

The Museum of **Everything**
Exhibition #4

Conversation with **Peter Heidenwag**

Peter Heidenwag

b 1970 (Hamburg, Germany)

Trained in psychology, art philosophy and music, Peter Heidenwag is director of Atelier and Galerie der Villa, Germany. Co-curator of Mehr Als Zuviel (2011) and Malerei und Grafik (2004), Heidenwag's publications include Zusammenspiel (2010) and Reflexion von Spreache bei Harald Stoffers (2011). Artists in Exhibition #4 include Harald Stoffers, Thomas Beisgen and Bernd Ollhorn.

[START]

MoE: **Peter**, we got to know each other through the tremendous work you do at **Atelier der Villa** with artists like **Thomas Beisgen** and **Harald Stoffers**. Can you tell me a little about your background and how this all started?

PH: My first contact with this kind of artistic production started when I was invited by **Florian Reese** to run a series of workshops at **Cooperations** in **Luxembourg**. **Florian** had previously worked at **Gugging** in **Austria** and between 1993 and 2002 we held a series of workshops for people from psychiatric hospitals and studios around **Luxembourg**.

MoE: Was your previous experience therapeutic or artistic? How did you come into it?

PH: I am not a therapist, so for me it was never about therapy. It was about making art and having fun. I had trained as an engineer but I quit - and that's when I started working with **Cooperations**.

I was studying psychology and organisational psychology, then I switched to art philosophy. I completed my studies with the publication of my book about **Harald Stoffers: Reflexion von Sprache bei Harald Stoffers**.

MoE: How did **Galerie der Villa** come about? Did you set it up or did it already exist in some form?

PH: In 1999 I proposed a project to **Elbe-Werkstätten GmbH**, an art studio in **Hamburg**. At that time I was still studying; but I had become frustrated by the temporary workshops, because they only ran on weekends or for a maximum of two weeks. I felt it was important to be able to work for longer periods with the same artists.

MoE: What was your model for **Galerie der Villa**? Did you want it to be elective or an open workshop?

PH: In the beginning, it was simply about giving people an opportunity to make art and be creative. There was no real concept, it was simply about drawing and painting. We started small, a few hours a week, and anyone at **Elbe-Werkstätten** could join in.

We held the studio in the cellar of an old brewery. We would store materials and artworks on a little wagon which I would wheel into the canteen

where we worked on the tables. As the project grew, so did the concept. Finally we got our own room, which was a big step.

In 2004 we moved into an small apartment in an old house which the staff called **The Villa**. By then we occupied three small rooms but more artists were turning up, so in 2007 we moved into a bigger two-storey building which we then developed into a professional atelier.

MoE: How many artists were you working with?

PH: In the beginning around six, including **Bernd Ollhorn** and **Thomas Beisgen**. Now there are 12 fixed places and around 35 artists a week.

MoE: Did you choose artists or did artists come to you?

PH: Either they came on their own or via recommendations. We went to the other studios to find people with potential and I would ask friends, artists, curators and exhibitors their opinions on them.

My interest was always in people with artistic potential. Today many artists want to join our atelier and spaces are limited, so we have a selection process and different groups.

MoE: How do you develop an artist, what's your method of working with someone?

PH: The best thing is not to do much! Our first artists made great art all by themselves. **Thomas Beisgen**, **Bernd Ollhorn** and **Harald Stoffers** worked graphically, so I would let them be, collect their works and discuss it with artists, curators and others.

With the help of **Florian Reese**, I sent some of **Harald Stoffers'** letters to **Johann Feilacher** at **Gugging**. He suggested I make a book and offered to write an article. **Jan Verwoert** also wrote text for the book - **Letters** - which took me a year and half to make. Once that was published, we started offering work to exhibitors and galleries.

MoE: How do you bring the work of your artists into the contemporary sphere? You are historically successful at doing this.

PH: At **Galerie der Villa** we work with artists, curators, teachers and academies, as well as similarly structured institutions. In recent years one of the most important collaborations is with **Hamburg** curator **Corinna Koch**. Together we have staged two theme-led exhibitions, **Zusammenspiel** and

Mehr Als zu Viel which show different levels of artists working with different media.

MoE: There is a school of thought that would say that the work of disabled should not be marketed and sold. What is your philosophy?

PH: People sometimes ask me how I can sell an artist's work when it does not come from a self-reflective practice. My answer is simply: how do you know that this art is not self-reflecting?

MoE: I'm going to read you a quote of a well-known curator in **London**:

There is a difference between art as a considered intellectual activity and creativity per se. Which is not to say that the fruits of the latter cannot be as intriguing as those of the former. But the artists I look at are all engaged in a knowing and self-reflective way with their practice and as much with the history of art.

What he is really saying is simple. Where is the knowing and reflective practice? Where is the considered activity and the intention to create art?

PH: More than one curator has mentioned this to me. My question is whether it is important for art to be self-reflective? There are many artists who aren't interested in self-reflection, either in their own work or in the history of art. They simply make art and experience success; after all it is often the market which decides whether somebody is an artist or not. Whether or not they are disabled doesn't matter. Other artists don't reflect on their work, they let the people who are writing cover that side of things - and those people are often the ones who can do it better.

There are different ways artists can reflect on work. When **Harald Stoffers** creates, he is reflecting on what he is doing. Writing is an intellectual act. **Harald** concentrates on the content of what he is writing, on how he is creating and designing his letter. In that moment he is reflecting on the work - you can read it and feel it. It offers us many different ways to connect to the finished product.

MoE: **Harald**'s letters are usually to his mother. They tend to have statements of intentions, on what he is going to wear or do.

PH: Yes, exactly. The addressee gives us the first impression that this is a letter. **Harald** then will write about all the things he wants to do in that moment, in the next hour or in the days to come.

MoE: Do the letters go beyond that?

PH: On the one hand they can be seen as diaries or notebooks containing **Harald's** personal history. Like many other people he uses the format of a letter to get started, even if the letter is not delivered to anyone. His letters take on the character of a model. He is writing reminders for himself, concentrating so he does not forget what he wants to communicate. The addressee tells us about his social range - for years it was only his mother, today he writes to others because his social and artistic network has expanded.

MoE: What is the difference between **Harald's** letters and a child who writes to his parents to describe his day in school, for example?

PH: The main difference is how meticulously **Harald** designs and creates the letters. He has a structured system. He is always creating, one letter after another, which makes it a very authentic and special practice. He writes with various repetitions and permutations, all of which gives it uniqueness. It's as if he is perfecting his system.

The other difference is that he uses only the format or the idea of the letter as a model. Sometimes he writes about his present needs, giving the letters the quality of a performance. He writes to give himself time and space, structuring and shaping his everyday life.

MoE: Is there is a crossover between the picture and the letter? Does he intend a visual idea or do you think he only sees it as language?

PH: **Harald's** letters allow us to think about language in different ways. Art is language. Pictures can have different meanings. You can read the letters or you can just look at them. You can think about where he writes them and whether or not they are delivered.

Jan Verwoert wrote about this in our first book:

Am I the recipient of the letters? Do they appeal to me? Are they my concern anyway? If they are, then why?

MoE: What about the argument that the artistic form is more to do with us than him, that we like them because of what we think, not because of something inherent? The argument is that a formal artist would intend these artistic qualities, **Harald** does not.

PH: Can you be sure? I personally think the question is much more important than the answer. Do we as human beings always have to decide what other people can or cannot do? Or is it better for those people to decide to do for themselves? Do we even understand these different ways of reflecting and these different languages?

The [Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry in Miami](#) acquired [Harald's](#) work for their visual poetry collection. They were interested in the meaning of his letters, about how the design and creativity come together in the content. Does the design undermine what he is saying? Or is it only design and is the writing irrelevant?

How does [Harald](#) work with layers? Why does he tear the pages? How does he write on the reverse? These are interesting and important questions, as important as whether it's a formal aesthetic or not.

MoE: So this is [Harald's](#) aesthetic as a matter of fact - and in this way it is no different to the aesthetic of any artist.

PH: It depends how much time you take. In my opinion, [Harald](#) knows exactly what he is doing.

MoE: What do you think about your role in this collaboration? [Harald's](#) success is due to him and you, not just him on his own.

PH: We were lucky because we recognised the quality of [Harald's](#) work. All we can do is present it to other people and remain open to the different meanings, messages, qualities and potentialities. We can then continue a social and institutional artistic dialogue.

MoE: Let's talk about influence. How do you stop yourself from interfering? I know [Harald](#) sometimes tears up his letters. What is your philosophy of interference and guidance?

PH: We always let [Harald](#) do what he wants to do. We might offer him a selection of different pens, formats and sizes or ask him how he wants to hang a particular work. But he makes all the decisions.

When [Harald](#) is finished with a paragraph or sentence, or when he has finished what he wants to say, he stops. In order to underline that stop, he sometimes tears up the letter and starts again.

MoE: If somebody wants to start their own workshop what would be your advice?

PH: Ask, ask and ask. Be open, look at different workshops, figure out for yourself the similarities and differences. Think about different formats you can use and try to understand your work as something which is ongoing and can never be complete.

For me it is less important if it is seen as therapy, collaboration, study or something else. Works of quality can emerge from all kinds of approaches; but you can't make gold out of lead. The main thing is that the practice has to be free. I know financing can be difficult, but if possible you should offer artists a range of materials, so that they can decide what they want and what they need.

This point is critical. Imagine if **Harald** had gone into a painting workshop and been told: *Okay, what you are writing is quite nice, but your grammar is all wrong - so forget about it, get a brush and start painting!* He would have started to paint and might never written a letter ever again.

[END]

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