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**„der zweibeinige Stuhl“**  
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To make a chair talk: the two-legged chair as a figure of thought.

A two-legged chair is a contradiction in itself, a *contradictio in adiecto*, as it would be called in logic. But language can do that, because language and its users are free to suspend Western logic, itself a binary form of thinking. The somewhat disturbing marriage of words, however, has its justification not only as a linguistic image. In this presentation of works with this title, it stands for a figure of thought that seeks to do justice to the phenomenon of fine art. Warning: there are no two-legged chairs to be found here<sup>1</sup>. Not that these two-legged-illogical-chairs do not exist, along with one-legged stools or three-legged footrests. But only chairs with four legs are truly stable and statistically optimal, that is, defy gravity and support the person sitting over the floor, and for that reason they are the general rule. But art couldn't care less about rules. It can even suspend physical laws like that of gravitation, or at least try to do so. Right before our own eyes.

Physics cannot be questioned; it is a science. But we can ask what kind of knowledge science creates, under what conditions and premises. Then the stable structure might crumble and a simple chair along with the certainty about its construction and impact can take on cracks. The result is a vacuum of knowledge. That need not be something negative per se. Science is full of "black holes," both in the proper sense of the term and the metaphorical sense as well. Albert Einstein, for example, combined the three dimensions of space with time and called this phenomenon spacetime. He described gravitation as a bending of spacetime and thus made Newtonian physics more precise. Spacetime is, according to Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, a four-dimensional event, or rather it encompasses the entirety of all events. But our senses are not actually able to perceive the bending of spacetime. Can we even imagine four dimensions? That is difficult for us, in part because Einstein recognized for the first time that the referential systems space and time and the observer and the observed are relative. For our understanding, that is a paradox.

This is precisely where art and language come back into play. Art, philosophy, or literature can't teach us anything about physics, but instead do exactly the opposite by creating conceptual spaces that are independent of physical forces. And interestingly, they thus disturb yet another coordinate system: the anthropocentric view of the world. The humanities and arts are able to free us from rigid dualisms like the opposition of culture and nature, spirit and body / material, subject and object, man and woman, or human and non-human, unlike the modern natural sciences,<sup>2</sup> which rather cement such dualisms. But we also need to acknowledge that the natural sciences act in an increasingly interdisciplinary fashion. They even enter into forms of interaction with art, to mutual benefit. But this is not our subject here.

So back to our two-legged chair or to the claim that it should be made to talk here. We won't be able to make it talk, not in the near future. Just as the protagonist Larry in Annie Dillard's essay *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, from which I took the title of my own text, is not able to make the stone speak, not in the story at least. Larry hopes

<sup>1</sup> Or can you find any after all?

<sup>2</sup> The seventeenth century can be considered the time of the emergence of modern (Western) natural sciences and the rise of a related mechanistic view of the world.



for future generations, perhaps their work will bear the desired fruits. In brief, the stone is silent, the chair is silent, nature is silent. But in Dillard, the silence sounds: "At a certain point, you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding, or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread. You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is the silence. Nature does utter a peep—just this one."<sup>3</sup>

Of central importance here: the American poet claims that these silent things and people are linked to one another. "We are here to witness. There is nothing else to do with those mute materials we do not need."<sup>4</sup> Art also needs witnesses. It needs them here as well, dear visitors. Until the two-legged chair speaks, we can listen to its silence, the sound of its silence—a sound, that is nothing and everything at the same time. As I see it, the important thing is not what these practices are, but the fact *that* they are. This is possible without Cartesian models of explanation. Objects and art attest silently to their effectiveness, which also exists beyond the human subject.

The question of the origin of the world of things I would like to link to the Kabbalistic notion of the *tzimtzum*. Notable here is particularly that there is no original text for this teaching. Isaak Luria (1534–1572) was a man of the spoken word, we do not possess a single line written by him. Students rendered the spoken words of their master as texts. But the *tzimtzum* achieved a broader reception later in the writings of the German-Israeli religious historian Gershom Scholem (1897–1982). The Hebrew term *tzimtzum* means "contraction, constriction, condensation," it refers to God's contraction from his own center. That means, God withdraws to himself and has to limit himself, to make room for the creation of the world in his own midst. What Isaak Luria understood as a cosmological event was later adapted and read by countless philosophers, theologians, academics, and artists as a myth, a symbol, or a figure.

Such appropriations and transformations cannot provide a "correct" reading, nor can this text provide that. Instead, in the sense of the figure of the rhizome<sup>5</sup> in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari<sup>6</sup>, the *tzimtzum* itself is to become a rhizome. It does not seek to be a picture of something, but to do something with things. To that extent, figure of thought is not the right expressing. Could this linkage be called a "string figure" or "speculative fabulation" in the sense of Donna Haraway?

The two-legged chair was something like an incubator for this project. The expression—taken up in a conversation between Fabian Treiber and Jörg Boner on the occasion of the exhibition "XXX die III. – correspondances," took on a life of its own and formed proliferating rhizomes. Like now the *tzimtzum*. A paradoxical event that solves the dilemma of *creatio ex nihilo*. That is: how can something emerge from nothing? The *tzimtzum* as an event before the world, before the creation of the world, before the emergence of spatiotemporal objects, is a possible response to the question of the origin of all being. And this is how Luria's cosmogony sounds in the words of his student Hayyim Vital: "Know that before the emanations were emanated

3 Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expedition and Encounters* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 71–2.

4 Ibid., 72.

5 A rhizome is a horizontally spreading sprout axis system; in Deleuze/Guattari, it becomes a metaphor or the non-hierarchical linkage of knowledge that creates diversity instead of unity.

6 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).



and the creations were created, there was a simple supernal light that filled all of existence, and there was no empty space in the form of void and empty air. Rather, everything was filled with that simple infinite light, which had no beginning or end. It was simply one equal light, and it is called the 'Ein Sof' light . . . And behold, then He contracted Himself, may He be blessed, in the middle point, precisely at that point where His light was in the most absolute state (Meir says in our version that the Rabbi said this, and it may be inferred). And that light was then contracted and withdrew to the sides surrounding the central point, and then a void, air, and empty space were left, from a central point just like this.”<sup>7</sup>

This strange description of the action of the *tzimtzum* is intended to provide orientation, as a map through this small universe. Where is the “center” here? Is there one at all? Is the center in the universe not everywhere? And what if we human beings would engage in more self-limitation? That’s certainly worth a thought. In the works exhibited, standard spacetime coordinates and models start to falter, as in the two-legged chair or the *tzimtzum*; this is perhaps because we never find a footing in the representation of human beings. The deconstruction of the subject means at the same time a decentering of the Anthropos. Only then can human beings, non-human beings and material be treated equally and understood as equal actors that are mutually dependent on one another. That means: they are all “only” mass/energy.

Look closely. These works feature emptiness, simply emptiness; space, the dreamt, the embodied, the suspended space; the suspension or making visible of gravity; the human trace—yes, we are still around; the shift of scale with the appropriate humor; the logic of multiplicities—rhizome reloaded. And so on and so forth. But perhaps this listing is superfluous. Form your own rhizomes. Just try it, it’s very easy.  
Rhimtzimtzum!

Susanna Koeberle, trans. Brain Currid

*This essay owes a great deal to the following authors:  
Barad, Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Annie Dillard,  
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*In memoriam René Zäch (1946 - 2023)*

Tours:  
Saturday, October 7, 11 am