

## Interview with Philip Matesic about "Theory Tuesdays" & "Practical Fridays"

**Linda Jensen:** The first Theory Tuesdays session was held on October 6th, 2009. How did the project / discussion platform get started?

**Philip Matesic:** The impetus for Theory Tuesdays came in the summer of 2009. That is when I moved to Zürich from Chicago, fresh out of graduate school. I was still reading a lot of art theory, but theory is only half as good unless you can discuss it. After living in Zürich for a few months, I noticed an event posted on the Corner College website called "Summer School" hosted by the Polish-Canadian artist, Antoni Wojtyra. Wojtyra had organized and printed a "Summer School 2009" reader and for the duration of seven weeks (July-August) he held weekly discussion sessions at Corner College based on the texts in the reader. His pedagogical motto was "Each One, Teach One." There was even a graduation ceremony at the end of the final session! I went to the last three sessions and was impressed with the format, Wojtyra's coordinating style and of course, the discussions.

During the last session, Wojtyra said to me: "Listen Philip, you live in Zürich, why not continue the sessions?" I answered with: "I don't know. I just moved here. It's not something that interests me right now, coordinating such a platform." But then I spontaneously asked everybody in the room whether they would like to continue with me, coordinating sessions similar to those by Wojtyra. It turned out that everyone agreed and would continue to participate if I took the lead.

So I started to develop my own version of Wojtyra's summer school idea, adding a more "participatory" element in the organization. In September 2009 I proposed my idea for Theory Tuesdays to Urs Lehni, who ran Corner College at the time. He approved and starting in early October, I organized and coordinated the first five sessions, similar to Wojtyra's Summer School and for the sixth session, I invited an artist friend, Saskia de Brauw, to lead an artist talk. After the sixth session, I opened up the planning to those interested in leading their own sessions. They had the option to present a text, screen a film or invite a visiting artist for an artist talk.

**LJ:** What has been the breadth of the theoretical topics?

**PM:** The theoretical content covers a wider range and has been a mix of cultural, critical, art, design and literary theory. But within that wide spectrum of theory, there are consistent threads running through a bulk of the sessions. For example, when I present a text it always relates to my artistic practice, which involves participation, community-based projects, and urban interventions. Other re-occurring themes have been art in public space, how to deal with urbanization/gen-

Corner College  
Summer School 2009  
Course Book

Texts by

David Hammons  
Ken Lum  
Artur Żmijewski  
Boris Groys  
Brian O'Doherty  
Andrea Fraser  
Wiesław Borowski  
Hanna Ptaszkowska  
Mariusz Tchorek  
Michel Foucault  
Jeff Wall  
Seth Price  
Jorge Luis Borges

trification in Zürich, experimental curating practices, and multiple texts by Nicolas Bourriaud, Jacques Derrida, Boris Groys, Jean Baudrillard, Hal Foster and Claire Bishop. We've had 137 sessions so far! So we've covered a pretty large terrain. But each session is different in that a different person presents a different text weekly, opening up a wide range of theoretical topics.

**LJ:** How does Theory Tuesdays differ from a university seminar context? What is a unique characteristic of Theory Tuesdays?

**PM:** I have to say that the unique characteristic is definitely the motto that Theory Tuesdays has been organized under which is: "Each One, Teach One". Meaning each person teaches the other, sharing knowledge in a non-hierarchical way. This motto was first brought to my attention and put into practice by Antoni Wojtyra. "Each One, Teach One" incorporates a horizontal way of learning, where no one is an expert, but interested enough in a topic or a text that they feel comfortable collectively discussing it. "Each One, Teach One" eliminates a familiar hierarchy found in university settings where you attend a seminar and let's say you know nothing about Derrida. The Derrida "expert", or professor, then gives you all the information you need about "Derrida" without you having to give anything back, aside from your time and money.

Within the structure of Theory Tuesdays, the content is always generated by the participants and the discussions try to remain free and open to the public. Some of my friends ask me: "Well, what's the difference between Theory Tuesdays and a normal reading group?" I respond by saying that a reading group is often a set group of people that choose a book by a specific author and focus on chapters of that book for weeks, months or even years. The group often never changes and the book stays the same. If you miss one or two weeks it's difficult to participate. With Theory Tuesdays the topics, texts and presenters change every week, opening up the platform to a wider audience.

**LJ:** How do you document the sessions? You've been accumulating this body of knowledge, but it seems that it's more about keeping it in the temporal moment of discussions. Are the sessions ever recorded?

**PM:** I document each session by taking a photograph on the Theory Tuesdays website (theorytuesdays.com). I also post what we read, who presented the text and how many people participated. I've been often asked to record the sessions so people can hear what they've missed. But to me what's important is that people read the text beforehand and then we can talk about it in person sitting around a table. It's not a



Teoretiske Tirsdage at Rum46 in Aarhus, Denmark

collective discussion if someone can just hit play on an audio file, alone, years after the session took place. Theory Tuesdays is about being present when discussing a text. It's about being in the same room, sitting at the same table with other human beings, trying to learn more, collectively, each one teaching the other.

**LJ:** Do you consider Theory Tuesdays to be an ongoing artwork?

**PM:** Yes, to me Theory Tuesdays is an art project for many reasons. First of all, I'm an artist, organizing and coordinating the discussion group. Second of all, the sessions always take place at independent art spaces

(so far Corner College, Counter Space and Rum46 in Aarhus, Denmark). Thirdly, the "theory" discussed is usually art or culturally related. I define Theory Tuesdays as a "participatory platform for discussion."

**LJ:** I suppose there's also a reciprocal exchange that you're trying to achieve with the participants.

**PM:** Yes, exactly. That brings up another comment from a lot of people: "Why do you claim authorship to the project if everyone else is generating the content and all you do is just unlock the door and coordinate the discussions?" But for me an essential aspect of "authorship" is based on a high-level of engagement. I am involved in carrying out the weekly organization of the sessions, informing a larger public about the sessions and coordinating each, individual session. It's not just about unlocking the door and setting up a few chairs. My role as a "co-author" of Theory Tuesdays is about maintaining the platform: socially, virtually, physically and intellectually, day in and day out.

**LJ:** Has Theory Tuesdays gone through different stages over the last five and a half years? Has the platform been tweaked from the original format of the initial sessions?

**PM:** Theory Tuesdays has remained pretty consistent, but of course over the years a few things that have changed. For example, we initially had the option in the planning sessions to have visiting artists come and talk about their practices. But since there is very little funding for Theory Tuesdays, it made it impossible to continue with visiting artists without having access to a travel budget. Since moving to Counter Space in 2015, I've simplified the platform even more. Now during the planning sessions I ask those interested only to bring text suggestions. So we are going "back to the roots" in a way: a text (read beforehand), a table and lively discussion.



How to Correctly Compost Practical Fridays session

**LJ:** Since 2013 there's been an extension of Theory Tuesdays called Practical Fridays, could you tell me more about that?

**PM:** Practical Fridays started in January 2013 because some of my friends were either not interested in reading theory, or were overwhelmed about the idea of having to read and then discuss theory in English. So I thought to myself, what would bring them to a session? Would it be possible to use the "Each One, Teach One" format, but instead of discussing a text they could teach me something practical? So I started "Practical Fridays" and it's really about learning something practical from a non-expert, something hands on. Another difference is that Practical Fridays only takes place once a month. It also has taken place at different

places around Zürich. For example there was a session called "How to Correctly Compost" with Daniel Morgenthaler in his Schrebergarten.

**LJ:** How exactly are the texts and skills chosen for Theory Tuesdays and Practical Fridays sessions? How do you plan the sessions?

**PM:** The core of the organization happens twice a year during the planning sessions. During a planning session anyone who is interested in presenting a text or practical skill shows up and presents their ideas to those in attendance. We then collectively fill in a





Planning Session, January 2015 at Counter Space, Zürich

calendar and afterwards I post all of the upcoming sessions on the Theory Tuesdays and Practical Fridays websites.

**LJ:** You did a publication after some stage, I remember buying a copy.

**PM:** Yes! After exactly three years of Theory Tuesdays we celebrated the hundredth session. I can still hardly believe we did so many sessions in just three years! So for this hundredth session we wanted to make a special publication. The content of the publication 3 Years / 100 Sessions was a collection of all of the "bloopers" we found in all of PDFs we read over the three years. For example, on one page you can see a

photocopied finger, or the fur cuff on the coat on the edge of another page, or a detailed image turned into a black square once it was copied. To me it shows the "human side" of all of the theory we have read, as self made PDFs are the primary, physical material of Theory Tuesdays. The front and back cover of the publication was also a complete list of everything we had read (title and author) along with all of the films and visiting artists.

3 Years / 100 Sessions publication, 2012



**LJ:** In a similar manner, you also organized and performed in a 5 Year / 133 Sessions anniversary performance. Could you tell me more about that?

**PM:** That was the very last Theory Tuesdays session that took place at Corner College. It was a reading performance reflecting on all of the texts we had read over a five-year period. Daniel Morgenthaler and I read random sentences from a 20cm tall pile of PDFs. It was an interesting experience, having the texts again in my hands and reading brief excerpts from them, I recalled the specific sessions, who was there, was it a good session and who organized the session.