

Slip Stream—Between Poetics and Politics: Improvisation in Cologne

Tanya Ury

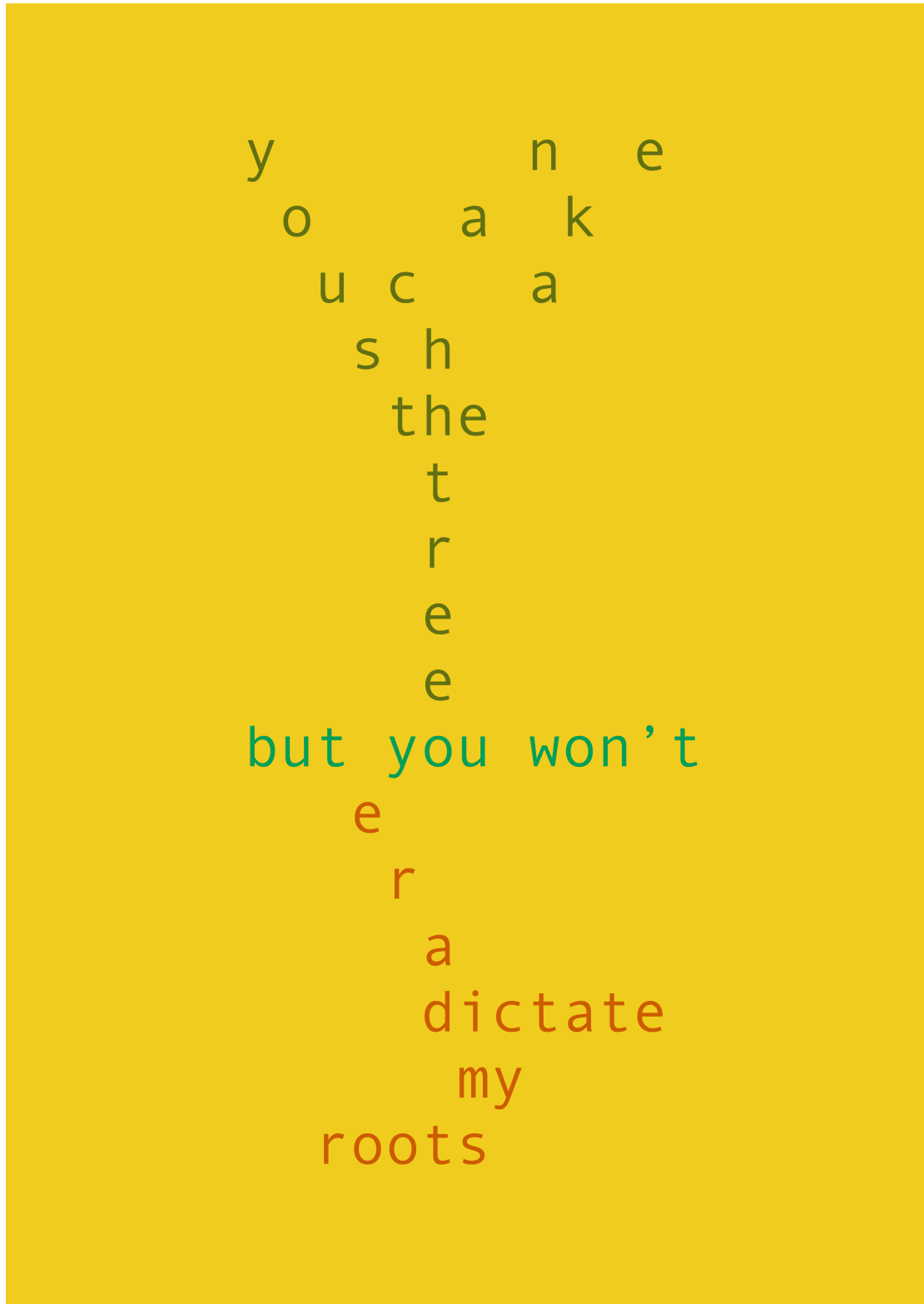
Cologne has a well-established jazz scene that has developed over the last thirty years around the University of Music and Dance, the largest institution of its kind in Europe, and also because of the WDR (West German Radio) concert sessions at the Stadtgarten venue and WDR radio in general. Out of this discipline a younger generation has followed in the footsteps of singular musicians such as Nils Wogram (trombone), Norbert Scholly (electric guitar), Frank Wingold (electric guitar), Jan Torkewitz (saxophone), Simon Nabatov (piano), and Sebastian Gramms (double bass), to name a few that I have heard in concert in Cologne over the years. But a free improvisation music scene, where rules that apply to sets are likewise cast overboard while musicians harmonize together, has evolved parallel to the schooled jazz improvisation milieu. This alternative scene also throws free jazz styles together with funk, rock, and New Music, but is less bound to academic dictates.

My involvement with the alternative scene of Düsseldorf and Cologne, in the North Rhine-Westphalia area of Germany, started in 2011 when Stefan Nordbeck, a musician at a performance evening I attended at the WP8 Kunstverein (Art Centre) in Düsseldorf, invited me to take part in a future session with improvised poetry when I told him that I wrote verse.

I had been writing poems daily on Post-it slips of paper since late 2009. These idea fragments, in English, sometimes in German, have often been merely lists of words related or unrelated by sound or by association that may have been perceived in a dream, or heard as part of a conversation on a train or on the street; occasionally more traditional lines are also conceived. But primarily, this written poetry already has an inherent improvisational quality to it: “The book writes itself, and if by chance the person opposite should ask you what you are writing, you have nothing to say since you don’t know” (Cixous 1993, 100).

The handwritten lines are collected and, before being discarded, transferred to the laptop. They are designed with either coloured letters against colour backgrounds or black against white and, alternately, white against black, as a visual composition and sometimes also as concrete poetry for subsequent presentation in video format, as poster prints, or to be read out in live performance. Here is an example of my concrete poetry from the *cross word* series of 2011:

Tanya Ury is a British-German writer. She studied fine art at Exeter College of Art and Design from 1985 to 1988 and spent one semester at the Institute for Theatre, Film and Television Studies at Cologne University in 1989. In 1990, she graduated from Reading University with a Master’s in Fine Arts. From 1991 to 1992 she was a guest lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University, and since 2010 she has been a PhD candidate in Humanities at the Leiden University Institute for Cultural Disciplines. Ury is also a jury member of the Hans and Lea Grundig Prize, administered by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin. As a writer, activist, and artist, Tanya Ury deals with questions of Judeo-German identity, Germany’s reconciling of its history, and migration and racism as they affect subaltern women. Prostitution, voyeurism and the Holocaust are issues in a large number of her works. Ury has been living and working in Cologne, Germany, since 1993. Most of her family lived here before having to flee into exile to London because of their Jewish origins.



cross word no. 2c, 2011.

In the main, however, I have been a mixed- and multi-media artist, working with video, photography, performance, and installation, on themes of gender identity, racism, torture, and recent European history (see my website: <http://www.tanyaury.com>).

Integrated into my paper are several transcript examples of my improvised poetry from a Suspended Beliefs group rehearsal session of February 3, 2013 (titles having been applied

afterward), and another poem from December 9, 2014. Suspended Beliefs is a group I put together in 2012 from the pool of session musicians members. Sadly, without the sound and music, the printed poetry will remain only a partial experience.

your hiding place palatial

first common
a wealth of
circumstance
evidence of
what's to come

play
plagiarise
not
a theme for
the season

a reason
to ride
the tide

soft set
was this
rhythmic
appeal

peal and
succulent
flavoured
flesh
a wound
in the whether
or not

be told
what you
should
not hear
forth
with

frequent
a latent
trial
insignificant

a loose breeze
rainfall
forestation
where spring

tides fly
all year round

ply me with
the strength to
find out
your hiding
place palatial
but unfunded

Writing articles and short stories has also been part of my practice over the last twenty-five years. I have relied on fixing ideas, even in performance, which has always been carefully envisioned and rehearsed—usually alone—and so this invitation to improvise spoken text in collaborative performance with musicians was a great challenge. It was also to become a new art form for me. Of the approximately two thousand poems improvised or written over a period of five years, none have been published—they have been conceived largely in English and because I currently live in Germany it would be difficult to find a publisher. They are, moreover, something to be better enjoyed in the moment either live or recorded and played back. I should add that verbalizing a memorized text would be an unimaginable feat for me—however, the invention of poetry in the moment is effortless.

It was only a couple of years earlier (before starting to perform with musicians) as a consequence of illness that I came to the practice of rarely edited and mostly unpremeditated written poetry—the immediacy of the art form being of paramount importance. The resultant unorthodox poems, which continued flowing during cancer treatment in the years following, when mind and body could not concentrate proficiently or for long periods of time, were a compilation of words, thoughts that routinely run through the mind, usually discarded or forgotten, a stream of the unconscious, notated; or the sounds of words, onomatopoeia re-interpreted, the meaning deconstructed; words read or heard moreover, misread, misheard, slips of the mind, wordplay, poems that write themselves and these all put together in series, so that a different sense might be intuited through the juxtaposition of lines that may nevertheless have been written on different occasions. In its style and intention the poetry is *automatique*—it is a collection of jumbled, abstract but sometimes cogent ideas that reflect day-to-day life, changing moods and preoccupations. With this practice, it is possible to approach everyday social dilemmas from a poetic perspective.

I will describe the process of oral improvisation, similar to the automatic writing of poetry. It will, however, be like trying to catch water in cupped hands over a fast flowing stream—it partially slips through my fingers. Giving voice, being a barometer to collective thought, opening the mind to whatever will appear, while sometimes also making a conscious point of consequence, might involve repeating the memory of a theme, or it will be vocalizing a telepathic impression.

The actuality of this way of thinking or writing that incorporates mishaps and the surfacing of the subconscious in the process has not only been referred to by the French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous but also is noted by many other writers and philosophers, including Ludwig Wittgenstein: “And what of unconscious meanings, which are by definition not deliberately intended? ‘I really do think with my pen,’ Wittgenstein observes, ‘because my head often knows nothing about what my hand is writing’” (Wittgenstein, quoted in Eagleton 2007, 47).

As I was developing my poetry (improvised and written) I was not aware of other artists working in the same manner or field—the life-affirming gift came to me suddenly and out of the blue and appeared to be unconnected to other forms of contemporary performance. Having investigated further, however, I discovered and identified with Chris Mann, an Australian writer and performer of improvised text, who lives and works in New York and bases his discourse on linguistic theory, which he parodies in performance, lending the performance a humorous edge:

dunno how to get there, but wouldn start from here

(which is also the wrong word), the listener as medium, the opportunists gIft symptom (the cure, and all cures labour under the whip of excessive meaning (the colour is only psychosomatically true) (the symptom a demand with ribbon and a card jealous of its own betrayal (the sprise is the system (a systems that diagnosed by its shit (it doubt so's to have something to be indifferent about))))): the symptom system. ouch. (the future is by definition boring, an itch a form of knowledge (evidence of crime), an explanatory blunt neurose, an agent audient. an empt. wIth on a stick. an only comes as pasts, a self on legs. with phobes. the repetition alibi. on scepts. the clusions jump. an then (then, the attempted context:)) to Be what you can't hAve, a promiscuous mourner (rhymes (i mean why know when you can rent?)), and cept as etiquette, communication just a kitsch unhappiness for which the sole pleasure s diagnose (reason has evolved such that negation now used to disprOve on the address (logic, the document of loss . . . (Mann n.d.)

Chris Mann's texts are peppered with slips and unusual, informal grammar, which he employs knowingly, for language is his primary interest. Mann comes from a mixed cultural background. His Jewish German parents were pioneers in the fields of ethnomusicology and oral literature. He studied the Chinese language, is also a composer, and sometimes works with other musicians and poets (Australian Music Centre 2015). John Cage on Chris Mann's music:

the surfaCe
of tHis
poetRy's music
itS body's talk
a fast Mix
of vulgarity
aNd
elegaNce (Australian Music Centre 2015)

While performing with musicians, it has been important for me to forget that I have been a fine artist, accustomed to working and presenting alone—I try to listen and fall in with the rhythm, the feel and sense of a piece being promoted, so that all participants may come together on a thought wavelength to give the performance structure even while it is being improvised. In fact, a great part of the joy of improvising with musicians is the shared encounter—such a contrast to the loneliness of the writer or fine artist in her/his solitary creative practice.

I listen to the music before taking the plunge with the first words and then surface—surf in the slip stream . . . The musicians have commenced, one following the other, advancing a theme, struck up by anyone that starts. There is a period of development, then a change or several changes of theme and then a progression towards an end. An ensemble working instinctively will produce a piece of any desired length but then, extraordinarily, finish together at the same time.

Only rarely is a format discussed among participants, such as decisions on genre, tempo and mood change, or variation in the choice of instruments playing.

Artists I have performed with at the Cologne and Düsseldorf sessions include Brigitte Küpper, Norbert Zajac, and Iouri Grankin (who was born in the Ukraine and now lives in Düsseldorf), to name but a few. These vocalists also worked with Phil Minton as part of his Feral Choir when he visited Cologne from the United Kingdom. Others attending the informal sessions include Andreas Techler (saxophone), who is, like myself, a practising fine artist, and Robby Göllmann (saxophone, clarinet), who runs the summer sessions with Georg Frangenberg (bass electric guitar) in Düsseldorf. I have also performed in concert many times with Suspended Beliefs, the members of which are Gernot Bogumil (trumpet), Peter Alexius (electric guitar), Hans Salz (percussion), and Kasander Nilist (double bass).

When I improvise with musicians, I often employ alliteration to decorate an idea. In the given moment, while inventing a phrase, I have also often found it pivotal to replace a word that directly comes to mind with a similar sounding or rhyming word, thus creating a very different combination and allowing new ideas to flow multi-directionally. The process is not consistently elusive—while concentrating on the moment, although one may forget the development of a sequence of ideas, it is crucial to allow a remembered thread to reestablish itself, especially when attempting to bring a definite idea or an activist element into play. But abstract ideas should also be allowed free run—nonsense poetry may also be a critical means of expression and is often unexpectedly politically apt (see the sample transcript of my improvised poetry included in this article, with examples of political relevance as well as nonsense poetry). Jean Genet, whose writing on gay love was utterly political at a time when any mention of homosexuality in literature was taboo, was aware of the vitality and importance of slippage when writing (or speaking):

Certain slips of the tongue in the course of a phrase give us sudden insight into ourselves by substituting one word for another, and the unwelcome word is a means whereby poetry escapes and perfumes the phrase. These words are a danger to the practical understanding of discourse. In like manner, certain acts. Faults sometimes—they are deeds—produce poetry. Though beautiful, these deeds are none the less a danger. (Genet [1951] 1971, 42)

Another example of Jean Genet's acknowledgement of the phenomenon of slips is more literal (though this being a translation from French, the slip will have been a different one): "Darling is merely a fraud ('an adorable fraud,' Divine calls him), and he must remain one in order to *preserve that appearance of a rock walking blindly through my tale (I left out the d in blindly, I wrote 'blinly')*" (Sartre [1951] 1973, 26).

At sessions, my poetry has usually been a monologue but is occasionally spoken in dialogue with the aforementioned performers and other performers who speak or sing at sessions in Cologne or Düsseldorf (the cities are situated approximately 40 kilometres from each other).

A second example of my improvised poetry from the practice session of February 3, 2013 follows. It includes a reference to Pan-Germanism, a movement of the nineteenth century that sought to unify all German-speaking populations of Europe in a single state to be known as Großdeutschland (Greater Germany), an ideology that was adopted by the National Socialists. Linguistically speaking, it was realized to a certain extent after the unification of East and West Germany in 1989.

this electric life

flustered
the filial
feeling
first
crowded out
from the earth
spilling
into largess

uncomplicated
they ran out
over the
brimful
fountain
begging for
nice ice

a complicated
comedy

the collective
cold shoulder
warmed to
their hearts

all is forgiven
in spring
when we cling
to the clang
of the commune

perspectives
widen on
horizons
mauve and
lavender

blood runs
thicker

the spring
sickens not

carefully woven
thoughts
unpublished
produce
a wave

Tanya Ury

froth on
the surface
of your kindest
preventive
measures

harvest
the minute

pretensions
may be
fulfilled
in this
fluted glass
of memory

feather light
is the sounding
in cerebral
continuity

this is not
parody
it is real

a pan-german
elegy
instructive
to the least
abandoned

behave
yourself
self serve
be a serf
surf the
season
a stale
mate

winds
morass not
my sensibilities

cushioned in
this unearthy
co-existence

electric

germination

give me
an input

my cell
a pinprick

I envision
all manufacture
for evidence
of life

extravagant
with my skin
I creep
and crawl
within
my two-cell
flesh

reproducing
elemental
misfiring
laboratories
I fetch
my wretched
soul
incarnate
once again
producing
the sound
and the look
long wished for
unfolding
frond
and finger
pointing
out
vistas
misinformed
or malformed
we encompass
all heavens
and none
a pretty
though
pretentious
party
to all
malpractices

earth
the conductor
to this
house and home
or she will fly
back and beyond
all programmes
beautiful
though
barbaric
this
electric life

Sometimes other improvisational voice artists at the Cologne and Düsseldorf sessions engage in speaking an invented language. On first hearing, this obscure language may appear to be innovative or even subversive, but I fear when nonsense language is always incoherent, it masks the unwillingness to confront the politics of language (political issues) and therefore breaks no taboos. For poetic language is loaded. On the rare occasions that language is employed in sessions, I have observed that it has generally been a simple form of English—this being a second language to Germans—permitting the parodied convention of love song to appear to be more exotic than it is. Sadly my encounter with improvising session artists of the North Rhine-Westphalia area leaves me in no doubt as to their apoliticality. I have never witnessed musicians coming out together to defend any causes, when there are any number of cases that might have been supported, from the repeated imprisonments (in Turkish prisons) of Dogan Akhanli, a Turkish-German writer and peace activist living in Cologne, who has spoken out on the subject of the Armenian genocide, still being officially denied in Turkey (Mirak-Weissbach 2014), to the vicious nail bomb attacks and murders of eight Turkish people in Keup Strasse, Cologne, in 2004 that were later accredited to neo-Nazis (Grunau 2014), to the visible rise of anti-Semitism in Germany, connected to the debate on Israel's brutal politics in Palestine, while the German government has been supplying arms to Israel.

Importantly, for myself, at least, the sessions are a testing ground. At the moment of writing this paragraph, I slipped up and miswrote “texting ground,” for that is what the sessions actually are—miswriting or malapropisms in speech gladly accompany me constantly. Another example of slipping up, where an interesting subtext may be embedded in the text is from Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card*, a compilation of articles on psychoanalysis, written in the form of a love letter:

For example I write *on* post cards, oh well I write on post cards. “I” begins again with a reproduction (say, I just wrote reproSuction: have you noticed that I make more and more strange mistakes, is it fatigue or age, occasionally the spelling goes, phonetic writing comes back in force, as in elementary school where it did not happen to me moreover, only to others whom I confusedly looked down on—plus the *lapsus* or “*slips*” obviously). And by means of a reproduction itself reproduced serially, always the same picture on another support, but an identical support, differing only *numéro*. (Derrida 1987, 27)

Regarding the legacy of spontaneously spoken poetry in other parts of the world, there has apparently been a long tradition of improvised poetry in the Arab world. Since the Middle Ages, Muwashshah and Zajal, a form of poetic duelling that includes singing, and to which Jewish poets also aspired (Emery 2007), is still being practised, though it appears to be a male-

dominated custom. In present times, this convention of oral poetry is applied as a politically active tool:

During Israel's war on Lebanon in 2006 Zajal came into its own among the Lebanese diaspora. Every week on the Melbourne-based Lebanese online radio station, resident Zajalist Antoine Barsouna penned a new poem, which he would read in a voice hoarse with emotion, such as "Israel, why are you bombing our children?" (Emery 2007, 6)

In Italy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries improvised poetry at cultural events was common and included many female performers.¹ And today in the Basque country a tradition of improvised poetry duelling may be encountered in the *bertsolaritza* conventions, where given topics or scenarios are elaborated on. These are, however, also largely male-dominated.²

A type of poetic duelling was also practised historically by Western poets such as Dante, Shelley, and Coleridge:

In his letters Coleridge describes "The Improvisatore" both as an actual improvisation and as a commodity when he complains that he sold it to the editor of *The Amulet* for less than ten pounds, parting with it too cheaply and impulsively on the day it was written, before he had time to reflect on its value. (Esterhammer 2011, 158)

And the Beat Generation pursued this art form in the 1950s. Allen Ginsberg was still giving student improvisation workshops, in the 1970s: "The subject of today's improvisation will be death. So, in answering the roll call, 'Death is . . .,' fill it in. No reading from old books. No stumbling on your own old quotations. Death is your tongue speaking right now" (Ginsberg 1975).³ The son of an English teacher and a Jewish Russian expatriate, Ginsberg wrote politically motivated poetry, examining themes of drug experience, living on the streets, sexuality, spirituality, and more.⁴

As far as my own practice with musicians is concerned, for two years from April 2011 I attended sessions in Cologne and Düsseldorf every other week (later rehearsing only with specific musicians every week or so). I have also taken part in many concerts, including: at the 5th Robodonien Festival, Odonien, Cologne, in 2012; in churches, in *SONGS WITH WORDS* at Kunstraum St. Michael, Cologne, in 2012 and for Newroz, a Spring Festival in the Lutherkirche, Cologne, in 2013; as an extra event to the exhibitions *Righting the Image*, an art exhibition of my own work 2013 in Cologne's City Library in 2013 and *Lost in Interiors—Photographic Positions on Political Imprisonment*, a group exhibition at PhotoWerk in the Kommunale Galerie Berlin in 2014, twenty-five years after the fall of communism (Ury 2014b). *archive burn out*,⁵ the performance of a written piece of mine with improvised music on the Nazi book burning of 1933 and the collapse of the Cologne City Historical Archives of 2009, was presented in the Nazi Documentation Centre, Cologne, in 2014 (Ury 2014a). All these gigs were performed with "Suspended Beliefs" apart from *Lost in Interiors*, which was a duo with Kasander Nilist.⁶

My improvisation practice is largely in English, which is not fully understood by a German audience. Of all of the performances I have taken part in, only one has been outside of Germany. I sometimes improvise in German but even after living in Germany and having spoken German for over twenty years, I make grammatical mistakes. Learning the intricacies of a foreign language when one is already over forty years of age is not really feasible, and so only sporadically do I feel confident enough to invent verse that embraces wordplay and any real

complexity of poetry in German. Because I have been away from England for so long, I am starting to forget my mother tongue and have, moreover, missed recent developments in the language. Much of my poetry and improvisation reflects this confusion—the chaos of language—and therefore defines for me a space that slips in between languages, a factor that Hélène Cixous refers to in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*:

I speak to you today (today April 24, 1990, today June 24, 1990) through two languages. From one day to another, from one page to the other writing changes languages. I have thought certain mysteries in the French language that I cannot think in English. This loss and gain are in writing too. I have drawn the **H**. You will have recognised it depending on which language you are immersed in. This is what writing is: **I** one language, **I** another language, and between the two, the line that makes them vibrate. (Cixous 1993, 3)

An example of a bilingual poem of mine follows; it was improvised on September 12, 2014 at the opening to the exhibition *Where Have All the Flowers Gone—1914–2014* in the Kunsthau Troisdorf (D), where I performed with Kasander Nilist (on double bass)—there has been much debate in Germany on the subject of war during this 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War.

frustrated teenagers with majestic accomplices

frightful
is this
fiction
of war
inhabited
by our
mind and
friction

wohin führt das?	where is this going?
die aufregung	the commotion
für kampf und	over conflict and
macht und besitz?	power and possessions?

a fatal
combination
where people
would be
picnicking
on fields

they fight
with bayonet
and gas
and lose
face they
lose their
faces
limbless

and legless
 but not drunk
 with the
 intoxicating
 smell of
 flowers the
 stench of
 gas and mud

they don't
 learn they
 harm
 themselves
 like
 frustrated
 teenagers
 with majestic
 accomplices
 and inflict
 the damage
 that takes
 generations
 to impede
 further war
 instincts
 manned

and should you
 fall on your
 knees to pray
 would you recall
 the battle fray?
 a final instant
 where the
 soldier fell?

he is
 our soul
 and died
 for what?
 another war?

Another of my poems follows, again from the session of February 3, 2013, this time entirely in German, with a translation that does not, however, compensate for the wordplay or alliteration. The poem refers to “Kauderwelsch,” which to a German speaker means gibberish or pidgin. This improvised poem was no doubt inspired by the constant tension I experience, having to think and express myself in a language other than my mother tongue:

Kauderwelsch—an incomprehensible or faulty language, but also a mixed means of expression in several languages ♦ actually *Kaurerwelsch* “Churwelsch”; *Kauer* is the Tirol name for Chur, in Switzerland, and the Kauer language stemming from

the early 15th Century, was previously considered difficult to understand; *welsch* from Middle High German *welsch*, *welbisch*, *walbisch* from Old High German *walbisic* “Romance,” from the Latin *Volcae*, the title of the tribes in Gaul, north of the Alps.⁷

kauderwelsch

kauderwelsch	double dutch
zwischen	sizzling
lust zum leben	love to live
rache	revenge
denn	for
leicht	our
in laibach	worst
sind unsere	dreams
schlimmsten	came true
träume	lightly
wahr geworden	in laibach
es blüht	it's blossoming
baum	bush
blutet	bleeds
eine generation	a generation
wächst auf	is growing on
dem beckenbogen	the pelvic base
leih mir	lend me
dein schuld	your guilty
bewusstsein	conscience
oder einen	or a
flügel	wing
und einen schirm	and a shield
schaff dir	get yourself
einen körper	a body
eine kollage	a collage
für die zukunft	for the future
prätenziös	pretentious
ein punkt	a place
worauf man	on which
aufbauen kann	to build
politische	political
rechtfertigkeit	justi-viability

pantoffel teufel	armchair devil
vergangen	past
die kehrseite der unschuld	the downside of innocence
stiefel treten auf hautfarbenen deckeln eine kulinarische sonderheit	boots kick in on flesh-coloured capping a culinary characteristic
wir angeln in unbekanntem wässern und finden ungewissheit	we are fishing in unknown waters and discover uncertainty
weißheit nährt uns gleichzeitig	wisdom nourishes us concurrently
eine kurzfristige gleichung stellt sich heraus	a last minute equivalence has transpired
entwickelt eine bewusstlosigkeit	developing unconsciousness
platitüden kommen in frage in dieser seltsamen zeit	platitudes come into question in these strange times
meine arbeitskräfte sind unvernünftig	my workforce is being unreasonable
eine plage von insekten stellen fragebögen	a plague of insects puts questionnaires
stolz ist derjenige mit der königen	proud is the person with the queen

der analphabet	the illiterate
zieht schlüsse	jumps to
macht	conclusions
schlussstriche	concludes

The previous poem refers to Laibach, the Germanized name of the Slovenian city Ljubljana, which suffered under Nazi occupation during the Second World War (and where I have twice attended its City of Women Festival). Laibach is, however, also an avant-garde music band from Ljubljana that has been controversial in its ambiguous parody of Nazi symbolism to represent the past German occupation. Laibach's performances in the former Yugoslavia were also outspoken in their condemnation of Yugoslav war leaders.

The following improvised verse of mine, a second part to the last poem (also from February 3, 2013) again thematizes Kauderwelsch and the double entendres found within language, especially when it may be perceived by others to be double Dutch:

kauderwelsch	double dutch
ist eine sprache	is a language
für die	for those who
gehörlosen	don't hear
die nirgendwo	who don't
dazugehören	belong here

ein parasit	even a parasite
hat auch sein	has a
recht zu geben	right to give

finde	find
deinen eigenen	your own
plunder	plunder

auf dem weg	there are
zur pfarrei	many open questions
gibt es	on the path
eine menge	to the
freie fragen	rectory

bösartig	this cell
ist diese	of religious
zelle	conscience
religiösem	is
bewusstsein	evil
infiziert	infected
mit einer	with a
auf tränen	plague
fixierten	fixated
plage	on tears

eine bürokratisch	a bureaucratically
gewollte	wished for
bekanntschaft	acquaintance

blumig	flowery
waren ihre	were her
wörter	words
lass mich	don't leave
nicht	me in
im stich	the lurch
ich praktiziere	I have
meine eigene	my own
art	style
hab nichts	have nothing
mit den anderen	to do
zu tun	with the others
ich bin nicht	I don't
verpflichtet	have to

Although English is my mother tongue, I initially heard spoken German at a very early age, in London of the 1950s—I moved to Germany permanently in 1993—because my parents and grandparents were Jewish German refugees, who had fled fascism for England shortly before the Second World War. Much later, I became a writer and a poet, not because I have a talent for language, but precisely because it is a challenge. Improvisation has allowed me to slip between linguistic formalities.

I admit to being concerned about the possible dullness of oration, of a repetitive vocal timbre that doesn't actually sing, because song is harmonious, is in its nature changeful and is therefore imbued with a transformational quality. Because of its lack of intonation, my spoken poetry, even when the language is understood and the challenge of improvisation is appreciated, risks sounding mechanical alongside improvised music over the duration of a concert.

It can happen that musicians drown out my poetry with sound intensity (even if I use a microphone)—it is often difficult to hold one's own with quiet, reflective poetry. And so it is of paramount importance to practise improvisation with other performing artists regularly, in order to gain a feel, an instinct that connects one to the others. It is only possible to slip up, make a mistake, when one or more of the contributors make their performance a focal point, placing its significance above the general interest, the experience as a whole.

These are some of the perils of collaborative performance. With all aspects of improvisation one is constantly dancing on the brink of failure; but these are necessary tensions, like a free-fall, when one nevertheless trusts in the safety net—this being the assurance in one's ability to connect up with a subliminal process: the communal effort.

The sessions in Cologne take part once a month in café/bar locations, most recently in the Bürgerhaus MüTZe, a social and cultural centre in the Cologne-Mülheim area, and are open to the public. The more established Düsseldorf sessions are held every other couple of weeks at WP8, an art centre-cum-bar during the winter, and outdoors at the Akki-Hauses in Siegburger Strasse in summer. Some artists attend venues in both Cologne and Düsseldorf, the cities being relatively close to one another.

I have attended other kinds of concerts as a spectator, listening to former students of jazz from the Cologne University of Music and Dance. These interpreters and composers often possess a faultless technique when covering jazz classics; ultimately this kind of performance incorporates no surprise elements, however. In my opinion, jazz sets that feed audience expectations may be lacking in fantasy and are valuable purely as entertainment. I have great respect for the daring of musical performers who are prepared to take risks with improvisation and thus allow more space for innovation.

And in the meantime I have come upon another improvisation scene in Cologne of mostly New Music (that occasionally verges on jazz) and exists parallel to the sessions. It consists of younger professional musicians (unfortunately again predominantly German, white, and male), who have studied at academies in Europe and who perform only in concert, forgoing any form of practice session. With their skill, they bring an intensity, concentration, and conviction that make a performance always convincing.

But I believe that risk-taking involves more than cultivating a creative imagination. I came to Germany as an artist and writer in order to reflect critically on a society that was established in the legacy of fascism, especially where neo-Nazism has been on the ascendance since German unification in 1989 (Pro NRW being the local far-right party):

Only Pro NRW (North Rhine Westphalia) could frighten with its individual results of over 3% in the Rhineland, in the Bergisch Land and even in the Ruhrgebiet. In the Cologne neighbouring cities of Bergheim and Leverkusen, they achieved 5.8% and 3.9%, for instance. A big surprise is the performance of Pro NRW in Duisburg. There they achieved a total of 3.9%, in some constituencies even over 4%. In Gelsenkirchen they even attained 4.2%. In both towns there were Pro-NRW events in April (2010). In Duisburg there are hardly any Pro-NRW structures, however. But the Pro-NRW demonstrations and the week-long continuous Islamophobic campaign against the Mosque in Marxloh, decisively contributed to these results.⁸

I can never forget that the BRD (Bundesrepublik Deutschland—Federal Republic of Germany) was reborn on the ashes of fascism after the Second World War, former Nazi functionaries having been reinstated at all levels of politics and industry, including the highest. Hans-Dietrich Genscher, for instance, who had been a member of the Nazi Party and fought in the army for Germany during the war, developed a post-war political career in the FDP (Freie Demokratische Partei—Free Democratic Party) that culminated in his position as Germany's vice-chancellor (Die Welt 2007). Walter Scheel, who was employed as Luftwaffe auxiliary personnel in 1943, was then posted to a Reich Labour Service in 1944; he had also been a member of the Nazi Party and a volunteer for the German Army and was later held in US and British war captivity. After the war Scheel, also a member of the FDP, held the position of Bundespräsident der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Federal President of the Federal Republic) from 1974 to 1992 (Becker 1978; *Der Spiegel* 1978). In this country, the questions of racism or fascism remain essential issues, especially when they rear their heads contemporaneously.

I admit to being disappointed in the lack of agenda regarding cultural difference at the regular improvisation sessions. Only thrice in a couple of years have I seen Turkish artists/musicians bring their cultural specificity to these gatherings, even though the Turkish population in Cologne is 6.23%,⁹ and there have been only two persons of colour contributing (one of whom being Mbongane, born on the African continent, who works with traditional African instruments and voice).

Even less is gender or queer identity an issue; in fact, politics of any hue, local or global, are avoided—the intention of the musical collaborations appears only to be to create a music form that explodes some of the conventions of jazz. This lack of a political agenda reveals the venture’s conventional nature. Of the fifty or so artists in the pool of improvisational musicians performing at open sessions in the North Rhine-Westphalia area, only a couple are of colour, a further five or so are non-German and maybe only a dozen are women (these include Gala Hummel—drums and vocals—and Marion Schüller—vocals). A large number of the artists are also of an older generation, so the development of a more flexible approach to sessions and their content is not on the cards. While the sessions appear to be open and free to anyone wishing to take part, not all are made to feel welcome, and I fear exclusivity will close doors to a true exchange and a genuinely wide experience.

I also feel compelled to report a lack of sensitivity towards Mohammed Bangora (a percussionist from Guinea), a person of colour in the audience who was unceremoniously shooed off the stage at a Düsseldorf session in WP8 in April 2013 when he attempted to join in without having added his name to the list of play (all participants are required to add their name to a chronological list before the session starts and this list is strictly adhered to). In Great Britain, where I spent the greater part of my life and where, after the misdeeds of a colonial heritage, a more rigorous condemnation of racism is finally being practised, this incident would, I believe, have been taken note of and censured. It wasn’t until the following day, however, that even I found the courage to speak out—an action which led to far-reaching consequences.

I sent my email on issues of diplomacy regarding a person from a minority culture to the two musicians responsible for sending out information emails to all session members in the NRW area, Andreas Techler (saxophone) and Karl Krützmann (saxophone); this was on April 15, 2013. Although I asked them to mail my commentary around, they declined, without explanation. I did, however, receive a private email response that Krützmann accidentally sent to me although it was addressed to Techler, which turned out to be an outspoken, anti-Semitic denunciation of my person. My dilemma then was how to deal with this new situation, which affected me so intimately. Although anti-Semitism is a criminal offence in Germany, I decided against legal action, preferring that the community deal with the issue internally. And so I mentioned the matter at ensuing sessions, privately in conversation, to several individuals and became increasingly disappointed at the lack of interest they demonstrated in taking any action.

Finally Robby Göllmann and Georg Frangenberg (who run the summer sessions in Düsseldorf) decided to give Krützmann a ticking off (via email)—should he behave in like manner at another time, he would be banned from the summer sessions in Düsseldorf. Again, Göllmann and Frangenberg did not inform the community as a whole, which left me with the bitter feeling that justice had not been done—an open discussion on racism was never undertaken. Eventually, I decided to forgo further attendance of the improvisation sessions, no longer wishing to be part of a group that tolerated racism by acquiescence.

It would be a fair assumption to say that session improvisers see themselves as being liberal-minded. Where then is the exact point of taboo—the line never to be crossed? And who is prepared to watchdog this troublesome no-go area? The diatribe that I accidentally received per email was reminiscent of the worst type of Nazi propaganda, but the community preferred to turn a blind eye to what had happened. To quote Chris Köver (2014): “Racism in Germany? Doesn’t exist.” This is what May Ayim was confronted with by a professor, as she announced that she was going to write a Degree in Pedagogy on the history of Black Germans.”¹⁰

Afro-German poetess May Ayim fought against racist attitudes in Germany and bore witness to her harrowing experiences of it in her writings:

Her poetry edition “blues in schwarz-weiss” (blues in black and white) was published in 1995 with the Orlanda Frauenverlag (Orlanda Women’s Press), as were most of her books. In it, May Ayim reckons with “a recently unified Germany” that “in private” gladly celebrates its “whiteness” after 1990: “without immigrants, refugees, Jewish and Black people.” (Köver 2014)¹¹

Ayim’s untimely death in 1996 was a suicide, an ultimate way out of illness and her exhaustive struggles with immovable xenophobic attitudes in Germany.

Olumide Popoola, a Nigerian-German writer and poet who won the *May Ayim Award for Poetry* in 2004 and has also performed together with musicians, left Berlin to live and work in more multicultural London. The introductory information Popoola’s publisher provides about her play *Also by Mail* (2013), in which she addresses issues of racism in Germany, explains:

Loss and racism, sibling rivalry and cross-cultural etiquette, the play incorporates and subverts it’s [sic] urban, neo-African elements of story-telling to give a contemporary picture of a family that struggles not only with the legacy of its patriarch but with being racialized within the German context as well. Where does each stand in a circle of relations and needs? Where does each want to end up? (Edition Assemblage 2012)

The introduction to Popoola’s first book *this is not about sadness*, which is set in London, is a poem of hers that speaks of heartache and lamenting the loss of “that which slips through our hands” while weighing it in the balance with what one can hold on to:

we don’t measure in impossibility
in anguish or that which slips
through our hands

in the end we only count what was there
to have & keep, attainable against all odds
that which remains, we carry beyond
hold it dear and declare it, sacred

there is no ceasing
merely change—unfailing
and invariably there is more—always (Popoola 2010)

I continue to perform in a duo with double bassist Kasander Nilist and record all rehearsals and performances (which I also transcribe and have corrected, when the German is faulty). I have more recently commenced playing with professional musicians from the parallel improvisational but more sophisticated New Music scene: Etienne Nillesen (percussion), Matthias Muche (Trombone), and Nicola Hein (electric guitar). Their music is born out of the atonal developments of modern classical music, combined occasionally with jazz.

These New Music musicians use their instruments unconventionally as boxes to create sound rather than to play more traditional music. I have witnessed Nicola Hein in concert playing his electric guitar as if it were a percussion instrument and Etienne Nillesen playing an

unconventional construction he built onto the snare drum surface, by plucking and bowing it as though it were a stringed instrument—each thereby evincing the most unusual and sublime sound.

The younger generation of New Music improvisation artists will no doubt also have their own issues to deal with. When I attended an initial group concert on September 17, 2014 in the Stadtgarten—held under their umbrella name of Auftakt (Prelude)—for instance, this group of twenty young white German musicians, including Nicola Hein, Philip Zoubek, Constantin Herzog, Fabian Jung and Niklas Wandt, had invited only one woman, Elisabeth Fügemann, a cellist, to participate.

To return to the previously mentioned grave assertions of racism that I have witnessed, I would like to know where this conformist position comes from. I fear that many German artists have not been vigilant in their questioning of given ideas—questioning the authority of American Culture, for instance. Jazz, which was banned during the Nazi era as being degenerate, was later adopted with an uncritical enthusiasm in the post-war years of denazification.

Many contemporary improvisational artists of the jazz and New Music scene that I have heard have too happily produced an imitation of popular culture (the German jazz tradition is not that distinctive from American jazz) while not understanding that the politics (of liberality) is in the fine detail of our lives, to which we have to make a personal commitment.

I believe that any matters may be addressed in poetry; in an area where politicized art is absent, it is a challenge to charge poetry with activism so that a resulting presentation with musicians may be more than just entertainment. Being less bound by constricting societal rules of conduct, improvisation—musical and poetic—may be implemented to construct a bridge for earwitnesses, thus addressing social issues in a playful manner.

Improvised poetry is the pulling together of many, or sometimes only slips of the mind, whereby lateral thinking meanders on, in such a way that one often isn't fully aware of where one is being taken—one is borne along on a slip stream of consciousness, which will nonetheless often reveal normally unspoken truths. And what is born out of the depth of the unconscious may of course be confrontational for observers, as Roland Graeter, the cellist and vocalist has observed (I performed with Graeter several times, during his 2011 Music Marathon year of daily presentations in Europe): “Yes, I often react traumatically to Tanya Ury’s words—we pursue a parallelism of music, verse and dream—a dreamlike balancing act, a pilgrimage to the occident and ‘Sandkuchen’ (plain cake), which suddenly asserts its presence” (Graeter 2011).¹²

On an ending note, the final poem of the February 3, 2013 session is a nonsense poem:

deleted diletantism

spam
wham
bam

I thank
you for your
conversation
less
instruction

Tanya Ury

we can
continue
unlike this
syndrome

it will compare
and find
fulmination

unsound
sounding out
a pulse
pointing out

found you
unshrinking

a folded
madonna machine
has been
invented
for today

outgrown
her mold
tomorrow

send me
a sentence
to death

a parting
gestation

calibrated
caliban

self-serving
your hunger
in the
incident room
indelicate

unspoilt
symposium
spinning
towards
a deleted
dilettantism

Notes

1. “As Saverio Bettinelli describes in his *Dell’entusiasmo* (1769), the virtuoso professionals gave every sign of entering states of poetic ecstasy, delivering odes, narrative poems, *canzonette*, and sonnets with a fluency and power that amazed their audiences, who suggested themes and very often rhymes and metres. Some improvisers such as Tommaso Sgricci (1788–1836) specialized in full-length verse tragedies. Like the heroine of De Staël’s *Corinne ou l’Italie* (1807), many of the most famous performers were women, such as Maria Maddalena Morelli Fernandez (Corilla Olimpica) and Teresa Bandettini. Though Perfetti and others actively discouraged transcription, a very large number of improvisations were recorded in some form. Later dismissed as frivolous or trivial, the whole phenomenon has recently begun to re-engage scholarly interest” (Caesar 2002, 301).

2. Writing about the Bertsolari Txapelketa, the national championship of *bertsolaritza*, an improvised contest poetry of the Basque oral tradition, which took place in Barakaldo, Spain, on December 18, 2005, John Miles Foley states: “To understand the power and presence of *bertsolaritza*, we need to realize that the art and practice of oral poetry is woven very deeply into the fabric of Basque society, in both formal and informal settings and on a virtually everyday basis. Perhaps the most intimate of such settings is the ubiquitous “*bertso*-dinner,” a city or village ritual that features a community feast followed by performances by two or more *bertsolariak*, who duel not for prizes or glory but for the enjoyment of all those present. More than one thousand of these oral poetry feasts take place each year, I was told” (Foley 2005).

3. This is from a transcript of Allen Ginsberg’s 1975 in-class improvisation, “History of Poetry 28 (Death Is . . . An Improvisation).” Gregory Corso and W.S. Merwin were on hand on this occasion to add their contributions.

4. “Ginsberg’s political activities were called strongly libertarian in nature, echoing his poetic preference for individual expression over traditional structure. In the mid-1960s he was closely associated with the counterculture and antiwar movements. He created and advocated ‘flower power,’ a strategy in which antiwar demonstrators would promote positive values like peace and love to dramatize their opposition to the death and destruction caused by the Vietnam War” (“Biography: Allen Ginsberg”).

5. *archive burn out* included “Suspended Beliefs,” improvised poetry with improvised music: Tanya Ury (voice), Gernot Bogumil (trumpet), Kasander Nilist (double bass), and Hans Salz (percussion): <https://vimeo.com/112831445>.

6. *Lost in Interiors (25 Years After the Fall of the Wall)* is about Hohenschönhausen, the former Stasi prison. Kasander Nilist, improvising freely on double bass, accompanies Tanya Ury’s poetry on the historical theme, in English and German: <https://vimeo.com/112798380>.

7. Translation by Tanya Ury of the following: „Kauderwelsch—unverständliche oder fehlerhafte Sprache sowie aus mehreren Sprachen gemischte Ausdrucksweise ♦ eigtl. *Kaurerwelsch* ‚Churwelsch‘; *Kauer* ist die Tiroler Bezeichnung für *Chur* in der Schweiz, und die Sprache der Kauerer galt schon früher (15. Jh.) als schwer verständlich; *welsch* aus mhd. *welsch*, *welbisch*, *walbisch* aus ahd. *walhisic* ‚romanisch‘, aus lat. *Volcae*, dem Namen eines Volksstammes in Gallien nördlich der Alpen” (see “Kauderwelsch”).

8. Translation by Tanya Ury of the following: „Einzig Pro NRW konnte mit einigen Einzelergebnissen über 3% im Rheinland, im Bergischen Land und sogar im Ruhrgebiet erschrecken. Zum Beispiel in den Kölner Nachbarstädten Bergheim und Leverkusen erreichten sie 5,8% und 3,9%. Eine große Überraschung ist das Abschneiden von Pro NRW in Duisburg. Dort erreichten sie insgesamt 3,9%, in einigen Wahlkreisen sogar über 4. In Gelsenkirchen konnten sie sogar auf 4,2% kommen. In beiden Städten hatten im April Pro-NRW-Events stattgefunden. In Duisburg existieren allerdings so gut wie keine Strukturen von Pro NRW. Allerdings haben die Pro-NRW-Demo dort und die wochenlang andauernde islamophobe Hetze gegen die Moschee in Marxloh haben entscheidend zu diesem Ergebnis beigetragen” (see “Nazi-Parteien” 2010).

9. On December 31, 2012, the general population in Cologne was calculated at 1,024,373. The Turkish population, the largest non-native group in Cologne, was calculated as having been 63,839 in 2007, i.e. approximately 6.23% (see Information und Technik Nordrhein-Westfalen 2010).

10. Translation by Tanya Ury of Chris Köver (2014): „Rassismus in Deutschland? Gibt es doch gar nicht.“ Diesen Satz bekam May Ayim von einem Professor zu hören als sie ankündigte, ihr Pädagogikdiplom über die Geschichte von Schwarzen Deutschen zu schreiben.

11. Translation by Tanya Ury of Chris Köver (2014): „1995 erscheint der Gedichtsammlungband „blues in schwarz-weiss“ im Orlanda Frauenverlag, wie fast all ihre Bücher. Darin rechnet May Ayim auch „mit einem frisch wiedervereinigten Deutschland“ ab, das sich nach 1990 gerne „weiss“ und „im intimen kreis“ feiert: „ohne immigrantInnen flüchtlinge jüdische und schwarze menschen.“

12. Excerpted from Roland Graeter (2011): „sehr gute ruhe zum zweiten beginn. es kam nämlich ein nachzügler . . . i can not calculate your credibility . . . beginn des wort-musik-gebäudes. ein sehr fragiles unterfangen, sicher, diese #194, das war von vornherein klar, und dennoch fühle ich mich sehr wohl in dieser mischung aus sinn-fragmenten und lautmalerei, gemischt mit perkussions-fetzen von uwe. Laukeningkat. ja, ich reagiere, häufig traumatisch, auf die worte von tanya ury, wir betreiben die parallelität von musik, lyrik und traum, von träumerischer gratwanderung, pilgerfahrt ins abendland und sandkuchen, der plötzlich seine anwesenheit behauptet.“ The full translation, by Tanya Ury, is as follows: “The second part started well—very peacefully—good, because there were latecomers. . . . ‘I cannot calculate your credibility . . .’ is the start of the word music construction. A very fragile undertaking to be sure, this #194, which was clear at the outset, and yet I feel very good about this mixture of fragments of meaning and onomatopoeia, intermingled with, snatches of percussion from Uwe Laukeningkat. Yes, I often react traumatically to Tanya Ury’s words—we pursue a parallelism of music, verse and dream—a dreamlike balancing act, a pilgrimage to the occident and ‘Sandkuchen’ (plain cake), which suddenly asserts its presence.”

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