

Distilling the ghostAkademie

An Interview with
Uli Aigner
By Valérie Chartrain

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Imagine a spider towering over a landscape, connected to the earth by its long legs, and spinning a complex web of delicate threads. Better yet, imagine a distiller within which liquid droplets slowly gather, condense, and

cool. The spider's movements forever mark the landscape; the droplets collectively unite to become a potent pool. Artist Uli Aigner channelled such imaginings when founding the ghostAkademie fifteen years ago, an



art school that was also a social sculpture based on the idea of students becoming the professors. They could even appoint their own official positions, which included Chair of Horror Vacui or Chair of Superficiality, among

other roles. Rather than rendering the professor obsolete, this methodology enabled Aigner to speak through her students, using their voices as a way of reaching them directly.

At the end of a two-year period as a guest professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich, Aigner couldn't identify with the school's approach, which was male-dominated and structurally rigid. Given that a number of her students were galvanised by her unique teaching methods, Aigner left to develop the self-financed concept of the ghost-Akademie. As a social sculpture, it sought both to nurture these students as individuals and form an idiosyncratic group of like-minded people. As a pedagogical model, this concept was not necessarily about inverting the traditionally hierarchical relationship between professor and student. Rather, it sought to actively use the students as a conduit through which

to convey Aigner's teachings. The ghostAkademie culminated in an exhibition in 2005 at Rathausgalerie Munich, which included video lectures displayed as a twelve-screen installation (the figures in this essay depict some of these lectures). An exhibition catalogue, as well as an invitation that looked like a timetable, accompanied it.

In this interview with Valérie Chartrain, who is a co-founder of *Petunia* (a magazine focusing on intersectional feminist art practices) as well as a future researcher, Aigner describes how the ghostAkademie came into being, the nature of her students' reactions, and what she too learnt during the process.

Valérie Chartrain (VC): You started the ghostAkademie a few years ago. How did it begin and why?

Uli Aigner (UA): The prehistory of the ghostAkademie started when I moved from Vienna to Munich in 2000. A professor from the Academy of Fine Arts there asked me if I would be interested in taking on a guest professorship. I found this interesting because she said the decision to employ a new professor would be made by the students—and they had chosen me. I subsequently worked for two years as a guest professor for this academy. My time there started quite controversially because I would not accept the small

Uli Aigner is an Austrian artist based in Berlin, whose interdisciplinary practice encompasses large-scale drawing and the medium of porcelain, within the frame of her lifelong project, *ONE MILLION*.

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office space they had given me as a classroom. It was two streets away from the main building. Instead, I situated my teaching at the Academy itself, starting a lecture programme in the main entrance hall.

It was always on Monday nights because I was quite busy at home with my new born twins and a two-year-old, so the only time I could go out was at night. I talked with the students for the whole evening. I called the lecture series *Hoffentlich Öffentlich*, which means “Hopefully Public,” mainly because I had the feeling that no meaning could be found by just sitting in an office space two streets from the Academy. [In the class] we discussed the self-understanding of the art student, the self-understanding of an institution, and what it is to be a professor. In a broader sense, we talked about work, money, and how to get materials.

In addition to the Monday night discussions, every Thursday and Friday morning I would meet one-to-one with

each student to talk about their projects and work. It was a distillation process: I was listening to the students and then telling them, “Go and see this; talk to this person; see this exhibition; go upstairs to the library and check out these artists.” Essentially, I always tried to find out what interested the student. That was the starting point for my teaching. If you listen to a person, then you can get to the centre of the issue. It may not be expressed in exactly what they are telling you, but you will find out what they are circling around. Everything is possible when you talk to a student. This is how I have understood my teaching: to discover the elephant in the room of a student’s work.

VC: You mention a process of distillation. Were you distilling the students?

UA: With distilling you have the ingredients: fruits, chocolate, you name it. You warm them, steam appears and rises, and this vapour is then cooled down to become a clear liquid. The dis-

tiller brings about this process, which makes it an interesting metaphor for me. In other words, the distiller is responsible for the result, not the student. In this sense, there is something almost undemocratic about the process. In our professor–student discussions, one student told me, “You are using our voices; you are speaking through

us.” And they were not wrong. Yes, the distiller makes a product by using other people’s products and ultimately makes a completely new product.

During the ghostAkademie, I interviewed each of the students. I then transcribed and edited the interviews to create respective scripts. I made each person read the script aloud as if it were their text (figs. 1–6). I also asked them to read all of the full stops and commas. I have to say, I would not do that again because I feel it was deconstruction

see you?” I replied, “Because we had completely different paths. I was in a different world, a different universe. This was not the same academy—how I was using it and how you were using it.” I was not able to communicate my ideas with the Academy, but I was able to produce a lot with the students and for the students. I created a new reality of production possibilities in this academy, in a dead angle.¹

VC: A dead angle. Which is also an interesting position from which a professor can speak, right? Is this the angle that the ghostAkademie spoke from?

UA: Yes. For me, this was very important because it was a reaction. It was not a concept that existed beforehand. It is just something that happened to me. I was asked by my students to remain as a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich, afterwards, but I refused. The students were disappointed. I told them, “I will finish my guest professorship and we will do

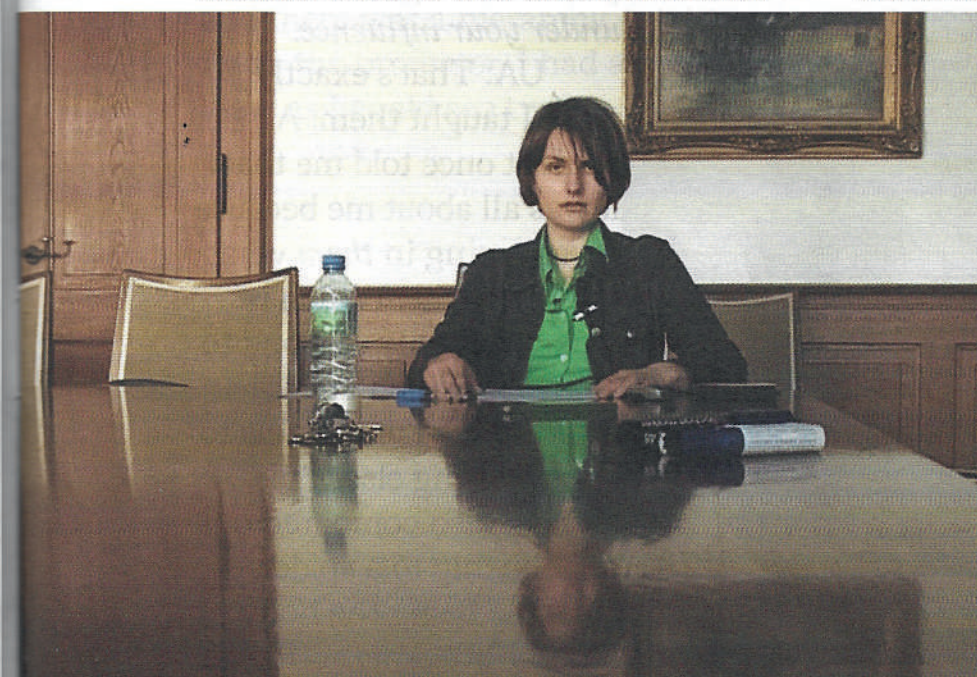
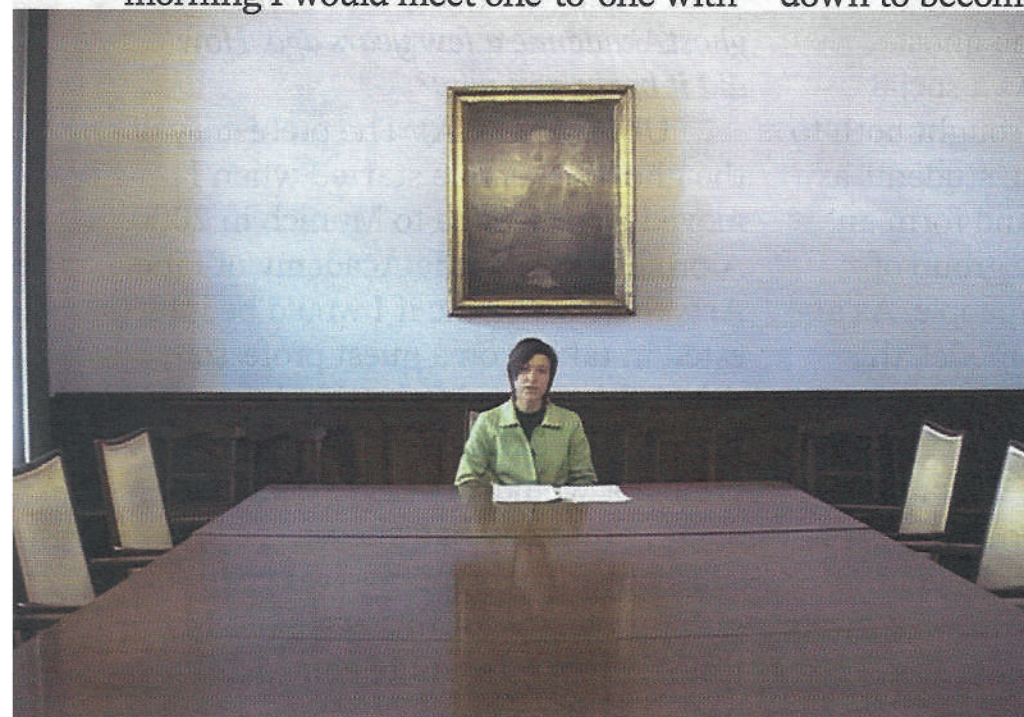


Figure 3. Peggy Meinfelder, *PRODUCT*, 2005, still from ghostAkademie by Uli Aigner in collaboration with Michal Kosakowski, 5:30, DVCAM.

stretched too far. I could probably be a better distiller now. Nonetheless, I could also say that I was like a mirror for the students, asking them to recognise themselves. This was my method.

Recently I met a professor here in Berlin, where I now live, and he asked me, “How come I never saw you in Munich? I just realised you were teaching for two years in the Academy at the same time as me. Why did I never

a ghost professorship.” The name actually came from the phrase “ghost writer.” The students called me Ghost Professor Jennifer.² So then I looked for spaces for the ghostAkademie. I called around and asked someone I knew at the Neue Rathaus (New Town Hall). I said, “Listen, I just need a small space, but it must be in the mayor’s house in Munich.” The project became akin to a social sculpture. I liked to teach



students in the Neue Rathaus because they could understand the importance of taking their own thoughts seriously.

This was the first step of the ghostAkademie. I did it for one semester and once a week we met in the mayor's huge state room. The students came and we would talk about their work. I then thought, "What can be invented so that the conversation continues?" That's when I came up with this idea—the second step of the ghostAkademie. I told my students,

experience a totally different reality from mine. I'm informed totally differently. Without the student, there is no teaching. There's no content. The students gave me the content to teach themselves and, equally, as a student, I was their content.

VC: Often a professor is the person who has some kind of authority and who is able to bring knowledge. However, in terms of what you're telling me, the knowledge obviously came through students under your influence.

UA: That's exactly what I taught them. A student once told me that it was all about me because I was seeing in *them* what interested me. Which is true. I can only respond to things in which I'm interested—I'm not able to see anything else. This student also compared our relationship to a spider, with me being the body and the students acting as the legs connected to the ground.

VC: Like pulling the strings of a puppet?

UA: No, they didn't feel used by me as such. What they meant is that even when I was making them read the texts that came from our interviews, it was always me talking *through* them. They understood what I did as a professor—talking to them via their own voices. Essentially, I distilled the content: the artists themselves. Actually, they were professors already and this

"Now, *you* are the professors, you are the ghost professors." What I learned from this experience was to try and find a form and to objectify what constitutes a student's work. By turning my students into the professors, I radicalised my interest in why I like to teach. I found out that I liked to teach because I like to learn. That is why I teach and that is why I enjoy talking to a younger generation, because they

is why the ghostAkademie became my artwork.

VC: Can we go back to the metaphor of the spider that you mentioned?

UA: For me the idea of the spider is very far from the idea of pulling the strings of a puppet. This wasn't the nature of the relationship I had with the students. As the spider's body, I was creating threads beyond the student's situation—their gender or social status, for example. In this sense, I was above and there was a hierarchy. Because I was the professor, I had a better overview as I could see twelve students and

I think I have been building a web as a professor. Some students used this web while others didn't.

Even now I feel there is still a web holding us together, despite the fact that the ghostAkademie happened fifteen years ago. I do wonder how my teaching influenced them. What happens during the teaching is one thing, but how it influences life, that is another. Maybe the legs should be seen as antennas always transmitting information back and forth.

VC: You said that the students chose you as their professor in Munich. How did this function when you started the ghostAkademie? Did you choose who participated?

UA: Yes, I chose them. From a pool of nearly eighty students, there was a group that quickly emerged with whom I had the most intense discussion and who operated with the same intensity.³ Many students consume you as a teacher. That's why initially I didn't want to become a professor. Back in 1999 there was a shift in the education system because of the Bologna Process.⁴ All of

they could see one professor.

This is why I had that feeling of being a little bit elevated, and that my connection to the ground was via thin legs. The students are the on the ground. In fact, additionally, a student is like a landscape. The thin legs connected me with this landscape. Now

a sudden, I had students and directors collecting points and credits. I'm coming from the perspective of institutional critique. I'm down-to-earth and somewhat critical about circumstances. Everything has to be questioned. Back then, there was a new generation of students who were not interested in

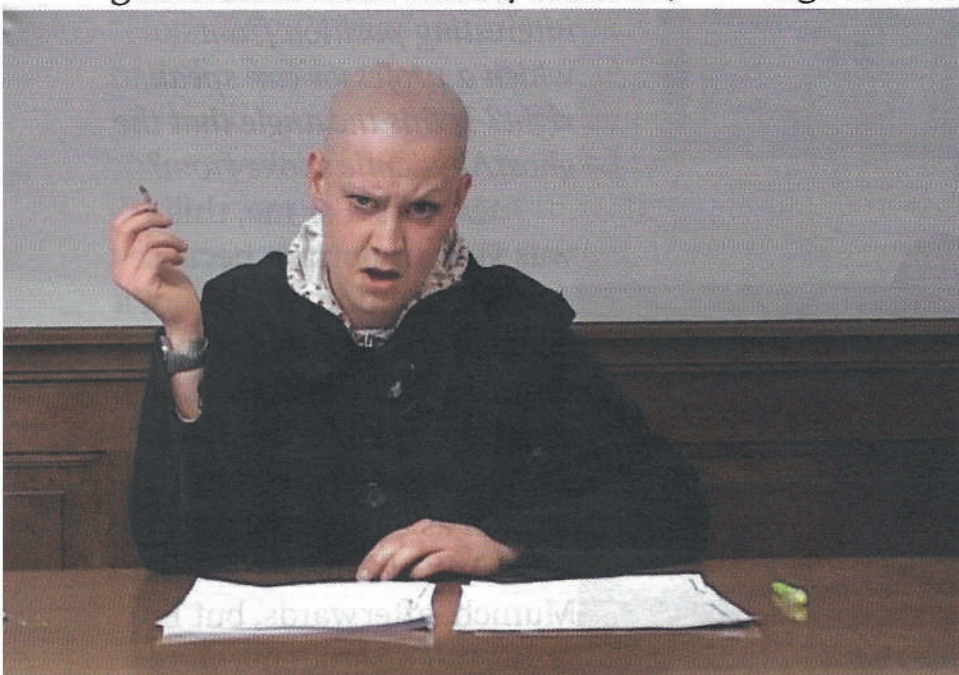


Figure 4. Franka Kraßner, *POLITICS*, 2005, still from ghostAkademie by Uli Aigner in collaboration with Michal Kosakowski, 5:30, DVCAM.

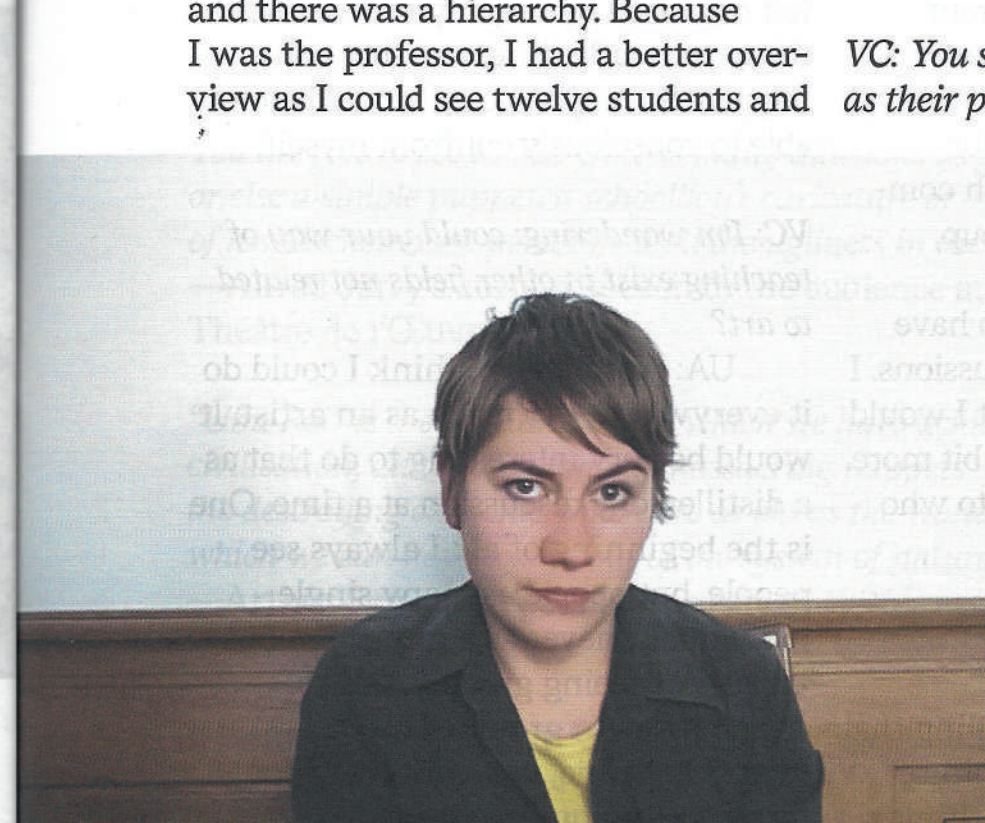


Figure 5. Lisa Erb, *HORROR VACUI*, 2005, still from ghostAkademie by Uli Aigner in collaboration with Michal Kosakowski, 5:30, DVCAM.

certain questions like, “Who am I?” or “How can I do what I do?”.

VC: If you had to do the ghost-Akademie again, what would you change?

UA: Oh, I would love to do it again. All of the ingredients would be different because I’m a different person now. I wouldn’t do it only in an art academy; I could do it in a marketplace, for example. Why not? To establish communication with a random group, that’s fantastic.

It would have been nice to have the chance for more open discussions. I did do this for the students, but I would have liked to open it up a little bit more. And I wasn’t paying attention to who was witnessing what I did.

VC: Do you mean with the other professors, for example?

UA: Yes. They had the feeling that it was not for them. I wasn’t doing anything like what they did. I think they also stayed distant because they



Figure 6. Tobias Yves Zintel and Matze Görig, *FILM*, 2005, still from *ghostAkademie* by Uli Aigner in collaboration with Michal Kosakowski, 5:30, DVCAM.

felt criticised by me; if you do something so totally different, that can happen. So maybe now I would be more able to consciously confront myself.

VC: I’m wondering: could your way of teaching exist in other fields not related to art?

UA: Absolutely. I think I could do it everywhere—to teach as an artist. It would be very interesting to do that as a distiller, one discussion at a time. One is the beginning of all: I always see people, but people as many single individuals, never as a group. I’m not capable of seeing groups. And so, I form my own groups. The *ghostAkademie*, in a way, was about forming a unique group.

1 A dead angle is originally a battle term that describes an angle or space that cannot be seen or defended from behind the parapet of a fortification.

2 One of Uli Aigner’s students decided that Aigner needed an alias. Jennifer seemed appropriate. The group decided that it reflected the period in which Aigner was a student, the 1980s. They all agreed that during that decade, Jennifer was a popular name for newborn babies in both Austria and Germany.

3 The following students were involved in the *ghostAkademie* with self-appointed areas of specialism: Lisa Erb, *HORROR VACUI*; Tobias Yves Zintel & Matze Görig, *FILM*; Peggy Meinfelder, *PRODUCT*; Franka Kaßner, *POLITICS*; Lena Bröcker, *MATTER*; Franziska Schwarz, *EVERYDAYLIFE*; Anna Witt, *EXPERIMENT*; Anna Mc Carthy, *SUPER-FICIALITY*; Stefanie Trojan, *BODY*; Florian Simon Winter, *PRACTICAL (relative) THEORY*; Daniela Leiter, *FAITH*. Markus Merkle was also involved as a guest “ghost professor”, with the self-appointed specialism of *TRAVELLING*.

4 The Bologna Process for standardisation of European higher education specified an undergraduate degree of at least three years called the Licence or bachelor’s degree, followed by a two-year diploma, the master’s, and then a doctorate, which is meant to be obtained over at least three years. The system applies to the European Higher Education Area.