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Marguerite Stix and the Shell—Notes on Disciplinarity and Contradiction

Abstract

This contribution discusses questions of disciplinarity with reference to the example of the person and works of Marguerite Stix. The authors debate the implications of concepts such as trans-, inter-, multi- and x-disciplinarity in a critical fashion. They connect biographical sketches with conceptual reflections on their case study, making a plea for new disciplines with specific disciplinary delineations. The article contributes to North American Literary and Cultural Studies as well as Interdisciplinary Linguistics while, simultaneously, it argues for overcoming such disciplinary ascriptions.

Résumé

Der vorliegende Beitrag diskutiert Fragen von Disziplinarität am Beispiel der Person und des Werks von Marguerite Stix. Dabei erörtern die Autoren auf kritische Weise Implikationen von Konzepten wie Trans-, Inter-, Multi- und X-Disziplinarität. Sie verbinden biographische Skizzen und konzeptionelle Reflexionen des exemplarischen Gegenstands und plädieren für neue Disziplinen mit spezifischen neuen disziplinären Zuschnitten. Der Aufsatz leistet einen Beitrag zur literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlichen Amerikanistik sowie zur Interdisziplinären Linguistik und argumentiert zugleich für eine Überwindung solcher fachlichen Zuschreibungen.

Références électroniques

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Marguerite Stix and the Shell—Notes on Disciplinarity and Contradiction

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“All beginnings are difficult”¹—such is the opening line of the introduction to *The Shell* by Hugh and Marguerite Stix and R. Tucker Abbott. We will return to this beginning. First, a remark on this essay, which interrogates how the current significance of disciplinarity could adequately be reflected—here and now, from our angles as scholars in the field of the *humanities*, more precisely, literary and cultural studies as well as linguistics; these are disciplines which nowadays usually act separately from each other, as much as German and American Studies, subjects of study to which we belong respectively. These are subjects with distinct traditions, diverse cultures, utterly different political motivations and by no means comparable critical claims. Does this entail considering this essay an attempt to merge disciplinary perspectives into one interdisciplinary undertaking, or are we even aiming to negate specific political circumstances of subjects, celebrating a new philology as an entity, as a shared academic place called ‘home’ beyond the differences of national philologies?

Neither one nor the other. We are neither attempting to work in an interdisciplinary way here, nor are we claiming a coherence among subjects of study that set themselves apart in historical trajectories and in consequence of numerous ruptures. We have as little intention of merging German and American Studies into a New Philology in this context as of bringing literary, cultural and language studies into an interdisciplinary dialogue, which hardly seems innovative nowadays. So what is the *Shell* in the title of our text all about?

We will answer not only this question in our contribution to the debate about disciplines and subjects of study, about disciplinarity and its putative opening-up to interdisciplinarity, as well as about subjects in general and the question of their boundaries and references to each other. This nexus of questions will prompt some consideration and further queries. Hence, we seek to open up an essayistic space, perhaps evading some questions for the time being, and set our thoughts in motion, step by step. Indeed, we want to avoid giving answers to questions not asked. So let us proceed with finding adequate questions concerning the subject of disciplinarity.

Let us say we are walking through a city while we are giving thought to this text; thus, for the time being: “*Sit* as little as possible.”² Once in a while, scholars of American Studies walk through New York City while considering scholarly thoughts, German Studies scholars do the same. So let us presume we are walking through Greenwich Village, away from our desks. The linguist takes note of language as he walks by, scanning in passing the *linguistic landscape* of public space. Perhaps something engages our attention. Suppose there is a bronze plate attached to a typical town house in 13 Vandam Street that reads:

¹ Hugh Stix, Marguerite Stix, and R. Tucker Abbott, photographs by H. Landshoff, *The Shell. Five Hundred Years of Inspired Design*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1968/1988, n. pag.



Fig. 1: *New York, 13 Vandam Street*. Blow up sketch. © Oskar Warnke 2015

Our interest is awakened. Either we now pause, let ourselves be stopped, or we continue walking, noticing the words only in passing. We choose the first option. It takes us closer to the topic of this essay than we had initially imagined or ever planned. Hence the smart phone. Who was Marguerite Stix? No Wikipedia entry. Interesting. We take a quick picture and continue walking; later, we note on the photo that a stylized shell is permanently attached to the brick stone façade.

Our essay provides a reflection on disciplinarity. This does not entail casual interests. Disciplines are serious business, as much as subjects of study and scholarship at large, a field with rules, of which society has legitimate expectations. We decide to develop our text with Marguerite Stix, to declare her the point of departure of our thoughts, walking through the city. Not yet knowing her can only be conducive to that end. But what would distinguish a disciplinary, well-founded, subject-specific, academic engagement with Marguerite Stix, we are asking? Beyond Google, Wikipedia and fast phone food?

Six questions would surely have to be answered, were we to assert a claim to acceptable scholarly standards:

I What is it that interests me/us, what is of interest to others? The answer to this question determines the subject matter of an academic project.

II What significance does this interest have in the context of published scholarly works and results? The answer to this question refers to what is recognized as scholarship in a society, be it widely accepted or contested in a field of competition with varying claims to validity.

III Which desideratum results from my/our interest in relation to existing research, to what counts as scholarly findings? The answer to this question is itself a question, the research question of a

²Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo. How to Become What you Are*, in *Nietzsche: The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, New York, Cambridge UP, 2005, p. 69-151, p. 87.

scholarly project. A research question may be based on assumptions if the project is driven by hypotheses.

IV Which object is suitable for finding answers to my/our research question, which data do I/we need, which sources could usefully be engaged? The answer to this question determines the data basis, the material of a project.

V What methods are appropriate for finding answers to the research question on the basis of the data or the material? The answer to this question determines the approach of the process of scholarly work.

VI Once the previous five questions have been raised and answered, it becomes possible to answer the most general question: what is the topic of the research, of the scholarly project?

This catalogue presents nothing but the general tools of the trade well known from scholarly propaedeutics. But in our view, precisely such a catalogue must be theorized in this context since we are considering disciplinarity, and it is such a catalogue of questions that formats what we want to call scholarly work, a process tied to and anchored in disciplines. We are thus already noting something well-nigh self-evident but nonetheless crucial. Disciplines discipline in two respects: they delimit associations and a wealth of ideas in comprehensible ways, and they determine what is acceptable, what counts as a necessary and/or sufficient condition within the boundaries of scholarship in general and disciplines in particular.

It is thus not enough to discover something in passing. It does not suffice for projects in the humanities that a subject matter provides pleasure or fun and that it is pursued as a personal interest. We rather take the view that personal preferences, individual intellectual curiosity etc. need to be disciplined if they are to be pursued in accordance with scholarly standards. Anyone who wants to meet such standards must live with being disciplined through disciplines. We do not want to ignore that this comes with advantages, such as opening access to resources, that such disciplining reinforces existing structures of social positioning and that it entails many more benefits that come with recognition.

But why abstract thinking about disciplinarity at all? And how do we relate such an abstraction to Marguerite Stix, to the shell in the title of this paper? Our propaedeutic questions can surely be answered in more than one way. Indeed, a plethora of answers is possible. We therefore know that we cannot bring Marguerite Stix and *The Shell* into focus in a comprehensive, conclusive, and exhaustive way, and we do not attempt to do so. The essay rather offers us the possibility to develop the question of disciplinarity in search of Marguerite Stix alongside our readers. Our text is not a project paper, nor a publication of research results; instead, it seeks to open up a perspective into the workshop of contemporary humanities scholarship. We will continue to develop further questions to this end, questions that need to be honed and answered in a conceivable research project in the first place. Along the way, we delineate what disciplinarity means to us. This involves possibilities to think about disciplinarity, and by no means does it include the assertion of necessities. In fact, we anticipate that our readers can and perhaps will turn the lines of thought of this essay in a different direction; we will also take up this thought at a later point. So let us now and in this sense—openly, incipiently—state more precisely our propaedeutic catalogue for Marguerite Stix, for *The Shell*.

Ad I First, we would have to clarify the reasons we can find a plate attached to this building, in this city, in this country, giving the name of Marguerite Stix, and how the person connects to the shell attached above the plate. The name itself—both anthroponyms, a French first name and a family name perhaps of Upper German or Austrian origin—would have to be analyzed. The background of Marguerite Stix moves into the focus of our interest, her biography, her belonging to one or many fields. Which scholars have already concerned themselves with Marguerite Stix, is there research on her and if so, by whom and how far does it date back? If not, why does this plate exist which is part of a personalized memorial culture without disclosing the protagonists of this commemoration? Does her name possibly stand for a substantial subject of scholarly study which would warrant disciplinary engagement beyond a singular, insignificant exemplary memory? The plate is indicative of something

not yet known to us, and precisely this can and should kindle scholarly interest. Marguerite Stix thus refers us to the fact that every disciplinary approach to a scholarly research topic has its starting point in the realization of nescience—a state of not knowing.

Ad II We can only determine nescience authoritatively once we have clarified what others already know, what has already been established and published—whether Marguerite Stix had previously been a matter of scholarly inquiry. Should she herself have had contact with the academy, this would be more than probable. But even if she does not belong to the academic field, the plate, as an indexical sign of memorialization, indicates that she must have been in touch with discussions of her time, and that she found a discursive place to which the plate and perhaps the shell refer. This discursive position could have exemplary character, so that an engagement with Marguerite Stix would be more than a biographical project, possibly an analysis of subject positions, ascriptions of meaning before, after, and between 1956 and 1975. This would put into focus a range of comparable biographies. Numerous studies would have to be considered. Whether Marguerite Stix merely features as a biographical and social model of the twentieth century or whether she would be suitable herself to revise existing research on biographies in New York and beyond should be clarified. Such research on Marguerite Stix would have to be included in inquiries concerning persons of the same era. It is certainly possible that previous scholarship would have to be expanded or called into question, and this might extend beyond biographical research. All this would have to be elucidated in a survey of previous work, and, in particular, this would entail a consideration of the discipline in which a project on Marguerite Stix should be situated, and which subjects of study with which preliminary work would be particularly suited for it.

Ad III It would be central for a research project on Marguerite Stix for us to know what we do not know, on the one hand, and what would be of interest for subjects of study that are clearly located in a discipline, on the other. A name and a shell do not suffice in this respect. Once more, we are faced with the figure of disciplining. The point, indeed, would be to discipline and integrate Marguerite Stix into a system of scholarly practices, starting from a desideratum that is precisely formulated. One or more hypotheses could of course give a sense of direction here and pre-structure the answer to a research question. We may already assume that the shell and the name do not relate to each other in an arbitrary fashion, that the connection between both signs in public space already provides an indication that we may assume mutual looking relations, that the shell contextualizes the name Marguerite Stix as much as, vice versa, the name specifies the perspective onto the shell. One hypothesis about Marguerite Stix could therefore be relational in this sense from the outset.

Ad IV Assuming that we were still interested in Marguerite Stix, and based on our previous research, we should now know to which social field she belonged, under what historical circumstances she acted, and also how she shaped them. It is precisely there, in these constellations, that data and material suitable for answering the research question of a project on Marguerite Stix should be sought. Supposing that Marguerite Stix published texts, intertexts referring to them could certainly be found. If she did create artifacts, these were perhaps collected in prominent places that, in return, could provide a body of research material we could access. Possible material, conceivable data thus lie where Marguerite Stix operated and where her life attracted attention. Just, for that matter, as it does in our essay.

Ad V The data and the material structure the methods—that much is obvious. Whether textual analysis, visual analysis, or multimodal analysis; whether fieldwork, surveys, qualitative or quantitative research, whether an inductive, deductive or abductive approach should be employed—all these decisions result from the genres of data and how they relate to a desideratum, from preliminary work as well as from the overall research interest of a project. The authors would have to reflect on the selection of analytical categories applied to Marguerite Stix.

Ad VI This essay, in its inquiring function, provides us with the possibility of postponing the topic of potential research on Marguerite Stix; however, we will yet address this point in precise ways.

It may now seem as if we have strayed from our subject matter, as if we were absorbed by a plate that we noted only in passing, to perform propaedeutic exercises, as if the essay as genre carried us away to the horizons of a vast space, or as if we were merely laboriously preparing a catalogue of questions for the draft of a project that no one at this point will tackle. There seems to be a contradiction between the effort and outcome of our text. But the larger contradiction lies elsewhere. Here we are referring to a “contradiction between reality and appearance,” since what we have produced so far only pretends to present an elaborate research idea.³ While we are developing first and utterly tentative aspects of a scholarly inquiry into an unknown person, we are in fact not interested in it. This is because we do not intend, with this propaedeutic catalogue, to prepare research on Marguerite Stix, however desirable this would indeed be. We therefore behave in notably contradictory ways. We use the sketch of a potential research process solely to emphasize the following: that we have no sense yet of the disciplinary place in which a project on Marguerite Stix could be located. As interesting as all potential research concerning this person might be, it would certainly have to be situated in a disciplinary environment, and it would have to be linked to a subject of study. This is what we are concerned with here. Marguerite Stix can serve as an example for the fact that a person largely remains uninteresting for scholarship as long as she is not placed within a discipline. All sketches ad I to ad VI remain blind to their object of investigation unless disciplinary and subject-specific instruments open our eyes to it. An American Studies focus on Marguerite Stix would be completely different from one of German Studies, a linguistic approach would differ from one in literary and/or cultural studies. Imagine we presented our abstract ideas about a project on Marguerite Stix to scholars from different subjects of study and disciplines and they were to concretize a research agenda respectively; we might well expect utterly distinct projects and utilizations. Our seeming performance of academic propaedeutics thus has the function of moving closer toward the problem of disciplinarity, not to Marguerite Stix; we move away from her step by step as we go along in our text, as she simply marks a point of departure for this essay. This will remain so, even though we want to expand our knowledge about Marguerite Stix. But thinking more specifically about this person makes us move farther away from her and closer to the problem of disciplinarity. Approaching Marguerite Stix serves as a means for us to create distance in the process of disciplining.

It is under these circumstances that we want to take a closer look at the life of this person:⁴ as her biographer Richard McLanathan notes, Marguerite Stix was born Margret Christine Salzer, June 15, 1907, into a bourgeois Jewish family. Her birthplace, Vienna, was considered a metropolis of contrasts and contradictions: poised between East and West, from monarchy to republic. Concerning cultural life in Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century, McLanathan observes, “Vienna’s cultural vitality encompassed many conflicting movements and developments;”⁵ between the poles of Romantic Mahler enthusiasm, operetta, and the twelve-tone music of the Viennese School, between the conservative Imperial Academy and the rebellious Vienna Secession. Salzer was born in the home

³ David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, New York, Oxford UP, 2014, p. 6.

⁴ All biographical notes completely follow and paraphrase the following two publications which have made the life of Marguerite Stix accessible to us in the first place. Richard McLanathan’s monograph in particular, which contains a comprehensive catalogue of Stix’s works including 198 illustrations, is impressively detailed; it was produced in collaboration with Hugh Stix after Marguerite Stix’s death. Everything we know about Marguerite Stix and outline here, we draw from these contexts, and we make no claims to original research.

Richard McLanathan, *The Art of Marguerite Stix*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1977, p. 13-24, 25-26, 31-32, 51, 55, 73-75, 89-92, 145, 149-153, 169-171, 174-179, 181-182, a biographical synopsis can be found on p. 184-185, a list of exhibitions on p. 186-188, bibliographical notes on Marguerite Stix on p. 189.

“Sculptor Marguerite Stix Is Dead At 67,” *The Virgin Islands Daily News*, Jan. 16, 1975, p. 17 <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=757&dat=19750116&id=xKxYAAAIBAJ&sjid=GUCDAAAIBAJ&pg=6465,1654610&hl=de> <17.04.2015>

⁵ R. McLanathan, *The Art of Marguerite Stix*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

of the Zionist weekly newspaper *Die Welt*—which was, at the same time, a place of anti-Semitic agitation. During World War I, Salzer moved in with her grandparents who lived in Innsbruck. During the 1920s, she took courses in arts and crafts at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Vienna. As a student of ceramist and sculptor Michael Powolny (1871–1984), she won a prize for a larger than life-size ceramic figure at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris in 1925, exhibited in the Austrian pavilion. This figure was later destroyed by the Russian bombing of Vienna in 1945 along with her other work created up to 1945. Influenced by the style of the Wiener Werkstätte, Margret Christine Salzer worked as a sculptor, ceramist, architectural designer, and garden decorator in Vienna until 1938; she exhibited in European cities such as Venice, Munich, and Brussels. We learn all this in the exuberant biographical overview by Richard McLanathan,⁶ of which only a few copies are available in research libraries in Germany. An early marriage to doctor Bela von Gomperz—a close friend of the writer Peter Altenberg—failed, presumably because he could not cope with her independence as an artist.

She and her father, mother and grandmother all fled Vienna when Germany invaded Austria, but while she managed to catch the last train to Paris before the borders were closed on March 11, 1938, the rest of her family ended up in Poland, where they perished in a concentration camp. During a short period in the French capital—we also read this in McLanathan⁷—she succeeded in designing *haute couture* jewelry and fashionable accessories for fashion houses like Lanvin und Balenciaga. On June 10, 1940, she fled from the Germans occupying Paris, pretending to be pregnant to get through the lines. Eventually, however, she was arrested and interned in the *Camp de Gurs* close to the Spanish border, a camp familiar from Hannah Arendt's biography. There, she drew images of life in the camp that portrayed the dignity of those interned under degrading and dehumanizing conditions. She was released without papers, survived on a farm in the mountains and joined a group of Czech refugees who organized a Czech passport for her, with which she managed to make her way across Franco's Spain to Portugal. From Lisbon, she planned to escape to the Belgian colony of Congo, a plan that failed yet awakens our colonial-historical and postcolonial interests in this twentieth-century figure. It was from Lisbon that she eventually reached the United States. After a strenuous, month-long journey on a small cargo ship she debarked in Baltimore and arrived in New York City in April 1941, where she settled down. Under the name of her first husband, as Margret Gomperz, she published an account of her experiences in the concentration camp, illustrated with her own drawings, titled "Career in France."⁸

McLanathan⁹ describes her early years in America in detail: until 1946, Stix worked in ceramics factories and her studio in MacDougal Street, close to Washington Square Park. Then she began to dedicate herself to drawing and painting. She met Hugh Stix, the man who was later to become her husband, in the gallery he had opened in 1936, *The Artists' Gallery*, by introducing herself to him with her drawings from the *Camp des Gurs*. Together, they organized several benefits at the gallery, for which they won over famous jazz musicians; the idea was to provide artists with an exhibition space where they could show their work independent of fashion trends and the need to make a profit. Between 1949 and 1963, she largely focused on sculpture, made first from terra cotta and later from bronze. Stix's first solo exhibition in the United States took place at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery in New York in 1951. McLanathan¹⁰ considers her bronze head of Lincoln, presented by an unknown donor to the *New School for Social Research*, as the high point of Stix's career in sculpture.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 13-18.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 23-24.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 25-26, 73-74.

Marguerite Stix and her husband moved into a house in Greenwich Village in 1956. Here, in 1964, they opened the *Stix Rare Shell Gallery*, a magnet for artists and media people. She now lived a life in the center of New York creativity. From 1963 onwards, the subject of most of her work was shells; as we learn from McLanathan,¹¹ a trip with Hugh led them to the Pacific, from which the couple returned with some fifteen thousand specimens of shells. She experimented with their forms and patterns, made lithographs, and created fabric and wallpaper designs based on them. While she first appreciated shells as abstract sculptures, Stix came to recognize them as elements of jewelry. Her jewelry, which she designed with shells and gemstones, combined handicraft with art. Stix collaborated closely with craftsmen and goldsmiths in France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and the United States. Her jewelry became fashionable; she repeatedly presented her objects in solo exhibitions, and her jewelry was sold at Cartier's. Public figures and celebrities, among them Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, called Marguerite Stix's *shell jewelry* their own. Not least, McLanathan¹² tells us that in 1968, she published the book *The Shell. Five Hundred Million Years of Inspired Design* in collaboration with her husband and R. Tucker Abbott, a distinguished malacologist and member of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. The book was translated into nine languages. At the age of sixty-seven, on January 10, 1975, Stix died of cancer in New York City.¹³

Marguerite Stix's work can be found in the permanent collections of the *Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art*, Hartford, Connecticut; *Contemporary Arts Association*, Houston, Texas; *Walker Art Center*, Minneapolis, Minnesota; *Butler Institute of American Art*, Youngstown, Ohio; *National Collection of Fine Arts*, Washington, D.C.; *Columbia Museum of Art*, South Carolina and the *New School for Social Research* in New York City.¹⁴ McLanathan¹⁵ honors her works as creations of an artist who combined the competence of arts and craft with abstract artistic expression, and he interprets her extensive, multifaceted oeuvre as the expression of her life: "In the light of her personal history, it is easy to understand her celebration of the beautiful [...]. Gratitude for survival and an enhanced joy in living are not only reflected but also clearly expressed in all her work, which is, in essence, an affirmation of life."¹⁶

10 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

13 "Sculptor Marguerite Stix Is Dead At 67," *op. cit.*, p. 17.

14 *Ibid.*

15 R. McLanathan, *The Art of Marguerite Stix*, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

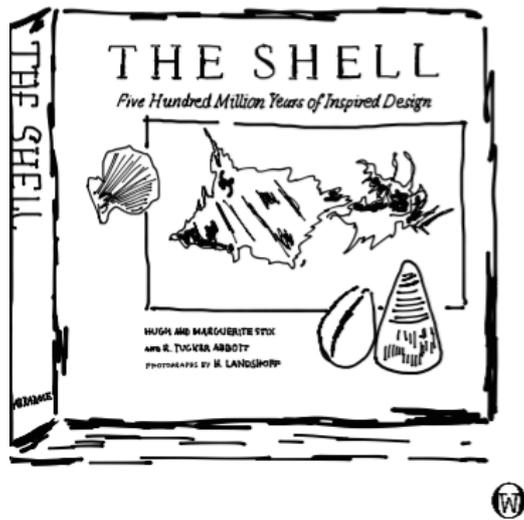


Fig. 2: *The Shell*. Blow up sketch. © Oskar Warnke 2015

This is Marguerite Stix. And the shell? *The Shell*¹⁷ is the comprehensive monograph that Stix co-authored with her husband and in scientific collaboration with R. Tucker Abbott. Published with Harry N. Abrams in 1968, it features high-quality photographic plates by H. Landshoff. The book was published in the wake of the broad public reception of the Stix's collectors' activities and the *Stix Rare Shell Gallery*. The opening of the gallery a few years prior had found great resonance in newspapers and television.¹⁸ While the book upholds rigorous academic standards, it is intended as “an introduction to a great world of beauty.”¹⁹ When reading this impressive book, we learn that Hugh and Marguerite Stix undertook a far-away journey to put together their collection, from Tokyo and Kyoto to Hong Kong, from the Philippines via Australia to New Zealand, from the Fiji and Solomon Islands all the way to Tahiti and Hawaii. And this despite the prevailing assumption that shells were mainly suitable to entertain children whose “wary parents [...] saw in the shell a perfect source of organized, stimulating play.”²⁰

The book is not about malacology, that is, a science focussed on the biological functions of living mollusks, but rather about the shells, a dead form of enduring presence. It is inscribed in the conchology “of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.”²¹ *The Shell* moves in quasi-disciplinary orders that may seem unusual to us, considering our current spectrum of subjects of study, especially since it does not understand esthetics and systematics as contradictions but much rather

¹⁷ Everything we know about *The Shell* and publish here, be it paraphrased or quoted, results from our reading of H. and M. Stix and R. Tucker Abbott, *The Shell*, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ R. McLanathan, *The Art of Marguerite Stix*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

¹⁹ H. and M. Stix and R. Tucker Abbott, *The Shell*, introduction, n. pag.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

construes them as complementary. This is a book of cultural studies in the best sense of the word, before this subject of study even became successful: it brings into play mythology, history, economics, sexual symbolism, religion, and heraldry. It reminds us of the significance of shells as commercial currency; pre-Columbian America and European cultural history are explained taking examples of shells as religious symbols, while art history is referenced not least with recourse to the New York *Metropolitan Museum of Art*. In a manner that would surely fail to meet today's standards of postcolonial critique, the book celebrates the spirit of discovery of the Early Modern period, making it tangible with reference to shell collecting. "The new infatuation with shells reached its highest peak in Amsterdam"—who would know that much today?²² The designation of an epoch, Rococo, "derives from the French 'rocaille,' a type of rock-and-shell decoration [...]."²³ Shells are everywhere, not least in transatlantic dimensions, and always with a view of Old Europe: in the "sentimental décor of the Victorian period," or the "scintillating shell pavilion at Goodwood Park, Sussex," not to mention the "Victorian interior cluttered with trinkets [...]."²⁴ The authors distance themselves from the "stuffy, enclosed style" of the time, celebrating instead the "emerging science of malacology", growing since the eighteenth century.²⁵ They offer a glimpse at the twentieth century, considering Odilon Redon's painted œuvre, as well as demonstrating knowledge about the "story of the Shell Oil company."²⁶ The authors tell us about the significance of the shell for Frank Lloyd Wright and, ultimately, glance admiringly at Japan as a country of shell devotees. We are given a global, culturally far-reaching, historically informed, stylistically precise overview of an astonishing subject matter, far removed from the classification books of beachcombers. This is a New York contribution to the cultural history of nature par excellence.

Famous shell experts paid visits to the Stix's and 13 Vandam Street became a New York mecca, as we have already learned from McLanathan's biography. We are surprised that Greenwich Village holds such secrets and begin to understand why, as a memorial trace, there is a stylized shell still attached to the façade of Hugh and Marguerite Stix's building. In its main part, *The Shell* contains 188 plates with large-sized photographs. It opens with the Emperor's Slit Shell (*Pleurotomaria hirasei*) and closes with the impressive display of the segmented shell plates of the Giant Pacific Chiton (*Amicula stelleri*). Upon closer inspection of the book, we learn about the stylized scallop shell valve attached to Marguerite Stix's house just above the memorial plaque; it belongs to the family *Pectinidae*, which is introduced over a stretch of several plates. The book includes literature on marine mollusks in all phases of marine conchology, leading all the way back to Aristotle's *History of Animals* (322 B.C.), and it is informed about Michel Adanson's *Histoire Naturelle du Sénégal; Coquillages* (1757). This latter tidbit is surprising to us in particular, since we have attended to this author in an utterly different context, not knowing that our considerations of Marguerite Stix would refer us back to him. Adanson also served as a reference point for abolitionist Quakers of the eighteenth century such as Anthony Benezet, who used Adanson's travel writing to authorize assumptions of West Africa as a paradise on earth for its inhabitants who were later enslaved across the Atlantic;²⁷ only now do we realize that the Senegalese shells Adanson describes may have played a

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*

role in this context. Completely new references emerge for us here. But back to Hugh and Marguerite Stix, to their shells. In systematic overview, the authors inventory additional literature from the Americas, Europe, from Africa and India, from Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Contributions to shells in art and literature are listed as well as children's books and, finally, recipe books à la *How to Cook Clams*. We are now literally pulled into this work and wonder which contradictory feelings Marguerite Stix may have had between the time of her destitute drawings from the concentration camp and that of her hymn to the shells.

How to approach such a book—no, such a person—in a scholarly fashion? How do we cover the variety and richness of this life, the activities and impact in different social fields on distinct continents, the biographical fissures and successful integrations, as they are documented by the sculptural work on Abraham Lincoln, for instance, that is registered as an item in the collection of the *New School for Social Research* in New York City—an institution that holds yet another remarkable, if not realized crossing of the paths of Hannah Arendt und Marguerite Stix?²⁸

Beyond a description of life courses and the content of publications, we ask two different questions here: first, which role can be ascribed to Marguerite Stix in writing *The Shell* along with her husband and the scientist Abbott, and second, which scholarly perspective could we take on her life and work? McLanathan already provides the answer to the first question. It was by no means an equally distributed collaboration among the three authors: Hugh ascribes the sole authorship of *The Shell* to his wife, claiming he merely edited her text and R. Tucker Abbott checked and added scientific information about the collection on display.²⁹ Considering her background shaped by decorative design and handicraft and her engagement with the New York art scene, it seems astonishing, therefore, that the ways in which libraries classify the book reveal nothing of the social field that encompasses the arts, creativity, and design.

Placing the three authors side by side, Marguerite Stix, Hugh Stix, and R. Tucker Abbott, it seems that the male scientist Abbott moves entirely to the fore in the systematic classification of *The Shell*. In the catalogue of the *Library of Congress*, both the *Dewey* system and the *Library of Congress Classification* allocate the book clearly to the field of the natural sciences. This conceals what was Marguerite Stix's obvious concern, a broad, almost seemingly associative but nevertheless distinctly structured presentation of seashells. In the catalogue of the Library of Congress,³⁰ *The Shell* is assigned *Dewey class no. 594* and *LC classification QL404 .S7*. Translated according to *Dewey*, this means that the book belongs to the category of *Natural Sciences & Mathematics*, and to the subcategories of *Animals (Zoology)* and *Mollusks & Molluscoidea*.³¹ According to the *LC classification*, the book belongs to the category of *Zoology*, more precisely, to *Invertebrates, Mollusca* and *Pictorial works and atlases*.³² Marguerite Stix's cultural-theoretical aspirations find resonance, however, in its reception. The cover of volume VI.3 of the journal *New Literary History*, on 'History and Criticism,' reproduces a glossy white shell common throughout the Indo-Pacific (*Ovula ovum*) taken from *The*

²⁷ Anthony Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great-Britain, and Her Colonies*, Philadelphia, Hall & Sellers, 1767, p. 16.

²⁸R. McLanathan, *The Art of Marguerite Stix*, *op. cit.*, p. 90. Statues of Abraham Lincoln by Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, published 1969, <https://archive.org/details/statuxxxxxslinc> <15.04.2015>.

²⁹R. McLanathan, *The Art of Marguerite Stix*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

³⁰ See <http://lccn.loc.gov/68012922> <18.04.2015>

³¹ See <http://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/dewey/resources/summaries/deweysummaries.pdf> <17.04.2015>

³² See <http://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeLCC/Q-text.pdf> <17.04.2015>

Shell,³³ apparently, literary theory circles indeed took note of the work. The publisher of *The Shell* promoted and marketed the book in the cultural-academic field. We find evidence that the publishing company Harry N. Abrams placed ads announcing a variety of its latest book, and in these ads, *The Shell* is listed along with the art books instead of the science books: in issues of the *Art Journal* (1968) under “New and Exciting Artbooks,”³⁴ along with more volumes of art under “New and exciting books” (1973)³⁵; the book is also advertised in the journal *Art Education* (1973).³⁶ In the 1969 annual report of the *Cleveland Museum of Art*, *The Shell* is listed as a “rare and outstanding” new acquisition along with other art historical publications since 1581.³⁷ The book was known in the natural sciences³⁸ but not there alone—this we want to emphasize. The library classification systems do not adequately reflect this broad reception.

Even if C. P. Snow’s book *The Two Cultures* (1959) is a text long historicized and not utterly uncontroversial, we feel strongly reminded of it and the catchy formula of its title. Snow famously proceeds from a contrast between the world of physicists on the one hand and that of writers on the other, but he extends this—and elaborates on this point accordingly—to mean a contrast between the cultures of the natural sciences and the arts and humanities. These cultures, according to Snow, not only oppose each other; he notes “[b]etween the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes [...] hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding. They have a curious distorted image of each other.”³⁹ We can recognize tension, judgment, rejection. In any case, we can assume for *The Shell*—and we now consciously say ‘by Marguerite Stix’ and no longer name the other authors—that its library classifications obstruct the claim of the book as a work of cultural history as well as its lasting impressive potential for further scholarly engagement. If one searched for literature on the cultural history of the shell according to the *Dewey* or *LC classification*, one would not readily know that Marguerite Stix’s contribution is of central importance, since it is categorized as a work of the natural sciences, of zoology. But where would Marguerite Stix and *The Shell* be positioned more adequately, in which systematics of the sciences? This question brings the topic of our essay, the current problem of disciplinarity, once more to the fore.

The Shell is perhaps, plainly and simply, a beautiful example of interdisciplinary collaboration, however difficult it would be to assign Marguerite Stix as well as her husband to a discipline in an academic sense, since they acted beyond academia. However, the book can be considered a consonance of cultural history—if not in a strict disciplinary sense—and zoology. The keyword *interdisciplinarity* refers us to a different text in which, not least, C. P. Snow’s resonates: Jürgen Mittelstraß’s paper “Interdisziplinarität oder Transdisziplinarität?” from 1998. The demand for interdisciplinarity is the putative answer to the seemingly irreconcilable contrast between the natural sciences and the humanities, linked with expectations of innovation in thinking and knowing.

33 *New Literary History* 6, no. 3, History and Criticism II (Spring 1975), Titelblatt.

34 *Art Journal* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1968), n. pag.

35 *Art Journal* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 1973), n. pag.

36 *Art Education* 26, no. 8 (Nov. 1973), p. 33.

37 *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 57, no. 6, Annual Report for 1969 (Jun. 1970), p. 184.

38 We name: Rory Fonseca, “Shape and Order in Organic Nature: The Nautilus Pompilius,” *Leonardo* 26, no. 3 (1993), p. 201-204, p. 204.

39 C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* [1959], London, Cambridge UP, 1998, p. 4.

Mittelstraß mistrusts such interdisciplinarity when he notes that the “result of even a well-meaning will to interdisciplinarity is frequently only a half-hearted multidisciplinary.”⁴⁰ He identifies a problem of drawing distinctions between the disciplines: “Where does a discipline begin, where does it end, and where does a new one begin? What defines a discipline in its disciplinary character?”⁴¹ Mittelstraß suggests a way out of the muddled situation of inter- or multidisciplinary scholarship and its imprecise disciplinary status: *transdisciplinarity*. He calls for detaching the sciences from their disciplinary history and from the inbetween: “Transdisciplinarity in the sense of true interdisciplinarity here refers to research that is removed from its disciplinary boundaries, that defines and solves its problems independent of disciplines.”⁴² Mittelstraß provides notable examples for corresponding achievements and by no means conceals the significance of disciplinarity itself as a “precondition for scientific achievements.”⁴³

While Mittelstraß comes close to our concern, we want to point to something different, even though we concede that Mittelstraß’s at times sharp critique of interdisciplinarity has not diminished the high prestige still attached to this buzzword today. In our academic environment, we hear affirmative talk of interdisciplinarity rather frequently, at least from some quarters. In this context, different compounds such as inter-, multi-, transdisciplinarity seem to be used more in an associative way than in a way that reflects terminology; now and then, they perhaps act merely as synonymous cyphers for an unease with the old disciplines. It is not altogether uninteresting that morphologically, current manners of speaking do not throw overboard the disciplinary, the disciplines, thus also disciplinarity. {Inter}-disciplinarity, as an endocentric compound, ultimately remains disciplinarity, as an A-B of this type is always a B. Inter-, multi-, transdisciplinarity is nothing but disciplinarity, even though the determiners {inter}, {trans}, {multi} doubtlessly articulate a demand for a liberation from dusty disciplinary boundaries. High-prestige words with a positive connotation emerge, which are used to valorize, actualize, and critically reflect disciplinarity.

A tentative conclusion lies in connecting disciplinarity with a variable as determiner, speaking of “x-disciplinarity.”⁴⁴ We cannot conceal that, initially, before Marguerite Stix crossed our path—completely independent from the apparently ongoing activities concerning x-disciplinarity⁴⁵—we were pondering this formula, not suspecting that it had already been coined in the productive bustle of the current humanities. But why should we even need such a variable, such an x? Is disciplinarity no longer tenable without a determining constituent, or has it turned into so much of a stigma word that it

40 Our translation of the German original: “Im übrigen ist das Resultat auch eines gutgemeinten Willens zur Interdisziplinarität häufig nur eine halbherzige Multidisziplinarität.” Jürgen Mittelstraß, “Interdisziplinarität oder Transdisziplinarität?”, *Die Häuser des Wissens. Wissenschaftstheoretische Studien*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1998, p. 32.

41 Our translation of the German original: “Wo beginnt eine Disziplin, wo hört sie auf und beginnt eine andere? Was definiert eine Disziplin in ihrem disziplinären Charakter?”, *ibid.*, p. 33.

42 Our translation of the German original: “Mit Transdisziplinarität ist hier im Sinne wirklicher Interdisziplinarität Forschung gemeint, die sich aus ihren disziplinären Grenzen löst, die ihre Probleme disziplinenunabhängig definiert und disziplinenunabhängig löst,” *ibid.*, p. 44.

43 Our translation of the German original: “Voraussetzung für wissenschaftliche Leistungen,” *ibid.*

44 Ralf Isenmann and Georg Zollner, “Nachhaltigkeit in der x-disziplinären Lehre,” *Interdisziplinarität und Transdisziplinarität als Herausforderung akademischer Bildung*, ed. Carmen Schier and Elke Schwinger, Bielefeld, transcript, 2014, p. 126.

45 Cf. also <http://blog.zhdk.ch/trans/x-disziplinaritat/> <18.04.2015>

seems downright mandatory to add a constituent? Does the concept of disciplinarity now need to be modified semantically, with whatever determiner?

It is precisely here that our considerations come into play. We assume that the hype surrounding inter-, multi-, trans-, x-disciplinarity points to a fundamental fuzziness. Are these compounds indeed a necessary step in shaping contemporary science, or do they in fact bring the disciplines which emerged during the Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment, not least in national and nationalistic contexts, into a long-heard and repetitively ritualized dialogue, which by no means modifies the disciplines themselves but rather affirms what is inherited in their boundaries? We are reminded of Hegel's philosophical formulation of the term *Aufheben* that refers to a condition in which something that is sublated is also contained.⁴⁶ In short: is every form of x-disciplinarity nothing but an affirmation of the disciplinarity upon which it is based, in essence, a retrospective device, one that presents a downright obstacle to thinking about scholarly subject matters in ways that are free from the partialities and burdens of bygone centuries? It is at this point that, in our understanding, Mittelstraß's considerations come into play when he emphasizes the importance of overcoming traditional disciplines, of conceiving scholarship as a process of transfiguring theories, methods, et cetera.

Our point, however, is precisely not to deliberate over scholarship that would permanently disengage itself from disciplinary boundaries but instead to deliberate over scholarship that can be established in new disciplinary structures—even via transdisciplinarity. These new disciplinary structures we envision would not grow out of the epistemological orders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but could be indebted to the historical experiences of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and their intellectual debates, including considerations of current societal problems. The point is to dare to try new disciplinary layouts for scholarly subject matters. We deem it desirable to establish new disciplines because the constructed character of scholarly praxis, as it is institutionalized in disciplines, is a higher good. With its constructed disciplinary character, academic study and achievement oppose ways of thought which purport to have no alternative; instead, academic study offers a claim to freedom of thought and knowing. Let us thus detach disciplinarity from its stigmatized semantics, from a putative need to supplement it with a compulsive determiner of an ever up-to-date x.

We make a plea for disciplinarity. The propaedeutic catalogue in six steps serves as a disciplinary instrument, structuring a praxis of constructing objectives, questions, methods, and hypothetical answers. As conditions for scholarly work, disciplines legitimize science in society. Yet the last thing we should do is keep old disciplines alive by playing language games that actually reinforce their legitimacy through determining or modifying constituents such as inter-, multi-, trans-, x-. We call into question the innovative quality of such language games. Instead, we imagine disciplines which are yet unfamiliar and which, as *emerging paradigms*, are momentarily in a state of controversy—a state in which scholarly inquiry takes place on a day-to-day basis.

Self-evidently, Marguerite Stix—not least also *The Shell*—could be disciplined in zoology, in art and cultural history, in cultural, literary and language studies as well as in semiotics and in subjects of study such as biology, German Studies, American Studies, art history et cetera. We would not object in the least. But we suggest a different kind of formatting. In this life that crossed our path incidentally, we recognize numerous contrasting phenomena; of these contrasts, we name nine:

[origin // future], [Vienna (Europe) // New York (North America)], [concentration camp // liberated life], [loss of family // gain of a partner], [academicism // avant garde], [handicraft // arts], [creativity // commercialism], [mollusks as organism // mollusks as artefact], [natural history // cultural history].

⁴⁶ This is Hegel's rather drastic formulation in the German original: "So ist das Aufgehobene ein zugleich Aufbewahrtes, das nur seine Unmittelbarkeit verloren hat, aber darum nicht vernichtet ist." Georg W. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, 2., unveränderte Auflage, Berlin, Duncker und Humblot, 1841, p. 104.

Such contrasts, of course, which can structure the perception of a life and work, are neither solely formative for Marguerite Stix alone, nor are they disjunctive. We are talking about the perception of contrasts as possible divergences, polarities, discrepancies, frictions and conflicting parameters of an abstracted perspective onto Marguerite Stix.

Here, once again, we return to our own subjects, to German Studies and American Studies. Marguerite Stix seems an appropriate subject matter for both since her European and North American life relates precisely to the cultural spaces connected to them. We also take up our disciplines once more: linguistics as well as cultural and literary studies. It seems that their respective disciplinary methods would be well suited to explore Marguerite Stix. And yet, we not only have a fundamental doubt about the sense and purpose of a project on Marguerite Stix formatted by our subjects and disciplines; with reference to the contrasts we have highlighted, we would consider such a project as reductionist. These contrasts therefore lead us to a different, alternative framing of a scholarly engagement with Marguerite Stix and *The Shell*: we emphasize the contrasts and relate them to concepts of contradiction.

It may seem far-fetched to conceptualize contrasts as contradictions in Marguerite Stix's life and works—but only if we take a formal-logical Aristotelian notion of contradiction as a basis. In his volume *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (2014), David Harvey differentiates between two very distinct concepts of contradiction: the Aristotelian logical contradiction, in which two irreconcilable statements or propositions (p) oppose each other; and the dialectical contradiction that makes visible a contradictory tension between two statements without one statement showing the other as true or false. The sentences (1) *Marguerite Stix is alive* and (2) *Marguerite Stix is dead* contradict each other in a logical sense. Only one sentence can be true. The sentences (3) *Marguerite Stix is a European artist* and (4) *Marguerite Stix is an American artist*, in contrast, open up an utterly different contradiction, a dialectical, biographical moment of in-betweenness. Given such a diasporic course of life, how should we possibly decide which is the more appropriate characterization? Types of dialectical contradiction are a complex matter of interest for the humanities. Harvey notes that the Aristotelian logical and the dialectical definition of contradiction—though “seemingly in contradiction—are autonomous and compatible. It is just that they refer to very different circumstances.” Indeed, he describes the latter, dialectical conception as “rich in possibilities.”⁴⁷

In formalized ways, we are dealing with two different concepts of contradiction:

- (a) $\neg \Diamond (p \wedge \neg p)$
 (b) $\Diamond (p \wedge \neg p)$

Type (a) can be paraphrased as *It is not possible that p and not p*. That is the condition for explaining a logical contradiction. Type (b), in contrast, formalizes precisely such a possibility, to be read as *It is possible that p and not p*. For formal logicians, this is the “maximum credible cognitive accident” since “[f]rom the view of formal standard logic, something is wrong when someone claims that p is the case and at the same time not the case.”⁴⁸

The task involves detecting and unveiling contradictions, not as implicit speech acts that ask us to establish clarity and unambiguity, but as procedures to grasp and understand that p and $\neg p$ can be valid, and recognizing that a dialectical contrast between phenomena which can be analyzed

⁴⁷D. Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Our translation of the German original: “der größte anzunehmende kognitive Unfall”: “Aus Sicht der formalen Standardlogik stimmt etwas nicht, wenn jemand behauptet, p sei der Fall und zugleich nicht der Fall.” Holm Tetens, *Philosophisches Argumentieren. Eine Einführung*, München, Beck, 2006, p. 232.

scientifically may be constitutive: we take this to be the task of a new discipline, one that not only allows us to examine Marguerite Stix but that raises numerous questions and renders a broader spectrum of subject matters recognizable and relevant for the humanities. To validate contradiction as an aspect of the humanities, we propose *Contradiction Studies* as a new discipline, including all references tied to previous reflections on this concept.

Contradiction Studies holds the potential of a new discipline; one model to be mentioned here only briefly may be Gender Studies as it has been pursued in Germany since the 1990s. *Contradiction Studies* can move beyond an affirmation of traditional disciplines, not bound to specific subjects, but still disciplinary. It is characteristic of academe that contradiction itself is a foundational practice of scholarly inquiry so that our essay—which in parts can itself be read as contradicting some forms of x-disciplinarity—may eventually be contradicted. From this perspective, *Contradiction Studies* also opens up a place for the reflection on scholarly praxis itself: “Disagreement discloses antinomies and tensions within the field discussed and calls for novel exploration.”⁴⁹

All beginnings are difficult—this is what Marguerite Stix writes on the first page of her work on *The Shell*. The plea for a new discipline is also characterized by difficulty. For us, this difficulty is linked to the idea that it marks a beginning.



Fig. 3: *Buccinum tenuissimum*, *Tafel 94*, *Stix*. Blow up sketch. © Oskar Warnke 2015

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⁴⁹ Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok, Cambridge, Mass., MIT P, 1960, p. 350.

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