

ox&öl – a multi-dimensional collective

Since 2010, director Philip Bartels and pianist Simone Keller have been working together continuously and have co-led the collective ox&öl since 2014. This collective organizes and carries out projects in experimental music theater and participatory educational initiatives, where diversity and inclusion are integral parts of the artistic practice. For example, ox&öl has launched an intergenerational project titled «piccolo concerto grosso» for children from multicultural schools and elderly people at the Zurich Tonhalle and the Concert Hall of the KKL Lucerne over several years. They have staged a spoken music theater with concrete poetry for children and job seekers and developed and implemented a collaborative concert format for juvenile offenders in youth detention centers over several years.



«Eight New Songs for a Mad Kingdom», music theater by Jessie Marino and ox&öl, 2023

photo: Michelle Ettlin

The name «ox&öl» refers to the experimental poetry of Ernst Jandl, who in his mini-drama «essen. ein stück mit aufblick» created a dialogue solely from monosyllabic words. He poetically elevates an ordinary everyday scene, merging nonsense and depth closely together. Additionally, «ox» symbolizes the effort and «öl» (oil) the ease in art, combining the ambivalences of creative processes.

In 2014, ox&öl founded the Kukuruz Quartet for «four well-prepared one-hand pianos», which has since been featured in the music theater piece «piano forte» by Ruedi Häusermann at Schauspielhaus Zurich and in the production «24 Bilder pro Sekunde» by Boris Nikitin at the Wiener Festwochen, Théâtre Vidy, and Kaserne Basel. The quartet also plays concerts regularly, such as at documenta 14 in the Athens Megaron and the Biennial of Contemporary Arts in Lisbon, as well as in self-organized guerrilla-like events in bars, banks, breweries, hospitals, prisons, schools, clubs, cow sheds, and artillery fortresses. The recording «piano interpretations» won «Albums of the year» in 2018 by *The New York City Jazz Record* and was listed as «Best Albums of the year» by the

Boston Globe and *Chicago Reader*. In 2023, the Kukuruz Quartet released its second recording «Breathing – Remembering – Dissolving» on *Innova Recordings*, with six new pieces for four pianos composed by six different composers, supported by the American Composers Forum, and rehearsed during a residency at Stanford University.



«Eight New Songs for a Mad Kingdom», music theater by Jessie Marino and ox&öl, 2023

photo: Michelle Ettlin

The collective ox&öl is deeply rooted in Zurich, having worked and presented productions at many local theaters and concert halls, while also maintaining international partnerships and often developing collaborations over long periods. Recently, this included a new music theater piece with Brazilian composer Manuel Pessôa de Lima and a new concert and education format with students from various music schools in São Paulo at the «Música Estranha» festival in 2023. In 2024, ox&öl was invited to Tbilisi to create a project with Georgian, Ukrainian, and Russian artists, and for 2025, a collaboration with a Mexican ensemble on microtonal music is planned.



Dance theater «24 Bilder pro Sekunde» in collaboration with Boris Nikitin and Lee Méir at Kaserne Basel, Théâtre de Vidy in Lausanne, and Wiener Festwochen, 2022
photo: Donata Ettlin

In 2020, ox&öl organized the acclaimed «Breaking Boundaries» festival at Zurich's Schiffbau, presenting a wide range of music theater and concerts dedicated to the concept of «Deep Listening», inspired by the great American composer Pauline Oliveros. ox&öl was awarded the recognition prize by the Cultural Department of the Canton of Zurich for its work in cultural participation and was nominated for the «Junge Ohren Preis» in Frankfurt am Main/Germany for its «groundbreaking education work».



Festival «Breaking Boundaries» at Zurich's Schiffbau, 2020

photo: Michelle Ettlin



«Extensions» music theater on acoustic phenomena with deaf dancer Lua Leirner, 2022

photo: Michelle Ettlin

From 2019 to 2024, ox&öl was the «group in residence» at Zurich's *sogar theater*, premiering three music theater productions in collaboration with composers and media artists Julie Herndon, Jessie Marino, and Lara Stanić. ox&öl also contributed to establishing a mixed bar team with artists and refugees at the *sogar theater* and advocated for the inclusion of deaf individuals.

In previous years, ox&öl collaborated with director Ruedi Häusermann on an interactive recording installation at the Zurich Radio Studio and created interdisciplinary music theater projects «Dinge, die man hin und wieder systematisch tun sollte» and «Ich denke oft an die Menge Rindfleisch, die notwendig ist, um aus dem Genfersee eine Fleischbrühe zu machen» with media creator Marcel Zaes at the Zurich Architecture Forum.



Music theater «ohne X und ohne U», 2024

photo: Michelle Ettlin



«MANYNESS», Performance at Kunstmuseum Basel 2023

photo: Damaris Thalmann

In 2023, ox&öl was commissioned by the Kunstmuseum Basel to create a multi-hour mosaic-like performance over four days for the exhibition «Shirley Jaffe. Form as Experiment» transforming the museum into a sound experience space using historical video synthesizers, old tape recorders, self-built wind machines, and Aztec death whistles.



«Lonely Hearts Radio», music theater with people with cognitive impairments, 2016

photo: Lothar Opilik

In their work, ox&öl continuously questions prevailing power structures and seeks to highlight mechanisms of inequality through artistic means, particularly in the recent project «Hidden Heartache» which makes forgotten composers visible and audible. Central to this project is the song «Good Morning Heartache» by PoC composer Irene Higginbotham, which has become a well-known standard in the jazz scene but has not brought its creator any recognition. This piece, along with many other unjustly overlooked works, was presented in unusual locations during the «Hidden Tour», both in hidden and public spaces, culminating in a piano disassembly for the CD release – a ritual that allowed the audience to look behind the black and white keys of a piano as its over 10,000 parts were carefully disassembled and reassembled into new instruments.

In its latest music theater production «ohne X und ohne U», ox&öl explores the texts of Basel poet Adelheid Duvanel, whose breathtaking work remains largely unknown to the public despite being repeatedly hailed by experts as one of the most significant voices in German-language literature of the 20th century. Lara Stanić has created a multifaceted and playful composition in which Duvanel's characters, often struggling with life's darker sides, are granted the «right to be unfit for life» (the title of one of her stories). Literary critic Beatrice von Matt wrote about the Zurich premiere: «Rarely have Duvanel's sentences seemed so light and witty to me as in this selection. Nevertheless, they remain deeply profound.»



Piano disassembly as part of the «Hidden Tour», 2024

photo: Michelle Ettlin



Music theater «ohne X und ohne U», 2024

photo: Michelle Ettlin

From the jury report of the 2023 Zurich municipal concept funding for dance and theatre on ox&öl:
«The concept of ox&öl confirms its position as one of the few contemporary music theater groups in the Zurich dance and theatrical scene. The ensemble's work is characterized by precise craftsmanship and claims high aesthetic as well as content relevance in the contemporary context. Keller/Bartels consistently pursue the approach of translating music compositions into theatrical space. With its experimental, curious, and open working method, ox&öl has great dissemination potential among the audience. In terms of public relevance, the jury also noted the theme of multilingualism. This allows compositions by artists belonging to social minorities to come into focus and be performed. With the research area 'hearing – not hearing', the collective also achieves a kind of artistic research in the field of inclusion, which is not simply based on an abstract theme but is a consequence of years of work and experience. The concept of ox&öl and the artistic projects ideally fulfill several content criteria such as artistic independence, potential impact, participation, and social relevance.»



Co-leaders of ox&öl: Simone Keller and Philip Bartels

photo: Lothar Opilik