

# Hunting in the snow.

**Artistic research as parrhesia.**

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## Abstract

Our paper takes Bruegel's *Hunters in the snow* (c. 1565) as a starting point. We will not present a traditional art historical analysis, but approach it as a material artefact 'to think with', an 'environment of thinking'. Anachronistically, Bruegel's painting helps us to understand the problems and possibilities of a Nietzschean 'transvaluation' *in* and *by* artistic research. These hunters entering a cold and indifferent environment have much in common with artistic researchers in academia. At first sight, the group of exhausted characters has nothing to 'show for': the only measurable result of their hunt is a small, skinny fox. In the distance, there is a chimney on fire – but it is clear that they are not able to provide any practical assistance – it is left to others to bring water and ladders. And yet, these hunters have something to offer: their very presence makes something visible – allows for a form of 'worlding'. Bruegel's hunters are more than allegorical figures: with their ankles deep in the snow, immersed in the *weatherscape* that surrounds them, the hunters on the painting reveal an existential and affective space. We do not simply want to approach Bruegel's painting as an allegory: it does not merely transfer knowledge, but embodies it and applies it in a specific environment. Because of this, we will link this painting – *and* the knowledge that can be gained by artistic research – to Michel Foucault's revaluation of the classical notion of *parrhesia*, a kind of truth-speaking that is not grounded in an external framework of scientific protocols and methods, but in a personal, bodily ascesis, in an ethical praxis. The knowledge of the *parrhesiastes* is based upon and directed towards a care of the self and of others. It has as its sole measure or touchstone the accordance of what is said with the body, the life of the speaker. We want to argue that the artistic research can operate as a modern form of *parrhesia* in academic discourse, a *parrhesia* based on the visual and sensual qualities of a work of art. Bruegel's painting exposes us to the anachronistic force of outmoded values like 'consolation', 'patience', 'attentiveness'. These words have become eccentric and exotic, hardly to be used without irony. But in the winter landscape, the seductive appeal of their 'glow' seems to announce an inevitable twilight of the idols, to persuade us to change the vocabulary and join the hunting party.

**Keywords:** artistic research, cynical *parrhesia*, image-sensation, Breugel

### Key references

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Pieter Breugel, *Hunters in the snow*, c. 1565