

Artistic Freedom and Scientific Research: Counterfactuals as a Starting Point for Artistic Projects. (Laboratory of Counterfactual Thinking / Peggy Mädler & Julia Schleipfer)

Thank you very much for the invitation. We are very honoured and happy to be able to take part in this conference. We have divided our talk into 2 parts. First of all, I will talk about what we understand by counterfactual thinking and how we generally use counterfactual assumptions as a basis for our artistic projects. In the second part of the talk, my fellow-presenter Julia Schleipfer, will talk about the “Empathy-Project” we are currently working on, with the title „Crying for the Polar Caps – Scenarios of Global Empathy.“ Using this example, she will outline the concrete steps and various forms that our counterfactual approach can take.

What do we understand under the term counterfactual thinking? First of all, simply: thinking against the fact. We are pursuing artistic projects, mainly because we are interested in social questions and in the possible variety of human relations. And this is a field where you repeatedly reach the threshold between the facts of actuality, on the one hand, and the assumption that we ourselves are the ones that describe and construct those facts, on the other.

By the term „actual“ we understand first and foremost the status quo, the interpersonal agreement on general „facts of reality“, the shared assumptions that lets a large mass of people inhabit a common world. And these shared assumptions are generally presented in such a way, that they seem unchangeable. They are detached from the question of their mutability, even though they often hold transformative potential, especially if their cultural practice is only of a limited scope. Some assumptions are even presented as absolutely immutable, as “the natural order of things,” like the fact that we are all mortal, although – by the way – there are some cultures that wouldn’t even agree with that statement.

And now the game begins. It is called: what if...

We are setting a new assumption. The new assumption is counterfactual, like for example: All human beings are not mortal. Or all humans have the same level of empathy.

To perform the experiment, we have to clarify at the onset the basic conditions of the experiment: imagine something like a technological switchboard, where you are able to turn switches on and off, where you can establish new connections and disrupt others. To stick to the two examples we have mentioned so far: To begin with, we have to clarify if people, that are not mortal, nevertheless get older or sick; or in the second case, we have to clarify what we mean by empathy. As soon as these questions are answered, the game can start. We are implementing one or several sufficiently specified counterfactual assumptions into our present understanding of reality. What we are interested in is how the familiar reality changes through these counterfactual assumptions.

Each project of the Laboratory for Counterfactual Thinking approaches experts from various scientific fields as well as other key social figures with specific knowledge and ask them to help us picture a counterfactual scenario. Many of them often smile at us in the beginning. Picturing non-actual realities – on first glance– feels like a childish thing to do, but it is also a long-standing practice in art, and it offers a high degree of freedom. Each of the people we question has an expert knowledge in a specific field of actuality, where he concentrates his attention, whether it is in the course of research or other activities. The counterfactual experiment consists of asking the various experts to leave their usual field of thought, but to take their knowledge about laws, principles and causal relationships with them. We ask them to apply their expert knowledge to a hypothetical scenario, which is not always an easy task.

In our interviews, we often experienced that our request to reflect on the possible consequences of a counterfactual assumption led to the reply: but that’s not possible. Whereupon we stubbornly insisted: but what



if? Without the expert knowledge concerning the structural conditions of the actual world the game with the counterfactual assumption does not work. We need the scientists, to find out together how a counterfactual assumption would behave in the actual world. These interviews lead to very different scenarios, because the knowledge of the experts doesn't only format the way they look at the facts of the actual world, but also influences and shapes the conclusions they draw from a given counterfactual assumption.

Science often uses counterfactual models, which consciously ignore certain facts of the actual world, to make structural statements. We are not focusing on formulating that kind of statement – this is something science is much more apt to do than we are. Rather, we are trying to create a space, where the audience of our performances, or the visitors of our exhibitions are able to experience these structural connections, on the one hand, but also experience individual and social freedom within them, on the other. This experience can provoke a process of reflection in the audience on their personal possibilities and limits when interacting with others, as our projects mainly focuses on social and interpersonal relationships. In addition to this, it also confronts them with the fragility of what we tend to perceive as facts, as facts of the actual world.

It is like shifting one's point of focus to an alternative reality. The history of technology is used to these kinds of shifts. In this area counterfactual thinking seems to be a motor for developments, an engine to create facts. How would we experience the world, if we could fly? A completely counterfactual assumption, that was made only two hundred years ago. A mind game, a brain-twister. We aren't able to fly yet, but we found the technical means, that let us fly. With the counterfactual experiment about immortality we should probably hurry up, though.

And although the question of "what if" has a tang of dreaminess for many people, and might seem, at first sight, to be the refuge of the escapist: not all counterfactual assumptions necessarily lead to positive scenarios. The scenario of an unlimited lifetime, a society where nobody has to die, can easily turn into a nightmare of birth control and conflicts over the distribution of limited resources. What is left is nevertheless a reflection – a reflection on a structural level – about the limits of the possible, which raises the question of what the actual facts are. In order to provoke this kind of reflection in the audience or visitors of our artistic projects, we transfer the theoretical mind game into the form of a theatrical performance, the actual play of actors, we use video cameras and interactive elements, in order to transpose everyday, individual thoughts and actions into the realm of the counterfactual assumption.

At best the counterfactual scenarios merge with the actual world and for a short moment become visible within the reality they seemed to contradict only moments ago.

We will now look at the concrete example of a Laboratory art project, and outline how we get from the basic counterfactual assumption to the finished theatre-project, the final exhibition and the video installation. I would like to introduce our way of approaching counterfactual assumptions using the example of the Empathy-Project we are currently working on.

It's called: Crying for the Polar Caps. Scenarios of Global Empathy. We brought a sample of flyers from the project (unfortunately they are only in German, but hopefully they're still nice to look at). Most of you should already have one.

Most of our projects have a very personal starting point: a question that occupies us, something we read or saw, that touched or disturbed us, etc. „Crying for the Polar Caps“ started with a documentary we watched together about the American Philosopher Judith Butler, where she says, that she is of the opinion that every physical injury that is done to a human being, every death – violent or not – is worth being grieved for, no matter where in the world it occurred.

And there it was: the counterfactual assumption for the new project: what if everyone had a higher or even unlimited empathy level? What if globalisation forced us, to trade empathy across our national borders like products or knowledge; assuming every injured human life made us cry like the death of our grandmother or our own child— what would the consequences be? Could we still make love, work, eat, have fun with friends? Would it be a complete mental overload or a rewarding means of humanizing the world?

The very first artistic decision we took, was that a project about Global Empathy has to take place outside of the theatre context and has to somehow be inserted into the actual world, with which it - in a way – competes. So, we decided to compose an Empathy-Festival, which will take place in three different streets in three quarters of Berlin. The project itself consists of 3 main parts: a video installation, that is shown on screens in 18 different shops along the streets (cafes, bars, hair cutters, flower shops, book shops and so on), a performance, which takes place in 2 different public bars in the evening and several little events in shops along along a stretch of public space, which we call the Empathy Mile.

For the Videoinstallation we conducted interviews with different people from Berlin. The result of which you see screened behind me. The starting point of these filmed conversations were newspaper-articles and news broadcasts. The difficult question, we wanted to answer together with our different interview partners, was: Is it possible to grieve for the worldwide injuries of human life as if they were a personal loss? Some of the interviewees succeeded (in crying), others didn't. But each interview reflected in a very personal way the individual limits and possibilities of empathy and created a new and unusual mirror image of the news which we are confronted with, on a daily basis.

The second important ingredient of the Empathy-Mile is a performance with the title “Where has my compassion gone”. This is the space where we – with the help of two wonderful actors – focus on the performative realisation and demonstration of different counterfactual scenarios that become possible in a world, whose inhabitants possess an enhanced level of empathy. The space of possibilities is multifaceted. Does the counterfactual assumption lead to a “Big Brother” state or to a complete capacity for understanding? Boundless harmony and worldwide peace due to unlimited compassion? The collapse of economies and political systems? Paralysis and exhaustion due to overwhelming individual and social stress? Or does the emotional overload lead to a world, where no one has empathy for anybody or anything?

Before writing the script for the performance, we asked experts of different scientific fields, to accompany us into the counterfactual imagination of a world with unlimited empathy and to contribute their knowledge to the development of various scenarios. We did this in order to gain a more concrete idea about the various dimensions, that an enhancement of empathy would influence, and to uncover the hidden potentials of this counterfactual assumption.

We talked to a neurobiologist, if compassion is inherent to human beings, or if it is just a cultural construct. We also asked him about the way that compassion functions from a neurological point of view and if there is the possibility to increase the level of human empathy through medication or education. Last but not least, we asked him to try to imagine a world, where every injured human life would stimulate our mirror neurons, as well as how much empathy a human body could cope with.

We also interviewed a political scientist and journalist, who very clearly painted a picture of a society totally incapable of action und we talked with him about the difference between empathy and solidarity. We asked a hospice worker, which skills and competencies are necessary to be able to responsibly handle one's own compassion. Together with a theologian we debated the question, whether the admission of powerlessness is already to be considered as a virtue.

As Peggy Mädler said before, sometimes it was not easy to convince the interviewees to apply their expert knowledge to the counterfactual assumption of unlimited compassion. But when they did, it led the wonderful moments, in which it felt as if we were wearing counterfactual skates, gliding across the surface of the postulated assumption, exploring the unknown terrain of a possible reality.

Every single interview was documented with a digital camera and a voice recorder. Their content was then transcribed and is – due to its concreteness – of utmost importance for the script for the performance, in which the theoretical interviews, terminology and scientific parameters of global empathy are turned into arguments on the counterfactual battlefield. For example: The quarrel of hyper-empathetic lovers, will be performed as an American-Style TV-show focused on: “How to teach empathy to my child?.” Other performative examples are an empathy-rap and a compassion choreography...

The actors will sit right in between the audience on camping chairs, and occasionally approach the microphone for a counterfactual speech. The counterfactual scenes and scenarios will melt into the everyday setting of an ordinary bar, with the smell of beer and the street noise of a trivial summer evening in Berlin forming the atmospheric context. And maybe for very short moment – and this is what we hope for – the border between the actual factual world and the counterfactual scenario, which is presented in the performance, will be gradually blurred for the audience.

In addition to the video installation and the performance, where the audience is caught in the rather passive role of the consumer, the Laboratory will also create locations along the Empathy Mile, where the reflection of empathy and the imagination of its global expansion inconspicuously invade the everyday life of pedestrians and visitors. The aim is to generate spaces, where the counterfactual assumption is disguised as fact for a brief period of time and thereby tiptoes into the daily routine of the people living in Berlin. For example, the innocent passer-by will be invited to an empathetic get-together in a small bar on Tuesday evening; at the ice cream parlour next door he can buy – beside the usual flavours – an Empathy-Sundae or he can find a selection of compassionate plants at the small flower shop on the corner.

While founding the Laboratory of Counterfactual Thinking we asked ourselves: What kind of knowledge does the world need? The knowledge of counterfactual worlds is probably only one of many. But is a challenging one.

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