

The Austrian Postwar Avant-Garde – Experimental Art on Paper and Celluloid:
A Semiological Approach

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The period following the Second World War in Austria represents a unique historical situation. On the one hand, strongly conservative and restaurative trends in politics, publications, media, and social life dominated the country – at the same time, a radically new avant-garde movement emerged. What today is collectively referred to as the *Wiener Gruppe* was, in the 1950s, a circle of young writers, connected by friendship and collaboration with the filmmakers Kurt Kren and Peter Kubelka. These artists created experimental works that pre-empt the concept of performance art established at a theoretical level two decades later, and anticipate the re-conceptualization of the role of the reader theorized by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault in the 1960s.

In this dissertation, I outline the socio-political situation in Austria during the years following World War Two in Chapter One and discuss the key concepts and works which are relevant for the understanding of experimental literature and film in Chapter Two and Three. I demonstrate that the radical experimentation of postwar experimental authors and filmmakers draws attention to the materiality, visuality, and performativity of their works and establishes experimental literature and film as individual art forms: writing-as-writing and film-as-film. In conclusion, I argue that

their works represent an implicit critique of language, culture, and society in the context of the “grand narratives” or the “invisible structurations” supporting a post-World War Two Austrian society.

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents Otto and Margarete Wurmitzer

for their support, encouragement, and love;

and to

Jens "Fame and Glory" Fuhrmann

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Introduction

What today is collectively referred to as the *Wiener Gruppe* was, in the 1950s, a circle of young writers, connected by friendship and collaboration to a number of filmmakers, painters, and other artists. Collaborating sporadically yet intensely, they created experimental art works at a time where unconventional approaches and themes were not welcomed by the mainstream. To lay a foundation for a discussion of Austrian postwar avant-garde art works, I therefore recapitulate the social, political, religious, and cultural conditions of the time. Through this investigation, it will become obvious that, while historical avant-gardists criticized art as an institution and demanded to abolish the division between art and life, this postwar avant-garde reacted to the ossified structures and attitudes, and the fundamental tradition-consciousness of Catholicism and conservatism dominating the cultural landscape of the 1950s.

The performative strategies of the members of the *Wiener Gruppe* and filmmakers Kurt Kren and Peter Kubelka were directed against a reactionary “Hochkultur” (high culture); their interdisciplinary works pushed against the traditional boundaries of art and literature. “Zu den Feinden der Avantgarde zählte die weihevollste Hochkultur ebenso wie das kleinbürgerliche Spießertum (The enemies of the avant-garde were the hallowed high culture as well as the petty bourgeois)” (Innerhofer 140-141). Radical experimental literature stood in opposition to the prevailing “heile Welt”-image (“safe and sound world” image) that I argue had become an implicit system of belief deeply

grounded in society. Austria was seen by the mainstream as a peaceful nation, heir to the grand traditions of a large empire and distinguished by picturesque landscapes and charming people leading a simple life. In short, Austria was described as a safe, sound, peaceful world – an “Insel der Seligen” (island of the blessed), a phrase used by Pope Paul VI describing Austria after the War (qtd. in Zeyringer 63). By their provocative and intermedial works *Wiener Gruppe* authors and experimental filmmakers challenged – explicitly or implicitly – a society which had retracted into this “heile Welt” schema to avoid accounting for the past: the Second World War and the Holocaust. In the 1980 “Jubiläumsband” (Anniversary Edition) of the influential Austrian literature magazine *manuskripte*, editor Alfred Kolleritsch suggested that the radically experimental works of the *Wiener Gruppe* were the first to break the invisible cultural boundaries of postwar Austria to the rest of the world and provided access to a liberal, stylistically diverse international scene.

Austrian postwar experimental literature and film was not only the refusal to fit in and become another cog in the wheel of society, but also a refusal to conform to the inherent rules that determine all social interaction – the rules of language (be they linguistic or visual). Despite their individual differing backgrounds and interests, the *Wiener Gruppe* authors shared a common basis in their original approach to art and their antagonistic attitude towards the establishment. Historian Alfred Doppler stresses:

[. . .] gemeinsam blieb ihnen, daß sie aufgriffen, was der offiziellen und allgemein anerkannten Literatur widersprach. Der Anpassung stellten sie die

bewußte Negation entgegen, dem glorifizierten schöpferischen Akt das formale Experiment, der Konvention den Schock.

([...] their common interest was to utilize that which opposed the generally accepted literature. They opposed adaptation by conscious negation, the glorifying creative act by the formal experiment, convention by shock) (223).

Wiener Gruppe authors made language their own – not, as the Dadaists had done, by inventing it anew, but rather by stripping it of connotations and metaphorical meanings and recombining its most basic elements. In doing so, they attempted to free the elements of language from their semantic and social connotations, and in turn, liberate the reader from being beholden to the hegemony of language. Thus, by their inter-disciplinary performative works, Austrian postwar avant-gardists preempted the concept of performative literature established at a theoretical level four decades later (beginning in the 1990s), and anticipated the re-conceptualization of the role of the reader which was theorized by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault in the late 1960s.

Experimental performative art forms challenged traditional modes of creation and entered the tradition-bound artistic landscape aggressively, resisting genre boundaries, conventions, and the hegemony of the nation's established cultural canon. Moreover, these experimental literary and cinematic creations defied interpretation and meaning-making, challenging readers and audiences to step out of the customary interpretative models endorsed by the intellectual elite, which relied on linear, narrative, and coherent text- or image-based content. Instead, these experimental texts demand to be perceived and experienced in their materiality, visuality, and performativity.

Experimental authors and filmmakers employed restrictive, rigid strategies to exercise control over the object (paper, text, celluloid, and light). The overall achievement of their visual works was to take the familiar and make it strange, analogous to the idea of “ostranenie” (making strange) in Russian Formalism decades earlier (1910s and 1920s). Thereby, the reader’s attention is drawn to the the work’s materiality, and language’s basic constituents. In other words, experimental literature disrupts the normal speed with which we typically read a text and move beyond the letters on the page. In traditional utilitarian or literary texts after the reading the meaning is remembered but the visuals and materials are forgotten, because what is printed, hand-written, drawn on the page, the page itself, as well as the materials of film, is disconnected from the meaning it produces. Attention is directed outward. With experimental literature the direction of the reader is focused inward onto the text, onto the materiality of the text. The seeing, touching, perceiving experience becomes immediate and is remembered equally is the meaning created from the text.

In this dissertation, I discuss the key concepts which are relevant for the understanding of experimental literature. The first set of concepts is related to the function of a text, to its use of language and textuality, and its utility as the stage for interpretation. The second set of concepts focuses on the texture of a work, its appearance, and its material components. The third concept focuses on the effects of texts, the way they interact with a reader, their performativity. These concepts are the

basis for further discussion of *Wiener Gruppe* works and experimental films.

Having outlined the socio-political situation in Austria during the years following World War Two in Chapter One, and reviewing the tools required to understand their literature in Chapter Two, Chapter Three focuses on the visual experiments with language of the *Wiener Gruppe* authors and establishes an outlook at experimental film from the late 1950s and early 1960s and presents an introduction to avant-garde films. I demonstrate that, by their radical experimentation, postwar avant-garde authors and filmmakers aim to draw attention to the materiality, visuality, and performativity of their works, establishing experimental literature and film as individual art forms: writing-as-writing and film-as-film. In conclusion, and as outlook towards a theoretical approach to the socio-political critique, I argue that, because of the radicality with which these works abandon ties to traditional and normative structures and disappoint audience expectations, they present a stealth critique of language, culture, and society in the context of the “grand narratives,” the stories that make up the “invisible structurations,” the underlying grid which supports society.

Chapter One: *Wiener Gruppe* and Experimental Film Between the Poles of *Restauration* and *Avant-Garde*

Before one can explore Austrian avant-garde or experimental literature and film from the 1950s, one must first understand the times in which the artists who fell outside social, political, artistic, and religious conventions came of age and lived. The following discussion of cultural and political conditions in Austria from the 1930s to the 1950s will serve as a tool for understanding the social and cultural influences that defined and guided the generation of authors and artists at the center of this project. To fully appreciate these artists, one must understand what, at the time they were working, constituted the expected – the norm – and what kind of artistic production was prevalent and determined the tastes of their contemporaries. Understanding the sociopolitical circumstances that made it possible for some artists to be shunned and others to be rewarded allows for a clearer appreciation of the period.

Literary scholar Hermann Kunisch reminds us that literature, like art, always exists at the intersection of scientific awareness and sociopolitical circumstances; that literature is always *in* its time but not necessarily *for* its time (5). According to Kunisch, avant-garde art comes into existence “before the time,” which often means that its creators are profoundly misunderstood by their contemporaries. Depending on the nature and severity of the perceived avant-garde provocation, audiences react to their art with outrage, resentment, misunderstandings, or speechlessness. The latter often

functions as both an expression of dismay and a cause for it. Muteness, after all, is not an uncommon social phenomenon during and after a time of great atrocity, and in the postwar years it was certainly prevalent amongst the general Austrian public. Unless otherwise noted, the term “postwar” in this dissertation refers to the two decades after the Second World War. In the following, and unless specified otherwise, the Second World War is denoted as “War.” The Second World War had left survivors without words to express their anger, sorrow, and pain; out of this speechlessness grew a general desire for safer and better times. Wholesomeness, health, and strength were considered emblems of a life worth living. Artistic representation of these qualities was fervently desired by a majority of the Austrian public, and any art that failed to satisfy this desire was viewed with suspicion if not outright hostility.

Austria After the Second World War: Politics, Society, Culture

*Haben wir nicht lange genug
aneinander vorbeigeschaut, haben
geflüstert anstatt zu sprechen, sind
geschlichen anstatt zu gehen? Sind wir
nicht lange genug, von Furcht gelähmt,
einander ausgewichen? Und wo sind
wir heute?*

(Haven't we looked past each other
long enough, haven't we whispered
instead of spoken out loud, tip-toed
instead of walking upright? Have
we not been hiding from each other
because of fear long enough? And
where are we today?)¹
(Ilse Aichinger)

The 1950s and early 1960s were tumultuous times for Austrian culture. "Where are we today?" is the question postwar² writer Ilse Aichinger directs at her generation of writers in her reflective essay "Aufruf zum Mißtrauen" (Call for Mistrust 10) published in 1946 in the first postwar literary magazine *PLAN*. In this very early manifesto she calls for self-reflection and a critical evaluation of the publicly sanctioned discourse about Austria's implication in the War and the role of the new generation of writers and artists that had been silenced during the War years. In the postwar years, an impulse to repress any memory of the immediate past took hold, accompanied by a strenuous effort

¹ All translations in this dissertation are mine, unless otherwise noted.

² Unless otherwise noted, "postwar" in this dissertation refers to the decades after the Second World War, which, unless otherwise specified, is referred to as "War."

to look backwards across the decades to the purported glory days of the pre-World War One monarchy. This regressive culture notwithstanding, it was also a period of intense artistic and literary experimentation in both form and content to an extent previously unknown in Austrian literature and cinema. Experimental performative art forms challenged traditional modes of creation and entered the tradition-bound artistic landscape aggressively, resisting genre boundaries, conventions, and the hegemony of the nation's established cultural canon. Moreover, these experimental literary and cinematic creations defied interpretation and meaning-making, challenging readers and audiences to step out of the customary interpretative models endorsed by the intellectual elite, which relied on linear, narrative, and coherent content. Instead, these experimental texts demanded to be perceived and experienced in their materiality, visuality, and performativity.

In the eyes of the general public, this experimental performative art and literature was seen as disruptive and unwelcome. Non-traditional artists and authors defied the mainstream, Catholic-conservative, traditional worldview. Yet independent art production in private homes, bars, small galleries, and local art spaces was copious despite the hostile surroundings. Postwar experimental art in Austria progressed steadily, incorporating and expanding ever more inventive practices, becoming part of a European tradition begun in the late nineteenth century – an avant-garde movement that encompassed all facets of artistic production from the visual arts to theater to

literature, amalgamating them and blurring the boundaries that traditionally divided them.

A Unique Historical Context

*The moon was shining sulkily,
Because she thought the sun
Had no business to be there
After the day was done –
'It's so very rude of him,' she said,
'To come and spoil the fun!'
(Lewis Carroll)*

But what, exactly, was the nature of this uniquely regressive climate in Austria? What were its specific causes and consequences? To begin with, it relied upon a very particular postwar understanding of what had happened to Austria in the preceding years. “It was so very rude of him, to come and spoil the fun,” begins Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (137). The line perfectly encapsulates what the majority of Austrians thought of Hitler after the end of the War and well into the 1980s. The *Ostmark* (Eastern March), as Austria was called by approval of an official referendum, became part of the Third Reich on 10 April 1938 although the German armies had already arrived four weeks earlier on the night of 12 March. With that, the “innocent” country was drawn into the War. Looking back in the postwar years, a majority of the Austrian population chose to remember that Hitler’s troops had marched into their country and forced them to cooperate and participate in the National Socialist war effort, thereby conveniently overlooking the very clear results of the 10 April *Volksabstimmung* (national

referendum), in which, according to voting records, 99.7 percent of the Austrian electorate voted “yes” to become part of *Großdeutschland* (Greater Germany). What was welcomed in 1938 had, by 1944, become a story of violent appropriation likened to the annexation of Poland.

This version of history went hand in hand with an official view of Austria as victim. As early as December 1945, an official government decree positioned the country as the first victim of fascist imperialism, stating: “Unser Heimatland, das erste Opfer des faschistischen Imperialismus in der Welt, ist wieder frei und selbstständig geworden (Our home country, the first victim of fascist imperialism, is again free and independent)” (Hanisch 163).³ From then on, the nascent government of the Second Republic devoted considerable energy to resurrecting Austria’s claim to a thousand year history and glorifying the Habsburg dynasty: “Der Mythos Österreich wurde aus seiner angeblich tausendjährigen Geschichte geboren; gleichzeitig wucherte die Habsburgernostalgie (The myth of Austria was born out of its allegedly thousand year history; at the same time a Habsburg nostalgia proliferated)” (Hanisch 163). It was hoped that the resplendent legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire would aid in cleansing the nation of the crimes perpetrated during the Third Reich. At the very least,

³ Furthermore, Timothy McVeigh explains: “A U.S. Army directive of June 27, 1945 clearly considered them [Austria] of equal culpability with the National Socialists [...] Marshall Tolbouchin, in command of the Red Army advancing in Vienna, promised Allied effort that Austria would be restored to the conditions which dominated until the year 1938 (!): “[...]die Zustände [werden] wiederhergestellt, die bis zum Jahre 1938 (!) in Österreich bestanden [...]” (6).

the monarchic past would distract from those crimes – for which no one wanted to bear responsibility – while presenting an image of cultural sophistication, civilization, and achievement in music, literature, philosophy, and science that would suppress any attempts to establish an avant-garde literature or art.⁴ There was, after all, no use for experiments in a country bent on preserving the past.⁵

This understanding of history goes a long way towards explaining postwar attitudes directed at artists and writers. Well into the 1950s, the cultural climate in Austria – unlike in West Germany – was profoundly nostalgic, glorifying almost exclusively those authors and artists who had been popular before and during the War and who had not left the country. Despite geographic proximity and a shared language, the German and Austrian cultural reaction to World War Two could not have been more different. As Hubert Klocker explains,

In contrast to the Austrian situation [sic], where legends of victimization overshadowed the complicity of the country [...] Germany went through a process of cathartic purging. The Nuremberg Trials, the restructuring of modern media, universities, public life, and cultural institutions – all contributed to a

⁴ “Aus einer starken – deutschen – Gemeinschaft der “Barbarei” war man befreit worden, nun sollte eine neue starke – österreichische – Gemeinschaft aufgebaut werden. Gefragt war demnach der positive Blick in die Zukunft, der ebenso positiv an die “alten Traditionen” anknüpfen sollte; eine “junge, moderne, pessimistische” Kunst konnte somit in der Öffentlichkeit nicht reüssieren, [...] (Austria had been liberated from a strong – German – community of “barbarity,” and was now developing a new strong – Austrian – community. Therefore, the country wanted a positive perspective for its future which also included a positive embracing of the „old traditions;“ a “young, modern, pessimistic“ art was not received well by the public [...])” (Zeyringer 61-62).

⁵ “Der Rückgriff auf die Tradition, vor allem [...] auf Barock und Katholizismus, verlangte ein positives Welt- und Staatsverständnis; eine derart rückwärtsgewandte Austriazität konnte freilich experimentelle Literatur nicht (ge)brauchen [...] (The reaching back to tradition, especially [...] to baroque and Catholic [ideals], demanded a positive understanding of the world and the nation; there was no place in experimental literature for such a retrospective idea of Austria)” (Zeyringer 68).

future-oriented change and fundamental modernization (Klocker 163).

No such cathartic purging took place in Austria, because the country was pre-occupied with forgetting, sweeping under the rug, and looking backwards instead of focusing on the present and looking into the future.

Tradition: A Dominating Force

Though a few remnants of modernist creations survived the devastation of the Second World War much of the experimental art produced before and between the World Wars had, by the 1950s, vanished – either stolen, destroyed, or stockpiled in now forgotten vaults inside libraries and art institutions. Numerous works had also been taken abroad with the emigrèes who went into exile. Austrian library shelves had been practically cleansed of any and all material deemed abject and offensive to the sensibilities of the dictatorial Third Reich. On top of that, the postwar government of the Austrian Second Republic made few attempts to bring back authors and artists who had gone into exile during the War and place them once again squarely on the nation's literary and artistic horizon. Instead, Austria focused on its past, where, it hoped, a Golden Age of culture and politics could be found and resurrected. One result of this backwards turn was the casting of several writers with National Socialist affinities as prime representatives of Austrian literature. In their foreword to *Literatur der Nachkriegszeit und der fünfziger Jahre in Österreich*, a collection of critical essays evaluating

the postwar literary landscape from a distance of thirty years, published in 1984, the editors, Friedbert Aspetsberger, Norbert Frei, and Hubert Lengauer explain that the newly minted Austrian nation was not concerned with repatriating of exiled authors but rather with celebrating those cultural ambassadors who had remained in the country during the time of turmoil: “Das kulturelle Selbstverständnis des Staates orientierte sich weniger an dem Faktum seiner zeitweiligen Annullierung oder der Exilierung seiner literarischen Repräsentanten als an dem, was immer zu Hause war (The cultural self-identification of the nation was focused not on bringing back its exiled literary representatives, but rather on those that had remained at home)” (5). Austria's cultural landscape, in other words, was governed by an official resolve to privilege and honor those authors who had not left the country but rather stayed at home and contributed to a continuation of traditional literature, mostly in the style of the late nineteenth century. It was these writers and their political supporters who established literary standards in Austria and bolstered a rhetoric of Austrian self-consciousness. Chronicling the fairy tale like history of Austria as a safe and sound world – “heile Welt” – was a very comfortable path for the inauguration of a narrative claiming smooth historical and cultural stability, which cannot be shaken even by world-wide catastrophes. Their conservatism was mirrored in Austrian politics: the Second Republic⁶ was governed not by newly

⁶ The term “Second Republic” (“Zweite Republik”) refers to the time from April 1945 until May 1955 when Austria was formally proclaimed a sovereign, independent, and democratic state.” During the Second Republic Austria had been provisionally established as democratic republic and a provisional government was set up under the leadership of then chancellor Karl Renner (Fellner and Wagenreiter).

nominated functionaries but by holdovers from the First Republic (1919 – 1938).

Historian Klaus Zeyringer recognizes the parallels between the establishment of a government from a stock of pre-war politicians and the re-construction of the cultural landscape based on already familiar authors went hand in hand during the immediate postwar years.

Nachdem das oberste Fundament des neuen österreichischen Staatswesens rasch konstituiert worden war – die Provisorische Staatsregierung unter der Führung des Sozialisten Karl Renner, des ersten Staatskanzlers (1919/1920) der 1. Republik, hielt schon am 27. April 1945 in Wien ihre erste Sitzung ab – wurde nach Kriegsende mit der 2. Republik auch eine literarische Öffentlichkeit “wiederaufgebaut,” die keineswegs aus dem “Nichts” entstand: Auch im kulturellen Leben ist die Vorstellung einer “Stunde Null” bestenfalls eine Metapher, die als Ablösch-Lappen auf der schwarzen Tafel des Gemeinwesens fungieren konnte.

(Once the uppermost stratum of the Austrian political system had been quickly assembled – the provisional government headed by socialist politician Karl Renner, who had also been the first chancellor (1919 – 1920) of the First Republic, held its inaugural meeting in Vienna as early as 27 April 1945 – the literary scene was also “reconstructed,” though not out of “nothing:” even on the cultural landscape, the notion of a “zero hour” is at best a metaphor that can function only as an eraser on the blackboard of society) (66).

Just as politicians active during the First Republic were reinstated as leaders, so too were authors popular before the War resurrected as shining models of Austrian literary greatness.

In 1945 immediately following the War the popular conservative Austrian dramatist, poet, and novelist Alexander Lernet-Holenia⁷ prescribed the action that must

⁷ Lernet-Holenia loomed so large in the postwar restoration of Austrian literary life that in 1948, returned from exile, literary critic Hans Weigel declared that Austrian literary life consisted of just two

be taken by his countrymen. It was important, insisted Lernet-Holenia, to look ahead and not to dwell on the years during which a madman named Adolf Hitler had wreaked havoc on Europe. Lernet-Holenia writes:

In der Tat brauchen wir nur dort fortzusetzen, wo uns die Träume eines Irren [Adolf Hitler] unterbrochen haben [. . .] In der Tat brauchen wir nicht voraus-, sondern nur zurückzublicken. Um es vollkommen klar zu sagen: wir haben es nicht nötig, mit der Zukunft zu kokettieren und nebulöse Projekte zu machen, wir sind, im besten und wertvollsten Verstande, unsere Vergangenheit, wir haben uns nur zu besinnen, daß wir unsere Vergangenheit sind – und sie wird unsere Zukunft werden.

(Indeed, we just need to pick up from where the dreams of a madman [Adolf Hitler] interrupted us. [...] Indeed, we must to cast our eyes not forward but back. To be crystal clear: we do not have to court the future and indulge in nebulous projects: we are our past, in the best and most precious sense of the word and we only have to call to mind that we constitute our past – and that it will be our future) (109).

This attitude is earnestly reflected in Heimito von Doderer's political novel *Die Dämonen* (The Demons), published in 1956. According to this widely popular book, Austria's historical narrative breaks off with the riots of 16 July 1927 (also titled "Julirevolte," July Revolt) – one day after the burning of the *Justizpalast* (Vienna Palace of Justice) and the shooting of sixty-six civilians by order of the Viennese police chief caused a reshuffling of political powers in favor of the president – and picks up again on 8 May 1945, V-E-Day as if nothing had happened in between. Doderer thus reinforces the predominant continuation narrative of an everlasting tradition-bound 1950s Austria: that the nation was poised to be re-born out of defeat and embarrassment, to rise again to its former

writers: Lernet and Holenia.

monarchic glory. Unsurprisingly, Doderer was revered in the 1950s as the *Staatsdichter* (Poet Laureate) par excellence and recipient of the prestigious *Großer österreichischer Staatspreis* (Grand Austrian State Prize). And although *Die Dämonen* is chiefly concerned with events occurring in Vienna in 1911 and 1923-25, making barely a passing reference to the First World War and ensuing loss of Empire, it nonetheless became a sort of bible of the Austrian literary world.

Instead of dealing with the impact of a grueling War and the consequences of the actions perpetrated by Austrian citizens during that War, the established literary elite of the 1920s and 1930s continued to propagate their halcyon vision of a Christian, western, Central European, “genuine” Austria after 1945. As Norbert Frei states: “unbefangene verschwommene Vorstellungen des Christlichen, Abendländischen, Mitteleuropäischen, Österreichischen [wurden] wieder inthronisiert” (Unabashedly vague conceptions of a Christian, Occidental, Central European Austrianness were once again enthroned) (67). This general attitude was succinctly expressed by writer Rudolf Henz (1897-1987), former *Kulturreferent* (Cultural Affairs Officer) of the Austro Fascist organization *Vaterländische Front* (Patriotic Front) and a member of the *Reichskulturkammer* (Office for Cultural Affairs) during the War.⁸ After 1945, Henz became editor of the periodical *Dichtung der Gegenwart* as well as of the literary magazine *Wort in der Zeit*, which was very influential and had little competition at the time. Henz’s entire attitude toward the

⁸ From 1934 to 1938, Austria was governed by the Austro Fascist *Ständestaat* (Austro Fascist Corporative State), a state without political parties or democratically elected government, essentially run dictatorially by Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß.

function of literature was premised on an erasure of his collaboratist wartime past, as he himself confesses in his autobiography *Fügung und Widerstand* (Fate/Acquiescence and Resistance): “Für mich, das sah ich, würde nun die Arbeit dort wieder einsetzen, wo sie 1938 geendet hatte (For me, I realized, the work would begin again where it had been left off before the War)” (301). In other words, whatever had happened since the outbreak of the War was not relevant to Henz’s work, which would resume as though no interruption had occurred.

Austrian Theater in the Postwar Years

The same artificial continuity that so dominated the Austrian postwar literary world was also prevalent in the theater. The classics were lovingly cultivated at both the Burgtheater, Vienna’s most renowned theater, and the Staatsoper (State Opera). Dramas by great and canonized authors such as Franz Grillparzer, Friedrich Schiller, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and especially Gotthold Ephraim Lessing served as links to an unblemished past and were performed in service of political restoration. No time was lost re-employing those actors and directors who had also been active in the years between 1938 and 1945; stage plays that did not acknowledge the National Socialist past could easily be performed by actors intimately tied to the Nazi regime. In their form and content, these performances followed classicist models of drama, ignoring modernism and privileging the stage techniques of Friedrich Schiller.

The focus of this traditional form was, ironically enough, placed on the great human crises. One of the most popular stage plays in the immediate postwar period was Fritz Hochwalder's *Das heilige Experiment* (The Holy Experiment) written in Swiss exile from 1941 to 1942. The play dramatizes the destruction of a state founded on socialist principles by the Jesuits in eighteenth century Paraguay. What may seem like a very appropriate topic for a critical consideration of the present was, quite to the contrary, staged as a self-contained historical drama with eminently responsible figures as protagonists. Indeed, throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, the foundations were laid for an enduring Burgtheater tendency to stage hermetic, historical plays, thereby sparing its audiences from having to confront either theatrical modernism, the Second World War, or any of its consequences. In the theater, as in literature, cultural politics were steered by traditionalism. Mainstream authors sought to construct a canon that was wholesome: "[...] in harmonisch abgerundeter Form osterreichisch, aufbauend und erbaulich" (Doppler 222), harmonious in form, clear in genre boundaries, Austrian in expression, constructive and uplifting, and sufficiently focused on the late nineteenth century idea of *Heimat* (the idea of a home land where one is born and feels deeply connection to). The main thrust of Austrian politics and culture after the War was to let bygones be bygones, to turn away from rather than confront the years between 1918 and 1945, and to move forward by looking back to a time before either World War.⁹

⁹ See Fischer 617-620.

The Austrian PEN Club As Paradigm of Uncritical Continuity

Postwar Austrian literary continuity is exemplified by the history of the Austrian Chapter of the PEN Club (the association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, and Novelists). In May 1933, at the 11th PEN Congress in Ragusa, in the former Yugoslavia, a group of international writers criticized National Socialist politics, book burnings, bannings, and incarcerations of so-called oppositional writers. Prominent and established Austrian writers such as Arthur Schnitzler, Franz Werfel, Stefan Zweig and Richard Beer-Hoffmann were among the authors banned in Germany, and with a few notable exceptions, the Austrian delegation at Ragusa loudly protested this discrimination, thereby prompting an angry exodus of the entire German delegation as well as demonstrative resignations and denunciations of the Austrian chapter of the PEN Club by those Austrian authors who sympathized with the Nazis. The consequences of the incident were mixed: on the one hand, the Austrian chapter of the Club came to a resolution – albeit mild – against German policies; on the other hand, the Austrian writers who left the Club were able to simply join the German chapter, thereby splitting the Austrian Club along ideological lines. When Austria was incorporated into the Reich in March 1938, both chapters of the PEN Clubs ceased to be active, putting the *Reichsschrifttumskammer* (Reich Office for Literature) in complete control of all literary production in the greater German Reich.

After the War, in June 1947, Austria's re-entry into the International PEN Club

was debated at the International Congress in Zurich. After much discussion, the chapter was invited back into the international community under two official conditions: first, all members of the London-Austria PEN Club Chapter, founded by Austrian exiles and active during the War, would automatically become members of the newly reconstituted Vienna PEN Club chapter; second, all members who had left the Club at Ragusa in 1933 would not be invited to rejoin. These stipulations were almost immediately betrayed. During its very first meeting, the newly reinstated chapter discussed whether or not to invite Max Mell and Franz Nabl – two Ragusa walk-outs – back into the Club. Nabl was voted to the executive committee just one year later, and Mell was invited to rejoin in 1949, an invitation he accepted without hesitation.

Uncritical Continuity in the Extreme

Considering how heavily dominated the politics and culture of the interwar years had been by a mixture of Austro Fascism and National Socialism, it is entirely unsurprising that the politicians and authors active during that period carried their sympathies into the postwar era. In the 1980s and 1990s, a growing body of secondary literature identified several authors whose nationalistic, Austro Fascistic writing had been popular during the 1920s and early 1930s and who, in the late 1930s, continued to write in an only slightly different direction, praising the Greater German Reich, the German homeland, and National Socialist ideology. Scholars Klaus Amann, Norbert

Frei, and Norbert Griesmayer, amongst others, have demonstrated just how influential these authors remained in the postwar era and up until the 1980s – authors like, for example, Franz Nabl, Max Mell, Franz Karl Ginzkey, Gertrud Fussenengger, Paula Grogger, and Rudolf Henz.

The Case of Josef Nadler and Heinz Kindermann

Just as Rudolf Henz resumed his writing as if no interruptions had taken place in the last decade, the entire Austrian literary establishment seemed to want to leap over the War years. Historian Klaus Zeyringer furnishes just one example of the shameless institutional and academic continuity that took place after 1945 – namely, the awarding in 1952 of the prestigious Mozart-Preis (Mozart Prize) to Josef Nadler, who had not only been active in the National Socialist Party but well-known for his influential writings in support of the ethnic and racial approach to literature espoused by the Nazis.

Ein Beispiel einer aus heutiger Sicht “unglaublichen” Kontinuität ist die Überreichung des Mozart-Preises an den Nazi-Germanisten Josef Nadler. Diese Auszeichnung wurde in der NS-Zeit als politisches Zeichen verstanden, da durch sie, wie es hieß, “Künstler der deutschen ‚Grenzmarken‘ im Süden als die ‚aktivsten Träger des nationalen Bewußtseins‘” bedacht werden sollten. [. . .] Der Mozart-Preis wurde Josef Nadler, der 1938 Kuratoriumsmitglied gewesen war, 1941/42 zugesprochen, ihm aber nicht mehr vor Kriegsende überreicht; Nadler erhielt ihn am 13. Dezember 1952 im Festsaal der Universität Innsbruck. Man bedenke und staune: Im Österreich der 2. Republik, die von sich behauptete, das erste Opfer Nazi-Deutschlands gewesen zu sein, führt eine Universität in offizieller Feierstunde eine von einer Nazijury – von fünf Mitgliedern waren zwei “Vertrauensleute” und ein Vertreter der Reichschrifttumskammer – getroffene Entscheidung durch!

(One example of continuity that today seems particularly unbelievable is the awarding of the Mozart Prize to the Nazi Germanist, Josef Nadler. During the Nazi era, this award was understood as a political statement meant to acknowledge “artists from the German border regions to the south as the most active carriers of national consciousness. [. . .] Nadler, who had been a member of the awards committee in 1938, was announced winner of the Mozart Prize in 1941/42, though he did not actually receive the award until several years after the end of the War, on 13 December 1952 in the ballroom at the University of Innsbruck. Behold and marvel: in Second Republic Austria, which claims to have been the first victim of Nazi Germany, an official celebration is held by a University in order to award a prize selected by a Nazi jury, two of whose five members had been “V-men” and one an official of the Reich Office for Literature!) (Zeyringer 69-70).

Nadler, the author of the defining Austrian literature anthology, *Literaturgeschichte Österreichs* (1948), represents perhaps the most egregious example of postwar literary continuity. Josef Nadler (1884-1963) was a prominent literary scholar, professor at the University of Vienna, and member of the National Socialist Party who received multiple literature prizes from 1938 until the end of the War. His major work was a German literary history first called *Literaturgeschichte der deutschen Stämme und Landschaften* (1912-1928) (Literary History of the German Tribes and Landscapes (1912-1928)), then later changed to *Literaturgeschichte des deutschen Volkes – Dichtung und Schrifttum der deutschen Stämme und Landschaften* (Literary History of the German Folk – Poetry and Literature of the German Tribes and Landscapes). His work as a German scholar before the War had become increasingly close to the National Socialist ideology and its anti-Semitism, as is evident in this excerpt from the third volume of this work published in 1930:

Man sah das bisher eingekapselte Gastvolk [die Juden] langsam in den Körper des Wirtes [die Deutschen] zerfließen, eine Wirklichkeit, gegen die es keine

Abwehr gab. Während das fremde unerwünschte [jüdische] Blut von Altersstufe zu Altersstufe immer tiefer in den [deutschen] Volkskörper drang nach den unentrinnbaren Gesetzen der Ahnentafel, rief man gegen das Schicksal den Willen auf. Aber so wenig der Einzelne für sich Glied eines anderen Volkes werden kann, so wenig läßt das Blut sich ausstoßen, das uns in den Leib gezeugt wurde. [...]. Ein Volk, das keinen inneren Widerwillen [gegen das Vermischen von jüdischem mit deutschem Blut] empfindet, wird Blutmischung niemals tragisch nehmen, sondern nur eines, das bleiben will, was es ist, und vom Schicksal gezwungen wird, zu werden, was es nicht sein will.

(One could see how the once isolated guest [the Jew] slowly penetrated the body of the host [the German], a reality against which there was no defense. As, from age to age, the foreign unwanted [Jewish] blood spread deeper into the [German] national body according to the inexorable laws of heredity, a will was called upon to combat this destiny. But as little as one individual can by himself become part of another people, as unlikely it is to rid our bodies of the blood that was implanted in them [...] A people that feels no inner disgust [at the mixing of Jewish and German blood] will never consider the mixing of blood a tragedy, rather something that will remain what it is and be forced by fate to become what it does not want to be).

Nadler's statements are based on a large body of literature about *Rassenhygiene* (eugenics), *Erbgesundheitspflege* (racial hygiene), and concern for the health of the human inheritance (in today's terms, gene pool hygiene). He specifically outlines the methods that can be used to defend against the constant threat of intruding, polluting Jewish blood and thereby ensure an unspoiled, clean, pure-blooded German race. Yet, despite his unabashed anti-Semitism and open support of the National Socialist government, Nadler remained one of the most established and recognized authors in Austria well into the 1960s. In 1947, the Austrian Ministry of Education did announce that he would not be reappointed for any post at the University of Vienna,¹⁰ but this did not keep

¹⁰ In January 1947, the Viennese *Arbeiter-Zeitung* states: "Die Nazisäuberungskommission des

officials from awarding him prizes all the same. Apparently, it seemed perfectly normal in Austria during the postwar years to award the Mozart Prize to someone so accomplished without critically assessing when, under what circumstances, and with whose help those accomplishments had been achieved. It seems particularly incongruous, in light of Austria's insistence on its own victimhood, that a prize originally bestowed by the so-called aggressor country would be honored by the "liberated" nation. And yet, this postwar awarding of prizes to a former National Socialist sympathizer and defender of discriminatory race theories is just one example of the extent to which the cultural landscape of Greater Germany carried over into the Republic Austria.

Indeed, Nadler's case is not an isolated one. Nor was he the only academic who was entnazifiziert (denazified) in this manner – that is to say, whose involvement with the National Socialist government was wiped off his résumé. Theatre and literature scholar Heinz Kindermann, whose work before 1945 was in keeping with National Socialist precepts, was nonetheless re-appointed to his professorship at the Institute for Theatre Studies of the University of Vienna after the War. In his major publication, the encyclopedic *Wegweiser durch die moderne Literatur Österreichs* (Guide to Modern

Unterrichtsministeriums hat nun die Wiederverwendung des ehemaligen Ordinarius für deutsche Literaturgeschichte an der Wiener Universität, Professor Dr. Josef Nadler, auf irgendeinem Lehrstuhl der österreichischen Hochschulen endgültig abgelehnt (The de-nazification commission of the Chamber of Education has irrevocably denied the request for the re-appointment of the former professor for German Literature at the University of Vienna, Prof. Dr. Josef Nadler to any post at any Austrian university)" (3).

Austrian Literature), Kindermann neglected to mention any of the National Socialist affinities and affiliations of many of the authors whose works he extolled. As British historian Antony Bushell writes:

With remarkable alacrity, those scholars who before the war had published in a manner acceptable to the National Socialists revised their approach after 1945, and the scholarly press throughout the early postwar years produced countless volumes and articles now identifying and extolling the unique spirit and tradition of Austrian letters (31).

Perhaps Rudolf Henz can again shed some light on this willingness – even eagerness – to de-emphasize, play down, and forget the recent past. Reflecting in 1945 on his and his contemporaries' literary responsibility, he contends that the recent War did not in any way have nearly the same detrimental effect on literature as had the First World War:

Uns [zeitgenössischen Autoren] ist das Wort wahrhaftig nicht nur mehr Gebrauchsartikel, sondern voll geistiger Spannung und verantwortlicher Entscheidung. Der Zweite Weltkrieg hat diese Entwicklung nicht berührt, höchstens vertieft [...] Daß es vor und in und nach ihm nicht zu einer neuen Atomisierung der Kunst gekommen ist und kommen wird, steht wohl fest. Damit aber scheint mir bewiesen, daß dieser letzte Krieg nicht jene elementare Katastrophe sein kann, wie sie der Erste Weltkrieg gewesen ist.

(For us [contemporary authors] language is no longer just a utilitarian object but filled with spiritual tension and responsible decision-making. The Second World War has not changed that, but rather intensified [...] It is now clear that a breaching apart of literature did not happen, neither before nor after the War. Thus, it has been proven that this last war did not have the same catastrophic effects as had the First World War) (Henz "In einem kalten Zimmer" 26).

Essentially, Henz claims that the Second World War had no influence on art and literature and that it was therefore unproblematic to simply continue writing in the same style and about the same topics as before the War. His matter-of-fact insistence that

literature had emerged unscathed from a war that had affected so many lives in a multitude of shocking ways is a clear, although astonishing, indication of his and his generation's readiness to gloss over events that, in their opinion, did not influence society or culture to any significant degree – especially not compared to the Great War, which had destroyed the Habsburg Empire and divided Europe. This generation of writers, active beginning in the 1920s and well into the 1970s, had witnessed life-changing developments caused by the first major global war during their formative years; for them, this Second World War – which did not wipe out large swathes of territory, vastly reduce the Austrian geography, or transform the monarchic political system into something more democratic – was a war of comparatively little impact. In 1945, Henz thus dismisses out of hand the necessity of dealing with the last seven years, confronting the atrocities of warfare, and admitting Austria's involvement in those crimes.¹¹

It is, of course, possible that Henz and other academics and authors never actually witnessed violence and suffering and thus could not relate to those who came

¹¹ There were some oppositional voices at the time. For example, Henz's contemporary, the lesser known Austrian author Eva Priester argues against Henz that writers *must* have the courage to help their country reflect on past events because the general populace knows that something evil has happened but is not strong enough to work through it: "Die Zeit der letzten sieben Jahre liegt den meisten Österreichern wie ein Stein im Magen. Sie bedrückt sie, sie denken an sie, fühlen, daß irgend etwas Böses geschah, etwas über das man sich klar werden muß, aber soundso oft können sie sich nicht klar werden, weil sie nicht den Mut haben, sie sich ganz zu vergegenwärtigen. Hier muß der Schriftsteller helfen, hier kann er helfen. (The last seven years weigh heavily on most Austrians. They are troubled by them, they think of them often, they feel that something bad has happened, something that needs to be elucidated. But as much as they try, they cannot get a handle on these years because they lack the courage to confront them. It is here that the author can help, it is at this point that the author must help)" (3-4).

home from the front, broken and mute. But as unable and unwilling as the returning soldiers might have been to recount their painful memories, as much as they might have wanted to forget what had happened and how they were implicated, just as uneager to listen and to ask was the stratum of the population that had had the good fortune to remain at home during the war activities. The less that was said, the less there was to forget and deny (Frei 65). As much as returning soldiers suffered from muteness, in the immediate postwar years the young generation of authors also had difficulty expressing what had happened during the War and what was going on around them. Lacking critical distance, it was understandably problematic to reflect on past events in their historical context. As historian Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler writes: "Die Sprachbewegung emanzipierte sich somit von irgendwie mitteilbar zu machenden Inhalten. Sie will bloß bannen, was sich bei der Erinnerungsarbeit ergibt (The language movement thus emancipated itself from all communicable content. It wants to ward off whatever comes up during the work of remembering)" ("Die unheiligen Experimente" 346).

Comparison to Germany

In contrast, both postwar German states pursued cultural policies intended to address rather than ignore the War years, making efforts to bring émigrés home and to support their cultural contributions. The stark difference of postwar mentalities goes a

long way towards explaining why German authors critically engaged with an assessment of the immediate past thrived during the 1960s and 1970s whereas their Austrian counterparts went largely ignored. The concept of a *Stunde Null* (zero hour) – a term used by the younger generation of postwar West German writers to denote a literary and cultural tabula rasa generated by the collapse of the Third Reich – bears little relevance in Austrian postwar literature. Simply put, a break with traditional literature never took place in Austria the way it did in Germany, and there was little desire in the Austrian publishing industry to print texts by younger writers who engaged with the trauma of war. Compared to West Germany, where *Erinnerungsarbeit* (working to remember and come to terms with something terrible; working through war trauma by acknowledging rather than ignoring it) occupied a large place on the cultural and social landscape in the postwar years, Austria placed very little emphasis on collectively and individually remembering and coming to terms with the recent past.

Two notable exceptions are Martina Wied's novel *Das Krähenest* (The Crow's Nest) written while she was in exile during the war and published once in 1951 and never again, and Hans Flesch-Brunningen's novel *Perlen und schwarze Tränen* (Pearls and Black Tears) from 1948 (Polt-Henzl 123). Unlike the majority of postwar Austrian literature, these critical novels address the nation's responsibility in the Nazi genocide. Sadly, they remain largely obscure. A larger and better-known body of literature committed to addressing Austria's wartime experiences and culpability did not develop

until the late 1960s with a particular resurgence in the 1980s due to the “Waldheim Affair.”¹²

Heimat und Monarchie

Enormous emphasis was placed by the mainstream on tradition and *Heimat* values. Deep respect was accorded to local, distinctively Austrian elements, most palpably in the insistence on the local vernacular in schools. The so-called *Heimatdichter* (home country poets), authors who extolled the virtues of the *Heimat*, enjoyed both generous political support and great popularity with the Austrian public. Karl Heinrich Waggerl, for example, wrote stories with titles such as *Brot* (Bread) (1930), *Schweres Blut* (Thick Blood) (1931), *Das Jahr des Herrn* (The Year of the Lord) (1934), *Mütter* (Mothers) (1935), and *Fröhliche Armut* (Cheerful Poverty) (1948). As is evident in the titles alone, Waggerl very much engaged in declamatory, glorifying folk literature that celebrated traditions and religious beliefs and insistent on the richness of Austrian life in spite of the actual situation of widespread poverty and destruction. The entire Austrian cultural scene was dominated by a sentimental myth of continued greatness inspired by several

¹² During his campaign for election to the presidency in 1985 Kurt Waldheim was accused by the World Jewish Congress to have lied about his service as officer in the mounted corps of the SA (“Sturmabteilung” storm-troopers that acted as paramilitary organization in the service of the Nazis) in Greece. He won the election and became president which initiated a controversy about the nation’s refusal to acknowledge Austria’s role in the Holocaust. See Richard Basset *Waldheim and Austria* (1988) and David F. Good and Ruth Wodak, eds. *From War to Waldheim* (1999).

late 19th century authors¹³ and a glorification of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy's splendor. Whereas intellectuals in West Germany sought to establish a new beginning based on the *Stunde Null* consciousness in order to separate modern German culture from its National Socialist past, most Austrians interpreted the National Socialist years as a period of foreign occupation and consequently sought to establish a continuity of tradition with the period before the Anschluss. Artist and architect Josef Frank describes postwar Austrian and specifically Viennese art as a concoction of styles, motifs, and topics chosen and assembled according to the sentiment of the times. The sentiment after the War was to forget and, in doing so, to reach back and assemble all that was conducive to this end.

Was der Wiener seine Kunst nennt, ist ein Zusammenstellen beliebiger Motive, die er einem Vorlagenbuch, das seinesgleichen zusammengestellt hat, entnimmt. Denn was außerhalb seiner Grenze geschieht, will er nicht sehen oder nur mit Augen, die das aussuchen, was er schon kennt, um mit Behagen festzustellen, daß bei ihm zu Hause alles am schönsten ist. [...] Der Wiener hat sich eine Sammlung undefinierbarer Formen zurechtgelegt, die er aus irgendeinem Grund Heimatkunst nennt, [...].

(What the Viennese calls his art is a conglomeration of random motifs which he takes from a how-to book published by his own compatriots. He does not want to see anything that happens outside Vienna's boundaries. He only looks for that which he already knows so that he can sit back in the belief that everything is much better and more beautiful at home. [...] The Viennese has put together a collection of indefinable forms which he calls, for some unknown reason, Heimatkunst, art of the home country, [...]) (qtd. in Kurrent 457).

¹³ Nineteenth century authors such as the writer Adalbert Stifter, the poet Peter Rosegger, and the dramatist Ludwig Anzengruber were particularly popular.

Austrian Film: Status Quo After the War

The glorification of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and monarchy was especially popular in postwar film. After “liberating” Austria from the National Socialist regime, the allied forces divided the country. Vienna, the heart of Austria’s pre-War film industry, was divided into four sectors, and the largest film company, Wien-Film, was seized by the Allies. The film studios at Sievering and Siebensternstrasse were under US administration. Rosenhügel was on Soviet grounds, and Schönbrunn belonged to the French. While the US, Great Britain, and France had no interest in taking over and incorporating the Austrian film industry, the USSR insisted on taking the studios as reparation payment. This meant that in the Western sectors, local film production could resume, while on the East side at Rosenhügel the Soviets made their own films.

As early as 1946 the film studios under US control started filming the first postwar feature length production, a saccharine and garishly colorful comedy about love. What followed for nearly the next ten years were films full of cheerful, comedic, light-hearted, navel-gazing, patriotic pride – feel-good entertainment that represented happy times, often in the form of filmic musicals. Very few productions dealt with the problems that had arisen during the War, and none even touched the difficult topic of the Holocaust.¹⁴

A significant portion of the many releases in the early fifties was based on popular literary works (for example Alexander Lernet-Holenia’s 1933 novel *Ich war Jack*

¹⁴ See Robert von Dassanowsky’s *Austrian Cinema*.

Mortimer (I was Jack Mortimer) which was released as *Abenteuer in Wien* (Adventure in Vienna) in 1953), safe territory for the national box offices and effective material for underscoring the country's rich cultural heritage. Several of these films were inspired by the *Bauerntheater* or peasant theater¹⁵ and pandered to the audience's desire for provincial escapism. The feature film *Der Weibsteufel* (The She Devil, 1951) returned to traditional folk literature by Karl Waggenerl. The original 1914 drama was scripted for the screen and directed by Wolfgang Liebeneiner, a German-born actor who had risen in the ranks of the Reich's film bureaucracy to become a professor and director of the Berlin Film Academy and governor of the RFK (Reichsfilmkammer, Film Chamber of the Reich). He had directed several egregiously propagandistic films, among them the notorious 1941 feature film *Ich klage an* (I accuse) advocating euthanasia. Another very popular genre of film was the *Bergfilm* (usually about one woman caught between two opposing men of different age or class, set in a mountain village or mountainous area), the "irrational female force" is deemed responsible for the disruption of the (male-dominated) order.

The critical and popular interest in moralistic and reactionary *Heimatfilm* (films positively reflecting the home country) which warns against decadence and disrupted social and gender role orders, reflected a conservative backlash in an Austria tired of Allied occupation and foreign cultural influences (Dassanowsky 142). There were a

¹⁵ For example, Arthur Maria Rabanalt's *Hochzeit im Heu* (Wedding in the Hay) and Paul Löwinger's *Valentins Sündenfall* (Valentin's Fall from Grace) both released in 1951.

small number of films that reflected on the realities of postwar Austria, the most representative of which is Harald Röbbling's *ASPHALT (Minderjährige)* (Asphalt – Juveniles) released in 1951. This feature film (re-discovered in a French film archive only in 2002) chronicles the disintegration of the lives of five Viennese “Großstadtjugendlichen” (big city juveniles) who succumb to the immorality and brutality of a cruel and selfish metropolis. The film was met by an overwhelmingly negative reception from the press. This following review is characteristic of the general opinion: It describes *ASPHALT* as a “Sittenfilm über die Gefährdung der Großstadtjugend, inhaltlich wie künstlerisch unzulänglich. [...] Erwachsenen abzuraten (A moralistic film about the endangerment of big city youth, deficient in content and aesthetics. [...] not recommended for adults)” (Döge 63). Amidst this mostly traditional and reactionary cinema emerged a number of young filmmakers ready to embark on new projects, apply novel techniques, address new topics, and even leave behind the established concepts of film, as discussed below.

An Avant-Garde Moment: Austrian Postwar Literature and Film

You don't define it, you recognize it as a historical phenomenon.
(Clement Greenberg)

Literary critic Roland Barthes writes in 1956 that “our dictionaries do not tell us precisely when the term avant-garde was first used in a cultural sense. Apparently the notion is quite recent, a product of that moment in history when to certain of its writers the bourgeoisie appeared as an esthetically retrograde force, one to be contested” (“Whose Theater?” 67). Barthes situates the term “avant-garde” in the early twentieth century and understands it as a reaction to a perceived domineering middle class with its consumerism, commercialism, and ultimately capitalism. No consensus exists on a single, unified definition for *the* Avant-garde, due largely to the transient, local, and also informal character of avant-garde movements and groups. A single term cannot do justice to a phenomenon so multidimensional and complex; hence, the “avant-garde” label is still fraught with misunderstandings and misappropriations. Art critic Clement Greenberg refused the notion of a definition at all. In his 1968 interview with Edward Lucie-Smith he proclaimed that the avant-garde movement cannot be explained but only identified retroactively: “You don’t define it, you recognize it as a historical phenomenon” (qtd. in Rees x). Bearing in mind the complexity of the term, I nonetheless use it to distinguish Austrian postwar experimental visual literature and film works distinctive from those of their contemporaries who were wedded to the conservative

and traditionalist milieu and conceptions of art at their times. The term “avant-garde” will also help place these artworks and their reception in an art-historical context. As a basis for my use of the term “avant-garde,” I briefly outline its origins and review its use and the associated art-historical and literary discourses.

It is always helpful to start at the top. I am therefore revisiting this idiom’s etymological heritage rooted in the jargon of the French military. The term was originally used to describe the foremost part of any army advancing into battle, also called a vanguard or, literally, the advance guard. In a temporal sense, then, the avant-garde is the small elite who rides ahead and shows the way to the masses. The term soon became associated with movements focusing primarily on expanding the frontiers of aesthetic experience and invention.

An early analysis of the idea of a small number of individuals moving ahead of the group, the avant-garde at the head of the masses as cultural phenomenon was issued by the Italian essayist Renato Poggioli in his 1962 book *Teoria dell’arte d’avanguardia* (*The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated into English in 1968). Surveying the historical, social, psychological, and philosophical aspects of avant-gardism, Poggioli defines the avant-garde as the shared ideals and values rooted in a non-conformist life-style. German literary theorist Peter Bürger, among the first to attempt a theorization of the avant-gardes, has pioneered the historicist approach to the various avant-garde movements Futurism, Dadaism, and early Surrealism. Bürger distinguishes between, as

he terms it, a “historical avant-garde” situated in the first three decades of the twentieth century and a “neo-avantgarde” that takes the stage after the Second World War. He harnessed the term “historical” because the movement to which he refers occurred during a very short and specific time interval, and because it was characterized by a highly political dimension of experimental art. According to previous theorists,¹⁶ stresses Bürger, the historical avant-garde movement set out to only eliminate art as an institution, but does not recognize the second and ultimately more successful ambition, the crusade to re-integrate art into the praxis of life.¹⁷

Avant-garde artists and authors opposed the cultural establishment and institutionalization of art by, for example, museums or in the art-history teaching canon. Institutions, Bürger claims, abrogate the political critique of experimental art that is the defining characteristic of the historical avant-garde. Abbreviating Bürger’s thesis, the intentions of the original (historical) avant-garde, dated from the 1910s until 1925, were to advance the abolishing of the division between art and life, the aesthetic from the real, and instead to integrate art into social praxis. And they made their views known

¹⁶ Bürger relies on Adorno and Benjamin.

¹⁷ Bürger writes: “Die Intention der historischen Avantgardebewegungen ist bestimmt worden als Zerstörung der Institution Kunst als einer von der Lebenspraxis abgehobenen. Die Bedeutung dieser Intention besteht nicht darin, dass die Institution Kunst in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft tatsächlich zerschlagen und damit Kunst unmittelbar in Lebenspraxis überführt worden wäre, sondern vor allem darin, dass das Gewicht der Institution Kunst für die reale gesellschaftliche Wirkungen der Einzelwerke erkennbar geworden ist” (Bürger 117) (“The intention of the historical avant-garde movements was defined as the destruction of art as an institution set off from the praxis of life. The significance of this intention is not that art as an institution in bourgeois society was in fact destroyed and art thereby made a direct element in the praxis of life, but that the weight that art as an institution has in determining the real social effect of individual works became recognizable”) (Bürger *Theory of the Avant-Garde* 83).

through experiments that ran counter to the understanding of art at the time.

Austrian Avant-Garde

As has been mentioned above, in the 1950s Austria experienced a radical literary avant-garde movement for the first time in its cultural history, despite a prevailing conservatism in the official cultural politics of the postwar era (Kastberger "Wien 50/60" 5). Although influential international avant-garde movements had come into being several decades earlier, these had for the most part bypassed Austria due to the strength of the local cultural elite's tradition-bound stance during the monarchic and inter-war years.

The most theoretically inclined *Wiener Gruppe* writer Oswald Wiener demanded that an absolutely objective approach to the world is necessary, but conceded at the same time that it is not possible. He declared in his "coole manifest," composed in 1954, that in order to express an event or a thought, the writer should use feelings, sentiments, intangible, mental processes to describe what happens. He literally sees the use of feelings as one would use cutlery to take apart pieces of information:

schon 1954 hatte ich ein mittlerweile wieder vernichtetes statement verfasst, das 'coole manifest'; es forderte von den unterzeichneten die enthaltung von stellungnahmen jeder art [...] man möge sich [...] angesichts eines ereignisses einer skala von empfindungen bedienen wie eines bestecks [...]

(already in 1954 i penned a statement, which i have destroyed again in the meantime, the 'coole manifest'; it demanded that all who signed it refrain from utterances of any kind [...] one should [...] use a palette of feelings as if they

were cutlery when expressing an event [...] (*die wiener gruppe* 635).

Whether destroyed, as Wiener claims, or lost as Rühm alleges, Wiener's statement as it is remembered here by Wiener, illuminates the differences between the ideological and polemical nature of the Dadaist approach and the *Wiener Gruppe's* attitude toward the creation of literature. But it also frames the attitude toward the uses of language and the purpose of literature held by the authors. Language is insufficient to describe, explain, or express reality.

As such, they were indebted to a long tradition of language wariness, and the phenomenon of probing linguistic rules and meaning in Austria can be traced back to the turn of the twentieth century. However, the explorations of the postwar Viennese avant-gardes into the uses and understanding of language as a central tool for human interaction took a tone more radical than ever before in the twentieth century. Most of the works of the *Wiener Gruppe* authors fall into the very broad category "experimental literature." In this dissertation, however, I focus purely on those texts that are radically different. Moving far beyond the breaking of genre boundaries or taking apart and recombining established structures of grammar and syntax, the most advanced experiments developed by *Wiener Gruppe* members.

In the following paragraphs, I take a look at the question how Austrian postwar experimental art relates to previous avant-garde movements, especially focusing on the 1910s and 1920s. Postwar experimental authors and artists readily admit to having been

inspired by the art and literature of the historical avant-garde. And the avant-garde of one era often becomes the tradition of subsequent eras. It is therefore interesting to explore the relationship of the Austrian postwar experimental art movement to its predecessors, which Bürger refers to as the historical avant-garde. Historical avant-garde authors combined the modernist *l'art pour l'art* view with a growing political fervor nascent in German naturalism to fuse art and life, in order to “challenge the assumption that literature had no direct consequence for other spheres of society” (Stoehr 54). The contention that literature bears relevance to society, while central to the avant-garde operating during and after the First World War, was less of a focus in the successor movements. One could argue that the historical avant-garde established the inter-dependence of art, politics, and life, and that later movements then built on that foundation. Indulge me, while I briefly elaborate on the aims and methods of the historical avant-garde with a special focus on Dada literature, to which the Austrian postwar authors and artists have a close affinity.

Historical and Postwar Avant-Gardes: Each Avant-Garde Is the First

An artistic or literary movement does not necessarily have to be new to be an avant-garde in its time. For any movement there are always antecedents or, better said, parallels in history, but newness and innovation as a definition for avant-garde takes us off course and leads us, in the end, nowhere. The search for originality is a search for

origins, and a search for continuities. It implies a fable of continuity that masks a discursive constructedness. Avant-gardes emerge again and again, they are always radically new in their historical moment. Categorizations in avant-garde scholarship impose upon the avant-garde narrations of continuity that actually cover up what is interesting about the *Wiener Gruppe* in their time and place and steer us away from engaging with what is distinct and important about this particular avant-garde movement.

Dadaism was the most important formation of the historical avant-garde for the Austrian postwar experimental authors. Dadaist artists rigorously demanded an overthrow of bourgeois concepts regarding the function and purpose, the production, and the reception of art, via an aggressive negation of the status quo.¹⁸ However, the artists did not achieve their goal to destroy art as institution since their negation happened within the art sphere (Bürger 28-29). His germane theory, that the avant-garde as historic movement did not fulfill its promise to destroy traditional nineteenth century notions of what art is supposed to do and therefore did not complete the push to bring art into life, has, in the meantime, been revised and nuanced.

For Barthes the avant-garde must end once it either has demolished the

¹⁸ This excerpt from the "dadaistische manifest" decrees what an anti-art pro-Dada motivation entailed: "Gegen die ästhetisch-ethische Einstellung! Gegen die blutleere Abstraktion des Expressionismus! Gegen die weltverbessernden Theorien literarischer Hohlköpfe! Für den Dadaismus in Wort und Bild, für das dadaistische Geschehen in der Welt. Gegen dieses Manifest sein, heißt Dadaist sein! (Against the esthetic-ethical attitude! Against the bloodless abstraction of expressionism! Against the world-improvement theories of literary egg-heads! Pro-Dada in word and image, pro-Dada events in the world. To be against this manifesto means to be Dada!)" (Richter *Dada 1916-1966* 34).

bourgeoisie or avant-garde perspectives have been absorbed by its fiend. The avant-garde needs a bourgeoisie and without a cause to rail against, it must wither. "The avant-garde is always a way of celebrating the death of the bourgeoisie, for its own death still belongs to the bourgeoisie; but further than this the avant-garde cannot go" (Barthes "Whose Theater?" 69). Agreeing to neither of the two propositions offered by Barthes, Bürger claims that the avant-garde is responsible for its own demise and that a bourgeois take-over of avant-garde art into the mainstream did not occur. For him, the avant-garde self-destructs because it ceases to demand the death of the bourgeoisie, not being able to fathom its own demise along with the establishment. But did it really self-destruct and vanish?

The question lingers, what happens when the ideas of an avant-garde movement re-emerge in a different time and a different social, cultural, and political environment, in part because it was unsatisfactorily and unconvincingly addressed by Bürger, lingers. In lieu of more adequate descriptors, Bürger coined the term "neo-avant-garde" to describe the descendants of previous movements. His ideas gained currency and are widely employed by following scholars. Hal Foster acknowledges his discontent with the abundance of the prefixes "neo" and "post" which are always used to delineate any emerging, yet on some level familiar, cultural phenomena that happened after World War Two in his essay "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" He states: "It is no secret that postwar culture in North America and Western Europe is swamped by *neos*

and *posts*" (5; emphasis in the original). What is designated as "neo-avant-garde" then is the phenomenon of experimental art and literature in the 1960s and 1970s which has apparent aesthetic similarities to the pre-war avant-garde art. "Neo-avant-gardists" are accused of being recyclers of forms and strategies from the historical avant-garde. A prominent example mentioned by Hal Foster is the situation of the artist Yves Klein who has often been accused of being a recycler of Kazimir Malevich's ideas and methods (7-8). The neo-avant-garde movements are often understood in terms of their re-working of what has come before and on emphasizing a rupture between the two.¹⁹ Rather than inserting myself in a discourse of "neo"-isms in art and literature I am using the expression "postwar avant-garde" to refer to the post-Second World War cultural landscape with specific focus on developments in the 1950s and with respect to literature and film that is primarily experimental.

While Bürger initiated a line of discourse that historicized the avant-garde, a second line of discussion, represented by theorists such as Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, P. Adams Sitney among them, adopted a structuralist approach to avant-garde practice. In contrast to the historicist view which isolates the avant-garde to a particular period before the Second World War, followed by a postwar neo-avant-garde, and thus finds disjunctions and specificity, the structuralist explores continuities. For the structuralists, "avant-garde" remains useful as a descriptor of a recurrent structural

¹⁹ See the introduction to Mark Crinson and Claire Zimmerman's edited volume *Neo-avant-garde and Postmodernism. Postwar Architecture in Britain and Beyond* for a pithy summary of the development of the connotations for "neo-avant-garde."

element in cultural production, and avant-garde serves as an umbrella-term that can cover various movements, like experimental, independent, underground, or visionary.

As true for all artistic movements, film also experienced phases of strong innovation and experimentation. In the following, I review the variations in terminology which were applied to these works by critics and art-historians. Of the classic accounts of avant-garde film-making, only P. Adams Sitney has embraced the notion “avant-garde film,” even if identifying it with what he calls “visionary film” (*Visionary Film*). Scott MacDonald chose the term “avant-garde,” arguing that it has the widest currency and “is generally understood to refer to an ongoing history that has been articulated in different ways in different places” (16). For Laura Mulvey, avant-garde film is understood as the negation of the dominant cinema (qtd. in O’Pray 5).

Other film scholars opted for a variation of terms to differentiate between sub-movements, approaches and techniques, and because it was felt that the term “avant-garde” was associated with too many connotations. David Curtis, A.L. Rees and others settled for the adjective “experimental.” The word “experiment” tends to denote changes in technique and in methodology. It does not necessarily herald an avant-gardism in the sense of a group charging ahead of the mainstream with new ideas and projects, but simply provides the traditional medium cinema with more variety of expression. The experimental tag also suggests a tentativeness and a scientific rationalist motivation. It fails to capture, and in fact seems to exclude, the passions and spontaneity

involved in many of the films it purports to cover. By the same token, “experiment” seems to exclude radical social and political ideas often associated with the avant-gardes. In fact, experimental techniques can be found just as often in the conservative film tradition as in the transgressive.

Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, Sheldon Renan, and Parker Tyler all used the term “underground” to describe film outside the mainstream. Malcolm Le Grice opted for “formal” and Peter Gidal has used “structural-materialist” and later just “materialist.” Originating in the US, the term “underground” has also been associated with a social, sexual, and cultural sub-culture operating “beneath” the traditional mainstream. Its connotation is quite different from that of “avant-garde” (O’Pray 5).

Hubert van den Berg asks: “Why not simply describe the temporal aspect in temporal terms, for example, by speaking of avant-garde movements before and after the Second World War?” (73). This is the question which bears relevance for my dissertation. For me, the more useful approach is the structuralist view of avant-garde practices as *continuing* aspects of modern cultural production. In its most basic usage, avant-garde refers to cultural production against the mainstream, blazing trails in the field of cultural development. But focusing simply on newness is insufficient. I forego all the certainly significant appellations and simply use the term “avant-garde” based on the following concept which begins from a basic definition. Avant-garde practices combine these qualities: extreme experimentation with form and content, non-

traditional aesthetic engagement with the materials, and negative reception by contemporaries. However, the particular form avant-garde production takes, is always situated in its historical environment. The medium or media with which its representatives experiment, the ways in which they make the media signify, all these take on specific historical contours every time anew.

Dada Heritage

*Dada kam, sah und siegte
und Dada lebt.*

(Dada came, saw, and conquered
and Dada lives.)
(Raoul Hausmann)²⁰

Within the European historical avant-garde, Dada was the most politically radical movement.²¹ Contemporaries received Dada art as a shocking provocation of war-torn Europe, and considered its allegedly inane public displays unworthy of the title “art.” At its inception, Dada encountered much resistance because it denied any meaning, subverted all politics, and aimed to destroy the concept of art as an institution, art as a separate and elevated sphere, advocating instead for the notion of art as indistinguishable from life. Dada, in other words, presented art as anti-art. Dada filmmaker Hans Richter declared that the inciting and rebellious nature of his and his

²⁰ “Dadaspruch für Österreich” (qtd. in Riha *Da Dada da war* 138).

²¹ The following is a commendable, albeit dated, edited volume of essays concerned with Dadaism: Wolfgang Paulsen and Helmut Hermann, eds. *Sinn aus Unsinn. Dada International*.

contemporaries' works was predicated upon the shared belief that bourgeois society needed to be shocked and angered. A primary Dada aim was to awaken a public that seemed oblivious to and ignorant of the dangers of encroaching capitalism, the ravages of the last war, and the general insincerity and emptiness of the modern world: "Unsere Provokationen, Demonstrationen und Oppositionen waren nur ein Mittel, den Spiesser zur Wut und durch die Wut zum beschämten Erwachen zu bringen." (Our provocations, demonstrations, and opposition were only a means to incite the anger of the bourgeoisie and through anger a rude awakening) (Richter *Dada Kunst und Antikunst* 8). Dada's radical distortion and destruction of language was a response to the politics of western bourgeois society that had led Europe into the First World War. By rejecting traditional culture and aesthetics, Dada responded to the cruelties of a senseless war, with art that defied categorization within commonly held aesthetic notions.

Dada literature seemed inorganic in the sense that it did not endow its material with life, but considered it to be just what it was: material. Linguistic signifiers were no longer meaningful or representative of a totality; rather, they were random, empty symbols taken out of their context, robbed of their conceptual (word immanent) meaning. The randomness of Dada works ranged from free association to the taking apart of any object – including a text – and rearranging the parts.²²

Nothing the experimental artists of the historical avant-garde produced was

²² In the process, the Dadaists hinted at the question whether man is the product of chance ("Zufall") (Richter *Dada Kunst und Antikunst* 7).

meaningless yet everything lacked meaning, nothing was obvious but everything visible. As an example, the first abstract phonetic poem (this genre is now called sound poetry) by the prolific early Dadaist poet Hugo Ball, "O Gadjji Beri Bimba"²³ consisting of made-up words and now considered a paradigmatic example for Dada art, was met with bafflement and confusion by the audience when it was performed at the first great Dada evening, July 1916 in Zurich. Kurt Schwitters' "Ursonate" (1922-23) is another particularly poignant example foregrounding the phonetic instead of the semantic and syntactic values. Ball described the purpose of his experimental works retroactively. Sound poetry, such as his famous poem, was a way to escape language, to not use language which had been destroyed and damaged by pre-World War One journalism. After World War Two, the critique of language was focused around the damage done by war rhetoric and a general public ignorance of the damage language can do due to its multiple ways of meaning. The Dadaists, for their part, used sound poetry as one means of devising an escape from the language of their time. Sound poetry meant that the focus was drawn away from the meaningful utterance toward an aural experience, a release from the ties of semantics. The Dadaists wanted a retreat into the inside of language to preserve the essence of language: "Mit diesen Tongedichten wollen wir verzichten auf eine Sprache, die verwüstet und unmöglich geworden ist durch den Journalismus (With this sound poetry we want to refrain from using a language that had been destroyed and

²³ This text has shown remarkable longevity in popular culture works such as a song titled "I Zimba" by the famous US-American pop band Talking Heads who set the poem to music in 1979.

made untenable by journalism)" (Richter *Dada Kunst und Antikunst* 41).

It is still contested whether the *Wiener Gruppe* authors have been familiar with works from the historical avant-garde at the beginning of their writing careers. In fact, Gerhard Rühm and his *Wiener Gruppe* colleagues asserted that during their early years they were unaware of works or techniques from the historical avant-garde, because they did not have access to it. This seems plausible, since many of the historical avant-garde works had been classified as "entartete Kunst" (degenerate art) or abject art by the national-socialists. Virtually all modern art, sculpture, literature, cinema, and music (for example abstract works cubist, Dadaist, surrealist visual art, expressionist cinema, atonal music, jazz), and works considered Jewish-Bolshevik had been confiscated, stolen, or destroyed during the National Socialist reign.²⁴

Nevertheless, the highly confrontational works of Viennese experimental authors and filmmakers of the 1950s show a clear indebtedness to the early twentieth century avant-garde art in general and its subcategory Dada in particular. This is especially true at the level of techniques, where a clear line can be drawn between the montage, concrete poetry, visual poetry, manifestoes and literary cabarets of the historical avant-garde with those of the Viennese postwar avant-garde. Furthermore, *Wiener Gruppe* authors, like the Dadaists, focused on the materiality, visuality, and performativity of linguistic

²⁴ This is a small selection of secondary literature on the topic of degenerate art during the Third Reich. Peter Adam. *Art of the Third Reich*; Stephanie Barron, ed. 'Degenerate Art': *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* ; R.J. Evans. *The Coming of the Third Reich* ; John Minnion. *Hitler's List: An Illustrated Guide to 'Degenerates'* ; Jonathan Petropoulos. *The Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany*.

signifiers. Ultimately, both avant-garde movements aimed for the de-montage of language formulas and concomitant deconstruction of meaning.

The aesthetic analogies between the *Wiener Gruppe* and Dada did not go unnoted by contemporaries. The mid-century appearance of artistic re-incarnations in film and literature was received, for the most part, with impatience or indifference. The general public perceived the works as childish frolic or inane provocation. Take, for example, the following representative pun-intended headline from the Viennese newspaper *Die Presse*: “Schau oba, alter Dada-Vater, wo sind die Kabarettiche des ‘Café Voltaire’? (Old Dada-father look down upon us, where are the cabaradishes²⁵ of the Café Voltaire?)” (Doppler 240). The pun here was clearly intended to ridicule the new generation of artists and criticize them for embracing the heritage of the historical avant-garde only in order to copy it.

Some scholars in the 1980s compared the *Wiener Gruppe*'s experimental works with those of the historical avant-garde, going as far as claiming a direct connection between the two. In their view, the *Wiener Gruppe* authors used the same historical avant-garde practices and just recombined them playfully. I am mentioning this as a preview to Chapter Two, in which I investigate the approaches, concepts, and styles of experimentation of the *Wiener Gruppe*, referring to the historical avant-garde movement where appropriate. It is, however, absolutely incorrect to assume that *Wiener Gruppe*

²⁵ “Kabarettiche” is a made-up word, consisting of the nouns “Kabarett” (cabaret) and “Rettich” (radish).

authors simply took what they liked from the older works and reassembled it for their own purposes, marching in the same footsteps of the previous generation.²⁶ The younger movement is not simply a copy of the older one.

Whether directly influenced by the historical avant-garde or similarly inspired, the *Wiener Gruppe* creations clearly fit into a trajectory of rich and influential experimental art that commenced at the turn of the twentieth century, reached across Europe, and was irreversibly interrupted by the political and social turmoil of the 1930s and 1940s. The Dadaist challenge to the very concept of an artwork as “meaning-making vehicle” is also reflected in the Austrian postwar avant-garde works. In fact, both movements have long since become a part of the arthistoric and literary canon of the twentieth century. And from today’s perspective each represents an important step on the way towards post-modern art.

Avant-Garde Film

The avant-garde film does not appeal to the mere pleasure of the crowd. It is at once too egoistic and too altruistic. Egoistic, because it is the personal manifestation of a pure thought; altruistic, because it is isolated from every concern other than progress. [...] The avant-garde is born of both the

²⁶ Alfred Doppler cites a literary critic from the fifties who accused the young authors of walking in the footsteps of the Dadaists: “Sind das wirklich neue Wege oder nicht viel mehr Trampelpfade auf denen schon Generationen von Dilettanten (...) zurück in den Urwald marschiert sind” (Are these really new paths or just dirt tracks on which generations of dilettantes have marched back into the jungle) (240).

*criticism of the present and the
foreknowledge of the future.*
(Germaine Dulac)²⁷

Although the continuities from avant-garde film of the twenties to postwar experimental film are also recognizable, experimental filmmakers in postwar Austria were not criticized as treading well-worn paths of earlier artists because experimental film in the 1950s and 1960s was marginal, little known, not funded, and very rarely publicly screened. Film as youngest of the arts with enormous potential, was also slow to develop an outspoken avant-garde community in tradition-bound Vienna. Film-as-film, the non-narrative, self-reflexive, experimental cinema has an almost one-hundred year history in Europe, beginning in the 1920s in Western Europe, most notably in France and Germany, and in the post-revolutionary Soviet Union. The avant-garde filmmakers of the twenties and thirties endeavored to claim a room of their own on the cultural spectrum of the time, sharply divided from conventional cinema. Early twentieth century avant-garde filmmakers were interested in painting and sculpture and their works are now considered the link between the art forms film, painting, sculpture, and photography as an inter-medial technique to produce images. Some avant-garde filmmakers turned to absolute, non-referential abstraction. In their case their immediate model was abstract painting (Rees 36). Hans Richter, the father of "absolute film"²⁸ –

²⁷ Dulac (43).

²⁸ „Absolute film“ stands in analogy to the idea of „absolute music,“ music that has no reference

film that is made for its own sake, film that does not allude to a narrative, an idea, or anything else besides its inherent basic elements light, darkness, movement, sound, materiality of film, non-reality. For Richter absolute film meant the creation of absolute “optical rhythm.” His filmic intention was to make visible patterns, pulses, beats, cadences, not through telling a story but by reference to themselves. Richter’s *Rhythmus* series bears witness to his theoretical musings.

The first experimental films in the twenties were created by artists such as the Swede Viking Eggerling, the German Hans Richter, or the French filmmakers Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. In Germany and France, the cinematic apparatus was seen as a tool with which artists working in the fine arts could expand their repertoire, and by doing so, attract more of the public. Indeed, going to see a film was becoming quite popular among members of almost all social classes so that artists inclined toward experimentation and social critique expected that the expanding audience will embrace their visual critique of traditions (MacDonald 2-3).

Avant-garde film from the 1920s is dominated by the graphic animation films created by German directors Walter Ruttmann (*Lichtspiel Opus I*, 1919), Hans Richter (*Rhythmus 21*, 1921), and Oskar Fischinger (*Wachs Experimente*, 1926),²⁹ and Viking Eggeling (*Diagonal Sinfonie*, 1924), who were inspired by painting and graphics general propensity toward experimentation. Film critic Michael O’Pray explains that “[t]he

point outside itself, and in its strictest application stands autonomous from its environment.

²⁹ Peter Tscherkassky calls the title “spröde und programmatisch (stilted and programmatic)” (9).

second decade of the twentieth century witnessed the burgeoning of abstract painting [...]” and contends that this impetus influenced filmmakers (9, 11). In France the avant-garde film scene was dominated by experimentally inclined film and visual artists like Marcel Duchamp (*Anémic Cinéma*, 1925) and Germaine Dulac (*Coquille et le clergyman*, 1927), as well as by the group of the Surrealists surrounding Man Ray (*Le Retour à la raison*, 1923) and the well-known collaboration between Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí (*Un Chien Andalou*, 1928). The dominant filmmakers of Russia were Sergei Eisenstein (*Battleship Potemkin*, 1926) and Dziga Vertov (*Man With a Movie Camera*, 1929). Instead of using elements like plot, character, and easily recognizable locations, these filmmakers surprised their viewers with non-narrative works. Their films attempt to visualize the relationship between the positions of moving shapes and draw attention to shape, motion, rhythm, black and white relation, and color. The filmmakers actively sought to disrupt the viewer’s comfort zone (MacDonald 3). The heritage of these early cinematographers was carried forward by the mid-century filmmakers Kurt Kren and Peter Kubelka in their extremely structured films. In the 1950s Kren and Kubelka revived the ideal of an absolute film with its intense self-reflexivity in their short features.

The avant-garde has been traditionally understood as a reaction to realism. But there are problems in this opposition as applied to film, as film, it can be argued, is intrinsically “realist” in its mechanical photographic reproduction of reality. Non-live-

action abstract animation in the German avant-garde of the 1920s however marks the point of break with realism. A definitive designation of experimental film cannot be reached, perhaps it should not be reached because it is also an indication of the film avant-garde's restlessness which continues until today.

How do these postwar avant-garde artists fit into the larger, twentieth century history of the avant-garde? How, in other words, does the postwar avant-garde relate to the historical avant-garde? Critical views on these questions are divided and tend towards one of two arguments. The first dates from 1974, when Bürger published his *Theorie der Avantgarde*, which contends that all contemporary artistic avant-gardes largely rehearse the deeds of their 1920s predecessors but fail to achieve their promise.³⁰ The artistic avant-garde, in other words, becomes the mainstream against which it has positioned itself. Dada is usually cited as the classic example for this. When that occurs, there is no longer any establishment against which to rebel, and modern art (including the supposed avant-garde) is dissolved into the mainstream cultural and media landscape.

The death of the avant-garde, which coincides with the "death of the author,"³¹ is in both cases seen as a sign of history failure. Art which opposes museum culture is now embalmed within it, with Dada as the classic instance. Furthermore, it often follows, the

³⁰ A nuanced critique of Peter Bürger's famous work and a relatively recent overview of developments in avant-garde scholarship are presented by Dietrich Scheunemann (15-48).

³¹ This concept will be discussed in Chapter Two. For the texts from which the term stems see Roland Barthes' 1967 essay "Death of the Author" ("La mort de l'auteur"), and Michel Foucault's famous lecture "What is an Author?" ("Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur") from 1969.

avant-garde in art is now the mainstream in itself; there is no establishment against which to rebel, with the final recuperation of modern art (including the supposed avant-gardes) into the cultural and media landscape. Writing in 2007, film critic and theorist A.L. Rees claims that “only the newest and most outrageous art attracts the interest of sponsors, curators and advertising agencies” (3). In his opinion the avant-garde has failed because the museums and institutions have long discovered avant-garde art’s value, for the art world as well as for their bank accounts. Art which had been termed avant-garde now is supported officially, publicly in the business world and the government.

On the other hand, Rees accedes that avant-garde art “has succeeded too well by making outrage the norm in a current art scene which the avant-garde dominates” (3). Rees of course speaks with the benefit of hindsight. In the 1950s, avant-garde art was by no means accepted by the public taste. In his opinion, the avant-garde has failed because museums and institutions long ago discovered its market value.

New Movements: Avant-Garde and Experimental Art

Despite this climate of widespread cultural conservatism, there did exist a younger generation of authors who engaged critically with contemporary topics – including, for example, Kurt Benesch, Walter Buchebner, Milo Dor, Herbert Eisenreich, Erich Fried, Fritz Habeck, Hans Heinz Hahnl, Walter Hollischer, Hertha Kräftner, Hans

Lebert, Jakob Lind, and Viktor Matejka (Strutz 207-222 and Schmidt-Dengeler "Im Niemandsländ" 290-302). But even these authors continued to write in traditional late nineteenth and early twentieth century styles. As early as 1946, lyricist, essayist, and literary critic Hugo Huppert was furiously complaining that his younger contemporaries were altogether too ignorant and unwilling to reflect on the social and political turbulences that had taken place in the recent past:

Es ist, als hätten sich widernatürlicherweise die Rollen in der Schaffensarena vertauscht: ein Großteil der Jugend ist nicht jung, schreibt eine vergreiste, altkluge Literatur [...] und möchte am liebsten noch weiter zurückblicken, um dem Straßenlärm da vorne entrückt zu sein. Diese dichtende Jugend interessiert sich wenig für die Zeit, noch weniger für das Volk, und bleibt ihr und ihm so ziemlich alles schuldig, was seit dem großen Wendepunkt des Völkerfrühlings 1945 gerade vom Nachwuchs zu erwarten war.

(It's as though the roles of authors have unnaturally reversed: the majority of the younger generation is not young, writes in an old-fashioned, precocious, know-it-all style [...] and would like to look back in time even further to escape the street noise of the now. These young authors take little interest in the present, even less in the people, and have not made good on any of what was expected of them after the great turning point of 1945) (qtd. in Berger "Schwieriges Erwachen" 194).

Though Huppert's anger over the lack of new and innovative literature in the immediate postwar years is understandable, it is not entirely justified. The younger generation of postwar Austrian authors (born in the 1920s and early 1930s) cannot be summarily condemned as unspirited and old-fashioned. Ilse Aichinger, for example, decried the mendacity of her parents' generation, most famously in her short essay "Aufruf zum Mißtrauen" ("Call for Mistrust" 10). Aichinger also reflected extensively and perceptively on the pervasive cultural silence and desire to forget what had happened

during the War years in her first novel *Die größere Hoffnung* (The Greater Hope) published in 1947. This novel is one of the earliest attempts to come to terms with the Nazi past. The book is set in Vienna during the last days of the National Socialist reign, but Aichinger devotes most of her attention the restricted world of her protagonist, a half-Jewish child named Ellen, whose young mind transforms the cruel realities it experiences into a series of fantastic reflections and nightmarish visions. Aichinger provides little concrete description of war-time reality; the story develops through associative sequences of metaphors resulting in a dream-like world where inanimate objects come to life and humans are reduced to obscure enemies. Eventually, Ellen is forced to confront reality but she does so while still maintaining her hope for a greater good.³²

Other authors, such as Erich Fried and Marlen Haushofer, also engaged with War and postwar topics in their prose and lyric works. The publishing industry and political mainstream were not, at the time, much interested in promoting candidly reflective works, but that does not mean there were no critical writers penning them.

Generally speaking, as much as the literary and artistic avant-garde movement of the 1910s and 1920s had passed Austria by, so did the first wave of filmic experimentation. From today's perspective, films from the 1920s avant-garde are now part of the visual arts canon, and their makers established many of the methods and

³² See also Hans Wolfschütz's article "Ilse Aichinger: The Skeptical Narrator" (156-180).

forms that were taken up by later experimental filmmakers. After World War Two, filmmakers on the nascent Austrian experimental film scene launched their attack on the commercial film industry received critical attention but was avoided by the general public who had not developed a taste for this expression of visual art. The uncompromising cinematographers used celluloid as their physical instrument to embark on an expedition into profound experimentation similar to that which was taking place on the literary and painting scene already. Radically breaking away from conventional uses of the medium, the filmmakers had a fascination for formal expression and control over their medium, as well as urgency for confronting the elemental material experience. Filling the void in which they were operating, they commenced a vital independent cinema movement. Like their turn of the century predecessors in the more established arts, literature, painting, sculpture, music, as well as in film, the experimental Austrian filmmakers of the 1950s denied absolutely any conventions through their medium by overturning the basic illusion of recorded images as representation of reality. Challenging expectations, turning away from the conventional, destabilizing norms and prejudices, unraveling narrative expectations and weakening the trusted value of documentation with their works, the filmmakers reacted to the assertion that film is intrinsically realist in its mechanical and photographic reproduction of reality.

The development of a new mindset in Austrian postwar art did not end in the

early fifties. Despite the conservative and largely retrospective mainstream that dominated society, media, and politics in the 1950s, Austria, for the first time in its history, experienced an insistent radical avant-garde movement. Next, I introduce the central players in this development, a group of young radically experimental authors and filmmakers.

The *Wiener Gruppe*: Origins and History

What today is collectively referred to as the *Wiener Gruppe* was, in the 1950s, a loosely connected circle of young writers who met by chance and began to collaborate sporadically yet intensely, giving each other support and encouragement at a time when avant-garde literature was not welcomed by the mainstream.

Their approach to literature was unconventional to say the least. The authors stumbled upon and collected artistic concepts and methods, unwittingly reinvented ideas from the past, in addition to being ingenious, innovative, and creative themselves. Figuratively, they put collected knowledge and their own inventions in a box, and let their imagination run wild. The result was a necessarily heterogeneous body of work encompassing dialect and concrete poetry, macabre and profane verses, incongruous novels, fragments and collages, songs, cabarets, and many inter-medial works that tied literature with the visual arts, music, sculpture, and mathematics. The principle of experimentation always superseded any other intention. Inspiration and drive for the

authors was the will to create something new, as well as the discovery and collection of forgotten traditions, embracing their methods not to copy them, but rather giving a space to that which thus far had been rejected by the mainstream. Their oeuvre is complex, yet the will to break free of expectations through experimentation and insatiable curiosity stretches throughout.

Composer Gerhard Rühm (born 1930 in Vienna) and bank employee Konrad Bayer (Vienna 1932 – Lower Austria 1964) began writing experimental texts as early as 1953 inspired by the much older and more knowledgeable poet H.C. (Hans-Carl) Artmann (Vienna 1921 – Vienna 2000). Jazz musician Oswald Wiener (Vienna 1935) joined them shortly thereafter, and architect Friedrich Achleitner (born 1930 in Upper Austria) started taking an interest in literature and collaborating with the group in 1955. Just three years later, Artmann left the group to focus on translating and writing his own prose and poetry, and he still continued to work on dialect poetry as well.³³

Gerhard Rühm is widely regarded as one of the central figures of Austrian postwar avant-garde art. In the 1960s his efforts to document and publish *Wiener Gruppe*

³³ Artmann's collection of Viennese dialect poems, *med ana schwöazn dīntrn* (with black ink), was met with enthusiasm by the public when it was published in 1958, because Artmann's revolt against the *Unterrichtssprache* (literally teaching language, the Austrian vernacular taught and spoken in schools) was mistaken for endearing *Heimatliteratur* in the vein of revered but second-rate writer Josef Weinheber (see Rühm and Wiener "berlin, 17.9.1970" 31).

It must also be noted that the government, trying to separate the image of Austria as far as possible from any connection to Germany, placed particular emphasis on calling the Austrian language not *Hochdeutsch* (high German) but *Unterrichtssprache*, and consequently strongly welcomed and encouraged the use of local vernacular.

works gained him visibility and recognition as the self-declared speaker of the group. Rühm studied piano and composition at the Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst (University for Music and Performing Arts) in Vienna where he studied under twelve-tone music composer Josef Matthias Hauer. In the 1950s, Rühm turned towards literature and performing arts, exploring the interface of music, text, speech, performance and visual arts. Under the influence of and impetus from his collaboration with Artmann, Bayer, Wiener, and Achleitner, he also produced “Lautgedichte” (sound poetry), “Sprechtexpte” (spoken texts), visual poetry, photomontage, and “Buchobjekte” (book objects).

Artmann, who was a decade older than his friends and collaborators, was also more erudite and widely read. From 1947, he produced pieces for the radio and published literary works in the journal *Neue Wege*. Through him the younger writers became acquainted with literature and art from the 1910s and 1920s.

Bayer, like the other group members, was part of a generation who experienced the War as children and teenagers.³⁴ After graduating from secondary school he plan was to attend the Kunstakademie (Academy of Fine Arts) in Vienna. His father, however, refused to support him and instead arranged for him to work at a bank, where he stayed for six years. In 1952, he met Artmann and Rühm who had been a jazz musician, and who at Artmann’s suggestion started to write collaborative poetry. Bayer

³⁴ In contrast, H.C. Artmann experienced the War as a soldier, was wounded in 1941 and kept as POW until 1945.

found in Artmann, who was already an established author, the support and encouragement he needed to write: “fasziniert von artmanns auftritt und seinen enigmatischen ausrufen werde ich kumpan, dann verehrer, aufmerksamer hörer und mitstreiter für die gute sache der poesie (fascinated by artmann’s demeanor and his enigmatic declarations i become first a buddy, then an admirer, a attentive listener, and a comrade-in-arms for the good cause – poetry)” (qtd. in Weibel 33). Thanks in large part to his friendship with Artmann and Rühm, Bayer grew increasingly comfortable writing poetry and prose which became an escape from his mundane workdays. In the early sixties, he wrote several longer prose texts, for example, *der sechste sinn* (the sixth sense) (1963) and *der kopf des vitus bering* (the head of vitus bering) (1964), along with a large number of poems and text fragments, montages, a cycle of short plays called *cosmology* (1961), and numerous collaborative works with Artmann, Rühm, and Wiener, such as *starker toback. kleine fibel für den ratlosen* (heavy tobacco. little dictionary for the perplexed) (1964) and *montage 1956* (1956). His artistic relationships extended beyond the literary scene when he collaborated with film makers Peter Kubelka and Ferry Radax on their 1955 film production *mosaik im vertrauen* (mosaic in trust). In 1957 he quit his job at the bank to manage a gallery owned by his painter friend Ernst Fuchs. Collaborative work with Rühm, Wiener, and Achleitner intensified, cumulating in the group’s first “literarisches cabaret,” a literary cabaret featuring music, speeches, songs, poetry, storytelling, and random performances held in December 1958 at a space provided by the

Vienna Artists guild called “Alte Welt” (Old World). The event included experimental poetry readings, musical numbers, and the destruction of a piano, and was so successful, it gave the authors renewed energy for creating texts that existed outside mainstream literary production. In April 1959 a second literary cabaret was performed, again to great acclaim among the audience. Shortly thereafter, Bayer as Achleitner, Rühm, and Wiener entered their most productive period, working on joint and individual projects that became increasingly self-reflexive and eclectic. Focusing on the act of writing itself, rejecting genre and category boundaries, and questioning the ability to communicate through language at all prompted the authors to experiment with radically new writing practices.

In 1959 Wiener left the collaborative and purportedly destroyed every one of his manuscripts.³⁵ Bayer cites Wiener’s action as the end of the period of intense collaborative production. But that does not necessarily make it the end date of the authors’ collaborations. Another potential end date is the year 1964, when the *Wiener*

³⁵ A facsimile written by Oswald Wiener some time after 1962 lists all of his destroyed works: “schon 1954 hatte ich ein mittlerweile wieder vernichtetes statement verfasst, das ‘coole manifest’” (in 1954 already i had written a statement ‘the cool manifesto’ which i have destroyed again in the meantime)” (qtd. in Weibel 635). Konrad Bayer writes: “als nach einem jahr oswald wiener den teil seiner werke, die ihm zugänglich waren, vernichtet und er das schreiben für lange zeit aufgibt, löst sich die ‘wiener dichtergruppe’ auf (the ‘vienna poet’s group’ fell apart when, after one year, oswald wiener destroyed most of his early work)” (qtd. in Weibel 39). Gerhard Rühm reports: “oswald wiener, der nach einer schreibpause an einem roman zu arbeiten begonnen hatte, verwarf – mit ausnahme der gemeinschaftsarbeiten – was er zuvor produziert hatte (oswald wiener had, after a one year writing hiatus, started to write his novel – he destroyed everything he had produced, with the exception of our collaborations)” (Rühm “zur ‘wiener gruppe’ in den fünfziger jahren” 89).

Gruppe collaborative, then already disintegrated, became widely known due to Bayer's suicide on 10 October, a date that also marks the beginning of the mythologizing process. In 1967, Rühm edited the first collected works of the *Wiener Gruppe* and began to circulate a genealogy – his story of the group's achievements (Rühm's anthology *Die Wiener Gruppe. Achleitner, Artmann, Bayer, Rühm, Wiener*). He thus became the self-appointed archivist and historian of *Wiener Gruppe* works, as well as of Bayer's posthumous oeuvre. The publication, distribution, and reception of *Wiener Gruppe* works were in this way filtered through the lens of Rühm's perception.

In general, though, it is difficult to definitely date the *Wiener Gruppe* because its members joined, left, and rejoined the group at different times. Even the name "*Wiener Gruppe*" itself is problematic, as it was not chosen by the members, but assigned to them in a newspaper article written by author Dorothea Zeemann on 23 June, 1958 in the Viennese daily *Neuer Kurier* (qtd. in *Die Wiener Gruppe* 26).³⁶ The matter of naming was complicated even further in 1974, when, according to Wolfgang Kraus, Artmann declared that the *Wiener Gruppe* had never really existed but was retroactively created as a legend in an attempt to present its authors as a unified troupe.

Aber des hat niemals eine *Wiener Gruppe* gegeben. Wir war'n gute Kameraden, wir war'n gute Freunde, wir ham uns gegenseitig besucht. Und da war der Konrad Bayer und da war der Ossi Wiener, als der jüngste drunter noch, und der Gerhard Rühm, und der Achi war da, und der Jandl war da, und die Mayröcker war da. Jo, aber wir war'n nie eine wirkliche Gruppe. Das ist draußen in

³⁶ Despite attributing the origin of the name to a source outside the group, its use in the title of Rühm's work contributed strongly to its institutionalization.

Deutschland entstanden. [...] Und die ham a Gruppe draus gmacht. Das war'n praktisch die Rezensenten und die Kritiker. Jetzt sind wir die *Wiener Gruppe*, und wir sind sehr schlagkräftig als diese. Aber wir war'n nie ein eingetragener Verein, e.V.

(But there never was a *Wiener Gruppe*. We were good buddies, good friends; we visited each other. And there was Konrad Bayer, and there was Ossi Wiener, the youngest among us, and Gerhard Rühm, and Achi, and Jandl was there, and Mayröcker, too. Sure, but we were never truly a group. The designation was applied to us in Germany. [...] And they made a group of us. It was the reviewers, the critics. And now we are the *Wiener Gruppe* and we are quite powerful as such. But we were never a registered club) (excerpt from interview with H.C. Artmann on CD accompanying Weibel; see also Kraus 584).

But whether or not the five authors can be neatly categorized as a formal group, the fact remains that they were a small number of authors who worked with unconventional methods, forced together by outward pressures and kept together by their isolation from the mainstream. “[I]n einer atmosphäre von ignoranz und wütender ablehnung war man aufeinander angewiesen, um nicht ganz isoliert zu sein ([I]n an atmosphere of ignorance and angry exclusion we were dependent on each other not to be completely isolated)” (Rühm *wiener gruppe* 7).

At a time when society cherished historical continuity and welcomed the peaceful reconstruction of traditional values, this loosely connected group of young authors, born in the 1930s, produced works that did not at all conform to the established literary and cultural conventions. The author's reaction to the establishment was aggressive: “Für die Autoren der *Wiener Gruppe* war die Masse der Feind, also alle anderen. Dem Kollektiv der anderen, dem man sich mitzuteilen verweigert, widersetzt sich ein Gefühl der Einzigartigkeit” (For the authors of the *Wiener Gruppe* society was the

enemy, everyone else. Their idea of uniqueness prevented them from interacting with the collective with whom they refused to communicate) (Innerhofer 146). They created these works in collaboration and alone, working independently as well as part of the group. They continued to produce even though responses from respected literary critics and journalists were generally negative and opportunities for publication of experimental texts were scarce. They continued to produce even though the “established” literary critics, whom Joseph McVeigh calls “the brokers of official literature in the 1950s and 1960s [who] were to a large extent themselves part of the continuity in literary culture from the 1930s”³⁷ generally ignored them (McVeigh 10). Their individual and group accomplishments speak for themselves, and the “group-no-group” discussion is but a by-product of their eventual recognition – it is easier for critics, after all, to refer to the authors collectively than to focus on each writer one-by-one.

Up until the early 1960s the authors very much worked for themselves and for a small but growing group of admirers and supporters. Although their collaborations proved extraordinarily fruitful,³⁸ publishing houses for the most part declined to print

³⁷ Mostly they were authors formerly sympathetic to national-socialist ideals prevalent during the Third Reich, such as Friedrich Torberg, Alexander Lernet-Holenia, Josef Nadler, and Herbert Eisenreich (Zeyringer *Österreichische Literatur* 71).

³⁸ “Das Ergebnis [der Zusammenarbeit] waren drei längere Arbeiten, die acht Jahre später (1964) als Sonderdruck der Wiener Zeitschrift *Eröffnungen* erstmals publiziert wurden: *vollständiges lehrgedicht für deutsche, 11 verbarien* und *magische kavallerie;*” (the results [of their collaboration] were three longer works which were printed eight years later (1964) in a special edition of the Viennese magazine *Eröffnungen: complete teaching poem for germans, 11 word games,*

their works, with the exception of the dialect poetry collection *hosn, ros'n, baa* (trousers, roses, bones) by Artmann, Achleitner, and Rühm, which was released by the established Viennese Frick publishing house in 1959. Looking back on this rare success several years later, Rühm remembers the public reaction with a touch of glee: "das buch erregte eher im negative sinne aufsehen, so sehr es auch von einem gewissen kreis begrüsst und gepriesen wurde [...] der spiesser fühlte sich hier tatsächlich auf sein wiener schnitzel getreten und reagierte dementsprechend beleidigt (the book caused a furor in a negative sense, as much as it was celebrated by a certain circle [...] the petty bourgeois felt "kicked in his wiener schnitzel" [insulted, GW] and reacted miffed)" (*Die Wiener Gruppe* 30). But despite the misgivings of the public, the collection enjoyed great success.

Rühm and those around him were not using dialect language to endorse Austrian values and traditions but to confront them. They exploited the methods of traditional poetry and demonstrated the dislocation between the author's language and the world in which he or she lived; their use of dialect had nothing to do with the evocation of a pastoral Austria but was intended as a way of breaking up ossified literary and linguistic usages through authentic vernacular. Members of the *Wiener Gruppe* saw ways of using dialect poetry in a manner far removed from the coziness evoked in its use by earlier poets. The power and ability of dialect to shock and to scandalize were unmistakably in the sordid but comical aggression expressed for

and *magical cavalry*" writes Erich Methuen (201).

example in Rühm's poem about his fondness for drowning victims ("wossaleichn" – Wasserleichen):

ich lig so gean
auf wossaleichn
di san so wach
und doch noch menschlich
und ia geruch
eainnad mich aun s mea
da krig ich eine sensuchd

i prefer to lay
on drowning victims
they are so soft
and yet so very human
and their smell
reminds me of the sea
and I feel a longing

(*Dialektdichtungen* 9)

Aside from the dialect texts, though, most other works did not find sufficient financial support or publishers. As soon as the "Kulturministerium" (Ministry for Culture) became aware of the claptrap nature and profanity in the author's experimental poetry, any type of financial subsidy was declined, because, explains Rühm: "man sah mit schrecken, was da bald subventioniert worden wäre (they realized in horror what they had almost financially supported)" (*Die Wiener Gruppe* 32). Such works simply did not fit the image of Austrian literature that the Second Republic wanted to convey to the world. Officially funded publications were even penalized for printing texts or favorable reviews of *Wiener Gruppe* works, for example in 1957:

[1957] erschienen in den *Neuen Wegen*, einer Zeitschrift des Wiener "Theaters der

Jugend," [waren] Texte von Artmann, Rühm und Jandl, der verantwortliche Lyrikredakteur wurde daraufhin abgelöst. 1958 wollte Heimito von Doderer die von ihm redigierte Literaturseite des *Kurier* der *Wiener Gruppe* zur Verfügung stellen; die Veröffentlichung wurde untersagt, [...]. 1964 erschien im Februarheft der offiziellen österreichischen Literaturzeitschrift *Wort in der Zeit* [der Text] "Experimente" von Bayer und Rühm; der Redakteur Gerhard Fritsch kam daraufhin so sehr ins Kreuzfeuer der Kritik, daß er seinen Posten aufgab.

(The periodical of the Viennese "Theater for the Youth" called *Neue Wege* (New Paths) published [in 1957] texts from Artmann, Rühm und Jandl. Following this, the responsible editor of the poetry section was removed from his post. Heimito von Doderer offered space the literature section of the Viennese daily *Kurier* to publish *Wiener Gruppe* works in 1958; the publication was banned, [...] the February 1964 edition of the quasi-official literature magazine *Wort in der Zeit* published Bayer and Rühm's "Experimente;" the editor Gerhard Fritsch was strongly criticized and subsequently left his post) (Doppler 223).

Disapproving opinions by official monitors were, of course, published in readily available Viennese newspapers and monthlies. On several occasions, benefactors inclined to support publication of *Wiener Gruppe* literature were not able to sustain production for longer periods because their magazines were read mostly by a small number of insiders and thus did not produce enough revenue.³⁹ The cultural climate was not, as I have shown, inclined toward experimental authors in the postwar years; quite to the contrary, the country craved stability, peace, and above all shelter from disruptions of any kind, especially from the art world. The *Wiener Gruppe* authors presented a considerable threat to the generally accepted understanding of literature,

³⁹ Rühm notes: "wir hatten in münchen kontakt mit den herausgebern der zeitschrift *note* [...] aufgenommen. für die nummer 5 war eine documentation der "wiener gruppe" geplant, aber mit der nummer 4 ging die zeitschrift ein (in munich we had contact to the editors of the magazine *note* [...]. they planned a documentation about the „wiener gruppe“ for their number 5, but after number 4 the journal folded)" (Rühm *Die Wiener Gruppe* 33).

and particularly of poetry; poems consisting of fragments, sometimes only of letters not only subverted traditional notions of lyricism, but completely rejected traditional ideas of subject and object. The general public could not tolerate these challenges. The abstract, concrete, and acoustic poetry in the 1950s and early sixties did not serve “the needs of the Austrian state in helping to create an Austrian identity within the context of a shared and mutually celebrated landscape” (Bushell 147). They took the challenge to traditional literary forms further as was tolerable.

Nevertheless, the authors continued to write, supporting and encouraging, influencing and inspiring each other privately. Small quantities of their works were, after all, being published – mostly via private printing at the expense of the authors or their patrons – and distributed to a select audience of like-minded friends and supporters. They were driven by a determined search for a history of the unusual and non-conformist, the innovative and the outrageously bold, of anything that had not been recognized by literary critics and the academic establishment as a part of the accepted literary canon. They yearned for an anti-canonical literary heritage that would serve as an antidote to the mostly staid, unimaginative, tradition-bound, and state-sanctioned literature available in libraries, bookstores, and at educational institutions.

In its more abstract form their work presented material which offered nothing that state could employ or endorse to bolster its own identity. Indeed, the decoding inherent in much abstract poetry could awaken amongst those readers prepared to read such material an alienation from, and mistrust of, the very language in which the state presented itself to its citizens, for the state, just like the language used in the poetry of the *Wiener Gruppe*, could now be thought of

not so much as a given and immutable fact but merely a construction if only the reader would learn to break with socially conditioned ways of perceiving (Bushell 147-148).

Yet despite all their efforts, the *Wiener Gruppe* authors found little response in the established cultural and social circles of Vienna. Their works remained largely unknown until the late sixties. It was as much the negative attitude of the general public, the inability to publish widely and profitably, as it was the waning interest on the part of some individual members that led to the end of intense collaboration in the early 1960s. In 1964 Rühm left Vienna to continue work in the more stimulating atmosphere of West Berlin, where opportunities for publication were abundant and the writing life was more lucrative. At the same time, Bayer retired to Lower Austria to work on his novel *der sechste sinn* (the sixth sense), but committed suicide later in the year. Achleitner went back to practicing architecture in Vienna, where he wrote the foremost and still unsurpassed multi-volume history of Austrian architecture. Wiener, for his part, embarked on a successful career with the thriving type-writer and computer company Olivetti, where he was able to pursue his growing interest in cybernetics and computers.

Experimental Film in Postwar Austria

Kurt Kren and Peter Kubelka are regarded as the first and still most important practitioners of experimental film techniques in Austria in the twentieth century. Kren was born in Vienna in 1929 to a Jewish father and an Austrian mother, and he died there

in 1998. During the Second World War he lived in Rotterdam, having been sent there on one of the “Kindertransporte” (children’s transports to locations relatively safe from war action). Finally in 1947 he returned to Vienna where his father had procured a job at the National Bank for him. In the early 1950s he started becoming interested in film, creating short experimental films on 8mm film, several years later he switched to 16mm film with serial montage techniques.

The systems of Kren’s early films were largely built on interchanging shots of relatively short duration, frequently a range of one to twenty-four frames, various fractions of a second. Sometimes the changes are linear and, even more frequently, they involve acceleration or deceleration of the rate of change, creating waves of interaction between shots (Le Grice *Abstract Film* 102).

Kurt Kren numbered his films rather than archiving them by name. His official filmography starts with *1/57 Test Versuch mit synthetischem Ton*, his first completed 16mm film in 1957. At this point Kren had already acquired several years of filming experience. Two more of his very early films had been discovered and restored in the mid-1990s, *Das Walk* and *Klaviersalon 1. Stock. Klavier Salon 1. Stock* is only a scant minute long, *Das Walk* lasts about eight minutes, both are shot on 8mm film.

During the early 1950s Kren was a member of the *Klub der Kinomateure* (club of cinematographers), but his day time occupation was as a bank employee at the Vienna National Bank. After the public uproar about the “Kunst und Revolution” action with the Wiener Actionists which took place at the University of Vienna, Kren had to leave the bank in 1968. He spent several years in West Germany and then emigrated to the

United States. During that time and due to his frequent moves much of his early work had been lost. It is known that in the mid-1950s Kren filmed the accidents and crashes of the racers of a ski race of bank employees, and inter-spliced them with images of fireworks. This montage has vanished. In his early works the inter-splicing of filmed photographs becomes prominent, especially in his 2/60⁴⁰ *48 Köpfe aus dem Szondi-Test* (2/60 48 heads from the Szondi-Test) and 4/61 *Mauern-positiv-negativ und Weg*, and appears again and again sporadically in other films throughout his oeuvre as well (Scheugl 21-22).

Rather than as pioneering experimental filmmaker, Kren is generally better known for his collaboration with the Vienna Actionists. In the 1960s Kren met Otto Muehl and Günter Brus, members of the *Wiener Aktionisten Gruppe* (Vienna Material Action Group) and started recording their actions. He is often considered to be a documentary filmmaker for filming these private actions, but even films of action scenes were either shot right away according to mathematical structures or edited later to fit precise mathematical arrangements like scores which he prepared first on paper and then cut the film accordingly. Their collaboration lasted until the end of the 1960s. The culmination and the most widely known event purportedly filmed by Kren took place at the main lecture hall and largest auditorium at the University of Vienna on 7 June 1968. The performance was called “Kunst und Revolution,” a collaborative event with Otto

⁴⁰ Kren numbered all his productions beginning in 1957, with the number of the film and the year.

Muehl, Oswald Wiener, Peter Weibel, Ernst Schmidt Jr., Günter Brus, and other artists involved in the actionist movement in Vienna at the time.⁴¹ The event was broken up by Viennese police. Subsequently, the happening caused such outrage and media frenzy in the Viennese press that Kurt Kren lost his job at the bank, although he had not been involved with the filming or the actions (Barber 67). With this event as catalyst and because of his future collaborations with the actionists, especially close with Otto Muehl, he had acquired a reputation as an Actionist documenter, and is considered by some critics as an “underground” filmmaker (Scheufl 7-8). But he is also renowned as an experimental cinema icon that had devoted his life stubbornly to filmmaking. He spent many years in Germany and the USA living in relative poverty, sometimes giving lectures at universities and film schools. From 1983 until 1989 he worked as a security guard at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas. In late 1989 he returned to Vienna during a time of renewed interest in the postwar avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s. He

⁴¹ “Paradigmatisch ist die Veranstaltung ‘Kunst & Revolution’ 1968 an der Universität Wien. Wurde vom Veranstalter, dem SÖS (Sozialistischen Österreichischen Studentenbund), eine politische Diskussion nach dem Vorbild der deutschen Studentenbewegung erwartet, boten die *Wiener Gruppe* (sic, neither Achleitner, Artmann, Bayer, nor Rühm participated) und die Aktionisten eine Aufführung, die jeder Didaktik, und sei es einer revolutionären, spottete. Während Wiener im Hintergrund einen kaum hörbaren Vortrag hielt, wurden vorne auf dem Podium Körper zum Einsatz gebracht: So urinierte Günter Brus nackt auf der Bühne und defäkierte, während er die Bundeshymne sang. Otto Muehl und eine Gruppe von Aktionisten, ebenfalls nackt, imitierten das Onanieren. Brus, Muehl und Wiener wurden in der Folge angeklagt, Brus wurde zu fünf Monaten Arrest mit Strafverschärfung verurteilt und entzog sich der Haft durch die Ausreise nach Berlin“ (The event ‘Art & Revolution’ held in 1968 at the University of Vienna is paradigmatic for Actionist events. The host, Austrian Socialist Students Association, had expected a political discussion akin to the German student movement, but the *Wiener Gruppe* (sic) and the Actionists offered an event that had nothing to do with political didactic. While Wiener held a barely audible speech in the background, the others performed in front. Günter Brus urinated and defecated naked while singing the national anthem. Otto Muehl and a group of Actionists masturbated naked. Brus, Muehl, and Wiener were charged and sentenced, Brus was sentenced to five months in prison but left the country for Germany to escape his arrest” (Innerhofer 144).

is also a co-founder of the *Vienna Institute of Direct Art* and the *Austrian Filmmakers Cooperative*. Both institutions have been and still are instrumental in the preservation and continuation of avant-garde film in Austria.

Kren was concerned with systems and processes long before their centrality in the 1970s. A.L. Rees describes Kren's work as involving both "chance and order" ("Kurt Kren" 255). For Le Grice, Kren's work embraces process and an existential attitude, by which he means that Kren's work also depicts subjective responses to his experience of the world. Peter Kubelka is known best for his thirteen minutes socio-politically critical experimental film *Unsere Afrikareise* from 1966. As most of his films, this was also a commission. Several wealthy Austrian business men wanted Kubelka to make a documentary of their hunting trip to the Sudan. The ensuing film is a complex, non-narrative, atemporal, "dystopian ethnography", which, as was the case with all of his other commissions, did not please its sponsors (C. Russell 3). Kubelka considers himself the first truly "independent" filmmaker, in the sense that in none of his commission film did he ever abandon his aesthetic ideas. He defines "independence" as "absolute freedom from producer control, whether the producer is a corporation, an individual, or the state" (Bodien 54).

Born in 1934 in Taufkirchen, a small village in Upper Austria, he studied film at the Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst in Vienna (University of Music and Performing Arts) from 1952 until 1954, and at the Centro Sperimentale di

Cinematografia in Rome (Center for Experimental Cinema) from 1954 until 1956. During these years, Kubelka made the acquaintance with Artmann, Bayer, Achleitner, the filmmaker Ferry Radax, and the painter Arnulf Rainer for whom he was to make a film of his paintings. In the 1954 Kubelka made his first experimental film *Mosaik im Vertrauen* (Mosaic in Trust) in which Bayer was one of the protagonists. Kubelka pioneered much of the field for modern avant-garde cinema with his early experimental films *Adebar* (the name of a bar in Vienna; 1957) and *Schwechater* (an Austrian beer company; 1958)" (qtd. in Sitney 2000, 326-348, 328). *Adebar* and *Schwechater* are "similar in that both are compressed graphic film poems, based on the editing of a complex rhythm of very short sequences of live action film, often the interchange of only single frames" (Le Grice *Abstract Film* 95). In 1960 he worked on *Arnulf Rainer*, his structurally and visually most challenging film.

In 1964 he founded the *Austrian Film Museum* with Peter Konlechner and was its curator for several decades. The *Austrian Film Museum* is one of the most important and largest archives Austrian film history. As early as 1967 Kubelka and Konlechner started to collect films, writings, photographs, posters and other documentation relating to the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov.

During the late 1960s and 1970s Kubelka traveled and lectured in the United States, and co-established, with Stan Brakhage, Jerome Hill, Jonas Mekas, and P. Adams Sitney, the *Anthology Film Archives* in New York, which opened its doors in 1970 with the

“Invisible Cinema” designed by Kubelka. The “Invisible Cinema” is a room in which the seats are separated so that the spectators are isolated from each other in order to eliminate noise and distraction to allow focusing on the screen without being interrupted. In its original conception, the *Anthology Film Archives* was to show a selection of films which would screen continuously. Today, *Anthology* is the main film museum in the US dedicated to filmmakers on the margins, containing the world’s largest collection of books, periodicals, stills, and other materials related to avant-garde cinema. In the mid-sixties Kubelka became interested in cooking which he integrated into his art. In 1974, back in Vienna, he started to study music and in 1980s founded the music ensemble “Spatium Musicum” with which he performed his “Nonverbal Lectures.”

In 1978 he was appointed to a professorship at the Städelschule für Bildende Kunst in Frankfurt (Art Academy Städelschule). He included his theoretical work in cooking into his teaching appointment at the Art Academy, and his teaching extended to include courses dealing with film and cooking as an art discipline. From 1980 until 1990 Kubelka taught as a professor, and from 1985-1988 he was dean of the school. In 1980 he received the *Grosser österreichischer Staatspreis* (Grand Austrian State Prize) and in 2005 the *Ehrenzeichen der Republik Österreich* (Honorary Medal of the Republic Austria).

Instead of using elements of plot, character, and locations viewers usually recognize, Austrian experimental filmmakers uncompromisingly disappoint viewers

with their non-narrative, non-meaning-making works. For these artists the films are not about form but focused on the movement of the material itself. In their films emphasis is placed on making visible the relationship between the positions of moving shapes, and directing the viewers to pay attention on shape, motion, rhythm, black and white relation, and color. The cinematographers hoped to disturb the comfort zone of viewers, consisting of the belief in “rationality and explicability of individual personalities” are found in the story of the film, and provide fulfilment of expectations by staying true to conventions (MacDonald 3).

Logistically, the generation of experimental filmmakers in the 1950s struggled to find studios, equipment, and supplies. Peter Kubelka, remembers the conditions:

The outward pressure was that there was absolutely no money and no possibility of working with any technical help. I could only buy a piece of negative, develop it, and then, maybe make some prints. I had no editing table, no projector. It was made in 35mm because there was no 16mm in those days. So I was forced to make the film with my hands, without having an editing table. This outward difficulty brought me into contact with the material which then led to whole new development [...] (qtd. in Sitney *Visionary Film* 145).

Nevertheless, in Europe Vienna was a very active center for experimentation in cinema, several filmmakers, in addition to Kren and Kubelka, other experimental cinematographers such as Marc Adrian and Ferry Radax were both formally innovative and at times political radical (see Dwoskin; Curtis; Rees *A History of Experimental Film*). Kren’s collaboration with Adrian, for example, resulted in *Black Movie* dating from 1957. With this film the filmmakers realized a new approach to cinematography. *Black Movie*

consists of sequences of monochrome color frames, the length and sequence of which were determined according to mathematically calculated rules. These filmmakers, especially Kren and Kubelka, are considered the first practitioners of avant-garde cinema in Austria (Le Grice *Abstract Film* 95).

Outlook: From the Margins to the Center

Though the impact of *Wiener Gruppe* works on official Austrian culture was minimal in the 1950s and 1960s, the same cannot be said of its influence on large number of writers who emerged during those years in Vienna and the provinces. The poets, artists, and musicians who gathered, for example, around the *Forum Stadt-Park Arts Centre*, established in 1960 in Graz, openly acknowledge their debt to the pioneering efforts of the *Wiener Gruppe*. Peter Handke's early work in particular, shows how quickly the techniques and principles first developed by the group members were assimilated by other artists around the country. In Vienna itself *Wiener Gruppe* activities naturally attracted all artists who shared the group's refusal to conform to accepted literary and social conventions (Rorrison 252ff).

In later years, this fringe recognition sometimes evolved into more mainstream success. In the 1970s and 1980s several of the *Wiener Gruppe* authors succeeded in reaching a wider audience and establishing themselves on the cultural landscape; some of them were even appointed professors at Austrian and German universities, for

example Gerhard Rühm at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg (University of Fine Arts in Hamburg) and Friedrich Achleitner at the Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien (Vienna Academy of Fine Arts). Starting in the 1970s, the awarding of literary and state prizes served – and continues to serve – as an official sign of this newfound recognition. Notable honors include, among many others, the extremely reputed *Großer Österreichischer Staatspreis für Literatur* to Artmann in 1974 and Rühm in 1991, and the coveted *Georg Büchner-Preis* awarded to Artmann in 1997.

A visible record of the *Wiener Gruppe's* improved reputation, wider acceptance, and greater self-confidence can also be found in the protest, at the beginning of the 1970s, against the still highly conservative and narrow-minded collective of the PEN Club. The Austrian chapter of the PEN Club had encouraged conservative literature written under the umbrella of occidental traditions for more than two decades after the War, provoking opposition from independent movements that saw the PEN as the club of the establishment. The opposition included a new generation of artists working and writing in experimental and sometimes confrontational and provocative styles as well as the more established postwar avant-garde writers like former *Wiener Gruppe* authors Achleitner, Rühm, Wiener, and radical actionists and performance artists rooted in the “Studentenbewegung” (student movement) of the late sixties. In 1972, poet Ernst Jandl penned a statement – the “Grazer Erklärung” (Declaration of Graz) – demanding a re-organization of the Austrian PEN Club; the statement was addressed to the international

PEN Club and signed by a number of supporters, including former *Wiener Gruppe* authors. Jandl considered the PEN Club in its current make-up a disgrace to the international PEN and to Austrian literature in general: “ich bezeichne den sogenannten österreichischen pen-klub in seiner gegenwärtigen zusammensetzung als eine schande für den internationale pen-klub und als eine schande für österreich“ (i call the so-called austrian pen-club in its present configuration a disgrace for the international pen-club as well as for austria)” (www.gav.at).

Following the 1973 election of Ernst Schönewiese as president of the Austrian PEN (Schönewiese succeeded Lernet-Holenia, who had resigned in protest against the awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to Heinrich Böll), a re-organization was not pursued further by the supporters of the *Grazer Erklärung*. Instead, the *Grazer Autorenversammlung* (GAV, Authors Collective of Graz) was founded in 1973 as an antipole to the reactionary PEN.⁴² Artmann (1973-1978), Rühm (1978- 1983), and Jandl (1983-1987) served as the first three presidents of the organization. Today, GAV is the largest author’s association in Austria regularly promoting young and up-coming authors, hosting literary events, and giving literary workshops.

⁴² Among the founding members of the GAV were H. C. Artmann, Wolfgang Bauer, Otto Breicha, Valie Export, Barbara Frischmuth, Peter Handke, Ernst Jandl, G.F. Jonke, Alfred Kolleritsch, Friederike Mayröcker, Gerhard Rühm, and Michael Scharang. See also Thomas Roth “Österreichische Literatur“ 684ff.

Chapter Two: Content and Form

When we read a piece of literature, the text is the basis of our engagement with the work. The *Concise Oxford American Dictionary* defines “text” as a “book or other written or printed work, regarded in terms of its content rather than its physical form; [...] a subject or theme for discussion or exposition” (940). This definition is helpful because it refers to two components of the text: content and form. Although form is mentioned as a quality of the text, it is not considered one of its defining features. Quite to the contrary, the definition states that the text can be detached from the form and indirectly suggests the possibility of that form can be changed without loss of significance or meaning. I demonstrate in the following chapter that this definition is incomplete, and that form does in fact constitute a defining feature of a text. Depending on the nature of the text, form might guide the reader in his or her interpretation of the text or even carry most or all of the information accessible to the reader for deriving meaning. Form – and, by extension, visuality – are particularly important concepts in experimental literature.

To lay a foundation for my examination of experimental texts in this dissertation, I provide a broader perspective on the material that constitutes the basis of my discussion of the texts and discuss the methods through which I approach the experimental works. This chapter engages first theoretically with the author – text –

reader constellation, it then considers Austria's twentieth century heritage of history of language criticism to which the *Wiener Gruppe* texts respond. The following section elucidates the semiological approach and theories this chapter relies on. Next, I elaborate on experimental tests and their constitutive elements language and textuality, materiality and visuality, and the performativity of the texts supporting my arguments with representative textual examples. In conclusion, I engage with *Wiener Gruppe* authors as performative writers and give a brief outlook to Chapter Three.

Text and the Role of Author and Reader

[...] a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.
(Roland Barthes)¹

The Text

A text consists of several elements, the most fundamental of which is letters which are formed into words, which might be separated by punctuation or spacing. The

¹ "Death of the Author" 148.

next larger unit of the text is the sentence, which consists of words used as individual building blocks. In traditional texts, words are arranged in sentences according to the rules of syntax in order to communicate information. Within the sentence, words are not independent, isolated entities; the linguistic context surrounding a word, also called the co-text – “[t]he co-text of a word is the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence,” writes philosopher of language George Yule (98-99) – has a strong effect on what we think the word means.

Instead of narrative structures literary critics are now faced with the materiality, parts, montages, constellations, constructions, lists and quantities, processes, redundancy, tautology, and ultimately entropy. Stock must be taken of the linguistic inventory and its meaning rather than metaphorical concepts. Metaphorics no longer apply, the meaning no longer lies in metaphoric constellations but rather in the material itself. Literary scholar Monika Schmitz-Emans provides a cogent example which I am slightly amending to fit the English use of language. She explains that the word “sheet” – in her German text she uses the term “Blatt”(leaf) – for instance, elicits the belief in a common substance, a common property of all possible “sheets,” although different kinds of sheets are in no way identical to each other, nor do they all consist of the same substance. Sheets of paper are vastly different from sheets made of fabric used for covering the body or furniture, which are again very different from sheets of metal used to cover a roof, for example. These products, consisting of cellulose, some soft textile, or

metal, exhibit on a material, physical basis differing substances (31). Of course, this does not prevent literary metaphoric interpretation, yet, it is an incomplete analysis. An unbalanced view emerges when material components are left out of the interpretive process and the understanding and conclusions will necessarily be lacking, faulty, deficient.

Presented with a poem, for instance, the reader would expect to find nouns, verbs, adjectives, and other grammatical particles, sentences or sentence fragments, stylistic markers such as a title, or several verses, rhyme, alliteration, enjambments, all of them offering the underlying structure upon which we can then evaluate what the words express. In other words, because the frame of the text is set, the reader's interpretation of it can take place focusing solely on the content; the visual structure takes a secondary rank. Such foreseeable layout also presents inherent rules for the reader who engages with a poem, a novel, a drama, and any other traditional form of writing. Written discourse privileges those who are familiar with its rules and peculiarities and encourages interpretation by readers. In fact, a reader is always already in pursuit of meaning, which for the reader "involves an activity of ceaseless metaphoric production" (McGann *Textual Condition* 6). Interpretation by way of recognizing and constructing meaning with metaphors, through metaphors relies on recognizable content, that is, words and sentences that "make sense." Meaning, which lies in a particular juxtaposition of words is appropriated by the readership, and the text entails

more than the author intended. Experimental literature, on the other hand, breaks with all traditional forms, overcomes genre boundaries, is self-reflexive and self-referential, non-narrative, symbol-based, repetitive, and visual as well as textual, with the visual component often overshadowing linguistic content. This is particularly evident, for example, in concrete poetry, a section within the category experimental literature, where form is the overriding feature, and words are used as material to create visual or aesthetic effects, often at the expense of meaningful content. Prominent early twentieth century examples for writers who created concrete and image poetry are Guillaume Apollinaire, the Dadaists Hans Arp and Kurt Schwitters, and Eugen Gomringer who coined the term in 1953 as an analogy to concrete (that is, abstract) art. The term “concrete poetry” refers specifically to a type of poetry that impresses by its playful and direct visual expression of its content. The term is generally attributed to the best known representative of concrete poetry, the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer. In an interview printed in the online version of the *Nürnberger Zeitung* on the occasion of his 85th birthday Gomringer describes concrete poetry as pure expression of simplicity. He recalls the time when he first encountered concrete poems. He remembers being “erschlagen von der schönen Einfachheit der Kunst,” overwhelmed by the beautiful simplicity of artworks which no longer need to refer to something outside but remain peacefully within themselves (Ruf).

In traditional literature a syntactically accurate structure is a necessary, although

not sufficient condition to allow the extraction of meaning. For example, if the conceptual meanings of the individual constituent parts, words, in a sentence do not meld into one, the entire structure does not bear meaning. The structure is then considered “semantically odd,” in other words, it does not make sense (Yule 92-93). Experimental literature does not need syntactically correct statements; in fact, experimental texts can work only when in a fragmentary state. This is illustrated by the following example from Artmann: “ich pflege mich weihnachts und osterns ausschliesslich mit der einzig und original (I tend to groom myself at Christmas and Easter with the only and original)” (105). Each single element of this string of words, when considered independently of the rest of the sentence, has conceptual meaning, which is the basic, essential component of meaning which is conveyed by the literal use of a word in isolation. However, in the above string of words the co-text is incomplete and the linked up words are unable to elucidate meaning of the entire linguistic structure. Because the words do not relate to each other in a semantically logical way, the entire construction is “odd.” What the above text needs to become “normal” is an indirect object. What is this unique thing the person uses to groom him or herself only at Christmas and Easter? The string of words is not a full sentence that a reader can effortlessly understand and interpret. Artmann’s sentence fragment turns the attention onto itself rather than giving off meaning to the outside. A performance from the reader is required, where the reader inserts him or herself into the text, works with the text and

completes the sentence; perhaps filling in the missing parts to make the entire construction say: ich pflege mich weihnachts und osterns ausschliesslich mit der einzig und original wohlriechenden nivea hautcrème (I tend to groom myself at Christmas and Easter with the only and original pleasant-smelling nivea skin cream). In adding three words I have not only created meaning, I have also created a purposeful statement – an advertisement for Nivea skin cream. I have made this text mine. I have invented and appropriated its function. I have also made it a “readerly” statement, because now it contains all the information necessary to be understood by others. With my semantically correct statement I am conveying to the world the fact that I prefer to use a particular brand of skin care products at Christmas and at Easter.

Experimental works necessitate that reading and comprehending practices must shift away from a context-based approach focused on deciphering the text through metaphorical engagement. They demand that attention to their material substance, visual appearance, and performative nature in order that the reader may arrive at meaning from his or her point of view. Leaving the sentence without an addendum keeps it open and available for the next reader to engage performatively with it.

Readers always want to know the the provenance of a text. From whence does it come? A work does not just appear out of nowhere, it reaches the reader when its author has released it. Every document has an author (from Latin *auctor*, from *augere* ‘increase, originate, promote’ [...])” (*Concise Oxford American Dictionary* 53), someone who put pen

to paper. By extension, it seems reasonable to assume that an author invents and creates a text which is then received by a reader, and that information flows from the author to the reader via the medium of the text. However, this concept has been challenged and proven to be overly simplistic by modern linguistic analysis. I will introduce theoretical concepts in the following to be able to investigate in how far these bear relevance for an analysis of Austrian postwar avant-garde literature.

“What Is an Author?”

In his essay, “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault, perpetually suspicious of hegemonic interference and pre-determination, argues that the author is not a source of infinite meaning, as we often like to imagine, but rather a part of a larger hegemonic system or system of beliefs that serves to limit and restrict meaning. Appealing to “authorial intention” confines readers to thinking about the text in terms of what the author had in mind when the text was committed to paper. Foucault asks why we are concerned with the idea of authors at all, rather than focused on the discourse as a grouping of texts and ideas. For him, the term “discourse” denotes any coherent body of statements that produces a self-confirming account of reality by defining an object of attention and generating concepts with which to analyze it. For example, the word “body” refers to a different concept in medical discourse, legal discourse, or literary discourse.

Foucault wants to know why we always want to trace ideas and texts back to specific authors. In his examination of this question, he points out and offers corrections to some commonly held assumptions about authorship. He claims that our belief in the concept of authorship as a constant and stable unit is deluding because it is not a natural occurrence, but something that was developed at a particular point in history, under particular circumstances, and by specific individuals, and something that may very well disappear again in the future. Foucault also wonders why western society is inclined to think about authors as omniscient individuals, heroic figures who somehow have stepped out of history and gleaned truths which others do not see, when. Foucault insists that authors are just as much products of their time as everyone else. The idea of the author as "genial creator of a work in which he deposits a world of knowledge and signification" is incorrect: "the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works" ("What Is an Author?" 118-119). The author also does not possess complete power over his or her text, but rather releases the work into the world of readers.

Closely related to the question of the significance of the author is the idea that texts exert some control in choosing their readership. Literary works are determined by several conditions. Where is the work printed and published? Books, magazines, and journals indicate the institutional frame within which the text is arranged. For example, the printed material published by university or commercial presses is always directed at

a readership who has certain expectations of the texts format to follow certain conventional and aesthetic rules. These are stable and formulaic, hence can be relied on, taken for granted, and therefore disappear from view. The rules become “invisible structurations” as Foucault puts it. The poetic rebellion of the *Wiener Gruppe* authors was not only directed against the belief that language can express truth, but also at a language which they perceived as dependent on “invisible structurations” meaning rules, norms, and conventions supplied by state and church. Foucault’s idea of “invisible structurations” entails all the things that we do not recognize because they are too close to home, they are right in front of our eyes, the invisible and insidious processes of behavior codes, cultural norms, inherited thoughts, prejudices, all that is taken for granted, the entire “genealogy of knowledge,” the global network of accumulated thoughts that have been established as truths, according to Foucault. Invisible structurations bestow upon a society imperceptible normative, traditional frameworks and inherent expectations. Language is the vehicle through which knowledge is expressed and exchanged. A language that is perceived as broken and corrupted cannot but convey knowledge that is erroneous and can be used to deceive.

Stable narrative forms, the most common are novels, poetry, dramas, short stories, and novellas, and their respective formulaic arrangements, fulfill the need for predictability and allow the reader to focus on the development of the story, on what is being said in the text, and on the relationships between individual characters and the

world around them. While the traditional form is certainly not simply a prepared grid into which facts and stories are inserted, it does present the written body as a closed entity bound to conventions that raise expectations in the reader. Realistic literature echoes the author's view of the world and leads the reader to accept this view by creating plausibility of the presented information. In contrast, experimental works leave the reader to ponder, investigate, construct meaning, and lead to an unaided understanding of what the work means.

fastfastfastfastfastfastfastfastfastfastfastfastfastfastfastfast

(Friedrich Achleitner *die wiener gruppe* 93)

An experimental text, such as the one on the preceding page stops a reader in the tracks. The question, what am I to do with this, immediately arises. It is a repetitious line of letters in the middle of an otherwise empty page, indented to the right margin. Looking closer, it becomes clear that it is a string of words, or rather, a string of the same word over and over, fifteen times. But when concentrating further, we can identify two words, "fast" (almost) and "ast" (branch). Asking what the author intended with this work is not helpful. If we inquire into his life circumstances, we find out that he was an architect who turned to experimental writing and created a number of texts in a similar vein. Looking at the socio-historical context brings us a step closer to categorizing the work as an experiment from a time when a group of writers challenged their contemporaries' understanding of literature. Knowing the genealogy of the text is not that helpful. This work leaves the reader space to focus only on what is on the page, and invites interpretation according to individual view points. My immediate reaction to the text is deciphering the discrete letters and making sense of them, that is, making out the words "fast" and "ast." Now that I have words, I want to put those into some context. The position of the string of "fast" on the page points to the idea that the line on the page almost reaches the left margin. I can also identify the word "ast" in between the letter "f" which to me represents a visual image of a branch in the shape of an "f." In this case, the string of words has linguistic as well as pictorial characteristics, the word "ast" is interspaced with a representation of a branch.

"The Death of the Author"

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.

(Roland Barthes)²

In 1973, Roland Barthes presented a fiery and poetic defense of experimental literature, upholding it as the only kind of literature that offers the reader the joys of co-authorship, with his booklet *The Pleasure of the Text*. He expresses his conviction that the only text that affords, in Barthes' words, true "jouissance," a state of bliss and ecstasy through reading and understanding, is a "writerly" text. Happiness and bliss are experienced precisely through the very difficulty in unraveling the text which causes excitement through the hope of understanding and making sense. The reader's creative response to the "writerly" text is what transforms the reader from a passive consumer into a protagonist (*Literary Theory and Criticism* 267-272). The *Wiener Gruppe* authors constructed texts that are wide open and invite the reader to be surprised by his or her discoveries in the text. One mechanism of surprise is the embedding of words in an unusual or "wrong" context, a technique that creates complex phrases that may not have semantic meaning. When readers encounter such apparently incoherent text, little if any assistance is provided by the experimental ("writerly") text itself in making meaning,

² "Death of the Author" 148.

leaving the readers to hunt for it on their own and be surprised by what they find.

Referring to the experimental *Wiener Gruppe* texts, historian Alfred Doppler explains what happens when a reader experiences the surprise inherent in unconventional literature: “Der Leser stößt zu seiner Überraschung auf verdeckte Sinnbezüge, [...] (the reader encounters to his or her surprise hidden meaning, [...])” (Doppler 227).

Sentences can be perfectly designed in terms of grammatical and syntactical correctness, yet still fail to convey a message. The anacoluthon “Um zwölf Uhr ist es Sommer, manchmal auch Dezember (at twelve o’clock it is summer, sometimes also December)” (uzu 87)³ comprises all particles needed to satisfy the rules of grammar and syntax are present. There is a subject “es” (it), there is a verb “ist” (is) which is conjugated correctly, there is a direct object “Sommer” (summer); and there is a specific time when something occurs: “um zwölf Uhr” (at twelve o’clock). Further, there is supplementary information intended to enrich the content: “manchmal auch Dezember” (sometimes even December). The sentence *in toto* fulfills all the necessary semantic prerequisites for communicating information. And yet, despite all the data it provides, the sentence does not mean anything, it does not contain an intelligible message, because the individual grammatical elements do not fulfill the expectations of the reader. As reader of the western hemisphere one would, after all, connect the signifier “summer” to the idea of a time of year lasting from June to September, marked by several

³ Gerhard Rühm *um zwölf uhr ist es sommer*.
In the following abbreviated as uzu and the page number.

distinguishing features, such as warm weather, long days and short nights, and plenty of sunshine. This particular meaning of summer clearly clashes with the idea of the month December which is associated with snow, cold weather, short days, long nights, and so on. Furthermore, neither “summer” nor “December” refers to a specific time of day (i.e. “noon”), and reading that sometimes December is also at noon only heightens the reader’s anxiety. Instead of reading the letters and words and focusing on making meaning of the individual elements, readers of this statement must focus on the words themselves and thereby engage with the very idea of something as “natural” as language. Because the elements do not stand in comprehensible relation to each other, the composition offers no direct link to the world and thereby defies understanding, either visually or intellectually.

Clearly, compliance with proscribed grammar rules does not assure transfer of meaningful information. Gerhard Rühm’s poem follows semantic rules but nonetheless causes confusion in the reader. Confusion and bewilderment allow readers to reassess their expectations and open up the conventional boundaries of communication, which endorse an understanding of language as a natural entity. There is nothing natural or innate about any language. Languages are artificial constructs with which all individuals within a community are familiarized from the very day they are born. The complete immersion makes language seem natural, when in fact, it is a fabricated mass-produced consumer item. And yet the consumer may not do with this item as he or she pleases

because the right to usage comes with a large set of rules, which are not apparent until they are broken. Gerhard Rühm aims at exactly the point with his rule abiding and yet nonetheless incoherent poem. His poem undermines the implicit reliance on language rules and becomes footloose.

The poem falls squarely into the category of text that Barthes calls “writerly” because it presents contradictions, and leaves itself wide open for the reader to discover not only the frailties of language but also to make the text his or her own and produce individual meaning. By contrast, the “readerly” text is a text that makes no demands on the reader to “write” or “produce” his or her own meaning. The reader of a “readerly” text may passively locate “ready-made” meaning. Barthes writes that these kinds of texts are “controlled by the principle of non-contradiction” (*S/Z* 156) – that is, they do not disturb the “common sense,” or “doxa” of the surrounding culture.⁴ “Readerly” texts, moreover, “are products [that] make up the enormous mass of literature” (*S/Z* 5). Within this broad category, there is a spectrum of “replete literature” which comprises “any classic (readerly) text” that works “like a cupboard where meanings are shelved, stacked, [and] safeguarded” (*S/Z* 200).

Until about the 1960s, a literary text was thought to be transparent, that is, to have a seemingly unitary meaning, immediately accessible to the reader, consisting of the unique expression of the writer’s singular genius. The reader’s role vis-à-vis the

⁴ For, as Barthes writes “each jargon (each fiction) fights for hegemony; if power is on its side, it spreads everywhere in the general and daily occurrences of social life, it becomes *doxa*, nature [...]” (*Pleasure of the Text* 28).

“readerly” text is that of an impotent, inert consumer of the author’s product. Barthes’ ideas, by contrast, make room for the reader and account for the differences within works, whether they are realist or experimental.

While Barthes is interested in uncovering the text’s machinery and independence from its author, Michel Foucault focuses on the power texts have in society. Foucault asserts that “systems of exclusion” in society serve to control and delimit discourse. The systems are invisible and society unaware “of the prodigious machinery of the will to truth, with its vocation of exclusion.”⁵ According to Foucault, authors’ intentions interfere minimally with meaning-making because it is left to the reader and the text to reach an understanding. Barthes, not unlike Foucault, perceives language as a hegemonic device in which we are all implicated.

For Barthes, pure and pleasurable language exists only in literature that is freed of all hegemony, defies discursive categorization, and has no socio-linguistic relation to its environment. His comments about a language that stands outside conventional language are directed specifically at experimental literature, which, Barthes claims, is the only kind of literature not entangled in the hegemonic system: “How can a text, which consists of language, be outside languages? [...] How can the text “get itself out” of the

⁵ Some structures, according to the theorist, are the rules of disciplines, morality, and prohibitions. In literature it is the “author function.” “Now, we demand of all those narratives, poems, dramas and comedies which circulated relatively anonymously throughout the Middle Ages, whence they come, and we virtually insist they tell us who wrote them. We ask authors to answer for the unity of the works published in their names, we ask that they reveal, or at least display the hidden sense pervading their work; we ask them to reveal their personal lives, to account for their experiences and the real story that gave birth to their writings. The author is he who implants, into the troublesome language of fiction, its unities, its coherence, its links with reality” (“The Discourse on Language” 220-222).

war of fictions, [...]?” Barthes explains that the text needs to destroy its place in the hegemony of language, it has to get rid of its institutional voice (scientific, political, historical, etc.), and it has to destroy its own “discursive category,” the genre into which it is categorized (*Pleasure of the Text* 30). The idea of texts set free from all social, cultural, linguistic strictures, and thus unencumbered by hegemonic powers can hardly be realized. Even a truly abstract text contains some degree innate cultural referents; whether impotent or not, there is always an author and there is always a historical context. A text does not come out of nowhere, there is always a genealogy associated with it, and this history of production leaves traces on it. But even if Barthes’ theory remains a chimera, it is experimental literature, if any, which is best able to withdraw, albeit not completely, from being implicated in the process of becoming a referent to its culture, institution, history, and an emissary of its own genealogy. The following example of an experimental text, a text that is reduced to its minimum – one letter and one number – will show that even a reductive text is still implicated in the systems of hegemony.

m1

(Rühm *die wiener gruppe* 487)

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“m1” is the penultimate form of a reductive poem that can be typed; only a poem containing one single letter or number or an empty page would be more reductive and thus leave more room for the reader’s interpretation. Visually the work is calming: the centered letter and number combination surrounded by negative (empty) page space offers radical symmetry which channels the eye into the middle of the page. Because there are no diversions, the reader can focus fully on the visible image that refers to itself, presents itself, it exposes itself in its minimalist form. This work shows, in essence, that the letter and number are self-referential; they do not refer to anything outside themselves, and any conclusions I am about to draw are entirely my own. Because there is nothing to distract from the letter’s and number’s materiality and visuality, they open up a playing field in which I can perform my interpretation of the two marks and blissfully discover meaning.

In the meaning-making process I decode the visual elements first. I recognize the letter “m” as the thirteenth letter in the Latin alphabet and the number “1” as the first cipher in the Arabic numbering system. Together as well as individually, they are fuel for an endless number of associations and are representatives for an equal amount of information. I mention just one possibility of association: “m” could be the first initial of a name, and “1” could stand for the amount of “m”s in the name as well as for the place in the word on which the letter is located – for example, the first position in the name “Marianne.” Using this rule, I could contend that the constellation m1 pertains to an

entire sentence fragment which has only one letter “m” in the first position: “marianne, deine kunst in ehren, aber (marianne, i’m honoring your art, but),” which, coincidentally is an early composition by Rühm (*geschlechterdings* 34). I am not suggesting that Rühm intended this connection to be made; in fact, it is irrelevant. What is important is the circumstance that I am familiar with Rühm’s work and thus in a position to link “m1” to “marianne” without approval from the author. To me, “m1” has become a referent in the genealogy of Gerhard Rühm’s oeuvre and, by extension, has taken its place in the history of experimental literature.

I want to ponder another interpretative alternative. “m1” could also be a code or a part of some formula in a scientific language. But because I am not versed in mathematics, chemistry, physics or any other language used in the natural sciences, I do not recognize “m1” as a part of scientific language. Because I cannot identify the discourse of which it is a part, I cannot see the ciphers as referring to any genealogy and discourse in the natural sciences. As my one very personal and specific interpretation shows, this text leaves its reader to play and create meaning without directing him or her towards any path following any established discourse.

These interpretations are not the only possible ones. But what is important in this exposition is not the final result – the conclusions I draw – but the performance of getting to that conclusion. The visual text does not give the meaning, I create it, and in doing so I become the author of meaning. I perform an action, speaking in performance

art terms, I become the artwork. As in any performative work, the end result, the artifact is not of consequence, it is the performance itself, the ethereal, fleeting moment of recognition and transformation of thought-processes. This may seem an esoteric remark at this point in the dissertation, but the concepts of performance and performative experimental literature will be elucidated in detail in the section “Elements of Experimental Literature 3: Performativity.”

One must also consider the poem at the level of its content. For yes, the poem does have content: the combination of the two ciphers can be interpreted as a critical remark on the language system used by western society, the Latin alphabet and the Arabic numbering system. Why is there no consistency in the use of systems in the western world? And why is Asia the only part of the world that does not use this system? Does the negative space on the page represent the absence of any writing system as dominant as the western one? What kind of commentary does this text deliver? To explore these questions, I immediately ask myself another one: what did the author intend with this work? Would the author approve of my interpretation of his text?

This is precisely the question Barthes wants to dispel. He writes that it is a ruse to believe that the truth of a work lies always in the author. “The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person,

the author 'confiding' in us" writes Barthes ("Death of the Author" 143). But the author does not and cannot confide in us in experimental literature. For Barthes, the authorial intent is irrelevant and unknowable. The reader's intentions are superior to the author's. The "writerly" text is a text that aspires to the proper goal of literature and criticism: "to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text" (S/Z 4). Which is exactly what just happened in my musings on this work. As reduced as it seems, the "m1" text is as much a "writerly" text as Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine*. "Writerly" texts and ways of reading constitute, in short, an active engagement and not a passive interaction with a culture and its texts.

A culture and its texts, Barthes writes, should never be accepted in their given forms and traditions. Unlike "readerly" texts, which are closed products, "writerly" texts are open and never finite. The "writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages" (S/Z 5). Reading a "writerly" text becomes, for Barthes "not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of writing," but rather a "form of work," a creative act (S/Z 10).

"Author" and "scriptor" are terms Barthes uses to describe different ways of thinking about the creators of texts. Historically, the author was conceived by a traditional concept of the eremitic genius creating a work of literature or other piece of

writing by the powers of his or her original imagination. For Barthes, writing in the 1970s, such a figure is no longer viable. The insights offered by an array of modern thought have rendered the term “author” obsolete. In place of the author, the modern world presents us with a figure Barthes calls “scriptor,” whose only power is to combine pre-existing texts in new ways. Barthes believes that all writing draws on previous texts, norms, and conventions, and that these are the things to which we must turn to understand a text. As a way of asserting the relative unimportance of the writer’s biography compared to these textual and generic conventions, Barthes says that the scriptor has no past, but is born with the text. He also argues that the absence of the idea of an “author-God” to control the meaning of a work opens up considerable interpretive horizons for the active reader. As Barthes puts it, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (*Image, Music, Text* 148).

Reading is the construction of meanings from texts. In order to constitute meaning from written expressions, the reader *must* in some way fill the subject position vacated through the death of the writer, who is also its original speaker. The reader must take on the responsibility of making meaning from a text, however reduced that meaning may be.

Experimental “writerly” texts are difficult to untie. Any reader encountering one has two options: refuse to engage with the text or enter into a creative relationship with it. A text image is an arrangement of signs on a page that do not present a story or any

kind of narrative (such as dots, loops, lines, letters, numbers, or scripts in some undecipherable yet formulaic arrangement). If the reader is curious and intent on finding some meaning, importance, or signification in an experimental text or a text image, if the reader does not give up when confronted with the seemingly meaningless collection of letters and symbols, if he or she reaches the point of engagement the symbols on the page reach a stage of independence, then the symbols on the page reach a stage of independence, and an intense engagement with the experimental work places the reader in the seat of the creator.

From Poetry to Experimental Texts

The definition for experimental literature in *Metzlers Literaturlexikon* alludes to the elusiveness of the term. "Experimental literature" as a specific designation is contested. Its common denominator is the premise that it is literature concerned with finding and practicing new ways of expression, in terms of both structure and content: "Experimentelle Literatur ist eine umstrittene Sammelbezeichnung für literarische Werke, die primär an der Erprobung neuer Aussagemöglichkeiten (formal, inhaltlich) interessiert sind (experimental literature is a contested umbrella term for literary works that are primarily interested in trying out new ways of expression (form, content))" (138). I agree with the principle statement, that experimental works are experiments in

form and content interested in finding and practicing new ways of expression. The works of the *Wiener Gruppe* authors fall into this broad category. I am focusing purely on those postwar experimental visual texts that are radically different from traditional texts. These works appear devoid of meaning and coherent content. The reader will find in them many non-traditional components including made-up fantasy words, non-linguistic elements (images, symbols, drawings), and copious empty space (negative space) on the page. In some cases, completely blank pages are part of the work. The phenomenon of experimental visual poetry is that it is “instantaneous – one feels the impact of the work by *looking at* it before one has *read* it line for line, as with traditional, linear poetry” (Higgins 23). It tends to transcend the language in which it is embodied. This enables it to have impacts which are closed off to linear verse, however valid such work may *also* be. In experimental visual works, heightened focus is placed on the materials used to create the work and the materiality of the entire creation.

A traditional poem is recognized, first of all, because it usually looks like one. Generally, poems are made up of short lines that can be but are not necessarily sentences or sentence fragments, often arranged into stanzas. The margins are usually indented and, on the right side of the page, uneven. The visual arrangement of the lines within a poem affects the overall image of the poem because it emphasizes certain words or syllables and suggests particular rhythms and pauses – that is, the meter. At the beginning of his famed Marburg University lecture on 21 April 1951 the literary critic

and author Gottfried Benn addressed students, professors, and colleagues with an influential talk on problems of lyric poetry, *Probleme der Lyrik*. In his opening remarks, he tells his audience how to recognize a poem:

[...] wenn Sie am Sonntag morgen Ihre Zeitung aufschlagen, und manchmal sogar auch mitten in der Woche, finden Sie in der Beilage meistens rechts oben oder links unten etwas, das durch gesperrten Druck und besondere Umrahmung auffällt, es ist ein Gedicht.

([...] when on Sunday morning, or perhaps even during the week, you open the paper, and you look in the supplement section you will often find, somewhere in the right upper corner or in the lower left-hand corner, something that stands out through its different lettering; this is a poem) (6).

Benn's pithy and of course ironic description of a poem identifies it as a piece of writing that stands out due to its formal appearance, which sets it apart from the surrounding text. It is clear, argued Benn, that poetic works are composed in part with a focus on their visual appearance. The focus of his lecture, however, was the fundamental question of how a poem is created, how it develops and comes into being. Benn influenced debates on poetry for decades by offering one possible answer: "Ein Gedicht entsteht überhaupt sehr selten – ein Gedicht wird gemacht (a poem rarely develops – it is made)" (6). He thereby critiqued the broadly accepted claim that a poem is inspired solely by external factors, being primarily an expression of personal sensations and emotional responses. Benn's assumption hinges on the structured nature of a work, which indicates to him an intentional and calculated construction visible in the organized configuration of a piece. In this sense, traditional poems are visual texts that do not contain images obviously diverge from narrative text.

Experimental literature, on the other hand, breaks with traditional forms and transcends genre boundaries. It is self-reflexive, self-referential, non-narrative, and visual as well as textual, with the visual components often overshadowing linguistic content. Abstract “text images” – for example, concrete poems – challenge the reader to interact with the visible. Referring to the text images of his contemporaries in the 1950s, Eugen Gomringer explains why concrete poems caused confusion and were met with disinterest by the public:

ein immer wieder genannter grund, warum unsere gedichte nicht ankommen, nicht verstanden werden, ist die einfachheit ihrer erscheinung. es steht nicht viel auf dem papier, und das was draufsteht, ist oft eine scheinbar nicht besonders tiefe aussage. man vermisst die metaphor und übersieht, dass ein kleines sprachelement, isoliert betrachtet, ein gar wunderliches und nützlich Ding sein kann. man muss sich nur die mühe geben, es unter verschiedenen aspekten zu betrachten.

(an oft mentioned explanation for why our texts are not popular, are not understood, is the simplicity of their appearance. there is not much on the paper, and that which is on it often appears not to have particularly deep meaning. the metaphors go missing and the fact is overlooked that a little language element, inspected in isolation, is quite a wondrous and useful thing. one must put in the effort to consider it from different perspectives) (35).

This quote is particularly poignant in connection with the “m1” poem discussed above. Making an effort to discover what the little information on the page may mean allows the reader to recognize the value and expressivity of each individual visual element.

Critique of Language: It's Not A Crisis, It's An Experiment!

The *Wiener Gruppe's* textual practices are indebted to a long history local of language wariness and intense investigative efforts to explore the rules and limitations of language. And yet, the writings of Viennese postwar avant-garde authors differ in approach and intention from the early modernist authors, who questioned language as a vehicle to convey meaning, as well as from the historical avant-gardists, who were concerned with political and social aims. The tradition of language doubt and the investigation into language's function and the communicative apparatus find their origins in late nineteenth century scientific writing and blossomed until the First World War.

Language Crisis: "Mir ist die Sprache abhanden gekommen"

Viennese fin-de-siècle authors were gripped by a *Sprachkrise* (language crisis) and concomitant aphasia – "Sprachzusammenbruch" – the breaking down of the ability to understand language and the inability to speak altogether. In the early years of the crisis writers had hoped to find an adequate way of expression somewhere else outside the known linguistic canon. A representative literary work of the fin-de-siècle *Sprachkrise* is Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief" (A Letter), a fictional account of Lord Chandos penned in 1902. In this letter Lord Chandos despondently expresses to Francis Bacon his inability to write anything because all the languages he speaks – German, Latin, English,

Spanish, Italian – fail to express what he wants to say. He hopes to one day find a language that will express exactly what he feels so that he can then convey his innermost thoughts in a pure language, but he doesn't expect this to occur until after his death:

Mein Fall ist, in Kürze, dieser: Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen. Nämlich weil die Sprache, in welcher nicht nur zu schreiben, sondern auch zu denken mir vielleicht gegeben wäre, weder die lateinische noch die englische, noch die italienische oder spanische ist, sondern eine Sprache, in welcher die stummen Dinge zuweilen zu mir sprechen, und in welcher ich vielleicht einst im Grabe vor einem unbekanntem Richter mich verantworten werde.

(My case, in short, is this: I have completely lost the ability to think or speak about anything coherently. This is because of all the languages I am able to write and speak, neither the Latin nor the English, neither the Italian nor the Spanish language are the ones which speak to me, but rather the language in which mute things speak to me, and in which I might have to explain myself in the grave before an unknown judge.)

Hofmannsthal carefully lays out the immediate concern of his time, namely that language has entirely lost its ability to refer to reality, to make-meaning.

Against Language: "ein aufstand gegen die sprache ist ein aufstand gegen die gesellschaft!"

*alles kann dies und jenes heissen.
alles mag auch etwas anderes heissen.*

(anything can mean this or that.
anything may also mean something
else.)

(Konrad Bayer)

Rather than feel bewildered and disheartened by the confusions caused by a fast

changing world, as fin-de-siècle writers were, the Dadaist artists of the 1910s and 1920s insisted that language must be used to offend and outrage bourgeois society.⁶ During the period of political and social disruption (World War One and the 1920s) avant-garde artists tended to accent the political dimension of their art in an attempt to connect individual experience and innovation to a broader social context.⁷

In the 1950s, the awareness of the problematic functionality of language as a means to convey information became prevalent again. Philosophers of language, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gottlob Frege, and Bertrand Russell in England conducted their theoretical investigations into the meaning and function of language during the War and postwar period, but their efforts, when noticed at all, were met by little enthusiasm on the continent, except by a handful of experimental authors. These authors were suspicious of reality as represented in common language, and once their suspicion was roused, recourse to extraordinary experimental models for creation of texts and images seemed necessary. In the postscript to his novel *der stein der weisen* (1963) Konrad Bayer comes to the following conclusion:

alles kann dies und jenes heissen.
alles mag auch etwas anderes heissen.
der apfel zwischen den zähnen ist geschmack.

⁶ In the 2006 special feature edition of the journal *Arcadia*, the authors of the collection of essays draw out regularities in a dispersed movement such as the avant-garde and discuss the concepts and differences of poetics and politics throughout the historical avant-garde period. *Bloody Cross Roads. The Politics of the Historical Avant-Garde Revisited*.

⁷ See also Helmuth Kiesel's excellent history of modernist and avant-garde language crises in Europe. *Geschichte der literarischen Moderne*, especially Chapter 4 (177-302).

der stein auf meinem schädel ist ursache einer beule.
die dame vor deinen augen ist einstweilen noch ein anblick.

(anything may mean this or that.
anything may also mean something else.
the apple between the teeth is taste.
the stone on my head is the source of a bump.
the woman in front of my eyes is at present still a sight.)
(*Konrad Bayer* 530)

He acknowledges causality between perception and reality, but negates that society's common language is capable of conveying reality to each individual in the exact manner in which it was perceived by the speaker. The incapability of language is the point where authors, striving for absolute clarity and truthfulness in their representation of reality start to hesitate, pause, stammer, stutter, and fumble for ways of unambiguously expressing their perceptions of the reality which they inhabit.

Whereas Dadaists were discontented with a language they viewed as ravaged by journalistic abuse, politicization, advertising, and war rhetoric, Viennese postwar experimental writers criticized the foundational constructedness of language as a vehicle to steer society's understanding of itself. Dada authors trusted that distortion of language would be sufficient to lead to revolution and ultimately transformation of the cultural and social system. Viennese postwar authors had lost faith in language altogether and thus sought to rid it entirely of its manipulating and normalizing forces. Unlike the Dadaists, they aimed to demolish the ruling apparatus of communication, not to rebuild it.

Konrad Bayer in particular suffered from an oppressive helplessness when faced

with what he ultimately saw as the impossibility of language to communicate anything beyond trivial phenomena: “wir haben mit dem vokabular künstliche kategorien gezüchtet, haben die erregung des unbestimmten als gefährlich einbalsamiert, können leichtfertig sagen, haha eine maus, und haben keine ahnung, jedes wort ein schlechter vergleich [...] (through the vocabulary, we have bred artificial categories, we have embalmed the treatment of the unknown as dangerous, and can now frivolously say, haha a mouse, and yet, we have no idea; every word is a bad comparison [...])” (qtd. in *Grenzverschiebung* 51). For Bayer it seemed as though language had no ability to express perceptions or the effect of the material world on the individual. For him, language alone was just not good enough to express all that can be thought.

The pathological fin-de-siècle complaint about the stultifying nature of language, elaborated by early critics of the adequacy of language such as Ernst Mach and Fritz Mauthner, and later by Friedrich Nietzsche, was no longer an option for the post-World War Two avant-gardists because they had altogether abandoned faith in language’s ability to represent reality. Diverging intentions, path-breaking visions, and a diversity of methods thus set the radical works of the *Wiener Gruppe* apart from the representatives of the *Sprachkrise* and the socially and politically critical Dada artists of the 1910s and 1920s. Rather than reacting to their extreme language suspicion with aphasia, this group of Viennese authors – Bayer included – engaged in meditations on letters, signs, numbers, pictures, and formulas. In their quest for a satisfying,

comprehensive, holistic manner of expression, they employed repetition, tautology, visual language, pictorial representation, and a reframing of negative space. For these authors silence was not sufficient to counter a language they recognized as subjective and socially constructed.

Die strenge, logische Konsequenz der Einsicht in die Unmöglichkeit sprachlicher Kommunikation wäre, zu schweigen. Schon die Mitteilung des Schweigens aber steht zu dieser Erkenntnis im Widerspruch.

(To be silent would be the strict and logical conclusion to the recognition that linguistic communication is impossible. But already conveying one's silence counters this conclusion. If one were to be mute one would empower the very system which it is supposed to undermine) (Wischenbart 365).

What Wischenbart expresses, in a very tortuous way, is the concept that silence is but another way of speaking, namely its antithesis – not speaking. It is part of the same language system from which the authors wanted to escape. Being mute does not change anything, it is just another way of saying: I don't want to say anything. But language (and with it silence), as it is used in daily life needs to be released from established connotations, liberated from both entrenched grammatical rules dictating how something ought to be expressed and deep-rooted social norms prescribing what could and could not be said or written. Neither silence nor destruction is the best way to counter the presumed neutrality of language. For the authors of the postwar Austrian avant-garde, the best way to liberate an imprisoned language was to break it down to its smallest, most minimal components, and thereby highlight its pictoriality, its materiality, and its auralty.

Their goal was to free up space for the reading subject to interject him or herself between the text and the moment of meaning recognition unfettered by established socio-linguistic strictures, connotations, expectations, and prejudices. Breaking language free of its normalizing shackles meant a direct affront to society as a whole. As long as society believed that language was neutral and did not take part in the restrictive, conservative mind-set of the time the authors needed to take action and confront these beliefs through their experiments. Oswald Wiener recognized that language is a defining force for society and that only a change in the understanding of language can bring about a change in social structures: “ein aufstand gegen die sprache ist ein aufstand gegen die gesellschaft (a rebellion against language is also a rebellion against society)” (*die wiener gruppe* 671).

New forms of expression and experience were tried out. Not only were they the first group of Austrian writers to radically engage with past and current forms of literary expression and to go beyond critiquing and belaboring it; they were also the literary forerunners of a new aesthetic called performance art, which requires readers to be active participants – to make the work speak, to become players in the field of the text. One technique often used in these performative poems is the inclusion of text-foreign elements, for example, images. Rüdiger Wischenbart summarizes:

Die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit der Sprache allein ist gewiß keine Innovation der fünfziger Jahre. Mit Blick auf die Nachkriegsliteratur geht es aber um ein Bündel von sehr spezifischen Konzepten: um das [...] Durchbrechen scheinbar verbindlicher Regelsysteme, [...] und um die Erweiterung der

sprachbezogenen Literatur etwa durch *graphische oder dramatische Elemente*.

(The critical engagement with language alone is certainly not an innovation of the fifties. But focusing on postwar literature, we see that there are very specific concepts at play: [...] breaking through apparently binding regulatory systems, [...] and the enlargement of language oriented literature through the inclusion of *graphic or dramatic elements*) (361; my emphasis).

Breaking Through Language: “eine geschichte”

One example of this technique is the textual and graphic poem “eine geschichte” composed by Friedrich Achleitner in 1958 (*die wiener gruppe* 108-113). This work encompasses six pages alternately arranged with one page text followed by one page of images of female mouths. The first page shows three words written in lower-case letters, which are centered and aligned on the page beginning at the left margin: it is the sentence fragment “es ging einmal (once there went).” The following page is composed of altogether thirty-nine small frames of images, cut out of magazines and newspapers, displaying laughing women’s lips and teeth. The individual images are stacked upon each other arranged in alternating rows of either four or three images. Each picture of an open mouth and teeth is of a different woman, but all of them reveal a very cheerful expression. The color scheme of this page of images is in a muted sepia-gray and light brown. The next page is another sentence fragment, centered and aligned at the left margin of the page, and typed the same commonly used font and lettering as the one on the first page: “ein jäger (a hunter).” This page is followed by another combination of

thirty-nine images depicting smiling women's mouths. This time, only four of the lips are parted, and even those reveal only small stretches of their teeth. The color scheme again is a muted and grainy sepia-gray-brown. The last set of pages follows the same pattern: again, one page is almost blank with the phrase "in den wald (into the woods)" typed on it while its opposing page features a collage of laughing female mouths – again bearing teeth, but this time in bright color pictures. The mouths are painted with expressive red lipstick.

es ging einmal



ein jäger



in den wald



Linked together, the verbal phrases form a sentence which reads “es ging einmal ein jäger in den wald (once upon a time a hunter went into the woods).” On the linguistic and semantic level, the phrase presents a German sentence that is grammatically correct and has meaning. The arrangement of basic segments on the typed pages tells the reader that at some point, a male individual whose profession is to hunt wildlife had gone into the woods. It can be presumed that he is going to do his work.

The first lip collage shows different mouths with beautiful lips and strikingly perfect teeth with wide open mouths expressing laughter and joy. At first, the composition seems to display a fun atmosphere, with the exception for a few mouths that appear to be grimacing expressing slightly cynical grins. But the longer one ponders this collage, the more frightening it becomes. The teeth look larger, the mouths become gaping holes, the lips recede into the background and blur with the rest of the picture. The individual frames are small so that the mouths and teeth come in close contact with one another. Because of the limited color range, shades of gray and brown, the white teeth and black orifices stand out, and the entire collage morphs into a nightmare of cavernous (hungry?) mouths.

The mood on the second collage is more temperate and calm. These lips are not open and laughing like those on the first page; some are in neutral, resting positions, and others are closed smiling slightly in a benevolent way. Again, a few of the mouths

smirk and seem thereby to express an indecisive mood. The overall expression in this collage is ambivalent. The last page is the most impressive because of the visual impact of the bright color images. The white teeth stand out prominently against the cherry red lips. The lips are slightly parted showing teeth but no open orifices. These are clearly models' lips, used perhaps in advertisements for lipstick or tooth-paste.

Mouths invite a multitude of associations. They are, for example, vehicles for communication and the exchange of information, the verbal expression of ideas and emotions, intimate interactions, pleasure. Mouths are also openings for putting things in and spitting them out again. On the symbolic level, they are a powerful sign of female sexuality. In other words, they don't seem to share much in common with hunters in the woods. One may be tempted to ask: what are the pages with sentence fragments doing here at all? What does the hunter in the forest have to do with enticingly poised lips?

Although the arrangement of the pages is visibly systematic, it would seem more logical for all the pages with words to be next to each other, followed or preceded by the montages. In this case, the work would present some type of narrative. There still would not be an obvious connection between the text and the images, but at least there would be a division between the two, so that each could be interpreted independent of the other. The meaning of the linguistic construction alone would soon become clear. The sentence is, in fact, a slightly altered version of the title of a folk-song from the 1800s called "Es ging ein Jäger spazieren (A Hunter Went for a Walk)." A reader who was

familiar with this could build an interpretive bridge between the text and the content of the song in order to try and understand the words on the page as a reference to the lyrics of the song. And yet, the question would remain as to why the author added visual elements so disconnected from the idea of a hunter who once went into the woods? It is possible that one story follows or emerges out of the other – that is, that the story of the lips, whatever it may be, is somehow related to the story of the hunter and vice versa. But by interweaving the two stories, the work also tears them apart internally in the sense that the words on one page are forced to be in communication with the images on the following sheet. On the one hand, the alternating format highlights the disconnect between images and language and breaks the narrative into fragments. On the other hand, the format forces image and language together, thereby demanding investigation of their collective meaning. The reader is forced to ponder why word fragments that together form a meaningful utterance and visuals that are expressive in a multitude of ways are paired together. Do the words stand in immediate correspondence with the images after all?

Yes, text and images work only together. Without the images, the purely linguistic investigation of the text is soon exhausted and doesn't reveal much more than its self-reflexivity. The sentence is a statement that is in itself complete because it provides all necessary information to derive meaning from it. The reader is given a factual statement: a hunter went into the woods at some time in the past. A curious

reader could ask why he (in German, the gender can be determined by the noun's ending and by the definite article associated with it) went into the woods, but the answer is implicit: it is his place of work or, if he is a hobby-hunter, the place where he conducts his hobby. The reader also implicitly knows what he does there: he is on the look-out for animals to shoot. The work of a hunter involves killing animals, and the most comfortable way to execute his work is to shoot the animals with some kind of firing weapon from a safe distance. The sentence thus presents an image of danger, of a man with a deadly weapon. What then are the images of attractive lips doing in this context?

To enlarge a language oriented text through the inclusion of graphic elements, says Wischenbart, is to extend its reach. In the work as it is composed, text and images are set within each other – one intrudes upon the other. They are interwoven, they are conditional upon each other, they reinforce each other, and they mutually determine meaning beyond what would be possible individually. On a metaphorical level of this textual-visual work, the hunter represents male sexuality as much as the lips refer to female sexuality. Together, text and images make each other's materiality visible, as typed words on a page and the visual depictions of the source of spoken words.

“eine geschichte” is a performance with words and images. It gives the impression of being impenetrable, gratuitous, and self-indulgent. Each individual reader is thus radically called into action in an effort to decode the piece and construct

meaning. As I mentioned above, the phenomenon of probing linguistic rules and meaning can be traced back to turn of the twentieth century authors; but the mistrust of language espoused by the postwar Viennese avant-garde authors must be considered total outbreak, an explosion, an uncompromising distortion and destruction of language more violent and insistent than experienced in the early twentieth century. It is an explosion that resulted in works that are partially un-readable because they defy linguistic rules – defy, as Doppler puts it “eine anerkannte und normierte *Gemeinsprache* (a recognized and normative *common language*)” (*Geschichte im Spiegel* 244; my emphasis) and the shared vernacular which readers and viewers typically rely on.

In the postwar experimental texts, language as a whole undergoes a visible fragmentation, and in experimental film, the means of expressing the visible is questioned by the complexity of shots. Experimental visual works undertake a rebellion against the normative idea of representing meaning. They do not have a narrative structure or a symbolic representative character, in many works a metaphorical dimension is also absent. Language in these texts refers to its material character rather than to its representative function.

The postwar avant-garde explorations into the use and understanding of language as a tool for human interaction took a more radical tone than ever before in the twentieth century. As a term that connotes a genre of written work, “poetry,” in the context of *Wiener Gruppe* experimental visual works, is an extensive array of styles and

expressions that cross genre boundaries and disciplinary frameworks. When I refer to *Wiener Gruppe* works as “poems,” I use the term generously to mean concentrated, compacted, formal textual and visual experimentations containing letters, words, images, or a combination of the three that are not classifiable as prose or dramatic works. Non-narrative *Wiener Gruppe* experimental poetry stands apart as an independent category that includes structured works akin to poems in form but lacking the usual semantic elements of poetry, such as full sentences, words, rhyme, and meter. Exemplary for such an experiment is Rühm’s visual poem “leib (body).”

leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leibleib

(Rühm *die wiener gruppe* 497)

“leib” features many elements that make a poem experimental. It lacks narrative, co-text, grammatical particles, and title, and it does not fulfill the reader’s expectations of what a poem is supposed to be. Although traditional poetic elements such as alliteration and meter are used, they certainly do not illuminate meaning. The learned practice of reading from left to right does not help the reader here because all the words are the same. The poem does not need to be read, it needs to be perceived. The visual aspect is the overriding feature of this concentrated, compacted linguistic experiment which obfuscates the disciplinary boundaries between literature and art.

This poem has no narrative semantic. It gives the reader very little to make sense of. We have eight lines of four words each, and each word has four letters. Visually, it is a rectangle of a strict arrangement of black letters. The word “Leib” is a noun and means human body and metaphorically speaking the body of Christ as represented by the communion wafer. In philosophy “Leib” is considered the surface for the connection between body and soul. In the last line two “leib” are fused together to “leibleib.” This combination presents two linguistic entities, “leib” and “bleib,” which is the imperative form of the verb “to remain.” Extrapolating from this small amount of information, we could say that many bodies are asked or ordered to remain. But remain where? What does the pictorial information tell us? Understanding this text means also taking into account its visual appearance, the sign it represents, namely the rectangle shape on the

otherwise empty page. The words are confined into that form situated perfectly in the middle of a page. Perhaps this is representative of a box; a box filled with small black letters that spell out the idea of a group of bodies being asked to remain somewhere, perhaps in the box. Could the rectangle shape represent a coffin and the words signify many bodies that have to stay in a box?

Only the interplay of the visual and the textual can lead to an understanding of what this work may mean. We have to take into consideration any sign on the page, every single entity including the ink and the paper gives us clues to make sense of what is represented. Focusing on the signs means approaching a poem semiologically on its terms, that is, every part of the work has significance and contributes to its meaning.

Understanding Experimental Texts

Hermeneutics is not the appropriate tool to understand experimental visual literature. Traditional literary works put their faith in the stability of meaning inherent in language. Experimental works rely on the subversion of language and take language out of its context to show its vulnerability and its constructedness. *Wiener Gruppe* visual texts do not lend themselves to scholarly approaches that understand language only in relation to its context and trust in words retaining a stable assigned meaning. These texts, which explicitly sought to defy the traditional hermeneutics-based process of making meaning must be interpreted using a different method.

Introduction to Semiology: Saussure and Barthes

The study of signs which encompasses representations in any medium or sensory modality was first introduced by Swiss linguist and social behavior theorist Ferdinand de Saussure under the heading “semiology.” Today, the field of study concerned with non-linguistic signification is more often called “semiotics,” coined by Saussure’s contemporary Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), an American language philosopher who formulated his theory of signs independently of Saussure.

I am using the term “semiology” because it is the one used by Roland Barthes whose theories are highly relevant to my cogitations on language. In his major work – a lecture series based on his teachings from 1906 to 1911, published posthumously in 1916

as *Course in General Linguistics* – Saussure proposed semiology as a new approach to the study of human interaction. He focused on deciphering the arrangement and systematic organization of words and recognized that language is a system that allows communication because it has specific structural properties and laws. Saussure’s lectures had envisioned “a science that studies the life of signs within society.” Saussure’s systematic approach viewed signs at once as inter-connected and dynamic, meaning that a change in one component almost always affected other components (Small 69). He defined “speaking” (or uttering) as a “willful and intellectual individual act. [...H]uman beings have the faculty to construct a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas” (Onega 260).

Saussure recognized that deciphering the structure of language was useful for understanding the structure of any other sign system. Since not only language but also human behaviors and customs are signs that operate within the organizing patterns of social systems, Saussure’s science of semiology impacts thinking not only in the field of linguistics, but also in anthropology, literary theory, and psychoanalysis. Saussure’s view of language as a system of signs has become the blue-print for models of understanding of all forms of social and cultural life.

Saussure’s starting point was the simple observation that language does not represent things in the world, but rather distinctions between different classes of things. But linguistic signs make meaning only within a given language system, and words only

derive meaning by reference to other words. A particular language system is based on rules, conventions, and distinctions known to all users; this shared knowledge is what enables users to make meaning from a series of signs. According to Saussure, a sign consists of the inseparable union of two concepts which he calls “signifier” and “signified.” The signifier is the sound, or mark, that stands in for the signified, which is the concept, or meaning. The sign unites the two realms (i.e. the signifier or sound realm and the signified or thought realm), each of which is comprised of undifferentiated sounds and ideas. Together, signifier and signified point to a referent, which is the actual thing – the sign. The connections constructed between the signifier and signified are arbitrary. That is, there is no stability in the name (signifiers) of a thing: any other signifier could just as well represent a given object.

Saussure introduced the idea that signifiers consist of entirely arbitrary sounds related to each other only in an internally consistent system; it is purely a matter of convention that certain signifiers mean certain things. In German for example the sounds represented by “fleisch” mean “meat” or “flesh” or even, in a biblical sense, the “human body.” Saussure also argued that language works by moving forward in time so that syntax can rely on word order to produce different meanings. If we look, for example, at the first line of Rühm’s poem “die mutter hat das fleisch” and examine the first line “die mutter hat das fleisch schon in der pfanne (the mother has already put the meat into the pan)” and substitute the object of the sentence, “fleisch” for the subject,

“mother,” we get “das fleisch hat die mutter schon in der pfanne (the meat has already put the mother into the pan)” (*geschlechterdings* 88). In German, this is still a meaningful albeit awkward sentence that expresses the same information as the first; the mother is cooking meat. In English, by contrast, this simple change in word does not work because it means the meat is cooking the mother, which of course makes no sense. In German using a different substitution – say a masculine noun like “father” – is another possible substitution for “mother,” but “meat” on the other hand, is not a possible substitution because “the meat has already put mother into the pan already” is not a meaningful sentence.

The study of linguistic signs and systems fell into disuse for several decades after the publication of Saussure’s seminal work; it wasn’t until the mid-1960s that semiology reemerged as a major tool for the understanding of sign systems in the field of cultural studies. Central to the reemergence of semiology was the work of French theorist Roland Barthes. Barthes starts with Saussure’s basic premise that semiology encompasses any system of signs, sounds, images, gestures, and objects that constitute a “system of signification” (Saussure 9). The system of signification can only be useful if all those who use it agree to adhere to it and use its signs in the manner intended. In his major work, the highly influential *Elements of Semiology* (1964), Barthes echoes Saussure and asserts that semiology is generally concerned with systems of signification: “Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits;

images, gestures, musical sounds, objects and the complex association of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not *languages*, at least systems of signification" (9).

Semiology – the study of signs – is a much more appropriate tool than hermeneutics for the interpretation of experimental visual texts. I therefore use semiotic approaches, to study the *Wiener Gruppe* texts with a singular focus on their individual components as signs in their own right and on their own terms. Before I proceed, let me first say a few words about hermeneutics and give an example of a text that does lend itself to interpretation along a hermeneutic paradigm.

Introduction to Hermeneutics

The word "hermeneutics" derives from the mythological Greek deity Hermes. For a long time, textual interpretation had focused only on the individuality and intentions of the speaker or author, which were viewed as integral to understanding the work. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a new generation of philosophers proposed that all interpretation of the meaning of texts must take historical context into account. The early twentieth century saw a shift away from the author-centered approach to interpretation. The locus of meaning, according to twentieth century theorists, is to be found somewhere between the text and the reader. Just as an author cannot step out of his or her time and place (society), these theorists realized, neither can

a reader or interpreter. All that remains for the interpreter, then, is to try to understand the particular traditions prevalent at the time when a text was conceived. Today, hermeneutics is seen as the study of the methods and rules of interpretation with which not just the roles of text, author, and reader are investigated, but also societal aspects that affect communication, such as prejudices. Yet, the basis for understanding still relies heavily on the reliance on the stability of word meaning, and in the unwavering constancy of a material text.

Looking at the function of hermeneutics in the past and present, I see a consistent foundational reliance on the implicit understanding of the linguistic signs (letters, words, sentences) used in a textual work, and on a general unspoken agreement between author and reader on the meaning of those signs.

I will now present a poem that does lend itself to hermeneutic interpretation in order to illuminate the previous discussion. Konrad Bayer's "der engel im eis (the angel inside the ice)" is one example of a prose poem that relies heavily on metaphors yet it is nonetheless a "writerly" text because it allows, even demands the reader to write him or herself into it. "Writerly" texts and hermeneutics are in no way mutually exclusive, as this poem illustrates.

der engel im eis

alle treppen waren aus stein
so vergingen zwei stunden.
alle treppen waren aus stein
da stand ein engel im eis.

alle treppen werden aus stein sein
so werden zwei stunden vergehen.
alle treppen werden aus stein sein
da wird ein engel im eis stehen.

alle treppen sind aus stein
so vergehen zwei stunden.
alle treppen sind aus stein
da steht ein engel im eis.
(*Konrad Bayer 37*)

This languid, repetitive poem consists of a comprehensible text organized in a simple structure. The reader understands the words and their combination as grammatically correct and semantically coherent.

all the steps were made of stone
thus two hours elapsed.
all the steps were made of stone
there stands an angel inside the ice.

This first stanza contains just three verbs: sein (to be), vergehen (to elapse), and stehen (to stand). The first strophe is in the past tense, the second in the future, the third in the present. A purely interpretative summary of this poem could read as follows: there are three stanzas, four lines each, no rhyme schema, no traditional meter. Rhyme is not used as a verse structuring system, but there is a non-metrical organizing principle based on the constructional scheme. In this poem, the correlation between the stanzas is built from the grammatically parallel sentence structure in each strophe and within the entire poem.⁸ It is particularly interesting, grammatically that the verb in each line is conjugated in three tenses, one tense per stanza without any variation in word order and

⁸ For a theoretical elaboration of non-rhyming poetry see Lewis Turco, Chapter One.

sentence structure.

“der engel im eis” is constructed of existing and imagined signs: a staircase made of stone, two hours elapsing, and an angel appearing. Conceptually, the staircase and the stones are physical entities. Hours are non-physical and intangible, but they do exist and are relevant to daily life. The angel represents an ambivalent state. It is a product of religious beliefs and subjective views of the world. In western society, the angel is commonly treated not as a metaphor, but a concrete object, as representation of a heavenly realm. In this poem, the physical appearance of the angel is left largely to the imagination. In the German language, angels are grammatically gendered male; yet in paintings and other visual media, they are generally depicted as asexual toddlers or adult figures with female features (for example, long hair).

Staircase, angel, and hours are nouns heavily infused with metaphorical meaning. Seeing something as a metaphor for something else requires a mental jump from the concrete to the abstract which has to be based on external, socially agreed upon information. The art of interpreting is of course to establish precisely those connections. A staircase is a symbol of moving and advancing on an uneven, slanted surface, inclined at some degree less than forty-five, because more than that is un-climbable. The ultimate direction is horizontal. Seeing the nouns staircase and angel in such close proximity is likely to evoke the image of steps rising towards heavenly spheres. Perhaps the staircase in question could be a “stairway to heaven,” to borrow a phrase from popular culture,

where an angel has appeared, will appear again once two hours have passed and then again and again and again, as the grammar suggests, in eternal repetition.

The potent symbolic elements draw the reader into the metaphoric language of the poem, vividly evoking mental images of the stone staircase, the ice, and the angel, as well as producing a sense of impatience or ennui as a result of the waiting period. The continual focus on something as fleeting as time – referred to in every stanza of the poem with the phrase “zwei stunden vergehen” – and the grammatical shift in tense in every stanza renders time as physically present as the angel, the ice, and the staircase, making it seem like a natural object that’s part of the stairs-angel-ice constellation. These signs could be interpreted to mean that the only way to escape earthly ennui is to make difficult and lonely climb into a realm not of diversion, but of complete stasis, as represented by the ice.

Metaphors have a linguistic level that invites readers to decipher what the individual words mean and figure out what the co-text in which the words are arranged is meant to express. Semantically, the sentences in the poem may make perfect sense. But the reader must look beneath the surface in order to understand what the author meant. A metaphor is usually in the context of the text ill-fitting. It is recognized as a metaphor because there is more than one ways to understand it. Once a reader has comprehended that what a text says is not what it *seems* to say, that the metaphor is a stand-in for something completely different, his or her next task is to find out what that

something different is.

Meaning emerges in interaction between text and reader. In visual experimental works habitual, learned communication and writing structures, such as those in the poem above, are abandoned, the alphabetic signifiers on the page no longer allow text-immanent work analysis because there is no semantically coherent, understandable, or decipherable textual material. At this point text and reader enter into an open relationship. The ciphers on the page are mere material referents providing the most minimal information – a thin branch for the reader to hold on to. Experimental poetry pushes against the boundaries of understanding, and this is the point at which hermeneutics has ceased to be useful; semiology, on the other hand, remains an incredibly useful tool, as it does not rely on context being provided in the text already.

What Not to Wear: Semiology Versus Hermeneutics

Die als "Verstehen" bezeichneten hermeneutischen Operationen funktionieren relativ erfolgreich, solange die Literatur sich selbst als Darstellung und Auslegung einer jenseits der Sprache liegenden Wirklichkeit, als Repräsentation, kurzum: als symbolisch im weitesten Sinn versteht.

(The hermeneutic operations termed "understanding" are relatively successful as long as the literature considers itself the representation of a reality beyond language, as long as

representation is understood as
symbolic.)
(Berger "Sprachästhetik")

In experimental literature, the text elicits a shift in conceptualization: it is not the author who begs the reader to look between the lines, or between the letters but the text itself. It stands alone and demands a shift in the reader's thought processes and an active recognition of a different way of thinking, interpreting, and processing information. Understanding the text is not as essential as experiencing it. Reading and interpreting occurs not by way of linguistic processes but by recognizing the material aspects of the elements (paper, ink, etc.) as such. Experimental works draw attention to their own material surface. They are compositions that rely not on implicit meaning but on the materiality of their being. The visuality of any random letter of the Latin alphabet is present on the page; the sonic value is present when the letter is enunciated within a particular language community. The Latin alphabet is just one of many tools of expression and has no primacy over others. Experimental authors of the 1950s break down the elementary poetic building blocks: sound and letter. They consciously experimented with the effects of poetic manipulations on the reader's perception and logocentric meaning-making habits.

Experimental literature stubbornly remains at the edge of comprehensibility and interpretability. The hermeneutic operations termed "understanding" are reasonably successful as long as the literature is representational (and symbolic) of reality (Berger

“Sprachästhetik” 30). And once the gap between the thought concept – or idea of something – and the word or sign representing it becomes too wide to bridge, once the sign seems no longer to represent anything, when language no longer is symbolic, at that point, hermeneutics has reached its limits. To continue engaging with the text, we have to take off the tradition-bound bonnet of hermeneutics and don instead the post-modern fedora of semiology. Our method of comprehension must harken back to the very edge of understanding; the semiotic intervention will begin at the place where there is almost no context where a radically different approach of meaning-making is necessary. Only the materials, that which can be touched and seen, remain as sources from which to derive meaning. The materiality of the words on a page thus challenges the reader to act, to spring into action, to work with that which is present.

Focusing on the purely visual aspect of words on a page, we know that the ciphers do not replicate the object nor are they an approximation of the concept. The purely material aspect of language is not able to represent reality. Albert Berger sees the material character of a written object, such as an experimental text, as a fundamental component of the text, yet one that does not contribute to understanding. To the contrary, the material character is intended only to be *perceived*: “Dort, wo die Sprache statt eines symbolischen Bezugfeldes ihren Materialcharakter hervorkehrt, statt auf Repräsentation auf ihrer nackten, dinglichen Präsenz besteht, gerät die hermeneutische Operation Verstehen in Schwierigkeiten (At the point where language exposes its

material character instead of its symbolic relations, insisting on re-presentation of its naked, material presence, it is at that point that the hermeneutic operation encounters difficulties)" ("Sprachästhetik" 31).

The Elements of Experimental Literature

In the following, I will discuss key concepts that are relevant for the understanding of experimental literature. The first set of concepts is related to the function of a text, to its use of language and textuality, the utility of the text as a playing field for interpretation. The second set of concepts focuses on physical presence of a work, its texture, its appearance, and its material components. The third concept focuses on the effects of texts, the way they interact with a reader, their performativity. These concepts are the basis for further discussion of *Wiener Gruppe* works and experimental films.

Elements of Experimental Literature 1: Language and Textuality

Language use is a practical skill, a manifestation, at first consideration, of "knowing how" not "knowing that." The exercise of this practical skill is ordinarily quite unreflective: we simply say things (Platts 69). Donald Davidson's thesis "we can give the meaning of any sentence (or word) only by giving the meaning of every

sentence (or word) in the language” (61), is a thought-terminating cliché only in the sense that we take it as natural, that we understand a language implicitly.

Philosopher of language H.P. Grice explains how implicit understanding works within a language community. Understanding as an essential act of communication is based upon a “cooperative principle,” which essentially states that to be able to convey information and participate in communication, one must make an appropriate, purposeful linguistic contribution only at the point at which it is required and only in service of the communicative exchange in which one is engaged. All participants of that communicative exchange must observe this principle (167). This rule is intended as a description of people's normal behavior, the following of linguistic rules, in conversations, not as a prescriptive command. The concept of “normal behavior,” of course, also implies that there is such a thing as “not normal behavior,” that means, not following the rules. In conversation one could subvert the socially accepted adherence to the principle by turning it into its opposite. I do not have room to explicate the principle more thoroughly, but suffice to say, that it requires a speaker to induce by his or her utterance a belief in an audience. The speaker must also want that his or her utterance be understood in the way he or she intends it. Moreover, not everything that a speaker wants to convey is linguistically expressed. That which is implied but not elaborated during a conversation, the “conversational implicature,” also plays a part in inducing a belief in the audience. If it does not achieve the intended effect, explains Grice, then

“something has gone wrong with the fulfillment of the speaker’s intentions” (Grice 219). Authors may not be aware of the philosophical implications, but they are very well acquainted with social norms and reader expectations, as well as with the “conversational implicatures,” which they use to their advantage by expressing something seemingly concrete, then imbuing it with a contrary meaning. The result is the sensation that something, as Grice puts it, “has gone wrong.” But, this “going wrong” is precisely what experimental authors intend. In experimental literature socially agreed upon meaning is no longer reliable.

A term⁹ has meaning only in its context of definitions. A signifier is a product of the definition of the sign. Whether a particular kind of animal (the sign) with four legs is called “dog” or a “cat” is up to the conventions of the system. If the sign, that is, the actual physical substance or, material object – the animal with four legs – has been called “dog” in the past by mutual agreement of the members of society then in conventional language use, future members of society will also use the term “dog” to designate a particular four-legged animal. Whether the material object is referred to as “dog” or as “cat” becomes unimportant at the point when agreement has been reached and the terminology established within the system. At that point, the linguistic distinction between two similar yet different four-legged animals has been accepted and becomes the signified. If two individuals from different linguistic communities meet to discuss

⁹ Saussure prefers to use the noun “term” instead of “word” because for him “term” evokes the idea of a system of which any word is a piece.

cats and dogs, and one community uses the term “dog” to signify the thing that purrs and the term “cat” for the thing that barks, whereas the other community does precisely the opposite, then the two speakers will not be conversing about the same thing because their thought concepts are divergent. In one language community the signifier “cat” has been assigned to the object that barks and in the other to the thing that purrs.

Meaning does not lie in any one isolated sign but in a differential relationship between signs. That the sign is arbitrary is quite a radical concept. It means that language is autonomous from reality. When Saussure proposed his theory, he emphasized that language was a sign system with internal structures; by extension, language constructs reality rather than reflecting it. We come to know the world through whatever language we have been born into. Structuralist theorist John Sturrock asserts that it is “legitimate to argue that our language determines reality, rather than reality our language” (79).

Meanings are not natural developments because language is a collective property, a result of the accumulation of long-established individual acts of speech within a language community. Signifiers establish their meaning by reference to what they are not: a dog is not a cat. Accordingly, meaning is the functional result of the difference between signs. If meaning is only present in difference, then the stability of any particular sign system collapses when oppositions are absent. A specific signifier is recognized as different not only in relation to another signifier, but also in a whole field

of signifiers, potentially endless, through which meaning moves and slips in an elusive interchange of signification. Meaning is never really stable because it depends on the social conventions and established customs of the society that uses it. Saussure underlines precisely this systematic and interdependent nature of language. Jerome McGann goes further and calls into question the entire concept of language when he writes that the idea of language is an imagination of codes and rules (*Textual Condition* 10).

Focusing solely on the relationship between signifier and signified, Saussure's theory largely ignores the recipient of language – the reader and the audience. For performance studies his approach thus leaves out a very important component. In fact, the receiver must be taken into account in any field that explores the role of the giver and receiver. I will thus augment Saussure's linguistic models with a discussion of the theories of French semiologist Roland Barthes with particular emphasis on his highly influential model of the author – reader – text relationship.

Textuality

Research into textuality pays much attention to words on the page as well as to “visual, oral, and numeric data in the form of maps, prints, and music [...], of films, videos [...] everything in fact from epigraphy to the latest forms of discography” (13), all of which is encompassed by sociologist D.F. McKenzie's expanded use of the term

“text.” McKenzie is concerned with texts insofar as they are components of bibliographies, the word he uses to denote the study of texts. But he asserts that our common understanding of texts – namely, as pieces of paper in some form with writing on them – is insufficient; text, in his view, is any kind of data that has been recorded for some future use. The origins of the word “ext” offer support for such a view. “Text” derives from the Latin word “texere,” to weave, and refers not so much to the specific material used but to the state of wovenness itself, the web or texture of some material. The idea of weaving also applies to the creation of texts, in that an author tends to weave bits of information into his or her written material. “[It is] by virtue of a metaphoric shift, [...] the verb “to weave” serves for the verb “to write,” that the words become a text” (McKenzie 14).

We tend to think of a text in three interrelated ways: 1) as a canonical vehicle of authorial intention; 2) as an intertext, the field of textuality; 3) as a material object, the text in hand. Barthes makes a convenient distinction between the first two senses, one that informs contemporary discussion of the textuality of performance. Barthes describes the idea of a written text from the “traditional notion of the work” to the more relativized sense of the text (156). The work, that “fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example)” (156-57), is the vehicle for authorized cultural reproduction, a “signified” approached through interpretation; it discloses a “secret, ultimate, something to be sought out” (158). The text, on the other

hand, is the field of production rather than interpretation; its “field is that of the signifier,” best approached through the “activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over,” or, in other words, through “playing” (158). The work is “normally the object of a consumption” (161); the text is not an object, but a field, a “social space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder” (164). If the work is interpreted and consumed, the text is encountered as a field of “play, activity, production, practice” (162). Barthes’ distinction between the work (authoritarian, closed, fixed, single, consumed) and the text (liberating, open, variable, traced by inter-texts, performed) proves very useful to the contemporary discourse about performance, in part because Barthes’ sense of the text is self-consciously performative. Barthes’ text is the field of the signifier, of textuality, of play (164). Whereas interpretation is earnest, concerned with fidelity and obedience, performance is insouciant, rewriting and disseminating the words of the text in various ways.

The “textual condition,” the symbolic exchanges and material negotiations carried out in textual events (3), as Jerome McGann aptly phrases it, haunts all texts. For as McGann suggests, the text is “a material event or set of events, a point in time (or a moment in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practiced” (*Textual Condition* 21). In this sense, no single printed text corresponds to the authorial work, which can only be perceived as “the global set of all texts and poems which have

emerged in the literary production and reproduction process" (*Textual Condition* 32) – texts that are necessarily contradictory, usually in their linguistic as well as in their material elements. "Texts represent, are in themselves, certain kinds of human acts" (*Textual Condition* 4). Much as the "author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture" (Foucault "What Is an Author?" 107), so too is the work a site of regulation and containment, a place to fix and stabilize meanings by pre-determining the range of appropriate interpretation, of licensed reading. Yet the work is never present in the text; the text is its signifier and its supplement, signifying the work's absence at the same time that it locates a material space for it. What Barthes means by text is in some sense akin to what we usually mean by performance: a production of a specific state of the text in which a variety of intertextual possibilities are realized. In this sense, performance has the same relation to the material text (the printed text, the text on the page) that the text has to the authorial work: the performance signifies an absence, the precise fashioning of the text's absence, at the same time that it appears to summon it into being, to produce it as performance (remember that reading is as much a performance or production of the text as a stage performance is). The material text, the text as object, deconstructs the work even before we encounter it, play it, or produce it as reading, criticism, or enactment.

The language of poetry is a condensed interweaving of linguistic material,

compressed and densely packed with meanings. The multiple semantic possibilities of individual German words and the relative openness of German syntax lend themselves to creative use but also to misunderstandings and misuse, particularly when the normal written or colloquial word order is adjusted to suit the demands of metric structure.

Elements of Experimental Literature 2: Materiality and Visuality

Der poetische Materialbegriff umfaßt nicht nur das wahrnehmbare, tönende oder sichtbare Zeichensubstrat, er umfaßt a l l e an der Sprache beteiligten Schichten vom phonetischen Stoff über die artikulatorische, verbale, syntaktische bis zur semantischen Struktur.

(The poetic concept of materiality not only encompasses the perceptible, audible, or visible sign, it encompasses a l l layers of language from the enunciatory to the verbal to the syntactical and semantic structure.)
(Franz Mon)¹⁰

Materiality

The most radical literary experiments of the 1960s can be subsumed under the term “text” which embodies a renewed understanding of language as a material phenomenon: everything is a text (Stoehr 306). McGann, acknowledging Barthes, refers to text as a material event, a stage where performative interchanges take place. Usually

¹⁰ “Säge” 433.

texts are thought of as sites of production not interpretation, because, as Barthes argues in *Image/Music/Text*, the terms “work” and “text” have different meaning, but are often confused. “Work” for Barthes is the thing, the physical object that has been created by an author and that has been inscribed with authorial intention. It is also the vehicle for authorized cultural reproduction and the physical object that the reader can touch. “Text,” on the other hand, denotes the field of production. Barthes envisions the text as a field of play, activity, production, practice” (*Image/Music/Text* 155-164).¹¹ What Barthes identifies with his conception of a text as a place to play, a site for performance, is, in fact, the very definition of performative space – a location where performance takes place. In Barthes’ view, this site is located where the “work,” i.e. the physical thing, and the reader meet – in the text on the page. Performance studies theorist Victor Turner calls this site a “betwixt and between” zone (qtd. in Loxley 156). This definition of text as an in-between place, a site of play and performance, is the critical foundation on which the walls of my investigations are raised.

In the next chapter, I will discuss Bayer’s “a-o.” A radical literary experiment which is composed entirely of the letters “a” and “o,” which embodies a renewed understanding of language as a material phenomenon. The uniformity of a page with a square-shaped text consisting of two alternating letters is striking and bewildering. Looking at it closely, the reader finds nothing that offers linguistic meaning; even

¹¹ See also W.B. Worthen’s insightful essay “Disciplines of the Text. Sites of Performance” (1995).

reading it out loud does not aid the reader in making sense of it. As such, the poem compels visualization, an apprehension of the page complete with its content as material entity, the thing in its entirety, the print, the spaces between the letters, and the negative space – i.e. the empty page – around it. The reader's first impulse, of course, is to find and decipher semantic values. But here, there is no semantic value to be found. The text demands that the reader unclutter his or her mind of learned, studied, internalized, and thus unconscious grammatical rules, thereby allowing the page and its contents to approach us on its own terms, inviting him or her into the space of play and the haptic dimension of the page.

McGann, acknowledging Roland Barthes' idea of text as a field of play, widens the definition of text understanding its site for communicative exchanges. Experimental texts allow for a shift in understanding and recognizing of different ways of thinking and interpreting. Experimental authors in the 1950s fought against the constraining power of language, making early attempts at opening up a space for the reader to think outside the traditional and social conventions of language.

The interactions and responses elicited by specific experimental text will necessarily depend on the nature of that text. The more abstract and experimental a text, the more it challenges the reader to construct meaning on the playing field. The experimental writings of *Wiener Gruppe* authors, do not stay within the boundaries of established writing conventions. Some appear hopelessly devoid of content and seem to

bear no meaning at all. Yet it is exactly the apparent inaccessibility of these experiments that opens the gates for the unafraid reader to start playing and begin to experience the text. Radically experimental texts break out of normalizing structures such as sentences and pre-formed expressions and curb language's ability to become an automatically determining and normative force (Doppler 246). They challenge the reader to get involved with the text, to create meaning with and through the symbols on the page. Without authorial intervention, the reading subject becomes author and creator. Once they are committed to paper, experimental pieces of writing exist independently of their creating subject. Meaning is not infused *into* such texts during the act of writing, but rather emerges *from* them during the act of reading.

I will show that experimental postwar Viennese authors worked with the linguistic material itself, privileging their material tools – paper, pen, typewriter – focusing on visual components such as typeset, casting words in various point sizes on the page, adding figurative elements and images, transforming the page into a play space for the reader. The textual composition and performatives – like, for example, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and rhythm – are elevated in these texts above expression, description, elaboration, and meaning creation. Such experiments succeed in freeing the reader from a prescribed linear top-to-bottom reading order. In the works of the *Wiener Gruppe*, language is specifically intended to *not* to do what it normally does – allow and provide paths to implicit recognition and understanding of what is meant.

Rather, the experimental textual works discussed in this segment represent rather a return to literality. They insistently refer to the materiality of language, whether that materiality is a textual, visual, oral, or aural component, and thereby make visible the challenges of language.

Materiality is defined as that which constitutes the matter of something; opposed to formality; the quality of being material; material aspect or character; mere outwardness or externality. The word "matter" came into English from the old French "materie," which can ultimately be traced to "materia," from which root meanings are derived. As a Latin word, "materie" refers to building material and, by extension, to a physical substance. Similarly, the paper and ink used to place ciphers on the page are materials that together make up a work of art, be it a poem, piece of literature, or drawing.

Language is a raw material and a collection of building blocks and not a finished instrument; it is not a tool with which non-linguistic matter (feelings, for example), content, reality or the imagination of a reality can be expressed. Albert Berger writes: "Die Wortbedeutung ist eine Resultante der Stellung im Satz; die Satzbedeutung hängt ab von der Position im Text; die Textbedeutung ergibt sich aus der kommunikativen Situation (The meaning of a word is the result of its position in a sentence; the meaning of a sentence depends on its position within a text; the meaning of a text emerges from the communicative situation)" (qtd. in Schmitz-Emans 31). What Berger describes is the

simple concept of relation. Nothing has meaning to something else; everything depends on its situational context, writes Fischer-Lichte.¹² Even the word “help” spoken in isolation means nothing, because it needs a context of some emergency in order to have. “Help” spoken out of context – say, in a calm voice while drinking a cup of tea – means nothing if no one hears it, and serves only to cause confusion in the listener. “Help,” after all, means: Do something! Act! It implores the listening party to react quickly, forcefully, and with directed purpose. When the expected context is lacking, the word (seme) becomes meaningless in itself and demands engagement on a material level. On the material level, presuming the term is written on an otherwise empty page, the reader must engage with the letters and the page.

Franz Mon lists some examples of materiality in visual texts:

Als Substrat visueller Texte kann offensichtlich jedes Material dienen. Es gibt mit dem Stift hingezogene, von Lettern, Figurationen, Lineaturen bedeckte Blätter; es gibt den mit Setzkastenmaterial oder mit Schablonen gedruckten Text, es gibt die aus gefundenem Material geklebte Text/Bildcollage; es gibt das ‚Dinggedicht‘ aus Gegenständen, die auf der Fläche angeordnet sind; es gibt den ‚Objekttext‘, der in eine Keramikform eingebrannt ist; es gibt den Text in der Flasche und

¹² “Da dem betreffenden Element nur aufgrund des Kontextes, in den es eingebunden war [...], eine Funktion und Bedeutung zukam, führt die Dekontextualisierung zu einer Desemantisierung und Defunktionalisierung: als ein bloßes Objekt verfügt es über keine Bedeutung an sich, und als Fragment, das aus einem Kontext herausgebrochen wurde, kann es auch nicht länger die Funktion und Bedeutung haben, welche der Kontext ihm zusprach. Dem Verlust der syntaktischen Dimension folgt auf diese Weise unmittelbar der Verlust der semantischen Dimension. [...] zunächst bedeutungslos und fremd gewordenen – Fragment zurück. (A specific element in a sentence had meaning and function only as long as it was part of a sentence structure, a context, [...], the de-contextualizing leads to a loss of semantic meaning and function; as fragment broken out of its context it loses its syntactic and semantic dimension and it remains a meaningless and strange fragment)” (Fischer-Lichte “Zwischen Differenz.” 233). Erika Fischer-Lichte. “Zwischen Differenz und Indifferenz. Funktionalisierungen des Montage-Verfahrens bei Heiner Müller.” *Avantgarde und Postmoderne. Prozesse struktureller und funktioneller Veränderungen*. Eds. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Klaus Schwind. (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1991) 231-245 here 233

natürlich in jeder denkbaren Form von Buch.

(Obviously any material can serve as substrate for visual texts. There are sheets of papers that have been covered by pen drawings, or individual letters, figures, lines; there are pages that have been printed on printing presses, there are text-picture collages that are made of found materials; there is the 'thing poem' made of objects arranged on a flat surface; there are 'object texts' that are burned into ceramics; there are messages in a bottle and of course every possible form of book) (Mon 79).

Visuality

*Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder,
sondern macht sichtbar.*

(Art does not reproduce the visible,
but rather makes visible.)
(Paul Klee)

A text is always already a performance: "es gibt keinen Text ohne Performanz, und genauso wenig gibt es auch eine Performanz ohne Text (there is no text without performance, just as there is no performance without text)" (Bucher 15).

By definition, a novel or poem must be written, a drama must be performed on stage, and any text must be performed by reading it out loud or silently. Without active participation from either the writer or the reader no text matters. The performance of writing a text, or the performance of producing a drama on stage, or a reading all involve an author, a written component, and a recipient. A visual experimental text, on the other hand, cannot be performed on stage or recited to an audience or to oneself. It does not have a narrative structure that would lend itself to representation on stage, nor

can it be read since it tends to consist of symbols, individual letters, isolated words without context, pictures, or blank pages. Visual texts require more from the reader; they demand active involvement with the elements presented on the page, precisely because the elements on the page begin to take on meaning only when the reader becomes an active participant. I am concerned here with the performance that happens between the reader and text in the space located between apprehension of the symbols on the page and comprehension of their meaning.

Visual experimental poetry works actively with the space surrounding the letters on the page, which is called “negative” space to set it apart from the “positive” space comprised of the text itself. Visual poetry works graphically to alter the conventional signifying functions of poetic language. Experimental visual texts are non-narrative, symbol-based, often repetitive, and self-contained. Reading such a text in the usual linear manner, from left to right or from top to bottom, is not possible. In the maze of an experimental text, the reader’s challenge is to find a way to make meaning without traditional meaning-making cues in the text. Because the linearity of the page is culturally the most pervasive and dominant method of reading, it is also the way in which the page as a material entity all but disappears as the space which allows the reader to read (Hall “(il)Legible Pages” n.p.). Performative, visual, and experimental texts cannot be approached from left to right and top to bottom, as most readers have been conditioned to approach texts.

Putting an immediate stop to our usual approach, the experimental text refers to itself, to the ink on the page, and thereby makes our reading practices visible. When we see a text that has the form, morphology, of a poem, we expect to read a poem complete with words, phrases, sentences, perhaps rhyme and meter. That expectation is not fulfilled by the pictorial works that look like poems. A visual poem or text is always directed at a reader community. In this sense this means it always is the performance of a social act.

Elements of Experimental Literature 3: Performativity

*Performativity describes a
fundamentally material practice.
It is also an analytic, a way of framing
and underscoring aspects of life.
(Della Pollock)*

The performative act takes place in the space between recognition of a textual artifact and uttering a response to that artifact text. The intimate meaning-making performance that takes place on the playing field of the text is an act that at first occurs without interference from outside information not directly related to the work. The visual impact of the experimental text is so great that neither metaphor nor interpretative tools can be used to achieve understanding. The meaning-making process is reduced to seeing first, interpreting later.

“To engage in a text textually, to think of the text as a production of the work, is

to attribute to the text (and to its performance as reading) the function of performance” (Butler 271). The following ruminations will serve as an introduction to the development of the terms “performance” and “performative text,” as both are interlinked concepts upon which my my definition of experimental *Wiener Gruppe* texts and the concepts within the texts rest. I argue that the experimental poems composed by authors of the *Wiener Gruppe* and the films made by Kurt Kren and Peter Kubelka are performative works, and that these textual and filmic experiments are seen as the beginning of the development of a distinctly Austrian experimental art. The texts and the pages upon which the texts are placed become, in the hands of experimental authors, media for exploring the boundaries and relationships between textuality, surface, and visibility as both conceptual and concrete, material space.

The *Concise Oxford American Dictionary* defines “performance” as “an act of staging or presenting a play, concert, or other form of entertainment; the action or process of carrying out or accomplishing an action, task, or function.” The verb to perform means “to act out, accomplish, fulfill (an action, task or function); present (a form of entertainment) to an audience; entertain an audience, typically by acting, singing, or dancing on stage” (657). This definition implies that performance is something that involves movement and action, and requires someone doing something concrete. Performance studies scholar Marvin Carlson’s definition coincides with this notion and adds another component to it. Carlson states that in a performance, the

performer always needs an audience. He calls this dependency the “consciousness of doubleness,” and claims that “performance is always performance *for* someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance, even when that audience is the self” (71; emphasis in the original). His definition continues:

[A] specific event [...] clearly separated from the rest of life, presented by performers and attended by audiences, both of whom regard the experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in, emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even physically (*Performance* 216).

Erving Goffman, a social scientist, concurs, explaining his view on the subject: “I have been using the term performance to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers, and which has some influence on the observers” (61). For theater and dance scholar Henry Bial, the term “performance” most commonly refers to a tangible, temporally and spatially delimited event that involves the presentation of rehearsed artistic actions. “We can extend this idea of performance to other events that involve a performer (someone doing something) and a spectator (someone observing something); performance can also be understood more generally as an activity that involves the presentation of rehearsed or pre-established sequences or actions” (57).

RoseLee Goldberg, by contrast, one of the first art-historians to publish a history of performance, theorizes performance as something natural. Her claim differs from the theater studies and social science explanations in that she sees performance events taking place everywhere, not just in the theater. A performance event must not, she

argues, occur in a rehearsed manner at a designated space: “the work may be presented solo or with a group, with lighting, music or visuals made by the performance artist him or herself, or in collaboration, and performed in places ranging from an art gallery or museum to an ‘alternative space’, [...]” Additionally, “[t]he performer is the artist, seldom a character like an actor, and the content rarely follows a traditional plot or narrative” (8).

This short excursion makes clear that there is no general definition for the term performance across all disciplines. Scholars have amended the term to fit their needs, a fact that accounts for the difficulty in finding one precise meaning. Common, however, to all these formulations is the notion that at least two parts are necessary for a performance to take place: a subject doing something and a space within which to do it. These are the two characteristics I rely on when I employ the term performance. The subject doing something is the recipient of the text, the reader, or the viewer of a film. And the space in which the (reading, viewing) performance takes place is the page or the celluloid.

One of the most prolific and accessible performance researchers is theater studies scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte. Her work melds the art-historical approach with the theater studies concept of performance and investigates the dynamic relationship between the performer and the viewer. While positing, as art-historians have tended to posit, that the performer creates an artwork that is not separable from the performing body. Fischer-

Lichte considers the viewer's involvement in the spectacle as instrumental. The lines normally drawn between artist, artwork, and audience begin to blur when the definition of performance is removed from the strict actor/viewer dichotomy, and placed instead into a dynamic relationship, by which everyone present at the site of the event has an integral part and function. Fischer-Lichte's work welcomes the art-historical perspective with its focus on the person as artwork (Stiles 75-97), and she insists that a performance always has a transformative effect on the audience.

Fischer-Lichte's focus is on performances on the stage, and her main concern is a key question in performance studies: how do the performer and the audience interact and influence each other? The performer is not, in Fischer-Lichte's view, an object to be observed, but rather a participant as much transformed and involved in the action as the audience members. Experiencing the effect of a signified and cognitively recognizing its meaning are not mutually dependent. A performance can have an effect, in other words, without the viewer taking stock of that effect; meaning gets inscribed during and, at the very least, for the duration of the event. In most cases, partaking in an event leaves an impression on all participants and transforms them in some way.

According to Fischer-Lichte, a performance includes the active participation of several subjects – the artist(s) and the audience member(s). The active audience members, she further contends, are co-creators with the artists. The act of creation affects and transforms all participants in some manner. It is this act itself that constitutes the

artwork, which is thus fleeting and intangible and can take place anywhere.

These principles allow the art-historian to understand a performance piece, and they allow the literary scholar to read a performative text. But rather than looking at the meaning-making process from the artist's or creator's point of view, I shift my perspective onto the reader or recipient, making him or her the acting agent. In my view, then, a performative text implies actions take place between a participatory reader and the text itself; a participatory viewer and the film (the materiality of the frames) itself. I argue that text and reader (film and viewer) form a co-dependent relationship and interact on a performative level. By revising Fischer-Lichte's terms slightly to fit the interaction between text and reader, I reach the following conclusion: a performative text provides a playing field for performative meaning-making between text, film and reader(s), viewer(s). In a performative work, the active recipient is also the creator of meaning. The place of meaning creation is in the material element text (film), which can occur anywhere. With the help of modern technology, films can also be seen anywhere. My analyses of the performative nature of representative works written by *Wiener Gruppe* authors and films produced by Viennese experimental filmmakers are predicated on this definition.

My usage of the term "performative" literature and film is based on concepts of performativity that philosophers of language have been utilizing in their scholarly investigations since the 1960s. The term "performativity" is a linguistic derivation of

“performance.” It is an interdisciplinary term often used to name the capacity of speech and language, but also other forms of expressive non-verbal action, to bring about an effect in the course of human events. Theorist Della Pollock sees textual performativity as a fundamentally material engagement. A focus on the materiality, visuality, and textuality of a given text diverts attention from what the individual words alone and within their semantic co-text do or don’t mean, allowing the reader to focus on “the complex problem of how to mean in words [...]” (75). Performative texts are self-referential, they mean what they do, and performative literature participates in reality by highlighting its own materiality, often at the expense of semantic significance.

The term “performative” was introduced in a lecture by philosopher of language, John L. Austin. In his William James lectures at Harvard University in 1955 (published posthumously in 1962 as *How to do Things with Words*), Austin focused on a particular type of speech act which he called a “performative utterance” (6). A “performative utterance,” in Austin’s definition, describes situations in which saying something means doing something rather than simply reporting or describing reality. Austin developed a theory of performativity that focuses entirely on linguistic concerns and communication, rather than on the idea of embodiment, which is preferred by performance studies researchers. He postulated that when someone speaks a performative, he or she does not just make a statement, but also performs an action by means of that statement. Performative announcements stand in contrast to constative declarations, which are

descriptive and offer a statement that may be either true or false. "The promises, assertions, bets, threats, and thanks that we offer one another are [...] not linguistic description[s] of non-linguistic actions going on elsewhere: they are actions in *themselves*, actions of a distinctively linguistic kind" (Loxley 2; emphasis in the original).

Performative sentences do not describe or report and are thus neither true nor false; rather, they are part of an action or they themselves perform an action.¹³ Since a performative's primary function is to do something rather than to assert something, Austin suggested that its success at conveying information should be measured based on whether or not the intended act was in fact successfully achieved or not – whether, that is, it was a "felicitous" speech act or an "infelicitous" speech act. For example, if someone says "Close the window!" to another person, but the other person reacts incorrectly or not at all, then "Close the window!" is an infelicitous speech act. This would be an infelicitous speech act, because the utterance was unsuccessful in making the other person close the window. Austin divided speech acts into additional categories: the locutionary utterance is a performative statement such as a question or a statement with intent; the illocutionary speech act is a forceful locutionary utterance, such as a demand or an order; and the perlocutionary utterance is an illocutionary act with consequences for the listener, such as convincing, deterring, or misleading someone (Austin 109).

¹³ Austin revised this strict separation of constative and performative soon after he had proposed it, realizing that both elements are present to varying degrees any statement (Bucher 10 in the footnote).

These divisions bear no relevance to this dissertation. Nonetheless, Austin's discovery of speech acts deserves special mention because it is particularly significant that he focused attention away from the talking subject and onto the utterance itself and showed that saying something is, in fact, doing something. Consideration of the action element of a speech act shifts the interpretive emphasis from the speaker to the receiver and to the performative utterance itself. Austin's theory also confirms that the performative is an integral part of communicative interaction between two (or more) persons, and thereby establishes the notion of a speech act as a creative event. In terms of experimental literature, this means that the texts elicit a performance from the reader. The texts have an impact on the reader; challenge the reader to spring into action. The act of creation becomes the focus of the interaction, just as it does during a performance of bodies. The act of creation is transformative and constitutes an ethereal artwork that highlights the importance of the material aspect of literature.

Like Austin, to whom she refers, Fischer-Lichte also privileges the performative event, making it the pivot point around which the acting subjects (performers and audience) move. Art-historian Kristine Stiles explains the consequences for actor and audience that a performance entails: "Performance thus modifies the fixed relation between subjects and objects and between exhibition and reception by interjecting into an aesthetic frame performing and viewing subjects" (75). In literature, it is more difficult to argue for the existence of performing and viewing subjects, as a text is not

considered a subject, much less a performing subject.¹⁴ But this important conceptual shift, successfully achieved by Fischer-Lichte supports my claim, that texts are performative: the recipient “co-creator” (Fischer-Lichte’s term) of a literary text is the reader, and the “utterance” (Austin’s idiom) is the text itself. Both are integral in the meaning-making process that takes place between text and reader. Both text and reader are, in other words, needed for the performative act to occur. The meaning-making process is the event that allows me to call a text performative. Although encounters with a text, such as reading it or pondering it, may occur silently and thus imperceptibly to outsiders, they exist in same the way performances and speech acts exist, and they affect the reader.

With this focus on the text and the reader, I maintain, with Barthes, that the author responsible for the actual creation of a performative text (the artifact) is irrelevant for the performative reading act. Pollock distinguishes between mimetic realist writing and performative writing and considers the ludic interplay between author and reader as an important factor, and contends that creator’s performative powers spill over to the reader when he or she is composing a text.

Whereas a mimetic/realist perspective tends to reify absent referents in language, thus sustaining an illusion of full presence, a performative perspective tends to favor the generative and ludic capacities of language, and language encounters – the interplay of reader and writer in the joint production of meaning. It does not

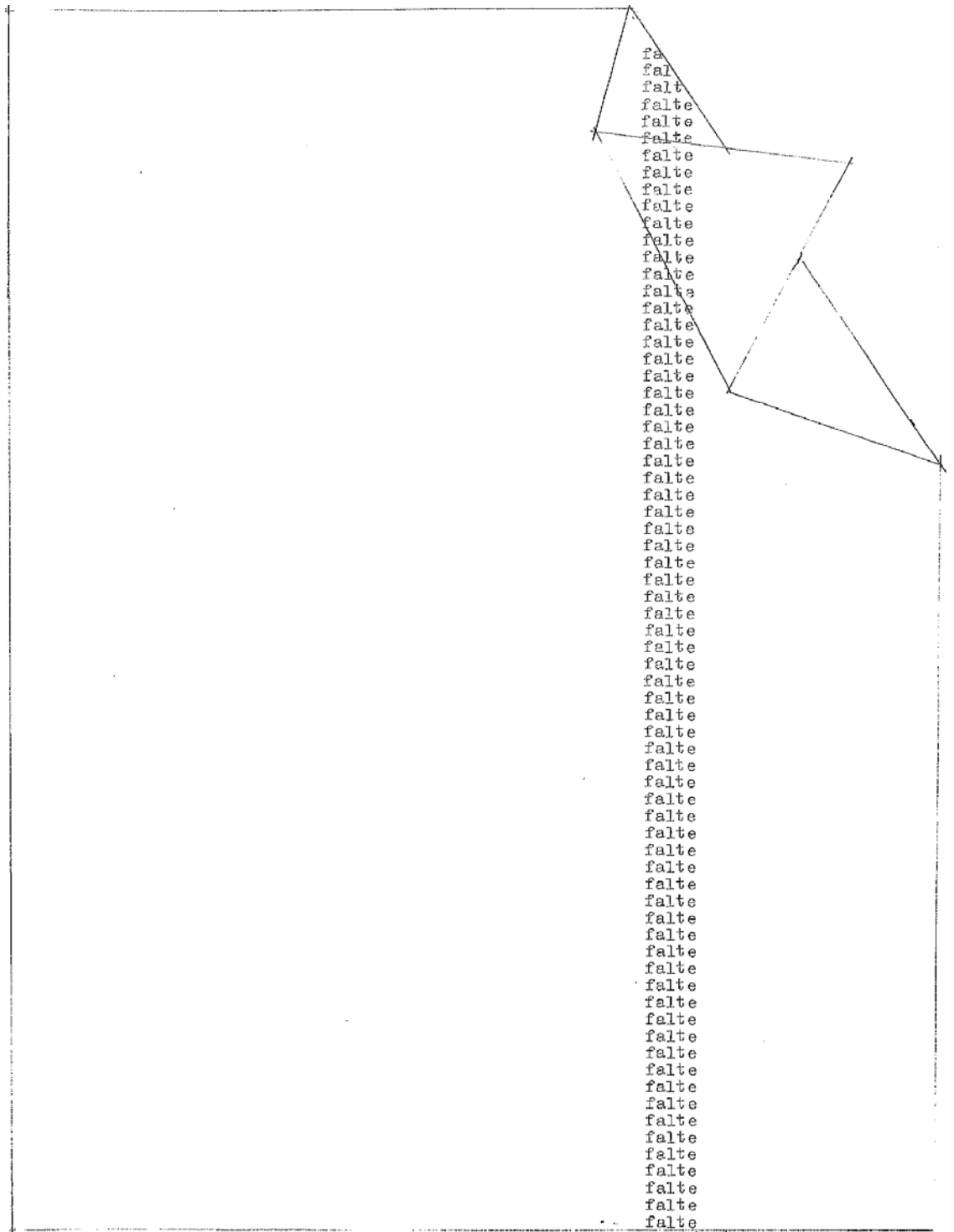
¹⁴ Austin excluded literature from his analysis of speech acts, but his theory is perfectly adaptable to the interactions between text and reader, and has been done so by literary scholars, for example S. Felman, M. Boletsi, H.J. Miller, E.W. Slinn.

describe, in a narrowly reportorial sense, an objectively verifiable event or process but uses language like paint to create what is self-evidently a *version* of what was, what is, and/or what might be (80; emphasis in the original).

However, in experimental literature, I argue, the reader plays with the text and not with what the author intended the text to say. The performative text is no longer an entity that was created and still is under the writer's spell. Experimental texts are embodied in their materiality which presents an interactive and transforming space. The page is materially and also ideologically an increasingly fluid space; as such, it determines, frames, and contains the types of performance that are enacted upon it and that it enacts.

Origami Text: "falte"

Gerhard Rühm's works are performative and material in many ways. A particularly innovative poem of his is called "falte" and was conceived some time between the years 1954 and 1957. "falte" (*die wiener gruppe* 476-477) makes evident that the page is a performative element with respect to its materiality and the author's engagement with this materiality.



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The poem is typed on a single page whose right upper corner has been “origamied.” It is folded twice; once in towards the center of the page and then back out again. The fold on top resembles a triangle (the physical corner of the page), while the fold underneath is shaped like a trapezoid. The obverse side of the page is this displayed as the trapezoid shaped part. The word “falte” (crease, fold) is typed horizontally one just once per line but over and over one exactly below the previous. The typed image resembles a column, from the top of the page all the way down to very bottom, indented about four centimeters from the right end of the page. But because of the fold, the page is no longer perfectly rectangular and page-like. When it is folded out again the three top “falte” words are not complete. The first word is reduced to two letters, “fa”; the second line has three letters, “fal”; the third line has four letters, “falt”; and the fourth one and all subsequent words then are spelled out in their entirety, “falte.” Lower case letters are used exclusively, which leaves the word open in terms of its grammatical function. It could be a noun, the fold, or it could be a verb in the first person singular active tense, (I) fold. If it is intended as noun, which would normally be indicated with a capital letter “F” at the beginning. Since this word is typed in all lower case letters, it would be logical to presume that it is intended to act as a verb and thereby indicate that some narrative I is doing the folding. But why would the verb “falten” be conjugated in the present tense when the page has already *been* folded? It is the page itself that answers this question. Because the upper corner is already pleated – that is, has been

pleated in the past – and because the creased corner, the fold, is the material evidence of that past event, the page tells the reader that the word “falte” must be intended as a noun after all, a descriptor for the state of the upper right corner of the page and the entire page – a page with a fold.

This poem not only beckons with its typed material in a grammatically ambivalent state, it also challenges the reader to be performative, that means, actually doing something (folding, unfolding). “falte” after all, can also be understood as the grammatical imperative, “fold!” The page, in other words, directly tells the reader to fold, thereby inviting the reader to open the creased corner, look underneath, and so become intimately acquainted with the page as entity. But when we look underneath, we see only the blank page – pure, untouched, white paper. We have been asked, we realize, to peek metaphorically under the pleated skirt of the page and see its nudity.

Extending the Concept of Performativity

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed the inception of inter-medial art practices, the focus in the materiality of art, and the processes of interweaving literature with other art forms such as fine arts, sculpture, and film.¹⁵ Many techniques and methods popular in those decades have now become historicized, but Rühm continues to remind us that the topics and questions pondered then are still relevant today. His work is defined by a principle

¹⁵ Roger Lüdeke and Erika Greber, eds., and Jörg Helbig.

called "Grenzüberschreitung," the idea of crossing boundaries and transgressing borders, particularly by use of intermedial strategies and the application of different artistic means and forms of expression across disciplines. As Rühm writes:

beim gegenwärtigen stand der gesamtkünstlerischen entwicklung ist es illusorisch zu fragen, ob es sich noch um dichtung oder schon musik, um musik oder graphic, um (mobile) plastik oder theatralische aktion handelt. die produktionen lassen sich nicht mehr in gesonderte disziplinen eingrenzen, die produzenten nicht mehr auf einen material- oder auf einen ausdrucksbereich festlegen. das interesse gilt vielmehr den problemen des ausdrucks und der vermittlung überhaupt, der material- und bewußtseinsweiterung."

(at the present point on the trajectory of artistic development, it is illusory to ask whether this is still poetry or already music, whether it is still music or already graphics, whether it is (mobile) sculpture or a theatrical performance (action). the works no longer allow neat categorization in separate disciplines, the producers no longer rely on a material or performative expression of their works. focus is placed on the problems of expression and transfer of information altogether, the increase of awareness of material and consciousness) (Rühm "Schriftzeichnungen" II).

This performative, writing-as-doing component of postwar Austrian avant-garde literature anticipates a novel way of making and perceiving art.

The Wiener Gruppe Authors as Performative Writers

der inhalt wird nicht mitgeteilt, sondern im vorgang des verstehens konstruiert und zwar durch die suche nach einer konstellation des inneren models, welche die wahrgenommenen entitäten [...] befriedigend abbilden kann.

(content is not being told but rather develops in the process of understanding when we search for constellations of an inner model which is able to satisfactorily depict the perceived entities [...].)
(Oswald Wiener)

The idea of notation implies, if not demands, performance. Virtually any form of writing is a kind of notation and any form of reading is a type of performance. [...] At the same time, notation is not a static body of conventions, but a nexus between large areas of contemporary art practice.
(Karl Young 49)

I am focusing on the interaction between the performative text and its reader, within a performative space. The meaning of the text is created during the engagement of the recipient with the document. If the space is furnished with a genealogy, that is, a creator, restrictions for interpretation would arise. A genealogy, after all, encourages the recipient to take into consideration the circumstances of the author during the process of creation. Outside knowledge about a text places it within the system from which it emerged and forecloses an innocent meeting of participants on neutral ground. In a text

where the author and any other extraneous information are unknown, the encounter between reader and text in the performative playing field occurs unencumbered and allows the recipient to become a co-creator of meaning. Performance and interpretation happen within that which is on the page and in the mind of the reader: “der inhalt wird nicht mitgeteilt, sondern im vorgang des verstehens konstruiert” (content is not being told but rather develops in the process of understanding) (Wiener qtd. in Schmatz 40).

As much as linguistic and rhetoric strategies create movement and cause action within texts, they also serve as catalysts for performative literature. For Pollock performativity means something fundamentally material. Performative writing is a discursive practice that emphasizes textuality and visualizes the materiality of what is on the page. The ideas of textuality, visuality, and materiality, according to Pollock, draw “us away from questions of what words do or don’t mean into the complex problem of *how to mean* in words [...]” (Pollock 75).

Performative texts are self-referential: they don’t describe a reality, they *are* the reality. Reading is a performative act, and like any performative act, it is a fleeting and intangible process that must be experienced. The act of reading a performative text makes the reader a participant. As performance artist Joseph Beuys famously said, everyone is an artist.

Radically experimental poems, like the *Wiener Gruppe* texts destroy any discursive categories and links to the accepted social use of language. These texts defy

classification; they do not fit into any one discursive medium (genre, discipline) within which the reader can situate them in order to access more information about them. The experimental text is purely self-referential precisely because it cannot be placed within a meta-language: it contains no points of reference to the so-called real world, which we understand by means of a socially constructed language. The experimental text challenges its reader to look beyond that language and enter a performative space in which to create meaning. By withholding any potential reference to language as it is understood within the linguistic system, the text allows the meaning-making to take place between the reader and itself. The performative act occurs in the space that opens after the reader's eye has recognized the symbols on a page but before his or her mouth can utter a response. Text and reader are already intimately engaged during the performative reading act.

In a statement that relies purely on symbols (for example, a description for description's sake, a random list, a word-arrangement, a non-linguistic character, a figure, an icon, a pictogram), the literary language becomes fragmented and dislocated because it cannot adapt to the pure, essential, grammatical language scheme. When faced with a self-contained, non-narrative poem such as Achleitner's repetition

“rot/anstatt”

rot
anstatt
rot
anstatt
rot
anstatt
rot
anstatt
rot
anstatt
rot

(red / instead)

or his dialect tautology,

wos na ge
ge na wos
na wos ge
ge wos na
wos ge na
na ge wos¹⁶

the reader’s interpretive focus is guided neither by textual references nor by the author.

Because the co-texts in these linguistic phrases do not contribute to semantic understanding, the reader is forced to step out of a reading tradition that relies on information visible on the page. The reader’s search for meaning must thus take place solely between the reader and the text, between which a performative space opens up.

¹⁶ “wos,” “na,” and “ge” are exclamations of amazement in Viennese dialect that translate to: “what?” “no!” “truly?”

Naming, attributing, and categorizing in order to find meaning will not reveal the text's intention. The individual who engages with material freed of the societal circumstances within which it was written is able to experience surprise.

Performing Sound: Breathing and Buzzing Out Loud

Rühm elaborates on the artificiality of signs as invisible tools. Language, he contends, has become invisible due to daily use for as long as modern man has existed. It is no longer recognized as a separate entity in its own right, but unquestioningly used as a means to convey information to someone within the same language community. The invisibility of language becomes evident when we try to communicate in an environment foreign to our own language, where our words no longer achieve the desired – and indeed expected – effect because they cannot be deciphered and understood. Suddenly, one recognizes the independence and arbitrary constructedness of signs. Rühm reminds us that language has become self-evident because of its continual and unreflected use in communication. He points out that in consenting to certain rules and conventions that shift our focus away from the powerful expressivity of language's materiality and visibility toward implicit meaning and uncritical usage, we dismiss the independence of each individual letter.

die zeichen der sprache – laute bzw. buchstaben – deren wir uns bei der kommunikation bedienen, sind uns im gebrauch so selbstverständlich geworden, dass wir sie als solche kaum noch wahrnehmen. ihr konventioneller zweck verstellt ihre eigenart [...] erst die lautdichtung und die visuelle poesie haben sie

als eigenwertiges Ausdrucksmittel zum Bewusstsein gebracht.

(the ciphers of language – sounds, letters – that we use to communicate have, through their continual use, become so self-evident that we hardly recognize them as such. their conventional purpose hides their singularity [...] only through sound poetry and visual poetry have they regained their uniqueness as means of expression) (*Ophelia* 248).

In the artistic realm, language can be made visible through sound or images. The sonic effect of language can be harvested to make its individual components visible.

Rühm's "atemgedicht," or breathing poem, performs not just an action that refers to a bodily equivalent but also brings to light the concreteness and independence of the letter "h." Through onomatopoeia, the reader's attention is guided toward the singularity of the letter as something other than just a building block used to create words. The individual letter, the unique sign, is finally recognized as independent. On the representational level, the sound this letter makes when voiced is understood as a sign of life in the widest sense – that which breathes and lives.

(ein- und ausatmen:) (breathing in, breathing out:)

h

h

h

h

h

h

h

h

h

h

(*Gesammelte Texte* 25).

While the “atemgedicht” focuses on conveying human sounds, Rühm employed a similar method to convey the sounds of nature. His “summen” poem is only effective and affective when it is sounded out loud; performed acoustically, it elicits images of bumble bees or other flying insects that make buzzing noises. Instead of writing a traditional poem about bees, Rühm focuses exclusively on the sonic dimension in order to evoke rich individual, subjective, and original associations in the reader.

sum en

es

um n

sen

u f

sum

su em

n

fu sen

es

e

sem

fun

u

um

nes

ef

me

us

(Rühm *Gesammelte Texte* 27)

One way of communicating with others is through basic sounds. When sounds are voiced, intonation, accentuation, timbre, and body language carry meaning to the recipient. In traditional written poetry, gesticulation, cadence, inflection, and so on cannot be sufficiently conveyed to allow the reader to perceive and understand them on his or her own, purely individual and subjective terms. Instead, the reader must rely on the text and the “pre-made” meaning implicit in the words. Committing single sounds to paper, as Rühm has done in his “atemgedicht” and “summen” text, gives a visual impression of how poor language actually is in conveying meaning.

Konrad Bayer was particularly interested in the effect a common language has on an individual’s subjectivity. He arrived at the conclusion that ultimately pure subjectivity cannot be expressed through words. Prolific and renowned Bayer scholar Ulrich Janetzki writes that Bayer doubted that a consensual language could in any way express individual, unique sentiments.

Man verfällt einzig der Suggestion der Sprache, die einen glauben macht, es gäbe so etwas wie Subjektivität und Individualität des Menschen. Sprache ist für Konrad Bayer Wiedergabe von Vorgesagtem, Vorgeformtem. Kommunikation fordert zweckgerichtetes Verstehen. Aber sobald sich ein Konsens gebildet hat, ist das Moment reiner Individualität nicht mehr gegeben. Kommunikation verlangt also notwendig die Ausgrenzung von Subjektivität.

(One falls prey to language’s suggestion that there is such a thing as human subjectivity and individuality. For Konrad Bayer, language is the replaying of pre-thought thoughts, pre-made thought. Communication demands goal-oriented understanding. But as soon as there is consensus, the moment of pure individuality has vanished. Communication demands the exclusion of subjectivity) (“es gibt nichts “34-35).

The *Wiener Gruppe* authors rebelled against that part of the normative system,

prevalent in Austrian society and politics, situated at the fulcrum of author and text. In order to derive meaning from a text, a reader must take into consideration the linguistic consensus of his or her language community; this forces him or her to abandon individuality and practice goal-oriented engagement with the text. But when the author is inconsequential and the text no longer consists of words situated in their context that let's the reader forget its material, visual, and sonic characteristics, but rather draws attention to precisely its materiality, visuality, and sound. It no longer channels consensus into a proscribed direction, and the reader can insert his or her subjectivity into the text.

Experimental texts with semantically "odd" word arrangements do not rely on consensus because they do not lend a feeling of familiarity. In other words, the more that is known about the genealogy of a text, the less the reader can break free from the normalizing prefabricated reality that surrounds it and influences its interpretation. Through creating experimental, performative texts, authors denounce the meaning-making machine (the rules of grammar and syntax), take words out of their context, and leave the creation unnamed, pure, and unencumbered by linguistic-restrictive forces. This aspect will be discussed further at the end of Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Experiments With Content and Form

After outlining the socio-political situation in Austria during the years following World War Two in Chapter One, and conceptualizing the tools with which to understand their literature in Chapter Two, Chapter Three focuses on the visual experiments with language of the *Wiener Gruppe* authors and takes a brief look at experimental film from the late 1950s and early 1960s. The conclusion will be that, by their radical experimentation, postwar avant-garde authors and filmmakers aim to draw attention to the materiality, visuality, and performativity of their works, establishing experimental literature and film as individual art forms, writing-as-writing and film-as-film. In conclusion, I argue that, because of the radicality with which these works abandon ties to traditional and normative structures and disappoint audience expectations, they present a stealth critique of language, culture, and society in the context of the “grand narratives,” the stories that make up the “invisible structurations,” the underlying grid which supports society, and that their most non-narrative works point to the “turtles”¹ upon which human interaction and our conception of society and the world rest.

First, I concentrate on two examples of visual experimental texts from the early

¹ The reference comes from the “thick description” concept in Clifford Geertz’ *The Interpretation of Cultures*: “There is an Indian story [...] about an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on a turtle, asked [...], what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down” (28-29). I thank Professor V.Y. Mudimbe for acquainting me with this story.

1960s, representing experiments with language but without words. Second, I will point to parallels in experimental film, as created in the very same socio-cultural context and society. In my analysis, these works are discussed from a semiotic perspective, always keeping in view their materiality, visuality, and performativity. And third, I cogitate on what I claim to be the underlying critique implicit in the radicality of the texts and films launched in the experiments of literature and film – a critique launched at the invisible grand narratives that govern society’s self-understanding from below, invisibly, stealthily, imperceptibly. One such overarching story attacked by postwar experimental literature is the pervasive belief that language is a neutral tool that can be used to express exactly what we mean. I have already shown in Chapter Two that this is a fallacy which the *Wiener Gruppe* textual and visual experiments call out. The second grand narrative I will be discussing is the belief that the author is a genial creator and the author has final authority over the text. The last and most targeted critique is launched at the grand narrative that Austria is a nation where the world is perfect. I call this the “heile Welt” grand narrative.

In the first section of this chapter, I investigate two individual visual experiments composed by *Wiener Gruppe* writers. In my analysis, I begin with the typewritten study titled “ao” composed by Konrad Bayer in March 1962, followed by Achleitner’s typogram “o-i-studie” from 1960. I am concentrating my attention on these works for several reasons. They stem from a time when the most determined intermedial

experimentation with text and images took place. The works were selected because of their unconventional presentation and their un-readability using hermeneutic reading practices traditionally employed to understand written signs. In this, they most radically challenge pre-existing concepts of what a text is, as well as the expectations of the readers. These works occupy a distinct place in the historical spectrum of experimental literature as important and necessary links to a new aesthetic developing in the second half of the twentieth century – performance art. In the second section of this chapter, I review two seminal films of the filmic postwar avant-garde, Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960) and Kurt Kren's *Mauern-positiv-negativ und Weg* (1961) and their relationship to materiality, visuality, and performativity.

Squares and Frames: Experiments in Form

*Laßt uns das Quadrat betrachten,
denn das ist dem Geist gesund.
Höher müssen wir es achten
als den Kreis, der gar zu rund.*

(Let us ponder the square, because doing so is healthy for the spirit. We have to hold it in higher esteem than the circle, which is too round.)
(Johannes Trojan)²

The visual works composed by Bayer ("ao") and Achleitner ("o-i-studie") draw

² Qtd. in Riha *Prämoderne* 167.

attention to the page, to the surface material, in that they make it appear three dimensional through their typing method and layout, the use of space on the page. It is this visual aspect that is one of the first noticed by the reader. If something stands out from its surroundings through a distinct structure it becomes recognizable as something different and receives special attention. Visuality then has always been a factor in poetry. In experimental avant-garde poetry, visibility begins to assume a much larger role in the composition of a poem. The strophic form is abandoned in favor of works that are experiments in form, works that by their open structure permit approaching the text on its terms.

An early and the most prominent visual, poetic, and semantic construction part of the twentieth century modernist avant-garde which was conceived by the French modernist poet Stéphane Mallarmé in his visual poem from 1897 "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira les hazard (A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance)." "Un coup de dés" is a semantically coherent poem, its words are typed across several pages in differing letter sizes and typesets. The aim of this technique is to defamiliarize language by pointing out its individual visible semantic components – the words. Such avant-garde experiments disallow the reader to remain detached and objective, and yet demand active engagement with the text. Literary critic Steve Padley writes that avant-garde poetry's characteristics are free verse, a turning away from traditional meter, rhyme, and the expected stanzic structure, all of which makes a poem recognizable as

such, as Benn declared in his 1958 Marburg lecture. Padley writes:

Avant-garde poetry is characterized by an emphasis on free verse [...] Typographical arrangement of words on the pages assumes primary importance [...] Linguistic innovation, explored through syntactic experimentation and the juxtaposition of incongruous concepts and images [...] performance of various kinds is crucial to the full realization and effect of the works by poets (70).

Theater studies scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte postulates, referring to performance art, that the use of the “correct formulae” does not guarantee a “successful” performance. In terms of experimental literature, this means that the application of “correct formulae,” in this case the grammar, syntax, meter, and rhyme, do not guarantee a “successful” (comprehensible) performative text (*Ästhetik* 29). Several other non-language based requirements will have to be met otherwise the poem fails and remains pure utterance disconnected from the prevailing decoding system used in a given society. The conditions for success of a traditional poem are not only linguistic, but they are above all institutional and social conditions. In experimental poetry all those “correct formulae” are thrown over board, which requires from the reader a shift in approach and conceptualization of the work right from the start.

“ao” Experiment

What Johannes Trojan calls “zu rund” (too round) is one of the elements sought out in Konrad Bayer’s “ao” experiment from 1961 (*die wiener gruppe* 172). But it is not the most visually apparent. Although Bayer’s typogram titled “ao” consists of letters from the Latin alphabet, the two typed signs, the vowels “a” and “o” and their arrangement on the page do not allow meaning-making and understanding of the work by reading them from left to right and top to bottom, as western readers are trained to do. The reduction of language to its smallest pictorial (the letter) and audible (the phoneme) unit creates a self-referential text. Within a tight, almost mathematical, framework, the typogram presents seven different arrangements of “a” and “o.”

a a a a a a
a a a a a a
a a a a a a
a a a a a a
a a a a a a
a a a a a a
a a a a a a

o o o o o o
o o o o o o
o o o o o o
o o o o o o
o o o o o o
o o o o o o
o o o o o o

o o o o o o
o o o o o o
o o o o o o
o o o a o o
o o o o o o
o o o o o o
o o o o o o

a a a a a a
a a a a a a
a a a a a a
a a a o a a
a a a a a a
a a a a a a
a a a a a a

a a a o a a
a a a o a a
a a a o a a
o o o o o o
a a a o a a
a a a o a a
a a a o a a

a o a o a o
o o o o o o
a o o o o o
o o o o o o
a o o o o o
o o o o o o
a o a o a o

a o a o a o
o a o a o a
a o a o a o
o a o a o a
a o a o a o
o a o a o a
a o a o a o

The whole poem is centered in the middle of the page, has seven verses, each of which is a perfect square, made up of either a single vowel or some combination of both. Each strophe is seven vowels wide and seven high. All seven verse-squares are stacked on top of each other with the exact same distance between each, and from afar they resemble one tall column in the middle of an otherwise blank page. The image is reminiscent of a very rudimentary and very tightly structured poem, where all lines have the same length, width, and number of letters. The entire text is meticulously uniform and angular, stretching vertically down the length of the page, leaving a 3.5 cm margin on the top and on the bottom, and 9.5 cm on the left and right side. The letters are all lower-case and typed in black ink on a white sheet using a traditional typewriter.

The first verse-square consists of seven lines with seven columns made up of "a," altogether forty-nine lower-case "a." Directly below at a distance of 0.8 cm (or the width of two rows of letters) follows the next perfect verse-square exactly like the one above but with forty-nine lower-case "o." The third stanza looks like the previous, but at the center resides one "a," which means it is made of forty-eight "o" and one "a." The fourth arrangement is an inversion of the third verse, forty-eight "a" and one letter "o" in the middle. Following these four comes a different constellation, made up of a cross of "o" in the middle of the square with the rest of the letters being "a." This means there are four small squares of three by three letters "a" and a vertical line of seven "o" through the middle, as well as a line of seven "o" dividing the image horizontally. Thirty-five "a"

and thirteen "o" make up this square. The sixth stanza represents a more elaborate pattern. Letters "a" and "o" are interspersed on all four sides like a frame, and the middle is filled with five rows and five columns for a total of twenty-five "o." The outer most top and bottom rows of letters and the outer most column of letters to the right and to the left alternate between twelve "a" and twelve "o." The seventh and last verse consists entirely of alternating "a" and "o." The letters are shifted such that two of the same letters are never side by side. This square hosts twenty-five letters "a" and twenty-four "o."

The uniformity of the text is striking and bewildering. Looking at it closely, as one does, when one reads a poem, there is nothing that offers linguistic meaning. Even reading it out loud does not aid in making sense. This makes me wonder why the letters "a" and "o" were chosen. "a" and "o" are vowels, they can be voiced with a minimum of effort and stay true to themselves, they need no other letter to be sounded. The consonant "m" for example needs the vowel "e" to be vocalized as "em." The use of "a" and "o" contributes again to variation in harmony with the least amount of effort. Both letters are round with but a slight change in appearance, but overall they create a uniform and positive appearance. A round shape is more pleasing to the eye than a shape with sharp edges, and it offsets the rigidity of the square format of the individual strophes of the poem. "a" and "o" both are circles and both have a center. The center of a circle lies of course in the middle as its anchor. The poem is anchored around its middle,

the fourth of the seven stanzas. Symmetry is a visible characteristic of this experiment. "a" and "o" also represent symmetry in its most reduced and effortless form. These letters signal completeness in their perfect roundness, as much as the entire poem signifies completeness with its formal perfection. Each stanza has its own structure and bears within it its own symmetry. The first square from the top maximal variation is achieved with a minimum of effort, only two letters in terms of visibility, between the extremes of "a" and "o" with representative types of mixtures, not all possible variations are shown, but several visually pleasing examples, again focused on symmetry, are given.

Visually, the text is a parody of the structure of a poem. Seven is a number with a center (four). The poem is very geometrical, very rigid, concrete and pictorial. It looks like a tower of several variations with just two letters. It is a minimalist construction, reduced to the minimum, but in the attempt to get maximum expression from it, like the binary code used for information processing in units in all electronic devices. Two allows recombination and expression of unlimited amounts of information at a minimum of effort. I would call this the visual prototype of a poem – it has letters, arranged like words, in blocks arranged like stanzas. Its form suggests linearity, that means it would be readable from top left to bottom right, but there is no semantic content. One might interpret that "ao" was meant to represent the ideal poem (as a maximal reduction, but possibly also in the sense of a generalization), or the ultimate

poem (a final conclusion), after which nothing can be added because everything has already been said. Its text is representative of any text, an association which is both supported by the ideal form as well as the combination of “a” and “o” (as alpha and omega) in a perfectly symmetrical form of seven times seven. From the ultimate reduction possible in terms of semantics (two units of information, a and o, comparable to the 0 and 1 of the binary code), a maximum of variation with minimum of input is demonstrated.

Are there decorative elements, aesthetics? Yes. Was it made (only) to be aesthetic? No. Rather, seven is an ideal choice because in mathematical language it is defined as prime number, it is divisible only by itself or by one. Seven has a center, the number four. If one draws an arrangement of seven images in a column, it is small enough to have visual impact that fits on one page to be a representative of a poem in form. In other words, while experiencing the image, it is rather the visual aspect that counts at first. In analogy, “a” and “o” could also be identified as having been selected for their visual properties rather than in relation to any meaning-making process. These would be the aesthetic, visual aspects of the text.

On the content level, yes, this experiment too has content, I cannot help myself, but to be reminded of the significance of the number seven. Nowhere in the poem is it represented graphically, neither as a number nor written out in any language, yet, it is ever-present in the work. I have already mentioned the seven stanzas and counting the

vowels shows that each square is exactly seven letters high and seven letters wide. Altogether in the entire text, there are 170 "a"s and the exact same number of "o"s, which does not seem very revelatory. More interesting is the fact that we have seven verses with seven by seven letters each, which gives each verse-square exactly forty-nine letters. The signs a and o correspond to A and Ω, the beginning and the end, respectively the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, similar to the English or German alphabet with A and Z as the beginning and the end of the alphabet.

The number seven and the signs A and Ω come immediately to mind as elements of great biblical significance. What does this connection mean; could the poem be used as a commentary on the bible? In the last book of the New Testament Jesus claims several times in Revelation (1:8, 21:6, 22:13): "I am the A and Ω" the beginning and the end. If someone (something) is the beginning and end there can be nothing outside, it is the ultimate representation of the perfect circle and also the letter "o." The cat that bites its own tail. From the "Seven Days of Genesis" to the "Seven Seals of Revelation," the Pentateuch is also saturated with references to the number seven. It is impossible to miss, as it is introduced in the first chapter: "And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested" (Genesis 2:2). It is repeated also in the Book of Exodus: "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day" (20:8). The seventh day is called Sabbath in the Jewish tradition and Sunday in the Catholic, and it

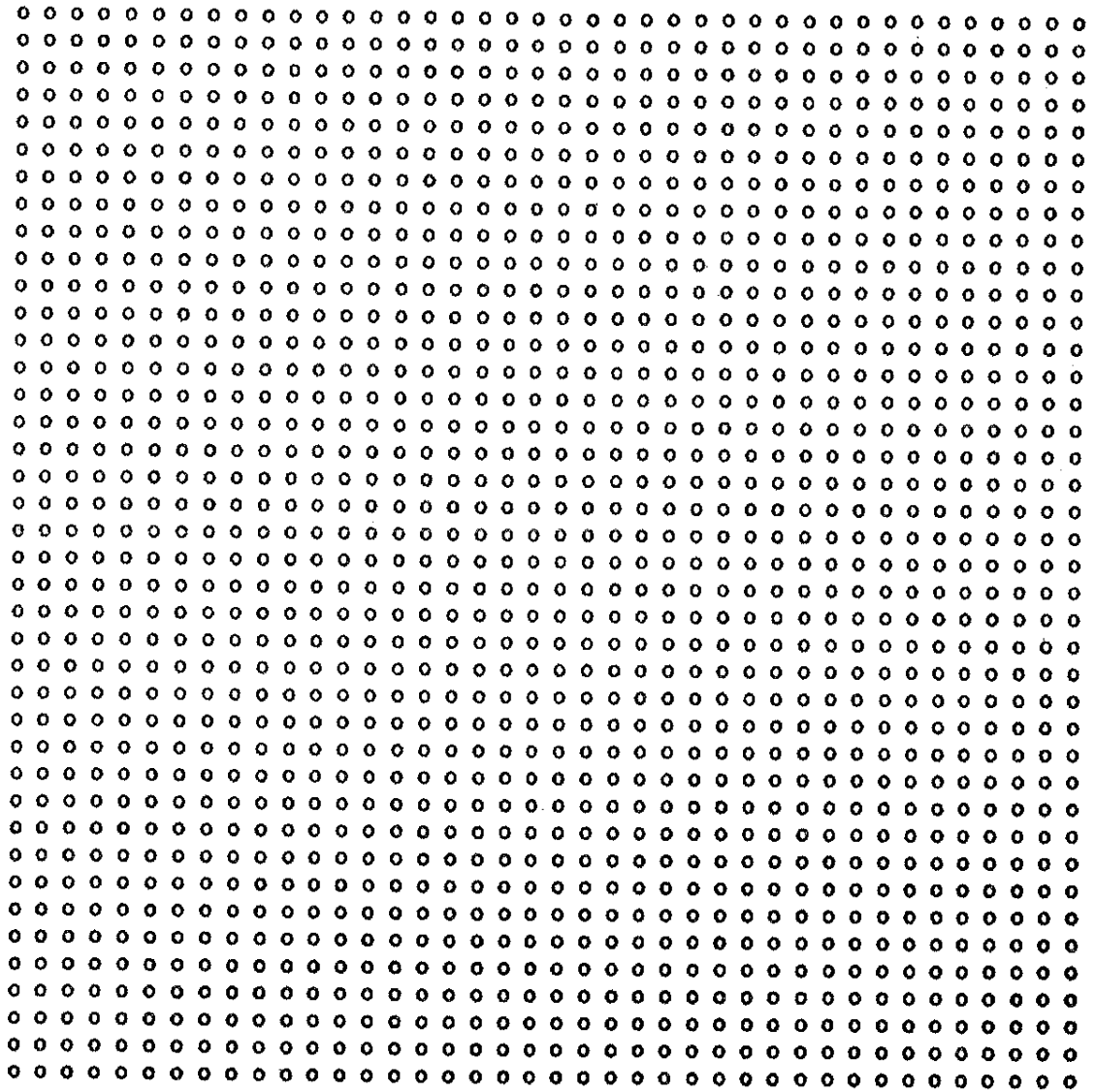
is the day when six days of labor have been completed and man must rest. Several times in the Old Testament it is mentioned: "for six days you shall labor and do all your work" (Exodus 20:9, Exodus 34:21, and Deuteronomy 5:13). Seven is introduced as a symbol of completion of the initial creative act, and it returns at the end in the last book with the "seven angels spreading the seven last plagues; because in them is filled up the wrath of God." (Revelation 16:17) And as addressed above, in the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation, the number seven receives ultimate importance, as there are seven seals which all bring about the end of the world. The seven seals are opened one by one and reveal four horsemen bringing conquest, war, famine, and death, the fifth seal unveils a vision of all martyrs who have died in the name of God. A great earthquake and the marking of 144,000 servants of God spring from the sixth seal, and the seventh seal reveals seven angels who bring destruction upon the world. Not only is seven a sign of complete creation, it is also the cue for complete destruction. Seven times seven then reiterates the significance of the sense of completeness. In the "Year of the Jubilee," at the completion of seven times seven years, all land is freed and returned to its original owners, says Leviticus 25:10. But the seven angels with the seven trumpets appear from the seventh seal to announce the end of mankind. As thus illustrated, the biblical associations are quite numerous.

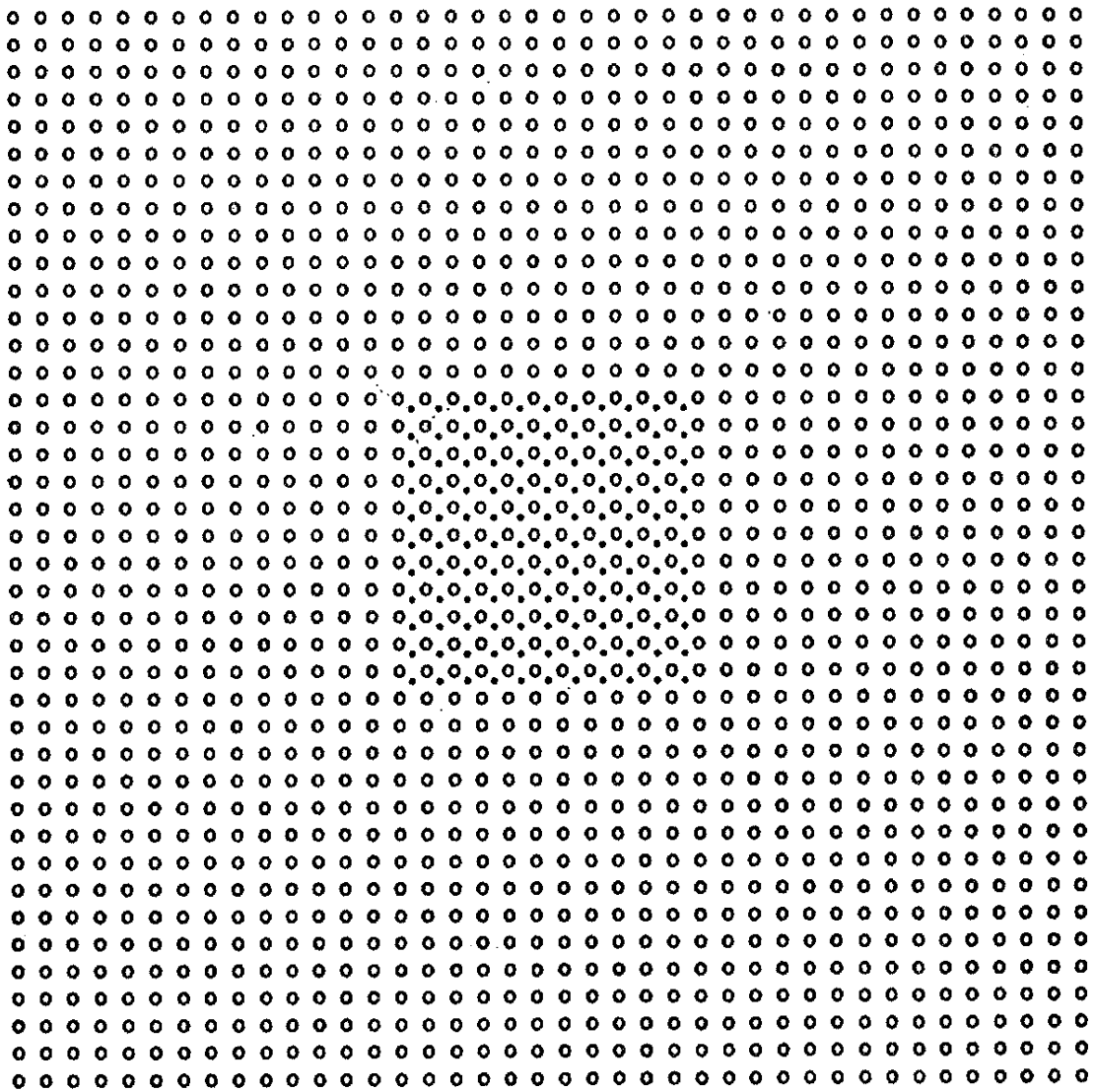
The question remains: why was the number seven chosen? The reader's field of play in this poem is so rich that I could blissfully go on making associations, inserting

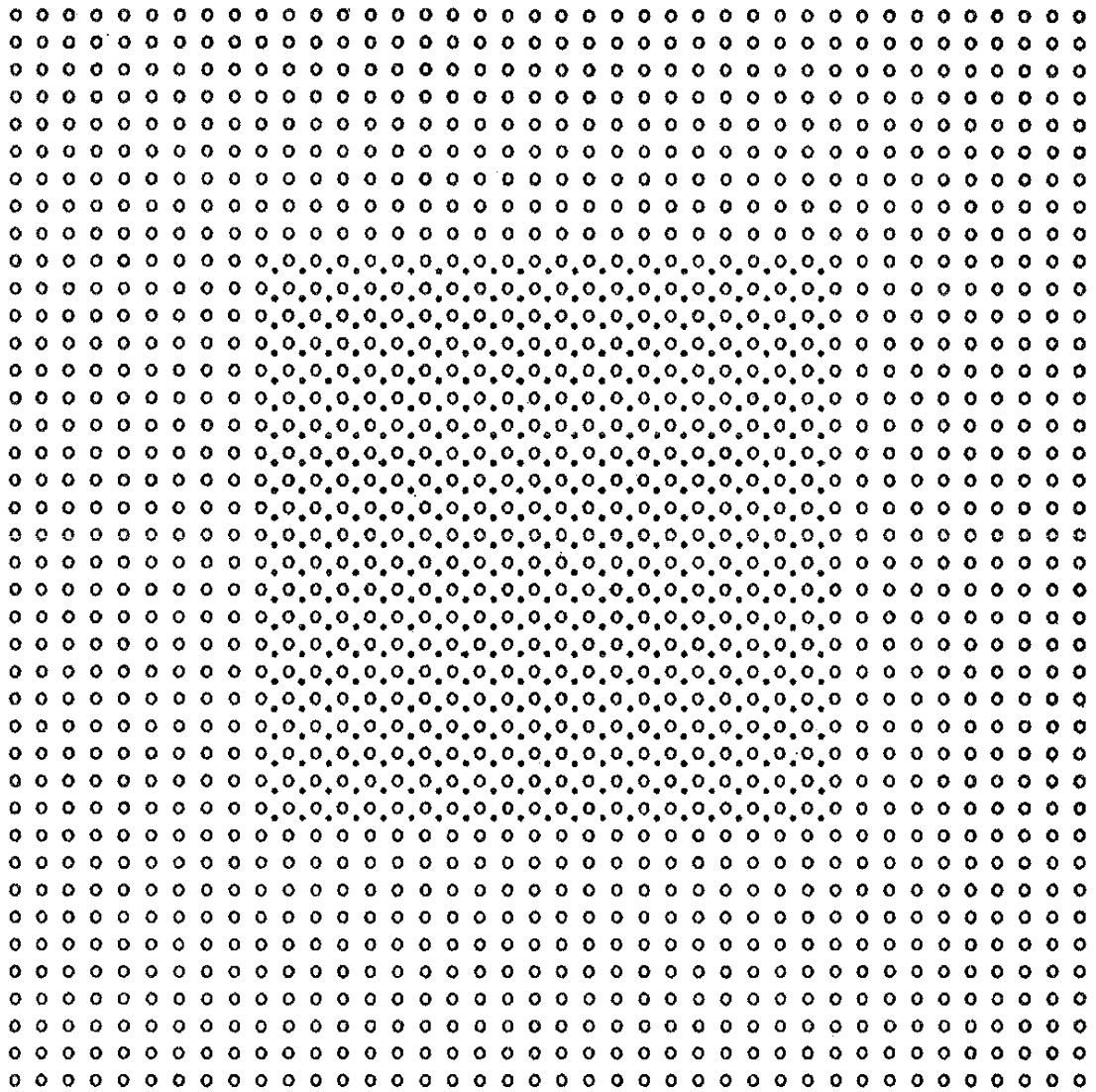
my subjectivity and individuality performatively into this experimental work.

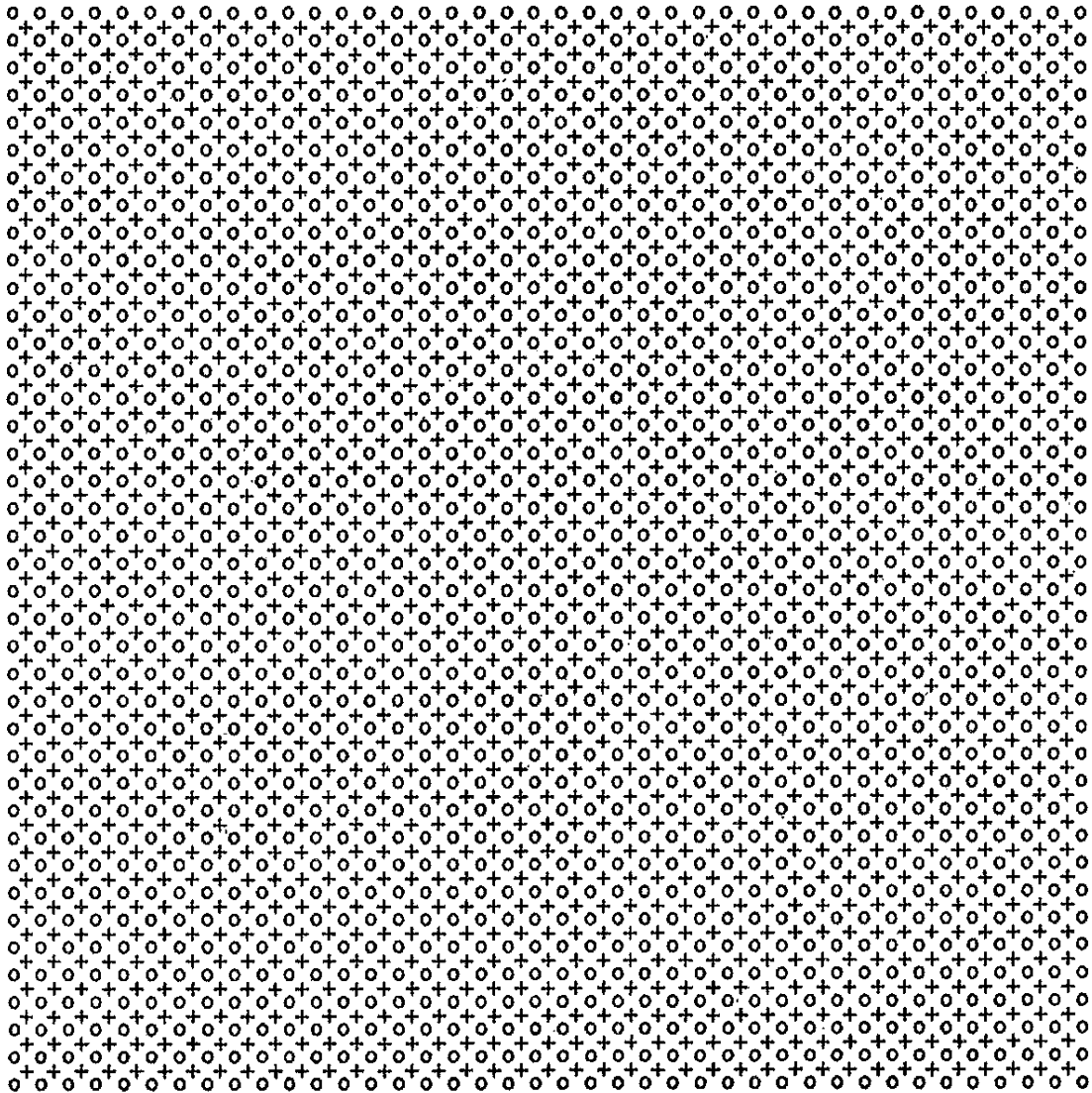
“o-i-studie” Experiment

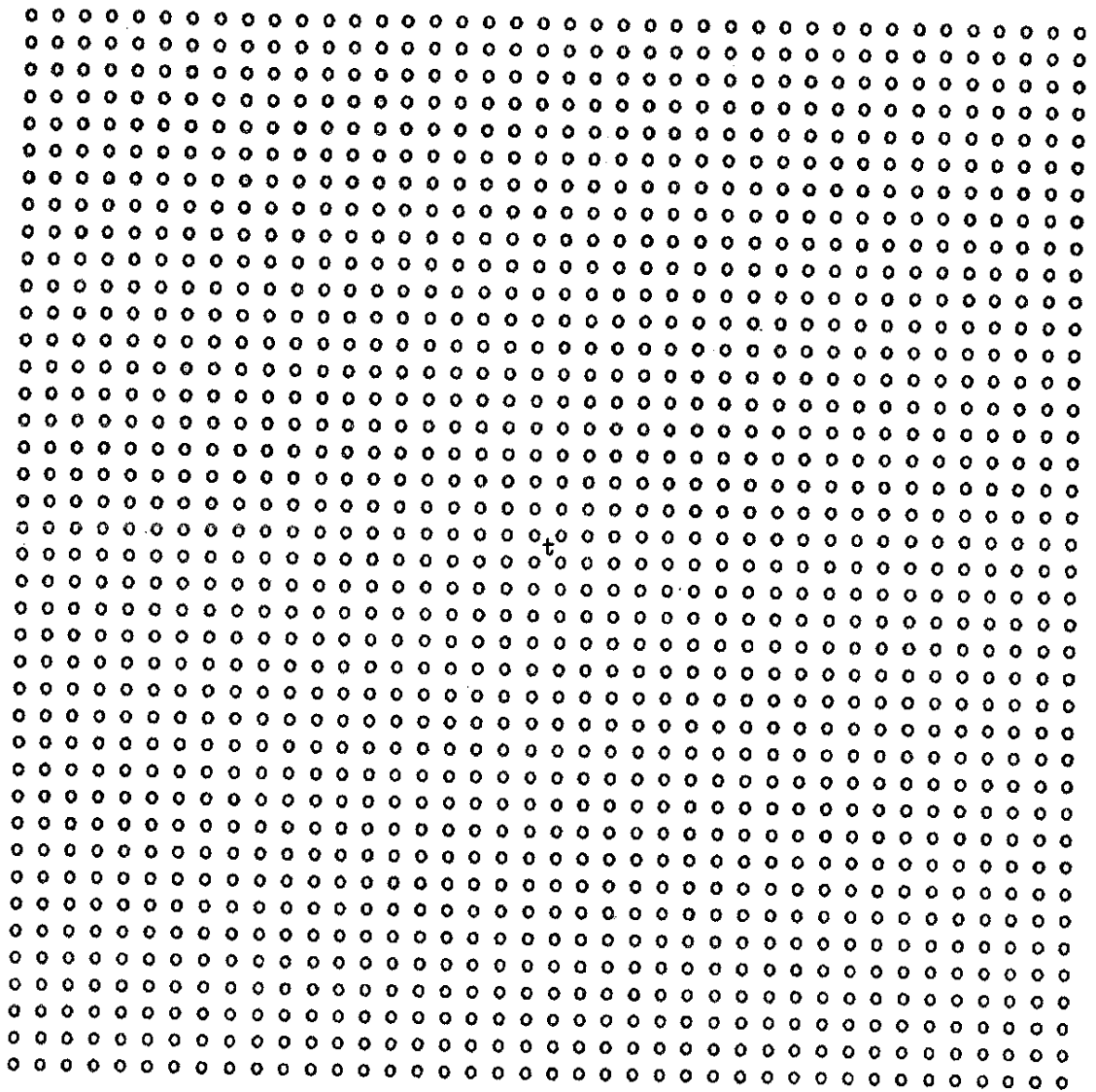
One of Achleitner’s representative typewriter studies is called “o-i-studie” (*die wiener gruppe* 138-147), composed in 1960. It is a ten page long black and white typogram, that consists entirely of the letters “o” and “i” interspersed with dots, plus signs, and one letter “t.” All ciphers are typed in black ink, all pages are white, and all individual characters are completely evenly typed and in perfect symmetry and in the same size on each page making up large squares filled with characters. Each page shows one square image made of some variation of the signs. The letter-filled squares on each page are centered and have the same dimensions.

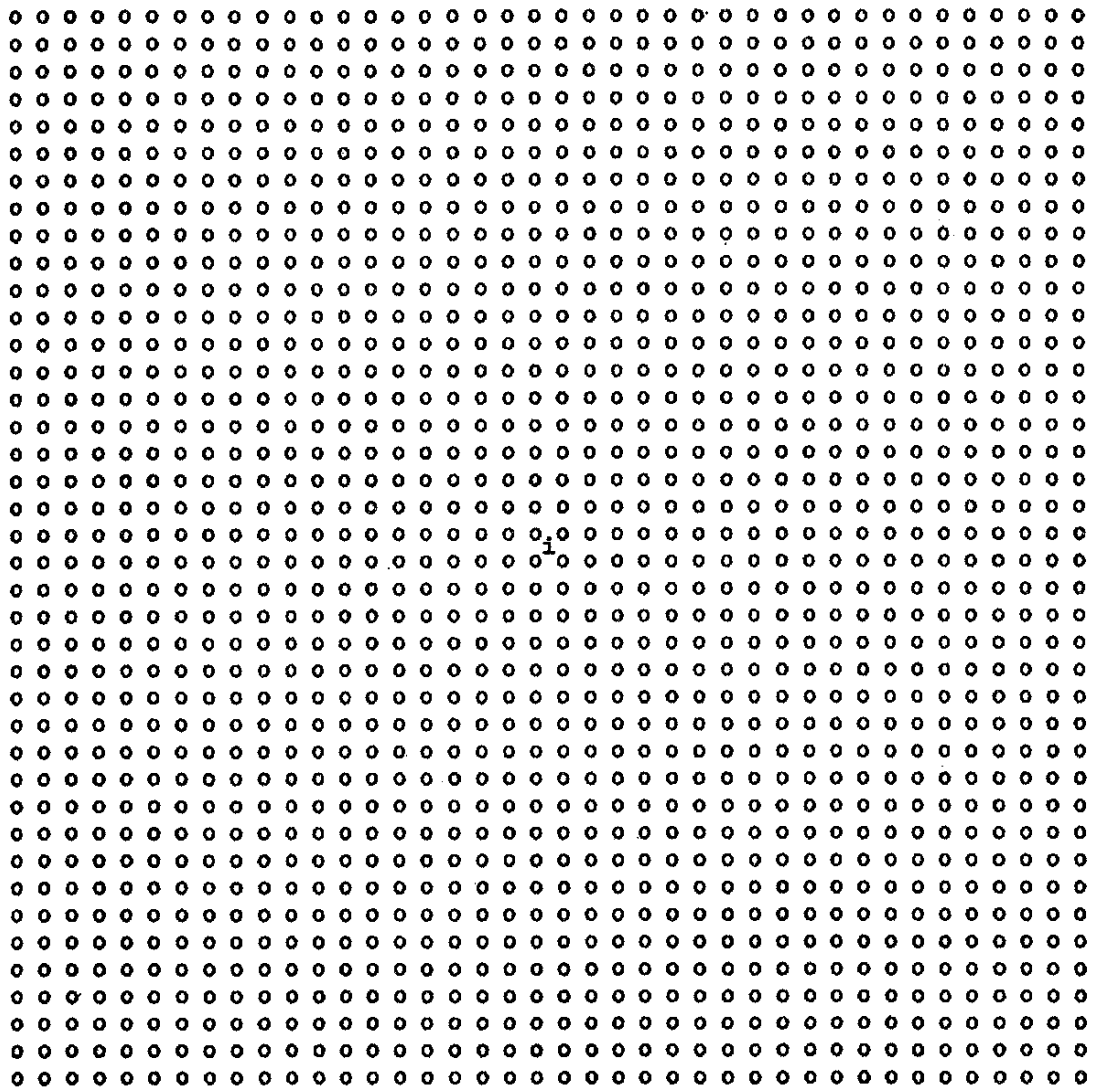


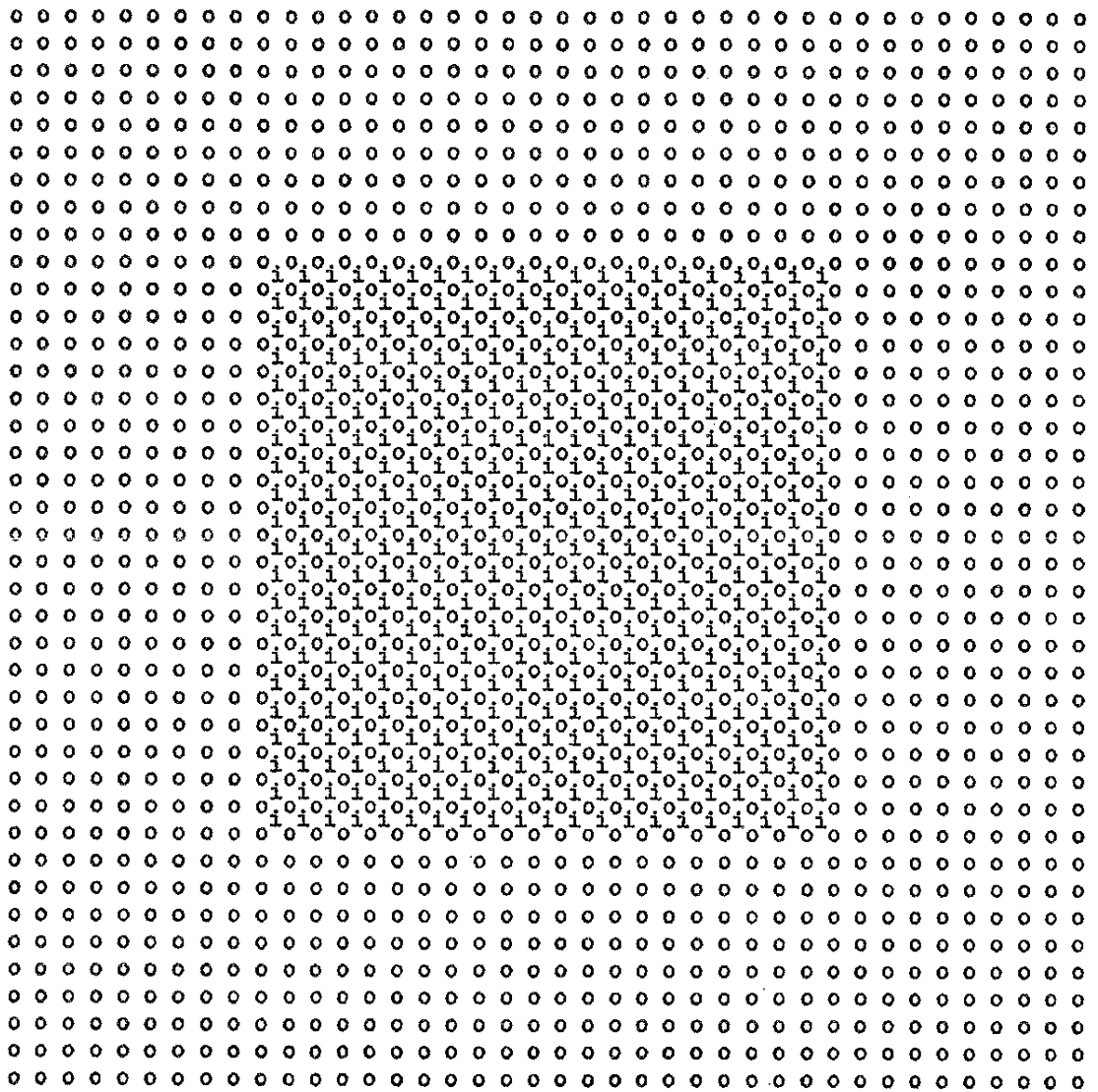


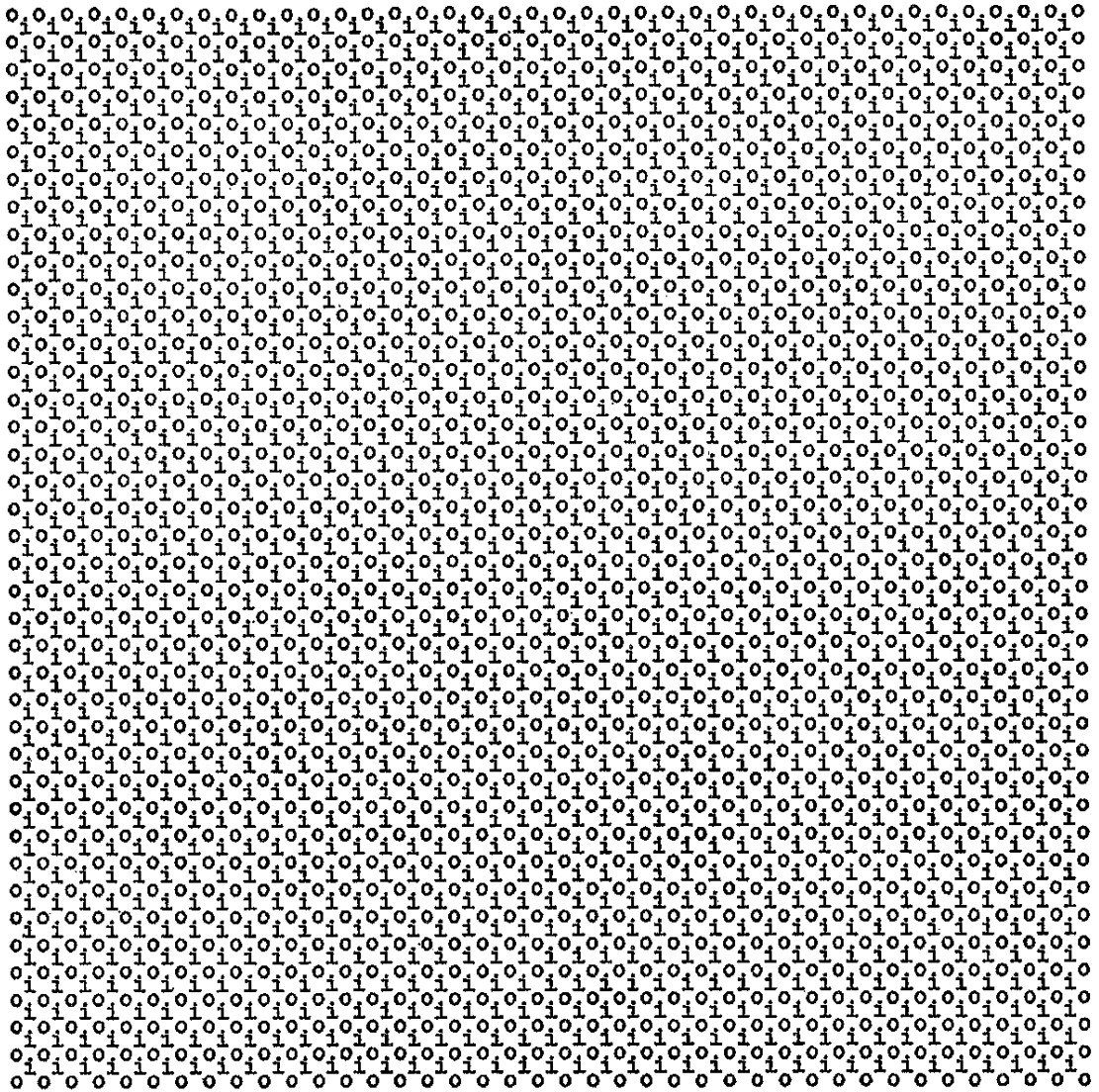


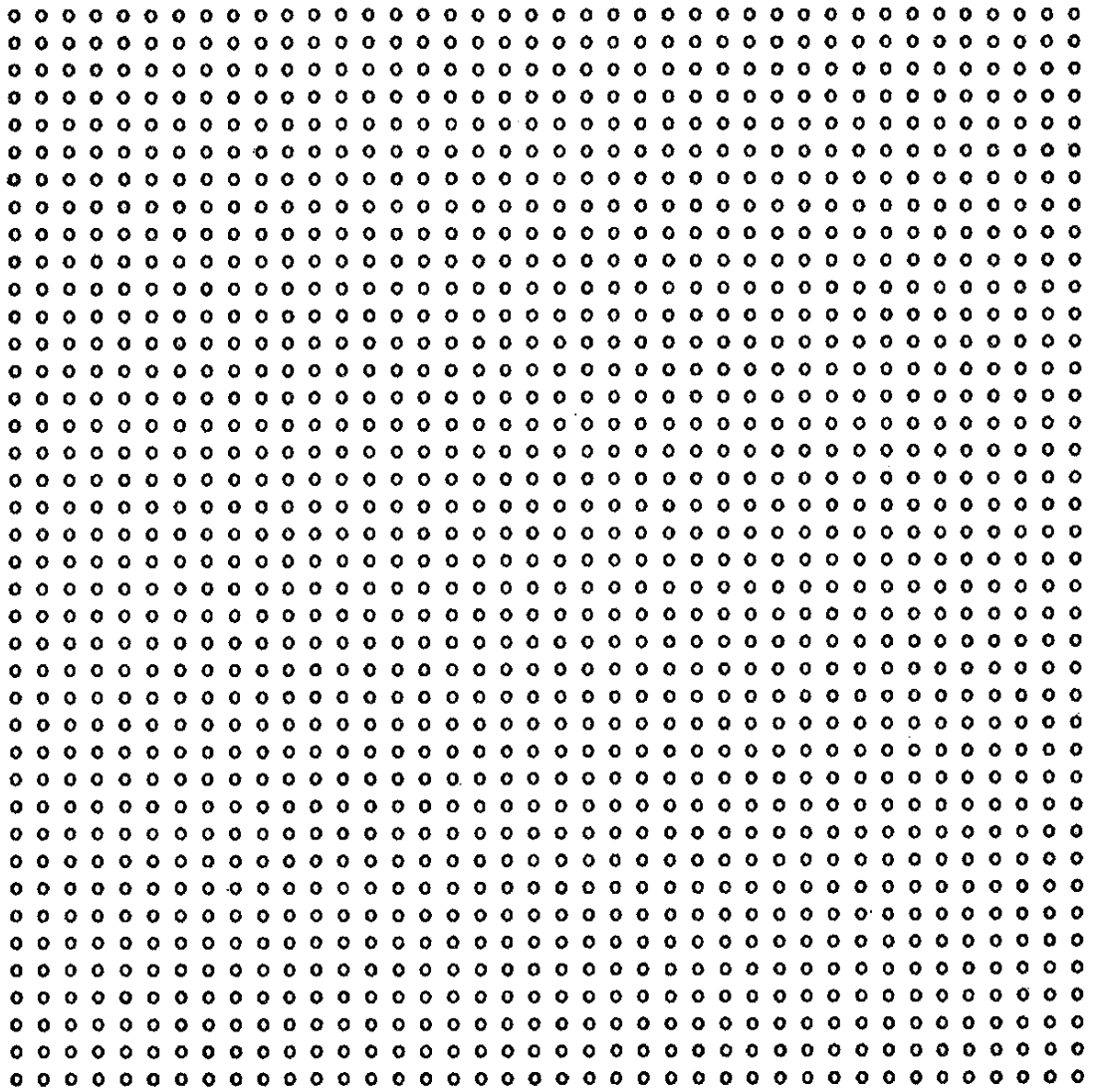












Situated on the first page is a perfect square uniformly filled entirely with "o." The letters are aligned in perfect rows and columns squarely in the middle of the page and make up a quadrangular shape twenty-one centimeters high by twenty-one centimeters wide. The next page has the same arrangement comprised of the letter "o," in addition, dots like punctuation marks "." form a small square in the interstices, half-way between the upper rows of "o" and the lower rows, right in the middle of the big square. This draws the eye automatically to the center of the image and gives the image depth and focus, as the square made up of dots is indented by 5.5 centimeters on each side. The next page shows the same figure, but this time the center square of dots in between the "o" is enlarged so that four centimeters of letters without dots remain equally around the dotted center. On the following page is a square consisting solely of "o" and small crosses or plus signs "+" once more arranged in perfect symmetry, with the plus symbols in the interstices of the "o" such that a frame of "o" remains around the "o" and "+" sign pattern. Page five shows the perfect square of "o" with one single "t" right in the middle. Page six is the exact copy of five but the lonely "t" in the middle is replaced with a single "i." Page seven is a repetition of an earlier pattern on page three, the square ground consists of "o" and the smaller square arrangement in the middle is again indented about four centimeters from each side. The next page presents a busy square made of "o" and "i" where the "i" are again placed in the interstices between the top row and the bottom row of each line of "o" just like on page four, where "o" and

plus signs were carefully typed all over. The “o” again from the one letter frame outlining the picture. On the ninth page is a perfect square made up of “i” and the tenth and last page features the same image as the first, a perfect square made entirely of “o” located in the middle of a white page.

It is probably evident from my description that these text images are visually dizzying and repetitive at the same time. Flipping through the ten pages is bewildering and confusing and tires the eye. At first glance all the homogeneous pages look alike, busy squares with regular patterns. The images with the squares of symbols situated within the large square stand out immediately. Or rather, move in. These visibly different images are on page two, three, and seven. The busyness seems suddenly to have meaning, the page becomes depth, it moves in, it seems to have a third conical dimension, as if one were looking down a square tunnel and see darkness at the end. The dots in the middle of the second image fill up the voids in between the letters and the resulting darkening effect impacts the visual experience of the page. On the third page this effect is mediated, although it is the same concept, the square of dots in the middle of the page is larger than the one in the previous image. Being dimensionally larger means that it appears less dense although the spacing is exactly the same as in the image that came before. As a result the image still has a depth dimension but appears shallower. Page seven works along the same blueprint except that the dots are replaced with “i.” This image has the same measurements as image three yet the inset square is

darker, due to the larger size of the letter. Darker again means more depth, yet the inner square is larger which indicates that the bottom of the cone is nearer than when the square is smaller. This means figure seven is shallower than two but deeper than three. The images have taken on form as if they were not flat pages at all but three dimensional objects into which one could drop something. This manner of composition accomplishes a deception of the eye, making believe that there is a relief when there is only flatness. Typograms four and five draw the eye into the middle of the page to the one letter that is different from the rest. The middle letters act as anchors for the eye, something to notice in all the conformity. Page eight is darker than nine and ten because the interstices between the "o" are filled with "i." Page nine and ten, the "i" and "o" pages, look light and spacious compared to eight.

There is an extreme rigidity pervasive throughout the text images. The individual works seem static, immovable as if carved in stone, and meticulously executed on the page. The starkly geometrical forms of the individual letters and the entire composition contribute to the austere visual effects. There are no serifs, also called the little feet of letters, there are no tails as a "g" or a "p" would have, there is nothing that could take the eye away from the overall impression of a rigorously planned exacting work consisting of circles, lines, and dots, like the geometric abstract art pioneered by Russian avant-garded artist Kazimir Malevich. Examining each page in isolation may be interesting, but they only develop a movement effect when leafing

through them like a through a flip-book. In doing so, the materiality of the work becomes tangible. Its haptic dimension emerges as one of its defining characteristics.

Setting the pages in motion means placing them in a new context and making them dynamic and fleeting, like in a film. Turning pages in quick succession means that each individual image can no longer be ponder indefinitely. Instead, the eye reacts quickly and combines the individual pages to a cinematic show. They do not appear as letter arrangements on separate pages any more, but as moving images, a pure incarnation of what film really is – separate pictures following each other in rapid succession. The question of meaning disappears behind the images, the purity of materiality becomes evident. Moreover, the inert print on paper suddenly turns into movement. The reader focuses on the apparent three-dimensionality caused by the movement and discovers depth. Setting the pages in motion means to deceive the eye and thereby alter the reading experience into a performative visual event. Reading is supplanted by viewing and perceiving.

Similarly, the early experimental films of Kubelka and Kren are “extremely compressed graphic film poems [...]. The component images are reduced to an abstract graphic simplicity by the use of either the negative or high-contrast positive” (Le Grice *Abstract Film* 95). The authors’ used filmic language to highlight the materiality of the film that impacts the viewing experience in a way that allows the audience to become aware of the film’s existence as an object and also, in the process, makes the audience

experience the films differently. Experimental literature and film defamiliarizes the linguistic and visual world, “making it strange.”

Conclusion to Frames and Squares

Their primary concern with language as raw material naturally led the *Wiener Gruppe* authors into experiments with its basic elements – words, syllables, letters, phonemes – which anticipated or rather coincided with similar investigations being undertaken on an international scale by diverse groups of writers (for example, the *Noigandres* group in Brazil or OULIPO in France). Just as in the 1920s Wassily Kandinsky had reduced painting to its essentials of point, line, and plane, and thereby freed painting from its representational function, as well as discovered new expressive potentialities of abstraction, so experimental poets hoped that by concentrating on the medium of their art, they could release the powers of spontaneity, inventiveness, non-conformity hidden beneath the rigidity of historically and socially determined forms. The extremely geometric, structural, visual works by Bayer and Achleitner relate to this vital aspect. They explore the poetic possibilities of isolated letters and words or word-groups, using the space around them as a structural agent. These works follow a fundamental principle: attaining maximum clarity and variation with a minimum of means.

As I have shown, experimental visual texts of the Austrian postwar avant-garde

such as the “o-i-studie” force the reader to step away from the idea of authorial intention and endeavor to explore the performative nature of the text-images. Text-images require the reader to engage on a personal level that takes place on the playing field called text. It is an act that happens without interference from the outside. Absence of words and sentences is another defining feature of this literature along with the eagerness to combine traditional and new art forms aiming at releasing the artist from the strictures of traditional art production.

The Filmic Experiments of Kurt Kren and Peter Kubelka

There will some day be an end of the cinema considered as an offshoot of the theater, an end of the sentimental monkey tricks and gesticulations of gentlemen with blue chins and rickety legs.

(Élie Faure)

We are trained to look for certain things, to view a certain way, to build up expectations when we watch cinematic features. One such expectation would simply be that there is a protagonist in the film, a human, an animal, a thing, something concrete that appears repeatedly, which lends some coherence and consistency to the film like an anchor. In many respects the formal bias of postwar European work can be considered as a continuation of the search for new cinematic form begun in the twenties (Le Grice *Abstract Film* 88). In 1923 Élie Faure hoped for the “end of the cinema considered as an

offshoot of the theater” (3). The experimental films of the fifties certainly established film as a material art practice of its own. In Kurt Kren’s and Peter Kubelka’s experimental films, the medium is no longer the platform to represent stories from the “real life,” but rather, the film-as-film, its materiality takes center stage.

What is not supposed to happen is the inscribing of meaning based on socially accepted knowledge (whether positively or negatively connoted in society) into the art work. Even abject ideas are accepted, taken up, incorporated into social knowledge, common knowledge, something every individual knows within a certain community. Sequences of images give the illusion of continuous movement in conventional film; experimental film takes this illusion and makes its artificiality visible. “[S]tructuralism in art can be seen as a consequence of the awareness that concept can, and perhaps must, determine the nature of perception and experience if it is to avoid determination by existing convention and habit” (Le Grice *Abstract Film* 101).

Traditional filmic narrativity has become stable through convention and repetition over innumerable films and has gradually shaped itself into forms and molds that are more or less fixed (Metz 73), but certainly not immutable. Kren’s and Kubelka’s vital contributions to film changed the form of expression and presentation of images through using a very strict and rigid formulaics to construct their films and thus escaped narrative structures. Each frame is its own individual creation and the arrangement of these pictures into an intelligible sequence – cutting and montage – brings us to the heart

of the semiological dimension of film.

The language of traditional film is a complex system made up of visual metaphors and allusions dependent on recognizable images and filmic narrativity that is overshadowed by language. Avant-gardist filmmaker Stan Brakhage's view on filmic narrativity is that humans lose their individuality and subjectivity as they learn language – which is the learning of conventions and rules – in other words, as a person becomes socialized he or she becomes immersed in the linguistic system that governs human interaction. But through “wrecking” linguistic norms and conventions, as presented in narrative filmmaking, avant-garde film can render an “untutored” perception and consciousness (qtd. in Smith 405).

In films without protagonists or in films fixed on one or several points without interaction between them, we begin to look for some other event that connects the individual scenes. If none is provided by the film, we are still intent on constructing our own narrative. The point of meaning-making is to understand the moving pictures, to make sense of the film and to make meaning of the images. Repetition of images, a prevalent practice in experimental film, alone does not make meaning; meaning develops from the interactions between different elements. As much as a sign by itself, without context has no meaning, just as much does an image not bear any meaning, if it is presented in isolation. As viewers then, we generally seek a network of how all the pictured images connect together, or we invent some connections and weave a context.

It is much easier to connect the dots and make a story that is a narrative which needs to be deciphered, than it is to experience a film on its own, material, terms, film-as-film. Interpreting and finding meaning in representational images is directed by the images, which force upon a film, whose objective it is to focus attention primarily on its materiality, something from outside the medium, something that represents not film itself but what's outside it.

As previously discussed, experimental films fall out of the expected format and so do not fulfill expectations which an exposure to narrative films has raised. Viewers faced with experimental forms of film have the opportunity to re-contextualize their previous film-going experiences and to expand their understanding of what film is and can be. When a film's material becomes jolted, irregular, unusual, abnormal the viewer is called upon to look outside the feature to discern what is causing the interruptions. Just as in language we are trained, normed, formed to accept and internalize the "normal" events, the narrative text, and thus start to build expectations which then help us forget the written thing and let us focus on the meaning, for example deciphering metaphors, so also in film. In other words, experimental film shows that, in spite of the fact that language is based on the arbitrary assignment of signifiers to signs, and to make sense of the signifiers, we need to agree on conventions and rules, most uses of language depend on the repression of this arbitrariness and conventionality. Most of the time language is "naturalized" and therefore seen as transparent; that is, as I have mentioned

already, as though it was a neutral reflection of reality. Experimental film uses techniques of non-representation precisely because it wants to emphasize the formal, agreed upon, constructed, and conventional nature of traditional filmmaking based on language, which presents the world reflected in images which can then be described by language.

In the 1950s, the tolerance for unusual cinematographic techniques was relatively high as long as the films still conformed to normative aesthetic standards. For example, in conventional film, it was considered normal practice for filmmakers to hold the camera steady, even in shots where the camera moves. In feature films, it was normal practice to make the movement as smooth as possible. This still the case today. However, this does not mean that filmmakers could not, or did not use unsteady or shaky shots. But the meaning of these shots was defined by their divergence from what was expected to be normal practice. For example, they are often used to suggest earthquakes, explosions, some subjective point of view of a particular character in the film, or to create a sense of documentary realism. In this sense the term "norm" is not used to name an ideal type of film but rather as the indication of what the general viewing public expected as normal. The general tendency to which most popular films conformed and from which a small number of experimental films deviated, can be seen as a cultural construct to which, by definition of construct, not all conform, but which is none the less ideologically powerful as an expectation of how something should be

under normal circumstances. Similarly, the cultural construct of the aesthetic norm in film, the idea of “ordinary film,” is an expectation of an “aesthetic norm.” “Spectators draw upon norms and expectations from their previous film-viewing experience to make sense of the perceptual challenges posed by a new film narrative” (Jenkins 108).

Because film was the youngest of the arts, such experimentation was seen to be part of its development. But, while different methods for expressing in film were accepted, the expectations of what was supposed to be in the film and its plot were quite conventional. The stories should have some resemblance to real life or refer to a time that has been or will be. Utopian visions were included in the idea of the filmic norm, as much as fictional reconstructions of the past. Just as in literature from the postwar period, the reflections of present or recent war history did not receive audience approval, so also in film. And what’s more, many avant-garde filmmakers did not even receive official funds to reach the stage of the realization of the project.

Film’s Materiality

Traditional cinema is an especially material art, but at the same time, and because of its very materiality, it is also the most illusionistic art form in its final effect (Rees *History of Experimental Film* 13). It purports to represent reality, but does so at a different place and time. Not only does the fact that we, the viewers, sit in a darkened room with many other viewers when we watch, for example, a film about zebras in

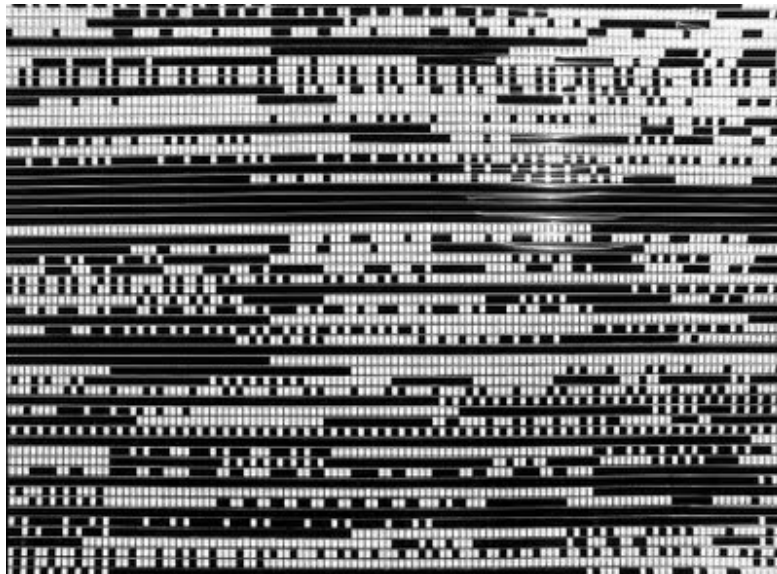
Africa, make us aware that what we see is not reality. But it is also the compressed time in which large quantities of the “world” are represented. Despite the external reminders that this is just representation, we get drawn into the film and experience it as if it was reality – unless, the film does not make sense, does not represent the world, or anything we associate with it, at all. When the film is not representational and instead relies purely on its materiality any relation to the outside world is lost, and film becomes film-as-film, the representation of its materiality. A film highlights its materiality if it does not cover up that it is a tool for the creation of illusion. When a film refuses to fulfill the viewer’s intentions on making meaning from the projected images, film becomes visible as construction. Making experimental films that focus on their materiality is a constant battle against re-producing “an illusionist continuum’s hegemony” (Gidal 17). It is much easier to fall back into the paradigm of making a film that represents the “real world,” than it is to direct film at itself in order to be just material. Films that represent nothing but film as a material entity defy social expectations, and the “illusionist hegemony.” It is also a defensive practice against some hegemonic given, an opposition to a given status quo (Gidal 17).

Arnulf Rainer

Cinema is not movement. Cinema is a projection of stills – which means images which do not move – in a very quick rhythm. And you can give the illusion of movement [...]

(Peter Kubelka)

Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer*, on which he worked from 1958-1960, is an exactly six minutes and twenty-four seconds barrage of interchanging black and white shots only, as can be seen in the images below.



Kaderplan for *Arnulf Rainer*



Stills from *Arnulf Rainer*

The film starts with normal celluloid leader with upside down numbers on it, counting down from nine to three. Two seconds into it, between numbers four and three, there appears a face, visible only for a fraction of a second composed of just a small number of frames. At normal speed, twenty-four frames per second, it is hardly perceptible. But even at half-speed it cannot be perceived in detail. Number three follows and then the title "ARNULF RAINER," hand-written in caps, appears. It looks like it has been scratched onto the celluloid with a thin instrument, a pin or knife tip. The fact, that I am noticing the celluloid – the thing which is the carrier of visual information – with scratches that have been placed there by someone speaks to the

obvious artificiality and refers to the materiality of the film. At second seven until second fifteen there is the first staccato of short bursts of white and black images, flickering by, at what seems like the same speed and interval. The white intervals appear the same length as the black ones. Next there comes a three seconds long pause of black followed by two seconds of white screen. Staccato between black and white again, but not at the same speed and interval rate as before. Then, there are pauses of longer black or white shots again. Even though the first pause in black is only a scant three seconds, it feels much longer. It gives the eye resting time, a cooling off pause, after such an assault of light and dark. The black and white frames are unequally distributed, the measurement of their cadences it is not apparent to the viewer. The experience is similar in appearance to a thunderstorm where lightning strikes in irregular intervals illuminate the black sky. The pauses seem longer than they actually are, because the black and white assault left behind an unsettled eye that enjoys the calm sameness of the image. Unsettled, not in the sense that there would be perceptible physiological results, like the color after-effect, but rather each shot is just long enough for the eye to get used to it, before it alternates with the next shot.

For Peter Kubelka, cinema is the manipulation of the representation of reality, and manipulating form has always taken precedence over content in his films. This is very evident in *Arnulf Rainer*, where he conceptualizes the film as a sequence of individual frames, with or without images and pictures, of which twenty-four can be

seen in one second on a screen.³ This is the speed at which images are perceived in action in reality. For Kubelka film is just the “illusion of movement” (“Theory of Metrical Film” 140). This fact determines his consideration with movement which he doesn’t see as an illusion of natural events but rather as a series of individual pictures, stills. On the cutting table, he works image by image, composing his films like a string of pearls, where every still (one frame) is a pearl and every image (more than one still) stands on its own, not necessarily in relation to the previous or the following. He works with a relatively small number of stills and composes them according to strict and intricate *Kaderplänen* (script, composition, blueprint, a plan for the splicing together of the individual frames) which he writes out by hand or types before he starts the filming and according to which he not only films but also cuts and splices. At the base of this system are complex mathematical sequences. No frame is put anywhere by chance (Hein *Film im Underground* 115).

Kubelka’s early films, most of which are between one minute and at most fifteen minutes long (*Mosaik im Vertrauen*, 1955), are thus exceptionally intricate, extremely controlled, and visually very provoking. In his early work he becomes progressively more focused on structure at the expense of images. This concentration culminated in the film, he was commissioned to make for his painter friend, Arnulf Rainer, in 1958. Kubelka was supposed to showcase the painter and his works. The six minutes and

³ “Cinema, as a mechanism, is designed to project one separate picture every 1/24 second” (Le Grice *Abstract Film* 106).

twenty four seconds film was finished in 1960. The painter Rainer is not seen in the film, and neither are his paintings.⁴ Kubelka rather wanted to find the essence of cinema at the cost of representation of reality in any form, and any reference to the man, the painter, and his work disappeared completely from the film (Masi 101). What remained as reference to reality (man, paintings) was the title, *Arnulf Rainer*. The film does not have anything to do with the artist and his work, but rather resulted in Kubelka's most extreme experiment in form.

Arnulf Rainer is a structured experiment of stringing together of black and white leader with white noise (sound that results from a mixture of all audible frequencies) and silence – the four essential components of cinema: light, dark, noise, silence. Kubelka had taken the extreme step of eliminating any kind of image, representational or abstract. In other films he had made before, he had used blank (white or black) frames between shots of images, “but this was the first film to function purely on the interchange between black and white frames. [... It is] visual music that develops a pattern of relationships between the periods of black screen and white counterpointed by the soundtrack [...]” (Le Grice *Abstract Film* 96). The patterns and colors that the audience sees are evoked solely by the most basic element of cinema – light. The sound is also “black and white” – absolute silence and complete “white noise” that contains all possible sounds in the spectrum of frequencies the human ear can hear, just as white

⁴ Rainer should have been aware of Kubelka's tendency to not fulfill his sponsor's requests, which he had done before, when he worked on assignments for the café *Adebar* and the beer company *Schwechater*. See Chapter One.

contains all the possible colors the human eye can see.

Arnulf Rainer relies on nothing else but its structure, it is pure structure and pure materiality. And, as Kubelka claims, he works according to a “metric” system, which has also led to his films being called “metric films:” “These three films, *Adebar*, *Schwechater*, and *Arnulf Rainer*, are metric films. [...] It’s the German expression “Metrisches System.” [...] I mean, I have no seventeenths and no thirteenths but I have sixteen frames, and eight frames, and four frames, and six frames – it’s a metric rhythm” (qtd. in Sitney *Visionary Film*, 139-140). It is a system that is reducible to zero through the division by two. There is no remainder, the final mathematical ending point is zero, that means there is nothing but emptiness and the absence of any signficatory value.

“Metric,” derived from the Latin word “metrum,” means that every part of the film is precisely measured and set in relation to the film as a whole and its individual parts, the shots, function as messengers so that every part of the film communicates with all the other parts. The filmmaker does not always the use the same mathematical standard. In *Adebar* he used different measuring increments. According to Kubelka, the single units out of which the film is composed are thirteen, twenty-six, and fifty-two frames long: they follow complex rules, which determine their appearance and their consecution within the film.⁵ I say, according to Kubelka, because as a viewer, one

⁵ “In my film every element is the same length, or a double length, or a half a length. The basic length of the elements is 26 frames and half the length is 13 frames, double 52. [...] You get the feeling of harmony” (Kubelka “Theory of Metrical Film” 145).

cannot discern this structure, even after having watched the film many times. Whereas in *Adebar* there are representations of men and women dancing against strong backlight and there is an overall structure that the viewer can deconstruct, in *Arnulf Rainer* this is absolutely not possible. It is not the overall structure that has an impact on the audience, but rather the unexpected interplay between black and white. *Arnulf Rainer* is so dizzyingly complex that, even if one knows its *Kaderplan*, it is impossible to anticipate the next frames. It is at this point, where I draw the connection to the “o-i-studie,” which is also composed according to a “metric” plan to achieve maximum variation and effect with a minimum of input. The variations of “i” and “o” are nigh endless, and the text-image presents just nine of them (the first and the last page being the same). The sequence in which the images of the text appear is also structured, and could be continued, say in a 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 1, 9, 8, 7, et cetera, arrangement, where each number corresponds to one particular image. The arrangement of pages could just as well be extended and printed as a (flip-)book.

The film’s movement is predetermined irregular staccato interchanges of black and white images. The printed pages can be flipped as fast or as slowly as one wishes also creating moving images. Neither the poem nor the film forces the viewer to think in any particular direction, as he or she would be channeled by narrative or image-based film. The viewer has to make peace with the fact that there is no narrative. Experimental films of that radicality soon dispel notions of anticipation and expectation.

To Flicker or Not To Flicker

The flicker-effect is a result of inter-splicing black frames with white frames in quick succession and in some discernable rhythm. Film critic Earl Bodien points out that *Arnulf Rainer* was finished in 1960, several years before strobe lights became popular in clubs and discos, and five years before the US American Tony Conrad made a film that on the surface shows similarities with *Arnulf Rainer* (55). Conrad's film, called *Flicker*, is a "true" flicker film; that means it causes physiological changes in the eye as the retinal responses to the systematic alternating of black and white frames affect specific areas of the nervous system. Le Grice claims that Kubelka was not interested in achieving physiological responses to his rapid black and white interchanges, he did not intend to measure the optical effects, like the "color after-image, which Birgit and Wilhelm Hein uncovered in the late 1960s." Color after-image refers to the impact of continuous strobe light, which can produce color images to be perceived in the eye in between the flickers. Rapid flickering can also produce an illusion of motion where there is none (*Abstract Film* 106-107). But that does not happen in *Arnulf Rainer*, where the so-called "flicker-effect" does not take place to the rigid extent it does in Conrad's *Flicker*. *Arnulf Rainer's* film must be seen in the context of perceptual film, because Kubelka's structure is not based on regular, aggressive black and white frame switching, but rather on an intricate mathematically structured *Kaderplan*. His film is consciously perceived as a black and white experimental construction.

Structured Film

Law and order is the basis of creating.
(Peter Kubelka)⁶

“Structural film” is a designation for films that are constructed according to strict, pre-established, formulaic scripts. Or is it? P. Adams Sitney writes in an often reprinted essay from 1969: “[t]he structural film insists on its *shape*, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline” (*Visionary Film* 348; my emphasis). He identified four characteristics of the structural film: fixed camera position, the flicker effect, loop printing (immediate repetition of arrangement of frames without any variation), and rephotography off the screen (*Visionary Film* 348). Immediately after positing these qualifiers, Sitney states that films may also be structural, if none of these elements are present: “Very seldom will one find all four characteristics in a single film, and there are structural films that avoid these usual elements” (*Visionary Film* 348). This gives cause to stop and ponder what a structural film really is. If they are identified by four characteristics but don’t need to follow them, in fact, if structural films don’t even have to include any of them, then all that is left is “shape.” And Sitney emphasizes this aspect of film: “the structural film insists on its shape and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline” (Sitney *Visionary Film* 227).

Since every film has some “shape” (I presume Sitney means an overall structure),

⁶ Peter Kubelka. “The Theory of Metrical Film” 148.

then how can we identify whether a particular one is structural or not? What differentiates a structural film from all others, if there are no parameters to define it? I am hardly the first to point out this discrepancy (see Cornwell, Jenkins, Le Grice, Peterson).

Yet, the term “structural film” still has currency, despite its obvious deficiencies. To avoid partaking in a whirl of theoretical debates on whether or not a film can be identified as structural, I am using the term “structured” for films that have a meticulously laid out, minutely planned construction. Structured film is already filmed with a structure in mind. Its structure is not the result of editing and cutting and imposing a structure onto the filmed material afterwards. Rather, structured film is conceived, filmed with that structure already worked out. It is filmed according to a meticulous design, its structure is a result of the application of a blueprint, a prearranged system. The act of filming itself become visible as a material practice to organize the frames (Gidal 9). Both Kren and Kubelka worked according to written blueprints for their films. All of their films are structured, in the sense that the films have either been shot right into the camera from the outset, corresponding to the filmmaker’s written instructions. Every shot would have been planned, and only the number of frames was filmed as was designed in the blueprint. In the films when the material was cut after the filming according to a preconceived *Kaderplan*, the process of filming was still very targeted. No shot was unplanned. Kren often edited his films within the

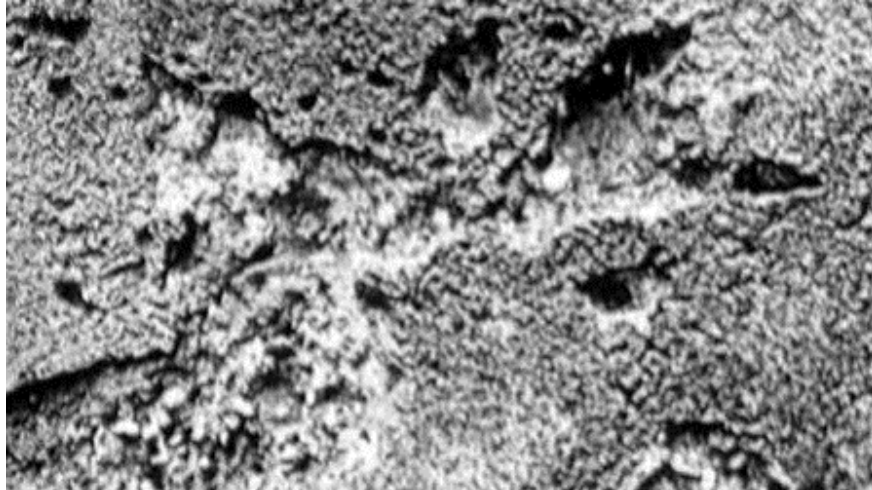
camera itself while shooting them, after working out the shot structure on paper before beginning to film. Le Grice alludes to one reason for this meticulousness: “to avoid determination by existing *convention* and *habit*” (*Abstract Film* 101; my emphasis). Kren’s and Kubelka’s experimental films are designed to generate works which demonstrate the material and visual nature of film and undermine viewing habits and expectations.

The preoccupations of structured filmmakers are often centered on shot-repetition, circular and extended camera movements, and most interesting for this dissertation project, the focus on materiality and the eradication of filmic narrative. In the case of Kren’s own filmic strategies at the beginning of his career both mathematical and formal procedures were equally important. In one of his films he arranged the length of each shot so that the number of frames it contained equated to the total of all the preceding shots. He also developed a strategy of using extremely short shots (often comprising a single frame) which flashed their content into the audience’s perception.

4/61 Mauern positiv-negativ und Weg

For *4/61 Mauern positiv-negativ und Weg* (4/61 Walls Positive-Negative and Path), made in 1961, Kren shot extreme close-up images of wall structures. For the film he interspliced every positive with its negative image, so that they immediately follow each other. Yet, because the individual images are quite complex, I did not recognize them as positives and negatives of each other at first. Also, Kren did not film a wall from a

distance, so that it comes into view as a whole structure. But rather, the images in focus are extreme close-ups and not immediately recognizable as walls or even individual bricks or stones within a wall. Kren filmed very closely, focusing on only parts of bricks.



Still from *4/61 Mauern positiv-negativ und Weg*

The brick fragments themselves seem to have structure, the lighter patches seem raised whereas the black areas appear inlaid, and this light dark offset gives the impression of viewing the earth from an airplane, the black patches resembling the ocean area and the whitish regions represent mountains. The images are reminiscent of a birds-eye view of the earth in black and white. In the positive images this is especially clear.

A wall was not the first object I thought of when I saw the film. Unfortunately, the title *Mauern-positiv-negativ und Weg* already steered my anticipation in the direction of

imagining a representation of some concrete stone structure used to divide spaces. Although the shots change rapidly, they do linger just long enough for the eye to perceive the this is an interchange of positive and negative shots, and consequently the film does not create a flickering effect. At certain intervals Kren spliced the same short sequence of a fast forwarded image of shadows, of a tree creeping across a path, again not immediately recognizable as such. Perhaps I do not have the necessary imagination to spot that the streaks which look like spiderwebs as negatives of the tree shadow images. It is not really relevant whether they are trees or not. Even though there is concrete title, the film does precisely the opposite. Instead of fulfilling the expectations – seeing a wall and a path – raised by its appellation, all these elements are distorted to the point where they are no longer recognizable as representations of reality.

Mauern-positiv-negativ und Weg works with graininess, scratches, and short cuts and becomes self-referential. A scratch is a result of its making, not only refers to the material on which it is made, or the material fact of its making, but also initiates a complex signification through the 'how' and 'why' of the act. Getting rid of the photographic portrayal of reality does not eliminate references or significations to the world outside the film. For Le Grice the introduction of the negative and positive versions of the same shot "in *Mauern* is not a graphic device for the transformation of image into abstract shape. Instead it opens up the possibility of seeing negative material as an element of the material process of cinema" (*Abstract Film* 102). This technique

makes the materiality of film visible; it presents film-as-film.

The compact and artistic interweaving of the fragments of reality being expressed – which may be glimpses out of a window, paths, trees, walls, the changing of seasons, faces or the human body in motion – as well as the way they are filmed, processed and arranged can often go unrecognized even if each film is seen several times. The methods used by Kren range from extreme over-exposure, individual shots, time-lapse, the use of filters and masks, alternating between positive and negative film, blurred images, imposing scratches and drawings on soundtracks and complicated cutting rhythms based on specifically pre-formulated diagrams to a variety of technical experiments and inventions which he has evolved over the years.

Conclusion: Semiological Analysis of Text and Film

What radically experimental films succeed in doing is nothing less than establishing cinema as an autonomous art form. Moreover, with their methods the filmmakers emancipated cinematic form from any content and narrative structure. The elements of film were separated from functional contexts, and became accessible as material for artistic expression in their own right. It was only at this point that cinematography reached the level of articulation of modern art in general: the artist is free to create without any prescribed sets of rules.

As “moving pictures,” produced when light is projected through strips of

celluloid onto a screen, cinematic images have a double correspondence with reality since they are both caused by it (light from these objects marked photosensitive film) and also resemble it. But the experience sitting in front of a screen differs from our empirical perception of everyday world. In everyday experience, the world is three-dimensional, on the screen all we get is two-dimensions, in our ordinary world we can look wherever we want within our field of vision, while the screen limits what we see within the masked frame of the screen. Cinema transforms and constructs a reality through many effects, such as camera angles and movement, focus, lighting effects, framing, altered motion, superimposition, in the individual shot, and through editing expands the representation of reality, producing significant effects of contrast and repetition, narrative, representation. Editing makes something new available to someone in the cinema, a new reality of what was originally filmed that could never have been seen by any empirical viewer (Weibel in Scheugl, 72-73).

Engagement with the problems of meaning, signification, structuring and material processes extends the awareness of substance into material reflexive attention (attention to the materiality). Experimental cinema is that which confronts the audience with the material conditions of the work.

As we have seen, neither the experimental texts nor the experimental films have inherent meaning and thus leave space for individual and subjective association. This field of play not only allows for meaning-making based solely on the visual signs, the

traces left behind from the creative process. Not only has the creator withdrawn from the work, but their creations expect engagement on an intimate level. They provide the room in which, unencumbered of linguistic conventions, socio-historical traditions, and pre-formed meaning of the reader or viewer makes the work his or her own. In doing so, the recipients have to act and engage performatively with the text or film, recognizing its materiality, textuality, and visuality as the elements upon which the work's expressivity rests.

Conclusion: On the Relationship Between Experimental Art and the “Established Order of Things”

Fundamental to this dissertation is the thesis that, through their works and their critique of language, *Wiener Gruppe* authors inherently challenge the structural basis of society, and thereby also its grand narratives: what was, in an unreflected way, considered to be universal truth. The concept of the critique of grand narratives is based on the demand that nothing be accepted as “natural.” It is not a denial of meaning but the recognition of the imposition of ideologies. I will begin with recapitulating the relationship between *Wiener Gruppe* works and experimental films to the rules and norms of language.

Conventions, or as Michel Foucault named them, “the established order of things” (“Discourse on Language” 216), are the very basis of a functioning society. Norms and conventions help us understand and operate in the world we live in, without having to reinvent the terms of interactive encounters every time anew. The very nature of experimental art is to try out something non-conventional and unexpected. If explicitly intended or not, the experimental approach therefore challenges the status quo. As I laid out in the previous chapters, this can occur at a multitude of levels. On the one hand, experimental and avant-garde art question conventions of a society such as cultural norms, reader’s and viewer’s habits and expectations. At another level of

abstraction, however, they also challenge structures which make up the basic framework of human interaction in any given functioning society. This is the case, as has been reflected upon by the authors themselves, for language, which was regarded as a system of normation, and even oppression, by *Wiener Gruppe* authors Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm, and Friedrich Achleitner. I have pointed out that the same aspect can also be found in experimental film in its relationship to language. In the following, I conclude that experimental visual radical, innovations of Austrian postwar avant-garde art, beyond the explicit critique of language as a normative force, challenge the rules, norms and conventions, all of which invisibly structure and shape the interactions between all members of a society in and through which they were created.

Grand Narratives

In different contexts, the terms “grand narratives” and “truths,” purposefully in the plural form, have been coined for what I introduced as rules, norms and conventions. When talking of truths, I refer to Michel Foucault’s idea, espoused in his works *The Order of Things* and “The Discourse on Language.” Truths are established, yet not necessarily verified or proven beliefs, possibly based on facts but mostly accepted because of their longevity in history. It is Lyotard’s theory and propositions that will guide the discussion of texts with respect to the unifying and legitimizing power of

grand narratives, such as justice, individual freedom, “the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (xxiii).

Lyotard refers to global narratives established throughout the centuries via scientific and philosophical discourses. In Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* he discusses the destabilizing influence of the postindustrial age’s “incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv) on cultures and their status of knowledge (3). As the importance of scientific knowledge increases the state control over narratives decreases. “The decline of the narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies [...]” (37), the willingness to believe in unifying and legitimizing grand narratives dwindles. I apply the term “grand narratives” to the national stories and tales of particular prominence in Austrian postwar politics and culture, keeping in mind that this is a retrospective application of a concept developed in the late 1970s when the belief in discourses on truth, ethics, and universal peace (xxiv) has already begun to vanish. The dominant discourses in the 1950s in Austria were concerned with image making and self-identification. Austria doggedly worked on constructing its image as a wholesome, healthy, and blissful nation – the construction of its “heile Welt” image.

Narratives are, with the aid of storing mechanisms in the form of books, political rhetoric, educational paradigms, the basis for knowledge production in society. Grand narratives are socially and culturally constructed narrative maps and strategies to explain and arrange knowledge, accepted, in an unreflected manner, by society as

truths. They are stored and brought into the present whenever needed by “ever more complex and extensive institutional objectifications – first in writing; then libraries, universities, museums; with the breakthrough in our own period to microstorage, computerized data, and data banks of hitherto unimaginable proportions” (Jameson xii-xiii). Narrative, whose formal properties become magnified in prosody and in rhythmic features of traditional tales, proverbs, and the like, is here characterized as a way of *consuming* the past, a way of forgetting: “as meter takes precedence over accent in the production of sound (spoken or not), time ceases to be a support for memory to become an immemorial beating that, in the absence of a noticeable separation between periods, prevents their being numbered and consigns them to oblivion” (Lyotard 22).

Grand narratives portray cultural values, historical experience or political ideology, and reflect what is deemed correct and what matters. As such, they strongly determine the self-understanding of a society. Grand narratives are not created by one single entity. Throughout history grand narratives become established parts of the self-understanding, the idea of something being self-evident, common sense. Instead, they can develop from the collective belief of many, or from the prerogative of interpretation and will to power of a few influential leaders or social groups. Grand narratives are strongly anchored in culture, reinforcing each other through the media and political thrust, being considered exhaustive in the sense of not leaving room for questions, and often transmitted uncritically to future generations. This implies that grand narratives

do not have to be global. In fact, societies, dependent on their individual historical experiences, generate plausible explanations for their observations, transforming them into coherent information to educate a community to hold the same knowledge base and understanding of history as true. The historical, cultural and political context of the Austrian postwar avant-garde has been described in the first chapter of this dissertation. Key aspects of the concept of grand narratives, as socially constructed and medially and politically perpetuated truths, can be easily identified in this historical setting. Central elements were the historical continuity between pre- and postwar times, or the interpretation that Austria was an innocent bystander of the Second World. In effect, narrative was perpetuated and kept alive and fueled an atmosphere of seeming harmony (“heile Welt,” “Insel der Seligen,” obviously expressed by the popular literature and film of the time) and the strong dominance of conservative, restaurative forces in politics and public life. Mass media has the effect of representing and repeating images and stories until the audience deems them to be unalterably true, accepts them as being natural, and above all believes the stories to be real. This construction of illusory reality based on myths is carefully explored, using examples from the everyday, by Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies*. Society’s blindness to quotidian activities and events and the overuse of the idiom “what goes without saying” prompted Barthes to “reflect regularly on some myths of French daily life” (11). Barthes describes mythologies as individual stories that participate in the making of our world and myth

as the system of communication, a message (*Mythologies* 109).

Myths utilize signs within codes and conventions that we are all familiar with. We grow up surrounded by social rules, consisting of signs, codes, and conventions that are generally dominant in the “specific socio-cultural contexts and roles within which we are socialized” (Chandler 156). The members of a given social group are generally not conscious of these signs and conventions as well as the myths, which constitute the foundation of society’s understanding of itself as well as any engagement with the group members. Chandler emphasizes that learned social codes, in addition to language, convey implicit meaning and information in interactions with other members of a group (154). Within any given group comprehension of interactions is based on this common unspoken agreement of what codes mean. Social rules become imperceptibly “profoundly naturalized” (Hall 132) over time. The same principle applies to the fictional world the media presents to us.

The Grand Narrative About Language

One of the main concerns of the *Wiener Gruppe* was the normalizing force of language: Olaf Nicolai summarizes their concern: “Die sprachlich sinnvolle Äußerung ist zugleich eine Bestätigung der Normen des Sprachsystems, das wiederum eine Form von Herrschaft darstellt. ‘Sinn’, ‘Grammatik’, werden so zu Beschreibungskategorien

von Herrschaft (every meaningful utterance is at the same time a confirmation of the norms of the language system, which in turn represents a form of hegemony. 'Meaning', 'grammar', thus become descriptive categories of hegemony)" (196).⁷ Alfred Doppler goes even further, when he writes that the experimental authors and artists are convinced that language is a construct meant to manipulate thought: "Sie sind der Auffassung, daß die Sprache ein Ordnungsgefüge mit manipulierendem Charakter ist" (They are of the understanding that language is a system to create order and has manipulating character) (244).

This attitude can be interpreted as criticism of a grand narrative, namely the hegemony of language (Foucault). Following this line of argumentation, language is seen as a socially constructed tool to explain and arrange knowledge in a coherent way. It has developed as a collective resource but is subject to manipulation by political or cultural leaders and social discourses such as the "heile Welt" discourse. The fact that language is such a fundamental basis for our interaction with our surroundings entails that it is usually not reflected or criticized. The result is consistency but also uniformity in human interaction, at the expense of individuality. Returning to Foucault: "[...] systems for the subjection of discourse [...] conform, first of all, by proposing an ideal truth as a law of discourse, and an immanent rationality as the principle of behavior."

⁷ Olaf Nicolai, "Kalkül und Expression. Zu den Voraussetzungen für eine Interpretation der 'literarischen cabarets' der 'Wiener Gruppe'." In *Sein und Schein – Traum und Wirklichkeit: Zur Poetik österreichischer Schriftsteller/innen im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Herbert Arlt and Manfred Diersch (Vienna: Peter Lang, 1994) 196.

(*Archeology of Knowledge* 227). It can thus be stated that *Wiener Gruppe* authors pre-empted, in their aesthetic praxis, the discourse on language which was formulated and theorized in the 1970s by Barthes and Foucault, among other theorists.

In summary, *Wiener Gruppe* authors perceived language as a normalizing force that dictated what could be thought and felt, and their criticism took the form of experiments to disrupt the order impressed upon the individual from above. Traditional rhetoric builds on a vast reservoir of unambiguous (because agreed upon), linguistic material. The reader of a traditional text is not free to experience language subjectively. Doppler points out one means to break the dominance of language as a hegemonic system:

Während sich im Alltag, im konventionellen Erzählen und Beschreiben in der Regel ein beruhigendes und besänftigendes Einverständnis mit der Wirklichkeit herstellt, erhalten Worte, die unerwartet in einem „falschen“ Kontext auftauchen, vielfältigere Bedeutungsschattierungen [...]

(While in everyday life, in traditional rhetoric and description usually a calming and soothing consent with reality is formed, words which unexpectedly appear in a “wrong” context gain manifold nuances of meaning) (227)⁸

Key to undermining the norms imposed by culture and language is thus to free individual entities (words, images, sound) from their traditional context and place them into new, semantically odd (wrong) surroundings. Through these means, the material, the phenomenological entity called “language” is made visible. With the creation of experimental texts, performative literature but also film, avant-garde artists denounce

⁸ Doppler, *Geschichte im Spiegel der Literatur*, 227.

the meaning-making machine, viz. the laws of grammar, syntax and linearity, and leave the creation unnamed, pure, and unencumbered from socio-linguistically restrictive forces.

The Grand Narrative of the “Genial Creator”

Explicating or meaning-making is a *tour de force* within radically experimental texts, precisely because the texts demand that the reader approach is founded on pure, individual, unrestrained subjectivity. This implies that also the roles of author and reader have to be re-defined. I have characterized *Wiener Gruppe* texts as writerly and even performative texts in Chapter Two, based on the notion that what is understood as their meaning is constructed by an interaction between reader and text, and not dictated by the author. Further, this is also true for experimental films created during the very same period of time in Austria. Two decades later, a theoretical foundation for this paradigm shift anticipated by the *Wiener Gruppe* authors and the filmmakers was formulated by Barthes, Foucault, or even later in the theory of performativity, as introduced in Chapter Two. The second grand narrative critiqued pertains to the conviction that creating meaning is in the hands of the creator, the “Dichter” (poet) as Poet-Seer (Butler 237) and encompasses the following two truths:

The truth that language becomes meaningful only when shaped by a creator. Differently expressed, only the creator imbues language with meaning intended to be understood by the recipient.

The truth that the text is a static element.

Foucault has written on author intention in the context of hegemonic “systems of exclusion,” serving to control and delimit participation in discourse. These systems are invisible, and society is unaware of the “prodigious machinery of the will to truth, with its vocation of exclusion.” Some structures, according to the theorist, are the rules of disciplines, morality, and prohibitions. In literature it is the “author function”:

We ask authors to answer for the unity of the works published in their names, we ask that they reveal, or at least display the hidden sense pervading their work; we ask them to reveal their personal lives, to account for their experiences and the real story that gave birth to their writings. The author is he who implants, into the troublesome language of fiction, its unities, its coherence, its links with reality. (“Discourse on Language” 220-222)

In Foucault’s terms, the privileging of the author constitutes another system for the subjection of discourse and proposes the author as the conveyor of an ideal truth and a proponent of an immanent rationality (“Discourse on Language” 227). Again, this normative system can be viewed as a form of grand narrative against which the Austrian avant-garde artists, among them *Wiener Gruppe* authors rebelled. In a case where the author itself is embedded in the established culture, privileging the author above the text and the recipient limits the freedom of interpretation and meaning-making to the socially accepted “Sinn” of the text.

Michel Foucault, perpetually suspicious of hegemonic interference and pre-determination, argues in his essay “What is an Author?” that the author is not a source of infinite meaning, as we often like to imagine, but rather a part of a larger hegemonic system or system of beliefs which serve to limit and restrict. Appealing to “authorial

intention” restricts readers to thinking about the text in terms of what the author had in mind when the text was committed to paper. Foucault asks in “What is an Author?” why we are concerned with the idea of authors at all, rather than focusing on the discourse⁹ as a grouping of texts and ideas. Why do we always want to trace ideas and texts back to specific authors? Answering these questions, he points out and proposes to correct some commonly held assumptions about authorship. He claims that the concept of authorship as a constant and stable unit is deluding, because it is not a natural occurrence but has been developed at a particular point in history, under particular circumstances, and by specific individuals, and may disappear again. Foucault also wonders why western society is inclined to think about authors as individuals, heroic figures who somehow have stepped out of history, when, as he insists, authors are just as much products of their time as everyone else. Foucault asserts that the idea of the author as “genial creator of a work in which he deposits” a world of knowledge and signification is wrong: “the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works” (Foucault “What is an Author” 118-119).

The Grand Narrative of the “Heile Welt”

With their critique of language and their anticipation of a re-definition of the role

⁹ For Michel Foucault, the term denotes any coherent body of statements that produces a self-confirming account of reality by defining an object of attention and generating concepts with which to analyze it: medical discourse, legal discourse, literary discourse, etc.

of reader and author, Austrian postwar avant-garde artists separated themselves from the established culture of their times. Their challenge of norms, rules and conventions was not restricted to a theoretical, linguistic level but instead expressed in their works in a multitude of ways. As exemplified by e.g., the literary cabarets of the *Wiener Gruppe*, an interaction with the audience was established. In these performances, the expectations of the viewers and the narrative conventions and cultural norms of the society were directly confronted with experimental art works. Evidently, this interaction was bi-directional: the sudden blossoming of a performative art scene in the Vienna of the sixties occurred despite the non-permissive surroundings of the time, but can also be interpreted as a response to the same. The reaction of the established circles of Austrian society towards this avant-garde was, if not ignorance, largely negative. This does not seem surprising, given the conservative, restaurative mainstream which I described in Chapter One, and the combination of unconventional form, but also content, themes of their works (which was not the subject of this dissertation), paired with, at least occasional, outright provocation (e.g., works considered obscene, blasphemous or pornographic).

The many facets of the interaction between Austrian postwar avant-garde with the cultural and political background from which they emerged can be integrated into the single thesis that immanent to their works was a critique of the central grand narratives of their times. Subsuming/integrating many aspects mentioned above, and

especially in Chapter One I propose to formulate the grand narrative (or inherent truth) in focus as the “heile Welt” narrative.

The aspects integrated into the concept of Austrian postwar grand narratives are the construction of historical continuity from before the disintegration of the Habsburg empire until after the War without consideration of the world-changing interruptions. A related aspect is the blocking out and silencing of the dark period of nationalsocialism with its brutalities when Austria’s population decided to join the *Deutsches Reich*, by referring back to the pre-War history, displaying Austria as heir to the traditions of a great empire. The second aspect is the focus on conventional form in art and aesthetics, and either regressing to focus on topics such as tradition, *Heimat*, rural life, or, if dealing with history or politics, avoiding any contemporary subject and instead glorifying the past splendor of the Habsburg monarchy.

This restaurative culture can be seen as an anachronism centrally depending on avoidance of the War years. Society avoided dealing with the present time with all of its challenges, such as the development of a more liberal society, freeing the individual from the primacy of authorities such as societal norms, political leadership, or religion and to open the view to other parts of the world. From today’s viewpoint, it seems obvious that a culture so retrogressive and backward-looking, with its grand narratives, should have a limited life span. The avant-garde authors and artists of the postwar years in Austria presumably had little influence on the development towards a modern

Austrian society because their works were created at place and time when their innovations were not appreciated, and they did not reach a wide enough audience, because the gap between traditional forms and content was too large to the new established artforms. However, the *Wiener Gruppe* works and Kren's and Kubelka's films and approaches have left their marks as early and anticipatory manifestations of concepts elaborated to greater theoretical heights in the following decades.

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Biography

Gabriele Wurmitzer grew up in Austria and moved to the United States after finishing high school. She completed her baccalaureate studies summa cum laude in German, History, with a minor in Biochemistry at the University of Vermont in 2002. In 2004 she earned a Master of Arts Degree in German and History from the University of Vermont and in 2012 her Ph.D. in German Studies from Duke University.

While an undergraduate student at UVM, she received the Outstanding Senior in German award. She was invited to participate in the summer program at the University of Augsburg and in Sion, Switzerland. She has received a number of fellowships for advanced study and research and achievement awards including the UVM Kidder Scholarship, and the UVM Graduate Student Tuition Scholarship, among others. At Duke University she was awarded the Graduate School Ph.D. scholarship, the Summer Research Fellowship to commence dissertation research at the National Literature Archive in Vienna (2009), a Dissertation Completion Fellowship (2009-2010), and a fellowship to Germany to study with Prof. Dr. Erika Fischer-Lichte at the Graduiertenkolleg InterArt at Free University in Berlin (2010-2011).

She has written reviews for the *Bulletin of Holocaust Studies at the University of Vermont* (2002-2004). She has published a chapter from her Master's thesis titled "Andre Länder, Andre Sprachen" Die Exilerfahrung Jimmy Bergs im Spiegel seiner sprichwörtlichen Kabarett-Dichtung in the journal *Proverbium* (2004), and an article on

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