

Call for papers  
**Event, *Dispositif*, Agency in Literature, Theatre, and Beyond (from 1700 to our days)**

Workshop at the Free University Berlin – 11 January 2018

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*Deadline for abstract submission: 25 October 2017*

The workshop will address the problem of reconstructing “artistic” experience, where “artistic” is defined by an event’s sponsors, participants, or audience. We will approach this frame of experience not only as a set of rules of conduct, changing through time, but also as a site of knowledge production. While a certain emphasis will be placed on theatre and literature in Europe from 1700 to recent past, students of other areas and artistic media are encouraged to submit proposals. The workshop will bring together researchers working on approaches to experience and its reconstruction ‘from below,’ from both historical and theoretical perspectives, across geographical areas and art forms. While spurring reflection on the possible sources for the historical reconstruction of an experience framed as artistic, the workshop aims at a broad revision of the studies in ‘reception’ of the arts. This rethinking will draw on recent developments not only in everyday history, but also in the history of the senses and emotions, as well as in qualitative social history.

**Keywords:** art and experience, art and agency, subject and subjectivity, social history, sociology of the arts, reception, non-expert knowledge, interactions, social anthropology, art and ethnography, power, *dispositif*.

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**Conceptualising art as *dispositif*.**

Long before John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934), the effects of a work of art (literary text, theatre performance, or painting) on its audience attracted the attention of philosophers and critics alike. Although separated by almost two centuries and by divergent understandings of the role of the subject, Dewey and eighteenth-century founders of the modern aesthetics shared some common assumptions about how people experience art (Fried 1987). One of these assumptions is that certain types of objects or experiences can be less efficient in the way they reach the audience and *transform* individuals and social groups. In the nineteenth century, a number of attempts were made to inscribe this transformation into medial narratives, speculating, for instance, on the physiological effects of certain types of reading or musical performance. According to another shared assumption, individual and collective exposures to artistic objects are the sites of knowledge production.<sup>1</sup>

A *dispositif*, as theorised in Michel Foucault’s works, is a mutable system of relations between the elements of a heterogeneous ensemble of discourses and practices (‘the said as much as the unsaid’) that define the way knowledge and its subject(s) are produced in a given social space (Foucault 1994). Our suggestion is to study this system of relations from the point of view of the subject that the *dispositif* seeks to shape – hence the centrality of individuals and their experience in the workshop’s design. At the same time, a more theoretical reflection on the specificity of the artistic *dispositif* seems useful, exploring the attempts to reinterpret the notion over the past decades by Agamben and others (see Dodier, Barbot 2016).

**Reconstructing *dispositif*, reconstructing subject.**

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<sup>1</sup> This latter point has recently attracted the attention of life scientists and then been transferred to philosophical aesthetics (Schaeffer 2015).

The criteria of the definition of artistic experience are mutable. As recent controversies in Russia have emphasised,<sup>2</sup> a number of agents — including the State, the church, media, and expert communities — can be involved in the debate about the boundaries of art. However, rather than addressing these public controversies, the workshop will tackle the issues of their impact on everyday experiences of art in the past. Still, we will be attentive to the tension between the etic and the emic perspective on the frames of experience.

How can one reconstruct a *dispositif*, and, more specifically, the relations that shape it, in the past? Our suggestion is to approach experiences of art as *events* taking place in a given social setting and a specific symbolic frame. Participants to these events would then act as informants with complimentary and conflicting perspectives on the event and their role in it. Putting the subject at the centre of a historical investigation certainly raises a number of theoretical questions, some of which will be addressed at the workshop. How do different artistic experiences complement each other or enter into conflict when regarded as ‘sources of the self’ by the social actors (Taylor 1989)? Foucault (1983), again, wrote on ‘technologies of the self’, reconstructing the circuit between disciplines of reading and writing, mobilising body and mind. Michel De Certeau (1980), in a different vein, addresses individuals as users (*utilisateurs*) of culture, with an agency expressed through appropriations of artefacts, resulting in the phenomenon of ‘anti-disciplines.’ What kind of (anti)discipline, if at all, did individuals need to adapt to partake in an artistic event? Despite the growing number of insightful studies in the area, little attention has been given to the ways in which non-expert audiences interacted with artistic frames of experience. These voices will be the focus of the workshop’s attention.

### **Non-expert knowledge of art and new sources.**

To respond to the questions raised, the study of first-hand accounts of the given events seems productive. Do first person writings, such as letters and diaries, offer privileged access to lived experience? Or, perhaps, the constraints of writing, social contexts and conventions cover the individual voice? More generally, what are possible uses of those sources for which an uncontested term is yet to be found, i.e. egodocuments, *écrits du for privé*, *Selbstzeugnisse*?

Whatever response one gives to these questions, at least two aspects of first-hand accounts of artistic events and interactions are worth exploring. The first of them concerns the hybrid categories that served to describe an artistic experience, identifying the extent to which the aesthetic notions were absorbed by non-professionals in their presentation of their interactions with art. The second aspect is the ‘subjective’ nature of these accounts. Is there a way to organise individual narratives of experience into a signifying whole, rather than a sequence of anecdotes? We suggest considering writing as an experience on its own, with its own material constraints and symbolic economies, and as a site of negotiation of both the writing subject’s identities and the social significance of the artistic event.

In order to discuss this and other matters, we will meet on 11 January 2018 in Berlin. To join us, please, address a 300-word abstract of your presentation combining historical reconstruction with a theoretical point, and a short biographical note, to [evstratov@zedat.fu-berlin.de](mailto:evstratov@zedat.fu-berlin.de) by the deadline of 25 October 2017.

The results of the proposals’ review will be announced by 30 October. The travel and accommodation costs will be reimbursed. The organisers will be happy to support participants’ visa applications. The working language of the workshop is English.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, *Pussy Riot* and *Voina* art groups, as well as Piotr Pavlenskii’s actions in Russia.

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