



Post-utopian staging of Europe's crisis in contemporary theatre.

Philippe Quesne's *Crash Park – La vie d'une île*

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Résumé

Dans sa robinsonnade *Crash Park – La vie d'une île* (2018), le scénographe français Philippe Quesne emmène le public en terre inconnue. Notre article a pour objectif de proposer une réflexion critique sur l'Europe à partir de l'analyse des représentations métaphoriques qui sont à la base de cette pièce. En faisant référence aux multiples crises – économique, politique, identitaire et culturelle – qui traversent l'Union, Quesne met en effet en relation les concepts d'Europe et de crash avec l'étymologie grecque du mot « crise », leur donnant une forme animale inspirée de différentes traditions historiques et philosophiques. Sur scène, des taupes et des poulpes géants symbolisent les tensions européennes à travers leur corps et leur énergie cinétique. C'est pourquoi *Crash Park* doit être considérée comme l'une des plus importantes pièces du théâtre post-utopique.

Abstract

French theatre director Philippe Quesne's 2018 staging *Crash Park – La vie d'une île* (2018), takes the audience to unknown territory by displaying a contemporary Robinsonade. In the face of Europe's current situation, mainly characterised by several crises, this article points to the critical reflection and questioning of current realities by extracting the metaphorical scenic motifs of Europe and crash, which form the dramaturgical basis of this mise-en-scène. The author transfers both terms to topical issues such as economies, policies and cultural identities by considering also the ancient Greek meaning of 'crisis' in a theatrical context. With reference to various historical and philosophical interpretations of animal-related intellectual concepts, the author also exposes moles and octopods as the leading figures of Quesne's stage work, and correlates their physical and kinetic constitution with the European crisis. Thus, *Crash Park* is declared and elevated to a signature piece of post-utopian theatre.

Mots-clés : Crise et corps, Crash, Europe, Mise en scène, Philippe Quesne

Keywords : Crisis and bodies, Crash, Europe, Staging, Philippe Quesne

Crash and the life of Europe

De manière générale, l'art, le théâtre en particulier, est le seul endroit pour moi où l'on peut survivre aujourd'hui, dans une société qui court à la catastrophe. (Quesne, 2018)

Crash Park – La vie d'une île (2018) is the work of French theatre director Phillippe Quesne and its title nearly speaks for itself: *crash* and the *life of Europe* could be defined as the leitmotifs of Europe's major crisis. The plot of the production is as follows: a small group of survivors of an airplane crash stranded on a tropical island à la Robinson Crusoe. The crash implicitly becomes the motif of possibilities and challenges of setting up a new community where the intellectual figure *quo vadis Europe* is balanced out elsewhere. Philippe Quesne studied stage design at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris where he discovered his passion for scenic staging. He programmatically calls his company *Vivarium* which stands for a notion of theatre wherein the existence of life can appear, be it of plants or animals, of humans; a theatre that does not deny its (significantly artificial) dispositif and unanimously preserves its relation to European, more specifically French, political, socio-cultural and economic realities without explicitly showing them. One might explicitly say that the everyday life of European existence in the 21st century is staged as a *day in space*. Quesne's typical artistic signature, authenticity effects, meaning, actions and gestures adapted from the contemporary everyday European context of life are dramaturgically intertwined with illusionist effects like theatrical fog and song dramaturgy. Characters and objects come together in a specific performative installation onstage: "I assemble scenographic devices which are both theatre sets, and workshops, vivariums for the study of the human microcosms." (Quesne 2011, 128) Scenic presence is primarily generated by small and big gestures made by the actors in direct relation to situation-specific objects (such as, for example, the plane wreck and the island in the form of a hill in *Crash Park*):

Such a conception of directing implies a minimal level of acting. All that interests Quesne in the actor, dancer or artist he is directing on stage is her immediate presence and its modalities (corporality, gesturalité, vitality. Here, the performer is, in a sense, out of action. (Gateau 55)

Philippe Quesne describes his directorial strategy as follows: "staging people who experience a relation to specific devices, objects and materials, and who are looking for a poetic place on earth while confronted with the challenges of today's contemporary world." (Berland, 28) All previous productions – *La Démangeaison des ailes* (2006), *L'Effet de Serge* (2007), *La Mélancolie des dragons* (2008), *Big Bang* (2010), *Swamp Club* (2013), *La Nuit des taupes* (2016) are just a few examples – distinguish themselves by their manifestation as contemporary surreal theatre of many gestures and few words. In *Crash Park*, the island becomes a post-utopian scenario wherein the temporary potential of post-catastrophic solidarity firstly, and secondly the captivity in culturally and already neo-liberally penetrated encodings is explored, both may well be interpreted as facets of Europe's crisis.

Preamble: The regime of the mole

Quesne uses the mole as an allegory of society, existence and thinking similar to what he does in *Nuit des taupes* or *Swamp Club*, where several giant moles can be seen onstage on a small island which is at the same time a hill dug up by these almost blind tunnel builders. Here,

contemporary theatre adapts a figure of philosophy, political theory and literature in which, from the early days of Modernism, the mole is the emblem of modern subjects and societies. It offers a reminder of Karl Marx's "Well burrowed, old mole!" in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* of the idea of a revolution ensuing from work and of the potential undermining of an existing regime; of Nietzsche's rehabilitation of the mole as an instance of thinking which rifles through and digs over the soil of culture beyond the known; or of Franz Kafka's giant mole as a figure of radical subjectivity. In European thinking of modernity, the mole has become the metaphor of an activity that wants to accept the digging up, the tearing up, the circulation as constant change of spirit, society and body. Gilles Deleuze will eventually ring in the end of the mole era as a conceptual animal for modern (European) society in his *Postscript on the Societies of Control*:

The old monetary mole is the animal of the spaces of enclosure, but the serpent is that of the societies of control. We have passed from one animal to the other, from the mole to the serpent, in the system under which we live, but also in our manner of living and in our relations with others. The disciplinary man was a discontinuous producer of energy, but the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network. (Deleuze 5–6)

Similar to Deleuze's conceptual *personae*, the mole is to be understood as a conceptual animal, which is more than an allegory, an abstract term or a personalisation for of modernity as he/it insists (Riechelmann 12). The surreal scenic presence of giant moles that seem to expect a small and stranded community of people calls for different interpretations simultaneously. The mole can be seen as a preamble of this post-utopian conceived production. This movement in contemporary theatre (still) insists on the possibility of revolutionizing, tearing up and digging up without positioning itself as political theatre explicitly. In the context of staging Europe in the performing arts, Philippe Quesne's oeuvre is to be understood as a theatre practice distinguishable from politics wherein the aesthetics' impact unfolds as and through distance, disruption and transformation. In a present in which the political reality has become highly abstract and medially conveyed pseudo-dramatic conflicts unsettle our European civil societies, an actual crisis and the associated need to make decisions, to choose an option or to provide alternatives can be experienced in *Crash Park*. Director Philippe Quesne describes the narrative of *Crash Park* as follows:

[...] a new organization in a place where they need to learn to live together and survive. [...] The island is a factory of fantasies [...]. Today, the imaginary potential of the island is colossal: it can be seen as a refuge, a place of tranquillity, abandonment, solitude, deprivation, exile. (Berland 29)

But maybe there are beneficial crashes when, for example, crisis evokes solidarity? And how sustainable will this be? One of the most beautiful scenes in *Crash Park* is the moment after the crash, more specifically after the survivors have climbed out of the plane wreck. In the background you can see debris and in reachable distance a tropical island. It is pouring down from the stage ceiling. The post-catastrophic atmosphere is enhanced by musical grounding in the style of blockbuster film music and the corresponding lighting control in terms of zooming in on the individuals on stage and by the use of darkness and fog effect. The trolley bags on the open sea become the symbol of globalisation while the refugee's plastic bag – in this scenario only implicit and invisible – is the reverse side. A group of different characters gathers and can be identified by their appearance and attitude as representatives of a French-European high-spending upper class with the opportunity of global touristic nomadism. Mutually supporting, they begin to form a community shortly after the disaster. As remains of the in-flight meal, they brotherly and sisterly share biscuits packed in plastic. The first character reaches the island, throws the rope to the other people. They are happy and applaud when the next is safe on the island. The (joint) decision made in this crisis situation generates loyalties. The joint project of survival corresponds to the development of compassion and

socially motivated affiliation, an important (and, in my opinion, geopolitically neglected) factor of human existence. In this sense, *Crash Park* can be seen as *Europe's vivarium*, as a staged insular microcosm in a contemporary moment of decay. But how do matters stand with the crisis in the European macrocosm from the point of view of philosophy and political theory? And what resonances of the crisis can be identified in contemporary theatre?

Europe: Crisis and body

The conflict areas in Europe are numerous: nationalism, populism and globalism intertwined with neoliberal impregnated politics should be certainly mentioned at first instance, even though the reduction to this triad represents a foreshortening of the perspective. Social rights and values of solidarity are continually reduced in an elusive and enormous framework of hegemonial structures, institutions and discourses. The context of (human) existence in a turbocapitalized Europe becomes more abstract and still it is immediately affective as, for example, in the case of the phenomenon of “threatened majorities” (Krastev 95) and their fear-driven decision in favour of anti-European parties. If intellectuals from political theory or philosophy reflect on Europe’s great crisis, as in the case of Giorgio Agamben, Étienne Balibar or Massimo Cacciari, then this unifies the constituting of a deeply fragile alleged understanding of European community first, and second the attempt to draw up a possible Europe without *névrose nationale*. The Greek word *crisis*, a basic term in the Greek language, means ‘judgment’ or ‘decision’:

Abgeleitet aus ‘krino’, scheiden, auswählen, entscheiden, beurteilen: medial sich messen, streiten, kämpfen, zielte ‚Krisis‘ auf eine endgültige, unwiderrufliche Entscheidung. Der Begriff implizierte zugespitzte Alternativen, die keine Revision mehr zuließen: Erfolg oder Scheitern, Recht oder Unrecht, Leben oder Tod, schließlich Heil oder Verdammnis. (Koselleck 203–204)

Reinhardt Koselleck interprets the term in four contexts of ancient thought: battle between the forces (Persian Wars), in medicine (the hippocratic school), in politics (preserve our rights) and in theology (judgment by God) and sums up:

Der Begriff erfaßte also potentiell alle Entscheidungslagen des inneren und des äußeren Lebens, des einzelnen Menschen und seiner Gemeinschaft. Immer handelte es sich um endgültige Alternativen, über die ein angemessenes Urteil gefällt werden mußte, deren alternativer Vollzug aber auch in der jeweiligen Sache selbst, um die es ging, angelegt war. (Koselleck 204)

At the same time, the crisis as a recurrent motif of (human) existence in theatre since ancient Greek times, more specifically in the tragedies by Sophocles and Euripides, has been dramaturgically explored and aestheticized. The prejudiced Creon in *Antigone* or the affect-steered Pentheus in *Bacchae* are certainly paradigmatic figures (Hall 65). Here, the decision situation is as follows: the right moment to act has been missed, the appropriate verdict has been made but misjudged and, hence, the individual figures fail tragically with radical consequences for the community. It can be argued that this is a tactical planned disruption of the civic attempt to establish a crisis scheme mainly based on logic. In tragedy, dark knowledge and misinterpretation rule in all their potentiality. And after all, who knows which what possibilities will open in a moment of crisis, which we have not thought about or felt yet? In post-heroic theatre, an example here is *Crash Park*, an individual character is no longer responsible for consideration and decision.

Crisis is body-bound in Greek thought, be it on the battlefield, in sickness, in the administration of justice, in the *Last Judgment*: being wounded and then death are possible threatening consequences if alternatives fail. In conceptual history it is no coincidence that the body image from medical discourse is transferred to states until the term becomes

independent and the connection to illness is only an apostrophized metaphor with beginning of the 18th century:

‘Krise’ legt insofern eine ähnliche Karriere zurück, wie ‘Revolution’ oder ‘Fortschritt’, die beide zu temporalen Begriffen werden, deren räumliche oder naturale Vorbedeutung sich seit der Aufklärung verflüchtigt, um zu primär geschichtlichen Begriffen aufzurücken. (Koselleck 206)

Philosophers, Giorgio Agamben amongst others, accentuate the actual body-bound meaning and the associated correct decision against a contemporary trend of inflationary word usage and in view of a widely received crisis of Europe:

In der medizinischen Tradition bezeichnet es den Moment, in dem der Arzt entscheiden muss, ob der Kranke am Leben bleibt oder sterben wird, in der theologischen den des Jüngsten Gerichts. Heute beschließt die alltäglich und unabsehbar gewordene Krise lediglich ihr eigenes Fortbestehen, die Vertagung jeder endgültigen Entscheidung. [...] Es ist die paradoxe Situation eines Werkzeugs, das sich dazu entscheiden muss, wozu es dienen soll, und sich dazu entscheidet, sich selbst zu dienen. (Agamben)

According to Agamben, crisis is paradoxically put into its own service, into the service of crisis without making decisions for a wounded and endangered Europe. This Europe, spelled out as body in two respects, is met by crisis. It is the eponymous mythological figure of a continent and a landscape, the body of Europa from the myth, which has become “another cape” (Derrida 1991, 229), abducted from Phoenicia by Zeus in the guise of a bull, both remembered by contemporary philosophy and theatre. In his epochal short text *The Other Heading*, published after and affected by political upheavals in 1989, Derrida points out that consciousness and reflection, the cultural identity of Europe as a *capital discourse* in multiple senses, are inseparably linked with crisis:

[...] this moment of awakening, of sounding the alarm, has always been deployed in the tradition of modernity at the moment and as the very moment of what was called *crisis*. This is the moment of decision, the moment of *krinein*, the dramatic instant of a decision that is still impossible and suspended, imminent and threatening. (Derrida 1992, 31–32)

The symptoms of crisis have reached a level of intensity so they are interpreted as irreversible: this forms the basis for moribund anti-European discourse by the right-wing nationalist political alliance. But what lessons do we learn from history? What do philosophy, political theory and theatre vehemently remind us of? Europe is undoubtedly in crisis, but in the proper sense this means that everything is in suspense and everything is possible in the light of this critical situation first, and second that decisions are required. Therefore, Étienne Balibar proposes in *Europe: crise et fin?* a re-establishment with a radical transnational democratization within the non-reversible globalization and demands the development of viable perspectives (Balibar 17):

Es wird daher dringlich erforderlich sein, für Europa eine konstitutionelle ‚Formel‘ zu finden, aufgrund derer ein Mehr an Demokratie auf europäischer Ebene – mehr Kontrolle über die Repräsentanten und Funktionsträger; mehr Beteiligung von Organisationen der Zivilgesellschaft, um der geheimen Macht der Lobbyisten Paroli zu bieten; mehr Möglichkeiten zu einer auf transnationaler Grundlage organisierten Opposition gegen Entscheidungen des Exekutive oder sogar gegen parlamentarische Mehrheiten – geradezu zur Bedingung einer Wiederbelebung der Demokratie innerhalb der nationalen politischen Räume werden kann, und ebenso auch umgekehrt. (Balibar 25)

This corresponds with the re-emergence of a term in philosophy, political theory and eventually in contemporary theatre: utopia. Cacciari predicts: “Was geträumt wurde, ob

Utopie, Schrecken, Wunder, es wurde immer verwirklicht.” (Cacciari 97) Even Philippe Quesne repeatedly mentions the term *utopia* in interviews as essential for his productions:

Ja, ich bilde die Welt nicht eins zu eins ab. Trotzdem geht es mir auch immer um eine Utopie, die mit dieser Welt konkret verbunden ist. In *Swamp Club* ist das dieser Campus von Künstlern, eine Mischung aus *résidence* und *résistance*, der von einem gigantischen Maulwurf verteidigt wird. Allegorien sind wichtiger denn je, denke ich. Denn verdammt noch mal, wenn wir in Zeiten wie diesen nicht an die Kunst – nicht an die Religion, sondern an die Kunst! – glauben, dann bleiben uns nicht viele Gleise, um als Menschen unseren Weg zu finden. (Quesne 2015)

Quesne’s reference to utopia close to theatre stands out due to its explicit disassociation of progressive and from modernist implications, which can be found in the utopian model of historical avant-garde. In the context of contemporary theatre I would more specifically speak of *post-utopia* and *post-utopian staging*. I feel that *Crash Park* can be defined as a signature piece in this movement of contemporary theatre, meaning a formal and aesthetic exemplary production. Post-utopian staged productions do not want to produce utopia (anymore) or anticipate it, consequently it is no revolutionary instrument. The content is not directly referring to a political struggle. Political gestures are rather marked over the imagination of another Europe wherein human understanding is tested in a post-utopian scenario, a “paradox of dreams”:

In meinen eigenen Stücken geht es oft um das Miteinander, das Zusammenleben. In der Realität, angesichts politischer, religiöser Unterschiede und einer Gesellschaft, die die Menschen auseinandertreibt, ist das oft komplexer, aber in meinen Stücken versuche ich, das Paradox der Träumerei zu zeigen, dass Menschen sich trotzdem verstehen. (Quesne 2015)

Finally, a theatre model is proposed that adds particles of utopia to the production. The island is certainly the most durable figure of thought for utopia in European philosophy, political theory and theatre. It becomes the decisive actor in *Crash Park – La vie d’une île*, one could even say the island is the protagonist of a post-utopian theatre (Ruhsam 54). It is the starting and vanishing point of the action in Philippe Quesne’s directorial concept.

Espace clos isolé au milieu des mers, propice aux visions les plus diverses, l’île est le support de nombreux mythes, symboles ou fantasmes d’Ulysse à Robinson Crusoé, de Jules Verne à Gilles Deleuze. À travers les arts et la littérature, elle est le lieu inspirant de multiples récits et histoires d’exil, le décor de certains fantasmes, ou le cadre d’utopies. Véritable espace des possibles, l’île peut représenter le bonheur aussi bien que l’abandon et l’angoisse. Elle peut être le théâtre des épopées, de la mise à l’épreuve, ou de l’initiation. Lorsqu’elle est au centre d’une œuvre, elle joue différents rôles en fonction thématique. Dans une robinsonnade, elle isole le ou les héros, qui apprennent comment y survivre et s’en échapper. Dans un récit de chasse au trésor, elle sert de planque au butin. Elle peut aussi être le repère de criminels se coupant du reste du monde pour réaliser tranquillement leurs activités. Ou encore elle est le lieu où prend vie une société imaginaire (utopie, dystopie ou autre). (*La France à la Quadriennale de Prague*, Le Concept)

Following the plane crash, the survivors, like Robinson Crusoe spread out over different characters, are stranded on an island. The group’s fate is closely connected due to the catastrophe and they explore the island. Different associations simultaneously emerge by interweaving scenographic and choreographic arrangements: colonialism, piracy, tourism, long-distance travel... The transformation from nature to culture is marked by performative actions (dances, songs) and constantly accelerated in a sequence of small scenes – the room is explored through movement. Also, the island is constantly changing due to and with its inhabitants who are neoliberally and capitalistically socialized from times before the crash. The island turns into the stereotype of a tropical phantasm with cocktail bars familiar from travel brochures, only the plane wreck in the background disturbs the idyll. Ambiguously interpretable characters such as a dream ship’s captain in shorts, a man in suits wearing a

Hawaiian shirt, a hippie with cocktail, a hipster with sports clothing and a surfer on a Maori board perform to the music of Riz Ortolani and move across the stage. Most of the time they do it by dancing. From a kinetic perspective they move in the form of oscillating bodies regulated through, first, a uniform energy distribution and, second, emotionless, extensive gestures (e.g. alternately swinging and raising their arms above their heads). Third, they are also characterized by contemporary face-to-face disco and couple dances which are 'easily' performed in a closely embraced way by turning on one's own axis and without changing dynamics. The song dramaturgy switches to the Latin Hip Hop song *Tres Delinquentes* by *Delinquent Habits*. The mood gets chilly and the collective is split into individual figures who meet in calculated manner. The longing caused by isolation motif is dramaturgically introduced by Daniel Johnston's song *True love will find you at the end* while a female character smokes a cigarette in darkness.

Finally, underground caves (dug up by the moles) become visible and they function as a place for the hipsters' club culture. Philippe Quesne constantly and vehemently strikes out any native idea of island, of utopia as 'nativia' in a loving gesture. The production makes clear that the decision for a solidary and democratic togetherness can be imagined within globalisation only. Dissociative phantasms and deglobalisation are wrong conclusions: the neoliberal regime already presents itself in Europe in an effective constellation of hegemonial structures, institutions and discourses, which cannot be reversed. Still, their contradictions could be used to develop a new model (Balibar 227–237).

Postscriptum : The fight against the octopod

In the final part of *Crash Park* the island has turned into a techno club and a monstrous creature enters the scene: a boneless giant octopod with eight arms, three invisible hearts and a brain as a network of neurons ramified to its extremities attacks the new islanders. Octopods are representatives of a species that has lived on the earthly biosphere for millions of years, and, according to Peter Godfrey-Smith "an island of mental complexity in the sea of invertebrate animals." (Godfrey-Smith 9) He holds a loudly screaming female character with its tentacles in *Crash Park*. The octopod is a motif that significantly often appears in science and in the arts nowadays. Donna Haraway, feminist social theorist and biologist, opens her monograph *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) with the discovery of forces living underground and are declared as essential for the contemporary figure of thought of "companion species". Therefore, the term 'chthonic' (from the Greek word *chthonios*, gr. χθόνιος, meaning 'belonging to the earth or underground') is reintroduced, including arachnids as well as octopods, these intelligent, extremely flexible sea dwellers without skeletons. Ethical, political and aesthetic implications are linked to this radical definition:

Der westliche Anthropozentrismus (wie auch der moderne Individualismus in seinen endlosen Varianten) ist im Angesicht der drohenden ökologischen Katastrophe schlicht nicht länger denkbar. An seine Stelle muss ein radikal relationales Denken treten, das sich der Abhängigkeit vom Kompost des Planeten bewusst wird. Statt des Cyborgs oder des Hundes mobilisiert Haraway nun also die Tentakel der Erdwesen – Spinnen und Oktopusse –, die paradigmatisch eine Lebensform markieren, die ebenso verwurzelt wie mobil ist. (Loick 188)

As a conceptual animal, the octopod meets our here and now because of its fluid form, its tentacles, its lightness and alleged weightlessness. A here and now of European crisis where the neoliberal Europe, characterized by "software capitalism and light modernity" (Bauman 116), faces the possible – partly virtually, partly historically justified – solidary Europe of democratization.

At the end of *Crash Park* the titanic battle between the octopod and the human figures is staged. Again, temporary solidarity emerges in a moment of threat. In a *Jurassic Park* manner, they fight against the resisting octopod in the darkness of the night, they kill him, spread out its tentacles and place it on top of the plane wreck in a dystopian scene. The human figures are no longer hipsters as they seem to have become historical figures (through costume change), they can be interpreted as French revolutionists and/or pirates. Any coherence of time, space and figure is suspended in the last scenes of *Crash Park*. The play ends after the reconquest of the island and with its transformation into a ship. The ship is a second important figure of thought in the context of utopia: “the ship was simultaneously both the greatest instrument of economic development and the greatest reserve of imagination.” (Sudrajat 31) In this post-utopian performance, the individuated characters – revolutionists, pirates, who knows? – read in small cabins accompanied by Frank Sinatra’s song *Fly me to the Moon* until the lights go out. Allegories are more important than ever according to Philippe Quesne. (Quesne 2015) Specifying his plea in favour of allegories in contemporary theatre, one could consider the giant moles and octopods in *Crash Park* to be conceptual animals according to Deleuze; i.e. scenic figures regarded as animal. Precisely because of their polysemy, these ‘animalizations’ insist on possible post-utopian (re-)drafts – rather than allegories, abstract terms or personifications. These kinetic and intellectual concepts could be the result of a pro-European plea including the courage and responsibility Europe deserves in its current severe crisis.

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Biography

Nicole Haitzinger, Univ. Prof. Dr., is Professor at the Department of Art History, Musicology and Dance Studies at the University of Salzburg. She conducted her doctoral studies at the Institute of Theatre, Film and Media Studies (TFM) at the University of Vienna. Former member of the DFG-funded research group on *The Staging of Otherness in the 'Long' Nineteenth Century*. International teaching activities and guest lectures, e.g. in Oxford, Paris, Mexico City, Moskow, Shanghai, Beijing, London, Belgrade, etc. Since 2019 part of the leading team of the FWF-funded project *Border Dancing across Time* (together with Sandra Chatterjee and Franz Anton Cramer); scientific direction of the doctoral program Science and Art; co-convenor of the university course Curating in the Performing Arts (with Sigrid Gareis, since 2017 in cooperation with the LMU).