reader, i.e., what emotions and feelings, bodily states and biographical experiences are being addressed in me? Which interfaces in terms of content can be rethought if I not only refer to understanding, but also register the affects that make my body an experienced and knowing body in the first place?

Becoming sculpture as a network process

On the sculptural object level, I explore the connection between trauma-induced bodily deformations (morphoses), somatic healing processes (e.g., TCM practices) and medical aids, corrections and supports. In this case, I choose the word sculpture or a variant of sculpture, sculpture-object, despite the fact that some of my objects – if we locate the term in the historical field of art – are, for example, direct body imprints or are reminiscent of bodily set pieces, up to and including very abstract material collages that gradually take shape or are peeled out. No

chiselling out in the classical sense, but a removal, reapplication and joining of materials. In the deformation, or rather in the transformation of my objects as a whole, I seek on the one hand an expression of the vulnerability that can be depicted, an ambiguous state of the in-between that leaves room for queer speculative thoughts and gaps, and on the other hand also a humorous level that often makes the complexity of our feelings visible in the first place. To this end, I reinterpret or transform logos from the 90s and invent stickers that negotiate new discursive terms – such as the term *transclass*, coined by Daniela Dröscher in “Soll & Habitus” (2021) – or enjoy the act of swapping typographies, such as the *Fisbone* brand for the term *class*. At the moment, it is still an experiment in digital space.

The sculpture objects are made of silicone, plaster, jade, glass, plastic, plasticine, rubber, wax, acrylic glass, foam, wood, aluminium, chrome, steel and copper tubing. They are fabrics, bandages, tapes, protectors and rolls. They are constructed, modelled, applied, torn off, repaired, knotted, cast, cut, ablated and fused. Some materials are recycled and organic in nature, skin-compatible, partially coloured silicones or are coated with them.

They are transparent slime formations, in transition to the opaque, perhaps a new organ – a *organelle*, as Octavia Butler has an *ooloi* describe it in her sci-fi novel “Imago”, “The organelle had divided within each of my cells as the cells divided. It had become an essential part of my body. We were what we were because of that organelle. It made us collectors and traders of life, always learning, always changing in every way but one – that one organelle.”¹³

They are storage medium and network of biographical relics, they are material hybrid with USB ports on soft rubber wheels. They have different consistencies, drip from *rails* or *copings*¹⁴ or are supported by medical aids like “back correctors” and bandages, are taped for a more stable posture. They are pulled, bent and corrected into a supposedly correct and balanced position. That this degree of deformation and flexibility is not suitable and functional for all bodies is made clear by the overstretched materials themselves brought into absurd positions.

In their posture, the sculpture-objects thus perform on the one hand the force acting from outside and at the same time their (physical) unruliness. Above all, they are precarious and queer in their incompleteness: “In order to maintain the term »queer« as a subversive and critical force within discourses, Judith Butler therefore pleads for keeping the term open, never taking possession of it once and for all, always using it anew, crossing it, keeping it in the process of becoming and changing and affirming this volatility, openness and incompleteness of »queer«”¹⁵.

If I imagine my sculptures as autonomous sentient beings, I will attribute curiosity, the desire to learn and sensual experience to them. The sculpture body is a *network body* (*Netzwerkkörper*)¹⁶, intertwined with the permanent influences and theories that affect the fabric. The desiring touch, my touch of the forms, expands into a double touch, i.e., also a double sensation in the sense of self-touch. I touch in the moment of touching in which I am also touched, not as a reaction to the first, i.e., my touch, but directly in the same moment. “While objects of perception stand in front of me and can be unfolded before my gaze, my body always remains at the edge of my perception, so that it is never in front of me, but always “with me”,” writes Marie-Eve Morin in “Körperglossar” [body glossary] with recourse to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. And further: “Let us imagine that when we touch (something), we ourselves do not feel touched. Our hand can touch but is not touched itself in return. What kind of experience would that be?”

Would it still be touch?"¹⁷.

Within TaijiQuan practice, the internal martial art, there is an exercise called „Tuishou“. The translation — there is no clear definition — is: *feeling, sticking and pushing bands that never lose contact with the counterpart*. A nice final thought that can be transferred to my idea of *tentacular knowledge practice*, i.e., the experience of reading texts *differently*, of *sticking* to works of art, mentally as well as physically, of being allowed to touch them because they *touch back* and we must never lose the different perspectives.

¹ Matthias Wittmann (2021): *Die Gesellschaft des Tentakels*. Berlin: MATTHES und SEITZ.

I would like to include other passages from the book and introduce terms such as ambiguity, milieu (habitat / class / living space, relationship / environment / social space) and ethos (attitude / habitus) and promote a different understanding:

"To learn from the octopus is to engage with entanglements, ambiguities and multiple *double binds*, a fragmented middle and an experimental space full of deviations, detours and branching points, perhaps also points of despair." (p.39)

"Let us take a revealing experiment, crucial for the following essay, which Félix Guattari describes in *Three Ecologies* (1989): He [note: biologist and environmentalist Alain Bombard] presented two pools of water; one was filled with polluted water, such as one finds in the harbour basin of Marseille, and in which a very lively octopus moved as if in dance, the other with pure sea water without any pollution. When he caught the animal and plunged it into »normal« (clean) water, one could see how it curled up after a few seconds, then slumped down and finally died.

A nostalgic to identitarian-autochthonous nature protectionist would derive from this experiment the proof that the change of milieu of a living being is fatal and that it is therefore vital to embrace the ancestral milieu for life." (p. 35-36)

"When it comes to attitude *ethos*, octopuses seem to have the opposite: no grip and no attitude. They are twisted and crooked. Their tentacles are curious, but also noncommittal, unrestrained, presumptuous." (p. 40)

"The growth axis of cephalopods has reversed, the mouth and anus have moved closer together, so that the head is now between the legs and the excrement is at the front, as it were at the bow and not at the stern. Octopods also have a short life, are completely unprotected and lustfully steal the shells of protected animals. In addition, octopods have cannibalistic tendencies and a propensity for profligate gluttony, which is particularly evident in the remains of their shrimp, crab and clam feeding orgies." (p. 41)

"In order to orientate itself in a world in which it has neither parents nor other vertical role models, the octopus is literally forced to develop tactile, metic and mimetic techniques of sense making and sense sharing. It depends on observing, touching and tasting its environment and its conspecifics." (p. 126)

² Alan Watts (1983): *Der Lauf des Wassers – Eine Einführung in den Taoismus*. Hamburg: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag. [*Tao-The Watercourse Way*]

³ Antke Engel, Jule Jakob Govrin, Eva von Redecker (eds., 2016): *LUST AN KOMPLEXITÄT UND IRRITATION – 10 years Institute for Queer Theory*. Berlin: Gender/Queer e.V., pp. 18-19.

A definition of the word *em_bodiment* [*Ver_Körperung*] that seems fitting to me is formulated by the Institute for Queer Theory in their anniversary issue:

"Behind the term *em_bodiments* is the assumption that subjectivity is always body subjectivity. Subjectification takes place not only as identity formation, but also as the embodiment of differences, as their formation and expression. Body subjectivity is the changing, never-finished result of embodied biographical experiences, which are in turn framed by historical and geopolitical power conditions. Social norms and common sense, habitual practices of daily life and sophisticated disciplining shape embodiments and define which bodies count as healthy and highly productive, as disciplinable or as most resistant to discipline, are deemed appropriately or deviantly gendered. Yet, it is also the other way round: binary gender difference, health, or whiteness operate as normative ideals that gain power through being embodied and performed.

Nevertheless, embodied subjectivity is also a potential source and site of resistance. It might evolve from discrepancies between expectation and experience, or from failures of complying with ideals or comes across as creative stubbornness. It is exactly because body norms — to be healthy, to be beautiful, to be disciplined, to be gendered — are so varied and numerous, that they intermingle and interfere and possibly contradict each other. In how far do such interferences or contradictions open up space for bodily resistance? Expressed in the underline of embodiment, resistance, the ability of bodies to persist or the urge to change become the occasion for the investigation of heteronormative, racist, anti-Semitic, body-forming relations of dominance and the formation of subcultural counter-worlds [...]."

⁴ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

⁵ Donna J. Haraway (2018): *Unruhig bleiben – Die Verwandtschaft der Arten im Chthuluzän*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag. [*Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*]

⁶ Danieler Dröscher and Paula Fürstenberg (eds., 2021): *Soll und Habitus*. Berlin/Hamburg: SUKULTUR. [*Debit and Habitus*]

Intro:

"Everybody now just has to make up their mind. Is money money or isn't money money", Gertrude Stein once asked, only to then assert "Everybody who earns it and spends it every day in order to live knows that money is money". It's true: whoever grows up with little money, or with wage-dependent rather than rich parents, usually knows very well what money is. If you are transclasse, you have a different perspective on dominant social relations. [...]" Daniela Dröscher

⁷ Ann Cvetkovich (2003): *An Archive of Feelings. Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. London: Duke University Press/Durian and London, p. 7.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Danieler Dröscher and Paula Fürstenberg (eds., 2021): *check your habitus*. Berlin/Hamburg: SUKULTUR.

¹⁰ Dissociative states, also known as dissociative disorders in the medical field, describe a physical and psychological splitting of what is experienced and felt, can cause disorientation in space and time and are accompanied by movement disorders and restrictions.

¹¹ Angelika Baier, Christa Binswanger, Jana Häberlein, Yv Eveline Nay, Andrea Zimmermann (eds., 2014): *Affekt und Geschlecht: Eine Einleitung in Affekt-Theorien aus einer feministischen, queeren und post/kolonialen Perspektive*. In: *Affekt und Geschlecht – Eine einführende Anthologie*. Vienna: Zaglossus, pp. 11-17.

¹² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2014): *Paranoides Lesen und reparatives Lesen oder paranoid, wie Sie sind, glauben Sie wahrscheinlich dieses Essay handle von Ihnen*. In: *Affekt und Geschlecht – Eine einführende Anthologie*. Angelika Baier, Christa Binswanger, Jana Häberlein, Yv Eveline Nay, Andrea Zimmermann (eds., 2014): Vienna: Zaglossus, pp. 335-56. [*Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You*]

¹³ Octavia Butler (1989): *IMAGO – A Lilith's Brood Novel*. First published 1989 by Warner. London: HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP, 2022, p.26.

¹⁴ Rails/Copings are railings, metal bars, on which e.g., inline skaters can base, i.e. slide. They are either a fixed component of a skate park or converted railings or edges of buildings in public space.

¹⁵ Esther Hutfless (2021): *Queere Körper*. In: *Körperglossar*. Heidi Wilm, Gerhard Unterthurner, Timo Storck, Ulrike Kadi, Artur R. Boelderl (eds.). Vienna: TURIA und KANT, pp. 128-132.

¹⁶ Georg Kneer (2009): *Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie*. In: *Handbuch Soziologische Theorien*. Georg Kneer, Markus Schroer (eds.). Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 19-39.

"Actor-network theory (ANT) is a new sociological or social-scientific approach that has been elaborated and further developed since the early 1980s in a leading role by the French sociologists Michel Callon and Bruno Latour and the British scientist John Law. [...] The concept of the social does not denote particular entities alongside which there are other, non-social entities, but a „linkage type“ (Latour 2007, p. 17), i.e., the process of networking, translation and association of human and nonhuman entities, i.e., heterogeneous entities that are not themselves social."

¹⁷ Marie-Eve Morin (2021): *Berührend-Berührte Körper*. In: *Körperglossar*. Heidi Wilm, Gerhard Unterthurner, Timo Storck, Ulrike Kadi, Artur R. Boelderl (eds.). Vienna: TURIA und KANT, pp. 36-42.

In this chapter, the phenomenological concepts, among others on the Leib, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (among others "Phenomenology of Perception" (1966), "The Visible and the Invisible" (1986)) and Edmund Husserl ("Cartesian Meditations" (1950), "Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy" (1952)) are focused on and taken up by the author.