

Kontakt (simultan)

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Kontakt (simultan) is a hybrid net-art piece and screen installation on an experimental waiting process taking place as a permanent arrangement inside the studio of *Reagenz*. Here, a glass plate with collected lichen fragments is irrigated and photographed four times a day, perhaps producing an extremely slow growth, that is revealed as a time series of the photographs. The recordings began in April 2021. The process can be followed online, as a bot posts the photographs on a social media account. The second form are physical installations, using either a suspended screen in a showroom window, in front of which stereoscopic lenses are mounted, or a tabletop viewing device. In these versions, the most recent photo is superimposed with a photo that was taken a month ago. The tabletop version allows the visitor to scroll through the time series. The photographs are augmented by text lines contributed by people reacting to an ongoing open call, reflecting on waiting and on making contact.

Keywords lichen, symbiosis,
open ended, simultaneity,
stereoscopy

Description

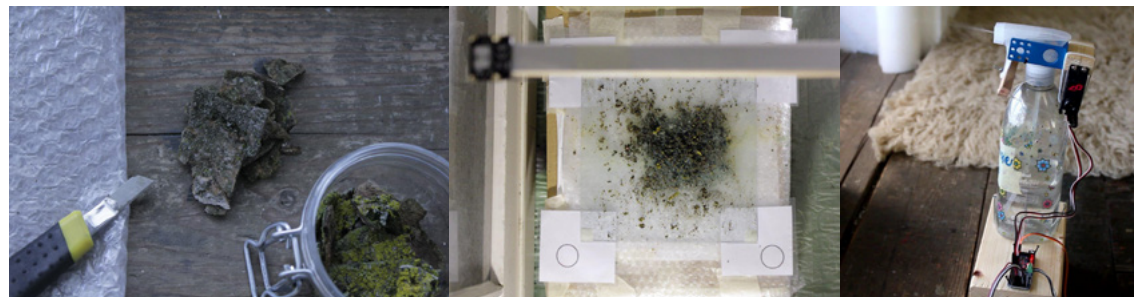
Lichens are interesting life forms. They are a composite (symbiotic) organism formed both by algae or bacteria and fungi. Halfway plant, halfway microorganism. Their occurrence is very specific to the environmental conditions, and biologists study them to map out air pollution (e.g. Wilfling et al. 2008). They grow extremely slowly, and they are not exactly something you can cultivate deliberately, although obscure “formulas” exist.¹ Opinions are diverging on whether it is possible to transplant lichens at all, and whether they would grow anywhere outside their original habitat. This piece, or set of pieces, nevertheless begins with such an attempt.

1. “Magnificent Lichen Growth Formula” containing all the ingredients one could come up with: milk, flour, yeast, gelatin, algae powder, fertiliser. (https://web.archive.org/web/20161025041044/http://lichenlovers.org/lichen_growth_formula.phtml)

Kontakt... departs from the question whether an ongoing process happening in the studio can become a continuous piece observable from the outside. Sharing a glimpse at my working space, forming a connection between the daily activity of being in the studio and the reception or exhibition of art, rather than confining the latter to the typical time frame a piece is exhibited. Making a mutable piece. And finally, as the process began in early 2021, attempting to make a piece accessible during the pandemic.

The setup in the studio, *Reagenz* in Graz (AT), is elementary (Fig. 1): A heap of lichen fragments collected nearby the studio was spread on the surface of a square glass plate placed near a window. A camera is mounted on a gallows above and connected to a Raspberry Pi computer, which is also attached to a motor controller. Two servo motors are attached to a spray bottle filled with distilled water, placed so that when the motors pull the bottle’s trigger, the lichen fragments on the glass plate are irrigated. Every six hours, a timer switch starts the computer which runs the irrigation process, then takes a photo. During the night and the dark season, additional flood lamps are activated to illuminate the photo. The digital image is straightened out and cropped based on the detection of visual markers placed on the corners of the plate. The computer then connects to the Internet, and the image is uploaded to the social media account <https://botsin.space/@kontakt> and tagged with a time code and a text line that changes every day.

Fig. 1. Setup of the experiment inside *Reagenz*.



The piece is essentially speculative, and an exercise on waiting. Will anything happen? If so, what? Observing the time series of images, several things were indeed happening. The situation is creating a trace of itself. I use fixed exposure

times, so you can see how the light conditions change depending on the weather. Rarely glitches in the Hough marker detection algorithm occur. Sometimes I feed the lichens with xylitol and spirulina, leaving a vanishing layer of white dots and green background.

Most importantly, I noticed that when you compare the same time of the day, but spaced weeks apart, the images differ. I began to develop a topography of the plate, there are prominent fragments, constellations, shapes. Perhaps the lichen fragments open up? Or they move slowly by the impact of the water drops? Or they really grow by fractions of millimetres? One finds oneself in the thought space opened up by the likes of Donna Haraway, Lynn Margulis, Isabelle Stengers, or Karen Barad, who have often noted the peculiarities of lichens, rethinking ecologies, individuality, and relationality beyond the human (cf. Gabrys 2018).

How can this become a *piece* (or set of pieces)? There is something atmospheric about the disposition—a texture of warm, moving air. Always flat and relational, small forces working between the elements. Tiniest forces that can only be perceived with special attention or apparatus, as reading between the lines, millimetre by millimetre. Soon after setting up the social media account and thus the existence of *Kontakt...* on the Internet, I became interested in reflecting the poetic qualities of the developing image series in the form of short text fragments, going hand in hand with the format of the microblogging platform (Mastodon). Every day, a new text fragment is chosen from a pool—mostly written by myself, but also with contributions based on an ongoing open call—and displayed along with the image, often reflecting on forms of waiting and contact-making, but generally open to any direction of meandering.

I wanted to refract the net-art piece back into the physical realm. In June 2021, an installation version based on a small screen in a wooden frame and two optical lenses glued to one of the ground-floor windows of *Reagenz* was inaugurated. Passersby on the street can pause and observe the unfolding experiment (Fig. 2). The attribute *simultan* (Engl. *simultaneous*) was added to the title: One can contract the temporal process by comparing photographs side by side. I am intrigued by stereo vision, the merging of distinct left and right eye image into a spatial phenomenon. Unlike a “normal” stereoscopic photography that is taken at the same moment from two slightly different viewing positions, here the photographs are taken from the same viewing position, but at different moments, revealing thus “as spatial expression” what has changed over a period of time. When the viewer turns towards the window and directs their gaze through the magnifying lenses, relaxing the eyes to stare parallelly into an infinite distance, two white cross-hairs move towards each other. When they eventually coincide, a sharp synthetic image with spatial depth is revealed. The most recent photo meets the state one month ago, without a foreground and background or hierarchy, a simultaneous situation is established. Moreover, without cause and effect, the two text fragments attached to the two selected days meet, creating a new semantic-poetic space.

Fig. 2. Internet-based version (left) and window installation (middle and right) of the piece.



The third version is a portable variant of the physical installation. A tabletop machine consisting of a stereoscopic lens mounted on top of the screen, and the entire recording history to the avail of the visitors who may browse using two rotary dials on the left and right side of the box (Fig 3). One may decrease or increase the temporal distance between the left and right image, exploring the different spatial expressions thus created, or reading through the catalogue of texts. If one has never looked at a stereoscopic image, the striking effect is difficult to describe in words, and here new spaces are created by the organism meeting itself. It reminds me of a line in video artist Susanna Flock's piece *I don't exist yet* (2019): "Only if we touch ourselves we are feeling at two places simultaneously." The lichen fragments touch their past or future form, digitally produced proprioception governs. Or perhaps: human and lichen want to make contact independently of each other, and how would that be?

Fig. 3. Tabletop version of the piece with random-access dials.



References

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