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CHERNOFF FACES 2014



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Aneurysm

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# CHERNOFF FACES

01 24 March

ANEURYSM

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**Lots of  
reputation,  
little qua-  
lity?**

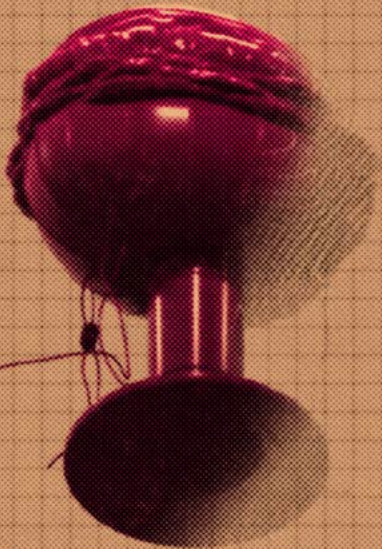
why the hier-  
archies of the  
art world are a  
social phantasm

**No Blabla**

how the Chernoff  
Faces under-  
mine encrusted  
structures

**This is how  
it works!**

Virtual rooms as  
contemporary  
exhibition spaces



Including an interview with  
Dr. des  
Matte Hückstadt

**Caution!**

The information symbol indicates references.

Dr. Hückstädt's statements are personal interpretations of the listed theoretical and empirical studies and not an objective reproduction of their findings. The sources are provided solely for interested readers.



## AN INTRODUCTORY CONVERSATION BETWEEN ANDRÉ BINNOIT AND DR. MALTE HÜCKSTÄDT

André Binnoit: Dr. Hückstädt, what are the Chernoff Faces?

Malte Hückstädt: The Chernoff Faces are a loose association of artists and designers, but originally a data scientist collective.

André Binnoit: Data scientists? How did you get from data science to the fine arts?

Malte Hückstädt: The other way round! I originally studied painting in Hanover and Berlin, but after graduating I realised that the real-world equivalent of this profession - well - repelled me. After a few years of professional stumbling, I ended up studying sociology at Humboldt University in Berlin. Contrary to expectations, I realised during my first year there that I had a certain talent for quantitative methods. I later specialised in this field and now work as a data scientist. A few years ago, I founded the Chernoff Faces<sup>1</sup> with two other data scientists for fun and to pass the time. When art production became more interesting to me again, I started working with other artists and designers under the same name.

André Binnoit: Interesting. What role does data science and/or sociology play in your work today?

Malte Hückstädt: Data science plays no role in my work. Sociology probably does.

André Binnoit: In what way?

Malte Hückstädt: In various ways. All the generally accepted convictions, opinions and ideas within the art world that are taken for granted and undisputed; the social order that people generally regard as normal

1 / Chernoff Faces are originally a method of visualizing multivariate data using facial features to represent different variables. Developed by Herman Chernoff in 1973, this technique maps multiple data points onto various facial characteristics such as the shape of the face, the size and position of the eyes, the length and curvature of the nose, and the mouth's shape. Each of these features represents a different data dimension, allowing for an intuitive grasp of complex datasets through facial recognition. This approach can make it easier to spot patterns or outliers within the data, leveraging human ability to recognize faces. However, the effectiveness of Chernoff Faces can depend on the user's skill in discerning facial differences and the appropriateness of the data mapped to facial features.

and natural, the collective phantasms, such as the often still unbroken belief in meritocracy. These are all things whose credibility decreases as one's own social science education increases.

For my colleagues and myself, I can state quite soberly that we do not imagine that fine arts are somehow above society, that they can be produced and consumed in a socially detached way. Nor do we consider ourselves to be somehow chosen, morally superior or somehow smarter. We also have nothing to share. We don't know anything concrete and we can't help anyone. As individuals, we have nothing to offer either, we are all absolute modal personalities in terms of our social position (laughs). We can only create substances that allow us to temporarily escape the mess of ordinary life. And I think we owe this hopefully realistic sobriety to our more or less pronounced education in social science.

André Binnoit: I can hear an distance to the established cultural sector in what you say. Is this distance solely due to your sociological re-training?

Malte Hückstädt: No, certainly not. My primary and secondary socialisation is certainly the basis for the fact that I developed against rather than with the field of fine arts: Both my parents and my teachers at art college had a rather fractured relationship with the cultural sector. They saw it for what it is: a bourgeois allotment (laughs). So I also acquired this view of things to a large extent through the influence of my environment. Like all of us. Nobody stands outside the gravitational field of social reality. Even if this is a great offence for many artists and cultural workers: Humans are two-thirds automations, as Gottfried-Wilhelm Leibniz already knew.<sup>2</sup>

André Binnoit: What exactly bothers you about the art world, can you name it?

Malte Hückstädt: Almost everything, unfortunately. The list is endless (laughs). First and foremost, of course: the art market. The epicentre of hopelessness. Let's not even talk about that. Then the formal conditions of fine arts. The high redundancy of the artistic position, its shamefully low complexity, the self-forgetfulness of the protagonists, their arrogance, the collectively accepted customs and rites.<sup>3</sup>

2 / see Bourdieu, Pierre. 2000. *Pascalian Meditations*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.

3 / see Bourdieu, Pierre, Alain Darbel, and Dominique Schnapper. 1997. *Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*. New Edition. Cambridge: Polity.

André Binnoit: I've rarely encountered the fundamental malaise towards the art world that artists themselves express. Why do you think that is?

I suspect that the blindness to the situation in one's own professional field is not least due to the training that most artists have to undergo at art academies.<sup>4</sup> If you don't explicitly resist the invisible socialisation of art academies, then unfortunately you end up as what is called a *contemporary artist*: you make video, performance or sound art, are a painter or sculptor and work with galleries and museums that are as renowned as possible, publish exhibition catalogues and have a website with the name `www.firstname-lastname.com`. You are interested in specific social phenomena and move along the boundaries between genre X and genre Y. Your own work aims to be as unique as possible and perhaps also to cross some boundaries in order to challenge the taste of the audience. In any case, the reception of your work requires a high degree of cultural education. Simply beautiful, i.e. intuitively accessible to everyone - that is not an option. Economic interests: None, of course. You exhibit once a year in a white cube - probably at Städtische Galerie Bottrop, with a lot of luck at Kunstverein Braunschweig. In any case, the exhibition has to be opened by an art historian who gives a laudatory speech, categorises the works in terms of art history and asserts the usefulness and relevance of the exhibits. This is more or less the norm for art school graduates. No wonder most of them give up after a few years (laughs).

André Binnoit: Before we talk about your work in more detail: Don't you find it somewhat polemical to devalue the reality of life, the endeavours and modes of expression of so many artists in this way?

Malte Hückstädt: No, not really. But I admit to you that this is certainly an exaggeration on my part. Albeit in the direction of the truth (laughs). These are the conditions under which all the endeavours of the few *successful* and infinitely many *unsuccessful* artists in the Western art world take place.

André Binnoit: What specifically do you and your colleagues do differently from other artists?

Malte Hückstädt: We don't orientate our efforts around the exhibition concept of the White Cube, for example. We consider the White Cube

4 / see Tangian, Katia. 2010. *Spielwiese Kunstakademie. Habitus, Selbstbild, Diskurs*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag.

to be one of the worst symptoms of contemporary Western fine arts. Contrary to popular assumptions, the White Cube is by no means neutral.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, it represents semantically highly contaminated material that is added to every work that is presented in it. It is the symbol of a old bourgeois culture. A kind of temple in which the sacred, inherited relics of the past are kept.<sup>6</sup> But not only that, it is also the symbol of open nepotism, of money trading on an unimaginable scale, of fictitious reputation. The list could go on.

Artists are naive if they believe that their artworks have any substantive qualities that could prevail against the oppressive semantics of the white cube. On the contrary: it is the work's relational relationship to its environment that ultimately creates the work that the public sees in the end. So there are no artworks that are perceived against the background of the white cube. Artworks and white cubes are always one in perception, even if people are not aware of it.

André Binnoit: What do you mean?

Malte Hückstädt: You have to be blind not to realise that the presentation of artworks is not a neutral accessory that supports its perception and appreciation, but a central stage in the creation of the work, its meaning and its value. And now I ask you: why should I choose the white cube for the presentation of my production from all possible environments - youth clubs, dentists' surgeries, job centres, tennis courts, hobby cellars?

André Binnoit: But there is fine arts in public spaces, for example, and has been for many decades.

Malte Hückstädt: I agree with you. Unfortunately, this is always the kind of fine arts that comes from the logic of the white cube and flows seamlessly back into it. It remains completely disconnected from the environment. Have you ever been to Hanover? The whole of Germany is full of such sculptures: steel girder constructions by Richard Serra, which are supposed to *make space tangible*, or - I saw this devilry by chance the other day - the simple copy of the *Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* on a building façade in Berlin Mitte by Thomas Locher. It is the continuation of the logic of art production

5 / see O'Doherty, Brian. 1999. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Expanded ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.

6/ see Bourdieu, Pierre, Alain Darbel, and Dominique Schnapper. 1997. *Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*. New Edition. Cambridge: Polity.

for the white cube in public space. With the difference that you can walk past these pale products in public spaces without feeling ashamed (laughs).

No, that is definitely not a solution. We have something completely different in mind: in 2005, the artists Christian Riebe and Marius Albrecht put on an exhibition entitled *Monster Attack* in an empty but still intact Expo 2000 pavilion. In my opinion, this exhibition was very far ahead of its time and is still programmatic for our work today. Basically, the visit to *Monster Attack* began with the journey to the outskirts of Hanover: a long journey through the sprawling periphery of Hanover, then a walk across the then deserted Expo 2000 site, which was already in darkness, to the Lithuanian pavilion, a kind of giant hairdryer half-sunk into the ground, on the outside of which an arranged chain of lights proclaimed: *Hannover muss vollständig zerstört werden*. Riebe and Albrecht assembled perhaps 40 exhibits in the 800 square metre, pitch-black interior. It was breathtaking: only slightly illuminated by fairy lights, you were confronted with exhibits that looked extremely credible to the viewer as sovereign subjects. It was a bit like being in a natural history museum, looking at deceased organisms that seem so alive despite their preservation that you can't be quite sure whether they might still be alive. It is difficult to put into words. Everything was of boundless perfection. At the same time, there were no elements of the usual exhibition practice found in the normal art world.

André Binnoit: What role does this exhibition play for you specifically?

Malte Hückstädt: There are perhaps two things that we would never have been able to acquire without the *Monster Attack*: On the one hand, the knowledge that exhibitions can be created anywhere. Ideally very far away from the centres of the established art scene. I have already hinted at this: attics, cellars, bowling alleys instead of galleries and museums forever and ever. On the other hand, artworks that give the impression that they are not made, but have become. In other words, things whose species-appropriate existence is inevitably linked to a certain habitat that has nothing in common with the living environments of modern artworks. Things that are not interested in the visitors, that have nothing useful to communicate to him. Just imagine the freedom that comes from releasing artworks from the humiliating service relationship that the established art world so permanently imposes on fine arts. That is euphoric! All of a sudden, perspectives come into focus that really bring a breath of fresh air.

André Binnoit: Let's talk about your specific work. Why have you shifted your endeavours entirely into the virtual world?

Malte Hückstädt: Because it allows us to synthesise what I have just outlined with few financial and energy resources: High-quality cultural productions in an adequate presentation. Thanks to our digital tools, we are not dependent on expensive production processes, on the long-term favour of any property owners, let alone on the willingness of investors, art dealers or artists to cooperate. We can therefore provide a cultural production at minimal cost that I think I can say operates at the highest level.

André Binnoit: The public sees it differently. You only have 200 followers on Instagram. Three people visited your last exhibition in two days, as you told me in the preliminary discussion.

Malte Hückstädt: That's true. We are very bad at self-promotion. Unfortunately, the amount of time required to provide our production is still so high, despite the tools I mentioned, that there is hardly any time left over for advertising, building networks, etc., in addition to our other main jobs. It's like in science: there are those who teach, raise third-party funds, network, become visible at conferences and organise science, and there are those who actively conduct research. It is almost impossible to reconcile both at the same time due to a lack of time. We would probably need help in finding our audience. Personally, I reckon it's somewhere on TikTok and is between 11 and 17 years old (laughs). Seriously, if anyone reads this and wants to help, I'd love to!

André Binnoit: Do you exclude any contact with the real world of fine arts?

Malte Hückstädt: If by *real world* you mean the established world of fine arts: Yes! It's bad enough that we partly come from this sector (laughs). We do a lot to ensure that our production doesn't look like it. Under no circumstances do we want to be associated in any way with the contemporary world of fine arts. All of this can only be touched with a pair of pliers. So the lack of interest is definitely mutual (laughs).

André Binnoit: Let's talk about your exhibition *Aneurysm*. Why the title?

Malte Hückstädt: I have no idea. It seemed right to us. But I can recite a lexical definition by heart: an aneurysm is a pathological, limited, irreversible expansion of the wall of a blood vessel or the heart wall. In



a broader sense, various vascular changes caused by haemorrhaging are also referred to as aneurysms...

André Binnoit: Thank you. Why is the exhibition, which you are now presenting to the public in a web-app, located in a simple apartment block in the GDR of all places?

Malte Hückstädt: We felt we had to create a new genre of artwork that required a new habitat. The exhibits that we are showing as part of Aneurysma called for a small, mutated flat in an apartment block in the GDR. In this respect, we work quite classically: we do what is asked of us. Just like Sigmar Polke said: *Höhere Wesen befahlen: Rechte obere Ecke schwarz malen!* (laughs).

André Binnoit: Does your work have no political motives, no social implications?

Malte Hückstädt: No, I think that's a bizarre requirement that should no longer be placed on fine arts. If you are looking for socially relevant communication, then please turn to psychology, social science or philosophy and so on. I don't think the fine arts have ever been able to do that well.

André Binnoit: Could you be more specific?

Malte Hückstädt: Of course. Artists tend to take on topics that are fashionable. That's not a bad thing and is basically a classic mechanism of economisation. The world demands fine arts that deal with global warming, migration crises and social gender, for example. These are not trivial issues if you take them seriously. Topics that - e.g. in the context of research funding from the German Research Foundation (DFG) - dozens of top scientists from a wide range of disciplines work on together, sometimes over many years, in order to gain a better understanding of them. Artists, in their boundless illiteracy and hubris, think they can, for example, paint a picture on the subject of climate change. That's like trying to paint the Holocaust: impossible. It only ever results in shallow insipidity, that's what I think. And that's partly due to the extremely high complexity and ambivalence of many of the current fashionable topics in fine arts, and partly due to the hubris of artists who think it's enough - by virtue of their own genius - to read half a book and a few Wikipedia articles to be able to make a relevant contribution to society's understanding of the climate crisis. That is ridiculous. At the same time, of course, a new form of genius cult. It's sad, but unfortunately we move in circles.

André Binnoit: Could you say something about your work? How do you personally approach your artistic production? The artists of the Chernoff Faces come from different disciplines. Is there a kind of triangulation?

Malte Hückstädt: Basically, my personal work consists mainly of resisting the desire to end it (laughs).

A triangulation? No, not really. You produce something, it lacks a certain *substance* that you can't synthesize yourself. A piece of music, a layout, a texture, a piece of HTML code. Then you ask a colleague. That's it. Don't expect me to tell you anything about interdisciplinarity. Believe me, I know exactly what interdisciplinarity means and how difficult it is to practice. I'm not going to pull the wool over your eyes and make you believe that we work in an interdisciplinary way.

André Binnoit: Thank you for the interview.

Malte Hückstädt: Thank you very much.