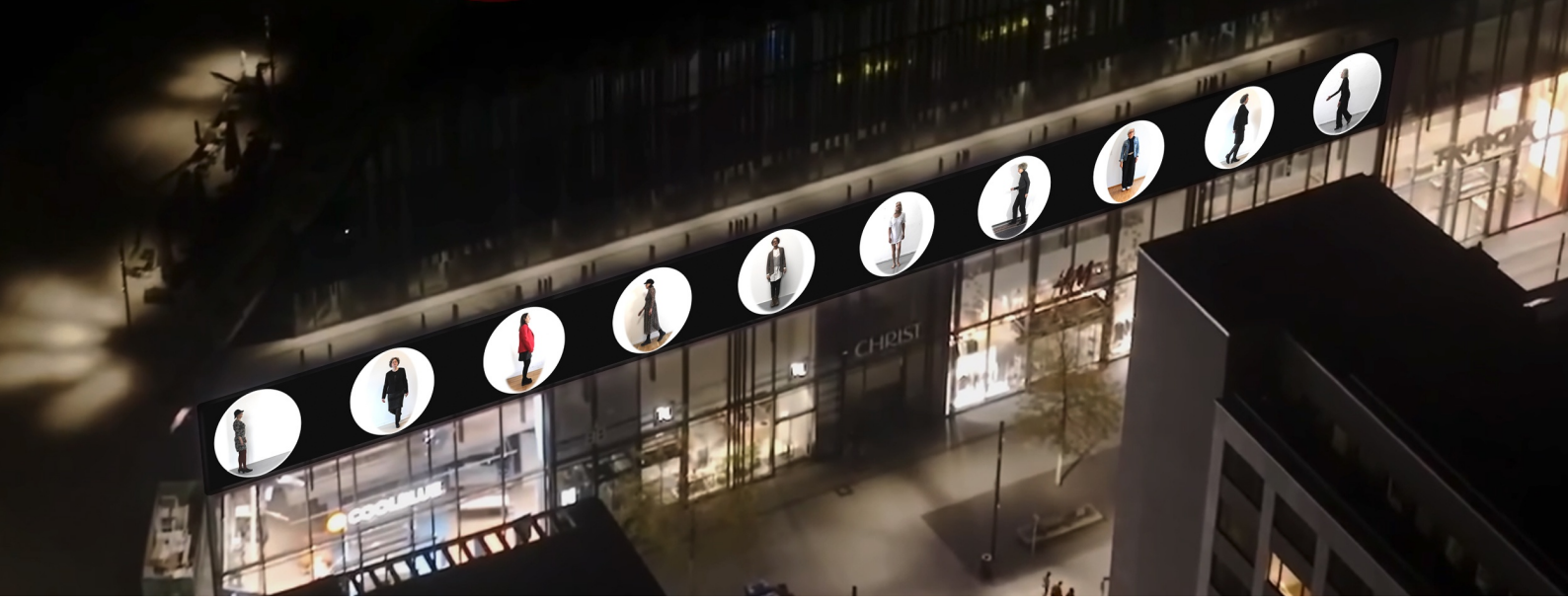

INTERVIEW WITH MYRIAM THYES

Meike Spanner, 2026

Question: Many artists say that they developed an interest in art at a very early age, even as children, and had access to it from an early age. Was that the case for you?

Myriam Thyes: In my case, it was actually true that I started drawing circles, spirals and lines with a pen when I was a very small child, around one and a half years old. My younger sister and I were always drawing and painting, and we also incorporated this into our games, for example with dolls, stuffed animals and LEGO. These were essentially multi-layered games that always included painted pictures or paper creations.

Question: Was there any encouragement in the family?

Myriam Thyes: We weren't taught, but we were given coloured pencils, felt-tip pens, drawing pads and craft materials as gifts and were praised for our 'works'. Art, literature, theatre and concerts were familiar to us from childhood through our parents and their circle of friends. My father was an architect, my mother was trained as actress. In addition, my parents sent us to the Rudolf Steiner School in Zurich because of its strong focus on the arts. That certainly helped. My interest in these subjects therefore did not need to be particularly encouraged.

Question: Interests that one has in childhood sometimes do not last very long. Interests can shift and change. As teenagers, many rebel and want the opposite of what their parents exemplify or represent.

Myriam Thyes: I wasn't a rebellious (but supposedly cheeky) teenager, I didn't rebel particularly. I always had a wide range of interests, for example I read a lot, took flute lessons, and went to jazz dance and ballroom dance schools for years. However, I never wanted to pursue music professionally. I knew very early on that I wanted to do something with painting and drawing.

Question: What happened next?

Myriam Thyes: From around the age of 17, I started to get involved in scientific drawing, among other things. My father and I attended a course in scientific drawing and watercolour painting together. It was held by Cornelia Hesse-Honnegger, who is an authority in this field. I also became interested in stage design for the theatre, partly because I had a connection to it through my parents and their circle of friends. But I didn't want to commit myself at that point.

Question: And after your A-levels?

Myriam Thyes: I completed the 'preliminary course', the foundation year at the College of Design in Zurich. What we know today as the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) did not exist at that time. It only developed into a university with the advance of digitalisation. The foundation year was very broad, ranging from painting and drawing in the artistic sense to technical drawing and typography to costume design. After that, you could specialise, but only in applied fields, and I didn't want that. I wanted to study fine art. And I also wanted to work: after the preliminary course, I worked in a retirement home for six months. Then I became interested in stage design, which combined practical work and artistic orientation.

Question: Were you able to gain experience in this field?

Myriam Thyes: Yes, during the 1985 to 1986 season, I was able to complete a nine-month internship in stage design at the Badisches Staatstheater in Karlsruhe, where I shadowed and worked directly with the house assistant. I learned an incredible amount there. Inspired by theatre rehearsals, I also designed pictures and took them to Karl Kneidl, the stage design professor at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, to ask him whether my work was good enough to apply. He encouraged me to develop something bigger based on a play. I began by painting scenes from Hamlet, which was staged in Karlsruhe in 1986, on newspaper glued to cardboard. With this and my earlier work, I applied to the Düsseldorf Art Academy and was accepted. There, after a one-year 'orientation period,' you had to specialise, and I chose the stage design class. But I soon realised that this was too restrictive for me. Fine art was more my thing after all.

Question: How much did studying art influence you?

Myriam Thyes: It's important to know that at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, art students are expected to develop their own projects and come up with their own ideas right from the start. You are given hardly any assignments and little assistance. You were thrown in at the deep end, so to speak. In that sense, my studies were the exploratory and experimental beginning of my own artistic work. Of course, I also attended lectures, but there were only a few, and they hardly covered classical modernism and the 20th century. My professor of painting, Rissa, and later my professor of video art, Nan Hoover, were of course important to me. So were the contact and exchange with fellow students from different classes. I was also interested in the other disciplines.

Question: You mention the two female professors. But women were generally underrepresented in research and teaching at that time, weren't they?

Myriam Thyes: Yes, unfortunately. That's why we founded a feminist student group in 1989 (IG Frauen in der bildenden Kunst – Women in the Visual Arts). This was mainly due to the lack of female role models in art, who did exist but were not shown. And due to the lack of female teachers. We put together our own course of study. We were a group of about nine young women who invited female artists, art historians, filmmakers and cultural scientists to give guest lectures, film screenings, performances and workshops. That was an important part of my studies, namely organising for myself what I wanted to learn.

Question: Were you already interested in digital art back then?

Myriam Thyes: Digital art didn't exist at the academy back then (1986-1992). It may have existed at the Fraunhofer Institute or in the USA. I initially studied painting and drawing, but I was already looking for collage, photomontage and video. In 1990, I received a scholarship for six months in Paris and learned an incredible amount there. Living in Paris made me realise what particularly interested me artistically, namely people, movement and light. After my return, I began attending Nan Hoover's video art class at the art academy. I regularly attended the weekly colloquiums and, of course, took all the technical courses, such as video camera, sound, editing and effects. At that time, electronic craftsmanship was still analogue, with magnetic tapes for video and sound! On the one hand, it was very exciting, but sometimes it was also difficult, as there were many technical errors that you could do almost nothing about. For example, it was impossible to edit videos frame by frame. It was complex, and we were not yet at a user-friendly level. Between 1990 and 1992, television studios were at most, but we at the academy were not. Nevertheless, I created my first videos back then.

Question: Did you then graduate from the academy, or how did it work there?

Myriam Thyes: The art academy is not a university, so there were no traditional final exams, at least not at that

time. In 1992, I was awarded the title of 'Meisterschüler*in' (master student). That was the only degree you could get there at the time. I spent the last year and a half of my studies working partly as a student assistant in the academy's archive. There I gained further exciting insights into the art scene and art history. I completed my studies in September 1992 because I didn't want to be a student anymore at the age of 30. So I stopped at the age of 29. However, this meant that I lost access to video technology for the time being.

Question: At that time, people didn't have that kind of technology at home, right?

Myriam Thyes: Exactly, it was too complicated and too expensive. There were also no workshops for electronic artists at that time. I initially returned to painting and had contacts with galleries, but that didn't work out. From 1996 to 1998, I did internships and jobs at multimedia agencies. That's how I was able to work with digital video equipment for the first time. I had to teach myself digital practices for my art through jobs, internships, courses and textbooks.

Question: It's hard to imagine today, but the web was slow and there were no flat rates. There was no Google either. No affordable user-friendly software for video editing, etc.

Myriam Thyes: That's right. If you were interested in it, you had to find indirect ways to access it. I was able to do this through jobs, namely by doing simple work on great technical equipment, practising video editing and animation, and earning money at the same time. From 1999 onwards, I was also able to do research on the internet, which was a big step. That year, I bought my first computer and learned web design on it.

Question: Was that also the job you did at first?

Myriam Thyes: I actually did a lot of web design for four years, including for documentary filmmaker Elke Jonigkeit-Kaminski. She wanted to implement a project about female artists from North-Rhine-Westphalia in the 20th century in the form of a CD-ROM. I said to her: Let's do it with newer technology, i.e. web technology, set up as a website, but on CD. I learned a lot again in the process, as it involved a wide variety of art forms, e.g. female directors, visual artists, dancers, etc. It was a cultural project, but it wasn't my own art. Of course, I had a lot of artistic freedom, but it was still a job to earn money. I didn't have much time to concentrate on my own art. I still managed to do a little art, but organising exhibitions, for example, was hardly possible in those years.

Question: That raises the question of how much artists are taken into account financially at exhibitions where there are many funding sources. It often seems to me that, although artists provide the material for such events, they themselves are only given a pittance in return.

Myriam Thyes: That's exactly the point. It's one of the reasons why I'm involved in the Deutscher Künstlerbund (German Artists' Association), the Kulturrat NRW (North Rhine-Westphalia Cultural Council) and various cultural policy contexts. Namely because there is no exhibition fee. We are slowly getting to the point where exhibition fees are being introduced, i.e. for making one's art available in the first place. Exhibition fees, on the other hand, mean that one is remunerated for helping with set-up and dismantling, for preliminary discussions, for producing new works especially for an exhibition. But the amount of the fees does not cover what one does and what one actually needs. Costs such as transport, travel, accommodation and expenses are usually reimbursed. But we receive at most an expense allowance, not a real fee.

Question: This is certainly nothing new in the art world. But if you compare it to other artistic disciplines, it would be like not paying a band that plays at a festival. It's as if you were giving a DJ alms for his beats instead of paying him properly. It sounds scandalous that artists are fobbed off with such marginal sums.

Myriam Thyes: Yes, that's right. It's simply not right and should change. A new production can be very expensive. For example, I need a new camera or a new computer every few years. It's also expensive when I have pictures mounted on aluminium DiBond and Plexiglas, for example. No one reimburses you for such costs. No craftsman would accept that. And it will get even worse in the future: the purchasing budgets for art collections are being cut more and more rigorously. Cultural budgets are getting smaller and smaller. North Rhine-Westphalia spends 0.3 per cent of its budget on culture. If you know what the most expensive areas of culture are, such as opera, then you can roughly calculate what is left for the visual arts. We are always told, 'You can sell your art.' If you work with new media, that's not true at all. Painting may be easier to sell, but even then, If you want to sell not

only pleasingly painted pictures to private individuals, but also sophisticated art to professional collections, whether private or public, it becomes very difficult. Sculptures and digital art have a hard time. Anything that isn't flat, anyway. Photographs don't sell very well either, as they are not considered unique, and in the art market, it is primarily unique pieces that are considered saleable. At the same time, however, exhibitions increasingly demand that reference be made to the space, the architecture, the local community, history and politics. So you work more and more with installations, participation, new media, photographs and local people, which is exciting. But it's labour-intensive and costly, and no one pays you for it.

Question: There are often themed exhibitions by several artists that feel like a long-drawn-out event. Like an overall concept and great for visitors. But the overall effect makes it seem even more unlikely that individual parts of such exhibitions can be sold afterwards. That's counterproductive for survival as an artist, isn't it?

Myriam Thyes: Yes, that's right. The problem is also that it's very difficult for artists to assert themselves and get fair payment. It works better in art in architecture. But that's only a small group that specialises in it. I've never really considered it, because you're limited again: My art is quite critical; I also deal with political issues. I could hardly do that in art in architecture.

Question: That's a good point. What is the content of your art, what do you mainly deal with? Your art often has a direct political reference. Would you go so far as to say that your art is activist?

Myriam Thyes: I don't think my works are activist; there are others that are. But I always find it incredibly exciting to see how social ideas are reflected in culture and cultural history. This is also true from a historical perspective, for example in the Baroque or Renaissance periods. In different eras, art forms had different patrons and also had to reflect political or religious worldviews. Or how artists themselves contributed to changing the images of religion or society. You can credit these artists with having an influence on this, for example on ideas about heaven and hell or the universe. From the 19th century onwards, artists began to caricature or even completely negate traditional ideas with their new art. From the First World War onwards, art critical of war increased, and I think Dada was an important influence here. This was not about a fixed goal, but about working with the material of the world, be it cultural or political, reassembling it, collaging it and thus creating commentaries on social reality.

Question: In this sense, you are also moving in this direction, i.e. by reassembling, collaging and using the means of digital art, right?

Myriam Thyes: Exactly. That's why I'm interested in Baroque, Constructivism and Dada, but also in Hollywood cinema, for example. On the one hand, because they were or are very strong cultural forms. Baroque and Hollywood cinema involve mass media, while Dada was a relatively small group that nevertheless brought its influence from Europe to the USA in the form of a cultural technique of questioning, collaging and deconstructing. For me, these are powerful and at the same time contrasting forms of cultural expression, which I like to combine or bring into dialogue or confrontation with each other.

Question: You once mentioned elsewhere that you feel a great freedom in digital art to destroy things completely and recombine them. This is very different from what would be possible in painting, even if you were to work with crossovers or collages. Is that also the appeal of digital art?

Myriam Thyes: Here I can also combine a wide variety of sources. I work with many different programmes. Flash (now Adobe Animate) is a pure vector animation programme; you animate lines or surfaces. That's completely different from pixel-based animation (e.g. with After Effects). I also use stereoscopic 3D animation. Combining different techniques is very appealing to me. Rhythm and dance inspire me in animation and video editing.

Question: Heretical question: You mentioned freedom. But doesn't digital art also create new dependencies? From electricity, of course, but also from monopolists in terms of programmes, possibly also from tech giants and thus data leeches, and also from templates? But does freedom outweigh that?

Myriam Thyes: Well, even in the most liberal political system, we are always dependent as human beings. We have to eat and drink, and in our civilised technological standard, we also need energy such as electricity, of course. But if resources eventually become too harmful to the climate to be available around the clock, then I would just go back to drawing. I would find it very sad if I could no longer work digitally, but I am very aware of

my dependence on electricity.

I am also quite dependent on Adobe programmes to create my videos, animations, image montages and layouts. I also use open source programmes such as Blender (3D animation) and Libre Office. I admire the programming skills of the developers, who usually enable me to realise my own aesthetic ideas. I don't use templates or ready-made 3D objects (such as human avatars or plants).

On tech giants/data octopuses: I use Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and X/Twitter to communicate about art and politics. I don't post anything private, I don't use WhatsApp and I don't upload my contacts anywhere. However, I want Google, META, X, etc. to use my posted artistic and political content to train their AIs (and I deliberately do not object to this use). This is because I don't want AIs to be trained solely with propaganda, disinformation, right-wing extremist, conspiracy-believing and commercial content. But I expect VG Bild-Kunst (German equivalent to the British ‚Design & Artists Copyright Society') etc. to soon achieve remuneration for artists from corporations for their use of artistic content for AI training.

Question: Do you notice any disadvantages in the general evaluation of digital art compared to visual arts such as painting, also in terms of attention?

Myriam Thyes: I would say that painting and sculpture are still considered by the majority of the population to be the 'real' art, whereas video art is seen as just a bunch of flickering images or something hectic. And I say quite clearly: no, because digital art is as diverse as the visual arts as a whole. This is less of a problem with young audiences. For them, it's more of a problem to sit quietly in front of a screen for fifteen minutes or longer. This clientele is sometimes more interested in VR glasses or gaming situations. Computer games in art are certainly a format with future potential. I myself will not be moving in this area.

Question: Can this be used to engage digital natives in a completely different way?

Myriam Thyes: Yes, that's true. I've also noticed that younger people tend to be more interested in my themes.

Question: Is the form of presentation in digital art possibly a problem for viewers?

Myriam Thyes: I myself much prefer to view digital art as a projection, rather than on a computer screen or television. I like projections on walls or screens or semi-transparent screens. For example, I projected an animation onto a matt Plexiglas surface that hung diagonally in the room. The animation could be seen from both sides.

Question: So there are already many possibilities?

Myriam Thyes: Yes, absolutely. The space also plays a role. I like to project onto walls or ceilings. Together with Maria Anna Dewes, I recently developed a four-channel video installation that is to be projected onto four large, transparent 'walls'.

Question: Projections also offer the opportunity to choose completely different forms of presentation than, for example, simply viewing an image head-on?

Myriam Thyes: Yes, and that's another reason why ceiling projection has been important to me for over ten years. The perspective in the room is special: you can lie comfortably on a mattress and watch the projection on the ceiling, for example. This is particularly appealing in historic buildings, churches or castles with white stucco ceilings.

Question: What would you like to see in order to draw more attention to digital art and bring it out of the shadows?

Myriam Thyes: Digital art does not lead a shadowy existence in exhibitions themselves. Art with new media is very present there. Where it is lacking is in collections and marketing opportunities in general. I am represented by the imai Foundation. It has included some of my moving image works in its archive, tagged and catalogued them. But mainly single-channel videos. imai rarely includes multi-channel and interactive works.

Question: This archive is a way for your art to be communicated and conveyed, isn't it?

Myriam Thyes: Yes, certainly, it also leads to exhibition participations. But imai does not sell videos proactively, only on request.

Question: Keyword AI: Is this being discussed, especially in digital art?

Myriam Thyes: Yes, AI is very much part of the discourse. I am also involved in this, especially in a group in the Kulturrat NRW (North Rhine-Westphalia Cultural Council). The topic has various facets. On the one hand, we want to have a say and receive financial compensation when AI is trained with our works. Conversely, many artists use AI to create their own new works. Working with AI in the artistic field can be simple and stupid, but also highly intelligent and creative. Another point is the extent to which AI influences our opinions. This changes culture and society as a whole. Sometimes I wish that electricity and the internet weren't always available everywhere.

So it remains exciting. Ms Thyes, thank you very much for the interview and your time.

Myriam Thyes: Thank you for your interest and your detailed questions!