

Artist's Statement: Franziska Ruprecht - poetry that glitters

Performance poetry is my passion. Since 2013, “poetry that glitters” is my slogan. I am proud to present my current projects to you: a [book](#) of English poems, “BODY TAG”, and [poetry songs](#)!

I studied Creative Writing for two years with poets in Detroit and have some roots in American Poetry Slam. In the Motor City, I also picked up the musicality and elements of rap. My poems and poetry song lyrics communicate a strong femininity and a particular playfulness with words. They can also be found in my German book “Meer-Maid” (published by Wolfbach).

My delivery on [stage](#) has a somatic quality and presence. I like to throw a pinch of glitter on my interdisciplinary approach.

In writing, performing, and my whole life it is my duty to create something beautiful and to protect the emotional element. (www.franziskaruprecht.com)

My occupation is: Performance Poet. The term is widely used in the US. This is where I was born as an artist when studying Creative Writing in Detroit with Carla Harryman and Barrett Watten.

The Cabaret of Weimar Republic influences my performance style; in 2012, in Munich Schwabing, I produced five shows called “Dichtwerkvariété” in a 1920s style theater. The audience was invited to enjoy performed texts by various artists in combination with a location worthy of having been considered for the movie “Cabaret”. Whenever I perform, I carry this spirit with me on stage.

The radio has been used in the process of writing by poets ranging from Waldman (299-301 Talking Poetics) to Watten (for instance in his poem “Plan B”). Media as the radio and television have definitely influenced me, especially concerning pop music and (German) rap. In a record store, you would find my poetry songs under “Spoken Word”. **I am a spoken word artist.**

In performance art, there are different approaches to events; in the heyday of the “happening”, the actions of the performers preferred the process over perfection in the arts. Having grown up with video clips on MTV, striving for an ideal outcome when preparing a performance is my goal. **I am a performer impersonating the persona of the poem I am performing.**

Writing and performing are my vocation. The performance which often includes movements inspired from dance is rehearsed, has to be, as more spontaneous readings fail to communicate what I intend. In contrast to this, the links between my poems are mostly improvised spontaneously; they establish a personalized contact with the audience. Emotions, specific, often erotic relationships to an “other” form the core of my poems. Describing each “other” as distinctly as human individuality deserves it, is a process I enjoy. **We all share similar experiences of desire, hope, joy, disappointment, and gathering strength** — this is the route to identifying with my poems.

Imagine the legendary Munich Poetry Slam in the 2000s! It claims to be the biggest one in Europe. Me as a young student with a boyish haircut in the audience: independent German poets such as loud Wehwalt Koslovsky, punk Lasse Samström, and mysterious Tracy Splinter on stage with provocative texts and physicality in their performance. **I longed to dare being as wild as them!** The experience fueled my private creative writing and prompted me to share first texts with my friends — until I took off to study in Detroit, where I dove as fast as I could into the poetry slam scene.

The poetry slam movement is now active in Germany since over twenty years, since over thirty in the US. Even before slam started in 1986 in Chicago, the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York’s lower east side breathed life into poetry. Miguel Algarín states in the introduction to “ALOUD” from 1994:

The philosophy and purpose of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe has always been to reveal poetry as a living art. Even as the eye scans the lines of a poem, poetry is in flux in the United States. From Baja California to Seattle to Detroit from the dance clubs with rap lyrics booming to the schools where Gil Scott-Heron plays to the churches where poetry series thrive to community centers with poets-in-residence and coffeehouses throughout the whole of the nation, **the spoken word is on fire** (8).

After two years in the D, the full-grown slammer “Frances R” returned to Munich. For four years, I traveled and performed at a high frequency, including gigs in other European countries such as Poland and Denmark.

How did the enthusiasm for performance poetry seep into my mind? The North American spirit of acknowledging poets! From cyphers on street corners for the truly cool, coffee shops where artsy people would write poetry in their analog notebooks for hours, to prizes and

residencies such as the current “write a house” in Detroit: this was the artistic vibrance I soaked up for two years.

Poems written in German are traditionally categorized as *Lyrik*. They can be described as rather intellectual poems read in the calm manner of water glass readings. **The American “Love Jones” soulful coffee house or jazz club atmosphere hardly exists in Germany.** If it does, it obviously lacks the African-American influences.

There are three poetic “scenes” in Germany I can think of: Older *Lyrik* folks (including the “*Alt 68er*” type), young ambitious *Lyrik* hipsters who study/ied in Hildesheim or Leipzig, and the vagabonding Poetry Slammers, commercialized and domesticated quite a bit.

None of them are celebrating themselves in venues as described above by Algarín.

Performing at the lower east sides’s Nuyorican Poets Café in 2016 was a stellar experience for me – you find there a dancing American crowd animated by a powerful style of hosting that Germany simply lacks. Here, the term “performance poet” is not understood or smirked at, whereas “Poetry Slam” is by now a term widely mis-used in German mainstream culture (“Oh, I slammed two times, now I am a “*Poetry Slammerin*”, or calling one poem “a poetry slam”). Typical elements of a German slam performance include a particular pacing and melody or lack thereof in the texts. This singsong is often copied by new and upcoming slammers. *My poetry that glitters* follows its own rhythms and rules; I have found my flow. Still each poem of mine has a different form, dictated by its function.

The majority of German slam poets who can support themselves through gigs are writing funny texts so they can be booked as comedians, and a small portion of this group aim to produce sophisticated *Kabarett* (German witty political stand-up). Often, cursing, and offending women helps to win a German Slam. Female poets do it as well, elevating themselves through the poem higher than for instance “stupid” girls who strive to be top models. I don’t even enjoy listening to average slams in Germany, as I don’t enjoy being offended as a woman. My poetry might have its finely tuned funny moments, especially when I act them out on stage (“I can stop to diet and say I’m yummy / I can push his head down my tummy” from “My Wallet” in “BODY TAG”) - still I am a poet, not a comedian.

Another typical element of German slam poetry: short stories! This is a huge differentiation from US Slams: “Slam is *poetry*.” As Marc K. Smith lists it in “Take the Mic”: “At times it incorporates storytelling and rhetoric into its mix of many forms, but the basis of its appeal (and its root) is poetry.” In the past, I ran second in the German International Poetry Slam team competition, loosing against a short story from Leipzig. By now I accept short stories as

bedtime reading; but why read such prose on a stage – a place that was build for free physical movements bare of handheld scripts?

Of course, a poetry slam is a competition; to prevent wrong usage of the term in Germany: competition is the defining element of an event called Poetry Slam.

In the States, the phrase: “The point are not the points, the point is poetry” (Allan Wolf, 1994) still seems to remain common knowledge that smoothes the edges of the rivaling spirit.

Especially in South Germany, winning and nothing but winning seems to matter; this is cemented by some hosts announcing slam poets on stage based on where they have won only. My experiments with abstract wording, and with rather feminist topics at poetry slams made it hard to win in Germany - not in Detroit. **From a creative approach, the comparison or measuring of different artists and their works is neither helpful nor representative of varying tastes.** Thus I am not a fan of poetry competitions. Such aspects as well as changes in my personal life estranged me from the German Slam scene.

When I am now in charge as a slam host however, I teach the original mission of poetry slam according to Marc K. Smith to the audience: I cherish the artists for their texts and delivery instead of their prizes!

Let’s talk about my friendly estrangement from the Munich *Lyrik* scene. **Since I found out it existed, I was drawn to the poetry slam movement founded by a former construction worker** for reasons he states in “Take the Mic”: “Slam is *not* a formalized poetry reading during which the audience listens passively and applauds politely regardless of what they really feel and think.” (...) “Slam is *not* an art form that lets an elite few decide what’s of value and what’s not.” Call me a punk, but while dreaming of walking the red carpet I never grasped what makes elites, children of and chosen ones so special after all.

Think about it: even at a formalized poetry reading, competition did take place – obviously not at the event, but beforehand when the invited poets were chosen over others! The texts are often written with the Pager (Martina Pfeiler) approach: Poetry that needs not to be understood by the audience, neither in its wording, nor in the oral quality of the reading. Other than the German highbrow *Lyrikerin*, **I am a performer, as much as a wordsmith on the page.** Not only the poem in print is important, the performance ranges equally in importance and actually demands more work from me than the writing process alone. According to Pfeiler, this defines me as a Page-Stager.

The style of my lines stretches from comprehensible to abstract. Some audience members notice the simple lines in my poetry; those who listen a bit closer or who reread, discover

wordplay and deeper meaning – even in wordings that seem more street than Fifth Avenue. The down-to-earth and hip-hop elements give me a suspicious edge in the eyes of *Lyriker*. My performance is too playful for the majority of them to store my work in their serious drawer or book my for their events – and German *Lyrik* is a serious business. In Detroit however, I trained in exploring the playfulness of words: As we face enough restrictions in this society anyway, why should I limit my ideas and the forms they take? Sometimes art is the only escape to freedom.

An uncomfortable question that I am sometimes confronted with is: “Why is such a performance actually worth money?” This is my profession. Performing takes a lot of effort, comparable to the preparations actors take when acting in a play. Maybe the reason for this struggle is linked to the digitalization and the rising demand for free artistic products online. As Marc K. Smith words it in “Take the Mic” (p.5): “Slam is *performed*.” Poems are presented with as much precision and professionalism as can be found in any of the performing arts. Personally, I put in some practice time everyday. **The way I live informs my writing, I am breathing my art 24/7.**

Poet, performer, my own promoter and pr agent: these are by far not all the functions I execute in order to make a very humble living; the poet’s life is a struggle. On the other side of that coin shine advantages: for instance, being able to determine the use of my time and dedicating it to the creative process. And sometimes, the upsides are crowned by connecting with audiences.

In a poetry slam, “Following the Rules” is required: No costume, no music, and no props - “Nothing fun” one might claim. Of course poetry slams cannot function smoothly with up to twelve poets per night using all these possibly bulky gadgets. Young women in Germany generally used to dress quite casually when I started, so I found myself often on the verge of wearing a forbidden costume at a slam. Also, inspired by Ursula Rucker, or the German Xóchill A.Schütz, I longed to perform with music. As a performance artist I prefer the freedom to choose whatever I like if it enhances my performance. Outfits that could be a costume for an actress on stage, music, plus my dance movements when performing are summarized in my own slogan: *poetry that glitters*. “Glitter” kicks off associations which shall lead to my major inspiration, variety shows.

I have outgrown the German Slam scene and disregard the limiting rules of slam. But be aware that I highly respect the American poetry slam culture. Its family tree keeps inspiring

me. Algarín summarizes it in “ALOUD”: “The idea for the Slam grows out of ancient tradition of competitive and / or linked rhymes between orators—from the Greek mythological tale of Apollo and Marsyas to the African griots, (...) to the African-American “dozens.”” (16). Tracing these roots and teaching them is exciting to me. Oral culture has very deep and thick roots while the tradition of water glass readings is actually very young. Many exercises in my seminars, workshops, and personal coachings connect body, voice, and word again. I offer possibilities to improve the delivery of texts - even to those who prefer to sit when reading. **To make others listen to you!** That is the very ancient skill of a spoken performance, and a basic need.

As a virtual and yearlong project from Valentine’s Day 2016-2017, I tweeted a rhyme with a rare German word and explained it. This expands on my switching from English to German and back in my poems. The [twitter account](#) still offers a tiny vocabulary lesson to all who aim at improving their knowledge of the German language. My twitter name is *wrtsucht*, for *Wortsucht* – addiction to words.

My even more abstract approaches used in mostly my English poems, where I take language apart and sometimes switch between English and German, might be challenging. **They are now published in my new book, “BODY TAG”.** Sometimes in writing, a word from another language than the one of the main text fits in better and offers a deeper possibility of language play. At Wayne State University (WSU), I learned from Carla Harryman’s language-oriented approach to poetry and writing, and started paying attention to this. For Jay-Z, hip-hop is often misunderstood at the first encounter; a rap that can be experienced anew during several receptions is one that owns quality (55). Always consider that a “bitch” can be a K-9 (61). The reader can re-read or re-listen (to) my work several times and still discover new meaning or a new interpretation.

Rap and hip-hop culture is something that people rarely identify me with based on my appearance. Still they form elements of my rhythm in reciting, my music, and also jump at the recipients of my German poems. The art of rap (cp. the back-jacket of *Decoded* by Jay-Z) has highly influenced my flow; it can be traced in elements such as braggadocio (lines that communicate: “I am more dope than you”) and unexpected end-rhymes. For Russell Simmons, in the introduction to the book from *Def Jam on Broadway*:

(...) hip-hop culture continues to evolve multidimensionally reflecting the truth of the oneness of humanity expressed in a splendid array of diversity. Poetry is the highest

artistic form of hip-hop. The poet speaks from his or her heart. This love, when expressed through spoken word, should always be welcomed and cherished.” (...) “The resurgence of poetry throughout America and around the world is a positive testimony to the irrepressible creativity of the emerging generation of youth who will not be silenced (viii).

When I teach at German schools, one of my main goals is to inspire girls to speak publicly. Maybe women are still silenced in their expression of lust and longing. Maybe female writers are silenced as they are not expected to perform seductively or intensely on stage. Maybe I was silenced, maybe I speak for many. No matter the degree of personal urgency my outcries may hold, I have to let them out.

Reading my German collection of poetry, “Meer-Maid” might give you “guilty pleasure” (Fixpoetry) and offer the possibility to identify as the subject or object of the poem. In “BODY TAG” I played with the concept of muses by adding male names next to many titles of the poems. Desire and freedom, plus the more romantic German translation of desire, *Sehnsucht* (addiction to missing someone) – are the issues that speak of my urge to survive; **a fight for the survival of a soul.**

The speaker of the poem, the “lyrical I”, is not the same as the human being who wrote it. If this is news to you, you might check your notes from literature class or google it. The persona of the poem is not the same as the performer who walks around in the venue after a gig. Please respect this and respect the performance poet’s personal space and limits at all times.

In “The Spoken Word Revolution”, Saul Williams states in his essay: “The Future of Language”: “A Latin transcription of the word person is “being of sound.” As human beings, we communicate with each other and the greater universe through sound vibration. (...) All sounds reverberate with meaning” (55). Sounds such as “Om” have been used since ancient days to put us in touch with the universe and its godlike qualities. Chanting, praying, and singing carry and prove the power of sounds - and thus words. In my workshops, I incorporate voice coaching as well, strengthening the participants unconsciously through this “power of sounds” - and reminding them on ancient oral traditions.

Williams even confesses: “I have also been in numerous occasions where I have felt that I wrote or recited a situation into existence” (56). Poetry is visionary; the thought that we would write our future when writing poetry was shared in my creative writing classes at WSU

as well. **We have a responsibility in what we create!** If we give in to spiritual knowledge disregarding the poses of Western intellectual enlightenment, it is very obvious, why we should create beauty and interact accordingly: Saul Williams criticizes rappers for their content; especially if the songs become hits, they could spoil reality. On the other side, if we would not “recite the same ol’ shit into microphones” (57) the bad outcome would not manifest itself again and again. As you can study it in for example the beliefs of Gandhi, the law of attraction, and experience, our perceptions and how we word them determine our realities. Anne Waldman reminded me and a group of female poets as well of this responsibility when I took her workshop at Schamrock Festival in Munich in 2018. Nowadays is a time where many people in the Western world “wake up” and comprehend spiritual wisdom to a higher extent. “What we say matters (becomes a solid: flesh)” (Williams, 57). My mission is to create something beautiful, and to take the mask down - inspiring others to let go of emotional pretense as well.

In the chapter “The Media Generation” in “Performance Art” by Goldberg, many American artists of the 1980s are portrayed who allude to TV shows in their performance, using technology such as projections on stage. The work of German choreographer Pina Bausch contrasts this. Simultaneously to the media generation, she was living with her ensemble that consisted of people with a variation of body shapes, creating her own dance theater. Their choreographies develop from ordinary movements. On stage, the elements, such as (buckets of) water play an important role (Goldberg, 205-206). American movements including Occupy have happened far removed from me in my German place. I create art independent of the major poetic groups in my vicinity. This bears witness to **how I navigate in this world: as some kind of lone wolf, first-generation poet.**

This statement hopes to clarify that “glitter” for me is more than an accessory. It refers to the luminous reflections of a blend of certain styles, the mission to leave sparks, and visual allusions to variety shows — paired with less explicable aspects: my experience, and the magic of creation. It also refers to the possibility consuming poetry is offering to you: to reflect in your mind, to feel in your soul. The slogan *poetry that glitters* resonates with my focus on a physical, sensual performance and underlines my individuality as an artist.

PS After working on this wordy statement, I found a great summary of it: this is from years ago, an article about a gig in Prague, written by Ken Nash after interviewing me:

Franziska Ruprecht developed as a performance poet in Detroit, where she won several poetry slams while studying at Wayne State University. She's also been a frequent performer at the Munich Poetry Slam. She says that she's influenced by "the play between languages (German and English, sometimes French, too); the experimental approach of the Language School poets, especially Carla Harryman; sophisticated hip-hop music; everything that's pop; the emotional mission of poetry; and the wonders of life."

So briefly: I stayed true to myself – and performed in Prague again in spring 2018.

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