

**THE SAME
AS IT EVER WAS?
A CHANCE FOR
CREATING NEW
QUALITIES
IN OUR EXCHANGES**

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When participating at a conference in Washington DC in 2019, I organised a panel of speakers from Austria. Due to an unexpected health issue, on short notice, one of the presenters could not travel across the Atlantic to join us at the venue.

I suggested a participation of my colleague online, but the response was negative. The organisers of this very well established and respected congress remained adamant about not accepting any version of a presentation via a long-distance audio-visual communication application. There was no way to convince them that “face-time” might be a way to replace face-to-face interaction temporarily.

During the conference, however, when, shortly after the rejection of my request, one of the main keynote speakers also got ill, the responsible board accepted a prerecorded presentation of this well-known researcher. A brief local introduction by a colleague justified a “one-time” exception, and the organisers kept this talk as an online-substitute in the schedule. That’s when I saw a chance to also get permission for the same type of solution for the panel that I had put together. With silent grudging, my proposition was accepted, but only under the condition that I would never mention this exception anywhere at any time in the future. The message was clear: A presentation at a conference may only count if the author will be on-site, speak in person in front of an audience, and be open to discussing the paper’s content with peers present in the room.

No other format would be acceptable.

Since then, the academic world has undergone some radical changes, and the process is not near its conclusion. Academia is a very close-knit environment, proud of its conditions and requirements, methods, and procedures. Still, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is providing unexpected possibilities to develop, question and reform central elements of it.

What I had experienced in Washington short before the pandemic hit the world had been in line with similar observations

at other conferences, symposia, and smaller academic events. There had always been very good reasons to explain to all participants why physical presence is a fundamental condition for the validity of the whole structure of scholarly discourse. If you can’t attend a meeting in person, your contribution will not be accepted, that rule was at the core of the academic exchange and nobody considered ever changing that.

Even if it had been quite clear for a while that the vast expenses for transportation and accommodation and the use of enormous resources, which expanded the CO2 footprint of all attendants to an unbearable extent, should make everyone question the system, everyone also held on to it. A paper had to be presented in person, on location, no matter how much time and money it would cost. A critical reflection of such requirements barely ever reached the level of practical application. Then again, besides the subject-specific and potentially functional aspects of such meetings, the social and interpersonal component had also always been known as a vital and indispensable reason to travel to a specific destination on the planet and to spend a few days meeting and exchanging views with people who share similar interests and ideas.

This gregarious aspect had often been downplayed and valued a lot less than the more formal and more respected interaction in the conference rooms. Still, it was undoubtedly at least as important and meaningful to most participants. While the presentation may have been listened to with more or less attention, the interaction with other participants outside the venue, at dinners or special events for socialising, this element created a lot of engagement by most attendants of gatherings under the veil of academia.

What is called “networking” always happened very well around a table with food and drinks to share, even if that wasn’t considered as reputable and prestigious as the official listing in the group of selected speakers. Only if you spoke at a conference, your academic requirements were matched, as it proved your acceptance through evaluation

and recognition. Playing by the rules, providing the necessary conduct and thus being accepted at the table was the only way to enter this seemingly exclusive sphere of intellectual exchange.

What suddenly hit the academic world also hit the arts, the entertainment business, the music and film industry, and tourism in all its shapes and forms: it all came to a complete stop. Almost two years of empirical investigation and study of a world without meeting people in person, without the social component as an aspect also of all organised academic exchange-events has led me, like many others, to a simple conclusion: Even if it was denied or at least downplayed; that social component had most likely always been the primary goal of such events. I can claim this based on direct and personal experience and on extensive communication with peers and colleagues.

This essay reflects on the background and outcome of two events, planned as a cooperation for 2020, that had also led to the selection and compilation of papers presented in this publication. There is no attempt to shoe-horn this review of a specific personal experience into a reference-based academic format, primarily because even in 2021, we are still adapting to circumstances.

As the founder and organiser of the annual symposium and festival "Under_the_Radar" in Vienna, focusing primarily on experimental work in animation, film, and art, I had reached out to the group of researchers and artists behind the series of academic sessions titled "Ecstatic Truth", to propose a collaboration on the newest edition of the two meetings. In summer 2019, I suggested a topic and title for the coming year, in which "Ecstatic Truth" would present its 5th and "Under_the_Radar" its 10th program. I also invited the University of Applied Arts Vienna to participate as a third partner in this cooperation. The plan was to hold a five-day-long hybrid event, part academic symposium, part film festival, and part artistic presentations in late April of 2020 in Vienna. Unfortunately,

right in the middle of the final preparations, the first-ever country-wide lockdown caused by the Covid19-pandemic put a sudden halt to all plans. The discussion that I intend to suggest in this text is about the potential for substantial adjustments that a radical external factor should and could have for academia in general and the idea of symposia and conferences in particular.

For everyone working in any cultural environment, like arts, education, research or communication, the same unexpected incident blew up all previous plans. It eliminated the conventional procedures and it required readjustments and an adaptation to the new situation. Optimistically we tried out several ways to postpone the event, but in the end, only a very limited version, in its last preparations again affected by the pandemic, was able to take place over a much more spread out timespan in late 2020.

For the academic presentations, the alteration from originally three planned days of sessions in person in Vienna to three very condensed and much shorter online sessions with no specific local centre had been the most significant change. Also, the possibility to mix the experience of original artwork on-site, films in special programs and competitions, and the opportunity to connect artists and creators with the academic sphere and its dynamics had to be given up completely. The overlapping and interdisciplinary quality had been an outstanding aspect of "Under_the_Radar", and it was difficult for me to accept the limitations of the new needs and circumstances. However, the topic that I had originally proposed, and that the team behind "Ecstatic Truth" had adopted with an application of their own interpretation of it, had suddenly turned into a seemingly visionary title for the much broader situation: "The Age of the Absurd!"

When we finally held the symposium online in December 2020, this title appeared as a very descriptive designation for the constraints that we all had suddenly found ourselves in. The coincidence of the developments matching the ideas

behind the topic's overall direction can also be demonstrated in a strangely fitting additional alignment. The work of French philosopher and author Albert Camus had been one of the initiating sources for the original conception of ideas for proposing a theme for the coming meeting. In particular, the essay "The Myth of Sisyphus", in which Camus reflects upon the notion of absurdism and its connection to human responses, had inspired the tone of a topic to be coordinated in the projected collaborative event. Deriving from a more general, abstract approach, the team behind "Ecstatic Truth" applied a concrete and tangible level by relating to the work of George Monbiot, a British writer and political activist. Monbiot described our contemporary age of increasing social and economic inequality, mass extinction and impending climate breakdown as deliberate disaster-capitalism in which the ultra-rich benefit as institutions, systems of taxation and democratic processes implode.

By coincidence, Camus's equally political and critical work would suddenly find a new recognition in current popular media. In 2020 the British publisher of his book "The Plague" reported it to be a best seller to a point where the demands in sales of physical copies could barely be matched. What strikes me as an intriguing fact is the connection that had already happened in Camus's mind: the correspondence of a broad need to deal with the absurdity of contemporary life and society and what a sudden pressure on society, caused by a pandemic, will make us think about.

Without hard evidence, it is difficult to argue that circumstances potentially converge to focal points in historical developments, so this claim requires accepting a certain amount of intuitive correlations. The combination of the political situation in major countries, like in the US, the UK, Russia and Brazil, the development of global climate-related issues in connection with economy-based problems and tensions, mass-migration and social inequality, plus the general question of still unresolved predicaments around cultural tolerance and the acceptance of human rights, created a complex

system of interacting elements that altered the life for almost everyone in the "global village" of Western civilisation.

After living for weeks and weeks under the influence of necessary restrictions, limitations and considerations, it is obvious that all the mentioned issues interact in a closely connected environment. While the planned conference had been designed to enable participants to approach the topic from various angles, reality added an additional one that fitted the title almost perfectly: We already lived in "the age of the absurd", and the Covid-19 pandemic did nothing else but making that clear to everyone on the planet.

In the call for papers, animation, also seen as an extended way of working with sequential images, presenting a way to express artistic and conceptual positions, had been positioned into a slightly provoking angle towards the very prominent issues of the modern world. While the goal of sustainability on all levels, in climate and nature, in social structures, in business, in food production, in education, in media and in the integrity of global leaders and politicians appeared as a more pressing and acute priority than ever before, developments leading up to the outbreak of the current pandemic did not show enough substantial actions of resistance or counteraction to work towards it. Organising a conference that attempts to connect all these burning issues with artistic animation seemed, especially in hindsight, somewhat absurd too, but it had also been an effort to connect the field of study and practice with the global situation. Having several participating organisations, and with them also slightly diverging ideas about the overall direction of the event, had already created an ambitious context to work with, but the avalanche of restrictions and limitations that the pandemic introduced throughout the year added a whole new dimension to the concept of collaboration of everyone in academia, arts, media and cultural work.

Looking back, postponing, re-planning, postponing again and never really knowing if or how much of the conference could even happen had required a shift in one's mindset and

a focus on issues and questions that lay behind the topic of the symposium, actually, behind any symposium or meeting. Finally, in December 2020, after months of experiencing the disease's effects, one would not anymore have to organise a symposium to merely discuss topics that derived from either an abstract idea of the absurd or from the role of animation in an absurdly commercialised world, or the connection of experimental artistic expression in a hostile environment of false news and alternative facts, or a rapidly changing climate that affects everyone's ability to live, move and travel. It also got essential to start thinking about the reasons for our activities and the effects of our endeavours, including the symposium itself. At the same time, it is also important to point out that, as challenging the situation may have been in December 2020, only through shared efforts and mutual contributions a successful and encouraging online-meeting could take place.

As the situation may ease out, at least temporarily during the warmer season, it is important to process the experiences that the various restrictions that governments and local institutions had to introduce to protect the population from an even faster spreading of the virus that is threatening lives directly and through the impact on the health-systems the well-being of everyone in every country in the world. What appears as a necessary step following this situation is accepting the possibility to reconsider hardened and dug in structures, especially in academia. Will everything go back to normal once the pandemic is under control? Will there be enough people vaccinated in the coming winters to allow on-site education at schools and universities? Will institutions attempt to organise internal processes in ways that will enable us to go back to a working environment that is as close as possible to the same way it had been before?

Without a possibility for prior experience, it is not easy to draw from resources or to relate to previous reflections or considerations. No wonder that a novel, published in 1947, using records of an actual plague in the 19th century in North

Africa, suddenly gained interest and popularity in media, audiences and discussions. This is even more understandable as the author's absurdist philosophical views are explicitly expressed in this work. Questioning all personal and social efforts in the light of a profound desire for a deeper meaning and with the simultaneous understanding of the contradictory nature of setting reachable goals while experiencing fragility, uncertainty and volatility of one's life, is a relatable response. Breaking this down to the level of organising meetings, collaborating with peers, exchanging ideas and findings, discussing and publishing varieties of approaches and thoughts and, hopefully, gaining new understandings of the world while, in doing so, bringing it onto the level of academic research, this is amplifying questions that have been lingering in the atmosphere for quite a while. Using a convincing metaphor for the situation between waves of variations of the virus, we are probably right in the eye of a storm, awaiting the moment when everything will get worse again, but also knowing that we most likely already made it somewhat halfway through the tempest. We got so far, although there was just little experience with a pandemic to learn from, and we had to rely, on the one hand, on skills and experiences that are rooted in much deeper levels of our internal structures, but we could, on the other hand, also rely on advanced natural sciences and medicine. What may we be able to gain from this experience for enhancing and revaluing academic practices and long-known, established procedures?

In our case, a conference that happened on a limited size, with only online participants, still worked out. It even allowed the attendance of people who could otherwise never have joined if the meeting would have happened on-site more than half a year earlier. That is a clear advantage, and there are more to be addressed. As the concept of sustainability had been prominently emphasised in the description of the call for papers, a meeting that does not require long-distance transportation that leaves an exceedingly heavy carbon footprint would for sure always be the more environmentally friendly choice, thus also work better for the given topics. When excluding the

necessary access to a stable internet connection and the required technology behind it, an online meeting is potentially allowing more diversity and equality regarding participants, as the funding for involvements will not need the support of an institution or otherwise provided sufficient resources. The possibility to record online meetings automatically yields the opportunity to extend the discussion into an exchange and study that may happen even after the event. Digital communication not only enables more direct, egalitarian and open-minded interaction between peers; it also presents additional tools to share ideas, data, visuals and research content.

On the downside, some of the prominent key areas can also be identified, in which the effects of not meeting in person at a specific site and at a specific time must be addressed.

In a broader scope, conferences, festivals, and symposia are an element of the economy, particularly the travel industry and local tourism. Of course, the economic impact, especially of the very large and extensive meetings of thousands of participants, is crucial for cities that focus on accommodating such events' needs. But let us stay on the level of dimensions that both "Ecstatic Truth" and "Under_the_Radar" had so far been working on. For sure, transportation, accommodation, and connected expenses had played a role, but even combined in a proposed collaboration, the size of the two symposia together would never reach a volume that could have a massive economic influence. Such small events gain leverage only through their large number and frequent appearance.

The role of institutions had already been subtly questioned by many smaller symposia, which had not primarily been planned out of one specific host university or similar central organisation, but out of a network of collaborating individuals who created ephemeral and fluctuating structures to work on the setup of such meetings and interactions. The significance of an institution or a location connected to a conference is severely reduced when people meet in a virtual space.

The biggest and probably most relevant negative effect in connection with online-only meetings is the lack of actual physical presence and direct communication. This does include the experience of the environment, the location, city, people, life, food, weather and much more, but, in particular, it includes the intellectual and emotional interaction with like-minded people, with fellows and peers. It is, however, still too soon to reflect upon the long-term impact of this experience and what the academic world will be able to learn from the lack of direct, face-to-face contact, looking at not only small, flat, electronically generated reproductions of faces, but at full-bodied people, as they move in the real world.

This is probably it: the world was pushed into a situation where, after at least two decades of flirtation with an all-digital environment, the actual reality suddenly put its foot down.

Nothing appears out of the blue. Everything requires some time for its development, but when it reaches the surface of public recognition, it may appear as it came from nowhere while it had actually been in preparation for a long time. We will still look with awe at specific moments in the past that enabled us to become aware of something new, something that we had not seen before. We can recognise the period around the year 2000 as the time when various media converged in the non-physical sphere of zeros and ones. Images and sounds, music and film, animation and graphics all came together in exchangeable forms and shapes that one could share and experience around the planet instantly. Those among us who can still remember the times before the digital flood had swept us away, can also remember well that this coming-together had not appeared overnight, but in many small steps, which, at some unclear moment, seemingly abruptly enabled this technology to dominated every aspect of our lives. Let us claim that the year 2000 is a fitting symbolic date within the human scale of thinking, to be recognised as a conceptual turning point for this aspect. Similarly, we should understand the development of the first vaccines against the Covid-19 pandemic, delivered just before the end of 2020.

This occurrence marks the introduction of an effective tool to combat the disease and identified this moment in time as a landmark in the development of serums that will enable the human body to defend itself against future threats. We will most likely also remember the year 2020 as a moment in which medicine had made a considerable step forward into the future. Will it also play a role in how academic communication will be handled, processed and executed?

Will there be a development that may start with questioning the structure and setup of meetings, symposia, conferences and festivals, and potentially jump over to even more pressing questions? Undoubtedly, even bigger matters of concern need to be addressed, like open wounds that require attention and care. The question of limited contracts for part-time researchers and educators in academia and the growing number of precarious working conditions that will make it impossible for scholars to ever reach a reliable and sustainable position within an institution is a well-known issue that has reached dramatic dimensions.

The preposterous attitude that researchers have to publish on a regular basis in order to survive the domestic competition within each internal university system of evaluation has proven to create more fake content and predatory platforms that exploit authors than producing substantial and inspiring research. Especially if an academic has not reached a position in which writing papers, articles or conference contributions is funded by an employer, all this work is nothing else but self-exploitation and abuse in the name of a higher goal, like a promised future within academia.

The aphorism “publish or perish” has developed into a widely accepted process of devaluation and discrimination that made a career almost entirely dependent on the volume and not so much the quality of a researchers’ or creators’ output.

Even symposia on a smaller scale, like the ones discussed here, have to question their *raison d’être*, their justifications

and their reasons to exist. What are they really about if events are not primarily about the genuine, personal, engaged exchanges of dedicated individuals?

In the last 20 years, the global community has changed, and it has grown together in a way that we still have to grasp and accept. Everything that had made our lives more interesting and exciting had also come with a cost that we prefer to overlook or neglect. The climate changed faster and faster because global warming was also caused by our way of living, by our communication, by our transportation and consumption. The digital wave allowed us to slip away and drown in insignificant content that new platforms that are commonly described as “social-media” pored all over us and into our brains. One may discuss if the word “social” is the best fitting choice for their commercial orientation or if it may actually distract from the effects of these applications, but this conversation is to be held in other fields.

As pointed out in the description of the topics that had been on the agenda for our projected symposia in 2020, the areas in which we, as participants of a seemingly refined, first-world civilisation, have already exhausted a majority of the potentials and resources in our environments, are extensive and sprawling. In case we were not well aware of them while operating in an academic environment, we would have to accept ourselves as ignorant and misguided fools. Even more so, our understanding of reality would have to be truly absurd.

We know that we, as a global community, are exploiting the planet, and warnings are loud for not only 20 years, but for much longer. This did not stop us driving at full speed into the direction of an invisible wall that we had to expect to show up, suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, at some point. By proposing the topic for the collaborative academic event, issues had been addressed on various levels that had already been floating around our minds for a while. The accelerated developments of the last two decades have thrown us deeply into

an age of the absurd, and that happened even more so in all media-related and connected areas and fields.

While we could recognise the digital realm's potentials and prospects, we could not protect our lives from most of the dangers and threats that had also come with them. More people than ever travelled around the planet to meet for short events, like conferences, festivals, art-gatherings and presentations. Everything got faster, shorter and easier, but it also put a permanently growing pressure on everyone. We all had to agree to burn as much of our resources and energies in as short a time as possible to leave at least a bit of a noteworthy track on the playground. With the development of cryptocurrencies, finally a system for exchanging virtual values has been developed and widely accepted that was built on nothing else but extensive energy consumption without any other positive effect on our environment or society.

Is this an exaggerated and very simplified description? Yes, it is. But this is also how we can operate to get the point across: by categorising, simplifying and condensing. That's also what we will do when looking back at the events of our current situation. In 2021 we are, so far, streaming almost everything, from major film festivals like the Berlinale in February to massive conferences like the annual Public Culture Association congress in April or the ANIMAFEST symposium in June. Small galleries create virtual openings and online exhibitions and look for ways to present at least a "digital component" on the internet. Most teachings took place online via "distance learning", and faculty and students were left alone with the massive problems this shift is causing. Communication through a digital environment was chosen, at least for now, to replace the physical world's interactions, and we all had to go through a steep and bumpy learning curve that will not level out for quite a while.

After a successful on-site event in Vienna in summer 2019, I, as the responsible organiser, had expected to contribute to the setup behind the hybrid-experience that "Under_the_Radar"

had proposed to provide by collaborating with partners, with the already mentioned University of Applied Arts in Vienna and "Ecstatic Truth", lead by Birgitta Hosea, Tereza Stehlikova and Pedro Serrazina. The pandemic forced me to learn a lot more than I expected, to develop my plans in a completely unforeseeable direction, and to accept a reality that would not look anywhere near the environment that I had been used to working with.

The isolation and inability to move and travel has thrown us back onto ourselves, and we are forced to reflect upon where we stand and how we got here. We may even consider moving into new, hopefully, better directions than the ones we had followed over the last decades. Whether any of the emerging good resolutions will be implemented in the future is an important question, but it can not be answered yet. We are still mainly adjusting and dealing with the permanently changing conditions, but, in between, we may also have a few moments to think about the situation more conceptually and from a more prudent distance. It is necessary to reflect upon the path that had led us to where we found ourselves in 2021 and apply the same rigour that academics are required to apply in their research in questioning established structures, procedures, and behaviours.

At our symposium in December 2019, we were able to listen to presenters from all over the planet, and based on cheap and affordable technologies, we could communicate and discuss across continents, time zones and cultural barriers. The number of participants from unexpected areas and countries had increased heavily, but the longer-lasting effects are also sobering. The online meetings could not substitute for actual encounters with real people in their spaces, with real bodies, creating real sounds that one can hear and feel in close distance. Even if nobody ever plans to do this, we touch each other, smell human beings, and feel the warmth of other bodies when we are in the same room. Hopefully, the value of these aspects will become apparent for more and more people in all areas of life. We will also have to accept that when we decided

to travel to a conference in the past, we really went to meet people at a location that we were interested in experiencing. In many cases, the papers were the ornaments on the structures we had constructed for this exchange with others. Also, scholarly communication is an interaction between people, who are breathing organisms that not only desire but require a connection that goes beyond the intellectual discussion of ideas and concepts. If there is anything that I can deduct from my experiences, it is the understanding that the human element in academic exchanges is not about the application of rules and regulations, not about formalities and expectations, but about a collaborative effort of people who are open to a serious and earnest communication about the topics that they are working on.

The genie is out of the bottle, and conferences will not move back to a format that will always require attendance as a condition for recognised participation. Instead, we will hopefully learn to separate the avalanche of online distraction from the few meaningful and inspiring digital experiences that the internet can provide us. The intensity of the direct personal interactions will be a much more consciously considered element of meetings, festivals, conferences, etc. What the pandemic destructed will be reassembled in new shapes and forms, and they will have an even stronger focus on the non-digital world while also embracing it as a device to expand their potentials.

We still have the known and established channels to disseminate new ideas, exciting theories, and refined concepts in academia. Yet, we now also have something else: A chance and a reason to hold on to the opportunities for creating a new quality in our exchanges. The pressure to accept and adapt to unforeseeable kinds of sharing and discussing our thoughts could lead to prospects for incorporating the absurdity in our existence within our research and creative work in innovative and productive ways.