



Academic Fables

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Academic Fables

The scorpion sat by the river and watched the incoming wildfire. The flames were drawing closer and the riverbank was no longer safe. At that moment, the scorpion saw a frog sitting on a water lily...

This visual essay (1) is linked to our Berlin art exhibition “Die Eselsbrücke (2) – Academic Fabeln”. In the essay, we present some images of the artworks and the ideas behind them. The names of the pieces also serve as keywords. In addition, we have included some of the interpretations our students have written about the artwork. While in Berlin, we had a productive discussion with our students about the factors that influenced the birth of our artworks. Nevertheless, we persuaded our students to throw themselves into their own subjective interpretations, and we warmly invite our readers to do the same.



Figure 1. The Horizon of Fear

(Academic) Fable

In the fables of Aesop, life experiences are reflected on as a kind of pessimistic life wisdom; the stories represent a practical philosophy of the meek. Constructive virtues, such as diligence or honesty, are rarely praised. In the struggle to survive, one needs a different set of features. The morals of the fables can be summarized thus:

- 1 The world is dangerous and ruthless;
- 2 Selfishness is reasonable;
- 3 The weak cannot hope for justice;
- 4 Goodness is rarely rewarded;
- 5 The dead stay dead;
- 6 Love makes one weak and foolish;

7 Wickedness is mundane and open.

Societal criticism is hidden as satire behind the delicate fable stories. The fables do not genuinely criticize the current circumstances, but human nature in general. In the fables, the animals create a courtlike structure, but the fables hit to the immoral individuals rather than the court.

The term “academic” usually refers to universities; topics related to or characteristic of higher education; or something theoretical, abstract, formal, and unfamiliar to practice. When used with negative connotations, “academic” can denote something conservative, petrified, conventional, and rigid.

The concept of academic art is usually used when one speaks critically about any kind of stationary art or especially the tradition in painting and sculpting that was maintained according to the instruction and education of European Art Academies when the new trends of modernism, such as realism, naturalism, and impressionism, emerged at the end of the nineteenth century.

Although the fables are unkind at their worst, we want to give another perspective and tell stories specifically with the voice of the oppressed and the undervalued. Even though we do not consider ourselves to be oppressed or undervalued ourselves, in our fables, we want to smile at ourselves more than at others.

Why are fables so appropriate to universities?

1. We both have a long experience of working at a university in different positions. This gives us plenty of rich material for academic fables. We are as *The Buck at the Spring* (in Finnish the word ‘lähde’ means both spring and reference) followed the life at the university. Life has absurdity, wickedness, amusement, and elements of the tragicomic – features the fables also share.



Figure 2. The Reference

2. The hierarchical structure of the university as an institution is the inspiration for many of the stories. Its structure resembles the idea of the court presented in the fables. The professors enjoy completely different kinds of benefits compared to the assistants, while the students are the runts of the litter, even though the university is an institution created for them. For example, the mission of the University of Tampere is to educate shapers of the future, people who understand the world and will change it.



Figure 3. The Assistant

The hierarchic structure enables various power structures, but also beneficial relationships between people. Getting to know the right professor or promising young researcher can lead to fruitful results, and the enthusiasm can be mutual. The situation is similar in the world of art. Getting close to a master can have determining effect on one's own artistic development as well as on one's career. The late professor Pentti Kaskipuro, who has educated many of the most noted Finnish graphic artists, stated at the opening of his art exhibition: "For a long time, my most talented students have held me up." (3)

3. The university is characterized by strong specialization: we all have our own allotment. In the field of educational sciences, one specializes in order to stand out from the crowd, even though at the same time the understanding of phenomena requires a broader range.

Figure 4. The Allotment



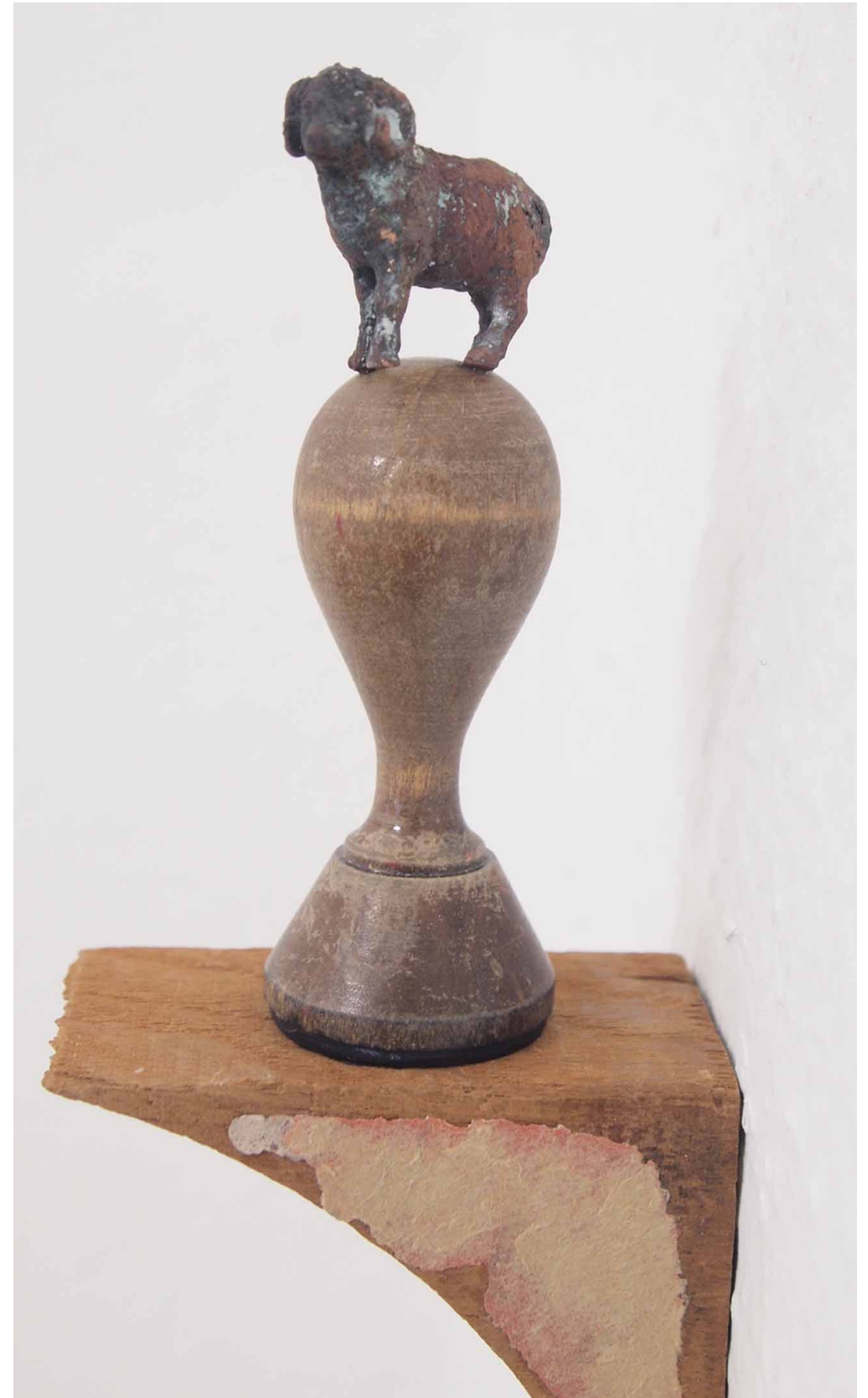
Today (4), we followed in the footsteps of Jörn Donner by visiting the Karlshorst allotment area in Berlin. Donner tells us: “new houses are being built. In the open spaces, the land has been divided into small fenced patches (laubekolonien). One grows useful plants and flowers there. On Sundays, the families sit in front of their small huts and admire the flora... Just as the backyards with their darkness are part of Berlin, the gardens equally belong to the city.” (5)

Even though the allotments have their strict communal rules, the hard-working bumblebee scarcely cares about them and flies from bush to bush.

4. The hierarchic structure attracts mutual rivalry. This is especially evident now due to the cuts in university funding. This is manifested as the almost uncritical production of articles. Quantity replaces quality, and meaningful research and traditional, academic, profound education is lost in the mass production of articles. A substantial list of publications can lead to a good position at the university. If one instead wants to concentrate carefully on what one is doing, and even strive to do something meaningful, one is left to wait for better times in *the ranks of the substitutes*. One must understand the dramatic structure of academic success.

Somehow, we are left with a feeling that the academic world is now in need of black sheep, those who challenge the dominant practices and have the courage to be jesters –mischievous and critical towards themselves and their court.

Figure 5. The Black Sheep



Die Eselsbrücke, constructing the exhibition

We made all the works of the exhibition via a dialogue, a method of working we have created over the years. The creation of the works is not bound to a specific place. We have both contemplated and developed the ideas on our own and discussed them together at the university or via email. The execution of the work required different conditions. It is more natural to work in suitable places with familiar tools and materials in Hämeenlinna. The dialogue means working at the same desk, one being the hand and the other the eye. This dialogue is founded on the tactful and respectful encounter of the other. Sometimes one also has to leave one's own thought to wait, lingering in one's mind or on the desk. We aim to combine our respective strengths and weaknesses, one as a painter and the other as a graphic artist.

As a new feature, we have subcontracted some parts of the works. The designer Pekka Koponen from Lahti Design Institute cast the small bronze sculptures we designed. For us, as a graphic artist and as a painter, it was important to use a traditional sculpting method with as high a quality as possible. The casting made by Pekka Koponen resulted in a rough and colorfully vivid exterior structure that strengthens the content and the interpretative dimensions of the sculptures: they absolutely tempt one to touch them.

Our colleague at the university, Outi Stüber, has served as our social media consultant. She has created and maintained our blog (mertaetpullinen.blogspot.com). We wanted expand the

visibility of our works that are on display in Berlin, but at the same time, we wanted to offer people the opportunity to comment on the work.

Die Eselsbrücke, artworks, and student's stories



Figures 6-7. Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer⁷

A. *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeervii*

I am sailing

I am sailing

Home again

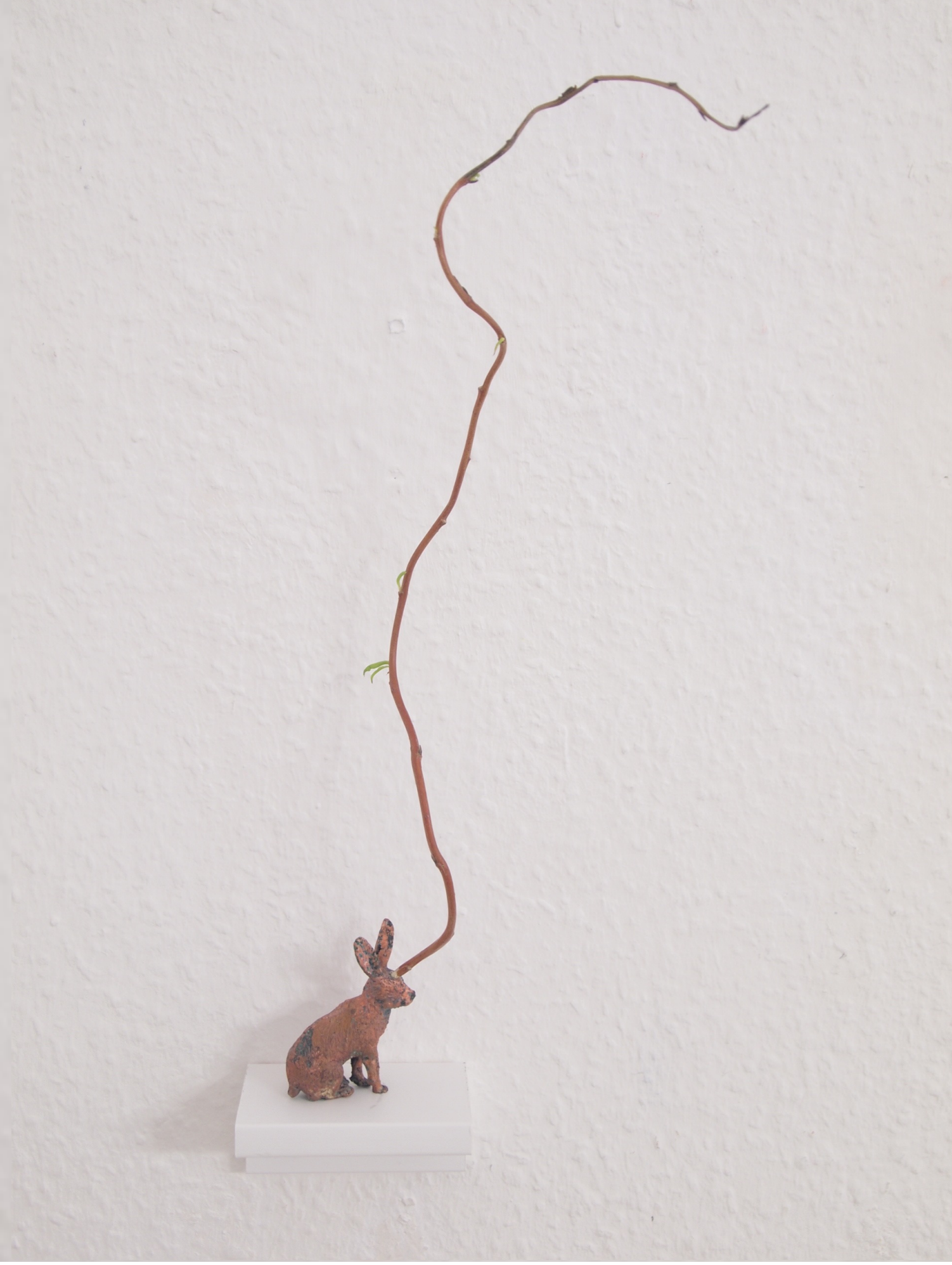
'Cross the sea

I am sailing

Stormy waters

To be near you

To be free



B. Head in the Bush

*No need to hop
when one can reach
Listen for and sniff at
from one's own spot*

*The thought is already far away
how can one catch it anymore
and put it on paper*

*The thought refuses
to draw explicit lines*

*Hopping here
and there
and time runs far away*

Figure 8. Head in the Bush

C. Chained to Tradition

Chained to tradition

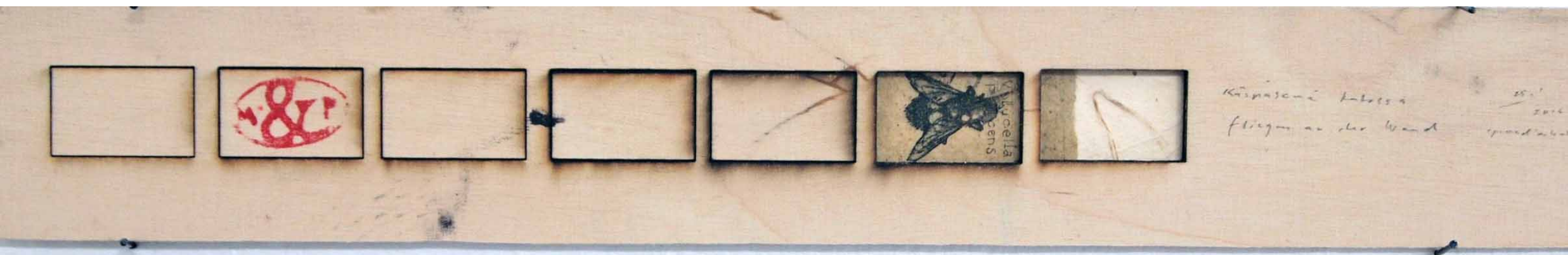
Devastated

howling in pain.

Why does no one hear?



Figure 9. Chained to tradition



D. *Fly on the Wall*

Figure 10. Fly on the Wall

*People have talked about the importance of making observations
And I do notice things
With two thirds of my whole capacity
Would that not be enough to be recognized as a participant?*

*Joining
Daring
Facing
Interaction and withdrawal into oneself
That is my everyday routine
I am a fly
On my own wall*

*People have talked about the importance of making observations
And I do notice things
Deeper via my awareness
Would that not be enough to be recognized as a participant?*

*Joining
Daring
Facing
Interaction and withdrawal into oneself
That is my everyday routine
I am a fly
In my own life*

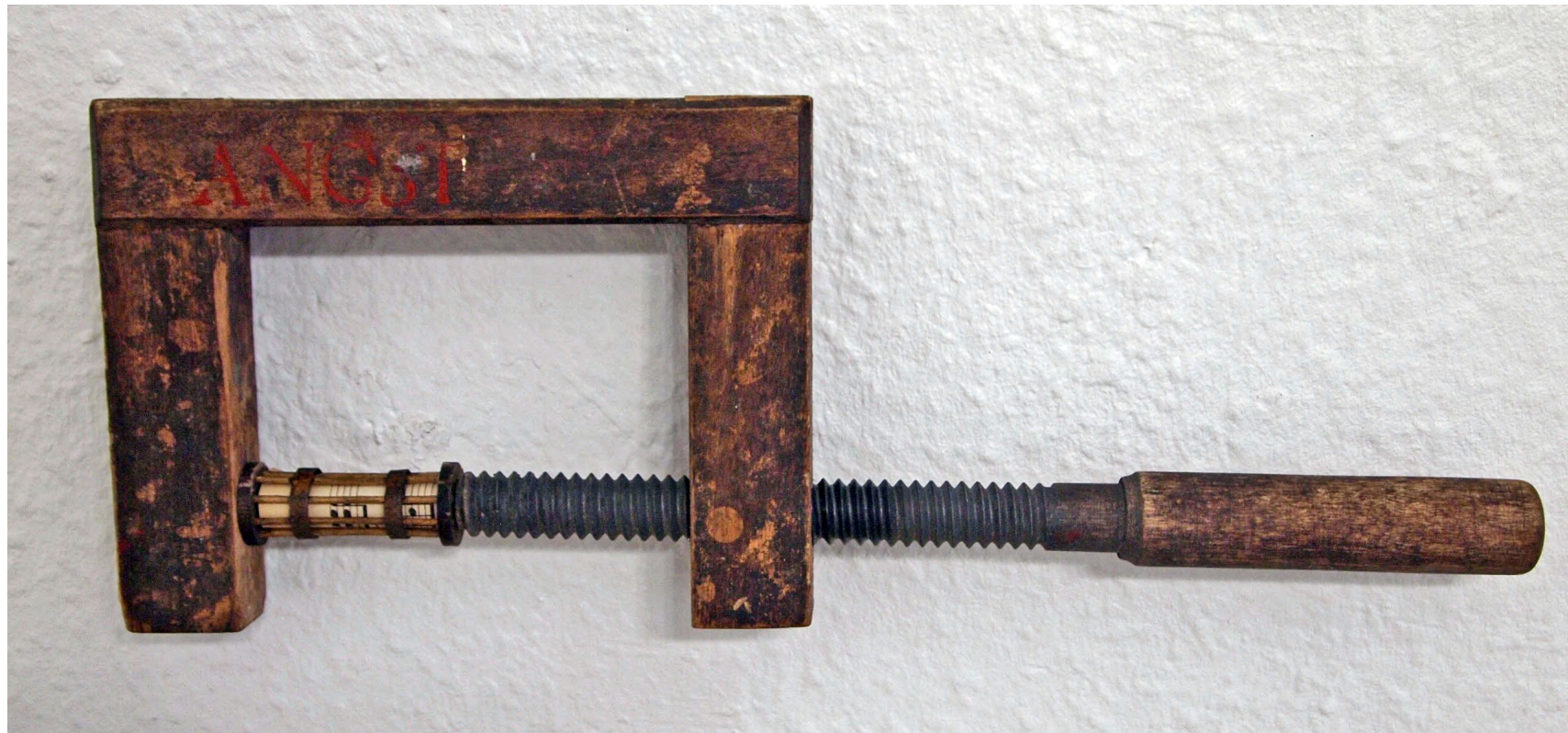


Figure 11. Die Angst



Figure 12. Post Scriptum

Post Scriptum:

The scorpion knew that it had no other choice than to ask the frog for help. "Take me across the river," said the scorpion, "Otherwise, I'll die."

The frog hesitated and refused to help, because he was afraid of the scorpion and its deadly sting.

"If I sting you, I'll die too," the scorpion said.

The frog thought about the matter and gathered that the scorpion could not harm him and was at his mercy.

"Okay, get on my back and I'll take you across the river". The scorpion thanked the frog and said that he would not regret this kind gesture. So, the scorpion jumped on the frog's back and they began the journey across the river. Halfway across, the scorpion slowly lifted his tail and stung the frog's neck. The frog felt a stinging and invasive pain.

"Why?" asked the frog. "Now I'm going to die and you'll drown!"

The scorpion answered, "It is my nature".

- (1). The art exhibition was arranged and the article written at Galerie Pleiku in Berlin, 16-26 February 2016.
- (2). Die Eselsbrücke = mnemonic.
- (3). Restaurant Laterna, 2000. These talented students included Outi Heiskanen, skanen, Marjatta Hanhijoki, Esa Riippa, and Inari Grönholm (the so-called Mestari K:n koulu, School of Master K).
- (4). 23 February 2016.
- (5). Donner, Jörn (1989) Berliiniraportti [Berlin report]. Keuruu, Otava.
- (6). In the animal world, being different is usually fatal. Camouflage. Chameleon.
- (7). The name of the work (Wanderer above the Sea of Fog) refers to perhaps the most famous painting by Caspar David Friedrich: the mountaineer looking out over a sea of misty summits. The driftwood theory.

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Artworks:

1. The Horizon of Fear	5. The Black Sheep	11. Die Angst
2. The Reference	6.-7. Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer	12. Post Scriptum
3. The Assistant	8. Head in the Bush	
4. The Allotment	9. Chained to tradition	
	10. Fly on the Wall	