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Now let’s all take a deep breath and scream together

A follow-up conversation between Bjørn Melhus, Angela Anderson, Jan Peters, and Johanna Schaffer, August 29, 2025

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Translated by Daniel Hendrickson

The following conversation between Bjørn Melhus, Angela Anderson, Jan Peters, and Johanna Schaffer was held on August 29, 2025, then transcribed and edited by Johanna Schaffer. The starting point was Bjørn Melhus’s opening speech at the *Kunsthochschule Rundgang* exhibition in 2025 [the art school's end of year exhibition], which has since been published on the *Monopol* website and is now also available on transversal.at [1]. Performative-aesthetic decisions, however, are barely visible in the printed text, and we wanted to speak about these. Bjørn Melhus gave his talk in the airy, glass-walled lecture hall of the Kunsthochschule’s Nordbau, a famous, if desolate architectural monument to Kassel in the late ‘60s, now left to decay. The

audience consisted of many students and teachers as well as a small number of colleagues from the KhK administration. Also present were Timon Gremmels, Minister for Higher Education, Research, Arts and Culture, Ute Clement, President of the University of Kassel, and Michael Wachendorf, the Vice-President for Research. As is typical at the Rundgang exhibition opening, the event was also attended by many people living in Kassel who are interested either professionally or privately in the exhibition and the Kunsthochschule.

Johanna: Bjørn, I'm very grateful to you for your talk and its bold critique, because it helps us—meaning us at the Kunsthochschule Kassel—to argue against what we take to be administratively enforced injustice, exploitation, and structural neglect. 'We'—that is, the teaching staff at the KhK in a wide variety of different employment situations, who have begun to resist—recently or like you for twenty years—the way we are governed by the university administration. But there were also students complaining loudly during the opening and who even went on strike at their own opening evening by closing their ateliers. In his talk, Bjørn uses the name *Master Control Program* to designate the authority that governs, administers, plans, and thereby exploits and debases. What he means in particular, I think, is the *Department of Strategic Development* at the *University of Kassel*, which is very centralized and thus managed in a fashion that is not at all neoliberal. It could of course also be said that the development department is merely doing its job, developing a university as best it can. Our counterargument is that this developmental logic has never been oriented to the needs of, and increasingly, we would also claim, to the legal parameters for art schools.[2] In other words, many here

at the Kunsthochschule accuse the university of making arbitrary decisions.

Angela: When we were told that the university had to make cuts, my first thought was: This is what I've constantly been hearing for years and in a wide variety of contexts, educational institutions always have to make cuts. And I see a connection here to the USA, where, as Masha Gessen has written, not only are there cuts being made to public and political institutions, but some are being dismantled altogether.[3] But since we now find ourselves and our society in a very dangerous situation, we shouldn't be so hasty to give up institutions. It can certainly be said, oh, that's just a small art school in North Hesse. But in fact what we are experiencing here is just the tip of the iceberg. And in a time when we're being told not to resist what I would call authoritarian movements, it is important to take a stand against thinking in Excel sheets—where everything can be codified in numbers and where the only value is economic. This austerity thinking is associated with adulthood, rationality, and logical thinking—when Syriza lost the last elections in Greece and a right-wing conservative government came into power, people said: now the adults are back in charge.[4] And there's one last point I'd like to make: in Berlin, in the spring of 2023 under the CDU government, the *Senate Department for Culture and Europe* was renamed the *Senate Department for Culture and Social Cohesion*—but this is precisely not the role of art, just as it is not its role to produce pretty things. The task of art is to critique and point to other possibilities. For our situation here at the school it was a lucky break that it began to rain and the opening speech was moved from the outside stage to the lecture hall. This meant that everyone present had to listen, and the acoustic space that was created sometimes got bombastic.

Bjørn: Thank you all for bringing us back to the situation at the exhibition opening. There are a few points I'd like to address. The *Master Control Program* is a citation from the film *Tron*, a *Walt Disney Pictures* production from 1982, in which the main antagonist, a ruling system, silences all other smaller programs. From the very beginning I replaced the term 'university' with 'Master Control Program' to expand the scope of things. This also includes creating a playful way to deal with references that are important to me. And even those who aren't familiar with the references will know what is meant by them. I'm interested in how, counter to general neoliberal structures, as Johanna says, we find a very centralized decision-making process at the *KhK* [*Kunsthochschule Kassel]*, which, in relation to our needs and requirements, we experience as arbitrary. Decisions are formulated over our heads that have nothing to do with our needs; and there is in fact no perspective on the *Kunsthochschule* because there is no understanding of it. This is why in my talk I also call for the thought experiment of imagining that the university were led by artists with no idea about academia and scholarship.

Jan: Angela, I agree with what you said—how terrible it has been to have to deal with rhetorics and practices of cutting for years. But I fear that this is in fact not the tip of the iceberg, but already the breakthrough. I also fear that our main adversary is no longer the neoliberal, but the authoritarian; and that it's therefore no longer about translating everything into numbers as stand-ins for economic factors, but about arbitrariness, obliteration, annihilation. I like your description, Angela, of how shifting the opening speech into the lecture hall created a situation like at the theater. Bjørn, you have also worked a lot at the theater, for

instance with Falk Richter. The way you read your opening speech and the way that there were also always moments of screaming incorporated into it reminds me of the so-called *Theater Weekends* at the Berlin *Volksbühne* (the whole place was open, you could go into the cloakrooms, and the parties took place in the mezzanines). Or in Hamburg when the first far-right government with Roland Schill surprisingly took power and then terminated the contract of the director of the Schauspielhaus, Tom Stromberg, who then spent the remaining year of his contract doing *Create-Resistance* actions and *Schill-out* parties, where screaming was always a part of it!



Anonymous poster campaign by students at the Kunsthochschule Kassel, Rundgang summer 2025
(Photo Bjørn Melhus, image editing Amelie Noll)

Johanna: Apropos screaming, what particularly intrigues me in Bjørn's talk-performance are elements that go beyond the sematic-linguistic text printed on the *Monopol* website. I would like to focus on the recurring moment of calling for collective screaming —Bjørn, who interrupts the performance of his always very sharp critique with the following call: "Here let's all take a deep breath and scream together: one-two-three [breathes deeply into the microphone, jumps in the air while pulling up his knees, not elegantly, but in a childlike manner, and starts to scream] aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah." On the cell phone video that you, Angela, took of the speech, we can often hear you laughing. Other videos show a lot of young people who, obviously already prepared, bang on pots and pans that they brought along and scream out loud. And in the front rows of the hall you can see older people bowing their heads, leaning forward, turning away. I can't be seen in the video, but I was potentially one of them. It was embarrassing for me to see and hear that, I felt ashamed for my colleague Bjørn, exposing himself like that, and I was embarrassed that he was calling on me to join in with this scenario of exposure. It took a couple of days for me to understand that I had not only watched Bjørn performing antiheroic gestures, that he had not only undertaken to dismantle his own position as spokesperson. Bjørn was clear and decisive in his critique, and he assumed a tendentially heroic position, or at least one that could be made heroic, offering something that many others could easily identity with. But this offer was repeatedly interrupted when Bjørn jumped up and down screaming, calling on the audience to enter with him into this space of self-display. This space, as a space of the performative, is also a space of exhibitionism, of transgression, and thus connected to shame, to embarrassment. With these elements of performative action, Bjørn opened up a field, undoubtedly also with the support

of the screaming students, in which feeling embarrassed potentially affected everyone. And this had a somewhat 'de-sovereignizing' effect on all those present, which I believe can orient us when it comes to developing aesthetics that are anti-fascist and critical of authority.

Bjørn: The shame affect was initially not a guiding principle for me. I was certainly going out on a limb, and I knew that calling on people to scream, as a childlike moment of not-being-able-to stand-it-anymore (or not wanting to), vehemently breaks with established patterns. This step was linked to the theme of this year's Rundgang exhibition, 'eXtase,' as a kind of breaking-loose, and making the opening talk a collective scream was announced in the program flyer long before any of us knew about the concrete cuts proposed by the presidium. At the time it was conceived as: now let's scream to break free from being-adult and to let ourselves go. But then the opening of eXtase coincided with the political situation, or rather, I wanted to bring them together in the talk in order to position myself and the audience in a completely different situation, also one of shame and infantilism.

Angela: At first I was also surprised by the theme of shame. For weeks during the preparations for the Rundgang exhibition Bjørn and I had been thinking about breaking-loose and about what happens when you're in a state of ecstasy. Shame really didn't come into the scope of possible feelings for me at all. But I thought about the moment of disturbance and about what the unspoken rules of such an opening event are, when the Minister comes and the President is also present, also in relation to the performance of a specific decorum. I remembered the moment in the New Zealand parliament when a new law was going to be passed that

undermined the rights of the Maori. A young representative, Hana-Rawhiti Maipi-Clarke, performed a haka, disturbing the reigning conventions through a different kind of expression that indeed had a very explicit performative character.[5] That is also a kind of communication, but it addresses and evokes completely different affects. As Bjørn mentioned, we also were thinking about collective screaming as a moment of acting against dominant social pressure, and about a type of communication that includes a bodily moment. And this also created a new energy, for the students as well, to develop other ideas again. It was empowering and connecting and got the students going, who were also using political gestures to communicate that we do not accept this kind of poilitics and have no intention of allowing this kind of austerity thinking.

Bjørn: I thought the action in the New Zealand parliament by Hana-Rawhiti Maipi-Clarke and the others supporting her was magnificent, these forms of expression were very interesting to me. The dominant forms of public expression are marked by bourgeois rules in our societies, and this was countered with a form that first draws a line in the sand and says: not so fast! Jan mentioned the realm of theater, which is a protected space of art, in which fictionalization is often used as a tool and the boundaries between fictionalizing and defaming are constantly being negotiated, indeed even in legal terms. Fictionalization is an instrument to say something that then stands in a new space — namely the space of art. It is therefore an instrument for using the space of art. And since we are an art school, we also have a different language, which can be unexpected, and in which we can choose other forms of expression than those sanctioned by bourgeois society. And speaking of shame: the ones who should feel ashamed are the

university and certain persons who were also sitting in the room and who are responsible for all the things I was talking about. I was indeed also talking about the *Master Control Program* on the basis of experiences that were entirely demeaning. This form of political speech, which steps outside the bourgeois world within the space of art — that's what I find interesting.

Johanna: I find your thoughts about the infantilization of protest important, since infantilizing statements and positions has often been a particularly effective strategy to exclude these things from the field of the political. Bjørn's performative gesture is risky, however, since it affirms the attribution of infantilizing. But what interests me about his action is precisely the dimension of the embarrassing, which, I hope, can destabilize those listeners who identify with authoritarianism.

Jan: Alongside the screaming, I also noticed other performative and rhetorical elements, for instance the disclaimer at the beginning and the end announcing a break with the traditional opening speech, when Bjørn said, "This is just my opinion, I'm not speaking for the Kunsthochschule as a whole." The idea of just sitting there and listening to an opening speech, especially one where the Minister is present, was difficult at first. There had indeed already been protests against the cuts, and rather than a general assembly of students, individual departments had decided at the grass roots level to lock our rooms and strike against the opening. Word got around, but there was no previous arrangement. There was no wider framework, some opened the classrooms again later, and then there was a little arguing. So I went to the speech with the idea that now things were going to get tense. But then things like this disclaimer happened, and with the

lucky break of the rain it was also more theatrical in the lecture hall. And then there were also other forms of protest. People were holidng up banners, someone got shouted down... And then you came, Bjørn, banging on your pot with a wooden spoon, perhaps organized with the students, perhaps it was simply a lucky coincidence. And you managed to get the protesters to quiet down a bit during the Minister's speech. So the protest and the Minister were there at the same time, and that was an important moment. And yes, there was some shame, I was embarrassed, you just don't do that, interrupting when someone's speaking. At the same time I thought the protest was justified—I felt conflicted about it. And then you came, Bjørn, and I was roused to courage, to 'let's not mince words here,' and I thought, how great, I wouldn't have dared to do that. I let myself get carried away and, just as you wanted, I became ecstatic. Leaving afterwards I thought, wow, that was an event like at the theater or the circus for a child, I was really worked up. [Bjørn laughs] And for me, and for many others I think, it felt like a victory, even if that's wrong and dangerous. We did it, we finally told it like it is. And your speech was really too long and turned into a kind of torture, but that was even better in the sense of: you [the management of the university] torture us and now we're getting back at you, since they couldn't get up and leave, they had to listen, otherwise it would have been a scandal since the Minister was there. And it seemed to me that the students and colleagues around me were sensing and feeling the same. What was dramatic, though, was that right afterwards came the semester break [three months of summer recess], while the cogs of the administration kept turning.

Bjørn: I didn't arrange anything with anybody and I didn't know that the audience also had pots and pans with them. I brought

along the pot and the wooden spoon in reference to the *Gezi Park* protests in Istanbul, which I also mention in the talk, because that was an enormously moving experience for me when windows opened up on both sides of the Bosphorous and you could hear a million pots being struck, lights were turned on and off, and a huge crowd of people rose up and came together to say: "Stop, no more!"

Jan: What happened at the *Rundgang*, and now is being continued with fantastically designed protest posters, the many banners with their clever, sharp-witted slogans, printed speeches, conversations with journalists, podcasts, photos of varous actions published on social media,[6] open letters, several letters to the university administration[7] and to different collagues at the university in the senate, all of these things say: Look, maybe we don't have a chance, but we're taking it anyway, and we mean it!

Angela: ...while, as Bjørn always says in his talk, the state is delighted about the growth of the arms industry and the simultaneous cuts at an art school.

Bjørn: I have nothing to add to that except that it's my hope to use the space of art as a big experimental field. At any rate, that is exactly what I will continue to do here.

Transcription and editing of the German conversation: Johanna Schaffer

[1] https://www.monopol-magazin.de/kunsthochschule-kassel-kuerzungen-bjoern-melhus-wir-haben-nichts-mehr-zu-geben. An English translation ist available at: https://transversal.at/blog/we-have-nothing-left-to-give.

[2] See "Schreiben des Rektors und der Rektoratsgeschäftsführung an die Präsidentin" [Letter to the President of the Dean and the Rectorate Management] from July 21, 2025, "Schreiben der vom Kunsthochschulrat eingesetzten AG Strategien-Kürzungen an das Präsidium der Universität" [Letter to the President of Kassel University by the Working Group which has been implemented by the Council of Kunsthochschule Kassel under the name *Strategies Budget Cuts*, from Aug. 20, 2025, "Schreiben des Rektors und der Rektoratsgeschäftsführung an die Präsidentin" (Letter to the President by the Dean and the Rectorate Management) from Sep. 9, 2025 (all of these texts were available to the participants in this discussion).

[3] M. Gessen, "The Chilling Consequences of Going Along with Trump," *The New York Times*, Feb. 8, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/08/opinion/trump-power-surrender.html (viewed: Sep. 9, 2025)

[4] M. Tsimitakis, "The Adults Are Back in Charge of Greece: And They Are Really Right-Wing." *The New York Times*, August 5, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/05/opinion/mitsotakis-greece-election.html (viewed: Sep. 9, 2025)

[5] Kathryn Armstrong, "Maori haka in NZ parliament to protest at bill to reinterpret founding treaty," *BBC News*, Nov. 14, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgwve4j176o (viewed on Sep. 9, 2025 — with the recommendation to watch the video on this page).

[6] https://bsky.app/profile/khk-gg-kuerzungen.bsky.social und https://www.instagram.com/khk_gegen_kuerzungen/

[7] See FN 1