Conceptualising Theatre through the Lens of Economy and/or Rethinking Economy through the Lens of Theatre

Michael Beron, Jakob Bogatzki, Toon Fibbe, Suzanne Kooloos, Lisa-Frederike Seidler

Der Beitrag identifiziert in theater- und medienwissenschaftlicher als auch theaterpraktischer Perspektive Schnittstellen von Theater und Ökonomie. Insbesondere in Krisenzeiten, wie etwa der globalen Finanzkrise 2007/08, haben Fragen des Ökonomischen auch in den Geisteswissenschaften Konjunktur und lassen auf einen ‚economic turn' schließen. Im Rückgriff auf philosophische wie auch literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Überlegungen zum Verständnis von Ökonomie wird nach der Anschlussfähigkeit und den Auslassungen dieser begrifflichen Konzeptionen für die Theaterwissenschaft gefragt. Vor dem Hintergrund des Aufbaus einer Forschungskollaboration diskutieren die Verfasser:innen Theater und Ökonomie als mehrdeutige, historische Begriffe der Wissensproduktion. Dabei werden Räume konzipiert, die offen für mehrdimensionale Verflechtungen von Theater und Ökonomie sind: thematisch, methodologisch, institutionell und praxeologisch. In diesem Sinne plädiert der Beitrag für die Schaffung disziplinär und zeitlich offener Räume, die Forschungs- und Kunstprojekte miteinander in Dialog bringen.

The correlations of theatre and economy are complex, both from an artistic and a research perspective. We come from different backgrounds in theatre studies, media studies, art history and performance and work in- and outside of academia in Germany and the Netherlands. Based on our various projects from the early modern time to the present, we look at economy through the lens of theatre and *vice versa*. In times of increased economic and political pressure, there is a growing need to discuss and understand what we call the economy. The same applies to theatre studies: important economic shifts are linked to intensified economic thinking. As we are currently a German-Dutch 'research collective', important examples are not only limited to the current situation in the cultural sector but also touch on the academic climate that is threatening both German and Dutch academia.

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In our contribution, we discuss ways to raise awareness of the interfaces between theatre and economics.

This is (not) an Amphitheatre: or – the Shared Space of Theatre and Economy

The picture on the left shows 'Sam the Shoe Doctor' holding a replica of platform shoes worn by stock market traders on the Chicago trading floor in the late 1990s (Fig. 1). Sam, whose real name is Cecilio Lozano, has a shop near the Chicago Board of Trade, where he crafted these elevated shoes for traders looking to add a platform heel to their footwear in order to gain visibility in the trading pit. The replica was made for artist Toon Fibbe. His performance *Too Big to Fail, Too Small to Notice* (2018–2025) examines how the demand for visibility not only led to platform shoes but also to extravagantly coloured jackets and a system of codified hand signals – designed to stand out, assert presence, and facilitate communication in this intensely competitive, hypermasculine environment. In the chaotic trading pits – filled with shouting, gesticulating men – the more visible you would be, the faster you could trade. As more traders embraced platform shoes, the heels had to grow higher and higher to maintain competitiveness, eventually becoming so extreme that traders began to lose their balance, causing accidents on the floor. In response, the Chicago Board of Trade introduced regulations to limit heel height. This interplay of visibility, costume, and physical performance in the trading pit reveals how what we view as economic space also operates theatrically, as power and competition are enacted through embodied spectacle.[1]

This entanglement of theatre and economics is more the rule than the exception: The picture on the right is from a patent for a trading pit, designed by R. S. Jenning in 1877 (Fig. 1). The patent describes an octagonal structure with tiered, stepped levels to ensure clear sightlines and audibility for all participants. These raised pits became a defining feature of Chicago's agricultural futures exchanges, such as the Board of Trade (established in 1848) and the Mercantile Exchange (1919), and remained central to trading even as these exchanges expanded into financial futures from the 1970s onward.[2] In the accompanying text, Jenning insists that his invention is unrelated to

1 On the one hand we refer to the term spectacle as established by Guy Debord in his book *La société du spectacle* as a transformative staging of the economic force itself, and on the other hand as a term describing theatrical events while also including objects and structures as acting agents; cf. Guy Debord: *La société du spectacle*, Paris: Buchet Chastel, 1972; cf. Kati Röttger: "Historiografie des Spektakels", in: *Neue Methoden der Theaterwissenschaft*, ed. by Benjamin Wihstutz/Benjamin Hoesch, Bielefeld: transcript, 2020, 133–156.

2 The Chicago Wheat Exchange and speculation processes were prominently taken up in Bertolt Brecht's *Jae Fleischhacker in Chikago* (1924–1929); cf. Phoebe von Held: "In the Stockyards of Finance: Brecht's Aesthetics of Fragmentation in Fleischhacker", in: *The Brecht Yearbook/Das Brecht-Jahrbuch*, Vol. 44, ed. by Markus Wessendorf, Rochester/New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2019, 39–60. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781800101296-006

Fig. 1: Left side: Toon Fibbe: *Sam the Shoe Doctor*, 2018. / Right side: R. S. Jennings: *Patent for a Trading-Pit*, 1878, © Toon Fibbe, 2018/R. S. Jennings, 1878.

the theatrical tradition, even explicitly commenting on how this is not an amphitheatre – thus highlighting the similarity even more. Much like a theatre stage, the trading pit depends on performers, labour, craftsmanship, and carefully regulated architectural space. As shown by the Chicago Board of Trade's heel height regulations it can be seen as an open space, where theatrical and economic, or: one could even call it 'theatro-economic' knowledge is produced. These particular constellations of architectural space, cultural artifacts, craftsmanship and practices point towards something like a shared space where theatre and economy meet, intersect or intertwine. Theatre and economy, are, in fact not 'two worlds apart'.[3] But it is not only thematically that the two domains are seen as open spaces, demanding or inviting interventions. Also on an institutional level we took open spaces literally and facilitated a workshop inviting ourselves and the participants of the conference to look at economy as theatre scholars and artists. We tentatively explored this space, facilitated discussion, and put it on the map of theatre studies as a possible field of interdisciplinary research.

By conceptualising theatre through the lens of economy and/or rethinking economies through the lens of theatre, we move beyond conventional analyses of economy and cultural production as separate realms.[4] Instead, we investigate their shared logics, histories, and practices, thereby creating

3 We borrow this phrasing from Jean-Christophe Agnew: *Worlds Apart. The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

4 For reasons of clarity and readability, we occasionally use the term 'the economy' throughout this paper. Conceptually, however, we question this notion and its boundaries, also in this paper, and we do not intend to treat it as a fixed or stable entity.

a space for interdisciplinary cultural analysis grounded in the specific methodologies of theatre and theatre studies – an approach that, although established in other areas of the humanities, has remained largely absent here.[5] When thinking about theatre and economy one should not forget to draw attention to the economic conditions of the investigation itself, which – not unlike theatre productions –, in order to take place, also requires labour, craftsmanship, and economic resources, such as funding, infrastructure or (self-)management. How do we reflect on our position as theatre scholars within the trading pit of academic work that is increasingly precarious? How do we negotiate the pressures of an economy and an academic and cultural landscape that often devalues the arts and humanities? What forms of knowledge and practice can emerge from this moment?

We rethink 'open space' as a multi-layered concept to understand the shared space of theatre and economy. The 'and' of theatre and economy functions as a conjunction on several levels. Thematically, both theatre and the market are often imagined as open spaces: spaces of encounter, exchange, of risk even; but what kind of open space is this? Methodologically, we understand theatre and economy as ambiguous, open, historical concepts and explore how theys are often intertwined, for example as a system of thought or through the notion of production. Institutionally, we reflect on what constitutes an open space within the context of our own, especially for collaborative research, which seeks situated and experimental (academic and artistic) dialogue. Finally, we interrogate the openness of this space, considering it to be a site of tension: openness invites participation, but also exposes asymmetries, exclusions, and conflicts. As such, an open space can also be a place for exploring, negotiating and potentially resolving conflicts of conflict resolving.

Since intersections between theatre and economy remain largely unexplored, we begin with a section on IMPORT/EXPORT. First, we give an introduction to notions of economy where we focus on Joseph Vogl and Rahel Jaeggi as two key thinkers – both for our understanding of what "economy" is and for conceptualising the relationship between theatre and economy. Second, we give an overview of existing research in the humanities, where the relationship between economy and literature has received particular attention. We ask: What insights have previous studies contributed, and how can we, as theatre scholars, position ourselves within this broader field? In the third section, we reflect on the gtw BarCamp to explore what our current perspectives as theatre scholars are. In the fourth and last part we offer a more focused pairing of theatre and economy. We describe the different

5 However, currently there are several international research (working) groups and projects touching upon the correlation between theatre and economics, such as: IFTR Working Group Performance Economies, https://iftr.org/working-groups/performance-economies (21/08/2025); ERC-project *Theatronomics – The Business of Theatres 1732–1809*, duration: 2021–2026, https://www.theatronomics.com/ (21/08/2025); ERC-project *Science at the Fair*, duration: 2021–2026, https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/science-at-the-fair/ (21/08/2025).

angles that emerged for understanding and making visible the complex correlations between theatre and economy.

IMPORT/EXPORT

Re/deconstructing Economy

When approaching the pairing of theatre 'and' economy, the first thing that must be acknowledged is that it is anything but self-explanatory, as both terms are highly ambiguous, and their relationship even more so. In order to access and orientate ourselves within this field, we present here a first, preliminary mapping, based on the work of critical social theorist Rahel Jaeggi and literary, media, and cultural scholar Joseph Vogl, who – from their respective disciplinary perspective – have both contributed significantly to opening up the field of the economic to discourse in the humanities and cultural theory since the early 2000s.

On the one hand, the notion of 'theatre' – oscillating between an art form, a set of institutions, a style of thinking, and a broader concept of theatricality – is far from clearly defined. Within theatre studies, this ambiguity is widely acknowledged. On the other hand – and this may require a bit more elaboration – the concept of 'economy' is equally complex and historically variable, ranging from narrow definitions focused on production, distribution, and consumption to broader understandings that encompass modes of social organisation, governance, and subject formation; therefore, too, resisting any straightforward or unified definition. As Vogl points out, the concept of economy originally referred to the art of housekeeping (from the ancient Greek *oikonomia*). Later it was used as a general concept of order for all possible domains – whether earthly, heavenly, natural, or rhetorical. Only since the Enlightenment has it narrowed to focus primarily on the economic concerns of production, distribution, and consumption in the context of political economy. Nevertheless, its meaning often extends to non-economic areas, such as the efficiency of lifestyle, the management of 'human capital', or the mobilization of creative resources.[6]

Regarding 'the' economy, a fundamental distinction can be made between a narrow and a broad concept of the term. This distinction can be traced back to the early days of critical theory (in the sense of the Frankfurt School). In a postscript to his programmatic text *Traditional and Critical Theory* from 1937, Max Horkheimer writes: "Economism, to which the critical theory is often reduced, does not consist in giving too much importance to the economy, but in giving it too narrow a scope."[7] Economism, in this context refers to the traditional Marxist idea of a material-economic base

6 Cf. Joseph Vogl: "Vorwort", in: *Handbuch Literatur & Ökonomie*, ed. by Joseph Vogl/Burkhardt Wolf, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020, XI–XV, here XI. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110516821-201

7 Max Horkheimer: "Postscript", in: *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*, transl. Matthew J. O'Connell et al., New York: Continuum, 1972, 244–252, here 249.

determining the cultural and ideological superstructure. Horkheimer argues that this model is problematic – however, not because it overestimates the economy and insofar underestimates the autonomy and power of culture, values, and ideas, as bourgeois critics would claim. On the contrary, the problem with economism, as identified here, lies precisely in its narrow and limited understanding of the economy itself, thereby still underestimating the economic and its complexity.

As Rahel Jaeggi argues, this fundamental problem persists to this day – albeit under different conditions and discursive frameworks. The call for a broader concept of the economy remains unrealized, both in the early critical theory of Horkheimer and his contemporaries and in more recent contributions by thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth. "Wherever critical theory now deals with the economic formation of capitalist societies, it thinks in the metaphor of politically or democratically taming the tiger that is capitalism."[8] This opposition – of tiger and tamer – presents the economic sphere as a narrowly defined, norm-free sphere, governed by the rational pursuit of self-interest, in contrast to politics and culture, which are imagined as challenging such self-interest. It constructs a dichotomy, Jaeggi argues, that not only makes it impossible but also unnecessary to rethink the economy itself.[9]

To move beyond this, Jaeggi advocates for an understanding of the economy as an integral part of the social order, rather than as its Other. The economy should not be viewed as a fixed, neutral sphere but as a set of actual social practices – what she terms "forms of life" (*Lebensformen*) – which are always shaped by norms, embedded within moral or ethical orientations and other practices.[10] In a similar vein, Joseph Vogl's work presents an understanding of the economic that is "freed from determinism"[11] emphasising its deep interconnection with social, cultural, and political life. Rather than being separate from these spheres, the economy is seen as closely woven into and intertwined with them. While Jaeggi speaks of 'forms of life', Vogl, drawing from a Foucauldian perspective, introduces the concept of 'forms of knowledge', which, in his case, can be examined through the lens of literature. Economic knowledge, he argues, has come to occupy a position of privilege in interpreting and representing social, cultural, and even scientific phenomena.[12]

8 Rahel Jaeggi: "A Wide Concept of Economy. Economy as a Social Practice and the Critique of Capitalism", in: *Critical Theory in Critical Times. Transforming the Global Political and Economic Order*, ed. by Penelope Deutscher/Cristina Lafont, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017, 160–179, here 162. http://doi.org/10.7312/deut18150-010

9 Cf. Jaeggi, "A Wide Concept of Economy".

10 Cf. Jaeggi, "A Wide Concept of Economy", 176–177.

11 Ivan Boldyrev: "(History of) Economic Knowledge Freed from Determinism: An Interview with Joseph Vogl", in: *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics*, 12 (2019), 1, 73–92, here 73. https://doi.org/10.23941/ejpe.v12i1.409

12 Cf. Boldyrev, "(History of) Economic Knowledge Freed from Determinism", 74–75.

The main problem, when speaking about the economy today, is of course no longer orthodox Marxism – which, since the collapse of the Soviet Union has largely disappeared from the stage – but rather, a dominant economic discourse that presents itself as hard science, akin to physics or chemistry, thereby immunising itself against critique. As Vogl points out, the very desire to appear pure or objective is itself already deeply political. It establishes the economy as well as economics as a dominant discourse or form of knowledge that claims innocence from political decision-making and appears to rest on seemingly self-evident market mechanisms.[13] In response to this, the shared critical stance taken by both Jaeggi and Vogl can be understood as a call to analyse, demystify, and deconstruct what we call the economy. To make visible its normative foundations, its social and cultural embeddedness, and thus open it up for negotiation.

To analyse the intertwinement of literature and economy, Vogl proposes three key concepts (*Leitkonzepte*). The first one concerns the emergence of economic dimensions within literature, ranging from phenomena such as labour and poverty to the concept of circulation. The second focuses on the economic conditions of literary production: from the act of writing itself – ranging from free expression to laborious effort, from solitary creation to organised collaboration – to the material processes of publishing, marketing, and distribution, with the market as the interface where meaning meets money and questions of authorship and copyright emerge. The third concept explores what Vogl calls the structural and processual homologies between literature and economics: for example, Marx's concept of the 'character mask' – the idea that individuals are shaped by societal forces into fixed roles or identities – appears not only in narratives and plays but also in economic transactions, where people often take on predefined roles shaped by economic systems. Another example is the emergence of "fictional capital" and medieval debates on usury, where the semiotics of literature and economics are rooted in the same sphere of fiction.[14]

Recent years have seen a resurgence of similar lines of inquiry, which we will explore and analyse in the following sections. Here, what is particularly relevant is how these initiatives align with and expand upon the entanglements Vogl examined in his seminal work. Notable examples include the DFG networks Model Aesthetics and Methodologies of Economic Criticism, which build on the foundational debates of 1990s Economic Criticism while pushing them in new directions. These groups investigate the intersections between literary studies and economic knowledge, as exemplified by the DFG Economic Criticism group, which summarises their objectives as follows:

> Economic criticism (i) analyses how the economy and what is seen as its constitutive elements (e.g. money, consumption, economic

13 Cf. Boldyrev, "(History of) Economic Knowledge Freed from Determinism", 82.

14 Cf. Vogl, "Vorwort", XIV.

agents) are represented in literature, film, visual arts, etc.; (ii) studies non-fiction about the economy (e.g. the foundational texts of classical political economy or Marxism) as primary literature; (iii) scrutinises activities and phenomena associated with the economy (e.g. shopping, work, class) through the methodologies of cultural and literary studies; (iv) investigates how economic frameworks influence the creation of literary and cultural products as well as the production of knowledge in academic disciplines; (v) explores points of convergence between terms, concepts, and methods of economics, literary, and cultural studies (e.g. circulation, representation, value, utility).[15]

The five categories outlined in the DFG Economic Criticism group notably overlap with Vogl's three concepts. Vogl's first, which addresses the representation of the economy in literature, aligns with the first category of economic criticism (i). The second, focused on the economic conditions of literary production, corresponds with the fourth point of economic criticism (iv). Finally, the concept of *Homologien* is similar to the fifth category of economic criticism (v), which explores intersections between economics and cultural studies. In relation to theatre, we will draw on these overlapping frameworks to define the various levels at which theatre research and artistic work intersect with economy.

The question if economy is an open space is a controversial issue. On the one hand, there is the belief that the market will 'solve' things on its own, or it is a tiger, having its own will, that needs to be tamed. On the other hand, economy is often seen as a liberal project. In line with critical thinkers, we reconceptualise economy as something constructed, or least socially embedded and historically contingent. This implies we have the option to analyse what kind of open space it actually is: as it is a shifting field of norms, behaviours, and power relations. We challenge the idea of the market as something external, or an animal to be 'tamed', but we also challenge the idea that the market is a space open to all (it is not). Instead, we explore if there is an open space to reimagine economic structures also through critical, embodied and performative practices, as economic criticism, but also theatre often does.

From Economic Humanities to Theatre Studies: Turning towards the Economy

Events such as the end of the Cold War or the global financial crisis in 2007/08 show that moments of major economic change are often accompanied by a heightened interest in economic questions. These phases of

15 Ellen Grünkemeier/Nora Pleßke/Joanna Rostek: "The Value of Economic Criticism Reconsidered: Approaching Literature and Culture through the Lens of Economics", in: *Anglistentag 2017 Regensburg. Proceedings*, ed. by Anne-Julia Zwierlein et al., Trier: WVT, 2018, 117–125, here 117.

intensified attention do not only concern the immediate crisis at hand but often prompt broader theoretical and historical reflection on economics. More recently, this has taken shape in what is referred to as the 'economic humanities'. We ask ourselves: how inclusive is this emerging field in relation to theatre and performance studies? And what specific considerations or adaptations are needed within theatre studies? Or, to turn the question around: what does theatre studies specifically have to offer?

The (Un)Disciplined Economic Humanities

Since the romantic period, art has often been considered to be the epitome of the uneconomical and unprofitable – and to some extent it still is for many. However, some fields have also historically had a focus on economic spheres. It has for example always been central to Cultural Studies to theorise the everyday operations of capitalism, particularly through the analysis of popular culture and media. The field has also contributed important critiques of neoliberalism and precarity. Cultural Studies' attention to ideology, representation, and resistance offers valuable insights into how economic structures are lived, negotiated, and contested.

In the last decades there have been several efforts to relate the different fields of the humanities with economics. This can be seen at least since the 1990s. Following the idea of a performative, visual or spatial turn in the humanities, one could argue that we are witnessing the emergence of an 'economic turn' – that was even intensified after 2008. For many people, the event of the global financial crisis in 2007/08 not only made economic matters visible, but above all made them tangible.[16] In this respect, it seems unsurprising that around this time in particular, we notice another shift towards an increased awareness on economic issues in the humanities.[17] Not just in cultural studies, but also in art history, the research focus on 'economics of art' intensified, looking for example into the supply and demand for artistic services, the contribution of the arts sector to the economy,

16 Awareness of economic aspects, as well as specific critique within the broader field of art has a long history. Take, for instance, the 1920s or 1960s, when artistic works not only depicted labour and aspects of commerce as a social reality but also engaged with the potential of art to alter and criticise (conditions of) production. What distinguishes the current moment, however, is that these questions have become a central topic within academic discourse. It is this development that we refer to as the 'economic turn' in the humanities.

17 This shift is also described in Paul Crosthwaite/Peter Knight/Nicky Marsh: "Introduction: The Interwovenness of Literature and Economics", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Economics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 1–16; Furthermore, this economic turn should not be confused with the one addressed by Kaplan/Reinert. In the *Economic Turn* anthology, Kaplan/Reinert identify a moment in the 18th century marked by an intensified cultural and discursive focus on economic matters. ("The Economic Turn in Enlightenment Europe"). Steven L. Kaplan/Sophus A. Reinert: *The Economic Turn: Recasting Political Economy in Enlightenment* Europe, London: Anthem Press, 2019; Sociologist Fran Tonkiss also speaks of an economic turn and emphasises that economic perspectives are not only to be understood as an addendum, but in particular in their methodological interconnectedness with cultural studies, Fran Tonkiss: "Kulturstudien und der 'economic turn'", transl. Brigitte Scott, in: *Die Politik der Cultural Studies – Cultural Studies der Politik*, ed. by Karin Harrasser/Sylvia Riedmann/Alan Scott, Wien: Turia + Kant, 2007, 214–226.

and the roles that public policies play.[18] Cultural, literature but also theatre studies deepened the reflection on the economics' influence on and the interplay with their research subjects, but also on the economic principles of both culture/art and research as labour/work.[19]

A more recent term and idea that seems to bridge all of the fields of humanities is 'the economic humanities'. This is prominently featured in Paul Crosthwaite, Peter Knight, and Nicky Marsh's *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Economics*.[20] The need for economic humanities is described as follows: "Economic Humanities, like the Environmental Humanities, challenges the assumption that the world's problems are best left to scientific and technical experts. [...] The aim is to shed light on the stories, images, ideas and technologies that actively constitute what we call 'the economy'."[21] This emphasis on repoliticising economic thinking resonates with Vogl's and Jaeggi's critiques of technocratic economy. In analysing 'who' is responsible for these critiques, the *Cambridge Companion* notes:

> The Economic Humanities needs to bring together literary studies scholars and historians (most notably those developing the New History of Capitalism), as well as economic sociologists and economic anthropologists, to provide an analysis of the material culture, representational practices, and ideological assumptions of economics and finance.[22]

With its strong emphasis on and roots in literary studies, it remains an open question whether the current articulation of the 'economic humanities' fully reflects the diversity of perspectives across the humanities – particularly those of theatre studies. Rather than merely supplementing a literary framework, theatre studies require their own methodological and conceptual approaches for analysing the performative, embodied, and institutional dimensions of the economy.

Economic Turn in Theatre (Studies)

Attention to economic questions is frequently tied to broader dynamics of economic and socio-political transformation. As a prime example, after the end of the Cold War, especially in Germany in the 1990s, an increased perception of the situatedness of theatre in the economic field was noticeable.

18 Cf. Hartmut Berghoff/Jakob Vogel (Ed.): *Wirtschaftsgeschichte als Kulturgeschichte*, Frankfurt/M./New York: Campus, 2004.

19 Whilst realising the complex historical and political differences between labour and work, in this paper we will use the term labour and work interchangeably.

20 Paul Crosthwaite/Peter Knight/Nicky Marsh (Ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Economics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

21 Crosthwaite/Knight/Marsh, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Economics*, 13–14.

22 Paul Crosthwaite/Peter Knight/Nicky Marsh: "The Economic Humanities and the History of Financial Advice", in: *American Literary History*, 31 (2019), 4, 661–686. https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajz031

The merging of the theatre systems of the FRG and the GDR in combination with rising of neoliberal policies of the time led to rationalisation measures and institutional struggles.[23] This in turn not only had an impact on changing production conditions and working structures, but also on topics that negotiated working realities in front of, on and behind the stage. It is not surprising that economic inquiries predominantly centre on theatre as an institution, and more specifically, on theatre understood as a business enterprise.[24] Ulrich Bröckling published *The Entrepreneurial Self* already in 2007,[25] a book that soon became a sociological toolbox to describe modes of work and self-perceptions of labour in the arts as well as in academia. Following this analysis, theatre was addressed as a structural or performance-related matter in order to discuss economic circumstances of stage productions. Within this narrow perspective, however, approaches to theatre rooted in the history of knowledge are easily overlooked. Though, there are ways to approach both theatre and economy as performative, historically grounded modes of knowledge production that both reflect and influence the realities they engage with.

As mentioned earlier, the most recent impactful event that prompted renewed attention to economic questions was the financial crisis of 2007/08. In 2009 scholars of the Collaborative Research Center 447 Kulturen des Performativen hosted an international conference at Freie Universität in Berlin. The conference *Spuren der Avantgarde: Theatrum Oeconomicum* had a particular interest in theatre historiography.[26] While focusing on experiments, the convenors aimed to examine the intersections of theatre and economics beyond approaches in traditional economic history. They saw it as a supplement to the historiography of culture and science. More specifically, it examined the historical significance of the experiment as part of a performative culture that shaped both the economic and theatrical spheres – or even merged them into a single sphere, as was the case in the early modern period. This reflects the need and wish for a clear focus: the program shows the challenges of connecting different projects, such as those questioning the value of a product of culture ('promises of value in postwar art'), to economies of 'something', such as "Ökonomie der Ungewissheit" or "Ökonomie des Utopischen", to appearance of questions of value in plays by Shakespeare.[27] This program demonstrates a common challenge, and sometimes also criticism of researching the interconnectedness of a

23 Cf. Franziska Schößler/Christine Bähr: "Einleitung", in: *Ökonomie im Theater der Gegenwart. Ästhetik, Institution, Produktion*, ed. by ibid., Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009, 9–20, here 9.

24 Cf. Schößler/Bähr (Ed.), *Ökonomie im Theater der Gegenwart.*

25 Ulrich Bröckling: *Das unternehmerische Selbst. Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2007.

26 International Conference from June 4–6, 2009 at Freie Universität Berlin. Part of the project *Theatrum Scientiarum* within the collaborative research centre Kulturen des Performativen. https://www.fu-berlin.de/presse/informationen/fup/2009/fup_09_132/index.html (06/05/2025).

27 These titles are copied from the printed programme of the International Conference of the re-

field in humanities and economy: it is difficult to create a coherent way of working, or to agree upon a narrow object of research, and the question is where to keep perspectives open, and where to limit them.

Returning to the Topic of the (Un)Disciplined Economic Humanities and the Question of Theatre

With regard to theatre (studies) we methodologically align with and diverge from the different approaches mentioned above: while we engage with literature's role in economic discourse, we also emphasise the agency of cultural objects, organisations, and performative practices in producing realities, rather than merely representing them. Theatre, in particular, plays a key role in our approach: not just as a literary genre or an institutional structure, but as a form of embodied, practical, time-based knowledge production. We view theatricality and performance as modes through which economic logic is produced, enacted, questioned, or reimagined – both, historically and in the present. Theatre, as an object of research, comes into focus through issues such as labour conditions, institutional precarity, and the performative dimensions of value, risk, and speculation. This list of topics is, of course, not exhaustive, but open-ended and multifaceted, pointing to the broad range of questions that emerge from this intersection. What we are thus trying is to create an even more open space: not just interdisciplinary but undisciplined and perhaps even unruly. A space where methods, perspectives, and vocabularies remain provisional and negotiable, but where theatre studies can enter, too. Theatre studies and artists working in theatre (in the broadest sense) reshape a field by introducing new case studies, theories, and methodologies at the intersection of theatre 'and' economy. In this way, the open space becomes both a metaphor and a method: one that resists closure but also helps to produce knowledge.

This approach allows us to integrate not only academic but also artistic perspectives. Artistic approaches, especially in theatre, offer embodied, practice-based ways of engaging with questions of labour, value, performativity, and the theatricality of markets or institutional conditions. Artistic explorations can make visible what often remains implicit or invisible. However, this integration also brings to light a tension between artistic and academic modes of thinking, which may be seen in their differing approaches to production, consumption, and their relationship to the economy. While academic research often operates within structured, institutional frameworks, artistic practices challenge these frameworks by embracing experimentation and embodied experience. This tension is symptomatic of broader differences in how these two spheres interact with and respond to economic pressures. By including artistic perspectives, research on theatre and economy not only broadens our methodological approaches but also invites us to

search centre Kulturen des Performativen (cf. previous note), Freie Universität Berlin, June 4–6, 2009; copy in author's possession.

critically examine the compatibility and potential frictions between these different modes of knowledge production. Our collaboration highlights the working realities and institutional precarity of both professions. And the network of artists and researchers from the Netherlands and Germany provides a comparative lens through which we can analyse the European cultural and academic 'markets'. The long-term aim of the group is to broaden the international perspective and critically examine how artistic and academic practices navigate, resist and reshape the structural inequalities that define cultural and educational institutions across Europe and beyond.

Open Spaces in Theatre (Studies): A Collaborative Exploration of Theatre and Economics

Our group already includes a rather diverse set of connections to theatre and economy. Examples of this are the intertwinement of theatre and financial speculation, strategies of theatrical visibility in practices of finance, collaborative working modes in culture industries and the hybrid status of plays as both a commodity and an artwork, spheres of commodification and mass media as a form of its theatrical representation, and the performance and negotiation of work in dominant television narratives of the present. Also in terms of (historical) time frames, our research starts from the early modern period and ends in the present. We asked ourselves the question: how can we open up this space even further?

At the gtw-conference in Leipzig, we took up the theme of *Open Spaces* and converted it into the BarCamp format in order to explore the space that we as a group had created. We were curious to know whether – and especially how – economic entanglements are reflected in participant's research and/or artistic work and how they deal with them. The BarCamp format, originally developed within the tech and web community, is an open, participatory workshop-event. Our experimental and cooperative session brought together researchers and artists from among others the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Romania.

To kick off the panel and map the search movement of the panellists, we asked the participants to write down their answers on post-its in order to visualise their associations, which we present in figure 2. Perhaps not surprisingly, many responses focused on the financial realities of theatre institutions and the commodification of art. Keywords included "market", "value", "profit", "competition", and "self-financing". The same tendency was present when we asked the participants to formulate questions. Examples were "can we measure the value of art?", "is theatre a commodity?", or "what is the profit of art?". These are not just theoretical inquiries; they are deeply tied to broader concerns about the future of theatre and, more generally, the role of art in society. Such associations show that, for many – to recall Jaeggi's metaphor – 'the economy' feels indeed like an untamed

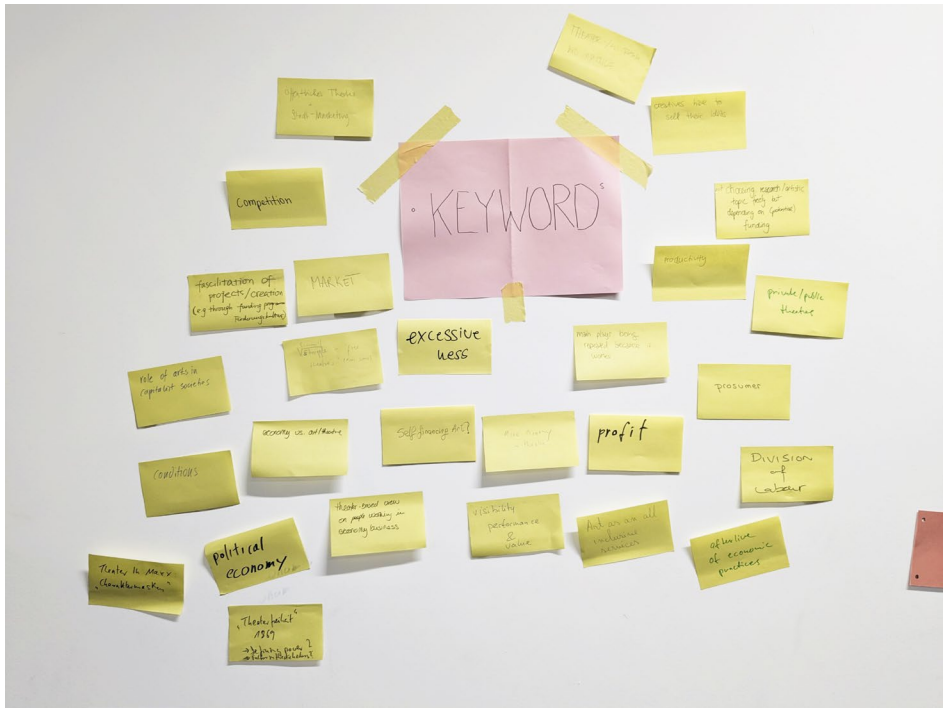

Fig. 2: Photo of the Post-its from the BarCamp *Room for Speculation*, 2024,
© Theatre and Economy Research Collaboration, 2024.

tiger: something powerful and dangerous, shaping the very conditions under which theatre is made and received. Focusing on the 'economy' and critically questioning it becomes a challenge at the point, when the structures we want to interrogate, limit our ability to imagine alternatives.

The workshop discussion extended beyond Western and capitalist contexts, exploring theatre evaluation and funding in post-Soviet countries. While theatre scholars are generally aware of international perspectives, the idea of an open space was not yet extended to ourselves as researchers in the conversation. However, this is becoming a daily concern, as also Christopher Newfield has observed. From an US-American background he directly challenges the current state of higher education, holding universities accountable for their role in perpetuating economic and cultural inequities. He specifically urges the humanities not to decline into darkness, but to take an active role in institutional transformation: "In short, academia needs a cultural change in talking about money, and the change will be coming from below."[28] As we write this in Spring 2025, German and Dutch universities are under intense pressure. In the Netherlands, proposed cuts of

28 Christopher Newfield: "Humanities Decline in Darkness", in: *Public Humanities* (2025), 1, e31, ed. by Zoe Hope Bulaitis/Jeffrey R. Wilson, 1–16, here 14. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.39

1.2 billion euros threaten academic jobs and entire programs.[29] This pressure is also evident in theatre studies. On March 19th, protests took place at the University Theatre in Amsterdam. Professor Kati Röttger, set to retire in October, notes that the search for a successor has been suspended due to these budget cuts, raising the question: "are theatre studies indeed declining into darkness?"[30] With the University of Amsterdam being the only one offering a dedicated bachelor's program in theatre studies, forces us to ask the question: what is an open space when the doors of our departments are closing?

Opening a Methodological Space: Mapping the Intersections of Theatre and Economy

Whilst being aware of these heavy emphasis on the pressure that we have now on the 'production' of culture, we want to open up the methodological framework of theatre and economy to the possible theoretical perspectives that help us to understand where humanities and economics intersect.

Leaning on the multifaceted approach by Joseph Vogl, that we presented above, we identify three aspects (see 2. IMPORT/EXPORT):

- Economical aspects represented in theatre (A)
- Economic conditions for producing theatre (B)
- Intertwinements of theatre and economy on a conceptual level (e.g. concepts like performance, character masks) (C)

However, we add two extra categories for a more precise overview of our perspectives:

- Analysis of phenomena associated with the 'economy' (e.g. work/labour through methodologies of theatre (D)
- Intertwinement of theatre and economy in our own production of knowledge (E)

29 For information on the budget cuts of 1.2. billion in higher education and sciences, see Ruben Puylaert: "Kabinet bezuinigt nog steeds 1 miljard op hoger onderwijs en wetenschap", in: *Universiteiten van Nederland*, 13/09/2024, https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/actueel/nieuws/kabinet-bezuinigt-nog-steeds-1-miljard-op-hoger-onderwijs-en-wetenschap (14/04/2025). For higher education only, the current budget cuts are half a billion see Ruben Puylaert: "Onderwijsbezuinigingen aangenomen – universiteiten naar de rechter", in: *Universiteiten van Nederland*, 8/04/2025, https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/actueel/nieuws/onderwijsbezuinigingen-aangenomen-universiteiten-naar-de-rechter (14/05/2025).

30 Wendy Lubberding: "Stakende wetenschappers: we hebben scenario's voor een leefbare toekomst nodig", in: *Theaterkrant*, 19/03/2025, https://www.theaterkrant.nl/nieuws/stakende-theaterwetenschappers-we-hebben-scenarios-voor-een-leefbare-toekomst-nodig/ (14/05/2025).

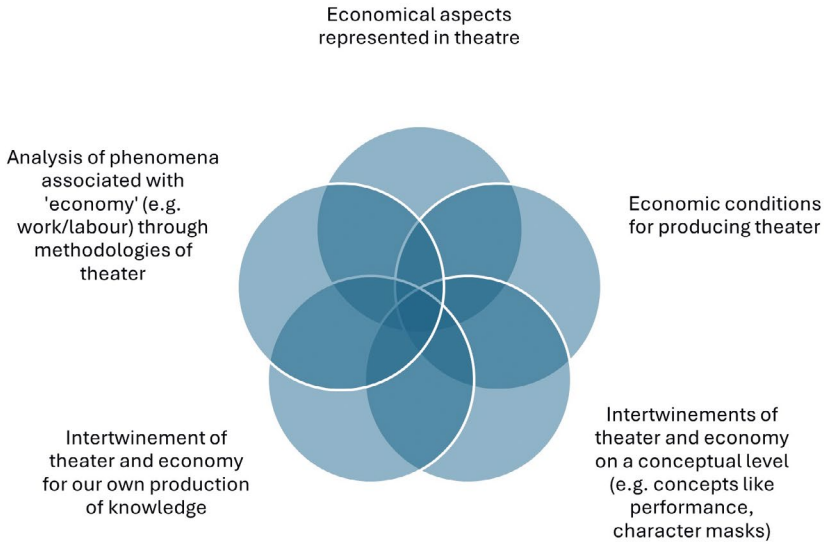

Fig. 3: Theatre and Economy Research Collaboration, *Economical Aspects Represented in Theatre*, 2025, © Theatre and Economy Research Collaboration, 2025.

Some aspects are quite self-explanatory. When poverty, or climate change is addressed in a play, this would represent A. When the current financial pressures for the cultural sector are being addressed, that would fit into B. When terms from the theatre give shape to economic discourse (greater fool theory, or Marx' 'character mask'), that would typically fall under C. A very prominent example of D is probably Erving Goffman's sociological model of theatricality, which he used to describe roles in everyday life (such as employees, workers, etc.) in theatrical terms.[31] And when we ourselves are limited in our ways of doing research, for example lacking institutional embeddedness, that would be E. However, it is important to say that these are not static categories. Rather, they are angles, or in visual terms, circles to approach the nexus of theatre and economy (Fig. 3). But the given approaches are not unilateral: When we produce knowledge about A–D, we are also and always concerned with E. And when we are looking at a play about poverty (A), this will probably also lead to a reflection on the state of theatre itself (B). When we focus on 'production' that is already a word with double meaning: both theatrical work 'and' capitalist logic (B and C). In addition, however, the realities of work in the cultural sector must also be taken into account. They cannot only be described as working realities through art as work, but shape working environments as labour. In this case, D and B interfere. To make it even more complex, when we would analyse the keywords as shown in the post-its above, one could easily hit three angles for one term: "Division of labour" fits B as an economic condition and D as an analytical

31 Erving Goffman: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Doubleday, 1959.

lens very clearly, but also slides into A when staged in theatre. Furthermore, it also mirrors the dynamic focus a dialogue between artists and academic researchers offers.

Within this setup, we have asked ourselves: in how far does this methodological space also open up a methodological space for artists or even artistic research? Toon Fibbe, currently the one artist in our group, wrote an intriguing response to that question that we would like to copy here as a reflection on the role of artistic practice within our shared framework.

The pictures at the beginning of this article (Fig. 1) are part of my research archive for my performance *Too Big to Fail, Too Small to Notice*, a work I presented during the gtw-conference's BarCamp. Research is very much part of my artistic practice, and as the only visual artist in this collective, I also found myself wondering: to what extent does the methodological space described in the text also open itself to artists, or even to artistic research? I found this difficult to answer at first, since our positions as academics and artists overlap in many ways, yet are far from identical. This text, for instance, reflects the precarious realities of both of our professions. In a way, we each find ourselves speculating on our own value – managing portfolios of articles, exhibitions, and shows – while working in fields shaped by cultural, economic, and political pressures. But as an artist within this research collective – and within the text we are currently writing – both I and my work also become, at least in part, objects of analysis. Which is, in a sense, the intent: I make my work to be looked at – to be examined, enjoyed, even categorised. Yet as I write this, I realise that what may have been lost is that, as the maker, I also see the work as something to look from – a lens, a vantage point.

For example, *Too Big to Fail, Too Small to Notice* examined the relation between visibility and value on the Chicago Stock Exchange. The more visible a trader is, the more profit can be made. Yet those same logics also mirror my own position within the art world – where visibility likewise operates as a form of currency. The more visible I am as an artist, the more value my practice acquires. Not only did I observe and interview these traders, but I also created a fictional character based on this research and embodied that character during the performance. Making the performance became a way for me to both investigate these traders and the conditions that shape my own practice.

Furthermore, a work always already reflects the conditions of its own making. In this case, the work would have changed considerably without financial support. Questions such as: "can I afford the flight to Chicago?" or: "will the funding come through?" inevitably shape the work and research. Even when a piece does not explicitly address these constraints, it is nonetheless produced through them and bears their traces. For me, every work is a kind of two-way mirror: it provides a vista onto something but also reflects – always – the conditions of its own making.

The position of an artist, or my position, isn't always easy to articulate from within a shared framework. Yet it also opens up the space to think methodologically through practice – not just about it. And perhaps that is where our strength lies: in creating a space where differences in orientation don't have to be resolved, but can instead shape new ways of working, seeing, and making knowledge and art together.

The panel discussion at the gtw-congress confirmed that the intersection of theatre and economy is not only about content or takes place as a structural matter, but it is also an epistemological one: it concerns how we think, work, and organise knowledge. By offering these five overlapping circles or angles – ranging from representation to production to institutional constraint and working from a perspective on theatre from metaphor to methodology – we aim to build a shared vocabulary that enables both critical reflection and creative knowledge production. Rather than offering a fixed framework, we understand these angles as always overlapping and shifting, and as a set of practices, much like economy itself. Yet this raises a further methodological question: to what extent can such a vocabulary accommodate the specific position of the artist, whose practice is not only subject to analysis but also produces knowledge in its own right? This tension between art and research is central to our inquiry – and we think it will help us in the future to develop new perspectives: both in academic work, collaborative projects such as performance lectures and artworks.