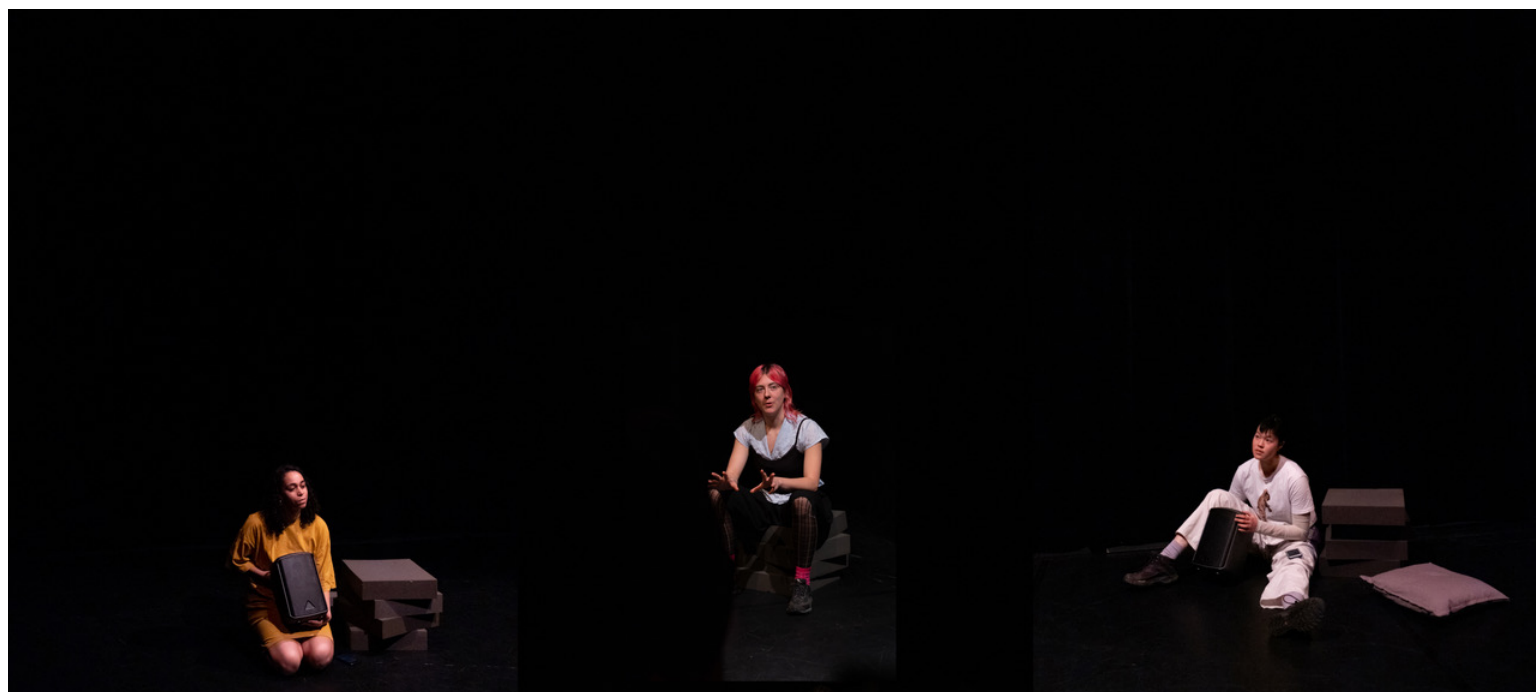


# David Weber-Krebs: what is it actually, this action?

THE INTERVIEW SERIES #6: DAVID WEBER-KREBS

BY ARIE LENGKEEK & JACCO VAN UDEN



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#LEARNING TO IMPACT (/ARTICLES/?FILTER=LEARNING-TO-IMPACT&FILTERTYPE=TAG)

*Since ACT is about making a change, we need to talk about impact. We must learn about the sorts of impact art can make, about the role and place of impact in art practices, and about how art practices themselves are impacted, for instance by Covid-19.*

*Therefore, as part of the Learning to Impact Work Package of the ACT project, we research the many faces of impact. We do so by interviewing artists. With **The Interview Series** we tap into their embodied, concrete artistic practices. We want to build an understanding of how these practices (may) evolve in the face of the current challenges. How the artists learn to 'stay with the trouble'. How the urgency of climate change, ecology and biodiversity informs their attitude towards the social impact of their artistic work.*

## #6: David Weber-Krebs: unsolicited experiments and unrequested services

Maybe it's the researchers' version of the much quoted 'never let a good crisis go to waste'. Eventually, for the artist and researcher David Weber-Krebs (BE/D) the covid-19 pandemic turned out to be a research lab. An uncalled-for space for experiment. On April 8, 2020 – a few weeks after the Corona virus made its sweeping entry in Europa – Weber-Krebs wrote an e-mail to fellow artists, performers, curators, scholars, and spectators to join him in reflecting on the closing of, basically, all doors. The ones that grant us access to places like the theatre – the doors Weber-Krebs knows all too well from his performance work – but at some point, even the doors that urge us to put on our coats, and leave the house to explore the world outside. Weber-Krebs set out to fantasize the re-opening of these doors. Unwillingly, we were being provided with the "huge speculative potential" of *le monde d'après*, the world after: "It was an invitation to imagine the future of the theatre in the context of this very specific momentum. As a matter of fact, I believe that this momentum was generating a specific quality of imagination. And I wanted to capture it." *And then the doors opened*

again seizes the seventy-five edited responses to Weber-Krebs' invitation. The book was to be presented in September 2020, when the doors would – well – open again. Naïf, Weber-Krebs called his invitation, but this way of using unexpected and unsolicited disruptions as 'research sites' does testify to his practice as an artist and as a researcher.

### What is essential?

Critical reflection and speculation on alternative futures are recurring themes in Weber-Krebs' work. This includes questioning art in its current shape and form. Covid begged the question of what is essential and what is non-essential. Weber-Krebs: "Of course, the art world was very quick to conclude that art is essential. But I wanted to ask the question: to what extent is that really the case? What is the impact on the 'real' spectators? Those who stand before the closed doors of the theatre and are no longer able to be spectators?". To this end, David started talking to them, to the people who feel connected to 'their' or 'the' theatre as visitors. His invitation was to go with him for a walk, literally going circles around the closed Kaaithheater in Brussels. And not only there: together with curator Simone Basani, David engaged in similar conversations in Rotterdam, in Skopje, and in various places in Latvia. Inviting theatregoers to reflect on what it is exactly that they miss when theatre-as-we-know-it becomes unavailable. When the theatres re-opened, but only under strict conditions, this 'controlled experiment' ran even longer, making it possible for David Weber-Krebs to discuss and study, for instance, the significance of numbers of visitors (limited because of the measures), proximity to one another (affected by social distancing regulation), or the opportunity to reflect on the work right after the performance (with theatre bars being closed to the public).

### New normalities

In discussing the matter, David Weber-Krebs noticed that there is no overall agreement on the long-term effects of the pandemic on theatre as an artistic practice. While some professionals in the field are eager to understand the climbing numbers of visitors as a sign that theatre will bounce back, Weber-Krebs himself continues to scrutinize normality. Not because he wants things to change per se, but because the love for theatre demands that we dare to reflect critically on what we have come to take for granted: "we're glossing over the exceptional changes of these times very quickly, but I think we should take our time to dissect the issues and re-imagine the future". For Weber-Krebs, this includes questioning all aspects of theatre, including its aesthetics, forms, and target audiences, while at the same time being certain – perhaps more ever – that the experience of *assembling*, of being in a space together is essential to theatre. "And if you look at what's going on these days, you can tell that this is going to be difficult. For instance, I work with people who, for various reasons, chose not to be vaccinated. Covid has led to distancing between people, to people not understanding each other anymore, to barriers. This has enormous effects on how we can 'do' theatre. And I think these effects will be long-term."



Tonight, Lights Out! at Cialo-Umysl (Warsaw) © Kasia Chmura, 2015

## Not enough drama

The specific confinement of the theatre space sets it apart from other settings, and for Weber-Krebs this has real consequences on how to address the central theme of ACT, namely climate change. Weber-Krebs follows the French sociologist Bruno Latour, who argues that the problem with the climate crisis is that there is not enough drama. In the words of philosopher Timothy Morton, he refers to climate change as a “hyper object”: too big, too comprehensive to be fully understood. Whereas a Hollywood blockbuster movie like *Don't Look Up* chooses the metaphor of an incoming, fatal-to-all meteorite to circumvent the slow, creeping destruction of real climate change, Weber-Krebs uses the specific affordances and qualities of the theatre to address the issue. “I still believe that there is a difference between the political or activist discourse, on the one hand, and the artistic, on the other. I am not an activist. Through and in the theatre, I work on the level of aesthetic experiences. I apply simple, minimalistic means to try to achieve some form of sensibility to the subject.” The question of how to do so, is very much part of his work as a researcher: “Together with my students, I explore new ways of narrating the topic, and develop new ways of relating to ‘situations of fragility’”.

Rather than developing firm models of how to deal with these situations – as one would perhaps expect from researchers – the artist David Weber-Krebs chooses to introduce ambivalence. He intentionally creates closed theatrical settings where the audience is pushed into the role of co-creating the theatrical experience. In *Tonight, Lights Out!*, for instance, Weber-Krebs invites visitors to literally switch off the lights in the theatre themselves. Playing an active role in the lecture performance, they are now part of something that is at the same very important and just art. The piece was created in 2011 but is still frequently programmed in festivals and theatres.

*No, but really! What is it actually this action of switching off the lights?... If you really think about it is actually a cheap way to ease our conscience but in fact it doesn't change anything.*

*(ask a specific person in the public)*

*What to do you think?*

*You?*

*(pause)*

*(from script Tonight, Lights Out! (<http://www.davidweberkrebs.org/work/tonight-lights-out-2/>))*

Weber-Krebs offers no answers, no clarification, no resolution. All the lights go out eventually. An end that's not ‘the’ end, where the curtain falls, and the show is over. In a way, the end *is* the performance. By deliberately refusing the audience the opportunity to applaud and initiate the transition from art to normal life, Weber-Krebs blurs the boundary between the two worlds and thus extends the ambivalence in time and space. Ambivalence as a strategy for things to get political: “In this way, the questions and the themes that were raised in the theatre can travel to the outside world, along with the audience, and emancipate themselves from the space in which they first saw light.”

## Creating fragilities

But again, Weber-Krebs does not want to be an activist. From the one-on-one walks he took with theatre visitors in different cities, he learnt that for many the theatre remains their go-to place. Most people want a “magical” experience that they can talk about afterwards. And Weber-Krebs is not at all interested in telling them that they are ‘doing it wrong’, and they should have experienced this or that: “I don't have pre-fab messages”.

When exploring the impact of his work, perhaps even more than ambivalence, it is *openness* that the artist-researcher wants to realize – exactly the opposite of prefabricated answers.

Our conversation ends with another example of the fragility David Weber-Krebs tries to create. Curator Simone Basani has initiated a project in which he commissions artists to offer an ‘unrequested service’, to deliver something that no-one asked for. David accepted this invitation with a radical proposal, namely by offering ‘openness in a public space’. He cultivates an attitude of openness, of being completely transparent in the public domain. As the site for this unrequested service, Weber-Krebs chose the park of Square Armand Steurs (Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, Brussels) that he normally visits as a private citizen: “I go to the park and sit on this one bench, close to where I live. I just sit there for an hour or so, quiet, trying to be as open as I can to what will come. Sometimes that leads to a conversation, sometimes with humans, sometimes with the animals. The impact of that? Yes, perhaps the impact is very small”.





Unrequested Services, a project by Simone Basani © Deborah Ephrem, 2021

More from David Weber-Krebs: <http://www.davidweberkrebs.org> (<http://www.davidweberkrebs.org>).

With '[And Then the Doors Opened Again](http://www.davidweberkrebs.org/work/and-then-the-doors-opened-again/)' (<http://www.davidweberkrebs.org/work/and-then-the-doors-opened-again/>) David Weber-Krebs participates in the Collection Europe project with Kaaitheater, Theater Rotterdam, Lokomotiva & NTIL

*This is the sixth article in The Interview Series on Impact.*

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