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EDITORIAL: WAYS OF READING

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Editorial: Ways of Reading



Fig. 1: This poem on a plate is a part of the exhibition *13 Morgen* by Jana Buch and Thea Mantwill, © Jana Buch

In the spring of 2023 an unusual exhibition opened in Düsseldorf. Its visitors did not find any paintings, sculptures, or installations to look at, but instead, found texts to read. These texts were printed on the floor banner in the entrance of the exhibition, in books placed on kitchen and coffee tables, on lounge chairs, on bed sheets suspended in the air, on posters and various other banners, even—like the poem in the image above—on dinner plates.

The exhibition, titled *13 Morgen* (Thirteen Mornings/Tomorrows), featuring the artists and authors Jana Buch and Thea Mantwill, perfectly visualizes what our sixteenth issue engages with: Ways of Reading.

The exhibition invited visitors to engage in different ways of reading: to briefly skim the short texts they encountered on posters on the wall, to pick up the book lying on a bench and leaf through it, to lie down on the bed in the center of the exhibition and ponder the inscription on a sheet hanging from the ceiling, to relax into an armchair and immerse oneself in reading a tiny book chained to the table nearby, or to sit down at the fully set dinner table and find poems instead of food on the plates.

Like bits of conversation shared over a meal, a different poem can be read on each plate.

The poem on the plate featured above reads:

Ungeschriebener Brief
Bewunderungen klingen stumpf.
Die Tiefe versackt hinter der Vorsicht.
Schön, dass es dich gibt,
will sagen: die Welt ist grausam und jemand wie du
bedeutet, dass nicht nur ich
verrückt bin.

Which roughly translates to:

Unwritten letter
Admirations sound dull.
The deepness sinks beyond caution.
How beautiful that you exist,
meaning: the world is cruel and someone like you
means that not only I
am crazy.

Everyone will read this poem differently. We, the editorial team, share our ways of reading it here:

Kacper: I read this poem in German first; I like to challenge myself. As it often happens, I came across a word or two I was not familiar with—slightly discouraging. But as I finished the reading, a new feeling of joy overwhelmed me. I felt genuinely happy for the person speaking in the poem for finding another person they hold in such high regard.

Ievgen: Poems are meant to be read in the original language. I go word by word to translate their meaning and then add one line to another, eventually connecting the whole text. This verse is easier to understand after reading it aloud several times. In

its simplicity, the reader encounters a hint to the deep meaning of human life, which is to find a soul mate.

Katharina: I read this poem as an expression of loneliness, empathy, and high sensitivity. Written by a person who searches for meaningful connections without hesitation, ready to drop the mask.

Riccardo: To me, the poem sounds like a melancholic and hopeful invocation to a sympathetic ‘other,’ who, despite being difficult or even impossible to reach concretely (as suggested by the paradox of the unwritten letter), nevertheless exists.

Jens: What struck me most in this poem is probably the theme of connection (or lack thereof). The struggle with the affordances and limits of communication (written and oral) in search for connection, the comfort of human connection in a world that is characterized here as full of challenges and full of disconnection.

Isabella: When I read this poem I get the feeling that a friend is whispering it into my ear; it evokes the feeling of sharing a secret, of us against the world. At the same time it makes me feel sad for the things I wish I had said but didn’t, or not just said but put into writing, had given to people I care about to read. There are so many moments in life that feel like unwritten letters, words that will never be read, and missed opportunities of telling each other: Schön, dass es dich gibt.

Erzhena: The poem made me think of how universal human experiences can be and how plural are the ways we interpret them. There is some unity in the practice of interpreting—we want to connect, understand and be understood. And then we interpret things that are incredibly different, while being almost the same.

Thea: I read the poem in German and in English. In my native tongue first, then in English, a language in which I have made a linguistic home in the past decade. Two rhythms, two structures of feeling. I read it as a painting, set in the center of the page. Each line springing forward from the middle and pouring out to both sides. I read it with a pause

before the last line.

For our sixteenth issue, our authors have also engaged with ways of reading. They explore the representation of reading in literary texts, political reading, reading as an academic but also a deeply personal practice, as well as different theories of reading.

These diverse ways of reading reveal major sociocultural issues upon which the authors invite us to reflect.

Reading practices in our epoch have undergone substantial transformations, becoming more and more diverse. The far-reaching expansion of the digital world and the hectic pace of modern lifestyles confer new cultural configurations to the act of reading: it takes on a subversive and resilient dimension, given the amount of time it requires and the sense alienation from instant living that a reader experiences. From this point of view, we can go so far as to conceive of reading as a form or act of (self-)care (as Sonka Hinders' *Article* proposes). In parallel, a distinction has been noted between the materiality of reading on paper versus to digital reading, the latter often being associated with skimming practices and superficial engagement, and the former with a deeper, more concentrated way of reading. Susanne Düwell's *Essay* explores the implications of these critical discourses on digital reading in the educational context. Simultaneously, the production of knowledge through various genres of text—fictional, academic, philosophical, etc.—has reached unprecedented levels in recent decades, which makes oppositions like the one between close and distant reading even more timely.

Finally, reading is hardly limited to purely literary communication. It is also through visual means that we code and decode meanings and messages among ourselves, whether in visual art or simply in choosing stylistic layouts for texts. A very prominent example of this is political writing, wherein the directive behind words is strongly impacted by their design, placement, font, color, etc. (Kuhn). Moreover, text is not only limited to paper or screen, but can be placed on a variety of media, as exemplified by the exhibition *13 Morgen*, which is also the topic of one of our *Perspectives* (Hinders). Writing and reading—or more broadly, acts of coding and decoding—are ever present in human life. With this issue, we invite our readers to contemplate various aspects of this fascinating process, and to reflect upon their own understanding of what all “ways of reading” could be.

Our issue's theme also prompts us to consider the criteria that we, as editors, apply when compiling these issues, and which ways of reading we use when reviewing submissions or embarking on rounds of editing. It presents a wide array of reading strategies and techniques, spanning the spectrum from initial skimming to analytical reading. Editing of this sort requires certain competencies and academic literacy, and

often, oddly, an absence of reading. In the whirl of mix-and-match reading strategies, editors are at the forefront of knowledge production, acting as gatekeepers who decide what shape and form any issue will take, choosing what to include or cut, rephrase or underscore. This meaning-making is as dependent on the types of literacy that editors possess, as well as on the politics by which they live. So, what does this issue want to achieve? What does it stand for?

Below, we offer you a short summary of each contribution to this issue, which are products of the ways of reading that we engaged in for this issue, and which we now would like to invite you to approach using *your* own ways of reading!

Contribution Summaries

In Simona Adinolfi's *Article*, reading is conceptualized as a hermeneutical posture geared towards the representation of distance in contemporary novels of migration. Using Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and Teju Cole's *Open City* as case studies, Adinolfi illustrates how the literary devices employed by each author center the theme of distance in the reader's experience. Thus, in *Exit West*, portals and digital devices serve as a means of simultaneously compressing and expanding spatio-temporal boundaries, whereas *Open City* relies on an elusive autodiegetic narrator to exemplify the difficulty of coming to terms with the temporal and affective distance of the migration phenomenon.

In her *Article*, Sonka Hinders analyzes the intricate relationship between reading and care that emerges when these two concepts are considered in relation to each other. Drawing on two contemporary North American works, Joanna Rakoff's memoir *My Salinger Year* and Ruth Ozeki's novel *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, she argues that the practice of reading can become an act of care for self and others. Hinders thereby offers a thoughtful consideration of the broader socio-cultural issues of reading in relation to care.

With his insightful *Article*, Axel Kuhn proposes new ways to approach political reading. By engaging with the fields of reading theory, praxeology, multimodality and political communication, he proposes introducing political reading as a distinct phenomenon and analyzing it as a form of empirical reading research. His work focuses on the ways in which political information is being produced and printed by newspapers, and read by the public. He offers a complex framework for combining

political reading processes, strategies, activities, and objects for empirical research in the future.

Sibylle Künzler engages with tactics and strategies of reading and non-reading practices, and how these implicate knowledge production. Building on participant observations, autoethnography, and interviews, the author approaches reading/non-reading as a performative enactment, with its own actors, actants and their corresponding environments. According to Künzler, practices of reading/non-reading involve techniques that can be used by readers to reinforce dominant discourses and positions, or, conversely, to undermine “the thorough reading equals proper reading” status quo. As a conclusion, Künzler underscores that non-reading or skimming-type reading are complicit in knowledge production in seminar rooms and thus should not be disregarded.

In her *Essay*, Susanne Düwell analyzes the construction of media-critical discourses on the psychological and physiological impact of “digital reading” on humans. The essay’s central objectives are to lay out which media-critical theses are the most prominent, to understand how the harmful consequences are “plausibilized,” and to designate which scientific/pop-science claims are dominating public discourse. The most polemical debates are built around how digital reading hinders educational processes, especially the cognitive development of children; the drawbacks of “intangibility” of digital books in comparison with the physicality of analogue books, and around anxiety over losing ability to “deep read” and thus “deep think.” Concluding, Düwell scrutinizes the media-critical discourses and questions their legitimacy in making far-reaching anthropological or socio-political implications.

In his *Essay*, Bennett Gilbert presents an account of his reading experiences spanning nearly seven decades. His autoethnographic approach traces the role reading has played as practice, method, and experience in a lifetime of reading for pleasure and for work, both in an academic context and as an antiquarian. He memorializes defining encounters with books from childhood and adolescence, and investigates the materiality of the reading experience and the spaces most commonly associated with a reading practice. Embedded in philosophical investigation into reading, as an academic research method as well as a vehicle for a personal historiography, his memoir of reading opens up avenues of inquiry into ways of reading conceptualized as ways of being.

In his *Essay* “On Reading Reading: Fundamental Problems of ‘Méta-lecture’,” Elias Kreuzmair explores the discourse of reading with special interest in its tropes, problems, and ways of expression. Analyzing strategies employed by texts on reading from different periods (Ickelsamer 1527, Keyn 1803, Moretti 2013, Wolf 2018) and drawing on Roland Barthes’ notion of “Méta-lecture,” Kreuzmair discusses the conceptual challenges of reading and the difficulties of observation that further complicate these challenges.

Sonka Hinder’s *Perspective* is an insightful interview with Thea Mantwill and Jana Buch, the two author-artists who invited visitors to read at the museum in their literary exhibition *13 Morgen*, which was on view at Kunst im Tunnel (KIT) Düsseldorf in the spring of 2023. In conversation with Hinder, Mantwill and Buch reflect on the challenge of bringing literature and reading into the museum, as well as the roles that time, space, and mediality played for *13 Morgen*.

The authors comprising the Science and Technology Studies research collective RUSTlab provide a *Perspective* on reading as a social, material, bodily, and affective practice. Through a collective auto-ethnographic approach, they examine reading from different angles: as a material and embodied experience, and as an individual and collaboratively practice. In doing so, RUSTlab aims to refocus reading, which hitherto was mostly seen as a means to an end, merely an academic craft that runs under the radar of dedicated research. With the help of vignettes and original photography, RUSTlab discusses and illustrates the social and political implications of reading when it is regarded as a fundamental element of academic discourse.

Simon Lee-Price’s *Perspective* is a part-playful, part-earnest experimental autofiction in which the author’s alter ego, the character Dutiful Reader, takes the reader on a meandering journey through history and the literary archive. In short paragraphs of autobiographical fragments, citations from various types of writing and historical sources, Lee-Price reflects on how reading shapes an individual’s life, and is a vital part of broader history and culture.

Acknowledgements

As usual, we thank everyone whose work was instrumental in making our sixteenth issue a reality—thank you all for engaging in so many ways of reading to bring this issue together, so that other readers too may read about the many ways of reading.

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Finally, we are indebted to the collective efforts of all those involved in the publication process, whose unwavering commitment to this journal has contributed to the successful publication of yet another issue.

We hope you enjoy reading “Ways of Reading”!

Giessen, May 2024

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