



Article

Conspiracy hippies and Holocaust denial

Fig. 1 Frankfurter Hauptschule: Fusion, 2022.
Courtesy: The artist and NAK Neuer Aachener Kunstverein. Photo: Simon Vogel

Conspiracy hippies and Holocaust denial: The exposure of some contemporary faces of fascism by Zentrum für Politische Schönheit and Frankfurter Hauptschule

By Laura Luise Schultz

Holocaust implies not only an inherited historical guilt, but also an obligation to prevent fascism, the German performance collective Zentrum für Politische Schönheit (Center for Political Beauty, henceforth ZPS) claims on their website.¹ This mobilisation against fascism is achieved through artistic interventions in public space – activist *operations*, as they call them in English (*Aktionen* in German) that constitute very concrete confrontations with the political and human consequences of Germany's fascist past, including the impact of this historical legacy on contemporary German and European politics. In particular, ZPS has warned fiercely against the rising popularity of the right-wing extremist party Alternative für Deutschland, AfD. The work of ZPS thus provides an exemplary case for a critical discussion of why a comparison of contemporary political movements and discourses with historical fascism of the 1930s is important today. What insights into contemporary politics may be gained from such analogies, and what is the role of art in this kind of cultural memory work when performed as interventions into contemporary public discourse?

The ZPS exert what they call an *aggressive humanism*, which “represents our vision of a better fight for human rights” (ZPS 2015, Ch. 6). By merging two seemingly incompatible terms in coining the concept of *aggressive humanism*, they want to dismantle “the social concealment of injustice” and initiate a “humanistic revolution.” (ZPS 2015, Ch. 8). In accordance with this programme, events of public mourning for the anonymous victims of both historical fascism and contemporary neo-liberal politics (refugees, migrants, victims of Srebrenica) constitute a strong vein in their work. In the Holocaust memorial *Search for Us!* from 2019, soil from the Nazi death camps was exhibited in a so-called *pillar of resistance* (*Widerstandssäule*) in front of the German parliament (Fig. 2). In different ways, the project echoed previous ZPS monuments for more recent political victims, thus linking the crimes of Holocaust to contemporary genocides.²

This article explores how *Search for Us!* is situated in a network of artistic, activist, historical, and political contexts. By taking its point of departure in contemporary political conflicts and exposing how they are influenced by ideological patterns reaching back to historical fascism, this operation makes clear precisely why it is important to keep dealing with the 1930s and the emergence of historical fascism, including the political circumstances and alliances of the 1930s that paved the way for the atrocities of Holocaust. Specifically, I argue that the National Socialist *blood and soil* ideology is critically reflected in *Search for Us!* While such ideological reminiscences may have

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- 1) Zentrum für Politische Schönheit (ZPS): “Guard the Abyss” in *Sucht nach uns!*
 - 2) Previous events of public mourning by ZPS include for example *The Dead Are Coming* (2015), in which refugees drowned in the Mediterranean on their way to Europe were brought from Sicily to Berlin in order to be buried under the eyes of their “bureaucratic murderers.” (ZPS: *Die Toten kommen*). In *The Pillars of Shame* (2010), ZPS published plans for an 8-meter-tall monument in the form of the UN logo that was to be filled with 16,744 shoes, representing the 8,372 victims of the massacre of Srebrenica in 1995, whom the UN did not protect.

added to the critique of the operation, it also relates it to visual artist collectives such as Frankfurter Hauptschule and Tannhäuser Kreis, who over the last few years have explored how esoteric trends in contemporary art and culture may be traced back to a *völkisch* movement related to National Socialist ideology. As conglomerates of racist nationalism and rural nostalgia, these echoes from the past are associated with a certain aesthetics that is also recycled on contemporary far-right platforms. Hence, an analysis of these aesthetic echoes may betray what is at stake, emotionally and ideologically, in contemporary right-wing communication, much in the way Sara Ahmed analyses how affects of fear or hate slide between objects and adhere to certain bodies in *affective economies* (Ahmed 2016).

Such elusive clusters of affective transmission through aesthetic means and across historical periods prove difficult to grasp in political and historical analyses but may be identified and laid open through artistic research and cultural analysis. More importantly, artistic interventions may also form active counterstrategies to the aestheticisation of politics that fascism makes use of, even as this aestheticisation takes on new forms in a contemporary media landscape and political climate. As Walter Benjamin pointed out: the active response to the aestheticisation of politics is to politicise art (Benjamin 2008, p. 42).

In his book, *Rechte Gefühle (Right(-wing) feelings)*, 2021), gender and media scholar Simon Strick has analysed the affective strategies of contemporary fascism through its digital presence in the meme cultures on social media. Strick suggests that we are witnessing a new reflexive fascism that has adopted a critique of elites, ideology, and society previously associated with leftist visions of alternative communities, as in the youth movement of 1968 (Strick 2021, p. 28). In order to support its authoritarian politics, the *alternative right*, paradoxically, offers communities of intimate identification, and its primary means of communication are feelings and affects (Strick 2021, p. 32).³ Strick emphasises the need for contributions from cultural studies when trying to grasp the disparate and amorphous manifestations of contemporary alt-right fascism due to its metapolitical use of cultural interventions as a deliberate political strategy (Strick 2021, p. 37). This article is an attempt to recognise the need for cultural analysis of contemporary manifestations of fascist ideas, including their infrastructures of (re-)circulation, which increasingly takes place in broad daylight on mainstream media platforms (Strick 2021, pp. 185-187). I wish to explore some artistic counterstrategies that expose the actual physical and material dangers of the slippery and constantly morphing presence of the alt-right (cf. Strick 2021, p. 22). Significantly, it is historical awareness that allows these artists to recognise manifestations of fascist ideology, and at the same time strategically offer counter-images of reality through critical interventions into the aesthetics that support alt-right dominance of social and political discourse.

Search for Us!

In 2019, ZPS erected a memorial in Berlin for the unburied and nameless Holocaust victims. The memorial was placed in front of the German parliament, at the site where in 1933, conservative politicians handed over power to the Nazi party and effectively helped dissolve the democratic parliament with the passing of the so-called *Ermächtigungsgesetz* (emergency powers act). This law remained the legislative basis of the Nazi regime and could thus be said to lead directly to the

3) Strick's analysis is inspired by Sara Ahmed, including her blogpost "Fascism as Love" (2016), in which she notes that "It has become common for hate groups to rename themselves as organisations of love."

concentration camps and Holocaust.⁴ ZPS's memorial contained soil from actual sites of extinction and the soil was visible through an amber-coloured piece of synthetic resin (Fig. 2). According to the collective, this meant that it literally exhibited the ashes of the annihilated in a public intervention claiming visibility and presence for the nameless, unburied victims. *Search for Us!* was an explicit warning to conservative politicians against a repetition of the fatal political mistakes of the early 1930s, where strategic acts by radicalised conservative politicians, who believed themselves able to contain Hitler, led to his dissolution of democracy, to World War II, and the murder of millions of human beings. According to ZPS, there exists a similar risk today for an alliance between conservative parties and AfD.

Apart from the pillar in front of the parliament, the project consisted of the research going into the work, including the unearthing of the ashes and testing the soil for human remains – much in the manner that geologists drill out ice cores in order to learn about (pre-)historical climate conditions. The group reported to have taken samples from 23 sites near death camps in Germany, Poland, and the Ukraine and found human remains in most of them (Frank 2019; ZPS).⁵ Important, as in all the work by ZPS, is the website documenting the work and linking together the different performative, visual, textual, discursive and material elements of the project. Especially the introductory video guides the audience into the operation and also sets the stage for the uncanny atmosphere of the project.⁶ In addition to the documentation on the website, the project included two e-books. The first one, *An die Nachwelt (To Posterity)*, contains last statements from victims of the Holocaust between 1933-1945.⁷ Many of these statements were buried in the ground, hidden in jars and thermos flasks. The second publication is a report on research conducted at Auschwitz: *Die Wege der Asche. Eine quellenkritische Chronologie für das Interessengebiet Auschwitz* by historian Hinnerk Höfing (*The Paths of the Ashes. A Source-Critical Chronology of the Auschwitz field of interest*). The report chronologically charts the process of annihilation in the death camp, the numbers of victims, and the methods used to dispose of the ashes – by dumping them in rivers and pits or making use of them as fertilizer. The report draws on historical research, bureaucratic documents, excavations of mass graves, as well as the few existing testimonies from camp inmates concerning the disposal of the bodies of the victims.

Finally, the operation *Search for Us!* was supposed to have included a large-scale march against the AfD party. This major event, however, had to be cancelled, due to the critique that the project raised, not least from Jewish organisations, who found the exposure of the unburied victims' mortal remains disrespectful. This criticism made the group hand over the ashes to the orthodox rabbis' conference (ORS) and cover the orange glass-like material with a black mourning band, thus also covering up the associations of fire burning in the interior of the earth as well as in the incinerators of the death camps. The memorial was changed into a defence for democracy with the addition of the inscription: "I shall kill, by word and deed, by vote and by my own hand – if I can – anyone

4) The memorial was erected at the site of the former Kroll Opera, which after the Reichstag fire in February 1933 was turned into a temporary plenary hall and worked as such for the NS 'pretend parliament' throughout the Nazi regime. The first concentration camp, Dachau, located outside Munich where Heinrich Himmler was police president, was opened two days before the passing of the emergency act with the explicit purpose of interning political prisoners.

5) ZPS: "The burned are everywhere" in *Sucht nach uns!*

6) ZPS: *Bekennervideo*

7) ZPS: *An die Nachwelt*

who overthrows the democracy.”⁸ The quote comes from an ancient Greek oath implemented in Athens around 410 b.c. after the brief oligarchy of the 400 that threatened to put Athens under Spartan rule.



Fig. 2 Zentrum für Politische Schönheit: Sucht nach uns! 2019. Photo: (c) Patryk Witt / Zentrum für Politische Schönheit

The ethical fallacy

While *Search for us!* was praised for finally making visible the lack of closure for the surviving relatives, and the lack of public recognition of the horrifying disposal of the remains of the unburied victims, it was also fiercely criticised by politicians and Jewish organisations. The question of whether the column actually contained human remains from the death camps was at the centre of the controversy. The main point of the critique was that the exhibition of human remains instrumentalised and appropriated the pain of the victims for contemporary political purposes, i.e. the warning against conservative politicians' alliances with AfD. This was further problematic as the operation disturbed the Jewish law of peace in death along with other Jewish rites of burial, and it would be impossible to decide whether the remains came from Jewish victims. Philipp Ruch from the ZPS, however, pointed out that the very fact that we will never know the identity of these victims is precisely what causes the horror when faced with the complete obliteration of these human beings. And he asked why it has never before been discussed how and where to bury these remains (see Leister, 2020).

The ambiguity of the forensic evidence, including the sources referenced in the publications, was mostly criticised rather than understood as a performative means of aesthetics. Professor in German, Mary Cosgrove, however, appreciates the function of theatrical indeterminacy when she argues that “the pillar, its contents, and the material on the website are also metonymical ciphers for the vast, unrecognised, and unconsecrated ‘land of open graves.’” She adds that “The ambiguity concerning the evidentiary status of the remains performatively reinforces this epistemic deficit” (Cosgrove 2021, p. 72). While making “a limited case for the display’s significance in terms of the epistemic deficit it exposes in the context of normalised memory culture” (Cosgrove 2021, p. 72), Cosgrove nevertheless argues in her thorough and nuanced analysis of the operation that it conflates

8) The German version on the memorial reads: “Ich schwöre Tod durch Wort und Tat, Wahl und eigne Hand – wenn ich kann – jedem der die Demokratie zerstört.” English translation quoted from Teegarden 2014, p. 31.

the trauma of the victimised other and their descendants with the trauma of a German generation born in a post-witness historical period and struggling with how to commemorate the atrocities through material remains. As already mentioned, the critique made ZPS change the project and even declare it a failed project. It is indeed a characteristic of all the operations of the ZPS that they fail to some extent – since they aim for utopian goals – but this was different. According to Philipp Ruch, it was a mistake to bring the ashes to the government area of Berlin, and not at all necessary in order to “wake up the forces of history” (Ruch in Leister 2020, my translation).⁹

I find the critique of the operation important and necessary. I still think, though, that we need to take the work seriously as an artistic intervention into a memory culture of repression. While I do not wish to diminish the importance of the ethical critique, I still want to emphasise and analyse the political impact of literally unearthing the reality of the fact that large areas of European land are saturated with the unburied remains of Holocaust victims. As Historian Götz Aly pointed out, systematic research into the disposal and exploitation of the victims of extinction has been almost completely left out of the memory culture and research into Holocaust (see Frank 2019). The real horror is the lack of recognition of these unburied victims from German and European politicians and publics. As Ruch states at the end of an interview when the interviewer suggests that everybody is now discussing ZPS rather than a political memorial at the site of the Kroll Opera: “This makes me think of Kurt Tucholsky: ‘The one who points out the dirt is considered more dangerous than the one who produces the dirt.’” (Ruch in Leister 2020, my translation).¹⁰

Holocaust as an ongoing political event

Like most of the operations of ZPS, the memorial was wild and transgressive in its scale and conceptual complexity, but it was also defined by a rather dark, uncanny, even abject tone or atmosphere. The memorial pillar was an attempt to address Holocaust as an ongoing event, to make history present. ZPS writes on the webpage of the project: “The Holocaust was not a mythical, prehistorical event. It was possible. It is possible. And it remains possible. There is no ‘back then’, there is just ‘over there’: a place with a forever gaping abyss.”¹¹ This statement echoes Theodor W. Adorno’s different comments on his own statement that after Auschwitz it would be barbaric to write a poem. Adorno later stated: “The declaration that after Auschwitz one can no longer write a poem is not to be taken as it stands, but it is certain that after that, because it was possible and because it remains possible indefinitely, one can no longer present art as something happy.” (Adorno 2003, p. 603; Pidoux and Jost 2005, pp. 40-43). What Adorno implies here is that since Auschwitz, art must acknowledge this impasse as its very condition of possibility: An evil that is impossible to grasp in its infinite terror and yet was something that was politically possible, and still is. The *Search for Us!* website opens under the headline “Guard the abyss” with the following sentence: “Failing to remember takes away our fear of what politics is capable of. There is not only guilt for the Holocaust. There is also an obligation. This obligation is to go beyond abstract remembrance and prevent fascism in a very concrete and very real way.”¹²

9) German original: “Unser Fehler lag in der Annahme, dass es notwendig sei, die Asche ins Regierungsviertel zu holen, um die Kräfte der Geschichte wachzurufen.” (Leister, 2020)

10) German original: “Dazu fällt mir Kurt Tucholsky ein: ‘Derjenige, der auf den Schmutz hinweist, gilt für viel gefährlicher als der, der den Schmutz macht.’” (Ruch in Leister 2020).

11) ZPS: “Guard the Abyss” in *Sucht nach uns!*

12) ZPS: “Guard the Abyss” in *Sucht nach uns!*

What *Search for Us!* tries to do, and the strength of it in my opinion, even as it might seem problematic in many respects, is to demonstrate how the political and the historical converge with the cultural legacy of the ideologies and discourses that made the horrors possible – and with the legacies of the individual, forgotten victims. Hence the effort not to forget them becomes a necessary political gesture: to remember and memorise them, and to literally unearth their last words before annihilation.

Blood and soil

As should be clear by now, *Search for Us!* not only dealt with a grave and heavy chapter of history, but it did so in a shattering way. In the *Bekenner video* on the homepage, this dark and uncanny atmosphere prevails. It almost seems as though the Nazi myth of *blood and soil* comes back to haunt the persecutors.¹³ Presenting itself as a mix of documentary and promotion trailer, the video opens with images of foggy landscapes of dark lakes, ash pits and mud fields, intertwined with maps of the death camps and photos of abandoned sites and barracks. Ominous musical tones are accompanied by a deep male voice-over for the first one and a half minute. After being exposed to the horror of the camps and the adjacent sites where the ashes were dispersed, there is a change of tone to a more scientific approach, marked by a woman's more business-like voice explaining the political, organisational, and forensic implications of the project. As such, the video mirrors in inverted form the unholy collapse of rationalist technological science into utter carnage.

The bleak atmosphere addresses the abjection related to the whole project: the shocking realisation that the soil is literally soaked with the blood and bones of victims, and the appalling work that has gone into making the traces of the victims as well as the scale of the crimes disappear – but also the equally unpleasant and insurmountable work that would have to go into an attempt at actually marking the grounds where we would find the remains of the hundreds of thousands who were murdered in the camps. One reason why it seems so horrifying is of course that this work has never been done and probably never could be accomplished. The locations have been left and neglected, like an open wound or an open grave, in a culturally incomprehensible form, as opposed to the many graves for dead soldiers (German and other) that are carefully maintained across Europe and the world.

What ZPS also addresses with this uncanny project, I think, is the very terror of the National Socialist ideology of *blood and soil*. The latent violence implied in this ideology is exposed and twisted: In the Nazi ideology, the slogan of *blood and soil* drew upon Richard Walther Darré's idea that a certain race had specific rights to a certain area of land and settlement – an idea that could both legitimise a *völkisch* rural nostalgia for the homeland and large-scale industrial warfare in order to gain *Lebensraum*.¹⁴ ZPS, on the contrary, confronts us with the horrifying and disgusting remains of that ideology after it has been turned into real politics. It is precisely this political analysis of underlying ideological ramifications that we miss if we focus only on the ethical critique of an operation like *Search for Us!*

13) ZPS: *Bekennervideo*

14) The conceptual pair can be traced back to 1920s German philosophy, but Darré in his 1930 book *Neuadel aus Blut und Boden* turns it into a useful formula for the Nazi ideology and its conflation of racial politics and the right to *Lebensraum*. Darré was minister for agriculture from 1933-42.

The Nazi myth and gothic romanticism

As a core concept of National Socialism, the blood and soil formula is closely tied to the more esoteric strands of Nazi ideology – and this is where things really become entangled in uncomfortable ways. As Peter Staudenmaier, and others, have uncovered, ideals of ecology and organic farming, including Rudolph Steiner's (1861-1925) anthroposophical ideas of biodynamics as represented by his followers, merged easily with certain rural-nostalgic undercurrents of the National Socialist blood and soil ideology and its gothic-medieval connotations.

The role of the gothic in National Socialism may be seen as an integral dimension of its aestheticisation of politics. In their article "The Nazi Myth," Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe argue that what the Nazi mythology did for Germany was to provide the shaky and rudimentary nation-state with a sense of (national) identity where none existed, as Germany was the youngest of the European nations. What myth does is basically to provide a sense of eternity to the most fragile, recent, temporary constructions, e.g., to the imagined thousand-year Reich which actually turned out to be a petty dictatorship that lasted but 12 years and ended in complete disaster. The problem with myth, according to Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, is that it refers to nothing but itself: "It represents a past for which the only reference is itself," as Sarah Hammerschlag has paraphrased their analysis. (Hammerschlag 2010, p. 12). The myth becomes racist because it provides a singular model, a singular identity, to which every subject must adhere on every level of the state. And the Jew then, in the logic of this myth, becomes the antithesis to subjectivity, not just a bad race, but the representation of the formless as such. (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990, p. 307). Importantly, as Hammerschlag also points out: "Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe construe myth as the dangerous mechanism whose conscious political deployment most clearly marks the movement from German romanticism to German totalitarianism." (Hammerschlag 2010, p. 12). What is implied in this slide from romanticism to totalitarianism is a slide from a nostalgia for medieval Christianity (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990, p. 300) to a complete conflation of art and politics, producing the political as art: "The Nazi myth (...) is also the construction, the formation, and the production of the German people in, through, and as a work of art." (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990, p. 303).



Fig. 3 Zentrum für Politische Schönheit:
Holocaust Memorial in Bornhagen,
2017. Photo: (c) Patryk Witt /
Zentrum für Politische Schönheit

Of course, we need to bear in mind that German romanticism cannot be held responsible for Nazi totalitarianism. As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy make clear: "Between a tradition of thought and the ideology that inscribes itself, always abusively, within it, there is an abyss." (Lacoue-Labarthe

and Nancy 1990, p. 295). Still, as Susan Sontag observed in her essay on Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler, a Film from Germany* (1977), which was also a main reference for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's essay: "It is true that Hitler has contaminated Romanticism and Wagner, that much of the nineteenth-century German culture is, retroactively, haunted by Hitler." (Sontag 2009, p. 151).

Exposing retrograde nostalgia in the rural idyl

This, unfortunately, means that certain forms of agrarian romanticism can no longer be (re-)circulated in any innocent way. When the extreme right-wing AfD politician Björn Höcke refers to his home in the small Thuringian village of Bornhagen as his sanctuary and his "Bullerbü" it is in no way innocent, but a gross appropriation.¹⁵ The idyl claimed by Höcke for himself and his fellow Germans is completely at odds with the messages of hate and intolerance towards minoritised groups that he advocates. The invoked idyl is glossing over the threatening politics of violence and expulsion that he preaches. When Höcke in 2017 publicly denounced Peter Eisenman's Berlin Holocaust monument as a disgrace for Germany, ZPS responded by building a small-scale replica of Eisenman's memorial in the garden next to Höcke's in Bornhagen (Fig. 3). In a precise operation, the group exposed the direct line from the nostalgic dream of a sealed and shielded homeland to genocide legitimised through the projection of one's own fear of intrusion onto the other. By literally following the trace of blood and soil after National Socialism, *Search for Us!* may be understood as a continuation of the Bornhagen Holocaust memorial.¹⁶

A similar critique of the affective and ideological connotations involved in the recirculation of a certain aesthetics of kitschy authenticity can be identified on the visual art scene. German artist collectives Frankfurter Hauptschule and Tannhäuser Kreis have uttered a critique of young artists flirting with esoteric and neoromantic currents inspired by a combination of environmentalist back-to nature romanticism, the post-human, and the fantasy genre in film, literature and games they grew up with in the 1990s and 2000s. What the Frankfurter Hauptschule and Tannhäuser Kreis claim to detect in contemporary neoromantic and esoteric aesthetics is a cultural presence of fascist imagery in the specific form of a gothic legacy in fantasy universes as well as everyday entertainment such as TikTok videos and the revaluation of handicraft in the wake of a heightened environmental consciousness.

The challenge is, of course, to combine a cultural sensibility towards these aesthetic connotations with a critical analysis of how to politically address the ideological undercurrents of this naturalised everyday imagery. Hence, like ZPS, these artist collectives have been criticised because they themselves, to a wide extent, make use of the very aesthetics they want to expose and criticise, i.e., an artistic idiom associated with a *völkisch* or gothic style, complete with esoteric symbols and DIY techniques such as woodcarvings, batik dyeing, etc. "Does it have to be with a Swastika?" as one critic called her review of the group exhibition *Schuldiger Realismus (Guilty Realism, 2022)* by Tannhäuser Kreis.¹⁷ The question is both precise and pressing: How can we criticise and expose

15) Noisy Village, the children's safe haven in Swedish author Astrid Lindgren's stories, was originally called 'Bullerbyn' in Swedish.

16) As might be expected, there was no welcoming of the artists in the idyllic village, instead we see them be driven out by local AfD supporters in a video documenting the event (Basil-Mueller, 2017). Unfortunately for Höcke, the artists had allegedly rented the neighbouring house on a long-term lease.

17) Anna Meinecke (2022): "Muss das mit Hakenkreuz sein? Tannhäuser Kreis in der Galerie Anton Janizewski."

such an all-pervasive yet slippery ideological omnipresence without reinforcing it through its own means?¹⁸



Fig. 4 Frankfurter Hauptschule, 2022. Exhibition view from kANzELKuLTuR.
Courtesy: the artist and NAK Neuer Aachener Kunstverein. Photo: Simon Vogel

Fascist aesthetics

The exhibition kANzELKuLTuR took place in the Neue Aachener Kunstverein in the spring of 2022 and was the first solo exhibition by Frankfurter Hauptschule (FHS). The collective has previously addressed issues of colonialism, gender inequality, and other power relations. They gained international attention with the project *Bad Beuys* in which they allegedly stole the Beuys sculpture *Capri Battery* (the one with the lemon and the yellow light bulb) and abducted it to an ethnological museum in Tanzania, as a critique of the slow processes of art restitution.¹⁹

The exhibition in Aachen specifically addressed the strange alliance between right-wing extremists and eso-hippies who came together in demonstrations against Covid measures. The FHS identifies an aesthetic bonding between these groups in their shared fascination of paganism, German romanticism, and Nordic mythology, which the collective further connects to contemporary young artists' similar attraction to spiritualist and mystical imagery. In a German context, it sets the alarm bells ringing when protofascist imagery and symbolism become fashionable as mainstream tokens of fascination. Pointing relentlessly to a potentially dangerous slide from concerns with nature conservation to remnants of the ultra-nationalist *blood and soil* ideology, FHS addresses the slippery and at the same time pervasive character of this imagery as it circulates in art and media. The very use in right-wing meme culture of esoteric imagery, which is usually associated with other kinds of alternative cultures, makes us unsure how to decode these messages politically.

18) As the swastika is banned from public display in Germany, there were actually only indirect references to it in the exhibition. The group makes use of a strategy comparable to Martin Kippenberger's 1984 painting: *Ich kann beim besten Willen kein Hakenkreuz entdecken* (*With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika*) – a painting displaying what might be deconstructed elements of swastikas in the black-red-gold colours of the German flag, thus pointing both to the repression of the National Socialist past in post-war Germany and to post-war abstract art as implied in this repression.

19) Tanzania was colonised by Germany in the 19th century and later by the UK in the early 20th century. The FHS version of the *Capri Battery* turned out to be a replica.

The exhibition space of the Neue Aachener Kunstverein is located in a park near the site where demonstrations against Covid restrictions took place every week during the pandemic. Originally, the exhibition included an outdoor installation displaying a huge dreamcatcher – appearing like cast-iron but made of coated styrofoam – in the shape of a so-called black sun, or sun wheel, used by neo-Nazis because it is less tabooed and recognisable as fascist propaganda than the swastika (Fig. 5). The dream catcher provoked the weekly demonstrators and was removed at police orders within the first days of the opening – despite the fact that a permission to display it had been obtained in advance. The gallery and the artists pointed out the democratic paradox, that while the demonstrators were protected, the artists' calling out the proto-fascist agenda of these demonstrations was prohibited.

Originally the dreamcatcher was hung in a sort of temple- or chapel-like memorial opposite the exhibition space. A window on the first floor of the gallery would be open with a prayer rug in front of it, creating a direct line to the dream catcher in a mix of Christian, Muslim, paganist and esoteric references (Fig. 5). The title of the dreamcatcher, *Osten ist rechts* (*The East Is to the Right*) ironically points to symbols of right-wing nationalism as appropriations from Eastern cultures. The title perhaps also addresses the fact that East-Germany is a stronghold for the far right – while the majoritarian German position is still conceived as West-German, from where the extreme-right might conveniently be isolated and othered as an East-German issue.

Arriving at the site from the surrounding park, the visitor was greeted by a pergola forming an archway from which batik-dyed flags in red and white with a black pattern in the centre were hung (Fig. 1). Clearly referring to the red Nazi flags with a black swastika on a white circular centre, the flags echo military flag parades and Nazi mass gatherings. At the entrance of the exhibition building, it turns out that the gallery is staged as a memorial site for the decline of the German republic, or rather the prediction of the dissolution of Germany, in the form of a warning against fascism as the road to self-destruction. A small brass plaque on the building announces in French:

Between 1986 and 2031 this building housed the Neue Aachener Kunstverein. It is here that, during an exhibition in 2022, the artist collective Frankfurter Hauptschule predicted a handover of power to a new fascist regime within ten years. After the third world war and the dissolution of Germany, the Belgian authorities decided to turn this building into a memorial.²⁰

After entering through an entrance wrapped up in dirty pale pink and dusty rose cloth – a work called *Entering the Vampire Castle* – we are confronted with a visual mix of esoteric back to nature aesthetics and ethno-nationalist romantic or *völkisch* imagery.²¹ Here we have bales of straw spread across a floor with black cast-iron chandeliers and a gloomy wall cloth with a print of the Reichstag in Berlin and the word ANTICHRISTO written over it – a combined installation view

20) The original French text reads: “Entre 1986 et 2031, ce bâtiment abrita la Neue Aachener Kunstverein. C’est ici que lors d’une exposition de 2022, le collectif d’artistes Frankfurter Hauptschule prédit une passation de pouvoir à un nouveau régime fasciste aux cours de dix prochaines années. Après le troisième guerre mondiale et la dissolution de l’Allemagne, les autorités belges décidèrent de faire de ces bâtiment un mémorial.”

21) The title of the entrance installation plays on cultural theorist Mark Fisher’s 2013 essay “Exiting the Vampire Castle”, in which he criticises callout culture and instead argues for solidarity based on class-analysis.

perhaps warning against the risk of a new Reichstag fire threatening democracy (Fig. 4). The rustic primitivism and latent violence continue in the work *Tzvetnik 3000*, where animal skins cover a so-called hanging bed, over which knives and daggers are hung from the ceiling in iron chains (Fig. 4). The windowsills are adorned with woodcuttings, and a live scorpion is placed in a terrarium under a motorised nail club hanging from the ceiling.



Fig. 5 Frankfurter Hauptschule, *Exiting the Vampire Castle*, 2022;
background: Frankfurter Hauptschule, *Osten ist rechts*, 2022. Courtesy: the
artist and NAK Neuer Aachener Kunstverein. Photo: Simon Vogel.

Apart from the obvious references to the demonisation of democratic institutions from right-wing conspiracy theorists, and in combination with the sloppily veiled glass-paned entrance, the wall-cloth could be drawing on Christo and Jeanne-Claude's art project *Verhüllter Reichstag* (*Wrapped Reichstag*, 1971-1995) which at its realisation in 1995 (after 25 years of preparation and endless applications) was supposed to celebrate democracy's victory after the Cold War. Perhaps ironically

pointing out the ghostliness of the original wrapping of the Reichstag when viewed from the present political climate where totalitarian ideologies and autocratic regimes are haunting Europe again, the FHS however explicitly relate their work to the more recent storming of the American Congress on the 6th of January 2021.²² On one side of the ANTICHRISTO Reichstag wall-cloth hangs a shield with two swords and a portrait of Jacob Chansley, the ‘QAnon Shaman’ who participated in the storm of the Capitol with face paint, an animal fur headdress with horns, and naked torso.²³ To the other side hung a small print of Americans re-enacting a medieval battle in full armour, but under stars and stripes, with the text “Dear Americans. Our culture is not your costume.”²⁴



Fig. 6 Frankfurter Hauptschule: Schrein, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and NAK Neuer Aachener Kunstverein. Photo: Simon Vogel.

In the main room on the top floor, a spectacular installation called *Schrein* (*Shrine*) again seems to be installed in a rural stable or hut. The windows are covered with wooden boards, and over an open grave or pit filled with water and placed in a heap of earth hangs a globe, onto which a motive based on Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) is projected. The earth heap is surrounded by straw torches, vaguely referring to fasces, the roman symbol of violent power that gave name to fascism. While the projected figure seems about to sink into a sea of lava on the disintegrating surface of the globe, the face of Donna Haraway appears interchangeably with that of Rudolph Steiner on its head – perhaps at once referring to the imminent climate collapse and to the dangerous political forces it activates (Fig. 6).

22) Half a year before the storming of the Capitol in Washington, far-right protesters from a demonstration against Covid restrictions had attempted to storm the Reichstag in Berlin on the 29th of August 2020.

23) Title: *Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler. (Every Human Being Is an Artist).*

24) Title: *This Needs to Be Addressed.*

Zones of indeterminacy

The challenge of the exhibition is the indeterminacy between the group's own aesthetic means and its critique of the mythological references to the fascist combination of "kitsch and death" in other artists' and movements' imagery.²⁵ The dilemma that Frankfurter Hauptschule identifies is that the climate crisis comes with the added challenge of a double-faced political crisis: how to avoid authoritarian leanings, not only among those in reactionary denial, but also in the climate movement itself. This indeterminacy is, however, precisely what is at stake here, because it mimics how the extreme right makes use of a similar, seemingly ironic indeterminacy in the midst of its most blatant propaganda.

Simon Strick traces how right-wing activists deliberately exploit minority discourses and concepts, for example comparing themselves to native Americans defending themselves against white settlers when applying Nazi buzzwords such as *Lebensraum* or celebrating indigenous peoples' day with an insistence on the British's right to a safe homeland under the slogan 'White Lives Matter' (Strick 2021, p. 112). By producing an at once ironic and cynical, and completely irrational, confusion of incompatible historical facts and movements, based on individual conglomerates of aesthetically and discursively transmitted affects, digital fascism becomes very plastic and slippery. Like the Holocaust monuments of ZPS, the *kANzELKuLTuR* exhibition is an attempt to intervene in these aesthetic clusters in order to disentangle and display the different cultural ideas that are mixed up in their shameless distortions. In fact, the tour through the exhibition moves from an entrance called *Entering the Vampire Castle* to the first-floor work *Exiting the Vampire Castle*, namely the prayer rug in front of the open window facing the sun wheel dreamcatcher: Perhaps a movement towards fascism – or through it.

Fascism and aesthetics revisited

Walter Benjamin famously claimed that fascism was the aestheticisation of politics and should be fought with the politicisation of art. According to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, fascism's relationship to mythology could be conceived as a process of aestheticisation. Instead of addressing real political conflicts in society, fascism perverts or blurs legitimate conflicts of interest, for example between classes, thus channelling the agency of the people into artificial fights against imaginary enemies based on conspiracy theories about either Jewish world-bolshevism, the deep state, the great replacement, micro-chips in Covid-19 vaccines, etc. Signs and symbols function both as ritual bonds of community and as self-confirming tokens of truth. Moral and ethical values, or imaginary threats to one's own group, are claimed as arguments for restricting and threatening the livelihood of others. Cultural values and by extension artistic practices and cultural products become the battleground for a promotion of hatred, bigotry and violence against antagonised and minoritised groups.

This is why artistic interventions into these discursive media systems of circulation may seem rather double-edged. Antje Stahl, for example, in her review of *kANzELKuLTuR* in *Republik* web journal, asks towards the end of her article, why it is necessary for an artist group to participate in the aesthetic levelling of politically incompatible positions that it wants to criticise?²⁶ This is a relevant question, but I do not think that this is what FHS is actually doing. On the contrary, I

25) It is cultural critic Diedrich Diederichsen who in his brief article on the exhibition refers to Saul Friedländer's identification of fascist aesthetics as "kitsch and death" (Diederichsen 2022).

26) "Die ästhetische Gleichschaltung von politisch Ungleichen ist ja leider tatsächlich ein ideologisches Programm, gegen das man sich jeden Tag zur Wehr setzen muss. Warum, fragt man sich deshalb, muss ein Künstlerkollektiv sich ausgerechnet daran beteiligen?" (Stahl 2022)

would argue that the artworks analysed here heighten our awareness towards affective distortions. FHS do not themselves *produce* the affective overload of esoteric and alt-right meme culture, but they do walk a tight-rope balance between affirmatively displaying or critically analysing these ideological clusters. In fact, they need to maintain this openness if they want to explore the appeal of fascist and alt-right material. It is perhaps no coincidence that this work is being done in Germany whose history should always be a reminder to artists and activists – as it should everywhere – of the necessity to mobilise against the circulation of ideological remnants of fascism while at the same time keeping in mind that historical abuse is still present, still going on: “There is no ‘back then’, there is just ‘over there.’”²⁷

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27) ZPS: “Guard the Abyss” in *Sucht nach uns!*

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