



★ My name is Anna Voswinckel. I am a curator for Contemporary Art with a focus on photography. I have a background in Visual Arts and cultural and gender studies. I worked as a freelance curator in Berlin mainly and in Leipzig. I was teaching photography there. And since 2023, January 2023, I have a permanent position as a curator at Camera Austria. I'm head of the exhibition program there. Camera Austria Graz is an institution that publishes a magazine for photography and lens-based art, as well as running an exhibition space and an editing house.

/ My name is Silvester Sabathiel and my educational background lies in physics. I studied physics in Graz and with a special focus on theoretical physics and theories of gravity, so how the gravity of suns and planets influence other objects.

And after that, I changed the subject a bit and did my PhD in Norway and working on artificial intelligence and using those artificial intelligence also to learn something about how humans think with our natural brains, so to say. And now I'm working in a research institute that applies this knowledge about artificial intelligence to technology.

□ Okay. I will be easily recognizable by the fact I will be constantly coughing. I have to apologize for that. My name is Ekaterina Degot. I received a very classical education of an art historian about which I will speak a little bit. And of course art historian per se is not a job, not always, so my job is actually being a curator, like Anna. I am currently director and chief curator of the festival Steirischer Herbst in Graz, which presents every autumn interdisciplinary program of performances, theater, music, visual arts, and various discussions, as well as social projects. So I'm curating all of it, together with my curatorial team of course.

That's my seventh year in Graz. Before that I lived in Germany a bit shorter, Graz is the longest time I'm away from home, which used to be Moscow very, very long ago.

○ Hello, my name is Anselm Wagner. I'm also an art historian, and I'm professor for architectural theory at the Institute of Architectural Theory, Art History and Cultural Studies at Graz University of Technology. So my students are the future, hopefully the future architects. And yeah, my field of research and also teaching is not only theory of architecture, but also the history of architecture, and also the visual arts of the 20th and 21st centuries.

★ Okay. Maybe I start with the question why I was invited here. I think it might have been because I'm a photo curator. Because photography is obviously a flat medium, especially in its current mode of contemplation, which is the screen. And I mean the screen wasn't always that flat, it used to be quite big, but nowadays it's a really flat issue. The flatness of a photograph, it results not only from the final form it takes, but also from its technical origin, which is the camera.

And I'm currently preparing an exhibition with Alexandra Leykauf, who in her work is examining the way we look at images, how we see the world conveyed in

Ekaterina Degot □
Silvester Sabathiel /
Anna Voswinckel ★
Anselm Wagner ○
Technician)

images, and what perception of space is created by the single lens perspective of a camera. And I borrow the following thoughts from her. So beyond the obvious that a photograph has to be transferred to a surface and is therefore two-dimensional, we could say that the camera cannot deliver any three-dimensional images due to its single-eyed nature. Stereoscopes have already worked their way through this with 360 degree cameras, and basically the whole virtual reality, VR affair, is an attempt to eliminate the shortcomings of two-dimensionality.

So three-dimensionality is created in our heads and bodies. The idea of visualized three-dimensionality is absurd, so I look forward to discussing this issue with you, particularly curious what you, Silvester, have to say about this matter as maybe an expert for this artificial intelligence and digital images.

/ Right. I guess since I'm coming from two fields, kind of natural science, physics and AI as well, I was thinking where does it fit, the term of a flatness or flat? It's a quite abstract term, and maybe later I can draw connections to the AI part.

When I first thought about it, I was first thinking, actually flatness plays a big role in natural science and how our understanding of nature evolved. And especially the aspect of that most of the time that humans thought that something is flat, it turned out as an illusion in the end. And there are two ways how flatness or the illusion of flatness can be revealed.

For example, if we are sitting on a table that's seemingly flat, we can either zoom very much inside and we'll start to see how unflat a wooden table for example is by recognizing its detailed structure. Or when you have a microscope, having an even closer look at it, we'll see even more structure and how unflat the surface is. And the other way to realize that something is not flat is by zooming out. Maybe we can't see it when directly sitting in front of the table and looking at it, but if we go further away, maybe we can see that the table is actually rounded or is not as flat. Its global shape is not as flat.

And with this analogy of the table, it actually happened many times in the history of natural science, starting with the analogy from the table, that flat things are not flat when you look closely. So they developed microscopes and other tools to look closer and closer and we could see which rich world is actually hidden behind a seemingly flat surface.

And also, by going out and seeing the global shape of something, for example, the Earth was believed to be flat, but when zooming out, it became, for most of the people at least, obvious that Earth is a sphere. And then actually, we can go around the globe and end up at the same place where we started. Most of us also noticed the path of a plane, shown on the screen on board and notice: "Oh, we should go the shortest way to New York by plane, but it's so curved," even though it's the shortest path. This is a direct product of the earth being curved and not flat. Because on flat surfaces the shortest path will always be a straight line.

And this thing kind of repeated in not only on Earth, but also looking at the whole structure of space-time of the universe, where we first thought, okay, it's all linear, flat, our space-time in the beginning. But then the famous Einstein came and said, "No, it's not all that flat actually. Space-time can curve." And so we can observe that even light that should go straight is actually bended. As our plane is bended on the Earth, so is light bended when it goes around the sun, for example, and it has been measured.

And if we zoom even further out even the whole universe can be thought or might be bent as a whole. There is this theory that similar to our Earth, we can go straight, straight, straight and we will arrive at the same point. The same with our universe but in three dimensions, if we continue to go straight, we will arrive at the same point. And yeah, I thought that was an interesting part when thinking about flatness in natural science, and especially that flatness most of the times turns out to be an illusion when looking close or far away. Maybe we will find similar aspects also in your fields.

□ All of it is very interesting. I actually want to say two things. One more general, and second as in art historian. In a more general way, I think the word "flat" belongs to the words we are using as metaphors, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. And those meanings are shifting, which is interesting, it tells us a lot about our society. Another notion of that kind is rich. We're usually using the word "rich" as something positive, like rich color, for instance, implying that the rich is better than non-rich. And recently it actually has changed because if you say now that the sauce or the soup is rich, some people would not eat it. So the rich is not 100% positive.

And this is same thing which happened to "flat." So flat we could often use as a negative characteristics, as not complex enough or not spicy enough. But then recently it's also being used in the meaning of non-hierarchical. There was a famous book, although I forgot the name of the author, but it's famous,... It became more famous than the author, it was published about 10 years ago, and it was called *The World Is Flat*. And this is some sort of a neoliberal bible that tells that the world is the same everywhere. The cafe where you're going, the coffee you are drinking, it's all the same, of course it's all the same if you live in Hong Kong or Seattle or Berlin, then yes. Actually this book can be criticized very heavily, but its point was that it's actually the world became so non-hierarchical that that is actually flat and that is actually good.

But that was just first point. And in general, as an art historian, when I heard the notion "flat," of course all my art history education came to me because the classical art history education is all around the notion of flatness in modern art, modern painting in the first place. Because historically, the normative European painting, or we can say old masters painting, is understood as a challenge of rendering the volume.

That is actually what is understood as the professionalism of an artist, starting with this old Greek Zeno, who painted those grapes so he fooled the birds, who

started to eat them. So he was such an incredible master so he could render the volume in two-dimensional situations. It became a symbol of professionalism, this volume, flatness was something that was reserved for non-professional artists, bad artists, children, so-called primitives, including icons. So that was all that was considered flat, and because of that not professional enough in this academic tradition.

Then comes modern painting, which of course changes this completely, first gradually and then fully assuming this flatness, like in black square of Malevich or in Mark Rothko paintings. And the main theorist of all of this thing was Clement Greenberg, who was an American, and of course some people here know it and probably some people who are listening to us but still I'm reminding, that Clement Greenberg was an American art theorist who wrote a lot about this flatness, also in the '60s when this trend was already going away.

But he was interpreting this flatness of painting as the truth of painting. So instead of lying that these are actually real grapes, the artist tells, "This is what it is." So a painting is flat. "A painting is a rectangular form on a white background," as Malevich seems to say. Nothing else. "I will not give you anything else. You just have to accept this." And people were deeply depressed seeing that, because by that moment they were actually hoping to get something else, a nice landscape, a nice, I don't know, lady on a painting. And the artist tells them, "No, I don't have this for you." So the painting is a painting, it's not the reality.

Or actually in the same way, in the same way of thinking much later, Magritte says that, "This is not a pipe, this is the image of a pipe. This is not the same, this is not a real pipe," on his famous painting. And Greenberg develops this theory of truths of painting that works on this meta level and on the medium specificity, and this is what he calls abstraction, so this is what is abstract about art being abstracted to this level. From that point of view, film, avant-garde to modernist film, has to be about the fact that it is a film in the first place, like with Godard, or literature work has to be about being a text in the first place.

Now to conclude, we can say that all of it is completely outdated. This heroism of flatness is completely gone because most of the things that surround us now are actually flat, including our credit cards, my Moleskine, our phones. Most of the things are flat, except natural things. Also, the medium situation has changed completely, starting with photography, and then with all the so-called new media, they might be not new anymore, but they're not handmade. So in photography, there is no challenge of rendering the object and transferring it, that is happening mechanically. And of course video, and I'm not even talking about artificial intelligence.

So this part, but then there also then other part which made it completely outdated in the first place, the fact that all the things that were rejected by this system which prioritized naturalistic volume are actually valorized now. We valorize tapestries, all sort of applied art, of course non-European art that didn't start with the idea of rendering the volume in the first place. So many African artists are

working in a completely different tradition, and of course icons and anything else. And so this flatness is actually valorized as in tradition on its own, one doesn't have to fight for it.

But still, I think that there is something still relevant in the notion of self-critical character of art, which Greenberg illustrates with flatness, and I find it still valid. What does this flatness of painting tells us? What does the artist wants to say? That indeed, painting cannot do everything. Painting is a painting, a two-dimensional object, and art cannot do everything, art has its limitations. Assuming this limitation is what being so open about flatness means.

And I think this is something I miss in art currently, when sometimes I don't feel that artists would be actually open about them being not full of power into transforming the world. I think that sort of self-critical attitude might be something positive, something we might still read in this purely formalist sometimes and not really innovative flatness that meets the eye in the modernist painting.

○ Maybe I can continue here, and I would like to underline what you have said, that we have on the one hand the literal meaning of flatness and on the other hand we have the metaphorical meaning. And of course these two are somehow interconnected. And the metaphorical meaning has been used very often as a weapon I would say.

For example, to go to my example of architecture, in modernist architecture, one of the most visible qualities of modernist architecture was that modernist buildings had a flat roof. And also the surface of the buildings, the walls, were flat without ornament, without any curvature and so on. So this has been the most visible character of modernist architecture.

On the other hand, when this came up in the 1920s and '30s, conservative and reactionary critics said that these buildings with flat roofs are not really something which fits to our, say, our German landscape. This is something Arabic or Semitic or Jewish or ... Which doesn't really belong to us, because we, as the Germans, we have our houses with a pitched roof. And you could say, okay, this is just a form. Pitched roof or flat roof, it's just a formalist discussion.

But I think there's more behind that. The history of architecture tells us that in the Mediterranean area houses have flat roofs. And in the Central Europe and Northern Europe's countries, buildings had pitched roofs. This fact was meant to have a special meaning: Pitched roofs were taken as an expression of the deep mind of German culture. Being not flat meant: it's not just on the surface. It's nothing which is just superficial.

And this is a very old discussion which dates back already to the 18th century, maybe earlier, that in the cultural wars between Germany and France, for example, Germans regarded themselves always as the more sincere, the more

serious, the more deep characters with deep thoughts. The country of the poets and the thinkers, “das Land der Dichter und Denker”. Whereas the French are regarded as the more superficial. They are just surfing on the surface. They are flat in a metaphorical way. So they’re more interested in fashion, a pretty appearance, for example, or this is also the case with the French language: elegant, but flat.

And in the 19th and 20th centuries, we find this same constellation again in the relationship between Europe and the United States. Still today America is regarded by many Europeans as a culture which is just interested in the surface. The people are very friendly, but this friendliness is nothing which is real. It’s just externally, it’s just on the surface, it’s nothing serious. Maybe you have seen the infamous Barbie movie by Greta Gerwig, which is somehow an exaggeration of this superficiality of American culture. So here in this discussion, flat is always something regarded to be negative, and to be something which has a lot of deficits, which is something which is without any value, without any quality, you could say. And at the same time – and this is a phenomenon I really can’t explain at the moment – we have this ideal of flatness, as you described to the table before.

We are sitting here around the table, which is very reflective, made of molded plastic. For us, for our senses, it is absolutely flat, and our smartphones are flat, and our computers are flat. Everything we use is flat, not just because it’s practical and useful, also because it’s somehow aesthetical. It is an expression of contemporary aesthetics. Things we like or we love or which are fetishized like our smartphone have to be very smooth and very flat. We like this flatness, and at the same time, we hate it, or maybe the subjects of these sayings are not the same.

□ What you’re saying is very interesting. May I ask, was it explicitly described that the flat roofs are Jewish?

○ Yes. There was a postcard published in 1933, when Hitler came in power in Germany. And this postcard showed the famous Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart, which is one of the most important examples of modernist architecture of Germany, with these more or less white houses. And each of these houses has a flat roof. And in this photograph there was made a montage with Arabs sitting on dromedaries, and so on. And the caption of this postcard was, “This is the suburbs of Jerusalem.” So the subtext was, “This is not just Arabic, or Mediterranean, or not German. It is Jewish.”

□ Very interesting, yeah.

○ This is just one of many examples.

□ Yeah, yeah.

★ Do you think it’s Jewish? But because Jerusalem then was a multi-ethnic society-

Yes, of course, this was nonsense.

* I think that the Arab-

The critique, as such, was nonsense. But it is interesting that the flat roof was regarded to be Jewish, which of course, is not true or is ridiculous. But from the national socialist point of view, this was an argument.

* Yeah, I just meant that it wasn't distinguishly Jewish, since Jerusalem wasn't Jewish then, mainly Jewish, but-

Of course, yeah.

Well, they're not Oriental.

It was just a symbol for-

* Orientalism?

Yeah, Morocco houses are also... They also have flat roofs,.

Of course, of course, yeah.

It's very interesting how Germany and Austria have a Nordic ideal of a roof. Yeah, indeed, true, true, until now, actually. By the way, my guilty pleasure currently is this game, geoguessr. You are getting a video of a street and you have to guess in which country you are. I like to guess by architecture, and actually you can tell. You can tell what looks Spanish, what looks Italian, what looks international modernism, which is usually in Germany or Netherlands. And what looks like Scandinavian, Northern German style. So it's actually very distinctive. It's true. And the flatness of the roof is an important aesthetical, but also ideological point, which is made by an architect.

It was rather funny that within the history of modernist architecture the flat roof was introduced in Germany, Netherlands, and France. In countries where a flat roof is not really a good idea, I would say. In the Mediterranean world, it was used for centuries before, but here, in Central and Western Europe, it was invented against practical reasons. But at the same time, modernists said that modernist architecture is something being functional. So every form is not just formalistic, just for itself, for fun, for aesthetics only, it has a real function. The function was having a roof garden.

And solarium-

Yeah, and a solarium.

Because at that time it was considered very healthy.

○ Yeah, a natural solarium that you can take sun baths on the rooftop. But it was very, very difficult to get rid of wet spots on the ceilings.

□ No, of course, it's not always practical.

○ It was very, very difficult. It took decades to get this problem fixed. So it was a more ideological and aesthetical invention or decision, and not a very practical one.

□ And of course, there was all this movement of organic architecture was actually against it with and other, because indeed, as we all know, all this modernist architecture and furniture is maybe not the most friendly. I could not say this table, for instance, is very friendly..It's smooth. Yes. But it angles that might be quite unfriendly sometimes.

○ Yeah, I think it's an aesthetic idea. And I think it also has something to do with hygiene. With the idea that an absolutely smooth, flat surface can easily be cleaned like this table here, and we have the illusion that it can easily be cleaned, that it is without any viruses and bacteria, which is nonsense of course. But we still have this idea. Also in medicine for example, it's still impossible to have wooden furniture in hospitals because the hygienic rules say no, the furniture has to be-

□ Clean.

○ Absolutely sealed, with sealed surfaces, which can be easily cleaned. And when you have wooden surfaces, maybe the material can never be so smooth and never be so sealed, and bacteria and so on can settle there. Which is nonsense because there are a lot of experiments done that natural surfaces like wood are much more antibacterial than, for example, a plastic surface or something else. But, this idea is that a flat, smooth surface is also healthy.

And I think this was a big argument also for the modernists. It looks nice. It is an ideal. Now we heard that flatness doesn't really exist in nature or in the universe. But things, I guess which don't really exist have a very good starting point to become ideals. We love it somehow because it is something we do not really find anywhere.

□ I had one thought which I wanted to share as a question. I don't know what you think about it. I understood, it's a very simple thought, but it didn't occur to me before that the whole reproduction techniques since centuries was actually aimed at flat things. Like printing books, then all the xerox copies and whatever, and photography of course. Flat is something which is easily reproducible.

But now in a development, which I still have to process, we have 3D printers, which make it possible to easily reproduce three dimensional things. If I understand right. Frankly, I'm really not getting how that can be. But you must tell us if this is really the case, and what does it change in our idea of flatness?

/ Well, actually, I would like to forward that question to you, Anna, because you mentioned in your introduction. Please correct me if I am wrong so, but that's something I took, that photography is kind of meant to be on a flat surface, and it would be a photograph in three dimensions. My question is, do you think it will stay like that? Will photography stay in 2D? And if so, if it will expand to three dimensions maybe, and will be not flat anymore, I'm wondering what it does to our perception? I could still think, even though the three dimensional photo will include maybe more realism, more information, but still the reduction to the flat surface actually adds something: namely the specific perspective of a scene the photographer wants to convey. Or, what do you think?

* Well, what Alexandra is arguing for is that an image that was captured by a camera, which is a one-eyed machine, has to be transferred on any kind of surface. And this means, the surface can be curved also, but still, it doesn't mean that this image has a body and that it is transferring the bodily experience to the image. And we are desperately seeking this.

And I think it's an interesting point, what Ekaterina mentioned, this three dimensional, or this 3D print, because it's relying also on cameras. I mean, it's a scan movement around an object or a body. And then the reproduction is made in the form of material. It's a three dimensional transfer of these camera or scanner images.

So yeah, it's a good question. I mean, it's obviously then a three dimensional object. We have this already in the forms of models of spaces, for example. I mean, architects work with models, for example, to compare an architectural rendering, a two dimensional image with a model of a space is interesting because now I think architects use renderings much more than these handmade space models, architectural models. But still, the spatial experience is richer in these models than in any rendering, I would argue. I don't know what you think about it, Anselm?

○ Yes, it's absolutely true. Renderings are just used for selling. This is for demonstrating the people who may buy or rent your house or your apartment, which you're designing, that they can get an impression. Because normally people cannot read a plan, or can also not so easily read a model. And an image, a three dimensional image, an illusionistic image is always something we can easily grasp and which is very familiar. We have been knowing it since centuries, since the invention of linear perspective.

I would like to go back to the 3D printer, which is interesting because when you observe the 3D printer when it makes the print, it is a rather linear process. It's just lines. It's just, I would say one dimension, not three, not two, it's just one dimension. And at the end we have this sometimes rather ugly product, which just is a kind of drawing in space, which is using clay or something else.

But I think the idea that photographs someday would not be flat anymore would mean that photographs would be like sculptures. So three dimensional, and-

* Is it technologically possible?

○ Or sometimes it would no longer be distinguishable from reality. So you could make this 3D photograph from the world, and maybe we took this new world and leaved the old one with all its CO2 problems behind us.

□ Would not it be then like a serial film.

* I mean there are holograms-

○ Yeah, maybe compared to holograms.

* Closely linked to photography because if you say a 3D sculpture, it's a sculpture, but it has a background in photography, but-

/ Sculptures exists since a very long time, but still the two dimensional versions of that kept going on to exist. So I don't know? The reduction to a flat surface seems to give our human brain some kind of... It's an extra, actually more than reduction, because it adds the perspective of something. So I'm wondering if that tells us, okay, no, maybe not everything will go to 3D in our world at some point, but we, as humans want to have some perspective or perspective of the photographer or the special lightning, especially from this direction. So the reduction can be an extra, maybe?

○ But the attractiveness of the photograph is not its flatness. It is the opposite. It is the illusion that I see, from my impression, a real space with real people and real landscape. This reality effect is what normally affects me or many, many people. So that I can say, okay, this has really happened. When I take a photograph now from this room, then I can say, "Okay, this is not a flat surface. This is you and you sitting on this day in the evening in this room."

So we don't really see the flatness. A photograph where the flatness is visible, is absolutely not interesting for most of the people. This might be experimental photography or something which is modernist in the way as Clement Greenberg has described it: a photograph which demonstrates its flatness.

□ But still, I would say that on the practical level, each of us owns much more flat objects than non-flat objects.

○ Yes.

□ We all have lots of photos, even. And yes, and of course we see the space and people, but we touch it and we kind of can have them in quite a small place. And I think it's relatively recent developments. Well, recently we speak of starting with, I don't know, 19th century, when the photos and books and images became so common. Because when we go, again back in history, then probably there were

much less flat objects. If we look at these first portraits like these Fayum portraits that were put in the coffin with dead people. I think for the people of that time, it looked amazing.

So just a piece of wood, and then it represents a person in a very naturalistic way, something which for us is quite normal. For me it's rather than 3D printer is something strange, which I don't know how it works actually. But for them it was a miracle. But right now I think the idea of flat image is the most common thing which surrounds us absolutely everywhere. So it's actually very difficult to speak about flatness, because it's so normal.

○ So it's like fish talking about water. Yeah?

* I think in the old cave paintings, there have always been these two objects, like the object made of wood or anything, and the hand pushed on the wall with color. So this is maybe the first flat image.

○ Yes. But the cave is never really flat. It's curvy. And the cave painters also were very clever, including the irregularities of the surface of the stone into their images. So it was two and three dimensional at the same time.

□ Yeah. When we speak about flat, I think we also speak about two different things, smooth but also thin. There can be smooth things that are not thin, like this table which is not really thin. And then there can be seen things that are not completely smooth. They have more like a natural surface that's probably in nature, like a leaf of a tree, it's thin but it's not smooth actually. But I don't know what I want to say.

○ Yeah, this is an interesting idea, but I think that in our cultural production, flat things always tend to get very smooth and also very thin. So the ideal to be thin-

□ Because it's cheaper.

○ Again, the example of the smartphone: It's cheaper, it's not so heavy. But when you imagine how cell phones looked like in the 1990s, they were like bricks, you could kill-

□ Yeah. This is also fashion in gen Z. If they are thinner, they think, they're more sophisticated. Yeah, interestingly. So will it go... So we see now actually the reversal of many cultural trends and social trends with the rethinking of climate change. And so many things are being kind of rethought. This fashion of flatness, will it stop? I don't know.

○ Yeah, we have both at the same time. So we have, as you have told, there's this ideal of flatness and of the thin structure or element. So, for example, when I talk to architects they tell me how to construct a flat roof, that it looks like to be

very, very thin. Which is not really possible because you have to do all the insulation stuff. And then they have all the machines for building services on the roof for climatization and so on.

So it is very, very difficult to construct a flat roof which looks like to be thin, and the architects have got a lot of tricks that it looks like that, but actually it isn't. This is an ideal, which is still very, very prominent. At the same time we have this comeback of natural things. So you have just a wooden beam, very fat, very rustical, used as a table in fancy restaurants, for example. There is nothing flat and there's nothing thin. It's just wood. So you experience the material as such

○ Very rustical, used as a table in some fancy restaurants, for example. There is nothing flat and there's nothing thin. It's just wood. So you experience the material as such.

□ Yeah, because that's about authenticity. [inaudible 00:46:15].

○ Authenticity, yes.

□ It signals something else.

○ To be authentic and not artificial.

/ That's the two parameters to say there is the extent of flatness is culturally dependent as you have mentioned, but also there is some temporal evolvement. Apparently right now in some parts, we are evolving towards more flat in many designs. Do you think that's something how it'll continue, it'll be an oscillation between more and less flat design and that's distributed over different cultures and how will the future look like?

○ That's a good question, man.

/ Or will some things just become flatter and flatter until ...

□ I think it might disappear. So indeed, you cannot probably make a credit card even flatter than it is, but what you can and then get rid of credit card at all and just check your fingerprint or your eye, so your body. The flatness goes, but then your body becomes involved, which is a bit scary.

○ So the flat things are just one step towards ...

□ Maybe.

* Disappearing.

○ Where everything disappears and just we remain.

□ Yeah, instead of film or photos, just a 3-D reality which surrounds you. Instead of money just transfer with your thoughts and yeah, I don't know. Paper does not exist anymore anyway.

○ This is old-fashioned to have paper.

□ Yeah, my Moleskine is very old-fashioned, which I like very much.

* Still looks very flat and thin.

□ Yeah. I like it very much. Yeah, this old perspectives are scary so that there must be some sort of resistance to it where people would value things that are not flat. Is it like a restaurant with really heavy wooden tables or things like that.

* I also found interesting the idea of flatness and reactionary movements. It's funny that you mentioned this postcard. I've seen it once as an example of degrading modernism. Then in Silvester's introduction there was also the flat earth theory. So on the one hand, these are two movements against modernity, against enlightenment, like the flat earth theory that's doubting that the earth has volume and is curved. The other that the flat roof is opposed to German or "Aryan" culture. I just found this remarkable that there are two movements. The one is in favor of flatness and the other is against flatness and both are directed against enlightenment and modernism.

○ Yes, I think in culture, nearly all signs can be used for everything. The semantics of a sign can change. One time it's this and the other time it's that. I doubt that cultural products or artworks always have to have the same meaning. Meanings are changing. Also in this very political and polemical and not very grounded or scientific discourse, people just take what they find to use it as a weapon in the cultural or the political discussion war.

/ When you mentioned the Germans before and how they mentioned that the flat architecture is not deep enough maybe for ... I could have expected or I expected something the opposite way. Maybe Germans identified themselves as straightforward, functional society and therefore they like the flat architecture. So in that sense, arbitrary they can pick whatever the culture.

○ We'll find also this argument on the other side of course.

□ This is a post-war, newly invented identity of Germany. A modern country starting with the '50s where indeed the most typical architecture of Germany would be modernist. If you see something in chalet style, then it's rather Carynthia

* Yeah, I mean this postcard, the style this postcard has, it reminds me of course also to current right-wing movements in Germany where right-wing poli-

ticians meet and discuss the questions of how to deport people in order to get rid of non-German cultures. That's also the mindset of this postcard of course. So it's still in some people's minds.

- I think this is still, or it comes back, I would say, because it's funny ...
- * I think it was always there.
- It was always there and now it is getting more visible or it has more voters.
- It's on the surface.
- Yeah. The funny thing is that – I don't know how it was in Germany, maybe it was similar – in the countryside of Austria buildings with flat roofs have been forbidden for a very long time.
- Forbidden.
- Forbidden, yes.
- For which reason?
- This does not fit into the ...
- Aesthetically doesn't fit.
- It doesn't fit in the landscape. The traditional landscape has this pitched roof.
- I did not know that.
- It was forbidden and all the architects fought for being allowed to build buildings on the countryside with flat roofs. This was a long, long cultural war you could say. Now since I would guess 20 years, you have been allowed to build buildings with flat roofs. Then the architects again were moaning: "Oh no, what have we done? Look at these ugly boxes in the countryside." Now again the more progressive architects built buildings with pitched roofs.
- More organic.
- It really fits much better into the landscape when you compare it to these white boxes on the countryside.
- The whole point was not to fit. So because that modernist building is a statement which you were saying, "I do not fit. I'm not a tree, I'm not a lake, I'm a white, strange object." This is the whole point. Yeah, they're very uncomfortable those places. I've been there. The ideological point is very strong.

○ In many times, the people who move out from the cities to the suburbs or to the countryside to build their own detached house with a garden and so on, want to have this modernist box with the flat roof. Now the architects complain: “No, that doesn’t fit to the landscape.” We have a kind of total conversion of the whole discussion. These things are always changing and evolving.

□ It still remains a strong statement, that people can agree with it and not agree with it. It’s still this flatness remains a strong statement. Aesthetical and even political.

○ It’s saying, I am modern, I’m new. So when you say: I would like to have a modern house, that means, in most times, it has to have a flat roof. This is what they want. They don’t want to be outdated or backwards or something else.

/ I strongly disagreed with the flat architecture when I was in Norway because there they have this little, not always little, but the wooden red houses as you might know, similar to Sweden and with the nice roofs on them. Sometimes the non-flat roofs have still grass on it and they put their sheeps on the roofs to eat the grass from time to time.

□ Oh, really?

/ Yes.

□ That I’ve never seen.

/ Then you see, like you described a white box somewhere in between. It’s like, it doesn’t feel right in this nice fairytale landscape, something flat and functional like this or seemingly functional.

○ I would like to go back to the notion you, Silvester, have made at the beginning of our talk when you said that flatness is always an illusion. It does not really exist in our universe. I didn’t realize this before and I think this is very interesting that we adore somehow this idea or we have this ideal of something which does not really exist in nature.

It is an ideal, it is fantasy. For example, when we go to the Midwest of the United States where the prairie is absolutely flat: You have just the sky over you and the flat prairie below you. But the flat prairie is not really flat. It is an abstraction.

/ I guess partly the reason is that humans come up with the simplest solution they can find partly. So when we see is mostly from our human perspective, down to earth perspective, is that the earth is flat, why should we come up with a more complex solution than the rest will be flat all over? It would add some complexity without any reason to assume it will be curved. To some degree flat, flat surfaces or straight lines or this is one of the simplest things that we can assume.

○ Yes. It's much easier to make a somehow curvy line than to make a really straight line. To produce a really straight line without any technical aids is really difficult. So maybe this is the fascination of these things that they are hard to produce. They are simple on one hand, but to make them is nearly impossible or very, very difficult.

□ It is an abstraction and it also requires some technology, at least some sort of technology to make things flat.

/ I don't know. I see also in nature the beauty of sometimes simple things, but then some interplay between simplicity that makes something beautiful, but then also something that gives complexity, can make things richer and more beautiful, gives more possibilities of how our universe works. For example, when Einstein came up that our space-time is not flat, but can be curved, completely new world opened up what can happen in our universe.

□ Yeah, we're now mostly talking about aesthetical things, but from the scientific point of view, there is no such thing as flatness. Right? Or how would you describe it?

/ I would say most of the times, at least that we assumed flatness, it turned out to be not flat. I mean most of the things are not idealized anyway in nature as we pictured them. So an idealized flat surface I guess does not exist in nature as we abstract it away.

○ Like a clean room without any dust is nearly impossible to produce. You can have I think 99.99% without dust, but not hundred percent. It's impossible. So this is also the difficulty of having purity. I think flatness has also something to do with our idea of purity. Absolute purity or cleanliness. Purity and cleanliness of different things don't really exist either. This is the reason why – I repeat myself – why we like it so much because it is something we can't really reach. Like a Fata Morgana. We want to have it, but it always disappears.

* It's also the fact with the projection of the earth, I mean the earth is somehow crucial in this discussion because if we look at maps, maps are flat renderings of a non-flat earth. There's always problems with that because the rendering is never exact. You cannot render a ball. Then there's political questions all around it. That's interesting. I think the idea of forced flatness leads to problems.

○ I think the map is a good keyword because flatness has also a lot to do with power. When you have a map, then somehow you own this piece of earth, you can grasp it, you can understand it, you know where everything is. So it becomes an object for you. When we go back to the history of map producing, so this always had a lot to do with commerce on one hand and on the other hand with military and with the politics of war. I need a map of the country I want to conquer with my army.

* Colonialism.

○ Colonialism for example. Here flatness is a tool for having power over this special piece of the earth, of this land. Who owns the map also somehow owns the land. You can go also into our galaxy. Mapping the whole galaxy means also what can I do with it? How can I use it?

/ It lets people dream maybe how they could use the power. First doing it on the flat map lets people dream how to project it in reality, imagine it first and then sometimes unfortunately realize it.

□ Yeah, you made a very strong point with those maps because indeed translating our spherical planet into a flat map actually changes proportions. The size of Africa is actually much bigger in relation to other continents, but we don't see it because it is being rendered from one particular physical point of view. I guess to translate something spherical into something flat can be done differently according to from which point of view you are doing it. We're looking at a map which is done from our probably European perspective.

Actually, the world map in Australia, is it still same thing or is it upside down? I don't know, I have no idea. So they also kind of accepting that it is the upper part is here and theirs is the lower part, although it's actually not necessarily the case.

○ I would like to go to another meaning of flat. Flat is also used as a noun, a word for an apartment. Why is there this coincidence? Does it just happen to read the same or does this mean something? Flat means that I live on one level so I don't have a house with more floors.

□ As opposed to a house.

○ Yeah, usually an apartment has just one level. The interesting thing is that the idea of the apartment or the flat is connected with the idea of housing, sometimes also social housing. I need a certain amount of square meters for a certain amount of people. So it is a very simple ratio having the amount of people and the amount of apartments or the amount of square meters, although we are actually talking about space, i.e. three dimensions. In our society, in our economy, we just count the two-dimensional surface.

Of course, you cannot live in a flat which has just the height of one meter. You need two meter and a half or something else minimum. What makes the quality of this apartment is absolutely out of sight because a flat with two meter 20 height or four meters is something absolutely different. But what counts is just the square meters. Henri Lefebvre has observed in his history of imaginations of space, that in the capitalist society we have this view from above. This view on the map where also the building lots and the whole world you could say is looked from above as flat

pieces which can be purchased or sold or something else. It's no longer the central perspective view which was created in the Renaissance that you walk through a city and have this perspective view. You just look from above and have this more or less "flat flats".

* This is interesting. Yeah, I never thought about it.

/ Interesting to know. And I was also wondering before our conversation started, are we actually talking about apartment flats or about the more abstract flat. But it's interesting to see the connection here. Yeah.

* I always had to think. I remember that you talked about this impossibility of flatness and that each material has a depth. And if you go into it, or if you zoom out, you see that the earth is curved, it's not flat. And now that you mentioned the view from above, I had to think of Powers of Ten, the movie. Was it by Ray and Charles Eames? I'm not-

□ Which film?

* Powers of Ten. Powers of Ten. It's an early film that emulates somehow Google Street view, Google Earth, I'm sorry, Google Earth. So it's a simulated view from the sky to the earth, zooming in, zooming into a scene where people have picnic and then zooming into people's skin, zooming into the body. So it starts with this objectifying view from above, but it renders the flat view and gives it materiality somehow. Renders in and out. Yeah. But it doesn't make sense maybe if you haven't seen it to discuss it, but-

○ It is a kind of macro and micro perspective. And now you have, I think the whole earth is in the beginning or the-

* Yeah, the whole earth.

○ The whole earth. And then-

* So you know the film, right?

○ I've seen it one year ago, I guess. And then it zooms in and to the atoms and tiniest elements.

* Yeah, I had to think of that in your introduction.

/ Yes.

○ Yes.

/ Know what to watch.

□ So it always brings us to the fact that flatness also in an apartment situation, it has some element of abstraction and reduction of the human space, which has to be a space. It's reduced to the surface in the same way it is reduced to the capitalist indeed mapping of territories to be sold. So then it's this flatness becomes this capitalist element. Something to think about.

○ Yeah, as you have told us before that we have produced so many flat things like paper and all this stuff is always flat. In this shape, things can be used more easily as commodities, I guess.

* We haven't talked about flat jokes although this is an exhibition about humor.

○ That's true. That's true.

/ Do you have one?

* No, I'm not a good joke teller.

○ I have got the allowance by my wife when we got married that I can make one flat joke a day, but just one.

* So you can make one now.

○ I fear I have already made my joke in the morning. Yes. Flat jokes.

□ So flat joke is a joke, which is not deep. What does it mean for the [inaudible 01:13:52]?

* Yeah, I mean, I don't know if this term exists in English actually in German it's called Flachwitz. Yeah, it's-

○ It's a flat joke.

* It's not complex.

○ It's a flat joke. It is a-

* It's a very simple joke.

○ Very simple. It's simple, not really bad. It's simple.

□ That illustrates your point that German culture wants to be deep. Even in its jokes

○ Yes. Even in jokes. Even jokes have to have a serious meaning. The second serious meaning. Yeah. Yeah, this is a good point.

□ Yeah. So flat indeed works as a negative characteristic, which was assumed and adopted by culture because it's easier to produce, to reproduce, to calculate, to sell. And it's easier to measure, indeed. It's all very much into this capitalist logic of growth and calculation.

★ So you mean the negative notion derives from this?

□ Well, I think initially it was probably seen as negative, but against us feeling this negative and even using it as a negative term, the culture and the everyday culture actually produced more, and more, and more and more of that flatness. And this was the question we discussed. To what extent can it go? So how flat can our world become like all Ikea furniture or... So then it'll be just dissipate. So when it's becoming flatter and flatter or there will be a resistance to it, as you say, in architecture. Like there is a resistance to flat roofs.

○ Yeah. When I talk to my students when they write a master thesis or a PhD, then I observe myself that I rather frequently tell them, "Don't just remain on the surface. You have to take just a small piece of land, of the scientific land, but you have to go deep. You have to drill into the very hard ground to find out something really new. Just surfing on the surface is not science. This is Wikipedia or something else."

□ Yeah, I'm saying that too, but not even as a metaphor, but on a very practical level. Young curators when they built an exhibition, they think of putting one work here, one work there, but they don't think about the space. And I always have to stress that any exhibition is the space. You have to think in the first place how you go through it. I'm always asking, "Okay, what do I see? I'm entering this room, what do I see first where I'm supposed to move, where you want me to move in this space?" So it's always a spatial situation to me, but it's being easily forgotten. That's true because it's also still easier to see it. It's just a wall with some flat elements on a flat wall.

So for me, it requires an effort. Of course with contemporary students when used to teach in a photography school to remind them that there is such a thing as reality, it was already difficult. Because everything is happening indeed on screen, on a very flat surface, and it requires effort to go out of it. So maybe we live in the flat world already and we need an effort to go out of it..

○ This is interesting. In my former life, I've been a curator, but it's long, long ago. A question to both of you, Anna and Ekaterina: When curators plan an exhibition now, do they use maps of the exhibition space? Or do they make a model, a 3D model? Or what is state of the art now?

□ Well, it depends, of course. You have a space now, which you know very well because you work with it. I, as a festival director, have each time a new space. I don't do three-dimensional models, but I do draw and I am trying to imagine a

space, and we use Sketchup... I mean I don't physically build a model, but with production we do build a three-dimensional rendering of it where we have to see what fits there. But indeed, as I said, what do we see first? How do we move into space? Especially when it's a complex space, it is useful. And there are special programs for that. Yes, true.

* Actually, I have a model. I work with the model because as you mentioned, it's the same space. So I had a model built in 1 to 30 and I can use it as a model, like a puppet house we call it. It's my little puppet house. And I can also use computer programs, but that are flat in design and then print it in 1 to 30 and put it in the space, in space model. And what I also do, so there's a movement between two and three-dimensional. And I also like to film when I put these works in the space model and then I film with my phone through it.

○ Oh, good.

* And this gives an impression of space, although it's two-dimensional images. It's funny how this-

□ That's a great method, I find it important. Sometimes unexperienced curators think of a space as a page of a book. They just put some works on the page. But it's not only that. We have to feel. And, as I say, we always have to see with our back as well: we see something, but we also see something we just saw two seconds ago, and it's still in our head. So it's actually a volume situation, but it requires an effort to remember this.

○ When I go to exhibitions, it's rather often an impression for me that these exhibitions have been made somehow two-dimensional by the curators. It's more paper in a metaphorical way, paper on the walls.

□ One has to fight it somehow.

○ It's difficult, of course. And in your field, Silvester, are there maps or two-dimensional illustrations used or is this something old-fashioned and no longer in use?

/ No, definitely it's still used because in the end that's the only way to communicate. Even for the computers to us is with two-dimensional maps, or graphs or whatever, which is actually a challenge because if we want to map either artificial neural networks and what they do inside, they're very high dimensional, we say. We have to map them somehow useful to two dimensions, which is not always an easy task. But for us it's necessary because it's the only way for us to visualize, understand something in 2D or maximum 3D. And beyond, that's where our brain is not made for more dimensions. And since you mentioned the movie before, there's also a nice book called Flatland. I'm not sure if you've heard of it. But there, it's a story about little abstract creatures, geometric creatures. So I think if I remember

correctly, the book starts with little points that talk about the higher dimension of lines if they ever heard of them.

But society was not ready for that and said, “No...” Believed to be crazy. And then the book goes on to the two-dimensional creatures that talk about the three dimensions. And then at the end there are this... Yeah. There are this two-dimensional creatures made out of squares or little triangles, all made within a funny story. Because each has its own character and they’re talking about the three dimensions and they can’t imagine something like this. Another dimension, how would it look like and make...?

And the aim of the book, I imagine, is to extrapolate that for us and that we are kind of stuck in our imaginations in three dimensions. Whereas in theory, there could be four dimensions or five dimensions and more. Indeed, in physics, actually we have four, or they talk about four dimensions because we have space and time which interact within each other. But then again, this space-time is hard for us or maybe impossible to imagine. So we again have to go back to write this structure down on paper, a two-dimensional structure. So in the end, wherever we work, we have to put it down to two dimensions or three dimensions in order for us to grasp it intuitively.

○ Yeah, that sounds nice. It says that visualizing something means that it has to be flattened and it has to be reduced to two dimensions in nearly all fields of culture and research.

□ And time. Can time be flat or not? Can this notion be applied to time?

/ It’s a good question. It’s a good question. Because usually we apply the-

□ To space.

/ To space. Not only that, but we apply it to something that has at least two variables. We say, “This table is flat and we can assign it to it because we can go left or right or up and left.” It’s hard to communicate that through the microphone now, but I hope you get the idea. And whereas for time basically only has one parameter.

□ Linear time.

/ So it’s a good question whether you can build or apply it to time or something.

□ I don’t know anything about it, but is time always linear or is it simply because of our human life, this is how we perceive it as a line? Yeah.

/ So linear is another term and no, it’s not always linear. So as also Einstein found out that time can be relative. So it depends on first where we are in our spa-

ce-time zone and clocks run differently here on earth, then we would on a mountain because the gravity is weaker there. And also if we move fast, very fast, I have to say in order to get noticeable, then the time will run slower or faster.

□ So the time is actually more complex than we assume in our everyday life. That probably means that in our everyday life, we experience time as flat, although it's actually much more complex

/ Exactly.

□ ... than that.

* I once learned that there's this term chrono-normativity, which means that we perceive time only as linear.

/ Right.

* So normativity would be flatness in that.

/ Yeah, I think so. Yeah, that's a good analogy for that.

○ Is this really true from the personal human perspective, that time is not linear?

* How we narrate it, it is, I would say that we always advance-

○ No, sorry, it's linear, but time does not always have the same speed, I would say. For us.

* No. I think chrono-normativity is about linearity.

○ Linearity, yeah, yeah, of course. Yeah.

* Yeah. But the speed is different.

○ Yes.

/ Subjectively and physically.

○ Yeah.

/ Yeah, exactly.

□ No, I think our perception of time as a linear thing from the past toward the future is really very, very much affected by human mortality. This is a historical perspective of time, a very human perspective of time. And I guess nature might have a very different one. I don't know anyone who has a different experience, well I assume that.

○ Yes. We have to ask nature how it perceives time.

□ Yeah. Or other creatures who don't have that sort of feeling. So I guess there is a space for time to be considered either flat or non-flat. This is a fascinating perspective and I thought about it.

○ But is the whole time like space an abstraction?

/ Space-time, the combination of it?

○ No, no. Isn't time like space an abstraction made by some humans some time?

/ Yes.

○ Like the black hole?

/ Every model that we have-

○ It's just a question, I don't know.

/ Yeah, I think so. Every model that we have and that we assign words to like space and time in the end is an abstraction in this sense. But for us apparently worked out very well in order to predict many things that happen in the world to organize it in that way and to take the abstraction of space and time. Initially it was separated, but then it turned out, "Okay, if we combine them and explain it in a similar way, space-time, as we did before with just space or time separately, then we can predict even more with this." So yeah, it's an abstraction, but maybe a useful one. Yes.

○ Yes. Very useful. Of course. Yeah. Now we have moved to the last questions of the universe.

/ From flat jokes to-

○ flat jokes.

/ ... to the universe.

□ I think we already went to such philosophical depths, not flatness, so I really need time to intellectually digest all of it. I don't have immediately more thoughts about the flatness.

* And I found also fascinating that every one of us was talking about the specificities of her or his own field, and it was interesting how this could overlap somehow, sometimes.

□ I actually went way beyond my field of competence. So I said lots of bullshit about something I absolutely don't know about, but I was very glad to do it.

/ That's why we here, right? We have all the freedom and the-

Opinions.

* Yeah, it's clandestine.

/ Yeah, I enjoyed it very much as well. Saw the connections, the differences between how it's used, especially the connections, the metaphors which connect the flatness in different ways.

Then we probably might also thank each other and the artist who gave us an opportunity to think about a notion actually that would probably never come to mind.

And to sit here in this nice basement room.

It's a secret room, but we also have to thank the institution-

Okay. Okay.

It's a secret room, but we also have to send the institution-

Basement room somewhere in the world.

Yeah, the curators of the project and the institution who's hosting.

It's very clandestine. Yes. Thank you very much. It was really nice.

/ Thank you very much.

Thank you.

* Thank you.

Yeah, thank you.

* Thank you. Thanks, the technicians.

) Thank you.

Yes.

Thanks to the technician.