

Artistic concept for the Summer School 2026

On Thin Ice

Reclaiming Humour in a Changing Cultural Climate



It's the third year of the Summer School. And this year it's going to take place in Oulu, Finland, which is European Capital of Culture 2026 (together with Trenčín in Slovakia). Oulu is the biggest northernmost city in the EU and its seasons are divided into polar night and polar day.

What is also very noteworthy about Oulu – at least from a German perspective – is the bike road network, which is as developed as in the Netherlands. Oulu is shaped by water and even the name goes back to the Sami languages, meaning flood or flowing water. It's a city close to nature. And still a city. And so, the title of the year as European Capital of Culture is a metaphor that embraces the two aspects: CULTURAL CLIMATE CHANGE.

What do you associate with this motto?

What kind of change do you recognise in the cultural climate?

Has it become hotter?

In January 2026 the Allianz Foundation published their "Next Generations Study" in which they asked young adults from 5 countries about different topics.¹ In this survey, the Allianz Foundation found out that up to 25% of the study group agree to some form of violence as political tactics.

Or has the cultural climate become colder?

The survey also made visible that particularly in the German next generation, people see their generation as deeply polarized.

So, does Cultural Climate Change mean that interactions have become harsher?

But at the same time, the next generations study shows that 97%, so almost everyone, of young Europeans engage in some form of individual civic action.

Cultural Climate Change can be a description of the now. It can also be a question into the future: What Cultural Climate Change do we need and which direction do we want to go in order to stand closer together again?





Every year, the enter Summer School tackles these questions with a new theme: 2024, in Gent, with the topic EMPOWERMENT – an experiment in standing up for oneself and others, in moving closer together through support and solidarity. 2025, in Nova Gorica, the topic was MEMORIES – the attempt to open up to each other through collective and individual memories, exploring similarities and differences across Europe.

This year, the enter Summer School wants to go the next step by picking up one of the parameters that have played a decisive role in the Cultural Climate Change of recent years: HUMOUR.

It's the age of humour.ⁱ

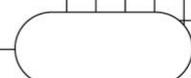
Because the use of humour has increasingly shaped how political discourses are debated and presented. Humour is used to push the boundaries to extremist positions by decontextualization, misinterpretation and irony, rebranding them in the name of free speech. Above that, digital communication speeds up dynamics because ambiguous contents go viral, AI makes fake videos and other bizarre contents possible and in comment sections a passive-aggressive communication disguised as irony often remains unregulated. As a result, humour can lead to an ongoing feeling of insecurity about how something is meant.

To put it pathetically: Humour is under pressure.

Because also on a personal level, humour has been very much involved in the cultural climate change of polarisation. Humour used to play on forms of discrimination, many of them which are not tolerable anymore. Just think of 'blonde jokes'. Would you still make them, or not anymore? Do you know them anyway? And here is where divisions become visible: Stop using those jokes (and certain terms and remarks) feels like censorship to some people, to others it's the necessary step to a more equal society. And so humour highlights and also drives social fragmentation.

Restricting humour is not the solution. Humour is essential for survival. It is the elixir that connects us to one another across cultures. And it has the capacity to become a tool for resistance and challenging power. So, should we laugh more together? Yes, definitely. But it's not that simple. Because in this age of humour, it's important to recognise the dual capacity of humour even more. Humour is double-sided, it can affect change, negative *and* positive, because it's deeply intertwined with conflict but also with relief.

We need to rediscover humour. Become aware of it. Reinvent it. And think about it intersectionally.



To take on this challenge, the Summer School will have three workshops which all deal with humour in different artistic practices. All three will explore the following these interdisciplinary:

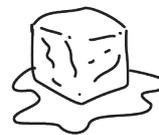
Humour is diverse and multifaceted. It can be in your body, your language, you can find it in the situation you are in etc. Humour is very personal and it can change, e.g. according to the phase of your life or the country you are in. And it has many different types: laughing at myself, laughing at others/ schadenfreude, dark humour, sarcasm, irony, silliness. How can we explore our own types of humour and translate them into an artistic practice?

Humour is not only about laughing, it's a form of perceiving the world. How can we stay open and be able to recognise the absurd and the surprising within all the shortcomings and difficulties of the world? How can humour be a tool to accept the unknown and engage in true and joyful connection with others?

Humour is dangerous. And it should be dangerous! To transcend the boundaries of what can be said is at the heart of humour; using humour means to tread on thin ice. How can humour help to take the risk of naming something others wouldn't name? How can humour thus foster better communication and enable us to react to misunderstandings, mistakes, disagreement and disappointment with lightness?

Humour needs a safe space. The famous clown Slava Polunin once said that to be a clown, you have to be a happy person, and that he wished there were safe spaces for happy people so that they wouldn't lose their happiness.ⁱⁱⁱ How can such a space be created and consolidated. How can we creatively approach a kind of humour that is *for* humans and not *against* them?

The artists of this Summer School will work with methods of gaming, body work/movement, contemporary clowning, photography and digital content creation (esp. text production). Together we will celebrate humour as an attitude to life, as a tool for resilience, as intersectional solidarity, as a safe space, as an artistic medium and creative practice, and as a form of democratic participation. In order to actively shape cultural climate change into a more critical awareness about as well as a playful joy in the use of humour.



ⁱ The study asked people from Poland, Spain, Italy, Germany, and France aged 16-39.
<https://next-generations-study.com/>

ⁱⁱ In their special issue about Humour and conflict in the digital age, Andrew Benjamin Bricker and Alberto Godioli highlight how humour has become “increasingly central to public discourse” in the twenty-first century, reshaping how political and social issues are debated, often in ways that blur the boundaries between the serious and the comedic (ref. to Kuipers & Zijp, 2024, p. 2). <https://europeanjournalofhumour.org/ejhr/issue/view/52>

ⁱⁱⁱ National Geographic's Short Film Showcase/American Theatre Wing:
<https://youtu.be/k4uT3ergY04>