Oswald Wiener's Theory of Thought

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Conversations and Essays on Fundamental Issues in Cognitive Science

DE GRUYTER

Contents

Preface

As a versatile and creative thinker, Oswald Wiener (1935–2021) developed from an artist into a researcher out of sheer necessity. Throughout his life, the academic reception of his psychology of thought has been troubled. This has various reasons, among which his doubly eccentric-seeming approach of combining explorative thinking with empirical science and, related to this, of linking computer science to introspection, is not the least.

In the 1960s, Wiener was an influential *writer* of the German-language literary postwar-avant-garde. He belonged to the first generation of intellectuals and artists who turned their partly disappointed artistic and political hopes to the new thinking of cybernetics having emerged since the 1940s. The philosophy of language and the linguistic turn increasingly did not seem to offer any promise. But the fear of looming social engineering enticed Wiener, as other thinkers originally oriented toward the humanities, to dwell in positivist, scientific, even behaviorist provocation. So in one of the conversations in this book, Wiener attributes his oscillation between the hope in and the fear of technology to a kind of "Stockholm syndrome." He was one of the first who, as a writer and computer scientist, embodied "the two cultures" of science and the humanities in one person.

Today, Oswald Wiener's reputation as a prescient critic of the effects of computer engineering not only on our sensibilities, but also on our behavior – on habits, customs, and our implicit ideologies – is internationally undisputed (cf. the English translations of some of his key texts in the magazine *October* 2001 and 2019). Yet, so far this has been recognized primarily in the fields of the arts and humanities.

The present volume aims to vigorously correct this by elaborating both the content and the significance of Wiener's theory of thought for cybernetics, artificial intelligence, theoretical and engineering computer science, psychology, cognitive science, philosophy, and esthetics. We believe that an adequate reception of this theory, which

has grown over decades, and, even more, its assessment and systematic adoption as well as elaboration in these fields, is still pending. So far, it has only proven fertile in practice, namely in a considerable number of thinkers and artists who have been inspired by aspects, concepts, or even just the forward-looking spirit of Wiener's theory.

So this book was originally intended to be a guide to the development and, thereby, also to a better understanding of Oswald Wiener's theory of thought, as it still seems unusual for laypersons and cognitive scientists alike. Three conversations between the editors and Wiener elaborate on its central concepts, which are derived from an epistemology supported by theoretical computer science and from a psychology of thought based on introspection. The conversations are intended to make Wiener's ideas, especially as expounded in the 2015 reference book *Selbstbeobachtung* (Suhrkamp, Berlin; Engl.: *Introspection*), more accessible.

Two developments during the work on the book led us to modify this mediatory approach. First, Wiener was rather inclined to attempt a forward-looking text elaborating on his new ideas than to reappraise the historical development of his old ones. Second, to our great sadness, Oswald Wiener passed away on November 18, 2021, and the fragments in the estate show that he never ceased to work on the one central question: "What distinguishes human thought and feeling fundamentally from statistical stimulus-to-behavior computation?" Unfortunately, he wasn't able to elaborate these fragments to the point of publication. So what he left behind are countless thought and introspection protocols. These, just as the entire estate, are still waiting to be processed and published.

Thus, the three conversations with the editors only form the first part of the book. They each detail one of three arguable phases of development of Wiener's theory of thought. The first phase was still marked by the linguistic turn, albeit often repulsively. During the second phase (since the 1970s), Wiener attempted to consistently define historically disputed epistemological concepts with the help of the theory of automata. Finally, the last phase, from the end of the 1990s,

was dedicated to the psychology of thought and introspection and encompassed extensive discussions within an informal research group.

The second, additional part of the book is now opened by Wiener's last major essay published during his lifetime entitled "Cybernetics and Ghosts." It represents a kind of recapitulation of his life's work and, as an appendix, also contains a short glossary with explanations of some central theoretical terms, which are also used in the other chapters of the book. It is supplemented by three essays by the editors, each of which expands on a detailed problem of the theory of thought. Michael Schwarz addresses the genesis of "cognitive symbols" as a grounding of thought in the awareness of a proxy object, thus representing an *essentially* different model than deep neural networks in computational neuroscience performing "object recognition." Thomas Eder tackles the problem of memorizing texts as a model case of structuring insight learning. Finally, Tom Raab sketches out a theory of memory based on Wiener's ideas seeking to consistently integrate psychoanalytic "metapsychology" into cognitive science.

We hope that at least the consistency of the use of technical terms characterizing both the conversations and the essays will give the book an introductory, albeit still demanding character. May it further contribute to the study of the work of one of the – as we are convinced – pioneers of a new theory of thought.

Our warmest thanks go to Ingrid Wiener, who always greatly supported our joint meetings and discussions, even when the group expanded. You made our endeavor possible in the first place!

The editors, January 2023

Literature, Language, Thought: The Beginnings

A Conversation between Oswald Wiener and Thomas Eder

First contacts with music and writing in the 1950s

TE: The three conversations in this book are supposed to document your intellectual development from the late 1950s and early 1960s until today. This one deals with your early phase as a poet and as an artist. What made you as a young man want to become a musician and a poet? Did you only have intrinsically artistic goals – to create innovative poetry, for instance? Did you want to add to the historic development of poetry? Or did you also have external goals relating to what art and poetry should develop into?

OW: If I had an external goal, it was only a metaphysical one. At that time I was a quite naïve philosopher of mind. Unraveling the mystery of consciousness – this was our ultimate goal. To this end, we hoped to gain insights and clues via poetry. I understood the question of consciousness to be beyond the reach of science, and this made me a fierce adversary of science right from the start. I invested a lot of time convincing myself of the idea that science is nothing but bullshit and a huge disaster.

TE: To which the alternative would be art?

OW: I didn't formulate my goals that clearly. Rather, I had the vague feeling that any possible breakthrough would come through art. Somehow we had to penetrate this blurry wall, and we did not really wonder much about what would loom behind it.

TE: Could you really separate your goals as neatly as you later claimed, namely that your work followed two tendencies in parallel or maybe against each other – toward the goal of intensifying sensation and experience through art on the one hand, and toward the goal of better understanding the mechanisms of consciousness through art and poetry on the other?

OW: The latter rather came by itself, so that I didn't realize it at first. At one point it became clear, of course, that I myself belonged to those people, whom I attacked with my criticism of science. In the end, I too wanted to understand in the sense of what I today call *clear understanding*. I didn't seek emotional understanding, which simply didn't

satisfy me. A true artist, I believe, would have been content with it. I was very receptive to moods and affects though. But they just weren't enough; I wanted to know more clearly what we could discover behind this wall we tried to break through. In the process, I acquired new knowledge without realizing it. I read a lot. So during this phase, I took notice of a few authors' names for the first time – Spinoza, for instance. During these years, the first half of the 1950s, the foundations of my thought were laid, not very solidly but at least sketchily. For me, the main conflict, as I once wrote, was this: "On the one hand, one could cancel out the effect [of making or receiving art] by comprehensively explaining the mechanisms involved; this knowledge made it possible to contrive and create effects at will, relativizing one's own heightened emotion and making the manipulator proof against manipulation. On the other hand, one must intensify the effect of art as far as humanly possible [...]. [T]his dichotomy led to wild oscillations between mentalist philosophy and behaviorism. Naïveté dictated the following compromise. In the 1950s I turned myself into a fanatical artist, because I regarded art as the supreme means of gaining knowledge. Art was *experimental*, because its varying effects on others, and above all on myself, could be observed and could thus give rise to hypotheses concerning the underlying mechanisms. [...] [I]t was possible to have both emotion and insight, and (this was the apotheosis of 'self-referentiality,' the ubiquitous slogan that had by then supplanted Hegel's notion of 'synthesis') emotion through insight. [...] It was not until the 1970s that I realized that [André] Breton's *program* (not his results) had anticipated one aspect of our work. If Surrealism is a 'pure psychic automatism, whereby one seeks to express, in writing or by any other means, the true process of thought,' then in a sense I was looking for the same thing. The 'true process of thought' had as far as possible to be documented. However, the art work was not the documentation. It was not about the process of 'expressing' anything – indeed, that process was the problematic thing – but about observing the impression made by the given text [...]. Art as understanding, understanding as art. The role of the art work in the art process is now

just this: to be neutralized by an effort on the viewer's part. [...] The maker is thus superfluous and his intention, if any, non-authoritative."[1]

TE: Outsourcing texts to blueprints, algorithms, or mathematical principles could be viewed as a complementary or the backside of this kind of automatic text production, e.g., the "methodical inventionism" of Marc Adrian,[2] who applied formal principles to generate texts from a stock of words to be manipulated externally. There had been similar attempts within the Vienna Group as well.

OW: Yes, these came from me. In a simpler form, Gerhard Rühm had achieved this already with his permutations, and I with my constellations. So it was obvious to further mathematize and complicate these attempts, which showed itself in the guise of texts such as "bissen brot" by Gerhard Rühm and Konrad Bayer.[3] This is an effective poem, I think. Then I realized that one could do similar texts by applying the theory and method of Claude Elwood Shannon, who had combined words by their probability. Shannon generated letter sequences according to probabilities of letters in natural language. At first glance, these sequences looked like letter salads. But if you then added the next letter of the statistics, it already sounded a bit like English, and so on and so forth. Eventually, the sequences became more and more like English, although the more English they become, the more banal they also get, of course.

TE: Had you heard of the German computer scientist Theo Lutz's similar experiments on Konrad Zuse's Z22 computer at roughly the same time? Or of the so called "autopoems" Gerhard Stickel produced on an IBM 7090?

OW: No, I didn't know these.

TE: He came from the circle around Max Bense.

OW: Max Bense annoyed me because of both his clear commitment to behaviorism and his belief in cybernetic esthetics, which is basically an esthetics of probability. I assume that efforts like these also had deeper, hitherto misunderstood facets, and a critical intelligentsia should scrutinize them and then write a monograph beginning with Shannon via Abraham Moles and Max Bense to Helmar Frank, etc. For

their effort continues to have an effect, albeit in a slightly disguised form. Yet, it is still unclear what this approach is able to achieve and what it is good for. Obviously, it is good for something but not for creativity, I believe. One can fake creativity with it, and one can also deceive oneself and take the fake for the real thing.

TE: Yes, reading such a product generated by means of probability may give you similar esthetic experiences as reading a text written by a person. Yet, this is a consequence of the *esthetic attitude* with which the reader approaches and unfolds the text, and not a consequence of the text surface as such or of properties of the generating process.

OW: Once we have a chess program like Deep Blue, chess ceases to be an intellectual challenge. It will certainly continue as a sport, but there will be no further thought about how humans play chess, I guess. Obviously, Deep Blue proves that surface processes suffice to bring somebody who knows how to play chess to attribute depth to the machine. Kasparov, for example, the world's best chess player at that time, who nevertheless lost to Deep Blue, believed that his own thought was deep, and he also attributed "depth" to some moves by the machine. He thus was convinced that the machine was literally thinking, even though he knew how it worked technically. Nonetheless, he was inclined to say: "Yes, the machine does exactly what I do." And yet it doesn't.

The stream of consciousness

TE: There is probably a similarity to automatic or algorithmic text and art production. What about the text *der vogel singt* by Konrad Bayer? Is it true that you did its mathematical blueprint?

OW: Yes. Bayer asked me to do it after he had sketched out what he wanted. But it is clear that the quasi mechanically created text was only a rough draft, to which Bayer then added the highlights. His basic idea was definitely a constellation in the astronomical sense. His vision of the machine was connected to Ramon Lull and Giordano

Bruno. It was about rotating spheres coming apart and together again in certain moments, so that, for example, three planets appear in a straight line. Assuming, for example, that there are seven spheres, you can construct a machine that starts with the initial state in which they are all in a certain order. Then the constellation seems to become disorderly until it reaches some extreme disorder, but in the end everything falls back into a simple form. Many people had this idea, not just in the astronomical domain. But the latter is the closest metaphor for it.

TE: Was Bayer's goal, or maybe your own goal in some passages of the *verbesserung* (cf. infra), to mimic the stream of consciousness by means of language?

OW: At least I claimed so, for instance, in the passage "für kornbluth," in which I described visual perceptions at the end of a drunken night.[4] But I already knew that the last chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance, was no realistic depiction in the sense of mimicking conscious or even unconscious processes. Only columnists are able to say that these sentences copy the "stream of consciousness." In fact, this final monologue by Joyce is totally artificial. At least my consciousness is very different to that in Molly Bloom's monologue.

TE: Unfortunately, it's not only columnists who claim that. It is also advocated doggedly in some debates in literary studies and cognitive science. Patrick Colm Hogan, a cognitive literary scholar, a few years ago claimed that Joyce consequently followed an arguably "critical psychological realism." The latter Hogan defines as "a form of realism that seeks to enhance the reader's understanding of human mental processes. 'Critical realism' is a form of realism that sets out to displace false beliefs that have been fostered by earlier works (e.g., by earlier novels)." [5] Joyce's novel, Hogan believes, precisely illustrates the paradox that emerges when you try to represent parallel processes of consciousness by a linear medium, such as language, with its necessarily temporal order. The serial processing of linguistic sensations is used to represent the parallel processing in consciousness.

OW: This claim is evident but nonetheless misleading, because it aims

at the mere surface of language. I don't see how one could render conscious processes into a somehow plausible linguistic representation. I have tried it repeatedly but always failed. The only thing you can do by means of language is triggering a number of specific experiences in the reader. One starting point would be the "time slices" of William James. In his *Principles of Psychology,* he writes: "As we take, in fact, a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is this different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period. The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest. [...] *Let us call the resting-places the 'substantive parts', and the places of flight the 'transitive parts', of the stream of thought.*"[6]

Onto this description I project a concept, which I name time slices. James's "perchings" are in actual fact relatively slight orientation developments, insofar as the major part of orientation remains more or less the same or seems static. Maybe some things change but at the periphery and not in focus of consciousness. In contrast, James's "flights" of the metaphorical bird are larger changes of background orientation. From this perspective I recently tried to precisely imagine the path of a gnomon's shadow as described in Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Jalousie*. In order to do so, I had to reconstruct this path mentally according to the situations described in the book. At first I found this very difficult. I keep watch especially for introspection tasks such as this, *because* they are too difficult for me at first. But I want to observe how my attempts at understanding proceed. In some respect, this is comparable to what Bühler already demanded in 1909, namely to find an "appropriate degree of task complexity that

is favorable to the results of introspection."[7] Tasks of this appropriate degree of complexity are still pending for the subject area of "language comprehension."

TE: Perhaps this also has to do with Gertrude Stein, who you, the members of the Vienna Group, read so intensely? She wrote (in her introduction to *Last Operas and Plays*, p. XII): "the mind is at every stage a theater of simultaneous possibilities." Stein was, after all, a student and early collaborator of William James.

OW: In the mid-1950s, I adored Gertrude Stein's *Last Operas and Plays*, especially the libretto "Four Saints in Three Acts"[8] (written in 1927) – even today I think it's the best piece Stein ever wrote. This text triggered a kind of pre-understanding in me, which, I believed then, the author intended. Today I must confess that I am not so sure about her intention any more. This work is the most difficult that I know of her. For me, it had the effect of triggering totally vague waves of emotion and mood. I still get that feeling when I leaf through it. One of her tricks in this play is that the acts and scenes are central. The actors are the acts and the scenes themselves, although the title suggests that it is about four saints in a drama of three acts, which is totally misleading. For there are many saints in many acts/scenes that cannot be traced clearly; some passages appear repeatedly, as do stage directions such as "Repeat First Act" or "Enact end of an act." So the acts and scenes are jumbled and repeated; they do not follow the numerical order. Suddenly at one point, for example, it reads: "Scene X." But what is being said in the tenth scene? Answer: "Could Four Acts be three." These words are thus both notation and text. You can't trace that so easily. Today I think I would be able to interpret quite a lot in the piece, but back then I didn't understand anything at all. It just touched me in a peculiar way. It was so mysterious that I hoped something would suddenly come to light ... As a young man, I was always inclined to believe in intangible powers, which I deemed real nonetheless – something like the objective chance of the surrealists, which I didn't know then. Maybe this feeling was in the air once they had put that idea into the world; it certainly felt that way to me. I hoped, that by way of art I

would be able to achieve things that could not be achieved otherwise. That's why I became a fanatical art lover and art enthusiast.

TE: But back to the desire for *clear understanding* that you spoke of earlier. Would you say that your friends in the Vienna Group shared it?

OW: At least they understood the questions that I posed myself, I think, and that these topics interested me in particular. We shouldn't forget that these were the first years of us going at least a bit public, as well as the first years when the so-called *linguistic turn* made itself felt. It was an international change of atmosphere leaning strongly toward the humanities, that means away from science. Naturally, we didn't identify it as an entire international wave yet. But our very existence itself was evidence that something was just changing. It is very strange how such things develop. It seems that something is in the air, which some people realize and others don't.

Thinking about August Stramm or Gertrude Stein, for instance, and not about everyday language I wondered why their texts made such a strong impression on me? But hell, how come? So I thought about language. But if I had been friends with visual artists, who I could have taken equally seriously as my poet friends, I could have easily asked myself: Why the effect of painting? Why of music? I did pose the question, why music appealed to me, but any answer seemed totally out of reach. But if anything gave my philosophy of mind a direction, it was the experience of music. As a young person, I was brought to musical ecstasy incredibly easily. In fact, music functioned like a narcotic for me. With language, ecstasy seemed much more difficult to attain. But then I started reading some philosophy of language – at first Friedrich Kainz from Vienna University, who had written a five-volume work entitled *Psychologie der Sprache* (Psychology of Language). The Vienna Group had nothing to do with academia at all, but at least the names of philosophers were familiar to us. At that time, Hubert Rohracher, who had published, among others, the book *Die Arbeitsweise des Gehirns und die psychischen Vorgänge* (Brain Function and Mental Processes), was still the head of the psychology department, and the Hegelian Erich Heintel was teaching at the philosophy

department. So the first few things I read sufficed to prove to me that I wouldn't find my answers there. Not that there was a lack of interesting facts, but step by step and more or less on my own I got to know more radical people. And then came the Wittgenstein accident, which would cost me an entire decade.

The Wittgenstein accident

TE: Accident? In what sense? At first you were certainly enthralled, weren't you?

OW: A friend of ours had stolen a Wittgenstein book from a library. One day the thief showed up in a café and claimed to have found an extremely interesting book at the British Council in Vienna. This was the British equivalent of the American Information Center, and it had a library on the Freyung in the first district. For us, these two institutes, but more so the American one, were the decisive sources of information about the Anglo-Saxon world. It was normal to be very unscrupulous in such libraries and to steal things. The man showed me the book, and I borrowed it from him right away. It was the *Tractatus*.

TE: In German?

OW: No, the bilingual Routledge edition. I was enthralled. At first the book was hard to understand, but I sensed that this man had had insights, and that they were important. But I didn't understand what the insights were. The tone in which the *Tractatus* is written is very certain: "I say how it is! And it is incredible that hitherto nobody has seen it this way!" But *how* it really is, Wittgenstein does not say. He only pretends to know it. The copy here on the table I then ordered at the bookseller Gerold am Graben, who had begun to import foreign-language books. I had to wait six months to get it – until June 1956. It was a different edition but the same book – the same publisher, the same design. Well, so I started to grit my teeth with "Luigi."

TE: Didn't you soon hold lectures, which could count as the first instances of Wittgenstein scholarship in Austria outside academia?

OW: Yes, but this didn't happen before 1961, I believe. So I have been chewing on the *Tractatus* for five years – not only on the *Tractatus* but also on other works.

They affected me much like the works of Gertrude Stein. Both authors' works have the same drive, if I may say so maliciously. Today, I'd say that the drive is due to the fact, that each sentence of Wittgenstein makes you expect something very important to follow in the next sentence. But this pertains to the entire book, so as soon as you reach the last line, you close it and ask yourself: What was that? Well, it was an experience of drive similar to the reading experience of Gertrude Stein's texts.

At the beginning of my pursuit I expected more and something different. I expected instruction on what interested me, for instance. It's just like I wrote in my later, already critical essay on "Wittgenstein's influence on the Vienna Group."[9] In *Tractatus,* Wittgenstein seems to "believe in the possibility of studying the postulated isomorphic mapping of language parts on 'facts' [*Tatsachen*] and 'atomic facts' [*Sachverhalte*] of the 'world' without any reference to mental or physiological processes. The central role given to Language conceals the further radicalization of this behaviorist idea. [...] today we expect answers to the questions of 'understanding', of 'meaning,' 'form,' 'content,' etc., as well as of the nature of Language most likely from a unified science of the 'mental,' which will encompass some mutations of psychology and focus on the 'representing relations.' It will not search for Wittgenstein's 'form of representation' in the mechanisms of language but in the nervous system and other material devices. [...] today i believe that we can and we should study 'mental' and physiological representations without special reference to Language; i believe that language may play an important role in cognitive mechanisms, but not that it is a crucial part of them (at least if defined as the phenomenon investigated by linguists)."[10]

These were the crucial questions for me then as they still are now. What is consciousness? How does it function? Wittgenstein couldn't have been less interested in these questions, or rather he might have

been interested in asking but absolutely not in answering them, as I'd say today. On the contrary, I believe that he later said that if we ask such questions, we realize how stupid we are *that* we ask them. We should not explain, e.g., the psychological (mental) causes which lead to this and that use of concepts, but should rather elucidate concepts such as "aspectual seeing" and their position within experiential concepts, for example. But *why* we are stupid to ask such questions, Witty did not say. Thus he immunized himself. Because if you say, to ask such questions is tantamount to being stupid, you are right in any case and from any point of view.

TE: Wittgenstein later tried to justify this by demonstrating the misuse of words/phrases. Didn't that have some influence on you at that time?

OW: A tremendous one even! Above all, my Wittgenstein reading cost me a lot of time without learning one single theorem that I could have kept and used as a treasure from time to time.

TE: Did your reading of Wittgenstein eventually influence the collaborations within the Vienna Group? In the essay quoted above, for instance, you wrote the following about its literary cabarets: "our experimental arrangements of randomly found words and language parts: we wanted to test how and why one could always understand these arrangements, and which factors specified this understanding. We introduced simple arithmetic and combinatorial methods in order to preferably exclude any unconscious meaning intentions, and boosted our interest in formal relations; complementarily, we developed a new standpoint concerning 'automatic' production, whereby our interest in the surrealists obtained a new facet [...]; our already existing relativistic tendency, equal validity of all possible interpretations, the inner meaninglessness of symbols – all these now became conscious and used for production."[11]

OW: An indirect influence was noticeable. Indirect insofar as we in the group agreed that anyone who thinks this is a problem doesn't know what the problem is. This motto had something liberating about it, because if we didn't get anywhere with a text, we could either say that

it doesn't go any further here, or, better still, we could ask, why we should even continue with it when it doesn't make any sense. That helped me to get a more detached attitude, even to what I myself was doing, and to cope with the disappointment that my reading of Wittgenstein constantly inflicted on me without having to admit it.

TE: I do think that there was some influence of Wittgenstein's writings on the two literary cabarets of the Vienna Group in 1958/59, to whose conception you and Konrad Bayer contributed a lot of theory. In your retrospective 1967 essay "the literary cabaret of the vienna group", you wrote that you also wanted to demonstrate the "control of concrete situations by the use of language." That, at least, sounds like an application of the later Wittgenstein. Then you once described what you call the "new realism" of the "literary cabarets": Realism "understood as direct symbolic manipulation of innate or habitual modes of reaction; [we had] the concept of a direct artistic impact on the life of the reader/audience by demonstrating or concealing their mechanisms of understanding."[12] And to quote further: "it was amazing that most combinations of any words could be made to mean things they did not signify – the fascinating aptitude of the human mind for constructing metaphors and mental images, the obviousness of 'meaning' projected on the most outlandish symbol combinations, but also the adherence to hypotheses once found, [and thus] a certain hopelessness of understanding."[13]

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literary cabarets

The two "literary cabarets" of the Vienna Group took place on December 6, 1958 in the theater hall of the artist association "alte welt" (on Windmühlgasse in Vienna's 6th district) and on April 15, 1959 in the trade union's "Porrhaus" (on Treitlgasse 3 in the 4th district). They were jointly planned and performed by Friedrich Achleitner, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm, and Oswald Wiener. H.C. Artmann had already resigned from the group by that time. Named in reference – and distinction – to both the Dadaist cabarets in Zurich (1916) and the cabarets of Helmut Qualtinger and Carl Merz in post-

war Vienna, these intermedia evenings could today also count as "happenings" *avant la lettre*. There is one structural parallel to this actionist art form, which has been thus dubbed predominantly in the USA and Great Britain, insofar as their press release called the literary cabarets "simply a happening [schlichte begebenheit]." The German word "Begebenheit" means "happening," as it was first used by Allan Kaprow in 1959 for an action in the Reuben Gallery in New York. In retrospect, Oswald Wiener classified the acts of the two "cabarets" as "chansons and dramatic poetry, polemic numbers, and happenings" (Wiener 1997: 310).

From today's perspective, the crucial features of these two events are not so much the traditionally Dadaist content of many of the sketch-like acts nor the qualities of the mainly sarcastic chansons written and performed by the artists themselves and meant to liven up the programs. With respect to the art movements to come, specifically to Viennese Actionism, mainly two closely associated questions are of interest. Firstly, the group did not represent or play-act their actions but rather showed persons and situations in their real and direct presence. Secondly, they challenged the traditional role of the passive audience: It was "one of the basic ideas of the event [...] to exhibit ‚reality' and thus, consequently, to abandon it. Another idea was to consider the audience as a group of actors and ourselves as spectators" (Wiener 1997: 308f.).

The protagonists of the literary cabarets should neither "present the illusions of other people (like Stanislawki's actors) nor will they pretend to be other persons (like Brecht's players)" (Achleitner, Bayer, Rühm und Wiener, 1997: 356). All persons involved should rather remain themselves. As "performative processes" the cabarets did not depict, perform, or represent but produce and present actions (Fischer-Lichte 2004). To this end, the group members instrumentalized their co-participants and pitted them against their flaws ("the miserable clumsiness, the naïve attitude, the lack of histrionic or musical talent, the complete lack of understanding of our ideas, their 'personal interpretation'" [Wiener 1997: 314]). In order to exhibit and

thereby abandon reality, the group had also considered plans "of transmitting the speaking-clock announcements by loudspeaker during the entire performance" (Wiener 1997: 320). At one time, the artists "placed a radio set in front of the curtain, tuning it to some station [...] and leaving the audience alone with it" (Wiener 1997: 312). The idea of spraying "phenol" during an "olfactory chanson" in order to directly affect the sense of smell only failed because "this liquid had not been obtained through sheer negligence" (Wiener 1997: 318). The role of language as a medium for conveying reality, for instance, was critically questioned through tautological real-time descriptions of events taking place on stage – so the emptying of a bottle and a glass of beer in the number "Friedrich Achleitner as a Beer Drinker." With an onstage "piano smashing" the theme of destruction emerged in the second cabaret. It became more virulent in the 1960s, finally playing a crucial role not least in Viennese Actionism.

The wish to unveil and disturb the illusionary mechanisms of the theatre by reversing the roles of actors and audience is put into effect most concisely in the opening act of the second cabaret: "the curtain rose, the ensemble was sitting on chairs in three rows, facing the audience and looking at it with great interest. the stage was dark, the auditorium lighted. we behaved like ordinary theatre-goers. one of us was late and tiptoed to his seat. we pointed a finger on individual spectators in the audience, gawking through our opera glasses, whispering. after some five minutes occasional bursts of laughter rose from the audience, which we interpreted as an important turn in the play we were watching; so we started to applaud just when the audience had started to do so as well, calling for the occasional encore. the atmosphere was great" (Wiener 1997: 316).

So the insistence on reflecting the context of the happening on stage replaced passive reception. The spectators were confronted with a role they themselves believed to fulfill. "Thus, into the real situation [= framing] its difference to the fictitious internal situation [= stage situation] is introduced (and vice versa)" (Backes 2001: 312). So a "collapse of framing" is enacted, and the implicit contract

between recipient and producer of the artwork – *a willing suspension of disbelief* – is cancelled. According to this contract, the audience reacts to fictitious texts and scenes at the theater emotionally similar that in reality, yet without interfering in the latter.

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TE

OW: Yes, of course, but at that time we wouldn't be aware of it. We only later saw that we had developed a theory of the "control of concrete situations by the use of language," although theory is too strong a word. Regarding this, Konrad Bayer and I are guilty of "blasphemies against the Holy Spirit," because we made experiments with real people. We deliberately agreed to make someone else we both knew do something by manipulating him or her. Then we drew lots: one of us was given the task of getting him to do something, and the other had the task of keeping him from doing it. Konrad and I were fighting implicit battles with each other all the time, and they went very far. Once it was about a girl who was undecided about which of two men she should choose. One of us sponsored one of them and the other sponsored the other. We had promised each other to keep working on it for a year. We even agreed on the allowed means of manipulation. So, for example, we were not allowed to praise our own protégé and belittle the other in direct conversation with the girl. That was taboo. But the more indirectly

we manipulated, the more permissible and the more desirable it seemed to us. This reminds me of what I once paraphrased from Gustav Bychowski. I called it a "marauding dandyism" "that reinterprets the threat of an insight to be caused the inadequacy of the subject into and the unworthiness of the object."[14]

TE: This example stems from everyday life, when such an agreement on a manipulative competition might appear as an art form. But does that actually have to do with art forms? Can we separate it at all from art events such as the "literary cabarets"? How would you see the "literary cabarets" in relation to these life-world experiments?

OW: Our goal was to put an end to the very notion of artwork and instead view our own behavior as art. The "literary cabarets" constitute but one step on the way to this end. We wanted to free ourselves from previous forms of art presentation and to dissolve such narrow definitions like "language arts" or "visual arts." We were almost at the point of wanting to be an artist of everyday life – without an œuvre so to speak. The artist without an œuvre! Very early Artmann had attempted something quite similar with his "Eight Point Proclamation of the Poetic Act" of 1953. But to me his poetic act still seemed too romantic. Generally, my attitude towards Artmann wavered a lot between admiration and embarrassment. I was often embarrassed by his production, and then the pendulum swung back again. Yet, I hardly let him notice that. The periods when he embarrassed me also came later, when I didn't see him so often.

All in all, what I wanted to indicate is our attempt to change our whole life. And one of the ways to do that was to distance oneself from everything. In other words, we were unknowingly moving toward the ideology of the dandy.

Dandy

Wiener adapted the concept of "dandyism" to his theoretical interests at the latest in his essay "Eine Art Einzige" (An Ego of Her Own) in the pertinent anthology *Riten der Selbstauflösung,* which he co-edited in 1982 together with Verena von der Heyden-Rynsch for

Matthes and Seitz publishers (Wiener 1982). Both the concept and the social phenomenon developed from the mid-18th century to the beginning of the 19th century. But Wiener is neither interested in the affects nor in the fashionable demeanor of a specific social milieu. Instead, he dwells on a single trait of dandyism, which he allegedly adopts "for Baudelaire's sake:" "dandyism is a very particular form of resistance to the notion that the human can be explained down to the last aspects of his psychological life by mechanical principles. [...] in the *dandy*, this resistance takes the form of a lone warrior who will not consider more than occasional alliances. argumentative consensus, the consensus of philosophizing, is out of the question: formal agreement must in any event be endowed with subjective meaning; absent meaning, it is mechanical, contradicting the intention that may bring it about. [...] idiosyncratic in the forms of his society, the dandy is an exacting and sensitive observer of his inner and outer environments but a theorist only ad hoc (*maxims, apothegms, aphorisms*). he has understood that the emotions that seize him obey internal laws, which is to say, are forced upon him a priori. he discovers the mechanics of ever-larger parts of what he thought of as his freedom, including even the apparatus of despair. *where is i?*" (Wiener 2019: 69).

For a lecture at the Kunsthalle in Bern in 2017, Wiener amended: "Dandyism is a specific form of warding off the thought that I can be explained. What is necessary for success is to immediately recognize and interrupt regularities in one's own behavior. The dandy is on an inward spiral, he subtracts meaning from everything he has become aware of: that is not you. Or (in a dispute with Günther Anders [and his *Outdatedness of Human Beings*]) 'Promethean defiance,' wanting to remain a subject vis-à-vis objects that are better than me – 'I don't want to be made;' '... especially not by myself;' 'I don't want to play a role;' 'I don't want a mission;' 'I have no fate'" (Wiener 2017).

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TE

TE: But wasn't that already the content of your 1954 "cool manifesto" ["cooles manifest"], which was lost later?

OW: Yes, the "cool manifesto" was a very early attempt in the same direction. My first motive to write it was that I had come to know André Breton's *Manifestoes of Surrealism* and liked the word "manifesto" a lot. So I wanted to write one, too. Secondly my discussions, primarily with Konrad, had already progressed quite far, and we agreed that it's ultimately the recipient who renders something an artwork. Thus, everything becomes art as soon an artist sees and recognizes it as such. That was the basic idea. So the "cool manifesto" called for giving up art production. I had started to quote and make montages from existing poetry and from advertising, and Rühm and Achleitner also declared found texts to be works of art. I also connect this with the attempt to train the gaze to become an artist without having produced anything at all.

TE: But this could also mean a lyrical, rather uncool attitude towards the everyday and its objects, just like in Artmann's "Eight Point Proclamation of the Poetic Act." What then was cool in the "cool manifesto"?

OW: Yes, there are similarities between the two attitudes, but mine was much riskier. Konrad and I weren't harmless and didn't rule out connections to groups similar to the Red Army Fraction in Germany. At least I didn't, and neither did Konrad, I believe. We would have been strange terrorists, but the option to kill somebody was definitely there, if only to have tried it once.

TE: Did you both know Breton's dictum: "The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd."

OW: Probably yes, but it didn't have anything to do with us, because this "firing blindly" would have sounded quite affected to me. My slogan in the "cool manifesto" was again paradoxical – stay cool in order to do away with affects. Carl Einstein had written the same thing decades earlier, but we didn't know it then.

TE: I find it remarkable that the "literary cabarets" coincided with, or even slightly predated, the happenings in New York.

OW: This was also something that was in the air internationally. It's one of those concurrences, which I have hinted to before.

TE: But weren't the "literary cabarets" more art-historically and theoretically motivated? Finally, you didn't only want to have an effect on the audience, you also wanted to connect your performance with epistemic claims, didn't you?

OW: For me it turned out to be more of an endpoint. The cabarets convinced me, that my artistic aspirations would never come true. I was searching for something I couldn't find in and through art. So I stopped doing art altogether and quit the Vienna Group, so to speak. I didn't declare my resignation though, but simply didn't meet the others any more and destroyed everything I had written so far. I realized that the texts, which I liked best, were still pretty much in Rühm's wake – and this view didn't please me at all. Various circumstances in my life prompted me to make the decision to stop doing art in favor of something completely different. I did not know exactly what that would be, but one option was to become a leader in real life, namely an important man in some industry.

TE: You mean your employment with Olivetti, where you became very successful as a sales manager?

OW: Yes, I joined the company right after the cabarets, because I hoped that Olivetti would achieve crucial innovations in the development of computers, and I could eventually contribute to it. But in contrast to IBM, Olivetti backed the wrong horse. So my engagement with them soon stalled too. In general, my life has been marked by many little shoves in the most different directions, which then lost momentum. These shoves were mostly connected to a

change of residence. Olivetti sent me to Upper Styria where I lived in a farmhouse near the town of Judenburg. From there I ventured out professionally, because this was an industrial region then. I had no contact with my friends back in Vienna whatsoever, until Konrad started to send me letters. First, I received them from Vienna, then from Paris. He said what a pity it was that we were no longer in contact. And one day I traveled to Vienna to meet him in his apartment on Dannebergplatz, where he lived with his wife Traudl Bayer. Immediately, we became close friends again. But only the two of us.

die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman

OW: Being friends with Konrad Bayer, was one of the reasons why I started to write *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman* (the improvement of central europe, a novel). I had the impression that both of us had emancipated ourselves from our 1950s attitude. So my incipient knowledge of computers and computer science, which was called cybernetics then, already informed the writing process. I had read quite a bit. This was the direction I headed towards, yet still in connection with the then fashionable philosophy of language. I hoped that cybernetics would somehow elucidate the problems of language. And this wasn't entirely wrong. More than anything, I felt a strong urge to liberate myself from everything that I had learned from the philosophy of language. That is why there are so many flat swipes at it in the *verbesserung*. Of course I knew that I was going way too far, throwing the baby out with the water. But I simply needed it for cathartic reasons. It *had* to be written down because Konrad didn't react when I was *saying* it to him. I had already said it dozens or hundreds of times. Now it had to be written down.

TE: Didn't you, from the very beginning of the writing process, have any doubts whether the philosophy of language and linguistics might fail to give you any new insight? Why didn't you switch to traditional