

fif- teen

January — April 2023

performing | WUK
arts

50 +

Ramblings on the Project
'FIT FOR FUTURE or HYPER HYPER or MELANCHOLIA'

Otmar Wagner

I want to see you sweat! I said, I want to see you sweat, yeah!
(Scooter)

*Die Nacht vielleicht geschlafen,
doch vom Rasieren wieder schon so müd,
noch eh ihn Post und Telefone trafen,
ist die Substanz schon leer und ausgeglüht.*
(Gottfried Benn)

PROLOGUE 01: Life

(to be sung in chorus): COVID-19 crisis, Climate Change, Climate Bonus, World Cup in Qatar, Fair Pay, Discount Coupons, Recycling, Loyalty Points, Pay As You Wish, Bombs in Poland, Mushroom Heater, Foot Fungus, Atomic Fungus, Political Correctness, Mushroom Ragout, End of the Workday, Retirement Planning, Remaining Biography.

PROLOGUE 02: Art

The conceptual starting point: Three performers, aged 50 +, work themselves to exhaustion on three treadmills for the duration of the performance. The audience has the pleasure of watching them. That is the core of the project.

The intention is to create a theatrical performance, which raises questions about lighting, video, sound, music, texts, effects, and forms of language — particularly in light of the chosen title, which, in terms of both content and formal aesthetics, calls for a dramaturgical concept that extends far beyond the project's core.

All the associated deliberation and experimentation shape the creative process — an effort that, for me (from my current perspective, just a few days before this process begins), will, at best, lead to a radical minimalism. By this I mean an artistic form in which the principle of rambling, of excess found in my previous works — the WOUNDED WORLD cycle (2016–2019), SICK IN EUROPE (2019), CABINET OF EXHAUSTION (2020–2022) — is condensed to a completely unplayful austerity that circumvents conventional entertainment strategies, thereby giving viewers the opportunity to entertain themselves as best they can by letting their own thoughts wander.

FIT FOR FUTURE

To be fit for the future, it is important to train into programs that focus not only on the momentum of personal fitness but also on the broader framework of social fitness. These include, first and foremost, health policy fitness programs such as 'fit2work', an initiative of the Austrian federal government (Ministry of Social Affairs in cooperation with numerous partner organizations).



'fit2work':
here is the logo ...



... here is its performative
visualization ...



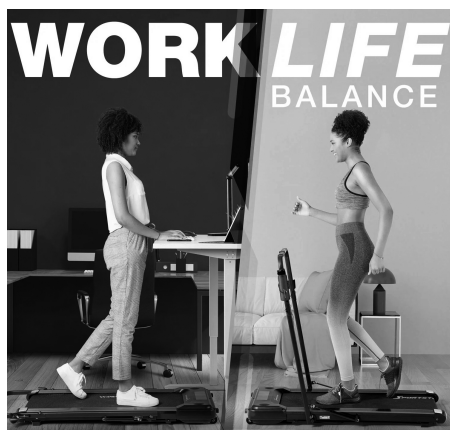
... and here is its practical
implementation

The goal is successful reintegration into the labour market through rehabilitation and fitness programs. It's about professional survival, and certainly not about questioning the structures of the labour market itself (including its requirements). Somehow, this pays off -even for the affected people: in addition to regaining physical and mental fitness, they benefit — in an advanced stage of social infantilization — from monetary reward systems ('treats') provided by social security agencies — for right behaviour in the wrong life.

For me, being 'FIT' means — accordingly — creating personal fitness programs that allow me to lower my personal cholesterol level, consume less animal fat and less alcohol, pay attention to mindful eating, and engage in more physical activity — in other words: living a humble, well-behaved, and proper life.

It's about self-optimization. The only question is: for whom or for what? It's obvious: the boundaries between private and public life are increasingly blurring; the workday never truly ends; the pale, bluish light of the smartphone casts its glow over tired bodies in bed, who, startled by constant beeps, swipe away appointment reminders and the latest news from the worlds of work and entertainment.

But, as Helene Fischer sang: *"Atemlos durch die Nacht / Bis ein neuer Tag erwacht"* (*Breathless through the night / Until a new day dawns*) — and it's 99% certain that this *new day* will lead us into a world where achieving a 'work-life balance' is no problem at all.



The conditions for this are: not the separation, but the integration of work and private life; not 'Inter-Esse' ("*...to be at the center of a thing and to stay with it...*", Martin Heidegger) but multitasking, not mastering one language but learning many languages, not persistence (stubbornness, obstinacy) but flexibility (softness, flow), not habit but adventure, not the aimless hesitation of philosophy but pragmatically formulated goals.

The answer to Ernst Bloch's crucial but little-noticed question "*Why do we get up in the morning?*" is:

*"I get up in the morning because I **MUST** fulfil my obligations to myself and to society — and I do so because I **WANT TO**. After making myself a Nespresso cappuccino and properly disposing of the biodegradable capsules, I read — because I **CAN** — first 'FOCUS. The Hidden Driver of Excellence' by Daniel Goleman, then Stéphane Hessel's 'Time for Outrage: Indignez-vous!' (a quick and easy read), and during my lunch break, 'Enthetzt euch! (Slow Down!)' by Karlheinz A. Geißler. If I'm **ALLOWED TO** in the afternoon, I'm going to tackle Jean Ziegler's 'Retournez les fusils!'. My treadmill, the "Darwin TM 40" from Sport-Tiedje, is handy because it has a built-in shelf for my e-reader. My employer, the Federal Office of Metrology and Surveying (my office is on Arltgasse in the 16th district of Vienna), thinks it's great that I stay in shape and continue my education during work hours, even though I'm actually **SUPPOSED TO** issue calibration certificates in the afternoon."*

HYPER HYPER

... is, for me, something like the high point, the climax that flashes briefly — that feeling of happiness that appears for a moment, breaking all the rules, and vanishes so quickly that even a fly swatter is useless (and that squashed feeling of happiness is useless, too).

Perhaps excess, ecstasy—that which, as a personal experience, proves enduring in the memory of certain moments in life—takes on the characteristics of an abstract loop, a mantra that accompanies life toward death with devotion and style.

When running, euphoria arises from the release of endorphins: serotonin, dopamine, adrenaline, and noradrenaline. In art, euphoria arises from the release of grants and project funding. Shrugs, sweat, and tears (of joy? of sorrow?) accompany these processes.

MELANCHOLIA

I'm already approaching sixty, so I belong to the '50+' generation. '50+': an energetic, affectionate term with a positive aura — it brings to mind discount cards, 'best-ager' trips, and dietary supplements. In earlier theories about life stages (see Thomas Batsching's dissertation *'Kompetenzen für Lebensphasen und deren Wirkung auf Arbeit an Innovation'*, 2020 ('Competencies for Life Stages and Their Impact on Innovation Work')), this stage of life does not appear — it falls under the working life phase, which refers to the third stage of life up until retirement age.



Due to corporate efficiency strategies, this stage of life is associated for many workers with unemployment and a slide into precarious employment — see for example 'Beschäftigungsinitiative 50+' ('Employment Initiative 50+'), including 'Eingliederungsbeihilfe' ('Integration Allowance') from the Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour.

In the 'independent' arts sector, ageing artists who haven't made it into the art market's Champions League find it increasingly difficult to keep up with the rhetoric of artistic innovation — that is, creating young and fresh art. Most of them are already in a precarious situation, and in line with the rhetoric of 'lifelong learning', many of them turn to retraining.

Summaries of some of the life-stage theories offer amusing descriptions of this age group:

"49–56 years: Synthesis. Either something new has been found or bitterness sets in" (Patrick Fritz; loosely based on Bernard Lievegoed), *"Integrity vs. Despair (from age 50; mature adulthood): After the rise... the fall. Gravity gains strength, time takes its toll on the organs, without a job, recognition and structure crumble, the music grows fainter, time passes both faster and slower than ever, death lurks somewhere, and that somewhere draws closer and closer."* (Tim Schlenzig; loosely based on Erik H. Erikson).

The most beautiful and poetic analysis, however, is presented by Gottfried Benn in his lecture 'Ageing as a Problem for Artists' (1954), in which he quotes Edward Burne-Jones:

"Our first fifty years pass in great errors; then we become fearful and can scarcely put one foot in front of the other, so well do we know our own weakness. Then twenty years of toil, and now we begin to understand what we can do and what we must leave undone. And then comes a ray of hope and a blast of the trumpet, and we must depart this earth."

When imperatives like 'Keep it up!' or 'Fit for the Future!' are supplanted by the uncertainty of one's own body's fragility and vulnerability, and by the finite nature of the remaining chapter of one's existence, a poetry of melancholy may emerge: as the Perfume of Fate, as the Mist of Grief, as the Eroticism of Depression (loosely based on Markus Weidmann).

EPILOGUE

My concept for 'FIT FOR FUTURE or HYPER HYPER or MELANCHOLIA' unfolds against the backdrop of a rhizomatic orchestra of pressing personal, social, and political issues — such as climate change and the associated culture of protest, proper waste sorting, the death of parents and the untimely passing of fellow artists, digital learning, my son's puberty, education and the formation of political opinions, retirement planning, reducing meat consumption, the fight against cannibalistic world orders, treating age-related erectile dysfunction, confronting one's own racism, the transformation of value and currency, the artistic articulation of participation as engagement, and the next gastrointestinal endoscopy.

I assume that this multi-kaleidoscopic background is not explicitly addressed in the minimalist artistic form or conception, but at best emerges poetically.

Otmar Wagner, November 30, 2022

Performance artist **Otmar Wagner** has been a regular guest on the WUK performing arts programme since 2017. The formats he creates are as diverse as his creative output and his artistic media, which range from essay performances and concert performances to performative installations. The artist will be returning to the WUK in March 2023 with his latest work.