





*Changes* features a collection of key texts and ideas by artists, intellectuals and curators who have rethought and redefined the way a cultural institution should work. Alongside these documents, five essays establish guidelines for describing the institution's experimental and vastly innovative conceptual approach over the last ten years: the new meaning of format (as distinct from artistic work), the issue of sustainability in cultural institutions, identity politics, immersion and digital culture.

A reader on the positioning of a pioneering German cultural institution that invites us to take a look at what has shaped the profile of its innovative programme.

With texts and contributions by Frédérique Aït-Touati, Ed Atkins, Sivan Ben Yishai, Jens Bisky, Emanuele Coccia, Brian Eno, Naika Foroutan, Dorothea von Hantelmann, Donna Haraway, Susanne Kennedy, William Kentridge, Signa Köstler, Bruno Latour, Robert Maharajh, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Thomas Oberender, David O'Reilly, Diana Palm, Philippe Parreno, Nancy Pettinicchio, Stephanie Rosenthal, Alex Ross, Rebecca Saunders, Frank Schirrmacher, Stephan Schwingeler, Tino Sehgal, Markus Selg, Gabriele Stötzer, Lucien Strauch.

# CHANGES

Formats  
Digital Culture  
Identity Politics  
Immersion  
Sustainability

Berliner Festspiele  
2012-2021

Edited by  
Thomas Oberender

**Theater der Zeit**

We would like to thank the Berliner Festspiele for their collaboration on this publication.

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Berliner Festspiele 2012–2021

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A note on the English edition:

In the German-language edition, the essays and documents from the last 10 years were accompanied by a picture series on the formats and events mentioned in this book. In addition, the German edition contains a chronicle of Berliner Festspiele's distinct programmes as well as documentation of an intensive film research endeavour. For this, curator Thilo Fischer sifted through over 1,000 hours of documentary material in the Berlin State Archive, broadcasting archives and private archives. The material selected was

subsequently restored, digitised and shown, in addition to a public screening, in the exhibition “Everything Is Just for a While” at Gropius Bau and the project “The Sun Machine Is Coming Down” at ICC Berlin. The complete list of films can be found online on the Berliner Festspiele page, in the exhibition booklet or in the Germanlanguage edition of *Changes*.

All texts have been adapted for the current edition. Special thanks to Tobias Kluge for his editorial preparation of the essays and conversations.

Thomas Oberender  
Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes

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# CH-CH-CH-CH-CHANGES

Thomas Oberender

This book is an attempt to pass on inspiration. It has emerged from the activities of a cultural institution that comprises all genres of contemporary art. And at the same time, this book is an attempt to transcend these last ten years of activities and to distil from them a few key thoughts and documents that highlight the most significant changes we have undergone during this period.

On the one hand, this *Changes* volume documents conversations with artists and intellectuals that, in the broadest sense, represent milestones marking profound changes in German-language cultural institutions. In addition to documenting these source texts of artistic practice, the second main purpose of the book is to distil from the wealth of themes and cultural events at least five guiding concepts that have pervaded all our programmes over the past ten years.

For us, these five key concepts are: format, identity politics, digitisation, immersion and sustainability. One section of the book is devoted to each of these themes, with each section featuring an introductory essay as well as corresponding primary texts by pioneering thinkers from the arts and humanities.

With this book, Berliner Festspiele has taken its seventieth anniversary as an opportunity not simply to look back, but to compile a collection of texts that point to what lies ahead, that think prospectively, make proposals and take up profound aesthetic or philosophical positions. And hardly any other German-language institution would be better suited for this than Berliner Festspiele, which produces events across the entire spectrum of contemporary art at its Gropius Bau exhibition hall.

In this respect, taking a closer look at the programme developments, new formats, themes and experiences that have emerged from this institution is not only illuminating for cultural managers, theatre professionals and art scholars, but can also be valuable for creative practitioners and researchers abroad who are interested in examining cutting-edge format ideas and politico-aesthetic concepts in Germany's contemporary art landscape.

This book also offers readers the opportunity to become acquainted, by way of example, with the setup and operations of a major cultural institution in the Federal Republic of Germany—the only cultural institution in the country to be run by the federal government.

From the very beginning, Berliner Festspiele has been Berlin's main port of call for anything too complicated, too big, too expensive, too niche, too daring and too nerve-racking. With its festivals, exhibitions, programme series and competitions, it has been able to set significant standards for day-to-day cultural operations while paving the way for many an international career and weathering a few storms. As an equally representative yet unconventional platform for exploring and presenting nearly all fields of art and culture, Berliner Festwochen and the subsequent formats of the Berliner Festspiele have hardly missed a single internationally significant event.



Emerging from the tradition of various summer festivals but also as a result of politico-cultural competition with socialist institutions and groups—which, likewise in 1951, had succeeded in securing the “World Youth Festival” and thus inviting 26,000 young people from all over the world to East Berlin—it did not take long for Berliner Festwochen’s offerings to take on a life of their own and fill an entire calendar year with programmes of theatre, music and exhibitions.

Berliner Festspiele’s cyclical formats are recurring islands that provide in-depth examination of particular questions—the meaning of time in music, the role of the orchestra as an apparatus or instrument in the history of evolving experiential spaces of sound and community. In this hectic business devoted to the constant production of new content and meaning that characterises the cultural industry, not everything poses a disruption. Festivals can also serve as sanctuaries for various forms of resistance, which can be communicated just as readily through slow deliberateness as in the urgency of the avant-garde. What is jazz? Going off-script—new music can do that just as well as improvised poetry.

The Berliner Festspiele is one of the best-known cultural institutions and yet, at the same time, one that often remains concealed behind the diversity of its formats and projects. Through all of its festival formats, youth competitions, exhibition projects, symposia and publications, Berliner Festspiele always remains in the background as the organiser, although Gropius Bau and Haus der Berliner Festspiele have become well-known addresses in the city’s cultural life. But few of our guests know that Berliner Festspiele is part of the prestigious Berlin cultural platform Kulturveranstaltungen des Bundes in Berlin (KBB), which also includes the Haus der Kulturen

der Welt, the Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) and a central administration office located on Schöneberger Ufer. Since 2003, Berliner Festspiele has maintained year-round operations and has served as a model institution of the federal government—the only one to encompass theatre, music and exhibitions.

Structurally, Berliner Festspiele reports to the Federal Commissioner for Culture and the Media (BKM). Prior to 2001, Berliner Festspiele was an institution without a venue of its own, but this changed fundamentally with the end of Ulrich Eckhardt's directorship. The federal government took over 100 per cent of the former "Theater der Freien Volksbühne" and Martin-Gropius-Bau, and the legendary Berliner Festwochen were broken up into specialised festivals by Joachim Sartorius in favour of a year-round programme at the new "Haus der Berliner Festspiele". These structures have endured to this day and include the oldest formats of the Berliner Festspiele: the Theatertreffen, the Jazzfest Berlin, the Theatertreffen der Jugend and the subsequently added MaerzMusik and Musikfest Berlin as well as three youth competitions in dance, music and literature, which are funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and organised by Berliner Festspiele.

Originally founded with a total budget of 20 million euros, which roughly corresponds to the budget of Deutsches Theater Berlin, the cultural platform Kulturveranstaltungen des Bundes (KBB)—to which Berliner Festspiele has belonged since 2001—was intended to operate three major venues in Berlin year-round: the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Tiergarten park, the Haus der Berliner Festspiele on Schaperstrasse and the Martin-Gropius-Bau on Niederkirchnerstrasse. To live up to this expectation and allow for inner-city competition with other

institutions, the various divisions now have an operating budget of around 60 million euros, which greatly exceeds its institutionally secured core.

This dependence on large-scale project funding, which requires additional organisation beyond our standard institutional framework, has fundamentally changed what our festivals are able to offer and also impacted our administrative operations and planning procedures. The abundance of formats illustrated in this book results not only from a curiosity about content and the desire to react to aesthetic and social changes with new forms of production and presentation, but also from the political custom that new money can only “be found” for new ideas and hardly ever for the actual cost of daily business for traditional festivals and programme work in the exhibition hall. The result is a team of programme inventors who feel compelled to produce a constantly regenerative yet monetarily rewarding stream of ideas—which, in turn, feeds a sense of anxious expectation in a contemporary scene that is always hungry for new themes, trends and names. On the flip side, this means increasingly short-term planning and employment periods and has caused a rift between those who stand up for temporary workers and those representing the interests of regular employees.

Without the various funds, foundations and government grants we are supported by, the programmes of the major players in our cultural system would probably be a quarter smaller, as would also be the case with the Berliner Festspiele in its two houses. In the public eye, artistic directors are primarily associated with their content profiles, but at the same time, together with their programme team, they are relegated to role of old-fashioned “fundraisers”—proliferators of economic resources, in a sense. Mostly, not much fuss is made about



this fact because it has become so normal, but also often because it is so abnormal.

Over the years, all of Berliner Festspiele's divisions and genres have followed a continual development away from the concepts and practices of traditional cultural institutions, because artistic practice dissolves this boundary. Today, many guest performances are multimedia installation landscapes that require long setup and rehearsal times and go beyond the scope of classical festival productions. As a result, this has meant greater time commitments and increasing expenses not only for Berliner Festspiele's own productions, but for guest performances as well. This challenge is a tendency of the times, not a mere fashion—giving the art business free reign to emanate from the artists themselves and testing our institutions' ability to adapt.

Another constant challenge for Berliner Festspiele has been the task of developing a high proportion of in-house projects alongside its main function of inviting and hosting guest productions and exhibitions. Producing its own works and formats has enabled Berliner Festspiele to shape its own profile and fill a gap in Berlin's institutional landscape—in other words, to offer precisely what is difficult to realise in repertory companies or art centres with their own collections. Often these have emerged as long-term formats like "The Long Now", Vinge / Müller's *Nationaltheater Reinickendorf*, Troubleyn / Jan Fabre's *Mount Olympus*, Ilya Khrzhanovsky's planned *DAU* project or Taylor Mac's *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*. Moreover, we have also been able to examine some questions and themes on a larger scale over several seasons, such as "Time" at MaerzMusik, "Healing & Care" at Gropius Bau or the "Immersion" project series, which focused on shifts in our worldview and artistic practice.

The key focus of Berliner Festspiele, as outlined in this book, has been and continues to be on the dawn of new identity politics (encompassing debates on gender, ethnicity and personal rights), the effects of the digital cultural revolution, climate change and a new worldview rooted more in ecology and symbiotic structures than dialectical opposites and a dirigiste force from above. The hashtags of this decade—#MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter and #Corona—were framed by the end of the Merkel era and the first generation of Germans who have only ever known their country as *one* country, without death strips or day visas. At the same time, we are still in the beginning stages of being able to take an open and balanced look at German reunification and the re-programming of our own operating systems in the context of festival and exhibition making. The next step we aspire to is to be able to apply our insights on necessary changes in the areas of sustainability and diversity to transform artistic practice. Perhaps one of the most moving works about this challenge is Arne Vogelgesang and Marina Dessau's production *Es ist zu spat*, which was shown as a livestream event during Theatertreffen 2021.

The last ten years have led to the emergence of a series of new formats that were also “formats of the new”: 30-hour concert clusters at Kraftwerk Berlin with an allotment of foldaway beds for visitors in the Turbinenhalle, or jazz concerts that edge back towards the experimental scene and political activism, or our own broadcasting platforms such as “Berliner Festspiele on Demand”, artist residencies at Gropius Bau, in-house VR productions and full-dome festivals at Zeiss planetarium. We have featured major guest performances by Robert Wilson and Alain Platel, Taylor Mac and Jan Fabre, Pina Bausch, FC Bergman and Marino Formenti. In a former munitions factory in

Reinickendorf, we teamed up with artists and programming specialists to set up a “national theatre”, we introduced a quota for women at Theatertreffen, and we sought to reconstruct the Berlin Wall for four weeks in the historic city centre in order to be able to open it once again. We researched the National Socialist past of the first director of the Festspiele. And our project “Down to Earth”, a part of our “Immersion” series, marked the first exhibition project in Germany to react to the topic of climate change with a change in our own operating system—unplugged, without air travel for those involved, without electricity, with full transparency about our total consumption as well as life lessons about the positive experience of practicing analogue art. Our national competitions took on a uniform structure and, in 2014, gained a new youth dance division with Tanztreffen der Jugend.

The following thematic texts pose an attempt to sketch the signature of the past decade of Festspiele activities on an overarching level. Each of the five thematic sections begins with an overview text and then contains a wealth of documents produced at, for or about Berliner Festspiele events over the past ten years.

On the one hand, this book is the portrait of a so-called “flagship” institution of the Federal Republic of Germany, a beacon which provides orientation, inspiration and exchange in lieu of a traditional repertoire. At the same time, however, it is an attempt to dip our hands in the current of time and hold onto something: grasping any time we catch a glimpse of change. This book lets us take a look at our own activities through the rear-view mirror of recent experience. It does so through the lens of five filters along with some chit-chat from the kitchen here and there, because we rarely talk about recipes, but almost always about the food. Though recipe is the wrong word, because



our work is not about reproducing a master dish. Instead, it is about ways of thinking, concepts and conflicts: our reflections on the new role of formats, for example, are an attempt to use this book to render transparent the kind of conceptual work that is often only reluctantly put on display.

Reflecting on the formats of Berliner Festspiele produces more than just a chronicle of our institution's creative endeavours, it also addresses what is perhaps the most important shift in the arts and culture industry in the last ten to twenty years. Reading and understanding formats means reflecting on a new relationship between an artistic work and an institution—a relationship which Berliner Festspiele has actively worked to reshape through many of its programme series, exhibitions and festivals. "Immersion" has become synonymous with this endeavour; it has become a word for something more than just differently conceived art—it stands for a new genre and the old principle of connectedness. There was no hype surrounding the term immersion, as *Die Deutsche Bühne* once headlined, before 2016. And we have even been able to free this word from its association with insider jargon and turn it into a metaphor for new concepts that are just as connected to fears and prejudices as they are to a newly emerging Gaia consciousness that is taking our old operating systems to task.

Berliner Festspiele is a wonderful structure, unique in its construction, representing nearly all art forms with its two houses—exhibitions, performances, concerts, dramatic productions, performance art, symposia and competitions. Comparable structures are rare in Europe, the closest one can think of is the Southbank Centre in London with its Hayward Gallery—from which we were able to acquire Stephanie Rosenthal as Gropius Bau Director.

I am grateful, in no particular order, for the work of curators such as Frie Leysen and Berno Odo Polzer. Thanks to Annika Kuhlmann, Richard Williams and Stephanie Rosenthal. And where would we be without the intelligence and uncompromisingness of Tino Sehgal and Taylor Mac, Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller, Philippe Parreno and Susanne Kennedy, Markus Selg, Joulia Strauss and Jonathan Meese, Milo Rau, Ed Atkins and Isa Genzken? Thanks to Gabriele Stötzer and Elske Rosenfeldt, Robert Wilson, David O'Reilly, Mona el Gammal, Bruno Latour and Frédérique Aït-Touati. And to Jeroen Versteede, Teresa Minn, Anja Predeick, Winrich Hopp and Yvonne Büdenhölzer, Christina Tilmann, Susanne Ritzal and Susanne Goetze and Nafi Mirzaii, a long-time graphic designer of the Berliner Festspiele who is responsible for the picture section of this volume. I would also like to say thanks to the photographer and graphic designer Christian Riis Ruggaber and the graphic agencies Ta-Trung and Eps51, to Andreas Weidmann and many, many others. And, above all, to all the photographers who occasionally clicked their shutters with an outsider view and David Bowie in their ears: *“turn and face the strange—Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes”*.

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Themes

Formats

Digital Culture

Identity Politics

Immersion

Sustainability



# Formats

## NEW FORMATS—FORMATS OF THE NEW

Thomas Oberender

*To experience art is usually to experience an encounter with works. But often we do not encounter the works directly, but rather mediated by formats. As a form of organisation, formats mediate works—whether exhibitions or performances—as a means of transmission. Formats are always containers for diverse works, and the sum of the different formats results in a programme. A structure becomes a format when it accommodates different works, either in combination or successively. Formats therefore have a constitutive relationship to works as well as to institutions. Since formats are the form of encounter between the work and the audience, they have often become synonyms for the art forms themselves, for example when people say “I’m going to the theatre”, or “to an exhibition” or “to a concert”, by which they mean the event rather than the building. Formats can therefore merge with institutions and become almost invisible, but they can also break away from their habits and form temporary alternatives. These creations are often given their own names, as if they were works in themselves. They develop their own narration which links them to their title and their inventors. Institutionalised formats, on the other*

*hand, have ostensibly become neutral over time because they have become the habitual form of our traditional art encounters. In contrast to institutionalised formats, new formats create originals, but they are always forms of presentation of works. Formats are by no means universal categories, but are culturally and historically specific. What distinguishes them is that you can play within formats, but not with formats. But that is what the following is about.*

The word “format” triggers multiples associations. On the one hand, it brings to mind standardised sizes or conditions. Formatting makes data and data carriers usable in the field of digital technologies. In this context formatting means overwriting. Colloquially, we recognise different book formats—which usually have to do with sizes, and book types such as paperback or hardcover. In the media industry, formats are certain types of products—a talk show as distinct from a news programme, for instance. What all these uses of the word have in common is that formats create a type of container, a standardised, predefined frame which can accommodate a multiplicity of works. Generally, it is the work that is seen rather than the format. But it is the format that largely determines how the work is “read”—is it a performance or perhaps an installation? Formats are principles of order which themselves assume form. They generate a display which makes a basic statement: they implicitly convey that a programme is a news bulletin or a casting show, for instance, solely through the form in which the content is produced. By contrast, the content itself—all the various contributions, film clips, segments, texts—is not fixed by the format; instead, the format must remain as flexible as possible to accommodate content variation without revealing its own premises. Because while the content

assembled within formats can change at any time, the format per se remains unchanged.

### Work—format—programme

When exhibitions, performances, festivals, themed series and other types of events are mentioned in the following, they come very close to what is described here as the “format”. Formats are means. They are used to structure overarching programmes composed of a variety of formats, which in turn present a variety of works. A standard television programme consists of a sequence of various formats, which might include, for example, a magazine programme, a specific film format, a news bulletin or a sports programme. Each of these formats offers a wide variety of works over the course of time, which replace one another over the course of an evening or over a period of weeks and months. All the different formats together make up the programme, in much the same way as theatres and concert halls have performances, matinees, audience discussions, guided tours and festivals. Formats thus create “territories” which are played upon; who plays upon them, and how, is conceived in terms of the works and often determined by the interests of the institutions.

Anyone who can “read” formats, including the classic, invisible formats, will often recognise complex political and aesthetic relationships, not by discussing the works and programmes, but rather these conceptions of an “in between”, the cement between the works which connects them and lends them cohesion. But the relationship between work and format becomes complicated and interesting above all because well-founded formats can themselves assume the character of works. Conversely,

many artists now take a more curatorial approach and understand each respective work as a format, as a playing field which they delineate and in which they enable various actors to be heard with their own history and form within that framework.

Formats are forms of relationships. Their essence is the design of the relationship between the work and the audience. They reduce the inexhaustibility of social issues and artistic forms not by defining the what of things, but the *how* of things. This rule is the DNA of the format. Programmes, in turn, are the containers for these formats. For programmers, formats are a means of producing a mix of perspectives and work forms which define the intention or the signature of a programme as vividly and diversely as possible. Programme managers establish rules for formats in the same way that formats define rules for multiple works. Every author knows this game in their encounters with the commissioning staff of broadcasters and newspapers, or theatres, where the programme custodians are called “dramaturges” and act as guardians of the formats. Therefore, they often trim works to suit the rules of formats, whereas programme managers alter the formats of commissioning staff. These framing hierarchies create “content” simply by defining the format. The implications for selecting and the way of viewing themes are seldom explicitly defined, rather they arise “automatically” through the structural guidelines of the formats.

The exhibition and festival project “Down to Earth” is an example of this. The ground rules of this format were: no air travel, disclosure of all consumption and origins of the resources used, and no electricity in the exhibition—which had significant consequences for the invited works, as many of them had been in existence, and touring, for

some time. Instead of electric light, daylight and coloured curtains were used in the windows on the south side of the Gropius Bau. Instead of using microphones and loudspeakers, the vocal parts of the piece *Felices Radices* by François Chaignaud and Marie-Pierre Brébant were played live and the audience positioned accordingly. Music from a laptop was replaced by the performances of musicians (*Velvet* by Claire Vivianne Sobottke), and electronic effects were created with analogue instruments (*Signs of Affection* by Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods). The format of “no electricity” raised numerous questions and policy issues, particularly the attempt to turn off the air conditioning and the associated contracts with insurers and lenders. But despite all this, these ground rules turned out to be inspiring and constructive, and gave some of the invited artists impetus for more “analogue” work.

In our institutions we may refer to a “game from below” when an author appears with new proposals and rule violations at the level of works. The “game from above”, on the other hand, is a game of containment and framing. But the interesting game is perhaps the one that doesn’t recognise “above” and “below”, only acquisition of knowledge, urgency and soft criteria such as beauty, quality, truthfulness and problem relevance. This also raises the question of institutional power and hierarchies. Working with format is without doubt an encounter with the power of institutions—and it differs from the encounter with the audience, which is also a power factor in itself.

What is the invention of a weather app compared to the invention of the format of the “app”, the mobile application software? Most written works have a long lifespan because, like plays, choreographies or compositions and apps as well, they are created in such a way that their script ultimately translates into behaviour—every work wants us

to do something. Through their “application” in city theatres or concert halls, these notations allow us to keep returning to our own actuality. All of these works that were created for the stage over time remained valid because they work in formats that are compatible with the appropriate hardware, and so the works are often straightforward to perform.

### Canon of formats

A performance is, in a sense, the “application” of the work in the format. Over the course of time, works are repeatedly reinterpreted and re-evaluated, just as the formats have to prove themselves in the perception of the audience and the programme directors. The inventory of central works, its “canon”, which is different for each epoch, is just as changeable as the canon of formats.

At the format level, just as at the work level, there is the category of “creations” (German: “*Kreationen*”)—or rather, “*créations*”—which only function in the context of the artists who produce them, and never really detach from them. They rarely give rise to a work that exists autonomously and awaits other interpreters. This is often the case with pieces of “devised theatre”, which are often tailor-made for certain artists or shaped by their participation, as these kinds of works result from a collective creative process and remain bound to the presence of those who brought them into being. Temporary or new format creations often remain similarly bound to their authors, and that means that they repeatedly re-write the content of their format, sometimes over the course of years. And so, the ravages of time gnaw at the format, primarily from the *inside*, unless the format can detach



itself from its creators and go on a journey through various channels and countries—like a TV show format.

But why is it that we barely talk about formats? When it comes to TV show formats, we often aren't even aware that they are usually not developed by the broadcasters who show them. A personality show format like "Kessler ist ...", which was produced in Germany by ZDF, actually originated in Israel where it was called "How to be". And the format of Germany's "Late Night Show" is associated with legendary figures of the American television industry, but at the same time so general that it has been, and continues to be, produced in countless varieties. The inconspicuousness of formats also contributes to the fact that many people in Germany, for example, like to watch "the news" by which they mean the "Tagesschau", which demonstrates that formats often have their own appeal. Some viewers or listeners love podcasts and then find a special one which suits them. Or they love "exhibitions" and "concerts" or "theatre". When someone says, "I love 'Tatort'," they are rarely referring to a particular film, they mean a film format distinguished by commissioners local to different cities in German-speaking Europe. And maybe that's why we don't talk much about formats, because the aesthetic impression is usually only felt at the level of the work—formats are abstractions.

Formats are pattern recognition tools. Their growing importance as well as their most recent developments are closely linked to the development of the digital age. This is not so much in the sense that they appeared in the world with the construction of the first computers, more in the conception of "digitality" as expressed by philosopher Armin Nassehi, who links the digital age with the beginning of a practice of measurement and a culture of standardisation and precognition (Armin Nassehi: *Patterns*.

*Theory of the Digital Society*, 2019). Formats develop formal, often intuitive and non-communicated algorithms for diagnosing relatedness. Thus, formats bring order to the world because they read and display its patterns.

## The format as a work

For artists like Philippe Parreno and Yayoi Kusama, the actual work is not the single object that they show in an exhibition or sell in the gallery, but the overall structure of the exhibition itself—only in its totality does it ultimately result in the “work”, and everything in the space, including the physical infrastructure, the artists present and the visitors, is part of the work. In the design of an exhibition such as the one developed by Kai Althoff in 2016 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, the format is conceived as a specific work—an overall composition of things, music, smells and occasionally rubbish, which in their interplay are designed much like the individual objects. His exhibition “and then leave me to the common swifts” arranges our encounter with the images and sounds by embedding all objects in an equally work-like ambience, entirely distinct from a white cube exhibition. Where classic exhibitions create septic spaces, overview and distance, and thus present the work as an object extracted from its context, Althoff buries his work in the exhibition. In the great hall of the top storey, he created a white tented cave where visitors discover the world of the artist in a tangle of artwork and found objects, in graphics and ornate letters under splattered glass plates, next to burnt mattresses, or in some cases don’t discover because the paintings are wrapped in grey paper and leant against the wall. In his exquisite exhibition with Lutz Braun at Berlin

Biennale 4, there was an odour of excrement. Kai Althoff may occupy the exhibition space, but he does not stage his work as a chain of singular events able to present paintings or drawings like sacred objects without embedding or context—which can be interesting, just not for Kai Althoff. He plays with the format, its hidden pedagogy, its subtle power, which affect us via their conventions which are taken as given so that we too, emerging from them, can go back into the world a little cleaner and more enlightened. Kai Althoff prefers to create untidy exhibitions which are so utterly pedantic in their thousand arranged details that you almost want to laugh at the liberation that they exude.

The format we are talking about here is a container or folder which is never neutral, even if it is “empty” in itself. Formats bring together works, or provide a narrative, they structure the space and create their own “user behaviour” with conventions such as applause or the prohibition of contact, which, as Botho Strauss once observed about the appearance of an actor, results in a mixture of prostitution and chastity, of energetic connection and physical separation.

Formats sometimes rival works, but above all they give them attention and strength. All types of events that are perceived as “classic” today are institutionalised formats, that is, formats which now represent the basic provision of institutions which allow their audience to encounter works which they know even before they know them. Culturally aware visitors know what a reading or an interview or a festival is, or a performance or an exhibition, a biennial or lecture performance. You can fill these containers with content as you wish; for the audience they will always result in the format as a “version” of that which is being presented, creating a form of security, habit, and recognition. As such, formats formalise various functions