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We have a tool – a few words about meeting an author as an equal and other acts of scenius-ism

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I don't dare to speculate about possible futures, it's difficult enough to survey and understand the many current forms of creative writing. I just want to fish three samples out of the sea of possibilities that at least give an indication of what could be, or: what I would like.

In 2019, we had a class at our vienna poetry school with the title "Code & Poetry - Poetry in the digital realm". It was directed by Fabian Navarro, a young author, slam poet and IT professional. In the announcement, Fabian wrote: "Code & Poetry draws on the hidden (html etc.) codes in the digital realm. At first sight they seem perplexing, but in fact they are also a text. Code is a language and language invites us to express and experiment. How this is done will be taught in this class. The participants learn the simple basics of a computer language and new approaches for writing in the digital age". And Fabian ends: "Everything is possible, from html poetry to randomly generated poems and interactive texts. The requirements of the course are interest and curiosity. Prior knowledge of programming is not required!"

What made this class exciting for me: We have a tool - programming language. We have amateurs who have no knowledge of programming. And we have a teacher to whom programming is just as important as poetry. Even more: Fabian Navarro handles a programming language inappropriately, or put it to a use other than the one intended. Misappropriating a technology is the beginning of playful creativity. Tool abuse is a wonderful strategy for surprising yourself.

Second Sample: A few years ago we had Canadian conceptual poet Christian Bök as a guest at our annual festival. In his Lecture-Performance Bök presents his equally megalomaniac and pataphysical project "xenotext experiment". The idea - very simplified - is to inject the DNA sequence of a Bök poem into an extremely resistant bacterium called "Deinococcus radiodurans". For more than ten years, the author has

been working on this bacterial poetry machine in collaboration with biochemists, with the goal now finally in sight: the poem will soon continue to reproduce without an author and, thanks to the bacterium's resistance, will also survive any nuclear catastrophe.

Again we have a tool: biochemistry. Don't ask me for the names of the devices used here. We have a non-specialist poet invading a foreign territory and finding there professionals as accomplices. Even more: Christian Bök and his friends of science handle a biochemical technology inappropriately, or put it to a use other than the one intended. Misappropriating a technology is the beginning of playful creativity. Tool abuse is a wonderful strategy for surprising yourself.

Third Sample – the most famous: In 1877, the recording of the nursery rhyme "Mary has a little lamb" sounded for the first time from a phonautograph invented by Thomas Edison. The medium of the phonograph recording was born. The material, the form on which sounds would be recorded changed over the course of history - from wax cylinder to shellac to vinyl - but the function of what later became known as the turntable remained the same: reproduction of sound events.

It wasn't until 1975, almost 100 years later, that Afro-American DJs in New York like Kool DJ Herc or Grandwizard Theodore came up with the brilliant idea of turning the reproduction tool into an instrument, i.e. a production tool. They invented new techniques for manipulating the sound source vinyl: Scratching, Beat Juggling, Echo Fade, Blends, Cuts, Chops – I repeat myself: we have a tool. The Turntable. And we have artists who improperly handle the tool, which will soon become a new musical art form: Turntableism. Misappropriating a technology is the beginning of playful creativity.

Whatever the technique, the key word is playfulness. Or play instinct? Does that mean the same thing in English? I don't know. But what I think I know: it is never a question of new and newest technical tools but how to use them, in our case: how to use them illegitimately.

When the first affordable synthesizer for the masses, the Korg Ms 20 was launched in 1978, it was a milestone in the democratisation of electronic music, but at the same time the starting signal for countless dull bands that all sounded the same. Thanks to the instantly recognizable sound aesthetic of the Korg MS 20. My favourite musician Brian Eno was asked at that time what he thought of the success of the MS

20. And he replied: happy the one who owns a broken Korg with some knobs not working. Eno meant: This “Kaputtness” makes your tool unique due to limitations. Work with defects, take advantage of deficiencies. These defects are yours alone. All the others sound well-behaved and the same.
Translated into creative writing one could say: learn from debutantes, listen to failed authors. They probably have more interesting things to report than their successful colleagues. Not to forget: read bad books, watch pathetic theatre performances and give chance a chance. The best is probably a mix of professional skills and spirited dilettantism.
Behind my defense of the imperfect and flawed is the idea of an artistic community of equals working at eye level. In the early days of the vienna poetry school it was necessary to show off with big names: Nick Cave as a teacher – what a sensational coup by Ide Hintze, founder of our school. Or Blixa Bargeld from Einstürzende Neubauten. Falco: unimaginable today - not only because he is dead. Of course international stars like Allen Ginsberg and Ann Waldman and the native avant-garde Gerhard Rühm, H.C. Artmann etc. etc. It was the time of the masters. Until the internet appeared. And just as video killed the radio stars, internet killed the poetry stars.
Today every blogger gets his/her 15 minutes of fame. Very few of them would think of taking part in a creative writing seminar. Their school is the digital space, where they learn and teach at the same time. They learn from other blogs and pass on their knowledge to other bloggers. There is no quality control, success is measured in the quantity of likes. Can good literature thrive in such an unabashed environment? For sure. But just as most literature is bad, so are most blogs.
Raquel Recuero, an early blogueira from Brazil, wrote 2003 in her blog about the literariness of blogs. I quote: „If we could see a typical bookstore maybe 20 years after Gutenberg, we would probably be appalled (appoled) at the speed with which junk was duplicated on the primitive presses of the time. Time and chance have buried the junk, leaving us with a tiny residue of superb writing and thought. Similarly, for every Swift and Sterne and Johnson writing in the 18th century, hundreds of dreadful writers scribbled more junk...buried under the junk of the 19th century, and so on. Many American authors of mid-century rated a portrait on the cover of Time

Magazine, and are now forgotten even by desperate Ph.D. candidates in search of a dissertation subject“.

But what's "bad"? What's "good"? We love the writing that addresses and expresses our anxieties, and we despise the writing that ignores them. Moralizing about blogs is as pointless as moralizing about the Mickey Spillane mysteries of the 1950s, or denigrating Donna Leon crime novels as cheap literature. Doing so may reveal much about our personal taste, or the taste of our time, but it says very little about what's really going on in blog writing.

Recuero had a curious idea to increase quality. She wrote: “We need a blog taxonomist: someone who can patiently record the number of descriptions of drunken college bashes, or the number of sincere laments over the death of Johnny Cash, and who can then discuss the more complex versions versus the simpler ones. And then our taxonomist can compare the Johnny Cash obituaries with those for other C&W singers, and with those for opera stars, and for aged parents...and finally for Hamlet and Gatsby”.

In other words, we need to see the archetypes in blogs, the recurring symbols, images, and phrasings, just as we need to see them in Shakespeare's sonnets or Scott Fitzgerald's novels. And Recuero ends: “The difference here is that most modern bloggers lack the education that enabled Shakespeare and Fitzgerald to invoke those archetypes consciously”.

This brings us back to the geniuses that no one needs and no one wants to have in post-heroic times. And we are thrown back to the question of the value of education and literary formation. A professor in German Studies, a friend of mine, recently told me in shock that a lot of his first-semester students had never heard the name Bert Brecht. “Literature students”! He sighed. I tried to comfort him, saying that Kendrick Lamar probably doesn't know Bert Brecht either, but that doesn't diminish his greatness as a fantastic rap-poet in the least. But the poor professor only repeated: these are literature students, not poets. I had to admit defeat. OK – students of German studies should have heard the name Brecht before. But as a poet, it no longer takes knowledge of the “Caucasian Chalk Circle” to rap about cruel living conditions and poor future prospects in American ghettos. Bob Dylan was still versed in Greek mythology. I am pretty sure, Killer Mike isn’t.

But what distinguishes all these former ghetto artists from the literature students is their connection to a community. They do not work alone, but in a pack. They share their beats and teach each other the latest skills. This is creative writing as part of street knowledge. In the best case - and without wanting to romanticise it - this creates a wisdom and poetry on the edge that cannot be learned at any school. However, writing schools should be used to unite, to form literary gangs and to ally collectively venture into unknown territories. Writers should learn from musicians how to form a band and what it means to be part of a certain scene.

And - again with Brian Eno - we realise that even geniuses could only emerge because they were involved in scenes from which they benefited. Therefore, we should abandon the idea and the goal of a singular mastery in our schools and make them into places where sceniuses can be formed.

Eno contrasts the old genius with the term scenius. Instead of thinking that you must have the most amount of talent or be an expert at something to create, there is a much healthier way of thinking: “Scenius.” Eno defines it as “the intelligence and the intuition of a cultural scene. It is the communal form of the concept of the genius.” Under scenius-ism, great ideas are the collective contribution of a community; and with the advancement of technology, it is now easier than ever before to have your ideas shared. Scenius-ism doesn’t take away the achievement and greatness of the great individuals we admire; instead, “it redefines the concept of great ideas under the modern world of digitalization: the collective effort of connected minds”.

For Eno, the British art schools of the 1960s were ideal types of scenius-ism. At Ipswich Art School and Winchester School of Art, Eno started out as a sculptor and ended up as the most famous non-musician in the world. British pop music would have taken a different course without these schools. Without their students like John Lennon, Pete Townshend, Roger Waters, David Bowie, Joe Strummer and so on. All these - pardon me - geniuses commuted between the disciplines of painting, film, music, text production and concept art at their art schools. And the best did it like Eno and handled their tools inappropriately, or put them to a use other than that intended.

I really want creative writing schools to learn from the sceniuses of these legendary art schools. The big question that really interests me is: what political and social conditions are needed to create such creative clusters of scenius-ism in a targeted

manner? Or in other words: how do you create a spirit of optimism in times of great depression? I have to confess: I don't know.

PS: When will the first great novel be published that we cannot praise enough, even though we feel like crying, because it was written entirely by an algorithm?