

Andrew Hodgson in conversation with Katharina Wendler

Email, Vienna / Paris / Berlin, September / October 2020

KW: What kind of project did you propose for Haus, and why did the concept of an exhibition interest you as a writer in the first place?

AH: I was drawn to the rubric of Haus, and its experimental and exploratory goals. Also, the idea of the demolition of the house itself following the show. The intention is that the piece I've installed there would remain to that moment of disintegration of the physical space itself, which bears parallels with the book object. Paper being a fairly ephemeral thing, that stains and rots and tears, and eventually, invariably, at some point or another, goes in the bin, however many hands it passes through before that moment. And so, that process of destruction was a draw.

Approaching a physical space such as this as a writer is something I've been interested in for a while, and have tested in different ways and different venues before. I view a book as a space entered, interacted with, and then left. Like a series of rooms in a house (to draw that sentiment into current context). And so I wanted to literalise that engagement. A very early criticism of my writing was that "it reads like running an assault course," which was an inducing of physicality, movement and material space in an essentially ephemeral process that I took on board, and, disappointingly for said critic, was drawn to explore further, rather than avoid.

For the last year I have been developing a book on these themes entitled *Experimental Praxis* which is due to appear next year. I curate and edit the book alongside co-editors Rosie Šnajdr and Chris Clarke; the project includes work from twenty-two contributors. After seeing the call for Haus, I thought these different strands might be drawn together and create something engaging and perhaps new, and went from there.

On a similar note, how did your artistic practice drive you to the medium of conversation? Would you regard the processes of a conversation as an extension of artistic affect, or maybe a disruption of those aesthetic processes of the art object?

KW: I'm afraid my answer to your question is rather boring, as I am not an artist myself but a curator and writer, and so conversations with artists have always been a tremendously important source of knowledge for me. This conversation project (that you are taking part in) came about because I noticed that I talk to artists about their work all the time anyways, and that these conversations are essential in order to really get to the root of a practice. At the same time, I found it such a pity that I should be the only addressee of this knowledge, so I decided to make these conversations public. Over the last year and a half the project has taken many shapes and forms, just like artistic practices do.

I do consider these conversations to be extensions, but maybe rather of the exhibitions/presentations than of the art works themselves. Art writing often faces the criticism that writers over-interpret and therewith kill the art. I try to avoid that. My approach of inviting artists to have a conversation aims more at an exchange. I want to get to know their work and I tell them my thoughts. If we're both lucky, something new comes out of it.

I find your metaphor of a book as a physical space very intriguing. It is, for me, very relatable (and might explain why we're sometimes left behind feeling so empty when we finish a book; it's like stepping out of a house and into nothingness). Following Foucault's idea of a heterotopia, it can be considered a space without a space, or a space that is somehow 'other'. I am wondering though, is this principle bound to a linear narrative, a story, a line of chapters?

Can you tell me more about Experimental Praxis? Who did you invite to contribute and what kind of contributions will be gathered in this volume?

AH: I'm never all so sure where those distinctions come in, or what delimitation or demarcation goes where. I suppose it is, as you indicate, one within many choices of framework and presentation for reception imparted by the creator of the thing, that genres that object into one space of engagement or another. You describe your process as an extension of the artwork, or presentation of art, which I find very interesting. These conversations going on within and without the durational aspects of the artworks themselves (i.e. during their showing), almost symbiotic of them. It would be interesting to know if you have found this extension or symbiotic interaction with the artwork also performs an act of modification. As you say, there is an element of bypassing interpretative engagement inherent in this extension of the work, which itself I guess is an interpretative act. Though the active work of that interpretation would seem to have shifted somewhat here. Would you say, in the writerly way you approach the process of conversation, your work acts as a sort of addendum, or marginalia?

PRAXIS sort of inhabits a smudging of those genred delimitations, I guess. In my critical work, I look to the efforts of experimental, or avant-garde, writers, in drawing that which is deemed "not-literature" – comic books, detective fiction, romance, horror and so on (and often extending further, to street graffiti, gifs, accounting ledgers...) – into contact with the literary, and then drawing that amalgam into closer synchronicity with the socially and culturally defined precepts of 'art.' In the spaces opened up by experimental practice, these sandboxes have a tendency to merge, or fall apart. A decent example of that would be Chris Marker's well-known work *La Jetée* (1962) – which was ostensibly a film, which was and is shown in cinemas. However, due to financial and temporal constraint, it is made up of photographs, and one single moving-image scene. To add to that blurring, the opening title card announces that it is not a film at all despite its presentation in a filmic venue, but a "photo-roman" – a "photo-novel," which was a type of short comic made up of speech-bubbled photographs on the back of newspapers at the time. The three photographic cells mimicking the novelistic poetics of the three-act narrative arc.

I think *PRAXIS*, and its book-anchor *Experimental Praxis*, certainly has the potential to be experienced as a social virtuality, moored but at reflective distance. I think that would be quite a generative interaction with the work within it. The project is rooted in a parodic response to novelistic poetics, what elsewhere I have attempted to coin as "experimental romantics." Myself, Rosie and Chris took the skeletal structure for the project from Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969), where Brophy sets out a narrative progression from "Linguistic Leprosy" to "The Case of the Missing (Re)Member," "De Rebus," and finally "Let it all Come Breakdown." This Brophy herself took from symphonic form, as a sort of Brahmsian work in four movements, attempting to create "a sense of disintegration rather than concordance."

In a similar mode, we wanted to create a co-op work that produced a parallel sense of growing allure and threatened discord. We developed these formal points into thematic prompts and we each invited

a number of writers and/or language artists to choose one of these prompts to contribute to. The idea being that, as a group work, we might mimic this sense of movement, or narrative progress. What that does to linearity, story or lines of chapters I suppose is a score for the viewer at Haus, or the future reader to settle at that post-object moment you mention, of a sensation of having left something behind, or perhaps that it is they themselves that have been.

The response we received from participants was great and the pieces that came in responded in unforeseen and complex ways with the themes and framework, and the idea of dispersal of narrative direction onto the collective work, that perhaps creates a sense of variable pluralisation of direction in the interactions and sequences, or desequenced roll out of the individual pieces.

I've already gone on a fair bit here, and so will leave you with the contributor list, which I'm really proud to say reads as a sort of school register of figures at the forefront of innovation in writing and language art today:

Derek Beaulieu, Guy Bennett, Kimberly Campanello, Spencer Campbell, Shane Jesse Christmass, Chris Clarke, Emily Critchley, James Goodwin, Bhanu Kapil, Jake Kennedy, Robert Kiely, Kevin McPherson Eckhoff, Sawako Nakayasu, Vanessa Onwuezezi, Outranspo, Imogen Reid, Shola von Reynolds, Rosie Šnajdr, Isabel Waidner, Joanna Walsh and Eley Williams

KW: I have always looked for ways to grasp art, to get access, to dive in. It starts with a very personal interest and desire I suppose. Every piece of art writing is as personal as every piece of art, I assume, for it can only be highly subjective. Art historians will probably disagree but then again, I am not aiming to write art historical texts. In dealing with contemporary art, artists have always been my preferred source of information. I sort of lost interest in interpretative art historical texts; endlessly repeating what others have said before and making speculations about what things could eventually mean or not can sometimes be terribly boring (I have a background in art history so I'm allowed to say that). I am not an enemy of art history per se of course but felt the academic style of writing quite limiting. So, whatever text I write, there's a conversation with the artist before. If I don't find her or his work interesting, I cannot write about it, it's that simple. There must be something there... an imagination, a fascination, an understating of the method/idea/background/interest. But the text will always remain an add-on, it is of course not essential to the work itself (there are some rare exceptions where artists have turned our conversation into an art work or have based later works on it). I'd say that this is a form of collaboration but it becomes (much!) more obvious in the texts than in the artworks.

Can writing be a collective operation?

AH: I see, in that sense I think we come to the topic from very different routes. When thinking of whether to speak with the last remaining writers of the post-war experimental novel when preparing to write that book, for example, I eventually decided against it, taking on the texts, or objects, and their paratexts as sovereign material. I did once relay a question to Hélène Cixous about an article she'd written in 1967, and her response was along the lines of, "why the hell would I know anything about that!" Though in this sort of way, this conversation, like those in Georges Perec's *Entretiens et conférences* functions as a historicising document, rather than a posteriori rerouting, maybe. But then, that position is perhaps a product of much of my work being carried out, and much of my

perspective developed, in the space you're looking to push against here, in academia, and so perhaps I've accidentally let it leak in with me.

I think I'd see, just as with the annotational aspects of conversation or *entretien*, a collective process at work. If a writer's experimental praxis in a book is to set the instruments of experimentation, and then, in publication, leave that space, leave it set up and primed so, it would be a readerly experimental praxis to enact them; to carry out the experiment as it were. When we talk of an experimental novel, for instance, it is not the writer but the reader for whom the novel is an active experiment, something to be performed. And between its priming and its enaction, there's a cast of silent actors upon that object that render it a functioning conduit; editors, typesetters, proof-readers, printers, booksellers... This is also why there can be no *experimentalism*, as such a word would imply set characteristics with set outcomes, when the characteristics are demanded by subject matter, therefore variable, and the outcomes reliant on, not only the inputs of those silent contributors to the object, often unknowable to the author at point of writing, but also the sum of experience, perspective and context a reader brings to it – the wheres and whens and hows of enaction of the object, by what user, is fundamentally unknowable. Experiment is not a genre or a movement, but a process integral to narrative art. And so I'd see a written object as always, integrally, a collective operation, whether these experimental processes have been fully committed to, or no.

I suppose with *PRAXIS* and *Experimental Praxis* we are sort of testing the extremes of the formal potentials of a *cadavre exquis*, however applying that premise to the overarching narrative poetics of the novelesque, rather than the line by line games from childhood. However disjointed the final result might be, there is a thematic setting out, problematic met, peak, and reconciliation (or perhaps demonstration of the impossibility thereof). There is a narrative movement, collectively committed to, that might generate a sense of chorus in its polyphony. In doing so, perhaps getting somewhere near the sort of experiential mediation the art object, or the book object, often claims to be able to achieve.

KW: *Apart from producing a text, how important is its later physical form to you? (its format such as book, wall text, print-out, poster, and so on, the paper / underground it is printed on, the size of it, the way in which it is presented)*

AH: I understand the relationship between content and form in terms of the worn maxim “form follows function.” In the context of written text, that the experimental formal demands of the object are integrally necessitated by the communicative aspects of an experimental content. Where narrative art diverges from the old sense of teaching a viewer a lesson (in the browbeating sense), leading to a moralistic pay off at its ends, and moves towards heuristic or formative processes, in which that viewer enters and must produce the results of the work themselves. If the rhetoric of a written object is to invite someone else into a space beyond themselves, to convince them to depart from their space and enter an otherly space, then a process of empathetic, or sympathetic affectivity is at work. A warped or magnified treatment of form might produce aesthetic interactions that have the potential to prompt that increased engagement. I've seen this process referred to as the aleatory, or the ergodic among other neologisms, which I suppose are both conceptualisations or recastings of that assault course description given above, and a deal less derogatory.

Perhaps B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), a book in a box in which all the chapters are separate, demanding the reader shuffle them at will, also demands that reader participate in the unsaid and impossibilities of its story, relating the slow and painful death of a close friend. Or

Brophy in *In Transit* presenting alternative words at once by placing both possible vowels one above the other, parallel column writing and visual images, invites us too to a frenetic space, where we might question our reliance on the socio-culturally given trappings of ascribed gender and sexuality. If these sorts of engagements act on an individual, person by person level, that might accumulate, and affect the seemingly staid systems that these artworks and people function within. It brings to mind a statement from a Pol Bury manifesto: “politics is (not without our complicity) placed between the universe and us like a horse frozen in stone: before a cigarette became a cigarette it was American; before a turnip became a turnip it was Soviet; [...] experimentation under these conditions has a historical role to fill: fuck with prejudgements, thaw normalities, and unbutton the uniform of fear.” In this sense the formal aspects of this sort of work has a realist function, experimentally so.

With *PRAXIS*, the work was printed onto paper, then adhered to all four walls of a room. The idea being that walls of text not being all that inviting, viewers would scan for sections that drew them in. Due to the nature and circumstance of design, printing and installation, contributor's work tended to be disrupted, cut in half lengthwise, missing beginning or end sentences; start or conclusion. The works were reprinted in different sequences three times around the room, therefore a viewer would have to search the room to complete the narratives they had opted to follow. There was an audio aspect, where contributors discussed experimental praxis, and performed their work, which was played in the room. Some contributors gave spoken readings that greatly varied in tone and address, others acted their work out, others had musical accompaniment, others used text-to-speech bots to read their work. The recording was 2:26:38 long and looped, and so a different viewer entering the room at a different point within the recording would be given a very different aspect to what the work on the walls might try to convey. With these formal attempts to intervene in singular linearity, and extend potentials to multiplicity, I hoped to generate a formalised physical space that would encourage these sorts of affective engagement with the narratives presented.

KW: Are you sometimes worried about the viewer's/reader's attention span or the (too little) time that they spend with your work?
Is it a blessing or curse that the audience will almost always only grasp an excerpt, a portion, a small fraction of the overall work?

AH: I don't really think of projections to the reader in any sort of idealised way; that this is what it is, and this is what they should get from it. Some might read from beginning to end, out of sensation, or interest, or boredom, or spite. But there is also a sense of projected readerly aversion and refusal that has become integral to making this sort of work, as it has followed the appearance of this sort of work for many years, and continues to do so. In a fairly popular, and fairly naff book, David Lodge said that experimental writing – he gives the example of Perec's *La Disparition* – is “more fun to read about than read.” It is tempting to state that this sort of reception, that there is no method, or draughtsmanship in the work, that it is gimmickry, or masturbatory, is a peculiarly British reduction, but I think it is a much more internationalised reactionary tendency. The sentiment that reformulating, or modulating modes of fictive writing is inconsequential, or irresponsible tends to follow literary cultures around, wherever or whenever writing such as that might emerge. In this sense even protectionist refusals such as in Lodge produce affect, as in 1992 he bemoans a book that he claims is redundant, that was published more than twenty years before, in 1969. Especially considering it wasn't accessible in English at that point, *La Disparition* appeared in English as *A Void* in 1995. So it isn't particularly clear if Lodge could do anything *but* read about it. Yet, after reading about it in Lodge, I then went off to find the book and read that also, and now write about it

here. Perhaps someone will go read it. Which perhaps all implies texts such as Perec's aren't redundant at all, and latency and refusal itself has an aestheticized role to play.

However, between out-and-out rejection of something that is perceived to ask for too much effort and too much time, and dorki malorki such as myself who spend years with texts like Perec's, there is a wide and erratic scale of potential engagement. In those more varied terms, I suppose the question of engagement is a bit like this conversation. A reader might begin at the top, and scroll, and see these walls of writing, and scroll a little further to see how much progress the scrollbar makes, and finding its progress slow going, abandon. Or bookmark, before doing so, in order to, in several years' time when sifting through that list, wonder what on earth this was bookmarked for, before right-clicking for removal. However, between the variegated drives to attempted completionism, those yearning for a TLDR, and the Lodges of the world, there are different operable functions of reading, that might engage in different ways. In scanning for themes or matter of interest to the reader, or leaving the tab open and returning intermittently, or buzzword searching to cut into the wider dreck of my warbling on.

In terms of drawing that sense of variability, partiality, and projections to refusal, into the formal aesthetics of the work with *PRAXIS*, it is rare that someone would read a book in one sitting. Doing so might even be counterproductive to the processes of the work itself. You read it over coffee in the morning, on the train to work, in the park on your lunch break, you forget it in the office, or in your bag for a few months, you loan it to a friend, you read it in the back of the taxi; on the toilet &c. The book-object itself is symbiotic, in a sense. The mediatory aspects of the book form become intertwined with the life lived during its reading, in which the episodic segments of the book become inlays in everyday life, or that, from a readerly perspective, episodic segments of their lived life become inlays within the progressional aspects of the book. This disruption, or perhaps, full function of a book object, implies that a written project is always partial; that this partiality is a central aspect to its potential functionality.

However, for *PRAXIS*, I could not expect a viewer to come intermittently live out of this room over several weeks, or months of their life. In the setting of an exhibition space, they were a transitory, rather than transitionally captive audience. Though this sense of the text seeping out beyond itself was still present. The recording was audible from the street outside the building, from the courtyard where the Haus building and its decrepitude is first viewable, and other artworks were shown. Slipping through snippets of varied narratives around the room, or spending time to follow and listen to where these texts might try to take the viewer, would remain with the viewer as they walk the rest of the buildings, and when they leave for the U3. In the context of a fair-like exhibition space, the work itself had to formally prefigure that sense of viewer drift, while maintaining that literary aspect of leaching from and into its surroundings. I suppose I wouldn't see it as a blessing or a curse, but that variability being part and parcel of the process itself.

Andrew Hodgson (born 1988 in Hull, England) is author of the monograph *The Post-War Experimental Novel: British and French Fiction, 1945-75* (Bloomsbury, 2019), the novel *Mnemonic Symbols* (Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2019) and editor of the experimental writing collection *Paris* (Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2019). He is translator from the French of Roland Topor's *Head-to-Toe Portrait of Suzanne* (Atlas Press, 2018), and from the Danish, Carl Julius Salomonsen's *New Forms of Art and Contagious Mental Illness* (New Documents, 2020). His visual work has been shown in Hull, Paris, Los Angeles and Vienna. *Experimental Praxis* is forthcoming with Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2021.

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Katharina Wendler (born 1988 in Hamburg, lives and works in Berlin and Weimar) is an art historian and exhibition maker. She studied Cultural Sciences and Psychology at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg as well as Art History at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin and the University of Iceland. From 2013 to 2017 she directed the project space Safn Berlin/Reykjavik and since 2014 has realised and coordinated numerous exhibitions, publications and other projects with German and international artists. She currently works as Curator of the Bauhaus University Gallery and Artistic Associate at the Faculty of Art and Design at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar as well as a freelance curator and writer in Berlin.

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In early 2018 she initiated the exhibition format *in conversation with*, that takes as its goal to bring people into conversation and thus into collaboration. Artists are invited to enter into dialogue and to develop an exhibition from it. The conversations are formulated into texts and serve to accompany the exhibitions as text material. They enable the visitors to develop a deeper understanding of the working methods of the artist and their artworks.

in conversation with is based on the assumption that artists themselves are best able to provide information about their works, their working methods, their ideas and inspirations. One simply needs to ask.

Exhibition

Das Haus

September 21–27, 2020

Haus Wien, Kobelgasse 3, 1110 Vienna

<https://haus.wien/>