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“We have nothing left to give”. Cuts at the Kunsthochschule Kassel

Talk given at the opening of the annual Rundgang exhibition

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What I actually wanted to talk about today was the potential of ecstasy, the social context of altered states of consciousness, also as a form of empowerment in a time dominated by debates around fear.

Art can be ecstatic. The creative process itself as well as its reception. I wanted to talk about art as a form of liberation, and about how we deal with spirits—and not least about the Kunsthochschule as a site of “excitement” in the sense of “inspiration”. A place at which we excite one another and from which we can bring critical questions into social life. Questions that are completely relevant in a systematic sense, especially for co-existing in a democratic sense.

Indeed, art forms an important corrective within a society, and personally I wouldn’t want to live without it. Art can be ecstatic, it

brings dreams and nightmares to the surface. It functions as an antidote and platform on which important and current topics can be continually renegotiated. It raises questions and opens up previously unseen aesthetic spaces.

That's just how it is—and not otherwise

An art school is the laboratory where students grow into these socially important roles, so they can prick at those places where it can sometimes really hurt—and where it must hurt. An art school is a place where visions of the future can arise, especially in a time when it is becoming increasingly important to scrutinize images and issues. And yet there are more and more people or parties in our society that call the value of art into question. Especially considering that mentoring students at an art school is particularly time-consuming and labor-intensive.

And now we learn: the coffers are empty and we have to cut back everywhere. The economy is in bad shape. Last year the state of Hesse had to contend with a deficit of ten billion euros, which of course also effects education and culture. And yet, at a time of crumbling democracy and military buildup, it would be particularly important to protect exactly these things. This, however, is obviously not currently a priority for the politics of the so-called "turning point."

So as part of the Higher Education Pact, Hessian universities are expected to contribute around 30 million euros to consolidation in 2026. With approximately 14 million euros of cuts, the University of Kassel apparently accounts for nearly half of this amount. This is a very bitter pill. "Let's not kid ourselves: the 2026 budget will have to be an austerity budget," said the Hessian Minister of

Finance Alexander Lorz. For as long as there is no clear economic growth in Germany, austerity will have to be “the new normal.”

A wonderful poorhouse

As far as the Kunsthochschule Kassel is concerned, we can’t really speak of anything “new,” but more of a decades-long status quo. When I took my position 22 years ago, I said then in an interview that although the school is a poorhouse, at least it’s a wonderful poorhouse. At the time I still believed in the idea of a poorhouse with a lot of potential. Today I unfortunately can no longer believe this. Despite the precarious circumstances, I have repeatedly stood by the Kunsthochschule Kassel over the past two decades, turning down other, often more lucrative offers.

I saw Kassel as an open creative space, a space that I must now, with the recently announced cuts, call into question. I was of the belief that I was in not only in one of the most important art schools in Germany, but also in one of the most beautiful. For the building by Paul Posenenske from 1962, at the edge of Karlsaue Park, is an outstanding example of post-war modernism in Hesse and is a designated historic landmark.

And yet, for decades this building has unfortunately been systemically run into the ground by cost cuts at the university, which I will refer to from now on as the Master Control Program. Buckets often have to be put out to collect the rain dripping through the ceiling. On the other hand, if you need a couple of buckets of white paint to spruce up the place yourself for the exhibition, the Master Control Program advises the exhibition organizers to pay for the paint for the entire campus out of our

own pockets, with only a very vague promise of ever getting reimbursed.

That's the reality

When, as part of the renovation of the façade for energy efficiency, we asked about maybe providing students with direct access to a restroom so they wouldn't have to go to the park or to another part of the building outside of the main opening hours, the Master Control Program called and told me: "You know, Herr Melhus, getting you a restroom is too expensive for me." That's the reality. While colonies of raccoons make their homes behind the crumbling fiber cement sidings, the administration decorates the university computers with goofy raccoon stickers. Just imagine: your apartment is getting eaten up by mice and your landlord sends you a goofy picture of a mouse from a children's cartoon. It's hard to imagine a greater discrepancy in perception.

No, austerity is not the "new normal" here. It is a decades-long permanent program. I sometimes wonder if this is in fact the result of a persistent cognitive dissonance, since a university can no more be bothered with the construct of an art school than a hardware store can with an attached flower section? Maybe they just don't even know that plants need water to live.

Perhaps their heads are also full of romanticizing images of poor poets, like Carl Spitzweg, and the notion that precarious circumstances might enhance the creativity of the young art students? I still wonder about this. Certainly it does not enhance the creativity of the faculty, who have been pushed to the limits of their capacity for years, no longer able to get to their own research, since, on top of everything else, they have to deal with more and

more bureaucratic tasks every year. Burnout eventually hits us all. On top of that, the administration is understaffed and overworked.

Less is not possible anymore

If we look at the entirety of the University of Kassel as a body, then the Kunsthochschule is an appendage that has been decaying for years, no longer supplied with enough blood and oxygen. It's somehow ugly and stinks, better not to look at it any more. While in the boom years the rest of the healthy body was maintained with increased staff and construction projects costing hundreds of millions, now, in times of need, when the air is really getting thinner, solidarity is demanded from the body part that was already short on resources.

An operation that has been run into the ground for years is now being drained of resources to the same degree as the well-maintained rest of the body. We've come to the end. There's nothing left here to take. Less is not more, rather less is not possible anymore. We have nothing left to give. Here let's all take a deep breath and scream together!

A brief look back: The Kunsthochschule was founded in 1777. Great figures have emerged from it, such as the artist Hans Haacke or Marion Ackermann, the new president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, to name just two. And it is the school that won an Oscar for student films in both 1989 and 1996. And last but not least, it is the school from which Arnold Bode founded the documenta in 1955, the famous international art exhibition. This laboratory of ideas, which takes place every five years and is set up for 100 days, in which the Kunsthochschule has also repeatedly been involved, is also a major economic factor for the city of Kassel.

The city lives from the documenta, while the Kunsthochschule wastes away.

From precarious to palliative

Already in the last several years the condition of the Kunsthochschule was shameful. But the current shift from a precarious care station to a palliative one is a scandal. What's being done here is active euthanasia.

Now we have the choice: either we line up against the wall and one of us gets "shot" at the discretion of the Master Control Program, or we pass the revolver around Russian roulette style and take care of the mess ourselves. Yes, that may sound cynical, but perhaps I'm still in the anger phase (in Kübler-Ross's terms) of a death foretold, while others may have already reached the acceptance phase years ago.

We simply want to be treated like any other art school in Germany. The issue is the ratio of faculty to students. It's just a numbers game, not witchcraft. Either with or without the university.

Give the Kunsthochschule autonomy!

Perhaps it might help if the next university director were an artist? They might not understand anything about the rest of the university, but at least they would know what an art school is. At this point the structural problem is perhaps clearer: an art school needs its own administration, one that is familiar with the field, since many things are just so fundamentally different.

Art is not any normal subject or university department. Perhaps this is the moment to really reconsider a possible autonomy for the Kunsthochschule. Even it times are hard and we all have to tighten our belts even more. Perhaps you, Herr Minister Timon Gremmels, could help us to make this jewel of the city of Kassel shine again in the long term?

Ronald Reagan said in 1987: “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” I say here and now: “Herr Minister Gremmels, give the Kunsthochschule Kassel autonomy!” Then it would be a powerful beacon for the city of the documenta. At least we could consider it, couldn’t we? In this forced married, equipped with unequal opportunities, we shouldn’t be saying: “Till death do you part,” right? I needn’t add here whose death that would be.

There needs to be a turning point

Certainly there have been—and still are—many great cooperative actions with the various university departments. This can continue and even be intensified. But one thing should be clear: the situation at the moment cannot and must not continue. The proposed cuts must become a turning point in the Kunsthochschule’s calculations.

Given the status quo, further cuts will make it impossible to keep running. It is like an airplane that is continually deprived of fuel until it starts to dive.

At some point it will simply crash to the ground. “This is your captain speaking: We’re going down. We are all going down!” Before it crashes let’s all take a deep breath and scream together!

Good news at last

Now finally to the good news: in a press release by the Hessian State Office of Statistics from June 23, we read that the number of millionaires in Hesse in 2021 rose 21.3 percent over 2020, to a total of 2,856—and their total income reached 8.7 billion euros. Bravo!

There's even more good news: in a press release by the Hessian Ministry of Finance from August 30, 2024, we read that tax investigations and audits in Hesse during 2023 provided additional receipts of 1.2 billion euros, and in addition 151 prison sentences had been handed down for criminal acts of tax evasion. Bravo!

But there is a lot happening on the economic front as well: already in 2023, when visiting the arms manufacturer Rheinmetall, Hesse's Minister-President Boris Rhein praised their preservation and strengthening of Kassel as an arms industry hub. For "Kassel is the center of the defense industry in Hesse. The presence of Rheinmetall and Krauss-Maffei Wegmann means that two globally significant defense companies are based in Kassel."

Assembling ammunition in the future

With a 15 percent increase in revenue, KNDS, the arms manufacturer formed from Krauss-Maffei Wegmann and Nexter, reached record annual sales in 2024 of 3.8 billion euros. Orders received increased by 40 percent to 11.2 billion euros. This has resulted in an order backlog of 23.5 billon euros, 15 percent more than in the previous year, and therefore also a record high.

Rheinmetall's stocks are also a big hit at the moment. Since 2022 their stock has skyrocketed by 907 percent. The largest

stockholder, with 5 percent of the total, is the financial services provider Blackrock (also the previous workplace of our current chancellor, among other things).

There's even more good news: "The local government is looking to further strengthen Kassel as a defense industry hub," said Minister-President Rhein. That means things could be looking up, since former art students could spend their futures assembling ammunition for the Leopard 2. Ten rounds of this ammunition would be roughly the equivalent of one professorship per year. When it comes to the defense hub Kassel, however, one might get the nagging feeling that history—which already left its mark on the urban space of Kassel once before—might end up repeating itself.

Education and culture are the foundations of how we live together as humans

But this is exactly the turning point. The only thing left to hope for is that the profits of these finance companies don't just flow—quite legally—into some tax haven, leaving the Hessian tax investigators standing there empty handed and looking dumb. Here let's all scream together again!

Anyone who wants to live in a peaceful society, invested in the future of the next generations, cannot cut education and culture. Not even at a so-called "turning point." Education and culture are the very foundation of how we live together as humans.

From the palliative station to death: in many reports, near-death experience is described as the most ecstatic experience. The fact that these reports exist implies that the dying were revived and found their way back to life. Otherwise they wouldn't have been

able to report about it. I hope the same thing applies to our magnificently beautiful, but critically ill Kunsthochschule. Perhaps this Rundgang exhibition is an ecstatic near-death experience that we can talk about later. Help us! Throw us a lifesaver and not active euthanasia!

This text is a revised version of a talk given by Bjørn Melhus at the opening of the annual Rundgang exhibition at the Kunsthochschule
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Jan Peters, and Johanna Schaffer from August 29, 2025: https://transversal.at/blog/take-a-deep-breath-and-scream-together.