



When walking around in the Volksgarten, one may see a small house on the border of the park. In fact, one cannot miss it. It is a regular Austrian small building, painted bright orange, and on its façade it has a sign: 'Gods Will'. When one enters through the door - that looks like it is always open - it appears that this is some kind of centre with a phone, fax and internet service. It is busy and lively inside: men, probably originally from Nigeria, chat, hang around, and seem to do some vague business and enjoy it. In the backside of the space, there is a door leading to another room. On that door is a big poster attached that immediately attracts attention. The announcement written on it goes, more or less, like this: 'Please be friendly and respectful to the police in case they would come in. You are also urged not to use your usual sense of humour in communication with the police since due to cultural differences that could lead to misunderstandings.' This hilarious announcement subtly points out the underlying issues that play a role in the daily struggle of 'belonging' that is going on in the world of today, with its migrational moves, its problems with identity and identification, its access and denial, its shared understanding and its misinterpretations. What is belonging? Is it just citizenship? Is it acknowledging difference? Is it respect? The poster is making fun of these issues, and everyone entering God's Will does not always appreciate this particular sense of humour, it seems.

In general, humour - and as a probable result of that, the laugh - can connect people (who share the same sense of humour), it can be a lifesaver, and it can help to deal with setbacks. Depending on how humour is brought into action, it can bind, but also separate, exclude and hurt. This is also the case with laughter. To laugh with is something else than to laugh about, and what is funny for one may not be funny at all for someone else. Watching this slightly ironic poster, and observing the light and lively atmosphere in God's Will, one might ask oneself: do these people have a greater sense of humour than policemen? Have they somehow, a secret ability that allows them to cope with potential problems? Do they laugh more? Do policemen, in general, laugh less? Is laughing culture dependent? And if so, can laughter influence or manipulate cultural specifics, modify it, create self-irony, and maybe even a break through, through the boundaries of cultural confinement?

What is it actually, laughter? Aristotle considered laughing located physically in the midriff. He argues that 'the heating of the midriff affects sensation rapidly and in a notable manner is shown by the phenomena of laughing.' and that 'man alone is affected by tickling is due firstly to the delicacy of his skin, and secondly to his being the only animal that laughs.' And Wikipedia describes laughter as 'a part of human behaviour regulated by the brain. It helps humans clarify their intentions in social interaction and provides an emotional context to conversations. Laughter is used as a signal for being part of a group - it signals acceptance and positive interactions. Laughter is sometimes seemingly contagious, and the laughter of one person can itself provoke laughter from others. This may account in part for the popularity of laugh tracks in situation comedy television shows.

The study of humour and laughter, and its psychological and physiological effects on the human body is called gelotology'.

So yes, laughter, is a physical state, seems to be culture dependent, emotional and may be a signal that one belongs, or does not belong, to a certain group. And a serious study on the subject exists. But let's first go back to this specific group, the inhabitants of God's Will.

The BBC reports on October 2, 2003 on a study by World Survey, of more than 65 countries published in the New Scientist magazine. World Survey is a worldwide investigation on social, cultural and political changes, conducted every four years by an international network of social scientists. According to the survey of 1999-2001, people in Latin America, Western Europe and North America are happier than their counterparts in Eastern Europe and Russia. And, surprise, in the Top Five of most happy people on the planet are (on number one) Nigeria, followed by Mexico, Venezuela, El Salvador and Puerto Rico.

The survey shows that factors that make people happy vary from one country to the next. Personal success and self-expression is the most important in the US, while in Japan, the expectations of family and society are far more important. Genetic inclinations to happiness, marriage, to make friends and value them, to desire less are factors that influence the sense of happiness. To do someone a good turn, to have faith (religious or not), to stop comparing your looks with others, to earn more money, to grow old gracefully, and to not worry if you're not a genius....all factors that qualify creating happiness.

Intriguing as well is that the researchers observe that desire for material goods is 'a happiness suppressant'. Despite the rise of income in the industrialized countries, happiness levels have been the same since World War II, although incomes have risen considerably.

What this report makes clear is that many routes lead to happiness. Seeing things from the bright side, taking life with a laugh, seems to be certainly one of them, one that is also self-empowering. The intriguing warning on the door of God's Will started to be a triggering factor, the starting point to search to how humour, or rather: the laugh, is imbedded in the culture of Graz. Not humour, because that would be a judgemental qualification, and include our own cultural difference and sense of belonging, defining a sense of humour as 'shared or not at all shared'. No, pure laughter is what we are looking for. Laughter without an intention, pure and simple laughter that does not separate or exclude. The laugh as an agent for social binding, since it is such an important instrument in human communication. If people are able to laugh with each other, some understanding is probably already there, which is a start.

According to several scientists, laughter has a positive effect. On a psychological and physiological level, it said to improve mental and physical health. There is a website on laughter yoga that also emphasized this point: 'the (positive) influence of laughter on our psychological, physical and social condition. Laughing together, even if for no reason, is an important generator: it opens up. It is self-empowering. It creates a community'.

Dr. Madan Kataria, a physician from India, invented in 1995 a yoga-based laughing technique, called Hasya yoga. So-called 'laugh clubs' (there is one active in Graz too) combine intentional laughter –laughing just for the sake of laughing together- with Hatha yoga breathing exercises, which should improve the mood and relax the muscles. Since there are no obvious negative effects associated with laughter, Hasya yoga has become an acknowledged worldwide supporting measure in for example cancer therapies.

On the website of laughter yoga many of the positive effects of laughter are summed up: laughter makes us feel good and improves our behaviour towards others. It strengthens the immune system, reduces the negative effects of stress, it is a powerful antidote for anxiety, high blood pressure, asthma and it increases pain tolerance. It also improves, as the website

text continues, 'sense of humour, self-confidence and communications skills'. A few generations ago humans laughed 20 minutes a day or more. Today, laugh time is down to 5 minutes or less in many countries. And that sounds like bad news.

The positive effects of laughter on the physical and psychological condition also enjoy support from science. Prof. Dr. Ilona Papousek, working at the Institute of Psychology at the University of Graz, has studied and analysed the positive effects of laughter on stroke patients. Thirty patients participating in the study were divided in two groups. One group participated in laughter yoga sessions, combining laughing techniques with breathing exercises for three half-hour weekly sessions. The other group practiced movement exercises. Blood pressure levels remained roughly the same in the movement group but dropped significantly in the laughter group. Where is the laughter in Graz? In the university? In the yoga club?

Graz is a city to wander around. One can stroll, as people did already for centuries...the history of Graz, as it has been unfolding itself during several centuries, can be seen from the perspective of the architecture of the city, and more specifically, of the parks that form such a crucial part of the city's layout. There is the bourgeois park, the emperor's park, the city park, the peoples park. And there is the park on top of the hill, which is by far the most beautiful park. One can reach it by foot, climbing the steep hill. Or one can take the elevator from the dark cave in the heart of the mountain, where a futuristic space traveller takes you up into the bright sunlight where fragrant flowers distribute their sweet smells. Already this is enough joy to make you happy. The teenage schoolchildren apparently like this park as well: there are a lot of them, hanging and lying around in the sun, reading a book, or dozing away. Some of them sit together in small groups, giggling, and very secretly they are busy with some gas-bottle, from which they seem to sniff the gas. The gas from the bottle presumably caused the giggling as we deduced later. Laughing gas is a popular recreational drug among teenagers, and not only in Graz. In London there is a club with a special laugh room, where you can buy a balloon filled with gas, and laugh your head off. Its chemical name is nitrous oxide (N₂O), a colourless non-flammable gas, with a slightly sweet odour and taste. It is used in surgery and dentistry as anaesthesia. Laughing gas is also used as a fuel in a rocket engine, by for example, Space Ship One. Its name 'laughing gas' is well chosen for the euphoria and slight hallucinations it creates when inhaling it. Laughing gas was first made by English chemist and natural philosopher Joseph Priestley in 1775. Priestley was delighted with his discovery: "I have now discovered an air five or six times as good as common air... nothing I ever did has surprised me more, or is more satisfactory!"

It is not easy to obtain the gas legally. Most recreational users get it from compressed gas containers, for example the ones containing whipped cream. Other ways of inhaling the gas are balloon, plastic bag, and homemade masks, though none of them is without danger, if applied in the wrong way. During the past century, laughing gas toured fairs and kermises as a major attraction. The Grand Exhibition of Laughing Gas, for example, allowed the audience to experience the effects of the gas. Men and women could test and try its exhilarating effects. Promotional leaflets announced: "Those who inhale the Gas once, are always anxious to inhale it a second time." Apparently these experiments were also entertaining for the public that could watch these experiments. Images show the effect on the volunteers, and it is not difficult to imagine that their behaviour caused a lot of amusement and laughter.

Laughter proves to be a binding force in creating temporary communities and relieves tension. As with homeopathic medicine, it is not the quantity that is the cure, it is the continuous and

consequent input of ridiculous small doses inserted in the bigger structure that eventually create change.

Thinking about how the ridiculously small can affect something that seems to be too big or desperate to even start considering, we had to think back about something we experienced while being in New York when this city was under the spell of the West Nile virus, an infection that can cause serious illness, and in some cases, even death. The virus is spread by mosquitoes, and was first found in New York State in 1999. In that year, the news about mosquito virus caused a lot of unrest among the city's population. Every mosquito became a potential killer, citizens got worried about their health and the city had to take adequate measures to deal with the invasion of these potentially dangerous small animals. The New York State Department of Health took radical action, under the catchy title: Fight the Bite. In New York City, nighttime pesticide trucks sprayed in the late summer and early fall of 2000 aimed at controlling adult mosquitoes that carry West Nile virus. The spray trucks usually started their rounds near 10 pm and continued through the night to 5 am. When having a drink at one of the terraces, in the sultry nights, one could see an army of small vehicles cruising the streets of Manhattan, puffing out small clouds in the streets spreading the pesticide, waging war, all united in a joint fight against the enemy. It was set out curing the city, and simultaneously looked as a very powerless gesture that above all provided a very amusing spectacle.

Our society today is based on fear. The many different groups of population are living separately or in distrust, often 'whipped up' to a level of anxiety by politicians, who are, sometimes actively, create separation between different groups, and benefit by gaining votes from this fear. If we do not want this community based on fear and anxiety, it has to be cured. We imagine that a vehicle like those we saw in New York can also be brought into action to distribute something uplifting, light-hearted, and constructive; instead of distributing pesticide to oust the enemy, to insert N2O in the atmosphere to create temporary communities based on laughter. United by the same air makes it difficult not to create at least a smile on our face. If we are willing.

For those who are interested, we owe a lot of the information to different sources such as www.ehponline.org, and www.health.state.ny.us, www.wikipedia.com, www.laughteryoga.org, www.worldvaluessurvey.org, news.bbc.co.uk. We used these sources in good conscience, sometimes they are quoted, sometimes used as material for thought.