

# art's labor

“How to Teach Art” – 100 Ways of Thinking, Kunsthalle Zürich

Dear colleagues and friends,  
dear artists and researchers,  
dear guests,

At the very beginning of this adventure, at one of the first meetings during the planning of the workshop, Artur Żmijewski asked us if we knew the scene from Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction*, where a man in the back seat of the car is accidentally shot by one of the two men in the front as they argue, and then they call a professional to clean up the whole bloody mess. You must know that Artur Żmijewski likes to refer to popular movies when he explains his work as an artist. He said to us: “You hire me when you need a cleaner.” Since we were responsible for the doctoral students who would participate in his workshop, we were glad he didn't say: “You hire me when you need a killer.” Even if it was meant metaphorically. I don't know exactly what Artur Żmijewski suggested when he compared himself to a “cleaner.” Maybe he intended to say that we are in big trouble, that we need a professional to clean up our political and social sphere, to deal with the consequences of the violence that all the “killers” in this world inflicted on human life.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote an interesting passage about cleaning in her book *The Human Condition* (1958). In this passage she reminds us of the mythical account of Hercules, “whose cleaning of the Augean stables is among the twelve heroic labors.” 3,000 cattle had lived in these stables producing an enormous amount of manure, and they had not been cleaned for over 30 years. It is a story of the “grandeur of heroic fights against overwhelming odds” that require great strength and courage, while “the daily fight in which the human body is engaged to keep the world clean and prevent its decay bears little resemblance to heroic deeds.” She concludes her thoughts with an ironic remark saying that “unfortunately it is only the mythological Augean stable that will remain clean once the effort is made and the task is achieved.” While the “Herculean labors share with all great deeds that they are unique,” the effort we as human beings must make in our daily cleaning, in dealing with “the waste of yesterday,” is “its relentless repetition.”

For Hannah Arendt, cleaning was an example of *labor* as opposed to other expressions of the *vita activa* or active life such as *work* and *action*. Labor in the sense in which she uses the word means unproductive labor, an effort “born of a great urgency” because it defends life against the threats of decay, yet “leaves nothing behind” because its result is consumed almost as quickly as the effort is spent. It was interesting for me that Artur Żmijewski, in his very modest and serene manner, compared himself as an artist with a professional cleaner, with someone who makes a daily effort in relentless repetition, who devotes himself to an urgent but perhaps futile task, as opposed to someone who does productive

work, who makes art by transforming matter into material, into objects that can be exhibited in museums or traded on the art market. The task of the artist, he said in a recent interview with the NZZ (“Die Vereinnahmung der Kunst durch die Wirtschaft ist nichts im Vergleich zur Vereinnahmung der Kunst durch die Politik,” NZZ, August 20, 2018), is to preserve and protect the freedom of the artist that is currently more and more threatened by “the new authorities and right-wing nationalists” such as Kaczyński, Orbán or Erdoğan. The decision to come to Zurich and give a four-month workshop is of course closely tied to this current political situation. Politics, he says, should be a means of communication and negotiation, but it has become a monster, a cynical creature like from the *Alien* saga in the cinema. In this situation he would not advise artists to share their fragile and subtle techniques and tools with politicians. They will be used against them. Seen in this context, the question “how to teach art” is about much more than developing didactic skills in art education and training; it also means sharing a certain kind of knowledge of how to relate to the outside world, to take responsibility to protect the freedom of art from its actual threats. With Artur Żmijewski this certain kind of knowledge is never simply passed on; it is not just there and at hand but has to be generated in a collective process.

Where is the “thinking” in all these remarks on artistic labor? As a philosopher, Hannah Arendt was very naturally concerned with the question of the conditions under which thinking can claim a place in active life. Considering thinking as “the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable,” she returned to this question in her last major work, *The Life of the Mind* (1977/1978), where she sets her idea of thinking as an activity against the Kantian tradition that shaped Western philosophy. Having witnessed the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, she asks whether doing evil is the result of thoughtlessness: “Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually condition them against it?”

As scholars working in the field of the arts, literature, theatre, performance, painting, sculpture, photography and film, we are particularly interested in the theoretical potential of art. The workshop was organized as part of the doctoral program “Epistemologies of Aesthetic Practices,” which is a collaboration between the ZHdK (Zurich University of the Arts), the ETH (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) and the University of Zurich. The aim of the program is to support research at the margins between academic and artistic education. What is the autonomy and specificity of aesthetic thinking? How does art think differently, using means other than purely discursive? What is its relation to scientific discourse? I can imagine that dealing with these questions in the workshop was not exactly a piece of cake, that Artur Żmijewski sometimes even might have hoped that the doctoral students would stop thinking while making art. We are very excited to hear from Artur Żmijewski and the participants about this process in the following collective talk, the first event of the series “Denkt Kunst” that will run through the program of the exhibition “100 Ways of Thinking.”

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## Words of thanks

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Fabienne Liptay