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Each One Teach One

Pablo Müller, Philip Matesic

Educational formats are an integral part of artistic curatorial practice today. With this educational hype in art, a new format has recently come into play: that of the reading group. The Chicago-born and Zürich-based artist Philip Matesic talks about his seven years' worth of experience with *Theory Tuesdays*, (self-)education and the significance of theory for artistic practice.





Session 140. Transparenzgesellschaft by Byung-Chul Han, Counter Space, Zürich, April 14, 2015.

Pablo Müller: Why did you start a reading group?

Philip Matesic: Theory Tuesdays started because I was missing something. In May of 2008, I had just finished my Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts (focusing on Social Practice) from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Shortly after, for reasons of the heart, I moved to Zürich. I continued to read art, literary and critical theory in my free time, but was missing the dialogue around specific texts. In my opinion, theory comes to life when it's brought into a dialogue with others. So after a frustrating two months, with a rapidly growing inner monologue around the texts I was reading, I heard about *Summer School*, a project hosted at Corner College in Zürich.

Summer School was organized and coordinated by the Polish-Canadian artist Antoni Wojtyra, who ran the eight-week school based on a reader he had assembled, designed and printed with the help of Urs Lehni (one of the two founders of Corner College). The reader was a selection of texts that we discussed each week along with a guest artist lecture held (via Skype) with the Canadian artist Ken Lum. The eight weeks concluded with a graduation ceremony. I attended the last three sessions and was inspired by the platform. It was Wojtyra himself who thought I should continue the reading group. I was hesitant and uncertain, but then asked the participants during the last session if they would like to continue with me taking the place of Wojtyra. Everyone said «YES!,» so I began developing Theory Tuesdays.

The first six sessions of Theory Tuesdays started in early October of 2009. I ran them in a similar way to Wojtyra, selecting specific texts for five sessions and inviting a guest artist for the sixth. It was only after these initial six sessions that I opened up the platform to anyone interested in running the following sessions. This was the moment when it became what it is today, six-and-a-half years and one-hundred-sixty sessions later, enacting the ‹Each One, Teach One› ethos that was also an essential part of Wojtyra's *Summer School*. ‹Each One, Teach One› is the core philosophy of Theory Tuesdays, where each week a different person presents a text and leads discussion, leveling the hierarchy between those who know and

don’t know, in a non-academic setting. Those in attendance also end up running sessions, with each one teaching the other and back again.



Planning Session, Counter Space, Zürich, January 13, 2015.

Müller: Who is part of the reading group? How open is it?

Matesic: The discussion platform is free and open to the public. There is almost always a new person attending each session. There are one or two people that have attended nearly every session, but there is also a weekly circulation of participants based on the flexibility and openness of the platform’s format. The average number of participants at each session is twelve.

Müller: How would you describe its culture of discussion? How do you generate a common ground within changing constellations? Do you have a set of rules or particular procedures for the discussion?

Matesic: I will answer your ‹four-questions-packed-into-one› in reverse order. A ‹set of rules› often comes up when a new person participates at Theory Tuesdays. I like to think that there are some fixed rules and unwritten rules. The fixed rules are that each week a different person presents a text in any way they choose. Some outline all of the details, others open up the discussion to the group right away. I also attend every session and loosely moderate, so we don’t get too far off topic. Another fixed rule is that each text presented and discussed must have a theoretical underpinning. It can’t be fiction, it can’t be journalism, it can’t be a poem or song lyrics. The theoretical aspect is essential.

An unwritten rule is that everyone is supposed to read the PDF before attending the session, but this rarely happens and still leads to a lively discussion. I’m not kicking anyone out if they didn’t read the text. Another unwritten rule is that not one, single person should dominate the discussion. Theory Tuesdays is a place where everyone can say something and everyone should listen to each other. It doesn’t happen all the time that a single person dominates, but

when it does I try my best to keep those certain personalities tempered.

The ‹culture of discussion› at Theory Tuesdays can be described as playful and serious, with the sheer plurality of views allowing for different positions to be taken on a text. It’s a push and pull, a feeling out of the topic, misunderstandings, clarity, sarcastic remarks and opposing perspectives. My role in the discussion platform it to keep the conversation critical yet convivial, grounded (with the relevant PDF as an anchor) yet open for personal input. A typical discussion lasts about two hours and so far, no one has left with a black eye or a broken limb.

Concerning generating a ‹common ground,› I see the weekly repetition of ‹when› (Tuesday at 8 pm) and ‹where› (Reseda Lochergut Showroom in 2016) as enough to demarcate this territory of theoretical discussion in the art landscape of Zürich. Another common ground is the table where we sit during each session. Nothing is recorded from the discussion to be published online afterwards. It’s about being in the same room at the same table with people you’ve most likely never met before, discussing a text that interested someone enough to present and open it up for discussion. So the table is also an important, a physical ground where we always meet.



Session 159. Das Theorem der neuen Landnahme. Eine feministische Rückeroberung by Die Feministische Autorinnengruppe, Reseda Lochergut, April 5, 2016.

Müller: In your reading group you mainly focus on — let’s say — contemporary critical theory. Why is this kind of writing important for you? Please give an example to illustrate your point.

Matesic: Contemporary critical theory is an essential part of my art practice. It rounds out the discourse. It examines, criticizes and adds a new dimension to an array of art projects and activities related to my social practice. I know I’m not alone (as an artist), keeping up with and reading contemporary critical theory. Theory Tuesdays is a place to come together and discuss with others who are reading similar topics. A few writers, whose work I’ve presented

at Theory Tuesdays, include: Nicolas Bourriaud, Claire Bishop, Shannon Jackson, Martha Rosler, Grant Kester and Jacques Ranciére.

Müller: Can you specify the critical approach of these writers? In what sense do you consider the texts you discuss at Theory Tuesdays to be critical?

Matesic: It would be difficult to define an overall critical approach shared by these writers. But they are engaged with the following topics: gentrification, reclaiming public spaces / the commons, conviviality, antagonism, conversation as an ‹aesthetic› form and, finally, radical forms of education. The criticality of the texts I've presented at Theory Tuesdays lies in their examination of the continually changing urban landscape through neo-liberal influences, the ‹value› (aesthetic, ethical, political or otherwise) of experimental social settings and educational scenarios.

But what does it really mean to be critical? In my opinion it's providing a setting / mindset where a wide variety of conflicting viewpoints on current topics can be expressed, examined and discussed on equal terms. The above-mentioned writers and positions only represent a very small scope of what's been read and discussed at Theory Tuesdays. So far we've had 160 sessions and the theoretical range is very wide.



Session 158. Hinter weissen Wänden. Behind the white Cube by Julia Voss, Reseda Lochergut, March 15, 2016.

Müller: The spatial setting seems to be important for your reading group and is designed. In what way? Why is it important for you?

Yes. It's important that Theory Tuesdays is always held in a public space. This could be (and has been) an art / off space, outdoors or, indeed, a furniture showroom (Reseda Lochergut), where the sessions are being held in 2016. This makes the reading group more accessible to a wider public and people can just stop by if they see us from the street. Concerning a ‹designed› space, I don't see the space where the sessions are held as ‹designed›; they are simply quiet, convivial spaces with free, public access.

Müller: Many of the authors and articles you read are part of the critical canon. Students read this stuff at art schools as well. How does your approach make a difference?

Yes, that’s correct to a certain extent. Most participants have been through some sort of academic training or art school and mention how they’ve read some of the authors presented. But the biggest difference that makes Theory Tuesdays non-academic and more accessible is that the person presenting the text is not an expert on the topic or author. They are simply interested enough in the text to present it in a public setting and ‹undo some of the knots› that appear while reading such texts.

I’d like to think that there is a flat hierarchy between the presenter and participants. The varying interpretations, viewpoints and critique from the participants help open up the topic to the presenter, re-shaping what he or she thought about the text before the session. Someone should attend the group if they are interested in this more ‹casual / non-expert› approach to discussing theoretical texts. I find that as a result of this framework participants are less intimidated by these dense, canonical texts when they are discussed in such a setting. They feel more confident to discuss their interpretations, without the fear of ‹sounding like an idiot› in front of an expert.



Logo of Theory Tuesday, designed by Urs Lehni.

Müller: Today theory has somehow become an aesthetic performative form. One recent example is the reading of Marx's *Das Kapital* initiated by Isaac Julien at last year's Venice Biennale. At the same time artists today are obliged to underpin their works with all kinds of theoretical references. Otherwise their works do not seem relevant. How does your project position itself within these developments?

Matesic: Theory Tuesdays positions itself as more of a community-based project. A similar model and position can be seen in the Open School East in De Beauvoir Town, East London where the ‹school› hosts different events around the needs of the surrounding community as well as offering temporary studio spaces for artists. Community members are allotted free space to do workshops of their choosing while the ‹artists in residence› organize reading groups and host events as well as workshops. Everyone is responsible for maintaining the space, bringing in and sharing content. It's a hybrid art space and community center, catering to both the local and the art community and offering a place where both can interact.

Müller: Claiming openness, non-hierarchical community orientation, you position Theory Tuesdays in the tradition of radical education like worker's education, radical reading groups and so on. On the other hand TT to me seems to sometimes be a celebration of theory for theory's sake. Do you consider TT to have an emancipatory agenda? If so, in what sense?

Matesic: Ha! I like that «a celebration of theory for theory's sake.» Yes! But it does go deeper than that. Theory Tuesdays does have an emancipatory agenda. That agenda starts and ends with the reader. Instead of feeling inadequate to understand the complexity of a theoretical text, he or she should know that simply through reading they know enough to form an opinion to share with others. Theory is often intimidating in this regard; it becomes something ‹impossible› to understand until an ‹expert› explains everything.

So instead of waiting to be told how to interpret a text (by an expert), the reader becomes emancipated the minute he or she starts reading a text for a TT session. This comes through knowing that what they interpret (through reading) is no less valuable than the interpretation of the person sitting next to them or the person presenting. Then the real exchange begins. Theory doesn't have to be inaccessible. Theory simply needs to be read with this mindset and discussued in an open setting to emancipate the reader from this positioning.



Session 100. 3 Years / 100 Sessions Theory Tuesday, Corner College, Zürich, October 9, 2012.

Müller: Do the group readings influence your own artistic practice? If so, can you give an example?

Yes, most definitely. Having a social art practice, I'm often reading and presenting related texts from an array of writers and artists. During the last Theory Tuesdays session I ran (January 26, 2016), I presented the second essay *Creativity and Its Discontents* from the three-part essay *Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism* by Martha Rosler (e-flux, 2011). We discussed the political role of the ‹creative class› (if there even is one), gentrification (an ongoing topic) and the Occupy Wall Street theorists (including Daniel Graeber).

Theory Tuesdays has, since its conception, been an important supplement to my artistic practice, bringing new and often conflicting aspects to theoretical texts I'm reading. Theory Tuesdays has also, simultaneously, become the longest running project within my art practice. I still get the question every once in a while, «Why do you call it an art project? Isn't it just a reading group?» To me the answer is very clear, but stop by next Tuesday and I'll let you decide.

PHILIP MATESIC

Philip Matesic (1983) is an American artist living and working in Zürich, Switzerland since 2009. He earned his Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2008. Philip's social art practice includes urban interventions, discussion platforms, workshops and conversations. See also philipmatesic.com [http://philipmatesic.com][http://philipmatesic.com] and theorytuesdays.com [http://theorytuesdays.com].

PABLO MÜLLER

Pablo Müller is an art historian and art critic. His writings are published in Kunstbulletin, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Die Wochenzeitung and Jungle World, among others. After having spent time in Berlin and New York, he has been working in research at the Lucerne School of Art and Design since 2014 and doing his PhD at the University of Zürich. He is co-editor of Brand-New-Life.

Pablo Müller ist Kunsthistoriker und Kunstkritiker. Seine Artikel erschienen unter anderem in Kunstbulletin, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Die Wochenzeitung, Jungle World. Nach längeren Aufenthalten in Berlin und New York arbeitet er seit 2014 in der Forschung an der Hochschule Luzern – Design & Kunst und promoviert an der Universität Zürich. Er ist Mitherausgeber von Brand-New-Life.

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