

# The Arts of Resistance

TAoR

Ruth Anderwald

Leonhard Grond

Association HASENHERZ Vienna

in  
Cooperation  
with

University of Applied Arts Vienna

Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb

University of Art Braunschweig

# The Arts of Resistance

TAoR

Edited by  
Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond



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# The Arts of Resistance:

## Why? What?

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Association HASENHERZ

Vienna

What is fascism? Approaching this question from a historical perspective necessitates a local context. When we talk about fascism in Austria, we think not only of the Nazi regime, but also of the first bout of Austro-fascism that led to the Austrian civil war in 1934. Fascism, along with socialism and liberalism, has proven to be one of the most influential political ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only in Austria, but worldwide. Its influence on the 21<sup>st</sup> century remains evident today. Even though we have profound

knowledge about the destructive and deadly forces unleashed by fascist ideologies, our educational and artistic efforts seem to require a different approach or intensification when scrutinising the current political climate.

Bringing together diverse perspectives on fascism, *The Arts of Resistance* is an intergenerational project that explores resistance against fascism. Specifically, it aims to explore what artistic means have been relevant and effective. Some artists have actively

supported fascist regimes (e.g., the Italian Futurists, Ezra Pound or Stephanie Hollenstein).<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding, many other artists have also been known to criticise their governments; they had been oppressed by fascist and authoritarian regimes or had their work exploited for propaganda. All these occurrences are not a matter of the past, as evident in current political developments. The contributions in this book address these topics not only from an Austrian, Croatian, German, or broader European perspective, but also from Iranian, North American, and Indian viewpoints.

*The Arts of Resistance* is a cross-disciplinary project, funded by the European Commission (CREA2027), which uniquely combines artistic research and practice with political and cultural youth education and remembrance cultures. The foundational approach to resistance is co-creative, bridging disciplinary,

cultural, or geographical boundaries to uncover and actualise links between artistic practices and the historical, cultural, social, political, and material ecologies of resistance against fascism. Together, we examine the phenomenon of fascism, as defined by Umberto Eco in “Ur-fascism” (1995), and explore what resistance to such tendencies entails. This approach encompasses historical research, artistic workshops, and expert conversations. It also includes an International Exchange Week at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, an exhibition and accompanying symposium at the MSU Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, presentations of art in public spaces with schools and at the University of Art in Braunschweig, and, eventually, this publication and its presentation. *The Arts of Resistance* brought together young participants with more experienced artists and researchers from a diverse range of countries and backgrounds,

including Austria, Croatia, Germany, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, the United States, Belarus, Ukraine, India, Israel, and Iran. Over the course of 20 months, we convened and collaborated through discussions and workshops, and facilitated co-creative processes, which culminated in the opening of the eponymous exhibition on May 8<sup>th</sup>, marking the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II.

*The Arts of Resistance* is based on the premise that learning from history for contemporary contexts is only achievable through supporting autonomous research interests, their critical analysis, and their creative application. Exploring historical art, the intrinsic power of imagination within works of art, alongside the personal histories of their creators, inspires a forward-thinking and inquisitive mindset. The project's co-creative approach to art practice is embedded within the context of Human Rights

Education (HRE) and contemporary artistic practices. By engaging with theoretical texts and historical artworks, and subsequently encouraging the co-creation of new artworks, the project seeks to illuminate the intricate relationship between culture, self-expression, democracy, and resistance.

Resistance can be mounted against anything or anyone, but it can also be given in support of a cause or a person. At its core, to resist means not being okay with something: circumstances, conditions, events, communities, laws and court decisions, the level and manner of discourse, or the dominant values on which our coexistence depends. We can only criticise, however, when we recognise that things could be different too. Therefore, resistance involves imagining alternative perspectives on these circumstances, conditions, discourses, communities, events,



decisions, and values. This needs individual and collective imagination. Critique and resistance are always as much about the critic as they are about the subject of criticism. First, it reflects a sense of empowerment and a sense of entitlement to speak out. It makes clear that we exist within a society where we have the right to express ourselves freely and share our opinions. When we criticise and resist, we also reveal something about ourselves—what we consider to be important, appropriate, and just. As Michel Foucault explained in his speech *What is Critique?* (2007),<sup>2</sup> critique highlights

“a certain manner of thinking, of speaking, likewise of acting, and a certain relation to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, as well as a relation to society, to culture, to others [...].”

Critique is situated, draws from local histories and knowl-

edges, and involves intersectional contexts such as social, cultural, ethnic, and gender backgrounds. It is always easier to criticise from a privileged position and in a community where you feel accepted and heard, as Judith Butler remarks in her response to Foucault’s *What is Critique?*<sup>3</sup>

When we are against something, when we resist, we are usually also for something else, even if this is implicit and not so easily put into explicit words. Sometimes, it can be difficult to find the right words to express what we would like to change. Resistance often begins with a corporal feeling of something being *off*. We will find ourselves feeling uneasy in certain situations, with specific people, or about particular decisions and ideas. Yet, we cannot put our finger on it. Often, we will just shy away from what makes us uncomfortable. The hard work of critique and resistance means

staying with the discomfort and finding ways to express and communicate its complexity. An invaluable method for staying with the difficult, troubling, and uncomfortable is to find a community of like-minded people who can offer mutual support. This project made good use of this method. As soon as we understand that we are not alone in this, we will feel a sense of relief and see new ideas, possibilities, and perspectives emerge.

Critique engenders resistance, but it also demands the sheer possibility and freedom to critique. This freedom to critique is essential, and it is a freedom that we must uphold and utilise, especially as practising artists and in the realm of art education. With all the difficulties that come with it, it is this freedom that allows and entices us to imagine different realities and possibilities for how we live and interact with each other on this planet. It gives us the space to

express and share such ideas. Real dialogue is never only about making your position heard. It is about sharing, listening, and understanding different perspectives, and making space to process and connect with what has been said and argued. This requires time, and it’s okay to not always have an immediate answer. Rather, it’s about considering and reflecting on the various perspectives and positions we encounter. This was a good practice in our project, and we are grateful for this experience.

The gift of such a project is that it invites us to imagine and practice an artistic, socio-political, and pedagogical “otherwise”, thereby opening a space that allows different, marginalised, emerging, contradictory, and even mutually exclusive narratives to unfold. Building on decolonial theory, this can involve delinking from the sociopolitical constructions prevalent in the West, investigating the past and

present collapse of humanity and human rights, and exploring interstices and interstitial spaces. In this space, macro- and micro-narratives and approaches are intertwined. In our interpretation, leading such a project entails facilitating and holding a space that is accommodating, contradictory, and thus, resistant.

This space, which we call the compossible space,<sup>4</sup> is as much theoretical and utopian as it is practical and pragmatic. With its uncertainty, positions form and dissolve, coalitions can emerge, and companionship will be offered. On many topics, we hold divergent views. However, we have taken the time to come together, ask ourselves difficult questions, work, and discuss these topics with each other to deepen our understanding in a pluralistic and polyvocal manner. Together, we aimed to resist sloganeering, preconceived opinions, and fixed answers. Accepting that questions and critique will be put forward in

good faith, listening to each other and allowing for new perspectives to emerge, while making space for what is not prevalent in our personal views, enriched our process of expanding our knowledge on historical and contemporary forms of (artistic) resistance against fascist tendencies.

Such togetherness in a project is temporary by default. Those who experience it can bring this seed into new spaces, coalitions, and partnerships, as well as into schools, art institutions, and their daily lives. We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to those who shared this space and journey with us, including the participants and their artistic-research work, the individuals engaged within the institutions, and the artists, researchers, and activists who generously shared their rich experiences, passion and knowledge with us all.

*The Arts of Resistance* catalyse a process around the potential emergence of a European Culture of Resistance, encouraging critical examination of the role and agency of artists, art institutions, art education and artworks as effective agents of resistance. It seeks to foster a nuanced, shared vision for Europe's future, grounded in a collective understanding of both local and international histories and the values they implicitly and explicitly entail. Looking back at the history of the neighbourhood where the International Exchange Week at the University of Applied Arts Vienna took place, we encountered the biographies of local people, such as Irma and Zalel Schwager, who lived to defend and fight successfully for the freedom we can now enjoy.<sup>5</sup> Their stories give us hope:

We have already defeated fascism once. And if needed, we will do it again, and again, and again.

<sup>1</sup> Schedlmayer, Nina (2025): *Hitlers queere Künstlerin. Stephanie Hollenstein – Malerin und Soldat*, Vienna: Zsolnay Verlag.

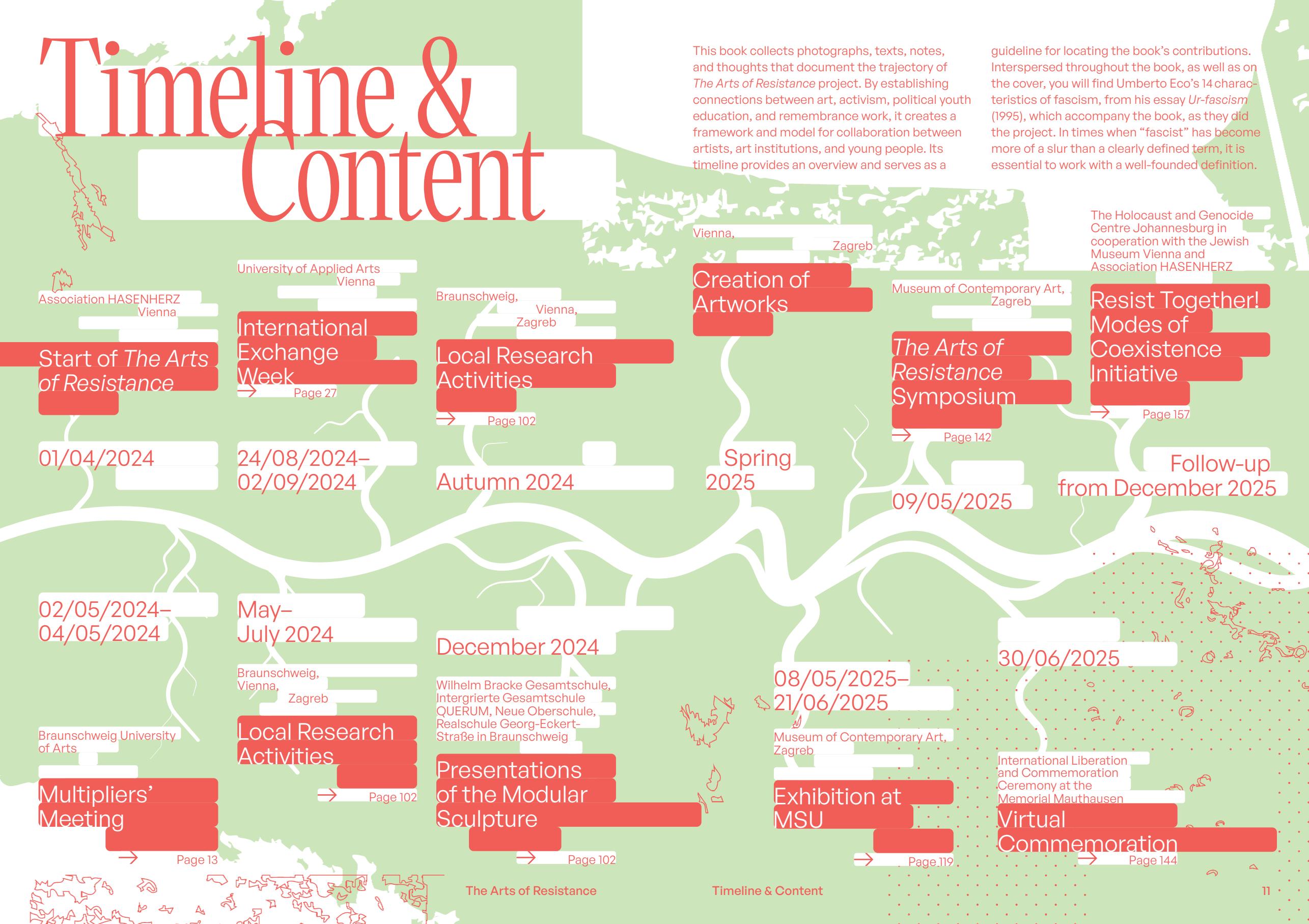
<sup>2</sup> Michel, Foucault (2007): "What is Critique?", in: Sylvère Lotringer (ed.) *The Politics of Truth*, pp. 41–82. New York: Semiotext(e).

<sup>3</sup> Butler, Judith (2002): "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue", in: David Ingram (ed.) *The Political*, pp. 212–226. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

<sup>4</sup> Anderwald, Ruth; Feyertag, Karoline; Grond Leonhard (2018): "The Concepts of Dizziness and the Compossible Space in Research-Creation", in: Davide Deriu/Josephine Kane (eds.) special issue *Emotion, Space and Society*, Vol. 28 (2018), pp. 122–130.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter: Rotifer, Robert, Semiotic Meltdown on Schüttelstraße, pp. 75–83.

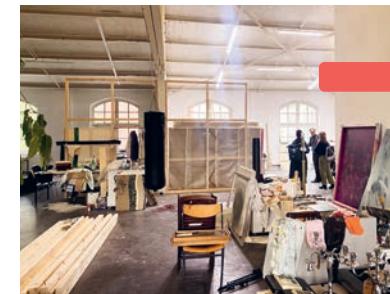
# Timeline & Content





# Multipliers' Meeting

## HBK Braunschweig University of Art

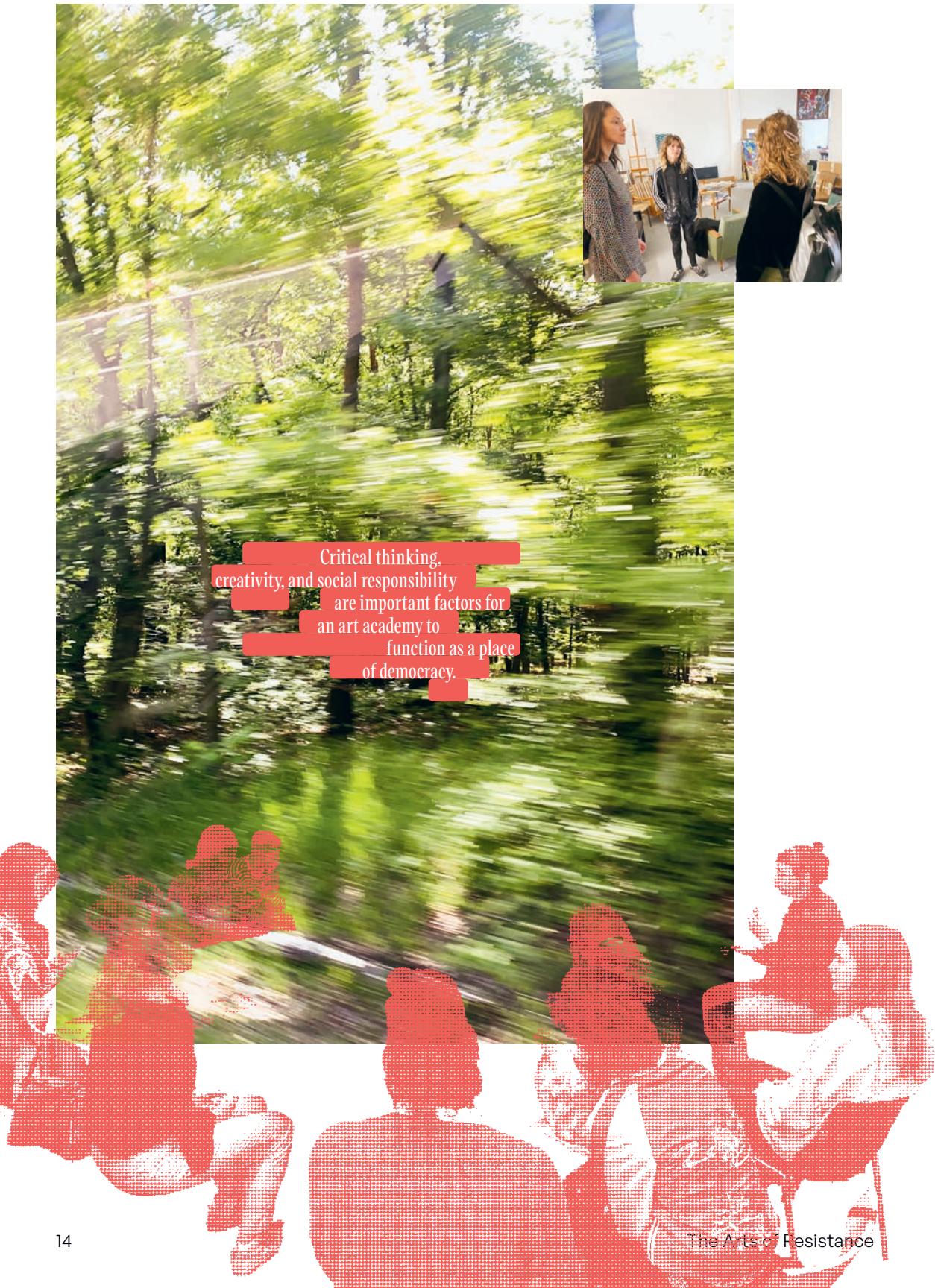


02/05/2024–04/05/2024

After the Zoom meeting for the project's start, the Multipliers' Meeting was our first face-to-face gathering. We came together to design the framework for



*The Arts of Resistance*, thoroughly planning and detailing the project, and then extensively discussing and agreeing on our steps and roles for the next 20 months. All participating institutions, artists, and youth delegates had the opportunity to share their expectations, their expertise, and raise open questions, allowing us to collaboratively shape the project's direction.



# Antifascism in Schools and at the Art University

Martin Krenn  
Professor at HBK Braunschweig University of Art

## A Modular Sculpture for Democracy and Against Fascism

When I received the invitation to develop a concept for the intergenerational artistic research project *The Arts of Resistance (TAoR)*, I was particularly keen to work on an art project with students at the Braunschweig University of Art (HBK Braunschweig) as well as with children and young people at public schools in Braunschweig. Ultimately, both the university and the school play a pivotal role in the preservation and enhancement of democratic principles. I firmly believe that the fight against fascism must begin there. A connection to the history of the place of one's community fosters a more immediate interest in dealing with the complex topic of fascism than a pathos of remembrance with which most young people can no longer identify. However, this study of local fascist history and its influence on the present is often neglected in education; our project began precisely at this point.

For an art university, an anti-fascist stance should not be merely a declaration or a confession; it should rather be a commitment to actively engage with power structures and ideologies that promote racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, as well as restrict freedom, diversity, and artistic creativity.

Umberto Eco's theses from his 1995 essay "Ur-fascism" can serve as a guide here. Using

14 characteristics, Eco illustrates the complexity of fascism and points out that it always appears in different forms. Indeed, Italian fascism under Mussolini was driven by its emphasis on the creation of an imperial state. Spanish fascism during the Franco regime manifested itself in authoritarian rule with a strong Catholic influence. German fascism, realised by the Nazi regime under Hitler, was characterised by anti-Semitic and racist genocide and pursued the irrational goal of creating an ethnically homogeneous "Volksgemeinschaft" (ethnic community) that never existed and cannot exist in reality. Modern fascisms often draw on these historical forms but adapt their ideological orientation to the specific circumstances of the respective present situation.

Fascist characteristics, as analysed by Ecco, often creep into democratic discourses more or less unnoticed, such as the devaluation of analytical criticism, the trivialisation of irrationalism, and a distrust of the intellect in general. In this sense, the task of an art university is not only to encourage artistic freedom but also to create a space for self-reflection. Fascist content can, after all, also appear in artistic works and actions. It would be naive to believe that free art or the artistic avant-garde are inherently incompatible

with fascism; one needs only consider Italian Futurism and the role it played in Italian fascism.

It is the responsibility of teachers and students at every art university to reflect on whether the opinions expressed and the artistic

content of the works and projects—intentionally or unintentionally—exhibit fascist traits. The question of whether something should be considered fascist cannot be answered hierarchically

from top to bottom; instead, it must be continually renegotiated and developed in a process-based exchange among all those involved. In other words, anti-fascist commitment and an anti-fascist stance within and outside of the arts require discourse and cannot be prescribed.

According to publicist Paul Mason,<sup>1</sup> today's fascism is based on a belief system. The beliefs it contains are held not only by fascists but also by right-wing populists, anti-liberal conservatives, activists of the esoteric left, and even some social democrats. According to Mason, these views include beliefs such as that ethnic majority groups are "victims" of immigration and multiculturalism, that the



**It would be naive to believe that free art or the artistic avant-garde are inherently incompatible with fascism.**

achievements of feminism, so-called wokeness, which raises awareness of racism and discrimination, should be reversed, and that science and the media are no longer trustworthy. Nations are said to have lost their bearings and must, therefore, regain their former "greatness".

**Workshops with school collaborative work**



**on the modular sculpture in schools in Braunschweig**



**Our project aimed to use a dialogic sculpture to reveal the fascist beliefs that are increasingly being relativised in social discourse and to expose the authoritarian, populist, and anti-democratic methods of modern fascism.**

Mason further explains that the adherents of these ideologies believe in an unspecified catastrophic event that will restore the situation. Voters of right-wing and populist parties, who often still perceive themselves as democrats, are increasingly influenced and radicalised by this ideology. Authoritarian right-wing politicians resort to fascist ideas, either openly or covertly, to gain electoral advantage. However, Mason highlights an important distinction between fascists on the one hand and populists and right-wing conservatives on the other hand. The ultimate goal of fascists is a global race war that would create a world of ethnic monocultures and eliminate modern society.

**Modular Sculpture for Democracy and Against Fascism**

Our project aimed to use a dialogic sculpture to reveal the fascist beliefs that are increasingly being relativised in social discourse and to expose the authoritarian, populist, and anti-democratic methods of modern fascism. To this end, a collaboration was initiated between the Zusatzqualifikation Kunstvermittlung (Art Education and Mediation program) at the HBK Braunschweig, "Demokratie leben!" Braunschweig ("Live Democracy!" Braunschweig), and the Volks hochschule Braunschweig (College of Further Education Braunschweig). Four Braunschweig public schools, the Wilhelm-Bracke Comprehensive School, the IGS Querum, the Gymnasium Neue Oberschule, and the Realschule Georg-Eckert-Straße, participated in the project. Students developed a concept with me for two 90-minute workshops in the seminar and conducted them consecutively at the schools during the summer semester of 2024. In the first workshop, the characteristics of fascism as defined by Ecco were introduced. Three classroom stations were additionally set up on the topics of Braunschweig during the Nazi era, Braunschweig today, and art as a form of resistance against fascism.

At these stations, the students presented visual material ranging from Instagram posts by Braunschweig Neo Nazis and right-wing extremists to pictures of facades of historically contaminated buildings in Braunschweig to anti-fascist works from art history.

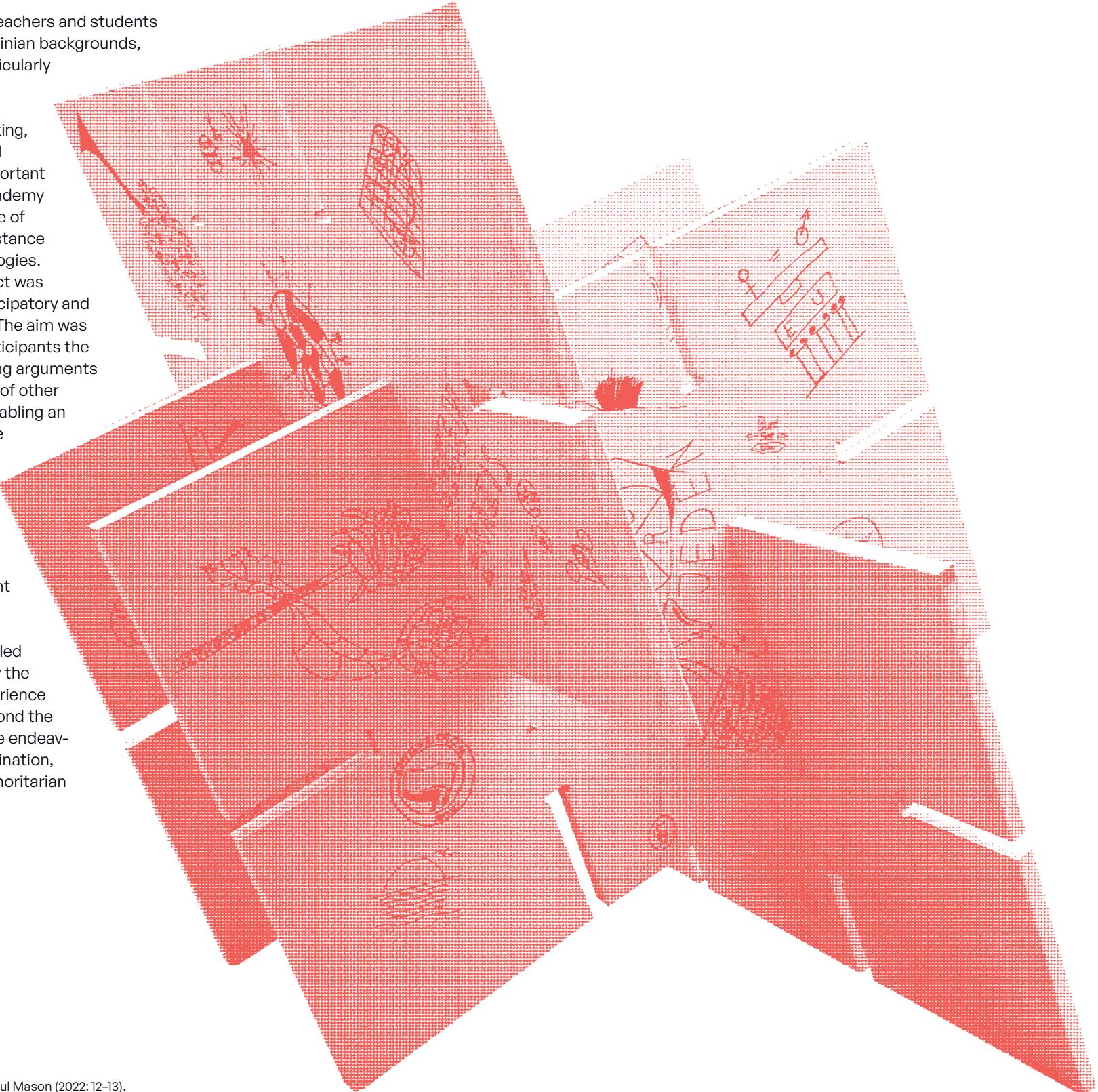
The students used this material to discuss the current state of democracy and the threats it faces from fascist ideology with the pupils. The outcomes of this workshop were captured on large posters featuring key terms, which served as the foundation for the subsequent workshop held the following week. In this workshop, the pupils drew anti-fascist motifs with the support of the art students. Collages of these motifs were printed onto individual interlocking wooden panels designed by RAHM Architekten in Vienna. These panels were then showcased as modular sculptures in various combinations at multiple locations, including the schoolyard of IGS Querum, the auditorium of Wilhelm-Bracke Comprehensive School, the entrance hall of VHS Braunschweig, and ultimately at the Museum of Modern Art during the *TAoR* exhibition in Zagreb.

From the very beginning, *TAoR* provided the reflective framework for our sculpture project. I presented the idea at the kick-off meeting, attended by representatives from all participating institutions at HBK Braunschweig. Between the school workshops and the production of the sculpture, I attended, along with the participating students, the *TAoR* international exchange week at the Center for Focus Research (ZFF) at the University of Applied Arts Vienna in August 2024. The meeting provided an opportunity to meet with all project participants and exchange ideas with numerous international artists, cultural workers, and activists. There were a variety of activities for in-depth discussions, including a visit to the exhibition “Protest/Architecture: Barricades, Camps, Superglue” at the MAK—Museum of Applied Arts Vienna and a shared dinner in the garden of the ZFF. The panel “Art Education in Times of War” addressed the current war in Israel/Palestine and the development of guidelines for “freedom of expression and creative freedom

in times of war” by teachers and students of Jewish and Palestinian backgrounds, and it remained particularly memorable for me.

Critical thinking, creativity, and social responsibility are important factors for an art academy to function as a place of democracy and resistance against fascist ideologies. Therefore, the project was designed to be participatory and dialogical in nature. The aim was to convey to the participants the dangers of simplifying arguments and being intolerant of other opinions, thereby enabling an understanding of the structural and ideological foundations of fascism in its various forms of expression. The in-depth engagement with the characteristics of fascism on different levels enabled participants to apply the knowledge and experience they had gained beyond the project in their future endeavours against discrimination, intolerance, and authoritarian structures.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Mason (2022: 12–13).





# Umberto Eco's Characteristics of Fascism

The fourteen characteristics of fascism identified by Umberto Eco form the basis of our project, inspired our collective research, discussions, educational work with schools and artistic practice, some of which is documented in this book. These characteristics are scattered throughout the book, and the contributing authors often refer to them explicitly or implicitly.

Eco's essay deliberates how to spot a fascist, a skill, he claims, gained from his personal experience as a boy in the 1940s. He lists 14 criteria, none of which relate to fancy dress or raised-arm salutes. Some are quite familiar: the "cult of tradition" and the belief that the world was better in an unspecified past, the fear of difference – be it related to opinion or ethnicity, anti-feminism and resistance to universal human rights, the obsession with conspiracy theories, heroism and war, or the scorn for the vulnerable. Eco reminds us that often just one or two of these characteristics are enough for the "fascist nebula" to coagulate. Therefore, we need to be able to identify them.

# What would you like to know about resistance and fascism?

[I want a] crash course – how to resist – what are the warning signs?

Why is fascism becoming more and more popular in Europe?

How to identify common “fascist strategy” in institutions, countries, social spaces?

What happens after you realise that something is becoming fascist?

What's their mechanics of operation?

How do systems like fascism come to power?

How and why has fascism survived, and how has it manifested and changed after WWII?

How do they gather masses of people to believe in and support the fascist system?

The Arts of Resistance

We need art that is accessible to everyone.

We need to take a firm stand against fascism and to reflect on our actions from all perspectives.

Social activities such as protests.

A lot of people do it together.

We need open communication and education (media, literature).

I would like to take a closer look at my daily life to see what forms of resistance are possible.

Joy and eagerness to participate in shaping our lives. Involving lightness and creativity.

Many acts of resistance have been moved to the internet and social media.

Comments of Participants

What

modes of resistance are

needed

today

Stopping the spread of fake news and hateful speech.

# Where and how does resistance begin?

It starts with a very small group of people and an idea.

I think resistance begins when you're tired of how things are going.

Stopping the spread of fake news and hateful speech.

It has always been a part of every nation's history, dating back to ancient times.

May it be through support, speaking up, protecting others or larger activism or art.

In your heart.

The moment you feel injustice, your body knows something is wrong.

A deep respect for humanity, a protection of everyone's dignity.

In the community, in a small group of people who fight against hate.

To gain hope, that resistance and the fight against fascism are still possible and manageable.

Spreading awareness and educating people, making them believe change is possible only when people aren't passive about the world's issues.

I would like to fill my mind with new knowledge about history and art.

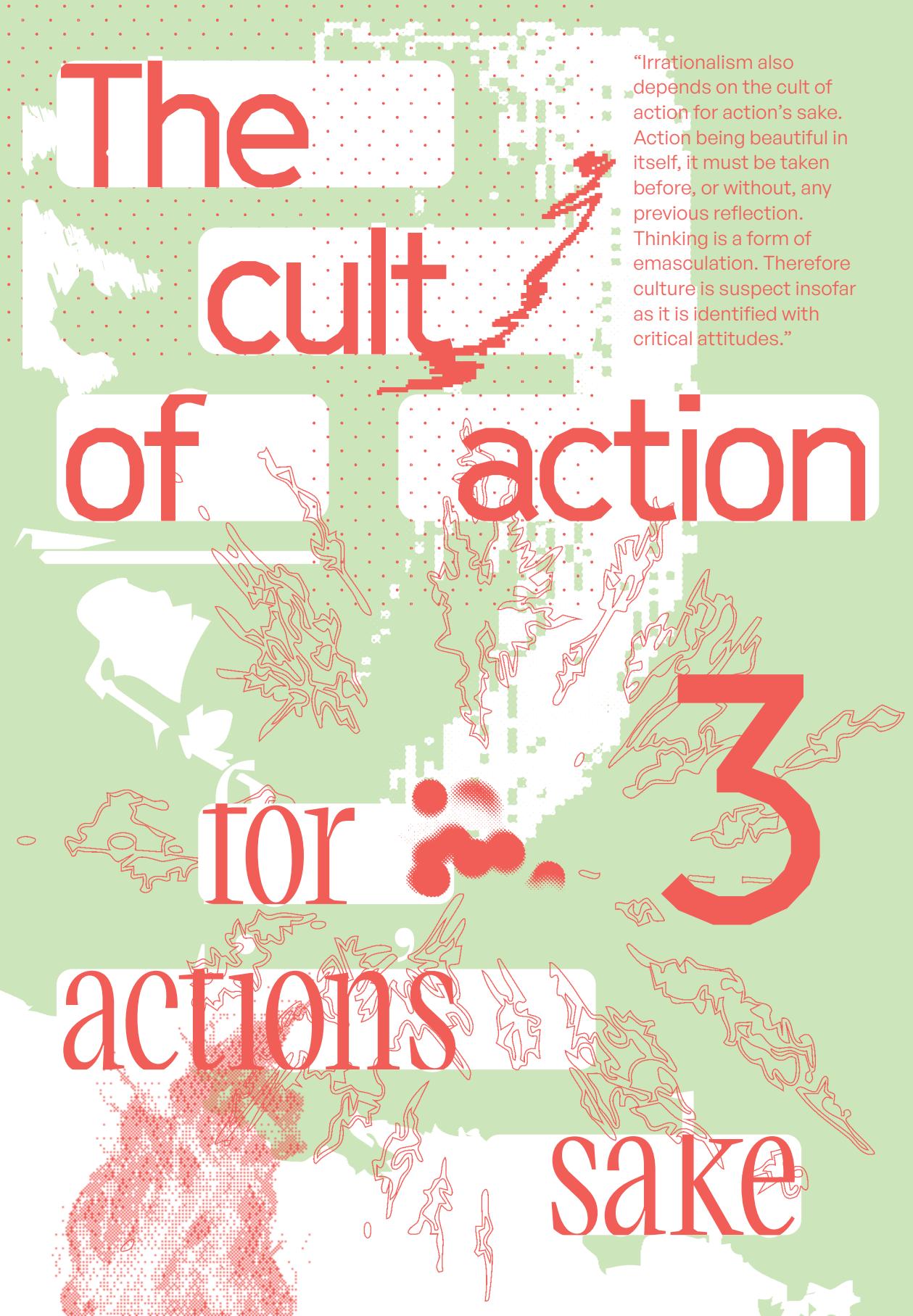
# Traditionelles

Coming together with solidarity, empathy and revolutionary love.

To learn about creative methods to inspire people to get engaged in the fight against fascism.

# What do you expect from this project?

As a child of a migrant, I ask myself: How can one tell if a political system has reached a tipping point? At what point is it better to leave a country that wants to harm you?



"Irrationalism also depends on the cult of action for action's sake. Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation. Therefore culture is suspect insofar as it is identified with critical attitudes."

24/8/2024 –

2/9/2024

As an interdisciplinary project, *The Arts of Resistance* combines artistic research, political and cultural youth education, and remembrance work to foster a vibrant, collaborative environment dedicated to exploring and promoting resistance through art. The International Exchange Week established a sustainable and dynamic international network, inviting experts, artists and scholars into the process, thereby promoting interdisciplinary development across trans-national platforms.

During the 10-day International Exchange Week in Vienna, young people from participating institutions gathered, visited the Austrian Centre for Resistance (DÖW), the exhibitions *PROTEST/ARCHITECTURE: Barricades, Camps, Superglue* at the Museum of Applied Arts Vienna and *The Last Days of Democracy* at the Jewish Museum Vienna, for tours and discussions, presented and exchanged ideas, attempted to define both resistance and fascism, and explored how resistance against fascism could be expressed artistically. This community of learning included young people (Youth Club, MSU Zagreb; students of HKB Braunschweig; students from the Center for Didactics of Art and Interdisciplinary Education, University of Applied Arts; artists from the Office Ukraine-Support for Ukrainian Artists Network), artist-researchers, activists, scholars, curators and other members of art institutions, all sharing a common concern and interest in the cultural expressions of resistance against fascism. Engaging in collective critical inquiry and creative reflection, the International

Exchange Week examined resistance against fascism as a performative, artistic, transcultural, historical, activist, and educational instrument for realising a more desirable and just community in our societies today. Renowned artists, curators, education experts, and scholars from Europe, the US, India, Iran, and Israel openly discussed their approaches to and practices of artistic, activist, and communal ways of confronting fascist tendencies. As an undercurrent of this exchange emerged discussions about the values we would wish to be dominant in politics – whether in analysing past resistance fighters against the Nazis and their stories, or in exchanging hopes, fears, and dreams for a political system that understands differences and pluralism as its strength. As a result, during the 10-day event in the sweltering Vienna weather, friendships were formed, knowledge gained, and discoveries made through the contributions of exceptional artistic, curatorial, historical, and educational practitioners and scholars with diverse perspectives and rich experience on the topic – from remembrance cultures to art and activism – in order to foster a new vision of cooperation and coexistence beyond friction, polarisation, and conflict.

On a personal level, curating and preparing this Exchange Week for the groups and partners was a great joy. The meeting serves as a platform and foundation for our ongoing cooperation across cultural, historical, geographical, social, and educational differences, addressing the challenges of the present, specifically how to develop a new culture of socio-political and artistic resistance against fascism on a European level.

International  
Exchange Week  
August 2024

Ruth Anderwald +  
Leonhard Grond

# International Exchange Week

at the University  
of Applied Arts Vienna

24/08/2024–02/09/2024

hosted by HASENHERZ



The Arts of Resistance





Jo O'Brien  
**Sustainable  
Resistance**

Slow Beginnings  
for Durational  
Action





# Excursion to the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW)



# Presentation

of the artistic-research work by students from HBK Braunschweig



followed by a screening of

Martin Krenn's

“Notes on

Resistance”



# Practice- Sharing

by the MSU Youth Club, Zagreb



# Performative Walk

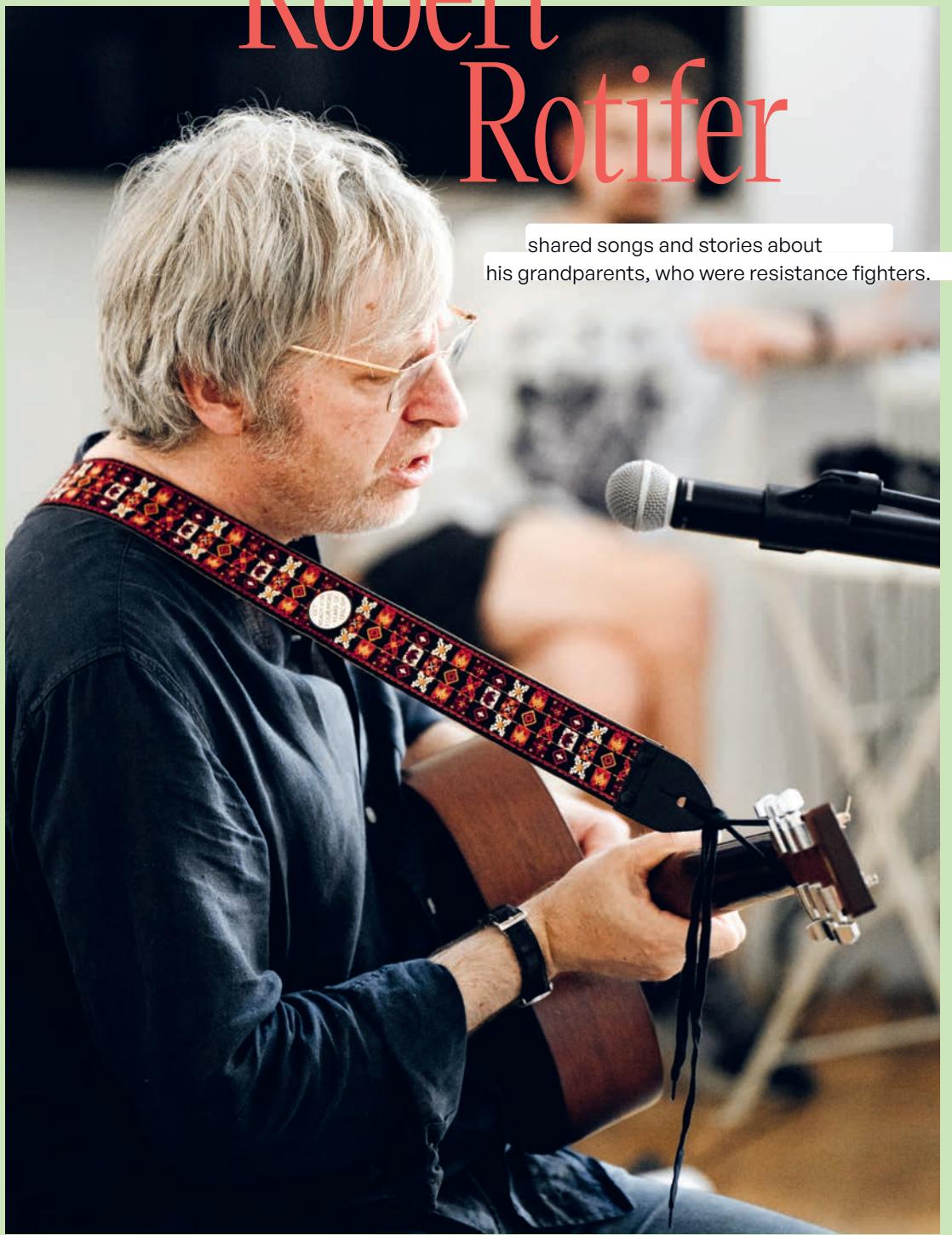






# Singer-songwriter Robert Rotifer

shared songs and stories about  
his grandparents, who were resistance fighters.

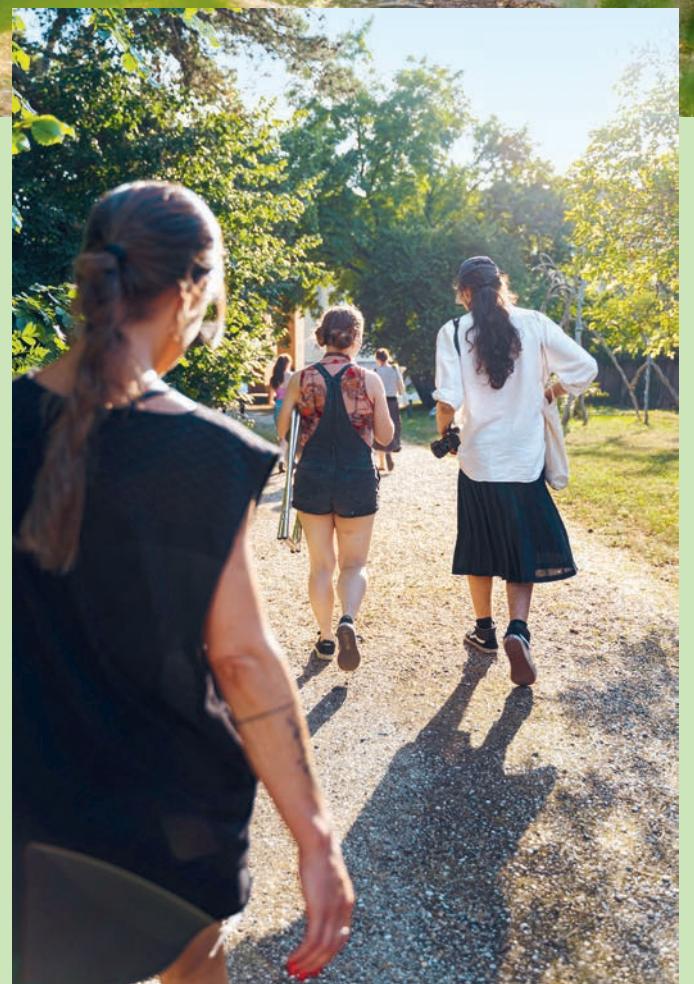




The Arts of Resistance



International Exchange Week



# The Last Days of Democracy



artist Deborah Sengl  
with director Barbara Staudinger

at the Jewish Museum Vienna

## Politics and Art. An Iranian Perspective



# Preeti Kathuria

Activism and New Perspectives

in Indian Contemporary Art:

Response to the Agrarian Crisis.



The Arts of Resistance

# Gelavizh Abolhassani





# Art Education in Times of War

moderated by

Ruth Mateus-Berr,

Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond

Liat Brix Etgar,  
Barak Pelman, Adi Stern

Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem

Vice-dean,

Academic Director of Research Development and Dean,  
co-developers of the participatory

“Guidelines for Free Speech and Creative Freedom in Wartime”

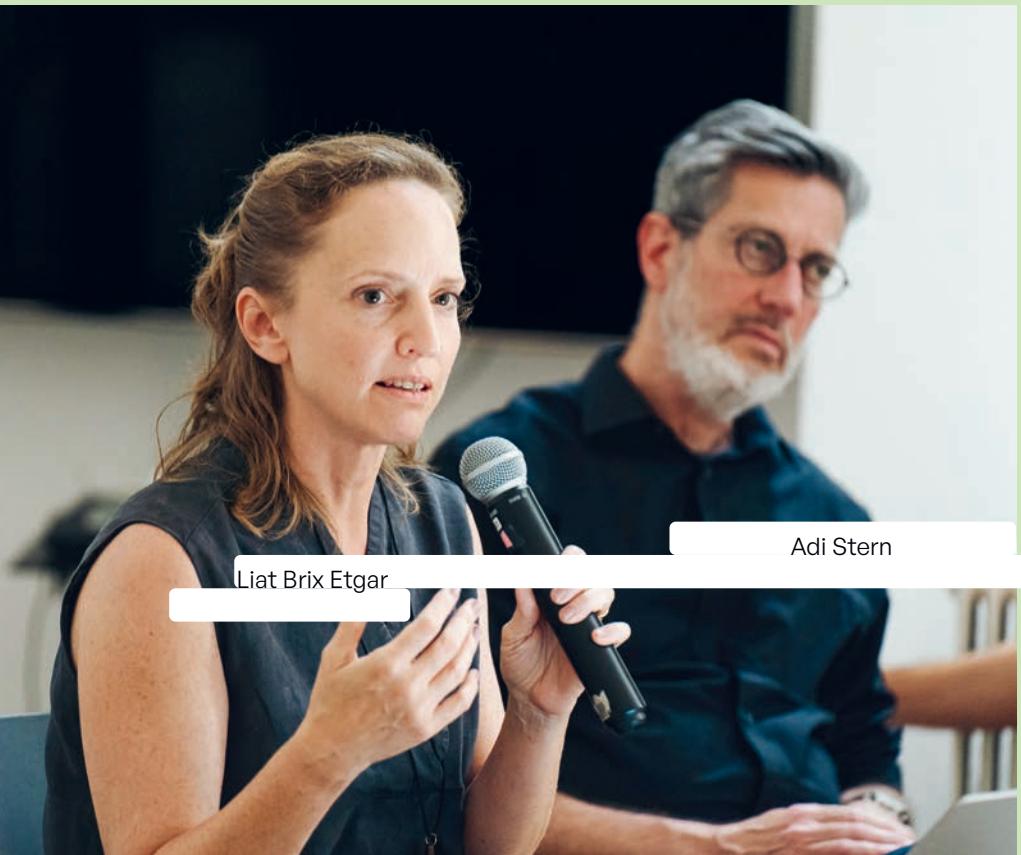




Moritz Wein, Anti-Semitism  
Counsel of the Austrian Ministry



Barak Pelman



Liat Brix Etgar

Adi Stern





# Widerstandsmomente

Filmscreening and discussion with Jo Schmeiser

(Moments of Resistance)



Final discussion and  
farewell party





The guests this week were  
so remarkable  
in their qualities –

all of them uplifting and inspiring,  
evoking a sense of awe.  
What a rare opportunity  
to meet them.



It was overwhelming,  
it was intense,  
it was a lot.



We are all full of stories.



After a challenging period,  
this week allowed me to  
reconnect with others.

Discover a sense of  
purpose, and find the

energy to stay engaged  
and resist. I now possess a

deeper understanding  
of history and a greater sense  
of urgency to take action.

# Qualities of Understanding for a Resistance Against Fascism

by Alexander Damianisch  
Support Art and Research, University of Applied Arts Vienna

I have learned that if one does not insist on posting the essential in absolute terms early, later resistance will not be required in the flux of things. Therefore, when the shaping of conditions occurs without those concerned acting clearly, responsibly, and empathetically, one should not expect wonders. It is essential to explore and understand the needs of those concerned to have an idea of what is required. And it is a required quality of integrity in good practice to claim the mandate of resistance in due course, a constant movement that provides critique towards what thrives under hegemonic dominance. I believe that the art of resistance can only be adequately understood if it is caught by not getting caught. In fact, the art of resistance is also about keeping circles open to allow for sustained and open dialogue.

Enduring,

Not in Absolute Terms

but with Nuance

Proposing,

A Prudent Approach

Precisely in the context of art, research, and education, projects are not established in absolute terms but with nuance. In the ongoing uncertain flow of developments, one must be able to incorporate a benevolent engagement of change. This calls for a dynamic approach to addressing the challenges that will inevitably arise. It is not a matter of doing one thing or the other correctly, but of adaptively orienting the practice toward what can be accomplished in resisting the simplistic solutions offered to the many.

This includes the capacity to endure experiences and to meet one another in compromise, ever embarking on new beginnings. Such an approach would succeed not in spite of, but precisely because of, all the open confrontations. Here, endurance is indispensable, its foundation consisting of shared interest and goodwill.

By transferring the “poetics of understanding”—rooted in interest and curiosity toward the Other—to a politics of understanding, I seek to establish a model that offers the possibility not of remaining in resistance, but rather of becoming involved in the shaping of conditions, particularly in terms of perception and transformation. This very indirectness, as an explicit expression, is of paramount significance.

By allowing collective work and this reflective documentation to render indirectly what has been experienced in encounters with diverse groups, we communicate that a prudent approach—even in a highly tense, poly-critical phase of global mobilisation—makes it possible to assert ourselves intergenerationally, internationally, and from a broad perspective against potential challenges. As I mentioned above, this prudent approach proves more effective than succumbing to toxic propositions—a toxic mix opposed to the values of a benevolent, transgressive politics of understanding.

Blindfolded in Front

of Reflective Mirrors

In standing firm against blindfolding and the reflective mirrors of neofascist strategies, also within the European Project, we propose to remain alert to fracturing reflections that operate through a reductive cult of manipulation. Following Eco’s list of fourteen qualities these reflections manifest in the cult of tradition, rejection of modernity, exaltation of action, devaluation of disagreement, fear for diversity, charging the resentments of the middle-class, propagation of conspiracy theories, idealisation of the so-called enemy, propagation of life as permanent warfare, a cult of a leader, a cult for heroism, the cult of machismo, selective populism, and an impoverished vocabulary—which exert their influence upon us.

## Understanding and Benevolent Transformation

Now, however, I propose to venture the idea that these qualities can be conceived in the opposite direction, so that the Antifascist European Project may be successfully reoriented through the lens of empathetic understanding and benevolent transformation toward new openings.

In this context, I do not regard prudence and the critical radicality of artistic practice as propagandistic instruments—an approach that has been rightfully discredited, on several historical occasions. Instead, I view it as an investigative-reflexive element that neither trusts itself nor others uncritically, unfolding its transparent quality through comprehensibility and communicability, adding qualities of research and ongoing self-evaluation. This self-evaluation is a process embedded in a collegial peer environment, and this again needs to be secured through the resilient strength of co-agential quality. Ideas need to be shared, proposals need to be brought to critique, and projects need to prosper by embracing change, making a difference, and learning from one another.<sup>1</sup>

## Counterplaying Through Art and Research

What would such a counterplay yield in the art of resistance—that is, through artistic research?

As counterplay to Eco's list of fourteen qualities, these reflections instead manifest in a

critical dialogue with tradition, in the embrace of modernity with its science, critical thinking and individual freedom, in the valuation of reflection before action, in the recognition of strength in disagreement, in the cultivation of diversity and plural voices, in care for all classes and social balance, in a commitment to transparency rather than conspiracy, in the refusal to construct an enemy as identity anchor, in the promotion of life as shared coexistence rather than permanent warfare, in the distribution of responsibility instead of the cult of a leader, in an everyday agency of care and solidarity, in the dismantling of machismo in favour of relational equality, in the practice of inclusion and dialogue, and in a nourished vocabulary that opens worlds rather than closing them.

In formulaic terms, the reflexive demonstration—and ultimately the conclusion, once reality is introduced as both material and measure—should leave no room for doubting critique and resistance as a source, as our experience in the project has shown us. The fascist measure of things stakes the future; within the realm of the arts and research, opportunities arising from the political milieu in political encounters, across boundaries, become manifest.

## You are our Open Circles and Spaces in Return

At an art university, I understand that reflexive demonstration and the deliberate introduction of reality, as both material and measure, can only unfold effectively if the institution itself creates open circles and spaces in which critique and resistance are

not treated as disruptions, but recognised as sources of understanding and transformation. This requires structures that are not solely driven by efficiency and control, but instead enable difference, conflict, and ambiguity to become forces of evidence and care.

This means: forms of collective perspective-making that take situated knowledge seriously. It also means a mode of management that does not act over and above but rather with its actors—reflexively, relationally, and with awareness of the respective context. In organisational terms: flat hierarchies that enable shared responsibility; transparently shaped responsibilities that protect and ensure safe and brave spaces.

Especially in a politically intensified present, where the authoritarian imposition of norms is gaining momentum, art and research bear a responsibility to resist. In this sense, organisation becomes both a condition and an expression of such action: not neutral, but consciously positioned, transgressive, resistant—and precisely through this, open to the future.

It is no vain exercise to bring art and politics closer together, especially via the direct route of research, as demonstrated in this project. The University of Applied Arts Vienna is a locus of this engagement; its central position in Europe marks an invitation to this new form of agency and confrontation. It is no longer about a hegemonic prescription of reason, but about a critically informed discursive inquiry that is always open to new perspectives—thus remaining timely, thanks to its partners, the students, educators, researchers, and the contextual framework that makes this interplay what it is meant to be: an interaction, and thereby also an art of resistance against radicalism.

I thank everyone on the team for allowing me to learn alongside them, and especially Ruth Anderwald and Leonhard Grond for inviting me on this journey.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the project was also presented at the Society for Artistic Research Conference 2025. In particular, during the Co-Agency Special Interest Group workshop, the poster featuring Eco's list highlighted the political dimension as a key aspect embedded in fields such as artistic research—especially regarding the development of a resilient research culture. I believe this addresses issues of integrity within and for artistic research.



# Resistance Without Protest

Jo O'Brien

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*“Do you want to go to the protest?” It’s a question that I never know how to answer. The answer isn’t as easy as yes or no, and the answering is made harder still by the upswell of emotions—sadness, frustration, and shame—that the question itself raises. How do I convey that right now, in this moment, there is nothing I want more and nothing I am less capable of? How do I explain that I am unwell when my immigration status compels me to hide that fact? How do I explain that I cannot go because I know that between the support I would need and the fallout should things go wrong, the risks far outweigh the benefits of me being there? How can my “No, I can’t” really be understood as an inability and not a lack of desire or willingness? How is my nonattendance not a moral failing, a lack of commitment, or proof that I do no more than pay lip service to pressing issues of life, death, and basic human rights? How do I encapsulate any of this in a simple answer to a not-so-simple question? How do I resist without protest?*

The United States' 2016 presidential election is often spoken of as an upset; none of the models or pundits considered Trump's victory a serious prospect until it had almost already happened. His politics were always shifting, bending to the will of supporters, and in turn, bending their will to him. In many ways, right-wing populism and chaos defined his first presidency. But as I write this now, just over eight years later, on the day of Trump's second inauguration, the world faces four years of a more organised, and likely more effective, Trump presidency.<sup>1</sup> At this moment, I am drawn back—not to his first election or inauguration but to the attempted coup that punctuated the end of his last presidency.

On January 6, 2021, Americans around the world watched in shock and horror as thousands of our fellow citizens stormed the Capitol Building in an attempt to prevent the election of Joe Biden. While armed paramilitaries chanted death threats and white supremacists built gallows on the Capitol grounds, our country teetered for a moment on the brink of an overt, fascist regime change. In that moment, we had the smallest taste of the sort of treatment that our country has been dealing out around the world for decades.

Four years after I became unwell, I first tried going to a protest again. The week prior, I'd already told a few different people that I couldn't go. It had come with that same—now familiar—set of conflicted feelings, tempered somewhat through time and repetition, but present nonetheless.

*L*, the friend with whom I made the somewhat last-minute decision to go, was close enough to know the challenges that gatherings like this presented for me. We went together with a plan in place, one that both *L* and I knew was

*provisional and incomplete. The plan was less a plan and more a list of what we could not plan for. I relied on *L* and the trust we'd built through years of friendship. We went to the protest, *L*'s hand there to steady me, and both of us ready to depart at a moment's notice. In the end I lasted 40 minutes there, a fraction of the day-long event.*

*Afterwards, we left and went back to our respective workplaces. I lay utterly drained on the couch in the office I shared with the other non-regular faculty. I contemplated cancelling*

*class—I could barely sit, let alone stand, and it was less than an hour before class.*

*But how could I explain what it meant for me to*

*be unwell? How could I justify my absence without an accommodation?<sup>2</sup> And how could I get any accommodation when that process could jeopardise my immigration application?*

*So, I went and taught class. I no longer remember it, but I know it was not my best. I must have been drifting, losing words, and fighting to remain present. The cost of that protest was more than I could afford. At home after class, overextended by half and again, I fell into bed and barely left it the following day.*

The United States has a pernicious relationship with fascism and its ideological kissing cousins. On the one hand, it understands itself as central to the defeat of fascism—which it insists happened (lastingly) with Hitler's downfall. On the other hand, it has a long history of protecting and supporting governments and political parties around the world that bear some serious similarity to fascism.<sup>3</sup> In America, fascism is mythologised strictly as a Nazi ideology that was eradicated in 1945. The imagery of fascism is the imagery of Nazism, and the figures of fascism are Hitler and Mussolini alone. This mythology establishes

a false equivalency such that any accusation of fascism is essentially an accusation of Nazism.<sup>4</sup> Obfuscating genuine fascist action with dated fascist imagery produces a tautology that protects contemporary fascist actors and actions while also diluting the meaning of "fascism" to such an extent that it becomes hyperbolic.

Since the 2016 election of Donald Trump, however, questions of fascism have returned to the fore. During Trump's first presidency, accusations of fascism were largely dismissed in mainstream discourse. However, many of these refutations hinged on the fact that he had not used or advocated overt violence to gain or retain power—a caveat rendered moot on January 6. Accusations of fascism, whether directed towards individuals, actions, institutions, or policies, may still not be taken too seriously, but the ease with which they could once be dismissed has faded. Over the last four years, people have thought more seriously about whether Trump—or his policies—are fascist. But when fascism is invoked, it tends to provoke a debate about the term rather than the situation. Too often, the debate turns on the caricatured fascisms of Hitler or Mussolini, and the same tautological refrain described above is invoked

as a defence. But the outcome of this debate does not really matter. If this conversation can occupy so much space and can draw in commentary from so many people, then the important bit is already established—a lot of people are not sure if the president is a fascist—and that is a scary place to be.

Many years after that first protest with *L*, I made plans to go to another protest with another friend, *J*. Drawing on lessons I'd learned through trial and error in the intervening years, we established upfront that we wouldn't stay more than half an hour. Even then, I knew that this fraction of time would consume hours of my energy.

We went together, running through the cold October rain to avoid the crowds and cops on public transit. We were shivering in our jackets, trying to figure out how to be there only for a short time. We were unsure of how close or far from the speaker to be, and unsure of how to depart respectfully.

Heading home, we shared the complicated feelings that rose from the resonance between this protest and others occurring in our respective home countries. We traced the tangled webs of life, death, and state-enabled violence that bound our home countries to the one we lived in now. We talked about which protests were tacitly allowed, which bodies could protest in what ways, the safety whiteness offered, and the precarity of protesting while on visas. We felt the guilt and discomfort of even naming the minor dangers that our protesting posed in the face of the violence we had come to speak against. Even so, we felt that sense of risk and the fatigue it caused regardless.

Later that night, my partner and I talked for hours about the precarity of protesting under shaky immigration statuses.

We talked about which protests were termed "marches" and which ones "riots", which protests schools supported

their students to attend, and which ones they stayed silent about. We talked about the ways in which

pillows were considered "passive weapons" in my partner's home country,<sup>5</sup> and how infrastructure was used to create reasons for arrest in mine.<sup>6</sup>

In hindsight, I wonder where resistance was that night. It was in the protest, to be sure, but beyond the protest, I think it was also in the mutual support that *J* and I shared, and in all the conversations about the different practices and precarities of protest across cultures.

We talked about which protests were termed "marches" and which ones "riots".

Thirty years ago, Umberto Eco proposed a list of 14 features of enduring fascist ideology and practice, what he calls Ur-fascism. Eco's text explores fascism not just through his own memories of fascist Italy but also across the intervening 50 years. He implores us to expand our understanding of fascism beyond the dated imagery of Hitler, Mussolini, and Nazism. Instead, he insists, we must look at the structuring forces of fascism so that we can spot it even when it does not wear an armband.

## We need to recognise forms of resistance that may be new to us.

Taking up Eco's call, it seems that about half the features he describes could reasonably be identified in Trump, his professed ideologies, and his actions. Does this mean Trump is a fascist per Eco's definition? I do not know, but whether he is or not may not be important. He is dabbling. He is giving fascist ideas credibility and room to breathe. He is normalising discrimination, encouraging violence, and endorsing ethnic cleansing. Whether these are manoeuvres of fascism, imperialism, colonialism, or totalitarianism is—to a certain degree—irrelevant. Eco offered these tools to help us recognise fascism, but it is important not to get too caught up in identification because an over-emphasis on identification is just another form of distraction. It is important to recognise fascism and the actualisation of other forms of dispossession, domination, accrual, and exploitation. However, it is also essential to recognise what we must prepare in response to all of this—resistance.

In some ways, resistance shares a similar difficulty to fascism—namely that an overly narrow definition elides some of its true potential. Commonplace imaginings of fascism are often limited to tropes eighty years out of date or to overt neo-Nazi salutes and slogans.<sup>7</sup> When Eco describes the enduring qualities of Ur-fascism, though, these images are not among them. Rather, he encourages us to look

more closely, more carefully, to see fascism before it becomes a slogan or symbol. This same attention to detail, to the subtle and structural, is something we must bring to our understanding of resistance. Too often, the idea of resistance is constrained to protest marches or direct actions. These types of mobilisations have been vital to the success of many movements, but they

cannot be our only imaginings of resistance.

Resistance is, has been, and must continue to be so much

more. There will always be those who cannot—for one reason or another—join a march or put their bodies on the line. Additionally, as nation-states pour billions of dollars into policing their own populace more effectively through increasingly militarised and technocratic law enforcement, we must develop the skills to see, imagine, and practice resistance beyond protest alone. Broadening our understanding of resistance is not just about expanding our idea of who can participate (though it is about that, too), but also about understanding that the strategies and frameworks for resistance that got us here will not be the ones that get us out. We need to recognise forms of resistance that may be new to us—forms that may be completely at odds with what we expect resistance to be.

*One afternoon, a few years before that evening with J, I was working at home when an email from a collaborator, T, popped up in my inbox:*

*Hey Folks!*

*[...]*

*Using funds from [grant], I would love to pay each of you [...] for the value you bring, for all your contributions to the [collective].*

*This doesn't mean you have to continue or engage anymore with the collective,*

*that what you already have given to this [community] is enough—it recognizes that every conversation, every word, side-chat, personal reflection, emoji sequence, audio-message, spoon recharging silence, not replying, taking extended breaks and time away for your well-being—is of value and is enough.*

*We don't have to do anymore. To crippling the systems, together.*

*[...] in gratitude for all you folks have helped build, sustain and hold as a collective.*

*It shook me to be seen this way and to be told so plainly. I felt the precious time and energy we had put into learning new ways to gather reflected back to me. In the days and weeks that followed, I began to realise the forms of resistance that these ways of gathering offered. We'd made ways to be present with each other unbound from time. We'd countered internalised pressures for efficiency and practised working from needs and capacity. We'd given up projects, cancelled meetings, and welcomed diminished capacity. We'd expected nothing from each other. We ourselves—our bodies, our needs, and our knowledges—were not assessed against a calculation of how much or how little but were welcomed with gratitude.*

*We were necessary and known in our own way. We were called into community with others who understood that new ways of being and doing will not be born of scarcity.*

In its best form, resistance strives for another world. It insists that things can be otherwise—even if that otherwise is unimaginable from the here and now. Resistance to the rising tides of fascism and other forms of domination

cannot succeed by appealing to a nostalgic past. Resistance must work to figure another future, because the past is what got us here. In the same way that resistance insists that things can be otherwise, it also requires us to recognise and imagine it across expansive and proliferating forms. The possibilities resistance might offer are bound by the limits of how we understand resistance.

Without eschewing the importance of protest and direct action, we also need to recognise the permutations of resistance that exist outside that archetype. At its most basic level, this means identifying the reproductive labour of protest and understanding it as resistance. It means understanding that the organising, communicating, and coordinating that happens before a protest is resistance; that the friend who is a safety contact for others is resisting; that the person who cannot attend but offers a meal afterwards is resisting; that the people who make sure that the protest continues to be talked about are resisting; and that all of these forms of resistance are also vital.

While many of these forms of resistance are invisibilised, there are also those forms of resistance which work best when they evade notice. In one recent instance, workers at pass-

port processing centres put in overtime to informally fast-track documents for trans, intersex, and non-binary applicants.<sup>8</sup>

Conversely, rather than working overtime, sticking closely to contracts and

collective agreements or “working to rule” can also be an effective strategy. For years now, bus drivers in major U.S. cities have used union protections allowing the refusal of “unsafe labour” to deny requests to transport police or arrested protestors. Additionally, policies and instructions can be wilfully misunderstood,

## Resistance must work to figure another future, because the past is what got us here.

stretched nearly to the point of breaking. This option is often hard to spot as it requires a degree of plausible deniability to be effective—as was likely the case with how T decided to distribute grant money. While all these forms of resistance are often less seen or heard than the resistance of protest, they are no less important. They are moments of stretching rules, following them too well, or intentionally misunderstanding them. They are moments where our action, inaction, or improper action can become a site of resistance. However, even these moments are just that—moments.

Fascism is not a series of moments; it is an ideology unfolding over time. Therefore, opposition to it and other ideologies of domination requires temporal forms of resistance. Opposition to fascism, to Ur-fascism, requires forms of resistance that are not just actions in the moment, but durational and communal practices sustained through connection. This is the resistance of coalition spaces, communities, friends, and found families; it is the resistance of small mutual aid initiatives that reject frameworks of charity; it is the resistance of support groups that are organised by and for the people they serve; it is the resistance of community initiatives that provide alternatives to—and safety from—the police. It is the resistance of practising different ways of gathering, making decisions, and caring for each other. These resistances are slow, durational, and often messy. They demand a labour that attends to our very understanding of what constitutes resistance itself. They demand time, vulnerability, connection, and much more. Durational resistance demands all of this, but it offers the chance to bring about unimaginable worlds.

*In a different, now-defunct group, back before T's email, I learned things I had no words for at the time.*

*I didn't know that we were falling apart, at least not while it happened, but I think I knew we were failing. Our group originally came together in protest of our institution's practice of treating racialised and gendered violence as isolated incidents rather than structural problems.*

*But as soon as we pulled at that thread, others came loose too. Soon enough, though—somewhere between the stress leaves, resignations, graduations, "contract non-renewals" (firings), task forces, presidential working groups, listening sessions, external consultants, and institutional EDI action plan—it became clear that what we had set out to prevent, what we were working to avoid, was going to come to pass anyway. I don't remember the moment that we failed—maybe there wasn't one—but at some point in the following years, I caught myself starting to speak of us and that time in the past tense. I began teaching our resistance as history, trying to make sure the work was not forgotten.*

*Throughout our time together, we talked a lot about sticking to the ways of making decisions, gathering, and communicating that let us do the work in a good way. But it's still taken most of the time between then and now for me to recognise that our falling apart was the only alternative to being subsumed into the structures we were resisting. Even more so, though, it's taken that time for me to realise that the most lasting impacts of our work together—those which endure in me, in how I am or try to be in the world—were shaped more by the ways we gathered, communicated, and made decisions than by what we did.*

*After hours and between classes, in small dark offices and late-night chats, we built unrecognisable worlds with each other. Worlds that sustained us, if only for a time. Those ways of being together that we shared live in me, in a place beyond language. I cannot name our practices, but I can name those with whom I learned them. As we fell apart, we mourned in twos and threes what could have been and what did become. It didn't get better or worse. There was no victory or defeat, just attrition. And that was its own lesson, crystallised through other losses over time—resistance might not just be for worlds we cannot imagine, but for ones we will never get to know. That group we formed is now long gone, but the practices of resistance that we learned together live on in each of us.*

Towards the end of his essay, Eco tasks his reader with the duty to "uncover [fascism]

and to point [their] finger at any of its new instances".<sup>9</sup> It is his final call to action, to identify and mark the new occurrences of Ur-fascism before they have a chance to take hold. But what Eco would have us do next is unclear. Identifying fascism is not cut and dry, and the very act of identification can become a debate which overshadows the threat it poses—as continues to happen in the United States right now. This is not to downplay the importance of identifying fascism or any other ideology of domination, but to note that identification cannot be the end goal. The same, however, is also true of resistance. Identifying the expansiveness of what can constitute resistance is a crucial step in forming a culture of resistance, but that knowledge must be acted upon and embodied for it to persist and grow. Practicing resistance means identifying our own capacities for it and working within those means to sustain it across months, years, and decades.

But resistance is not a solipsistic practice. For resistance to endure, it must be practised with others in community and across tenuous coalitions, through deep friendships and new connections.

Identifying and practising resistance in such a durational way may feel overwhelming, but it is not a new approach. For some of us, it is how we have always practised resistance—out of necessity, capacity, or circumstance. Resistance must be an ongoing practice because we cannot wait for fascism to appear before pushing back against it. We need to build the relationships and structures that will sustain us now so that we can act when the time arrives. We need

durational practices of resistance because we will fail, we will lose. We need resistance sustained by community and relationships because things do not always get better. We need durational resistance because coalitions will shatter, solidarity will have its limits, and some will only resist so long as it affects them directly. We need resistance built from support because the day will come when you are the one who cannot attend a protest, leave the bed, or lift a hand to help, and that is the day when resistance will matter the most.

Resistance cannot just be against fascism. Resistance must also be towards another world, even if that world is unimaginable and even if we may never know it ourselves.

**For resistance to endure,  
it must be practised  
with others  
in community  
and across  
tenuous coalitions,  
through deep friendships  
and new connections.**

*In another time and half a world away, L and I sit in the shade, avoiding the summer heat. I am telling L about a workshop I gave earlier that week on sustainable resistance. It was about slowness, capacitation, and the durational labour of resistance. I tell her that if we'd had the words and time for it, or if the workshop could have lasted all week, or if we could have come together sporadically over months, then the workshop would have been about resistance with-*

*out protest. It would have been about the ways in which resistance can or must happen in the shadows. It would have been about how, as much as resistance must be done in the streets, it also must be able to be done elsewhere and in other ways. It would have been a workshop about all the ways I haven't been able to resist, and the ways in which I, and friends, and friends of friends have*

felt like we've abandoned resistance because of how narrowly we conceive of it. It would have been a workshop where we talked about the ways in which valid critiques of comfort-dependent activism have also had regressive impacts on what we think of as resistance. But the workshop could not be about all those things, so instead it was only about some of them.

But now this essay is about more of those things. It's about the need to identify, imagine, and practise resistance without protest. Not because protest isn't valuable, but because other things are too. Because sometimes, the work of resistance is doing a job too well or following instructions too closely. Because sometimes, it is a wilful misinterpretation or a performed confusion. Because sometimes, the work of resistance lies in coming to terms with our own limitations. And because sometimes it is what happens when we gather out of need to find new ways of being together.

# We need resistance sustained by community and relationships

With deepest gratitude to A.C., B.B., C.F., D.D.E.A., G.R., J.R., J.W., L.B.P., LC., N.A., R.W., R.Y., S.M., S.N., S.S., T.G., and the many others who taught me to see and practise resistance without protest.

Because sometimes, the work of resistance is the trust built over years, or the softness of steady hands, or the quiet moments of words unsaid, or the shared tears for all that was lost and missed along the way.

<sup>1</sup> I wrote this essay in the month following Trump's second inauguration. Over the following months, as the text underwent internal review and editing, I watched as some of the spectres of fascism that had haunted the edges of this essay crept into being. I built a list of revisions that would be needed to address the new uses of juridical force, executive orders, and federal funding to suppress protests against the ongoing genocide in Palestine. I added litanies of anti-trans legislation and high-profile Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations meant to push queer/trans and undocumented people into hiding. I watched as calls for extra-judicial deportations and the suspension of due process took centre stage. But now as I am reviewing edits at the beginning of June, I am sitting with this list in hand and choosing not to make those changes I noted down. Not because they are not important, but because it is more important that these missing pieces stand as a reminder of how quickly things can change. As the right and ability to protest in the U.S. is further imperilled, the need to see, imagine, practise, and sustain resistance without protest becomes ever more vital.

<sup>2</sup> Accommodation here refers to accommodations-based processes for addressing accessibility. This process seeks to create accessibility for disabled, chronically ill, mad, crip, neurodiverse, and neurodivergent people by making exceptions to expectations and/or alterations to procedures. Most often these

accommodation processes rely on the medical model of disability and can only be obtained after receiving a medical diagnosis, and on the recommendation of certain medical professionals.

<sup>3</sup> The history, and present, of the United States as an imperialist nation is littered with examples of both covert and overt creation of/support of regimes and governments around the world that would protect U.S. interests abroad. Not infrequently, the U.S. has been willing to look the other way when these governments turn to fascists strategies to seize or maintain power. Some of the most well-known cases include backing the Husseini government in Iraq, support for Operation Condor in South America, and repeated blocking of attempts to sanction South Africa during apartheid.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion, see Bruce Kuklick's *Fascism Comes to America*. Kuklick traces the historical roots of fascism in America from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, through World War II, to its dilution of meaning in American culture during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and up to relatively recent times.

<sup>5</sup> Under German law, pillows—as well as other objects that can be used to resist police by shielding yourself from baton strikes—are considered “passive weapons” under certain conditions—such as when attending a protest.

<sup>6</sup> During the summer of 2020, protests against police brutality and anti-black racism swept across the U.S. and around the world after former

Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, a Black man. On May 30, during one such protest in Chicago, then mayor Lori Lightfoot made the decision to raise a series of bridges across the Chicago River and suspend local public transit service, trapping protestors downtown with very little time to leave before an emergency curfew came into effect.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that within hours of writing this statement, its point was somewhat undermined when Elon Musk closed his speech celebrating the inauguration of Trump by giving exactly the salute I mention here.

<sup>8</sup> Trump had made it clear during the elections that under his presidency the federal government would only recognise binary sex as assigned at birth. One of the impacts of this policy, which was issued via executive order on his first day in office, is that passport applications where gender marker changes are requested or any passport with an X gender marker are not being processed. According to an American Bar Association report from 2018, identity documents that do not match appearance are a risk factor for harassment (40%) and physical violence (3%) for gender non-conforming individuals. ([https://www.americanbar.org/groups/diversity/sexual\\_orientation/publications/equalizer/2018-winter/document-correction/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/diversity/sexual_orientation/publications/equalizer/2018-winter/document-correction/)).

<sup>9</sup> Umberto Eco, *How to Spot a Fascist*. Translated by Richard Dixon and Alastair McEwen (Harvill Secker, 2020), p. 28.



# Fear of difference.

# 5

“[...] Ur-fascism grows up and seeks for consensus by exploiting and exacerbating the natural fear of difference. [...] Thus Ur-fascism is racist by definition.”

# Semiotic Meltdown on Schüttelstraße

Robert  
Rotifer  
Musician, Music Journalist and  
Radio Presenter

As the drumbeat of the winter rain is hitting the bubble roof window right above my desk in my study in Canterbury in the south-east of England, I'm fighting a strange feeling of dissociation. I am typing away, trying hard to reconnect to a completely different world from an essentially distant past, trying to think myself back to a sticky hot summer day in Vienna, the sort you cannot imagine in other places or at other times of year (What could be wrong with a sunny day? It seems so churlish to complain until you've been there, melting into the tarmac, the collected heat of weeks without rain radiating from the streets and the buildings around you).

The specific day I'm talking about was a Wednesday in August of last year, a time when we were still anticipating, warily negotiating the possibility of a return to fascism, charting our slide towards it, but still in the form of a future warning expressed in stories of an unimaginable past. There used to be an easy heroism to anti-fascism for my generation. Instant distinction in lip service paid.

Any number of lines have since been crossed, taboos broken, outrage after outrage. It's impossible to keep track. So, by the time you read this, you likely won't remember that particular February day in 2025 when we all got

temporarily exercised over some AI-generated video of golden statues of Donald Trump and skyscrapers at a fictional future Trump Gaza beach resort, featuring the President himself and Benjamin Netanyahu sipping cocktails while lying topless in their sun loungers. An apparent satire accidentally (?) manifesting as propaganda since it appeared on the 47<sup>th</sup> US President's Truth Social feed, at the point of writing, this feels like another crucial moment in our collective downfall. For some time, it had become clear that AI aesthetics were associated with new kinds of fascism (for the purpose of this essay, I'm using the word in the definition of Umberto Eco's “Ur-fascism” essay that forms our common reference here). As I am not the first to observe, AI produces backwards-looking aesthetics by sheer virtue of being trained on images from the past. Its tendency towards the greatest statistical likelihood produces a kind of hyperconformity that will almost automatically fit a fascist agenda.

For someone like me, who has spent most of his working and creative life with pop culture, seeing that video with its dreamlike collision of biblical imagery and Trump as Elvis in a gold lamé suit amounted to a semiotic meltdown. Everything about it seemed familiar from the realms of art that makes you think, hence

the prompt appearance of endless social media posts declaring it an accidental masterpiece (it wasn't) while missing the far more immediate and disconcerting point that maybe the problems with AI imagery weren't what we had thought them to be. Never mind deepfakes; how do you read the produce of a technology that will second-guess human intention to the point that no one can tell for sure which, if any, intention there was in the first place?

To see that Trump himself couldn't tell and still chose to disseminate that video provided yet more proof of the farcical nature of this new fascism whose supreme leader displays a level of cognitive dysfunction not seen since the height of inbred aristocracy. This is not what you or I expected fascism to feel like, and yet it is reminiscent of the fascist buffo we know from black-and-white historical footage. A vain Mussolini jutting out his jaw from behind his lectern, or Hitler's own weirdly effeminate salute, flicking his hand in a comical way that would have got anyone else but him in big trouble.

The way somebody like Trump can seem like a real threat and totally ridiculous at the same time would have been familiar to Umberto Eco from his own experience.

"Mussolini had no philosophy, only rhetoric," he writes, citing the Duce's chequered political past, having crossed over from the Left to the Right, just as Trump, once a Democrat, turned Republican. Eco would also have recognised what he calls "political and ideological chaos". Again, this is not what most of us would have associated with fascism, but at the time of writing, it sounds like a prediction of what I'm living through.

AI produces backwards-looking aesthetics by sheer virtue of being trained on images from the past.

All of this was half in the past (the one we had only read and heard about, as well as Trump's already nightmarish first term) and half in the unknowable future when I was in Vienna that August at the invitation of Ruth Anderwald and Leonhard Grond as part of their *The Arts of Resistance* project.

Until then, I had only met them once over Zoom, but I knew on that basis that I could trust them completely. That, however, didn't stop me from being extremely nervous.

When I see Vienna, I see a city superimposed on the outlines of my memories. I was born there in 1969 and grew up there in a period of Social Democracy, which reigned almost unopposed during my childhood and then declined during my teens and twenties. Having moved to London in 1997, I have been living in the UK for 28 years, so every return to Vienna feels like a retracing of steps, literally in this case, as, by sheer coincidence, Ruth and Leo happen to live at the same address where my grandparents lived, and my mother and uncle grew up: an imposing, angular early 20<sup>th</sup>-century apartment block on the Schüttelstrasse in the 2<sup>nd</sup> district, which borders the Danube Canal.

When Irma Schwager, as my grandmother was called, died a decade ago at the age of 95, Ruth and Leo knew her as a neighbour. I remember one time, when Irma was already in her early nineties, a new elevator was installed. For months, she would walk up to her flat on the fourth floor every day without complaining, saying that the exercise was good for her.

I'm not saying this to make her sound heroic but to illustrate her incredible stubbornness, which played a large part in the aspect of her life that Ruth and Leo asked me to talk about.

Irma's stubbornness was both self-destructive and saved her life. The former when, in 1938, at the age of 18, she refused to wash the streets like all the other Jews for the amusement of the Aryan crowd and instead knocked over the bucket and cycled off. And equally when that same year, after her family had decided she was a danger to herself and found her a job as a maid in London, she got off the train in Brussels to join her comrades instead.

But her stubbornness also saved her later when she had to flee to France on foot, making it through the Vichy government camps, and doing her bit as an underground émigrée in the French Résistance.

The work she did in the so-called "Mädelarbeit" as part of the "travail anti-Allemand" within the Communist-led section of exiled Austrians (mostly Jews) within the French Résistance was extremely dangerous. She was chatting up German soldiers to learn about their plans, to instil doubts about the war effort itself, and sometimes even to pass on leaflets for distribution.

Some have expressed doubt whether that risk was worth taking. Many of Irma's comrades were caught, tortured, and killed; she was extremely lucky to survive despite a few close calls, and no one can tell how effective her work really was in bringing down the Nazi occupation of France. But what I learned from her was that the point of resistance is also what it does for one's morale, one's self-respect, one's moral survival, if you like.

After the war, that same stubborn faith in her beliefs, sometimes veering into dogmatism, would keep her going as a political activist, mostly for women's rights and peace. It would

also serve her in tirelessly passing on the lessons she took from, as she saw it, defeating fascism.

These observations, including all their ambiguities, certainly seemed worth passing on to the audience at my talk/concert for *The Arts of Resistance* that day last summer.

And while I'm always afraid it might look as though I'm taking undue credit for Irma's heroics, it's closer to the truth that I am suppressing my impostor syndrome for the more important mission to keep her message alive.

Ruth and Leo knew that I had written songs about her, in which their neighbourhood, the history of which they have done so much amazing research on, plays an essential role, so they

asked me to sing them and say a few words about them too. Lately, I have become a kind of ambassador for my late grandmother, who, for her part, has turned into a symbolic figure as a freedom fighter.

Learned from her that the point of resistance is also what it does for one's moral survival.

As Austria seemed to face up to its Nazi past, at least in a gestural way, over the past few decades, Irma and the likes of her have received more recognition towards the end of her life-time, and definitely since then. A few years ago, a piece of parkland opposite the Augarten was named after her. I will admit that I'm grateful for that, also because it happens to be very close to where Irma grew up between 1920 and 1938, the other publicly visible sign of her family's presence being the four brass plaques in the pavement commemorating her parents Nuchim and Leo and her brothers Arthur and Salo. All were killed in different phases and places of the Holocaust for the crime of being Jewish. Actually, it was different in the case of my great-grandmother, who was killed as part of the Nazis' euthanasia programme T4 in Hartheim for the crime of having lost her mind.

This is noteworthy in two different ways.

Firstly, because it's a reminder that you could be liable to be killed for a variety of different reasons at the same time. Just as my grandmother could have been killed for conspiring against the Nazis as much as she could have been killed for being Jewish. I'm thinking of this murderous randomness whenever people try to establish hierarchies of victimhood. What an awful, pointless exercise.

And secondly, because Lea Wieselberg, my great-grandmother, went mad because she could not bear the misery the Nazis inflicted on her and those around her, the falling apart of her existence, of those everyday aspects of life on which humans depend for their sanity. Obviously, it was the society that accepted such a regime that was gripped by a collective madness of the most dangerous and deluded kind. But just as obviously, society at that time chose instead to certify the person who saw and reacted to this as the one who was mad. This is a lesson I've been frequently reminded of in recent times, as perceived realities have fractured and imploded in the confusion of the so-called culture wars, general political developments and performative poses that people strike on social media to distract from the violence the weaker ones must suffer. Am I being too cryptic?

As I was getting ready for my "performance" in front of all participants in *The Arts of Resistance*, I was acutely aware of how different perceptions of world events between German-speaking countries (where I'm from, and my journalistic work appears) and the English-speaking world (where I live) can escalate all-too quickly at public events, but of course, I needn't have worried. Everyone was attentive and open-minded, giving me the benefit of the doubt, even as I started things off by singing "Blue To Brown", a tribute to Irma's husband, my grandfather Zalel. I wanted to bring him into the picture as his is a forgotten part of the story. He died in 1984 when I was still a teenager, but left a huge impression on me as one of those rare adults who will take children seriously.

Zalel had first been incarcerated in the 1<sup>st</sup> Austrian Republic in 1927 following the July Revolt when the Palace of Justice was set alight following the acquittal of three right-wing paramilitaries who had killed two members of the Social Democratic Schutzbund, the Republican Defense League. He was detained again and unsuccessfully deported by the Austro-fascist regime before making his way to Spain in 1936 to join the International Brigades, meeting my grandmother for the first time in the French internment camp for "enemy aliens" at Gurs, so I could not tell her resistance story without also telling his. My song, which alludes to blueshirts of the Austrian labour movement changing to Nazi brownshirts, moves to falsetto in the chorus: "All that you stuck out your neck for is over and gone."

I wrote this in the year 2000, back when the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) formed a coalition with the FPÖ, then led by the infamous Jörg Haider, whose brand of right-wing populism laced with Nazi dog-whistling would become the blueprint for similar demagogues all over Europe. And yet, at the time, I had no idea how much more of what my grandparents had risked their necks for would be over and done with just a quarter of a century later.

But there is also another more consoling line before one of the choruses that I often think of: "I'm glad you didn't see this day."

Having said that, Irma was still very much around for Haider, and she seemed to cope better than I did.

Back at *The Arts of Resistance*, as I croaked my way through the first verse, it became clear that I had no hope of reaching those falsetto notes as my voice was utterly and hopelessly shot, both dehydrated from the summer heat and congested from a heavy cold I had picked up on the way to Vienna.

My wife, our daughter, my mother, and I had spent the previous week in Lille in the north of France to celebrate my mother's birth there some 80 years earlier in April 1944. After

escaping the camps of the Vichy government, my grandparents had lived an underground existence in Paris and Lyon. I don't know if they ended up in Lille because my grandmother was pregnant, but I do know that she was about to be sent back to Vienna by her superior comrades to help out in the Resistance there, and true to form, she was very keen to do so. Apparently, it was her pregnancy that got in the way of what would have been nothing short of a suicide mission. So you might say it was my mother's conception that saved Irma's life.

As a child, I was always told that Lille was an ugly industrial city not worth visiting. It may well be that the suburb of Tourcoing fit this description back when my grandparents were hiding out there, but these days the city centre is stunningly beautiful.

It was the first time my mother had been back to Lille since she was a baby. We went to the Mairie and had the records of her birth printed out. We were also handed bureaucratic evidence of enquiries made during her childhood in Vienna when her parents had to prove her birth under a false name to the Austrian authorities. As confirmed by the Mairie of Lille acting on behalf of the French state, Monique Arlette Florin, born to Susanne Florin, wife of Georges, was actually Monika Schwager born to Irma Schwager, wife of Zalel. The birth records also listed a home address on the outskirts of town, which we went to visit but couldn't find. No such house number, just a bridge over a noisy outer ring road. My hunch was that my grandparents made up the address so as not to be found in case the Nazi occupiers went through the hospital's records.

We went to see the hospital as well, which used to be run by nuns and priests, in part to give so-called "fallen women" an anonymous place to give birth. These days, the building houses a school, and the front gates are firmly locked to outsiders.

Anyway, after all that walking around Lille, my body surrendered to the first germs I encountered, and that was the bug I carried all the way to *The Arts of Resistance* event in Vienna.

Miraculously though, as the evening wore on and I told my tales of Irma and Zalel, bits of my voice seemed to return as I sang the song I'd written for Irma's farewell at Vienna's main cemetery, the Zentralfriedhof, some nine years earlier. I can't recall if it was my mother or Irma's friends and comrades from the Communist party or her women's organisation who asked me to sing and play next to her coffin.

Unsurprisingly, I had nothing in my repertoire to fit the occasion, so I wrote a whole new song called "Irma la Douce". I pictured myself visiting Irma's flat one last time, passing through the rooms in my mind, running my fingers over the furniture, stepping out onto the balcony. But I also thought back to five years before when I had sung at her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration at the Roter Salon of the Volkstheater.

Again, I had been asked to play. That time, I performed "The Frankfurt Kitchen", a song I had written about one of Irma's best friends, the architect, fellow resistance fighter and comrade in the women's movement Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky.

When I had finished, I found myself onstage, standing next to a flabbergasted Irma who had no idea there was going to be an event in her honour. In the midst of this surreal situation, I heard myself say into the microphone: "Irma, there's one thing I've never asked you in all those years. I'm glad that you did it because otherwise, I would not be here now, but after all that happened to you and your family, why did you move back to Vienna after the war?" Her reply came like a shot, not missing a beat: "Because we'd won."

Now that Irma was dead, this was going to be the chorus of my song to her.

"Because  
we'd won."

# Irma La Douce

I'm getting ready for the last time I'll be standing on your balcony  
And see the sweep of pea soup as it flows out of the city  
Between poplar trees that reach up from the ground so far below  
Their tops in green and silver almost within reach  
While on the tarmac beach  
Incessant mess is rolling in a crescent to the left against the river's run,

I turn around and face the curtain stepping in  
I'm squeezing past the folding chair  
You used to park yourself in there  
On summer evenings  
In the golden sun rays gleaming shock of white  
Over that light bone china skin  
Your hairless brows white lashes under tinted glasses  
I will pass that desk, a shrine for thirty years  
To him who once was sitting here

There is the wall that was rebuilt when you moved  
in in '45  
A hole that some grenade had made  
Let in the wind that blew away the fatherland  
And very soon the hole was sealed  
To make a home to last till now that you are gone  
Do you know I wonder when they come to paint  
the doors  
Will they fill in the bullet scars?

Irma la Douce  
Tell me the truth  
What made you come back home?  
We came because we'd won

Irma la Douce  
Tell me the truth  
What made you come back home?  
We came because we'd won  
His books still sitting in the shelf  
Tobacco tin and wooden urn  
That I once opened unprepared

Irma la Douce  
Tell me the truth  
What made you come back home?  
We came because we'd won

That line about the bullet scars in the doors...  
I had talked to Ruth and Leo about this on Zoom.  
They told me that a young family now lives in  
Irma's flat, which, of course, has been ren-  
ovated. It would be quite unfair to turn that into  
some symbolism about forgetting the past,  
the brushing-over of history. Those doors had  
looked pretty shabby and flaky for years. And  
my grandparents hadn't left that gaping hole  
in the wall either, not caring to commemorate  
the Nazi officer who lived in that flat during the  
war and had been amongst the last ones to hold  
out while the Red Army shot at them from the  
opposite side of the Danube Canal.

Anyway, the problem I have with this  
song now is a completely different one. It's the  
line I was so fond of, the one Irma had given me.  
"We came because we'd won."

I feel it's becoming increasingly clear now  
that this win was only temporary. That the defeat  
of fascism was actually just a blip in historical  
terms. Something that happened because a  
short-lived alliance of Allied powers allowed it to,  
much against the general run of things.

I'm taking you back to my study now.  
The rain has stopped drumming on the bubble  
window. It's the day after I started writing this  
little essay. This morning, my wife Judith showed  
me a letter to the editor in the local paper, a ter-  
ribly amateurish publication called the Kentish  
Gazette. Under the heading, "Left-wing states  
ruled by fear", a correspondent called Bob Britnell  
contributes a rant on a theme that has become  
all-too-familiar in the topsy-turvy world of hobby  
historians doing their own research online, i.e.  
the recasting of Nazism as actually socialist  
("the clue is in the name"), followed by the reve-  
lation that "only Mussolini was actually a fascist  
leader and he was deposed democratically,  
which tells you something about the grip of fas-  
cism" as opposed to policies "symptomatic of  
a socialist government" entailing "incarceration  
of those who don't or won't fit in and a rule of  
fear". This sort of stuff would be easy to dismiss  
if it weren't so much part of the daily noise that  
surrounds us. The grinding noise of a funda-  
mental consensus being fatally shifted.

On my bluesky timeline today, I saw  
screenshots of Bari Weiss, a self-styled fighter  
against anti-Semitism, at least when she per-  
ceives it to come from the Left or from Arabs,  
explaining away Steve Bannon's Nazi or fascist  
salute (same difference) as being part of an  
"oppositional culture". This turns out to be a  
quote from somebody's think piece on her own  
online platform, The Free Press, which describes  
(and mildly criticises) "ironic" Nazi salutes as a  
sadly ineffective way of "owning the libs".

Meanwhile, various links on my social  
media timeline promise fresh analysis of  
"techno-fascism" while on BBC Radio 4, the  
Harvard historian Jill Lepore jauntily recounts  
Elon Musk's "origin story" in reference to sci-  
ence fiction and superhero comics. "The whole  
calling people Nazis because you disagree with  
them, I'm sick of it, you're sick of it," I hear  
Lepore say one evening as my wife and I are driv-  
ing home from a night out, baffled at the way she  
is assuming our agreement. "So let me be clear,"  
she continues, "the nearly 80 million Americans  
who voted for Trump in 2024 were sick of Dem-  
ocrats, unhappy about inflation, annoyed by  
progressive purity crusades, and unimpressed by  
Kamala Harris. I get it, Hulk Hogan, 'I don't see no  
stinking Nazis here!' (as Hogan had exclaimed at  
Trump's Madison Square Garden rally) Still, look,  
I'm a historian; there is history here. Fascism has  
a history, and it casts a very long shadow. And  
there's another very particular reason to spend a  
little time thinking about the year 1939," she says,  
before linking Musk to the history of Batman,  
whose character it turns out was created in  
that year. "Everyone's tired of calling everyone  
else a fascist," Lepore claims again, "but with  
everything that's going on, the rise of far right  
parties across Europe, including one in Germany  
endorsed by Elon Musk, you can't not talk about  
fascism. And Batman's whole origin story is  
bound up with fascism." In the end, the cheer-  
ful history professor lands on some undecided  
middle ground where the jury seems to be out on  
whether Batman, whom she equates with Musk,  
"is fighting fascism" or is, "somehow himself a  
fascist". As if there were any way in which endors-  
ing the AfD and mass deportations of foreigners  
could be interpreted as "fighting fascism".

Of course, much of this fuzzy reasoning isn't just an opportunistic hedging of bets. With a lot of goodwill, I also recognise her didactic attempt not to alienate, which is familiar to me from my own journalistic work.

But while Umberto Eco was clearly concerned with an inflationary, reckless overuse of the word "fascism" as a catch-all term of political toxicity, I don't think he could foresee the extent to which, three decades on, the sanitisation of fascist gestures, fascist thought, and fascism itself, even by name, would have crept into everyday discourse.

Combined with a rising tendency to ascribe anti-Semitism to the Left, especially contested in the contexts of Gaza and post-colonial debates of Zionism, this rehabilitation of the f-word has now led to an obscene role reversal where a historically anti-Semitic far right is allowed to style themselves as Israel's new best friends, among them people that Eco's definition would recognise as fascists. And why wouldn't they, if the Israeli government belongs to the far right itself?

Again, the line "I'm glad you didn't see this day" springs to mind.

If I had to come back to Vienna again to speak about Irma's life as a lifelong antifascist and a stubborn, particularly peace-loving Communist (with all the terrible contradictions this implies), an agnostic coming from a Jewish family, almost all of whom were murdered in the Holocaust, I don't think I could avoid this painful subject anymore.

Did I avoid it back in August?

I can't check because, in the end, I never downloaded the recording of the event that was waiting for me in one of Ruth and Leo's friendly emails. I don't know if I could bear to listen to it, but I regret not having it now. One thing I do know is that I sang another song about Irma that evening.

I wrote "Not Your Door" in 2015 shortly after her cremation when I was about to return to London and stopped by Schüttelstraße on the way to the airport, only to realise that I didn't

have the keys to her flat. This time, Irma wouldn't open the door for me.

What I neglected to tell my audience when I told them this story before playing the song is that I had, in fact, gone back to Irma's flat a day or two earlier, taking that last glance at her chair, her desk, and stepping onto the balcony overlooking the Danube Canal, exactly the way I'd envisioned it in my other song, "Irma La Douce".

Afterwards, I sat down on the floor in the living room. I went through the bottom drawers of her bookcase where her old letters were kept. Some of them were from Israel, where her one surviving brother Oskar had ended up, raising a family before dying too young. I can't remember if it was his widow with whom Irma was sharing letters, but I recall being taken aback by the rather combative tone of some of them. Naturally, all I could see was the Israeli side of the correspondence, but it wasn't hard to guess the views Irma had expressed in her letters.

Like her husband and so many others from her circles, Irma had been part of the left-wing Zionist Hashomer Hatzair movement in her youth but had moved on to the Communists later as they represented the strongest organised opposition to fascism. With that, her immediate political goal changed from Socialism and settling in Palestine to Socialism and liberating Austria. To claim her rightful place in the country where she was born, the country that had exterminated almost her entire family. Because we'd won. That was her history. That was what she fought for. And it seems no coincidence that now that Irma and her generation are almost completely gone, people are trying so hard to rewrite it.

"Let this be our motto: Do not forget," Umberto Eco writes at the end of his essay. It sounds similar, but on closer reflection, it is so much more useful than the popular evocation of "never again", which turns out to be all too easily appropriated for people's own agendas. "Never again" is a matter of definition. Not forgetting is a matter of learning and knowledge. It's the hard work we need to keep doing now that Irma's generation has left the building.





# Who's Wrestling? Agrarian Crisis and Artistic Combat

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Beyond the romanticised understanding of the farmland exists a precarious agrarian crisis which is inherently broad and entangled with various factors that cause injury to life and sustenance. Indian agriculture is subject to numerous uncertainties, leading to economic insecurity, especially for small-scale farmers, agricultural labourers, and landless peasants. Being heavily dependent on the monsoon and the unforeseen vagaries of nature, farmers are extremely vulnerable to debt traps. Climate change, along with land fragmentation, lack of institutional credit, risk of crop failure, price volatility of agricultural goods, exploitative intermediaries, and lurking corporate control, are some of the factors responsible for catalysing the agrarian crisis. This paper describes and reflects upon some of the different ways in which contemporary art practice becomes a site for critical commentary, analysis, and intervention into agrarian complexities. The aim is to bring

forth a composite of practices embedded in and with institutions and contexts that not only render the crisis in literal terms, but also place the call for awareness and agency amongst the public at large.

As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, five Indian states—Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, account for two-thirds of all farm suicides in the country.<sup>1</sup> Around 46 farmers commit suicide each day, on average, or nearly one every half-hour since 2001. The cumulative total of farmer suicides in the nation since 1995 surpassed the 300,000 threshold in the year 2014.<sup>2</sup> These numbers bring in a feeling of crippling helplessness. According to the 2011 Census, there are 95.8 million cultivators for whom farming is the main occupation, less than 8 per cent of the total population. Counting all cultivators and

agricultural labourers together, the total number is close to 263 million, which is 22 percent of the overall population. At present, rural workers represent nearly 70 per cent of the total workforce. Rural workers are composed of farmers, agricultural labourers, and non-farm workers. Such significant factual ignorance leads many to dismiss the country's massive farmers' suicides as trivial.<sup>3</sup> Farm suicides are a symptom of the systemically ill-defined conditions in the agricultural sector. They are an index of spiralling precarities and stigmatised social divisions.

The unimaginable complexity of the crisis either gets dumbed down or further mangled on various levels of policy-making, implementation, and media intervention. The opaque dismissal decisions by the enforcement agencies led to thousands of farmers rallying in Delhi for a mass protest in November 2020. The non-violent protesting farmers faced extreme hostility and violence but refused to relinquish their demands for the repeal of the enforced market reforms. This was one of the longest, largest, and eventually successful social movements in the history of independent India. It was a year-long combat between the power-stomping enforcer and the determined oppressed.

Delhi-based artist duo Jiten Thukral (b.1976, Punjab) and Sumir Tagra (b.1979, Delhi), popularly referred to as Thukral and Tagra, have creatively deployed a combat methodology to highlight the crisis. The metaphorical vocabulary of sports, gaming, and play has been their trope to redress the combat of contingent issues related to the Indian agrarian sector. Firmly rooted in the belief that "kushti" or wrestling is directly related to farming, the duo has resuscitated the sport and the "Akhaara", or wrestling ring, as a coded playing field.

Thukral & Tagra have delved into their own personal histories and memories to address the crisis brewing in their home state, Punjab, in northern India. Both their families, originally from Lahore, migrated to Punjab after the partition. Tagra's father got married and then moved to create a new life in Delhi. Thukral's father left Lahore, settled in Jalandhar, Punjab, and started to participate in the activities of the "Akhaada" which he later managed. "Akhaada", therefore, is a central point in their artistic practice. In 2006, the duo began supporting the "Akhaara" community in Jalandhar, the hometown of Thukral, which gave way to their first project titled "Match Fixed" (2010). With more involvement and proximity, the duo began to understand and delve deeper into the intricate details of the lives, trials, and tribulations of the agrarian community. They started to sponsor the annual wrestling matches, which became an interesting social construct and site for them—similar to an exhibition space—their aim being to understand and address underlying issues. Over the years, they started supporting the establishment of a community kitchen as a space for care and empathy, run by and for the families of farmers who have been affected by suicides. The artistic entanglement operated with a set of internal relations, but the idea always was to extend beyond the immediate visible spatiality of the crisis. In an interview with British curator Helen Pheby, Thukral and Tagra elaborated on the wider significance of wrestling in their artistic practice beyond just being a sport: "The work means the world to us; it may be a mere subject for everyone, but for us it is art; for the players, it is a sport; for wrestlers, it is the bout. The training ground is rugged and therefore requires muscle, mental capacity and strategy."<sup>4</sup>

Practiced for some 3,000 years, wrestling has been much more than a sport. It is

seen as a lifestyle that demands moral grounding, commitment, and rigorous discipline, which is very similar to the martial arts. More popular in the rural parts of the Indian subcontinent, wrestling is referred to as "Pehlwani" or "Kushti" in Hindi. Traditional wrestling involved two wrestlers, or "Pehelwans" with similar weight and compatible strength, to engage in physical combat to overpower one another to the ground or force each other to submit. The wrestlers traditionally wore only a loincloth, known as a "langot", and would massage their bodies with oil in order to make it difficult for their opponent to get a firm grip. The combats, supervised by a referee, were performed on a clay or mud soil surface in an open-air arena or gymnasium known as "Akhaara", considered a sacred space. Before beginning the combat, wrestlers coat their bodies with clay, an act of becoming one with the consciousness of the resilient earth. The sport has aimed to display strength and endurance by establishing superiority over the opponent, using a variety of grappling techniques, holds, and manoeuvres such as throwing the opponent to the ground, pinning the opponent down, and forcing the opponent to submit by applying pressure to the joints or weaker points and sometimes even choking the opponent. The match concludes when a wrestler is declared winner by the referee or concedes defeat. According to P. Sainath, Kushti remains a deeply embedded sport in the rural economy, operating at the intersection of sports, politics, culture, and economy. Most wrestlers come from the villages, often from impoverished farming backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> Today, the practice of "kushti" and "Akhaaras" is seeing a significant decline in India as the youth is more drawn



Interactive-Performative Game,



"Bread Circuses and TBD" Exhibition, Weston Gallery, Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP), UK, 2019

towards popular global sports like cricket and football.

"Farmer is a Wrestler" and "Bread Circuses" are two dense and layered research-based projects by Thukral and Tagra that deal with the agrarian crisis. In 2019, "Bread, Circuses & TBD" was exhibited at Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP), UK, and within the show, the game "Farmer is a Wrestler" was featured as the central installation. It would be useful to explain the genesis of the title "Farmer is a Wrestler", which was first shown at the Lalit Kala Akademi (National Academy of Art), Chandigarh, Punjab, in 2019. It was supported and directed by the President of the Academy, Diwan Manna. The exhibition drew parallels to the act of "Kushti", highlighting the stressful condition of the farmers. Wrestling, being primarily about physical and mental endurance, was used as a metaphor to illustrate the life of farmers in the face of the agrarian crisis. There have been seven iterations of this exhibition, and the format has changed and adapted almost organically according to the viewing context in both temporal and spatial terms. The

city of Chandigarh holds an important place for the artists. When they were students, they met at the Chandigarh Art College, where Thukral was already studying and Tagra was applying to study. Their paths crossed again at the Delhi College of Art, and a shared aesthetic and willingness to engage in visual dialogues brought them together almost organically.

The fourth iteration of the “Bread Circuses” theme was titled “Bread, Circuses and I”, and was exhibited at a private art gallery called Nature Morte in New Delhi in October 2019. It was a closely guarded, restrictive opening, keeping in view the artworks’ strong and obvious political undercurrents. The wall text of the exhibition reads:

*The exhibition title “Bread, Circuses and I” attempts a “self-absorption” of one’s status in the midst of a severe social crisis. By making the viewer confront these distress equations, the artists continue their pursuit in social communication and attempt to address the gaps between the urban and rural ways of living.<sup>8</sup>*

The carefully worded wall text did not unpack the specific rationale of the show. Instead, it packaged and glossed over the compelling representations. Treading the safe path, the exhibition text abandoned necessary information but was still a boldfaced critique. According to the artists, this dense exhibition represented a continuation and synthesis of works and concepts derived from two prior exhibitions showcased in 2019: “Farmer is a Wrestler” at the Punjab Lalit Kala Akademie in Chandigarh, India, and “Bread, Circuses and TBD” at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in the United Kingdom. This exhibition carried

*Agriculture is a high-risk occupation (Agarwal, 2011, p. 11), the changes in the frequency*



**“Verbal Kabaddi VII – Climate Anxiety in a Single Breath”,  
Banners, Walthamstow Town Square, United Kingdom, 2021**

one more game titled “Verbal Kabaddi—Farmer’s Distress in a Single Breath”, which was installed alongside the other artworks.

Kabaddi is another popular Indian combative sport in which a match is contested between two teams of seven players each, where participants alternate in pursuing

and attempting to tag players from the rival team while simultaneously avoiding being caught by them. Initially played in a

circular sand court, the players try to tag or capture opponents and simultaneously hold their breath while running, repeating the word “kabaddi” to show that they are only inhaling while speaking and are fully engrossed in the game’s purpose. Thukral and Tagra very creatively picked up the core determinants and essential cues of the game and created their own gameplay, a compilation of seven tongue-twisters in English, to be spoken in a single breath. It was a self-motivated gameplay with a four- to five-minute play duration that allowed players to recite urgent criticalities of the crisis in a single breath. The participants recited tongue-twisting sentences such as: “#1 Landless farmer spades the land of a fat farmer with many lands landed as a farm hired hand”, “#2 Green revolution revolutionises the farm evolution with no solution to resolution” and “#3 They’ve sown the known, where weather was unknown, what is grown is loan to mourn” simultaneously exercising some breath control. Each carefully sequenced phrase carried an additional detailed explanation, along with factual statistics and citations for the audience to engage with.

For example, the text accompanying #3 reads:

*Agriculture is a high-risk occupation (Agarwal, 2011, p. 11), the changes in the frequency*

*and severity of droughts, erratic patterns of rainfall distribution, and other calamities disrupt the ecosystem and pose challenges for farmers, thereafter threatening food safety and security. Overall, climate change could make it more difficult to grow crops, raise and rear animals. The effects of climate change are also considered along with other evolving factors that affect agricultural production*

*like myriad farming practices and technology. This situation makes it difficult for agriculturists, pastoralists to recover from financial capacity to make further investments in agricultural operations and allied activities.<sup>9</sup>*



**“The Game Play – Weeping Farm”,  
Game installation, KHOJ, New Delhi, 2022**

**“The Game Play – Weeping Farm”,  
Game Cards and Instructions. 9.75 x 7 inches.  
Latitude28, New Delhi, 2022**



After reading these elaborate explanations supplemented with each tongue-twister, the audience could gather that the tongue-twisters were not merely difficult to recite. Instead, these were real-life, difficult-to-live-with, complicated agrarian situations which were succinctly condensed and served as a gameplay. At the end of the game, after successfully reciting seven of these tricky distress monologues, the player received a stamp of sincerity as a winning reward. “Kabaddi”, a game of strategy, negotiation, team effort, and discipline in the form of breath control, served as a metaphorical tool to rehearse the dehumanising complexities of the agrarian situation. The game was rehashed into

a playable installation as banners in the park by the artists and shown as an iteration in 2021 as “Verbal Kabaddi VII—Climate Anxiety in a Single Breath” near Walthamstow Town Square, UK. This time, the emphasis was to let the players breathe upon the ecological emergency of melting glaciers, rising temperatures, burning forests, dying reefs, and drowning habitats.

In 2022, Thukral and Tagra showcased one more game, titled “Weeping Farm—40 minutes for Survival”, at multiple locations in Delhi. The game

was categorised as educational, and unpacked the invisible work of women farmers in the agrarian sector across India. In the rural agrarian sector, women are significantly engaged in farming as much as in the household but are invisible, undervalued, unaccounted for, and remain dependent on men. Peasant farms rely exceedingly on family labour, a euphemism for unpaid, intensive employment of women and children of the household, and excessive frugality, which undermines their health and education.<sup>10</sup> A total of three to six players could participate at a given time,

and each player had to roleplay the character of a woman farmer from across India for one year, which would mean at least two farming cycles. The roleplaying cards carried Prussian blue monochromatic illustrations of women working on the farm. Their occupation on the card read: “Farm Labourer” along with their age, number of family members, crop and State, such as Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Punjab etc. Each roleplay character was created with the specific regional clothing style and their situation in view—which could be a pre-existing loan, discriminatory

wages, or being a migrant, etc.—which the player seamlessly adapted. The visual and experiential aspects of the game make visible the layered, unwritten class-, caste-, and gender-assigned conduct and associated discrimination, which prevails strongly in India. Periodically, each player earned a salary to stay afloat and remain free from debt while simultaneously facing unforeseen circumstances of financial stress. As the game draws near forty minutes, the player with the highest amount of debt has to leave the game; the player bearing the burden of irreversible debts has to give up or simply quit, symbolising those farmers who chose to commit suicide. According to the available data, 76% to 82% of farmers who committed suicide since 1995 were facing debt and had borrowed money from non-institutional lenders who charged interest rates as high as 36%.<sup>11</sup> Economic hardships, primarily debt, are therefore one of the core reasons leading to farmer suicides.

As rhetorical tools in contemporary art practice, games and play are enacted narratives that allow the user to act out specific roles and confront planned encounters within the embedded diegesis. The emergent narratives are usually reflexive and experiential and provide players with the tools to construct stories of their own. The four games discussed here were, in some way, investigative and operated in close alignment with the dimension of player agency, both as a medium and as a methodology. Games are usually tied to a definitive medium and offer a framework or a sort of arrangement of information structured around a subject



**"Weeping Farm"**  
Series, Pen & Ink Drawing on Paper,  
KHOJ, New Delhi, 2022

matter. Needless to say, a game's visual appearance and design should be functionally adequate and sportively compelling to engage the audience effectively. Thukral and Tagra have been very crafty in negotiating a deep crisis within the representative play of resistance and domination. Their games created an alternative reality that offered a means of dealing with the harsh but significant real world while burdening the player/viewer with a distant rural character's existence in relation to the impervious agrarian narrative. The duality of detaching and interacting has been constant. In a way, the player was not just inside an artwork but simultaneously inside a farm and in a game trying to overpower and win, bound by time. The process-oriented, participative, and interactive dimension of

games created a spectacle which mandatorily shifted the viewer/participant's attention from the objecthood of art to a more immediate, tactile experience of a distant crisis.

The thematically layered body of works created by Thukral and Tagra, shown in diverse locations over a span of over 15 years, makes their approach towards the crisis very

intentional. Thukral and Tagra showed the same artworks, year after year, to re-emphasise the criticality of a perilous crisis, even when the tectonics of display constantly changed and challenged them. These closely connected and temporally aligned versions of play collaborated and

affirmed the revolutionary undercurrent and provided a chance to revisit and reassess the narrative in fresh formats of presentation, visibility, and audience engagement.<sup>12</sup> For them, the idea and substance of the artwork are at once a whimsical challenge to authority and a complete absence of it. Just like enforced policies can say everything without really conveying anything, artistic interventions such as play demonstrate

the unsympathetic redundancy of power. These are examples of ways in which the language of artistic activism becomes as 'newspeak' or surface-level simplified as the enforcers; with succinct inversion of customary correctness and consistent preoccupation with innovation. Play serves as a mechanism of emancipation for an ideological combat in a complex, entangled arena.

<sup>1</sup> P Sainath, "Over 2,000 Fewer Farmers Every Day | P. Sainath", 2 May 2013, <https://www.psainath.com/over-2000-fewer-farmers-every-day/> (accessed 23 August 2023).

<sup>2</sup> P. Sainath, "Farmers' Suicide Rates Soar above the Rest", 18 May 2013, <https://www.psainath.com/farmers-suicide-rates-soar-above-the-rest/> (accessed 23 August 2023).

<sup>3</sup> P Sainath, "The Slaughter of Suicide Data | P. Sainath", 5 August 2015, <https://www.psainath.com/the-slaughter-of-suicide-data/> (accessed 23 August 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra, *Weeping Farm*, 2022, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> "Wrestling with the Rural Economy", People's Archive of Rural India, 19 December 2014, <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/wrestling-with-the-rural-economy/> (accessed 23 August 2023).

<sup>6</sup> PTI, "Wrestling Federation of India Bans Mud-Wrestling", *The Times of India*, 12 January 2003, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/wrestling-federation-of-india-bans-mud-wrestling/articleshow/34178510.cms> (accessed 15 August 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Our Bureau, "Mud-Wrestling on the Mat—Federation Ban Tries to Take the Fight out of Akharas", *The Telegraph*, 12 January 2003, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/mud-wrestling-on-the-mat-federation-ban-tries-to-take-the-fight-out-of-akharas/cid/843995>. (accessed 05 September 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra, *Weeping Farm*, 2022, p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra, *Weeping Farm*, 2022, p. 273.

<sup>10</sup> Madhura Swaminathan and Sandipan Baksi, *How Do Small Farmers Fare? Evidence from Village Studies in India*, No. 5 (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2018), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Samir Bhatnagar, "Economics of Indian Farmers' Movement: A Study of Agrarian Distress and a Vicious Debt Cycle", *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 15 May 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Preeti Kathuria, "Iterations and Interventions: Temporal Agency of Indian Contemporary Art Amidst Agrarian Distress", *The Wollesen: Contretemps | University of Toronto Art Journals* Vol. 11 No. 1 (2024), <https://utaj.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/utaj/issue/view/2862>.

# Between Borders and Screens: Artistic Autonomy in the Digital Age, A Complex Illusion?

Gelavizh Abolhassani

Iranian scholar, artist, and visual-graphic designer

The relationship between institutional structures and art, as well as its influence on the autonomy of artists in the Middle East, has been dynamic and ever-changing. In recent decades, the rise of internet-based technologies and online platforms has significantly shaped this reciprocal interaction.

Social media has redefined the ways in which artists from the Middle East, both within their homelands and in the diaspora, engage with their cultural and socio-political environments. Whether aligning with or challenging dominant ideologies, artists navigate these spaces with varying degrees of creative independence. This essay examines the impact of artistic movements and their influence on the autonomy of the artist and the art they create.

In comparison with their European peers,<sup>1</sup> Middle Eastern artists face various constraints on cultural and artistic expression, resulting in what can be understood as “subtle

forms of expression”. This can be observed, for example, when internet access is limited in some regions and access to social networks is not as widespread as, for instance, in Austria. A crucial aspect to consider is how internet communication influences artistic autonomy and the role of visual arts in social movements.<sup>2</sup>

Art remains a powerful tool for communication, resistance, and cultural preservation. The Middle Eastern diaspora in Europe, particularly in Austria, has greater flexibility in expression and the right to engage in social and cultural discussions. This allows them to express themselves with greater independence and freedom. Thus, artists can participate in the creation and curation of public art, cultural events, public discussions, and institutions that promote international dialogue via visual arts exhibitions, music events, and film screenings, using art as a tool to foster critical conversations.<sup>3,4</sup>

## Visual Arts as a Reflection

### of Societal Shifts in the Middle Eastern Context

Visual art has assumed a unique and pivotal role in the “Women, Life, Freedom” artistic movement, which emerged in Tehran in 2022. A new generation of Iranian artists started producing artworks and promotional materials, both within Iran and abroad, in ways that had not previously existed in this form within society, although it must be noted that the connection between societal events and arts already existed prior to the internet.

In recent times, visual art has often navigated the complexities of societal power, serving as a barometer that reflects and measures shifts within artistic and social movements. This relationship is particularly evident in the aforementioned “Women, Life, Freedom” movement, where visual artists have utilised their work as a means to document, reflect on, and amplify social narratives. Still, artistic constraints have not ceased to exist, most notably in the context of political and cultural issues, where these limitations are most immediate and pronounced. This underscores the signif-

icance of the artist’s agency not only in terms of artistic knowledge and awareness of current events but also in possessing the determination, courage, and vision necessary to produce impactful and lasting visual works.<sup>5,6</sup>

## Symbolism, Artistic Autonomy, and Digital Expression in Iranian Art

Throughout Iranian history, the relationship between art and societal power has been shaped by various cultural and political transformations. While the formation of artistic schools and movements, particularly in visual arts, has faced considerable challenges since the introduction of Islam to Iran following the Arab conquest in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, Iranian artists have historically found creative ways to express their ideas by adapting their methods and structures.

A key example of this adaptability is seen in how Iranian artists have often avoided direct depictions of human figures and nature, instead utilising symbols and abstract forms to convey their messages. This visual strategy remains relevant today, as contemporary Iranian artists continue to employ metaphorical and symbolic imagery to navigate restrictions on artistic expression.

With the advent of the internet and digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, a significant transformation has occurred in the way art is presented and disseminated. Unlike traditional channels such as magazines, newspapers, or galleries, which remain subject to societal constraints, digital platforms have granted artists greater visibility, and thus, influence and independence.<sup>7</sup>

Compared to the classical relationship between art and societal power dynamics, in its initial stages, this technological shift largely operated outside existing power structures, enabling what can be described as true artistic independence.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in the works of contemporary Iranian artists

such as Mana Neyestani, who has utilised digital avenues to expand the reach of his illustrations. He argues that the evolution of artistic autonomy in the digital era has introduced new dynamics for artists engaging with visual storytelling.<sup>8</sup>

Symbolism and metaphor have long been integral to artistic expression in Iran, and Neyestani underscores the role of these devices in enabling artists to convey layered meanings to their audience while adapting to various creative frameworks. Drawing on his personal experience as an artist and cartoonist, Neyestani further elaborates on the efficacy of symbolism in facilitating the articulation of critical ideas within the confines of the prevailing environment.

On the other hand, Neyestani explains that outside Iran, particularly in the West, where artistic independence is less restricted, artists have more room for expression to represent reality more directly. Without the need for symbolic forms or metaphors, they can critically address people and subjects openly in their work. However, he emphasises that regardless of the context, whether in Iran or the freer Western world, the essence of art remains the same. Art always serves as a medium through which the artist can deliver their message, whether through symbolic representation, as in Iran, or directly addressing crucial issues, as is possible in the West.

Neyestani also discusses the role of social media and the internet in enhancing the autonomy of art and artists globally. From his perspective, while social media has enabled greater independence for artists, the challenges of creating and sharing thematic artworks remain. In Iran, artistic expression operates within a set of structural conditions. Outside Iran, artistic landscapes offer alternative dynamics. Nevertheless, a level of anxiety is associated with producing and distributing critical content. Neyestani acknowledges that access to social media in the West, being more straightforward and unrestricted, might provide greater independence for artists in Western contexts compared to Iran.

However, even within Iran, artists frequently employ virtual private networks (VPNs) to access social media platforms, indicating that the internet has facilitated a more globalised form of artistic expression and appreciation. This reflects how digital tools might have equalised the opportunities for artistic independence across different geographies despite the varying levels of autonomy artists may experience.

An archive of over 193 visual works by Iranian artists has been collected from Instagram by the author, with an emphasis on visual communication and symbolic imagery shared by Iranian artists over a period of two years. These reflect a range of social issues, particularly within the context of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” art movement, which has been expressed by Iranian artists across the world through visual communication, symbolic imagery, and narrative-based works. The archive places emphasis on artworks shared by Iranian artists both within the country and in the diaspora, documenting how digital platforms have influenced artistic expression and exchange in recent years.

The selection of Instagram as the primary platform for this study was driven by its accessibility, user engagement, and widespread adoption in Iran. Additionally, the platform has a unique ability to provide real-time, publicly available visual content, making it a valuable resource for analysing digital artistic representation. This methodological approach allowed for a long-term, focused observation, ensuring that the dataset captured not only a snapshot of artistic visibility but also its evolution over time. The study reflects how a general audience might naturally encounter and engage with digital art by engaging with the platform as a regular viewer rather than as an active participant. However, beyond this observational approach, a systematic statistical analysis of the archive offers deeper insights into patterns of artistic participation in digital spaces. The collected materials encompass a variety of visual media, including paintings, illustrations, digital artworks, and video-based projects. These works serve as an essential component of con-

temporary artistic discourse. While a significant portion of the archive covers themes linked to the “Woman, Life, Freedom” artistic movement, the broader categorisation of these works extends beyond any single thematic or ideological framework. Importantly, this research maintains a neutral and independent stance, focusing solely on the quantitative aspects of artistic engagement without association with any specific political group, organisation, or agenda.<sup>9 10 11</sup>

## Conclusion

Artistic expression in the Middle East has been shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-political transformations. Cases like Mana Neyestani’s work or the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement show how art has reacted and adapted to these. Neyestani’s perspective challenges the notion that increased digital access necessarily translates to greater artistic freedom. While social media has played a significant role in expanding the reach of art and artists, regional and geopolitical differences continue to shape the realities of artistic autonomy. Although Western countries may provide greater freedom of expression, this does not inherently mean that art produced in these regions is more impactful or valuable than art created in restrictive environments. As Neyestani emphasises, even in highly controlled spaces, artists find ways to navigate limitations, using tools like VPNs to access global platforms and to share their work internationally.

Furthermore, an archival analysis demonstrates that Iranian artists, whether inside or outside Iran, utilise digital platforms to engage with diverse themes, transcending gender and geographical constraints. However, it must also be said that while social media enables broader dissemination, it does not guarantee absolute autonomy. Artistic expression remains influenced by identity, socio-political conditions, and the artist’s place of origin.

Ultimately, artistic autonomy in the digital age is a complex and illusory concept.

While borders are blurred by screens, they are not entirely erased. Artists may transcend physical limitations through digital tools, but their work remains tied to their cultural, political, and geographical realities.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Emelife, Aindrea. *A Brief History of Protest Art*. London: Tate, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Frost, Charlotte. *Art Criticism Online: A History*. Canterbury: Gylphi, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Bagaeva, Sophie. “Expressing Your Freedom through Digital Art”. Medium, 17 June 2022. <https://blog.covatar.com/expressing-your-freedom-through-digital-art-7d65199d15a5>.

<sup>6</sup> CRUCIFIXVI. “The Artist and Social Media”. Medium (blog), 30 March 2021. <https://crucifixvi.medium.com/the-artist-and-social-media-4352b4ff9556>.

<sup>7</sup> Pérez De La Fuente, Oscar. “Introduction”. In: *Minorities, Free Speech and the Internet*, by Oscar Pérez De La Fuente, Alexander Tesis, and Jędrzej Skrzypczak, 3–15, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003274476-2>.

<sup>8</sup> Neyestani, Mana. “Art and Critical Perspectives: Exploring Artists’ Interaction in Iran”, 22 August 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Abolhassani, Gelavizh. “Autonomy of/ for Art and Artists through the Politics in Iran and Europe (Greece, Italy, Austria)”. Doctoral dissertation University for Applied Art of Vienna, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Hart, Fuchsia. “Women, Life, Freedom, Posters by Ghazal Foroutan • V&A Blog”. V&A Blog (blog), 26 July 2024. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects/women-life-freedom-posters-by-ghazal-foroutan>.

<sup>11</sup> Karimi, Zahra Pamela. *Women, Art, Freedom: Artists and Street Politics in Iran*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Nahidi, Katrin. *The Cultural Politics of Art in Iran: Modernism, Exhibitions, and Art Production*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Cambridge University Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009361392>.



# Anti-fascism Means Getting Your Hands Dirty!

Jo Schmeiser  
Artist, researcher, and

activist, Vienna

There's plenty of violence in the world that calls for resistance and critique. Racism, sexism, homophobia. Here and elsewhere. Anti-Semitism. Yesterday and today. During a workshop at a school in Vienna, when I ask a teenager what resistance is, he answers: "You can also call it reflection." Tomorrow. We can only combat violence in society if we acknowledge and reflect on our own entanglements. "Resistance and critique go together," says Rúbia Salgado in my documentary *Moments of Resistance*, "we're inscribed in power structures." Classism. But who's speaking here? I make films, teach at a university, work with migrants. I'm always looking for resistance in the form, not just in the intent. My pronouns: *feminist stranger*.

It's a Thursday in January, and I'm standing in a crowd outside the Office of the Federal Chancellor in Vienna. The slogan is written by hand on a piece of brown cardboard. The demonstration is against the threat of a coalition between FPÖ and ÖVP, against an Austrian government under an FPÖ chancellor. *Anti-fascism means getting your hands dirty!*<sup>1</sup> The cardboard sign catches my eye. It makes a deeper impression on me than the other placards and banners. I like its DIY cheapness, and I like its ambiguity. When Ruth Anderwald and Leonhard Grond ask me to write a piece for this book, I spontaneously decide to use the words from the sign as my title.

In my search for the slogan's origins, I find a number of variations on the websites of anti-fascist initiatives. It's been printed on merchandise like tote bags and pencils. What does this kind of marketing signify? The multiplication of resistance, or its domestication? This raises the old question of whether entry into the institutional mainstream lends added weight to political demands or gets in their way. Perhaps both. The earliest use of the slogan I can find online is from 2014, at the close of a statement made by a demonstrator before a German court: "The attack on the Oktoberfest in 1980, the pogroms outside asylum-seeker residences in the early 1990s, and the NSU complex are just three good examples of how foolish it would be to leave the fight against Nazis and their activities to the state. [...] Nazis and their structures must be combatted [...] Antifa means getting your hands dirty!"<sup>2</sup>

I suspect the slogan is much older. The impossibility of pinning down its precise origins points to a conspiratorial knowledge and practice designed to protect the survival of a larger collective, even if its individual members are caught, arrested and tortured: "One thing was certain, an illegal organisation had to be set up against this regime, and I was in contact with several people, always one at a time," says Anna Čadia in the documentary *Moments of Resistance*. The film focuses on small but sustained acts of disobedience. Courageous women of the past and the present tell their stories and talk to each other. We hear accounts of resistance work and the risks it involved. We see personal items and documents from the archives. A flyer copied countless times on a typewriter or by hand. A tiny secret message sewn into the seam of a garment to avoid censorship. A cardigan knitted in prison and handed over by a soon-to-be-deported mother to her fourteen-year-old daughter. "It always starts with commitment and becomes resistance," says Judith Umathum

to Anna Čadia. "You have to fight the power on a daily basis," adds María Cristina Boidi. And Gergana Mineva says: "The idea that we can live or act nonpolitically is misleading."<sup>3</sup>

It's a Monday in February, and I'm reading about fears of an election victory for the far-right AfD in Germany. Twice as many votes as three years ago. In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Peter Modler says that the party's female leader is "an emetic" to him but that she "really knows her craft." What does this mean? And which *craft* is he talking about? He gives the example of the way the candidate begins her campaign speech: "She comes on stage, spreads her arms, and says: 'Black, Red, Gold.'<sup>4</sup> Pause, arms spread, and then she says it again. [...] And the crowd goes wild." Modler calls for more analysis of symbolic gestures of power, but he also calls for a distinction

between power and abuse of power, including the possibility of a duty for politicians to display their symbolic

power because it is democratically legitimised.<sup>5</sup>

**The idea that we can live or act nonpolitically is misleading.**

As my mind turns this over, I wonder what the leftists, the anti-fascists, the feminists of recent decades, what I and others have done to help those on the right and the far right, the fascists and Nazis, to gain more and more votes. Maybe our refusal to adopt positions of power, to wield and express such power responsibly? Out of a (mistaken) fear of the fatal abuse of power by the Nazis, as Modler argues? He has a point, I think, but he doesn't focus enough attention on form and its role in the production of meaning. "Black, Red, Gold" and flag-waving are conservative, nationalist gestures of power that I reject. Umberto Eco writes: "All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning."<sup>6</sup> Does the same apply to images, and if so, to what extent?

Which kinds of *enriched/enriching* and *complicated/complicating* visual and textual politics exist? *Things we don't understand.*<sup>7</sup> *Opacity* as potential. *Declarification.*<sup>8</sup>

I read another, earlier interview with Modler about his courses in "arrogance training" for women in management.<sup>9</sup> He talks about Deborah Tannen's research into the language used by men and women.

About the interplay between vertical and horizontal language systems, with men communicating on the basis of hierarchies while women spread information equally among the group. This is likely true of any group oppressed by a dominant majority—as a way of strengthening one another. Is it only possible to achieve something in political terms if we adopt and rehearse patriarchal gestures of power? I refuse to believe this. Self-organisation, horizontal language, and collective redistribution can be constructively disruptive when we identify and critique the governing impact of asymmetrical power structures within our contexts where they have been framed as an external enemy. But Modler is right, the form of expression is important. It can't be purely rational, or well-behaved. I'm reminded of a poster advertising a car in England with the slogan: *If it were a lady, it would get its bottom pinched*. Under which someone sprayed: *If this lady was a car she'd run you down*.

I think about what other forms of expression I know and cherish. Forms of a "politics of weakness" that may emerge at any time from the *Dirty Pink Waters of Collectivity*.<sup>10</sup> Must they, too, accept the critique that they reproduce aspects of what they seek or have sought to combat? I remember a feature in the fanzine *Feeling Bad*, a project realised by Sabina Baumann and

Karin Michalski with other queer-feminist artists and theorists.<sup>11</sup> About the *First International Parade of the Politically Depressed* on May Day in Chicago. The demonstrators took to the streets in their pyjamas and bathrobes, carrying placards with slogans like *Speechless, Depressed?*

*It might be political.* In one photograph, one of the protesters is smiling from ear to ear.

The slogans are written on pieces of cardboard, decorated by hand.

As Elvira Espejo Ayca writes in YANAK

UYWAÑA. *The Mutual Nurturing of the Arts:*

"Thoughts are cultivated, they are inside the body, inside the landscape, inside the instruments that will come into play. Such synergy of ideas may pass from a young boy to an older person, from an older person to a young girl, or from an idea or instrument to a person. They are not rationalising agents, but, rather, they appeal to such connectivities, experiences and sensitivities in order to be able to generate the *amta yaracch uywaña*, the shared act of thinking that leads to new acts of creativity. [...] That is why we say, for example, *thinking with the fingertips*."<sup>12</sup>

**Thinking with the fingertips while ringing doorbells. Having discussions from door to door in the neighbourhood. On a Friday in September before Austria's parliamentary elections, a friend tells me about the doorstep conversations taking place in Vienna, Linz, and Graz. It's about talking to people who think differently. About making the first move and starting by listening. Asking questions. *Thinking with the feet.* And then offering arguments, providing information material and perhaps managing**

to persuade someone. These doorstep talks are aimed at undecided voters, protest voters and the large majority of non-voters.<sup>13</sup> I think of the writings of Dan Bar-On, of his realisation that the majority of Nazi supporters in the “Third Reich” were not perpetrators but bystanders.<sup>14</sup>

Talking about resistance to the Argentinian military dictatorship, María Cristina Boidi says: “Even in situations that are impossible and unimaginable, there are little things you can do. People always have the possibility to resist.” It’s a matter of “cultivating” these historical experiences, of the *moments of resistance* being translated and reworked by subsequent generations for new contexts. The small, smart acts of resistance from other times and places are so varied, so inspiring. *Old-fashioned* words, gestures, and actions that release unimagined energies. We can connect with them, playfully and with pleasure. For my

twelve-year-old niece, everything before the year 2000 is “old-fashioned”. But this *old-fashioned* stuff is also interesting because it eludes current systems of classification. Because it is (as yet) *unknown* or doesn’t (quite) *fit*. Because it can be reframed and put to previously unimagined uses.

The *unknown* or the *unfitting* can create possibilities when everything has come to a standstill or seems to have arrived at an impasse. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes: “We are obliged to build out into the dark.”<sup>15</sup> Maybe we should dream anti-fascism into being and then carry on working it with our hands, adds the *feminist stranger*. Like a sculpture in clay to which material is added, from which material is taken away, over which one sleeps a couple of times to take a fresh look before starting again, alone or with others, from the beginning, or from the end.

Translated from the German by Nicholas Grindell

<sup>1</sup> In German: “Antifaschismus ist Handarbeit!” In addition to its everyday meaning of “craft” or “handicraft”, the word “Handarbeit” can be translated as “a hands-on task”, in the sense of rolling up one’s sleeves and getting involved, of mucking in on a job. But it also has the connotation of a grassroots activity, potentially taking place on a conspiratorial basis, involving some form of commitment and risk-taking.

<sup>2</sup> <https://beobachternews.de/2014/06/04/antifa-ist-handarbeit/>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.widerstandsmomente.at/en/film/content/>.

<sup>4</sup> Black, red, and gold are the colours of the German flag.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/gesellschaft/macht-machtmissbrauch-peter-modler-trump-politik-sprache-e504471/?reduced=true>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/umberto-eco-ur-fascism>.

<sup>7</sup> The title used by Ruth Noack and Roger M. Buergel for their exhibition at the Generali Foundation in 2000, <https://foundation.generali.at/en/exhibitions/dinge-die-wir-nicht-verstehen/>.

<sup>8</sup> See the writings of Édouard Glissant and of Antke Engel: [https://monoskop.org/images/2/23/Glissant\\_Edouard\\_Poetics\\_of\\_Relation.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/2/23/Glissant_Edouard_Poetics_of_Relation.pdf); <http://www.antkeengel.de/books.html>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/karriere/arroganztraining-fuer-frauen-schluss-mit-freundlich-1.1343361>.

<sup>10</sup> The title of a lecture series organised by the department of Art and Communicative Practices (KKP) at the University of Applied Arts: <https://kkp.uni-ak.ac.at/dirty-pink-waters-of-collectivity/>. I use the term here in an expanded sense.

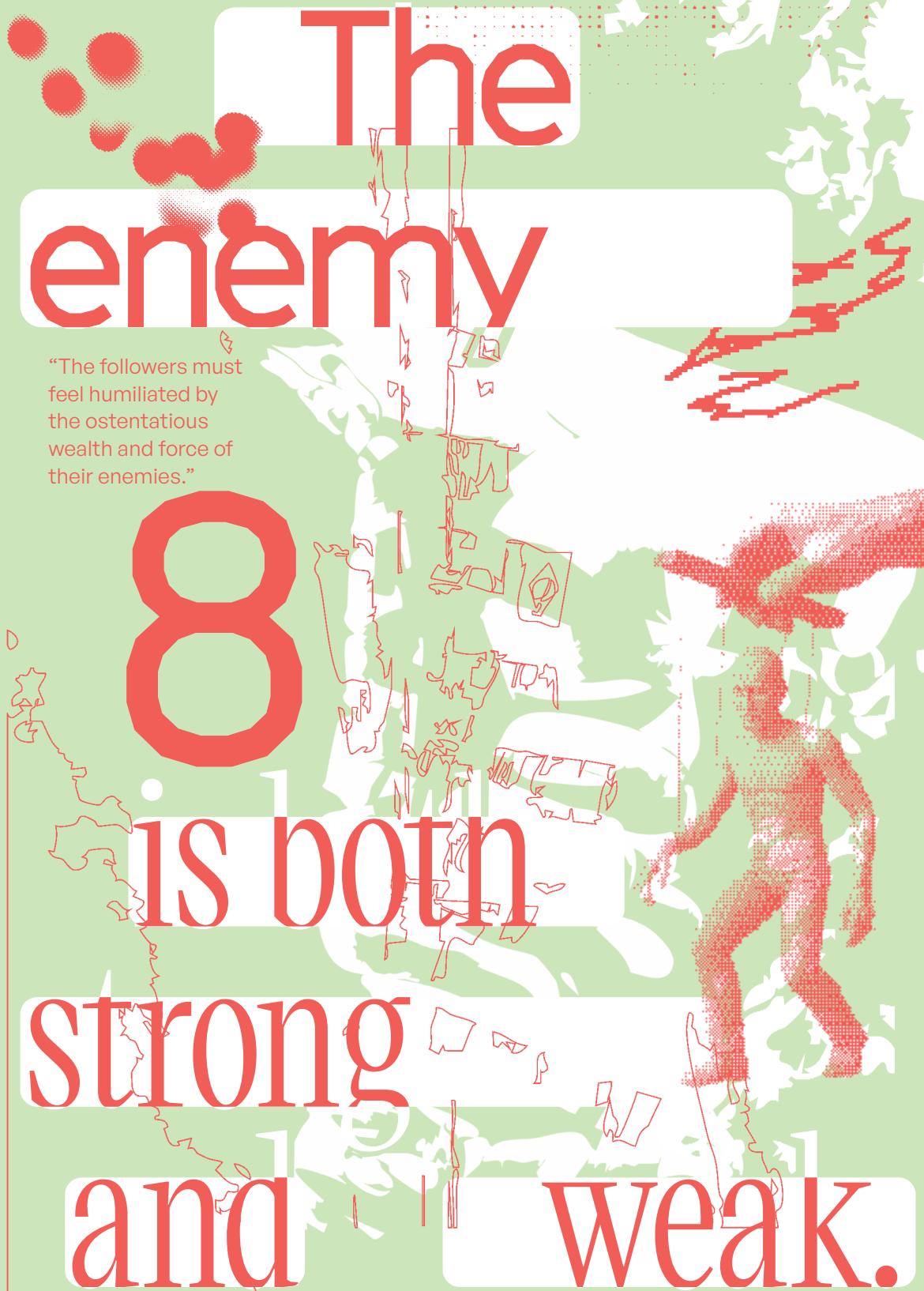
<sup>11</sup> <http://www.karinmichalski.de/feeling-bad.html>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://transversal.at/books/yanak-uywana-en>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://wir-gegen-rechts.at/en/intensiv/>.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Bar-On studies different types of bystander behaviour in the past and the present. Rather than the personality traits of bystanders, he focuses on their contextual and situational forms of action or inaction. See Dan Bar-On, “The Bystander in Relation to the Victim and the Perpetrator: Today and During the Holocaust”, *Social Justice Research*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2001): pp. 125–48.

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). (In the original German: “Wir sind genötigt, ins Dunkle hinauszubauen.”) First English translation by A. A. Brill (New York: Macmillan, 1913). The “complete and definitive version” edited and translated by James Strachey (1955) (New York: Basic Books, 2010). The translation used here is a mixture of the Brill and Strachey versions. Brill has “we are compelled to build in the dark” (435), while Strachey has “we have been obliged to build our way out into the dark.” (550).



# Local Research Activities



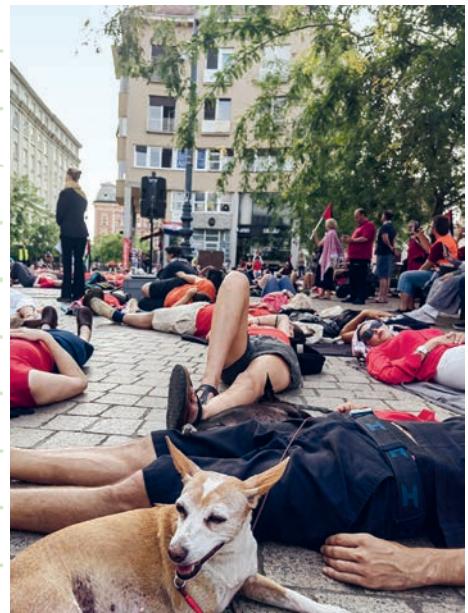
May 2024–March 2025  
Braunschweig, Vienna, Zagreb



Facilitated by the partner institutions, participants, and artists met locally in Braunschweig, Vienna, and Zagreb to conduct research, explore artistic possibilities, and work together on-site. Along the project's trajectory, they investigated their local histories, places of remembrance, current political struggles, and artist activism. The findings of these local activities were then shared at the International Exchange Week and brought into the Exhibition and also came up in the discussion of the Symposium in Zagreb. Spending time, learning, and working together reduced biases and prejudices, allowing everyone to meet in recognition of Europe's shared and diverse histories and to acknowledge the importance of a Europe of freedom and democracy for a more plurivocal and inclusive society.



The Arts of Resistance



# Teaching Anti-fascism in Higher Education: Umberto Eco's "Eternal fascism" and the Role of Universities

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## Introduction

As far-right ideologies gain traction in various parts of the world, it becomes imperative to reinforce anti-fascist values within educational institutions.<sup>1</sup> This contribution argues for the integration of anti-fascist education in universities, emphasising Umberto Eco's framework of "eternal fascism" as a critical tool for understanding and combating contemporary authoritarian tendencies.<sup>2</sup> Through an analysis of Eco's fourteen features of fascism, this piece demonstrates how universities can nurture democratic values and cultivate civic resilience against fascist ideologies. This article describes the collaboration between the University of Applied Arts Vienna (Center for Didactics of Art and Interdisciplinary Education) and *The Arts of Resistance* project, a Creative Europe Project (CREA 2027 <https://culture-of-resistance.eu/BLOG>) as a case study. This aims to show ways in which resistance to fascism can be developed. Racism, anti-Semitism and hatred can be countered, lessons can be learned from the

past, and possible solutions can be devised for the present and future generations through the arts. This paper also extends the discussion to National Socialism as a historical benchmark, to rising anti-Semitism as a pressing current issue and the need to counter it vehemently.<sup>3</sup> The interdisciplinary collaboration on this theme with students from the HBK University of Art Braunschweig and the opportunity to exhibit, reflect, and communicate together with young people from the Youth Club of the MSU (Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb) is an example of how fascism can be countered through interdisciplinary and artistic approaches and combated in a sustainable manner.

Fascism, though historically associated with 20<sup>th</sup>-century regimes like Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany and Austria, is not confined to the past. It is a chameleonic ideology that reappears in new guises; and in today's climate of political polarisation, social discontent, and digital misinformation, the threat of fascism is once again palpable.<sup>4</sup>

Educational institutions, especially universities, have a unique mandate not only to transmit knowledge but also to cultivate critical citizenship. Yet anti-fascism, antiracism, antiziganism and resistance against anti-Semitism remain underrepresented in higher education curricula. They have only now been made compulsory in the curriculum with the new syllabus: "The curricula, at least at the master's level, must focus on developing an understanding of the profession and a professional ethic that includes a comprehensive understanding of the educational mission and a community-building and democracy-promoting approach to exclusion and discrimination, such as racism, sexism, antiziganism, and anti-Semitism."<sup>5</sup>

In Austria, the number of anti-Semitic incidents has increased since Hamas attacked

Israel on 7 October 2023: the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights/Basis in Vienna conducted a survey of 12 Jewish organisations and found that there had been a 400 % increase in anti-Semitic attacks since 7 October 2023.<sup>6</sup> "Online anti-Semitism and antisemitic incidents in public, schools and universities increased dramatically. They negatively affect how safe Jewish people feel and their ability to be Jewish openly in their day-to-day lives."<sup>7</sup>

Universities were the scene of gatherings where anti-Semitic slogans were chanted, and Jewish students were targeted.<sup>8</sup> Anti-Semitism related to Israel is also identifiable (cf. [erinnern.at](http://erinnern.at)) in Austrian schools in a wide variety of forms. Teachers are encouraged to address the Middle East conflict in class but are often unprepared and powerless to do so. The topic has become particularly controversial in art classes because issues such as gender and depiction in European art and cultural history are also identified as "haram" by students and are increasingly complicating lessons. At the same time, images on the internet are used to manipulate and spread fake news. Unfortunately, there are currently very few, if any, specific teaching materials available for art and design classes, despite this subject being particularly important for interdisciplinary discussions of image manipulation, politics, history, art, and religion, and being identified as a political competence in the new curriculum.<sup>5</sup>

Umberto Eco's seminal 1995 essay "Ur-fascism," or "Eternal fascism," offers a timeless diagnostic framework for recognising fascist tendencies. As Eco writes, "[o]ur duty is to uncover [fascism] and to point our finger at any of its new instances – every day, in every part of the world."<sup>9</sup> He identifies fourteen characteristics of fascism that can manifest in diverse political contexts. These features, while not always present simultaneously,

collectively form a pattern that educators and students can use to recognise and challenge authoritarian ideologies.

This article argues for the inclusion of Eco's framework in university curricula across disciplines. In doing so, it proposes a structured approach to anti-fascist, antiracist, and antiziganist education, as well as education against anti-Semitism, rooted in critical thinking, democratic engagement, and historical literacy.

The project *The Arts of Resistance* was initiated by the Association HASENHERZ (Ruth Anderwald and Leonhard Grond) and a collaboration between HASENHERZ, the University of Applied Arts Vienna (Ruth Mateus-Berr), the HBK University of Art Braunschweig (Martin Krenn) and the MSU (Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb). *The Arts of Resistance* (TAoR) project is an interdisciplinary initiative that combines artistic research, political and cultural youth education, and remembrance culture. Building on the pilot project "Art Works! European Culture of Resistance and Liberation" (2019–2021), TAoR addresses resistance against European fascism by rethinking and creatively transforming songs, poems, graffiti, and artworks from the period 1939–1945. The aim is to develop a more active European culture of resistance—visually, performatively, and participatively—through critical learning from history and local practice.

#### The Legacy of National Socialism: A Foundational Case Study

To understand contemporary fascism and right-wing populism, it is essential to examine National Socialism (Nazism) as a historical paradigm. The Nazi regime, under Adolf Hitler, was the most extreme manifestation of fascist ideology, combining ultra-nationalism, racial purity doctrines, anti-Semitism and totalitarian

control. The characteristics outlined by Eco were fully realised by the Nazi regime. The myth of a glorious Aryan past, veneration of myth and blood, and anti-intellectualism served as tools to mobilise mass support and justify genocide. The Holocaust offers a sombre lesson on how fascist ideology can lead to mass atrocity. Courses in the arts, design, history, politics, ethics, and memory studies can engage with this material to provide students with tools to understand the dynamics of fascist violence and to commit to "Nie wieder"—"Never again".

#### Right-Wing Populism in Austria: Contemporary Fascist Echoes

Austria represents a crucial contemporary case of the resurgence of far-right populism. The Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), or Austrian Freedom Party, has gained substantial political influence over the past decades. Though its rhetoric stops short of open fascism, many of Eco's traits appear in disguised form:

- Fear of difference: Anti-immigrant and Islamophobic narratives dominate FPÖ platforms.
- Selective populism: Appeals to a "true people" against a corrupt elite, often directed against EU institutions.
- Nationalism and traditionalism: Myth-making about Austrian identity and values.
- Anti-intellectualism: Discrediting of academics, journalists, and artists who critique populist narratives.

The historical proximity to Nazism further complicates Austria's political landscape. The country's post-war narrative of



Pacifism  
is  
trafficking  
with  
the  
enemy.

"For Ur-fascism there is no struggle for life but, rather, life is lived for struggle. [...] a 'Final Solution' implies a further era of peace, a Golden Age, which contradicts the principle of permanent war."

g

being the “first victim” of Nazi aggression has contributed to a lack of deep confrontation with its complicity in the Holocaust.

Educators in Austrian and international contexts should analyse these dynamics with students, examining how history, identity, and populism intersect to threaten democratic values. Since art and design education inherently consider and address interdisciplinary connections, approaches through the arts are particularly well-suited to addressing and dealing with such challenging topics. In 2025, there was at least one example of teaching in the arts that drew on this historical approach (Moritz; erinnern.at).<sup>10</sup>

#### Universities as Contested Spaces: Contemporary Relevance in the U.S. Context

Universities are often described as bastions of enlightenment, reason, and academic freedom, which—in fascist regimes—were frequently co-opted or silenced.<sup>11</sup> Today, these institutions must act as bulwarks against ideological manipulation by teaching students to recognise the signs of creeping authoritarianism.<sup>12</sup>

In the contemporary United States, this call is particularly urgent. University campuses have become flashpoints for ideological conflict, with increasing pressure from political actors to censor curricula, ban books, and restrict discussions on systemic racism, gender identity, and American history. As Giroux argues, “[u]niversities have increasingly become battlefields in the fight over historical memory and the meaning of democratic citizenship.”<sup>13</sup>

These developments are not only about ideological suppression but also intersect with rising anti-Semitism. Right-wing discourse

often revives antisemitic tropes, especially when promoting conspiracy theories. As Eco<sup>14</sup> noted, fascist ideology frequently invokes the figure of an “internal enemy”—and anti-Semitism offers a persistent and dangerous template for such constructions.

In this climate, academic freedom<sup>15</sup> is increasingly weaponised or curtailed in ways that echo fascist tactics: simplification of language, suppression of critical debate, and targeting of minority voices. Holocaust denial, trivialisation of anti-Semitism, and the undermining of Jewish scholars’ contributions are emerging in subtle and explicit forms, exacerbated by social media and polarised media environments. It is, therefore, imperative that anti-fascist education also include a thorough examination of anti-Semitism.

Anti-fascist education is not about promoting a singular political agenda; it is about equipping students with the tools to identify and resist dehumanising ideologies that threaten democratic life by fostering critical analysis of power, discourse, and identity.

Anti-fascist pedagogy also encompasses the cultivation of ethical reasoning and historical empathy. It teaches students not just what fascism and Anti-Semitism are, but how ordinary individuals can become complicit in or resistant to authoritarian systems. As Eco warns, “Ur-fascism is still around us, sometimes in plainclothes.”<sup>16</sup>

#### Umberto Eco’s “Eternal fascism”: A Diagnostic Framework

One of the starting points for this collaboration was Umberto Eco’s texts. Umberto Eco, an Italian philosopher, novelist, and semiotician, drew upon his childhood experiences under Mussolini to craft his essay “Ur-fascism”. Rather than define fascism as a rigid doctrine, Eco proposes it as a cluster of traits—what he calls a “fuzzy totalitarianism.” Eco argues that Ur-fascism is eternal, because it is not bound to one historical regime but rather to recurring patterns of fear, myth, and power.

Eco’s fourteen features serve as warning signs, not a checklist, as many features even contradict each other. The presence of any combination of these traits may indicate fascist tendencies, even in democratic societies. Below, each feature is examined in terms of its educational implications, with an elaboration on its interconnectedness and relevance in modern academic discourse.

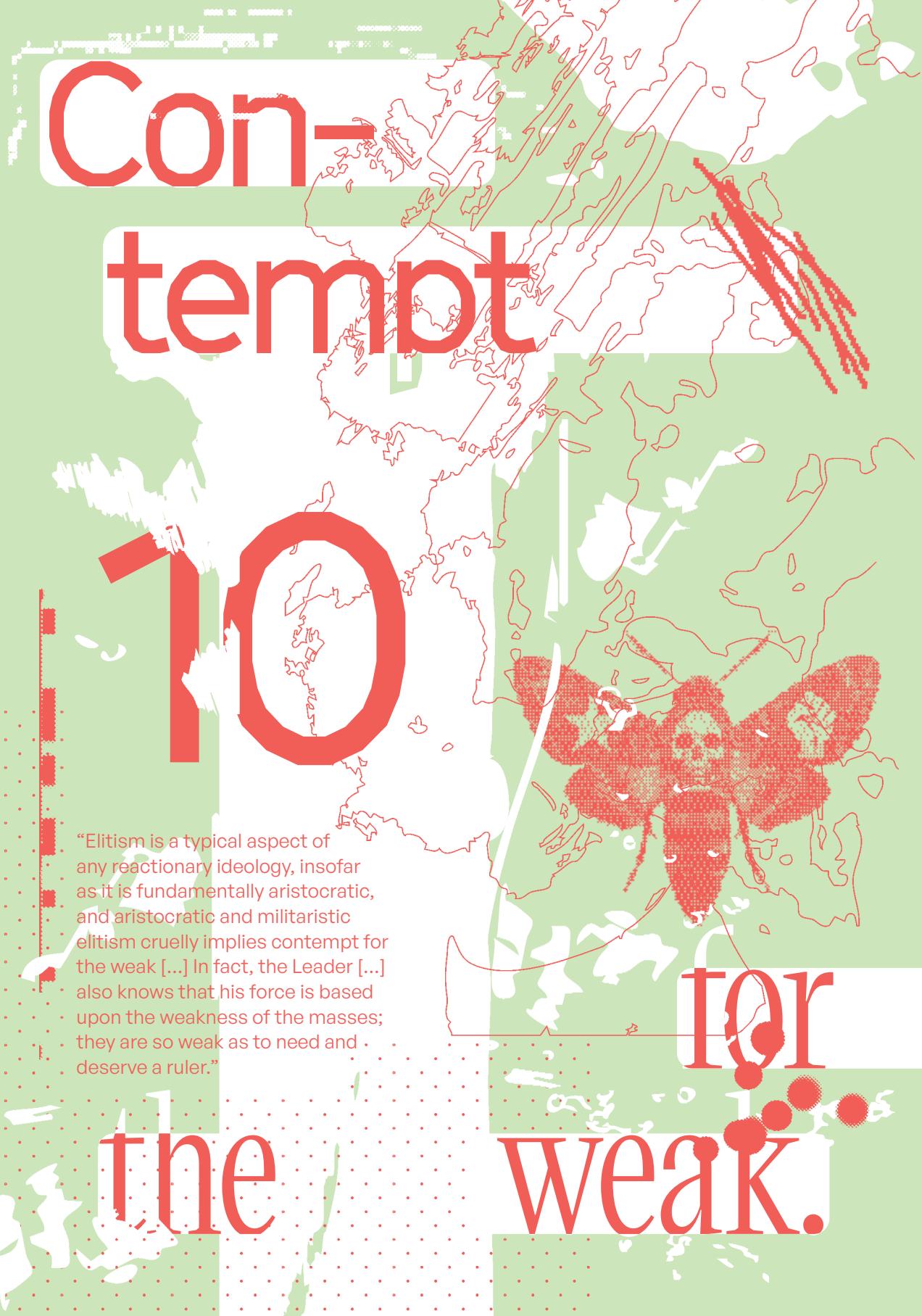
#### Pedagogical Approaches: How to Teach Anti-fascism

Implementing anti-fascist education requires not only curriculum design but also pedagogical strategy. Educators must foster classrooms where critical dialogue is encouraged, diverse perspectives are respected, and emotional intelligence is developed. Examples of effective strategies include:

→ **Arts-based research:** “[...] art-based research as the use of artmaking as the primary mode of inquiry by a person doing the research, alone and/or with others.”<sup>17</sup> Arts-based research (ABR) and antiracist art education offer critical strategies for addressing fascist, racist, and anti-Semitic

ideologies through creative inquiry. As Barone and Eisner argue, “Arts-based research is not only about representing knowledge aesthetically, but also about producing new forms of knowing that emerge through artistic processes.”<sup>18</sup> Shaun McNiff further emphasises the transformative power of art, stating that “art making is an expressive inquiry that reveals what is otherwise difficult to articulate in words.”<sup>19</sup> This underlines how ABR can surface embodied and emotional understandings crucial for dismantling internalised prejudices and systemic oppression. The act of making art can thus become a form of resistance. Educators like Desai<sup>20</sup> or Haag<sup>21</sup> emphasise the importance of moving beyond the celebration of diversity and actively engaging students in critical visual culture practices that interrogate systemic racism and power structures. Through critical art making, learners confront the ideological underpinnings of fascist aesthetics. Artistic experimentation becomes a counterhegemonic practice, enabling students to challenge authoritarian worldviews through creativity, empathy and reflexivity. Mateus-Berr also highlights the role of art in navigating ideological binaries, stating that “[c]rossing the black and white pattern of a chessboard with the colours of art means engaging ambiguity, resisting polarisation, and opening new democratic spaces”<sup>22</sup> and Mateus-Berr & Jochum<sup>23</sup> present various forms of the high impact of teaching arts-based research.

→ **Contemplating art:** allows for diverse interpretations and promotes tolerance of ambiguity. As the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Persian poet Jalal al Din Rumi writes: “The eye of the sea is one thing, the foam another. Let’s not just glance at the foam and miss the sea’s deep gaze.”<sup>24</sup> Human knowledge is



# Con- tempt

"Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology, insofar as it is fundamentally aristocratic, and aristocratic and militaristic elitism cruelly implies contempt for the weak [...] In fact, the Leader [...] also knows that his force is based upon the weakness of the masses; they are so weak as to need and deserve a ruler."

## for the weak.

inherently partial; and therefore there is a need to accept diverse perspectives without collapsing them into singular truths.

The concept of Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA) has deep philosophical and psychological roots. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) emphasised that ambiguity is a fundamental aspect of human existence. In *The Concept of Anxiety (Begrebet Angest)*, he described anxiety as a consequence of the “dizziness of freedom”—a feeling of unease provoked by life’s inherent ambiguities and possibilities, which many people find unbearable.<sup>25</sup>

→ **Case-based learning:** uses historical and contemporary events to analyse fascist patterns. Case-based learning (CBL) offers a strategy that engages students in deep, critical analysis by focusing on real-life or hypothetical scenarios—such as the rise of fascist regimes or right-wing populist movements—alongside visual, material, and artistic representations of these ideologies. In design and art education, CBL can involve the examination of stylistic tropes in propaganda posters, architectural structures, and design objects used by fascist regimes. Design theorist Guy Julier argues that “design does not merely reflect ideology—it helps produce and sustain it.”<sup>26</sup> These insights allow students to recognise how aesthetic choices can be mobilised for political messaging. Fascist art and design often emphasise unity, purity, and discipline, rejecting ambiguity and plurality. Teaching students to decode these signs supports the development of what Erwin Panofsky called an “iconological” method: reading not only the form but the cultural function of images.<sup>27</sup> By comparing historical cases to current political aesthetics—such as social media visuals or political branding—students learn to identify ongoing fascist or authoritarian tendencies.

→ **Role-playing and simulations:** help students empathise with victims and resisters of fascist regimes. Theatre as a medium in art education offers a unique and powerful space for anti-fascist pedagogy. Through embodied learning, role-playing, and critical engagement with narratives, students can explore the emotional and structural dimensions of authoritarianism. Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*<sup>28</sup> is a cornerstone for such pedagogical practice. It repositions learners from passive observers to active “spectactors,” enabling them to rehearse social change through performance. Theatre can be used to simulate situations of moral ambiguity, structural oppression, and historical reenactment, allowing students to experience, reflect on, and critique ideological mechanisms. Such practices challenge the dehumanising tendencies of fascist ideologies by re-centring empathy, relationality, and critical agency. Theatre also aligns with Bell Hooks’ vision of engaged pedagogy, where the classroom becomes a space for transformative dialogue and holistic expression. Hooks emphasises that teaching must involve “the whole self”, including emotion and imagination.<sup>29</sup>

→ **Digital literacy training:** teaches students to analyse online propaganda, misinformation, and algorithmic biases.<sup>30</sup> Digital literacy includes the ability to read and interpret images, texts, and interfaces critically. In the age of algorithmically curated content and visual disinformation, art education must empower students to identify aesthetic and ideological patterns within xenophobic, racist, or authoritarian narratives online. McNiff argues that technological advancements significantly contribute to the expansion of art-based research by facilitating innovative forms of interactivity and multimodal expression. Nevertheless,

he stresses that such digital practices must be critically informed to avoid perpetuating hegemonic ideologies.<sup>31</sup> Students should learn how fascist aesthetics are repurposed in contemporary online platforms and be equipped to respond with counter-narratives and artistic interventions. Teaching must always be a transgressive act—especially in digital space, where the boundaries of truth and representation are contested. Educators can foster these competencies through digital storytelling, interactive design, and collaborative online platforms that support participatory engagement and critical reflection. Projects might include remixing historical propaganda to expose its absurdities,<sup>32</sup> creating augmented reality experiences that deconstruct nationalist monuments, or producing social media campaigns that amplify voices of resistance.

→ **Community engagement:** Involving students in local initiatives that promote democratic participation and solidarity. Anti-fascist education in the arts requires not only individual critical reflection but also collective and community-oriented practice. One powerful pedagogical strategy is community engagement—actively involving students in local initiatives that promote democratic participation, cultural memory, and solidarity. Teresa Eça<sup>33</sup> argues for a collaborative form of education and, along with Paulo Freire (in form of a curious dialogue)<sup>34</sup> and others, states that art educators need to work with communities, not just within the classroom, to challenge oppression and promote social responsibility and combine theory and practical experience. Through collaborations with grass-roots organisations, cultural institutions, and activist groups, students can apply artistic skills in real-world contexts while learning the social responsibilities of creative citizenship.

Projects that engage with local histories can surface suppressed narratives and encourage reflection on issues like racism, fascism, and exclusion. Such initiatives are particularly effective when they encourage intergenerational dialogue and include marginalised voices. Community art and socially engaged art educator Beverly Naidus writes, “The potential for learning *from the communities* was rarely considered.”<sup>35</sup> When students are invited to respond creatively to social injustice in their own communities, they begin to understand that art is not separate from life, but a vital force within it. Faculty development workshops, institutional support for curriculum innovation, and interdisciplinary collaborations are all necessary to sustain such efforts.

### Applying Eco's Framework Across Disciplines

Anti-fascist education must be interdisciplinary. Each of Eco's features can be explored through diverse academic lenses:

→ **Art:** Art schools can address fascism's aesthetic manipulation by analysing propaganda posters,<sup>36</sup> architecture, and state-sponsored exhibitions. As Eco notes, fascism tends to “favour qualitative populism and aestheticisation of politics.”<sup>37</sup> Students can critique fascist symbolism and create counter-narratives through visual media.

→ **Design:** Industrial and communication design students can study how fascist regimes employed layout, typography, and branding. Critical design projects can include reimagining democratic iconographies or designing resistance-oriented infographics.

→ **History:** History departments can unpack the myth of the glorious past<sup>38</sup> and explore how fascist regimes constructed historical narratives. Modules might include analysis of Italian Fascism, Nazi Germany, or Japanese ultranationalism, connecting Eco's frame-work with empirical case studies.

→ **Political education:** Political science and civic education courses are natural venues to explore selective populism, xenophobia, and authoritarian leadership models. Eco's warning that “Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak”<sup>39</sup> can be explored in units on political rhetoric. Debates, simulations, and policy analyses can encourage students to think critically about contemporary political discourse.

→ **Education studies:** Curricula themselves must be examined for their inclusivity, historical depth, and civic focus. Courses in pedagogy and didactics can develop anti-fascist learning objectives, assessment models, and inclusive teaching practices. A focus on critical pedagogy, following Freire, reinforces student agency in confronting oppression, “conscientization” in the classroom, which can be translated as critical awareness and active engagement.<sup>40</sup>

These examples demonstrate that Eco's framework is not merely a theoretical tool, but a practical and interdisciplinary approach to democratic education. Since artist-teachers receive training in art, pedagogy, and subject-specific didactics, and must also study a second subject, these school subjects are particularly well-suited for teaching Eco's theories to promote critical education.

### European Case Studies and Contemporary Relevance

Recent events globally illustrate how fascist elements persist and adapt. To name a few:

→ In **Italy**, Eco illustrates the ideological eclecticism of fascist thought by noting how it often merges disparate and even contradictory sources. He points to a recent instance in Italian right-wing circles (such as Julius Evola), where thinkers as diverse as Joseph de Maistre, René Guénon, and Antonio Gramsci have been grouped together in educational syllabi. This tendency, Eco argues, is a clear manifestation of fascism's syncretic nature, in which ideological coherence is less important than emotional resonance and symbolic power.<sup>41</sup>

→ In **Germany**, the resurgence of far-right movements such as *PEGIDA* (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) and *AfD* (Alternative for Germany, a right-wing populist and far-right political party in Germany) has been met with coordinated cultural and academic responses. The *Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weißensee*<sup>42</sup> has incorporated anti-fascist curricula in its visual communication program, addressing visual propaganda and symbolic resistance. The German tradition of *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of remembrance) remains central in educating students about the Holocaust and the dangers of historical amnesia.

→ In **Hungary**, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government has been widely criticised for democratic backsliding, including attacks on academic freedom—seen in the forced relocation of the Central European University (CEU) from Budapest to Vienna in 2019—as

well as restrictions on civil society and a nationalist redefinition of culture and history. In response, Hungarian artists and educators have mobilised around initiatives such as *Dog-Party*<sup>43</sup> (*Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt*; MKKP), which, with humour and irony, attempts to parody the political elite through street art; or *FreeSZFE*,<sup>44</sup> a grassroots movement formed by students and faculty of the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE) after government intervention in its autonomy. These activists use performance, public protest, and symbolic actions to resist state control. These examples offer rich material for comparative analysis in university settings. They also underscore the necessity of preparing students to respond critically and constructively to political trends in their own countries and globally.

In the **Western Balkans**, post-Yugoslav nations such as **Serbia**, **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, and **Croatia** have witnessed the troubling resurgence of nationalist rhetoric, historical revisionism, and the glorification of fascist collaborators. In **Croatia**, the rehabilitation of Ustaša symbolism and the minimisation of crimes committed during the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) have raised international concern. Art organisations such as *apoteka*<sup>45</sup> have engaged against fascism.

→ In **Serbia**, far-right groups have gained visibility, often with state tolerance or indirect support. These groups frequently attack independent cultural institutions and human rights organisations. Public memory of fascist collaboration is frequently downplayed, while nationalist mythology is celebrated in official narratives.

→ **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, still grappling with the aftermath of the 1990s war and genocide, faces continued ethnonationalist

polarisation in its education system and political structures. Segregated schools and curricula perpetuate divergent historical narratives that hinder reconciliation and promote ethnocentric worldviews.

Despite these challenges, educators and artists in the region are actively resisting these trends. Initiatives such as the *CRVENA*<sup>46</sup> feminist cultural centre in Sarajevo and the *Rijeka European Capital of Culture 2020*<sup>47</sup> programme have sought to use arts and education to confront revisionist narratives and foster regional solidarity.

#### Case Study: *The Arts of Resistance – Lessons Learnt*

After two courses were held at the University of Applied Arts Vienna as part of the project, anonymous feedback was collected. In addition, there was a round of joint feedback with all groups by Leo Grond & Ruth Anderwald on 9 May 2025:

#### MSU Zagreb Group: Participants of the Youth Club

Historical research in their living environment, encounters with activists, and visits to cultural events (e.g., the play *Eichmann in Jerusalem*) have motivated and empowered the participants to take a stand themselves. When an arson attack was carried out on Sanja Ivezkovic's monument to the female partisans shortly before the exhibition opening, previous plans were abandoned, and the group referenced this event, as well as the concert (taking place these days) by a right-wing extremist artist, in a joint artistic work.

#### Braunschweig Group: Art Education Students

Here, too, local research was conducted on site: students of the project contacted schools and the adult education center, and a workshop concept – developed from Umberto Eco's 14 characteristics of fascism for school education – was implemented and translated into the modular memorial designed by Rahm Architects. The work in schools was difficult at times, but very meaningful. Historical knowledge has taken on a new relevance to reality.

#### The Vienna-based Group

Students of Art and Design Education at the Center for Didactics of Art and Interdisciplinary Education, along with two artists from the *Artists for Ukraine* network, were part of the Vienna-based group. Students explored Eco's fourteen characteristics, engaged in historical and philosophical research on authors such as Foucault's *What is Critique*, Butler's response, Arendt, etc. The joint reflection and discussion gave rise to specific interests, initial artistic prototypes, and renewed discussion. Ultimately, the question of contact and contactlessness in relation to current and historical fascism, as well as the associated traumas, evolved into a broader topic.

In an anti-fascist framework, critique is not an optional academic exercise but a democratic imperative. When students engage critically with fascist aesthetics, propaganda, and contemporary populist rhetoric, they learn to detect the "banality of evil" in everyday design, language, and policy. Art and design classrooms, therefore, become laboratories of resistance – places where students learn not only how to see but how to intervene.

#### Conclusion: Reclaiming the Role of Universities in Democratic Societies

The resurgence of fascist tendencies in modern societies demands a proactive response from educational institutions. Universities have both the responsibility and the capacity to foster anti-fascist awareness through critical, interdisciplinary education. Umberto Eco's "Eternal Fascism" and "How to Spot a Fascist" provide a robust framework for understanding the ideological mechanics of fascism and for building intellectual resistance. Participating students stressed the "importance of the topic of anti-fascism today" and the positive experience of "being able to do something" both politically and artistically; the importance of community building and communication in co-creative and activist contexts, the insight that "you don't have to be a homogeneous group to stand up for a cause"; that the project helped "seeing oneself as a multiplier, carrying the project and its ideas into everyday life/school"; the project was also "a space for courage and support to deal with family issues and traumas related to the Nazi era"; and encouraged to "(re)discover relevant literature (Eco, Foucault, Arendt, Butler, Havel...)" and lastly allowed for "new experiences in the tension between political expression and co-creative/artistic needs (a movement like through the fog and uncertain, but with a clear purpose)". They also emphasised that they had learned how to transfer difficult topics such as anti-fascism and anti-Semitism into schools in an artistic and meaningful way.

Understanding and cultivating a tolerance of ambiguity is not merely a philosophical exercise – it is a political necessity in anti-fascist education. Fascist ideologies thrive on rigid binaries, clear hierarchies, and the eradication of uncertainty. This discomfort creates fertile

ground for authoritarian narratives that promise clarity, order, and a singular “truth”.<sup>48</sup> Kierkegaard’s framing of anxiety as a response to the openness of freedom is therefore crucial: by learning to endure ambiguity, students develop resilience against ideologies that frame diversity, pluralism, and difference as threats rather than assets.

This has direct implications for combatting racism and anti-Semitism. Both are predicated on simplistic, essentialist narratives that erase the individuality and complexity of human beings in favor of stereotypes and scapegoats. Teaching students to tolerate—and even value—uncertainty and contradiction undermines these reductive logics. It encourages them to see human diversity not as chaos, but as a democratic richness. Thus, integrating existential and psychological perspectives into anti-fascist pedagogy equips learners with emotional and cognitive tools to resist fascist tendencies—not only in political rhetoric but within themselves. In this way, education becomes both a site of intellectual empowerment and a bulwark against authoritarianism.

Incorporating Eco’s insights into university curricula does more than honour historical memory—it equips students with the analytical tools to defend democratic life in the present and the future. In doing so, universities affirm their highest mission: the cultivation of knowledge, justice and freedom. Anti-fascist education is not a relic of postwar ideology but a living necessity. As we face new challenges, universities must reaffirm their role as guardians of democracy by teaching the values, skills, and courage needed to resist fascism in all its forms.

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# The exhibition at Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb

*The Arts of Resistance*

MSU Zagreb, 08/05/2025-  
21/06/2025

The exhibition showcases artistic works created as a result of the project, including the outcomes of international workshops and research meetings held at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, an artistic intervention with public schools in Braunschweig, as well as reflections by young artists on resistance through artistic practice. The exhibition's goal is to encourage critical thinking and dialogue about historical and contemporary forms of resistance against fascism and to open space for new interpretations through art.

Newly created works will be presented in correlation with pieces from the MSU collection that are related to themes of resistance and antifascism, as part of *The Triggers* exhibition cycle, thus creating new relationships and interpretations of the exhibited artworks and the concepts they address.

At the intersection of international youth work, contemporary artistic research, and political education, the TAoR project also aims to examine artistic works and cultural products based on local examples as possible forms of resistance. To build a pan-European understanding of fascism and artistic-based resistance, and with the support of internationally recognised artists, young participants have explored and co-created artworks as their expression of resistance against fascism.

## Artists

selma banich,

MSU Youth Club (Nina Čorić.

Celina Damjanović, Emma Matijević, Mirta Mesić, Antonija Mužar, Bohdan Myshkov, Stella Poljak, Dorian Štih)

Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond,

Daniel Hammer,

Theresia Heichinger,

Carola von Herder,

Anetta Luberda

Elena Rabkina,

Lena Scharnreiter,

Miriam Weichmann

Martin Krenn, RAHM architects,

Maria Ammann, Henadzi Arkhipau,

Paul-Can Atlama, Dana Crasser, Natascha Faber,

Xiaoming Huang, Fiona Jassmann, Nelly Khabipova,

Laetitia Lentz, Hye-Hyun Kim,

Merve Gisou Rosenthal,

and Daphne Schüttkemper.

Curator

Ana Škegro

# Collective Exhibition Setup

## at MSU



Arrival in Zagreb

Sanja Ivezović,  
Pregnant Memory

THE TRIGGERS  
COLLECTIVE  
EXHIBITION  
SETUP

Collective Exhibition Setup



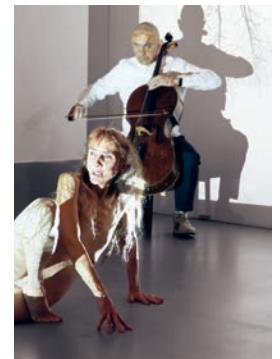
## Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb



# Opening MSU

08/05/2025

Museum of  
Contemporary Art  
Zagreb





# Museums As Places Of Resistance

Ana Škegro

*The Arts of Resistance*

MSU Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb,  
08/05 – 21/06/2025

In a time when democratic values, human rights, and anti-fascist legacies are increasingly challenged, distorted, or erased in public discourse and media, the role of museums extends far beyond preserving and exhibiting collections. Museums today have a crucial responsibility to act as spaces of horizontal learning, critical reflection, and civic engagement. As public institutions deeply embedded in cultural and educational ecosystems, museums must embrace their potential as active participants in shaping a more just and informed society. The

Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb (MSU/Muzej suvremene umjetnosti) has, over the years, developed a pedagogical and curatorial framework that prioritises collaborative projects and fosters socially engaged, participative practices through a variety of activities and programs. One such program is the MSU Youth Club, founded in 2016 with the goal of cultivating a participatory model that encourages young people not only to interpret but also to create content, becoming co-authors of contemporary artworks and programs, and agents of change. The Club brings

together individuals aged 17 to 27 with interests in contemporary art, critical thinking, and social responsibility. Through a range of activities—educational workshops, curatorial collaborations, research-based practices, and artistic interventions—participants are encouraged to interrogate dominant narratives, explore alternative histories, and reflect on their own position in society.

This approach reflects a broader institutional belief that museums must act not only as custodians of heritage, but also as incubators for civic imagination and platforms for collaborative social engagement. The projects *Art Works! European Culture of Resistance and Liberation* and *The Arts of Resistance* have emerged from this commitment, offering concrete examples of how contemporary art practice and youth engagement can intersect to address urgent historical and socio-political questions. It is within this framework that the exhibition



Ana Škegro

*The Arts of Resistance* was conceived—not as an isolated artistic event, but as the culmination of a co-creative research process rooted in long-term institutional collaboration. The exhibition explores the historical, cultural, and social dimensions of resistance against fascism—past and present—with the aim of creating new works of art through collaboration and shared authorship.

Based on Umberto Eco's essay "We Are European", the project positions Europe as a space of fragile peace and layered identity—a continent shaped by war and migration, now confronting new political and social challenges. The exhibition opened on 8 May, the day Zagreb was liberated eighty years earlier, a date that continues to resonate as a symbol of collective resistance, transformation, and the possibility of building a more equitable future.

The exhibition brought together a series of newly created works resulting from a months-long process involving artists, students, researchers,

and pupils from several European countries, who were brought into conversation with artworks from the MSU collection. The opening part of the exhibition featured black-and-white photographs by Tošo Dabac documenting the entry of partisans into Zagreb on 8 May, 1945. The historical footage serves as a visual prologue, unfettered by a nostalgic view of the past, and sets the stage for further reflection on who writes history and who is prepared for resistance today. Among the central works is the installation *Who Ignites, Who Remembers?*, a piece that contrasts two artefacts and two regimes of memory. On the first pedestal, protected by Plexiglas, is a ticket for a concert by Marko Perković Thompson. This seemingly innocuous object becomes a symbol of a society in which nationalism, misogyny, and historical revisionism are normalised under the guise of entertainment. Its contextual framework is violence against public spaces of memory, including the repeated acts of vandalism against the monument *Pregnant Memory* by



Opening of the exhibition

Sanja Iveković, displayed in front of the Museum as part of the author's retrospective exhibition shown at MSU in 2022. On the transport boxes next to the pedestal are 91 smoke flares, each bearing the name of a heroine of the National Liberation Struggle taken from the vandalised monument. Next to the opposing artefacts are tools with which they can be activated — a stone, a hammer, and matches. Memory is not kept passively here; it is relayed, shared and activated when needed. The work *Modular Sculpture for Democracy and Against Fascism*, created through the collaboration of students from the Academy of Fine Arts in Braunschweig and

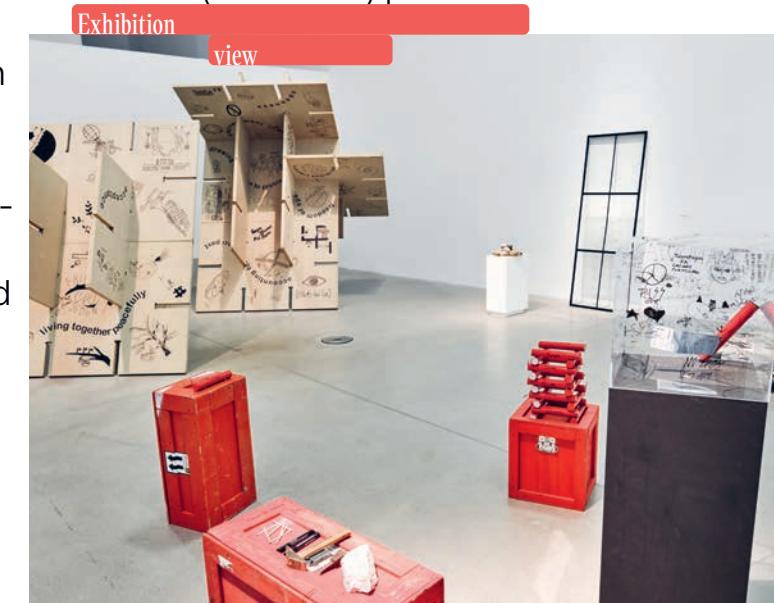
students from four local schools, represents a process of collective learning and creation. Through a conversation about the fourteen

characteristics of fascism from Umberto Eco's text *Ur-fascism* the students created antifascist visual messages that were transferred to modular wooden panels, designed as a sculpture that can be rearranged and moved, like

a living form of resistance that responds to space and context. The group work *Fascism is Contact(less)* was created through the collaboration of nine artists from Central and Eastern Europe. Starting from and discussing the fourteen characteristics of fascism, they developed a series of individual intermedia interventions that permeate the entire exhibition. Thus fragmented, yet connected, the works range from postcards depicting sculptures asleep, through sewn-up newspapers that we can no longer open, to a sound installation that uses synthetic voices reciting a poem by Michael Rosen in different languages, repeatedly warning of the dangers of fascism. This collective installation does not offer a single meaning; it calls for sensitivity and active presence in a time of social tensions and ideological divisions.

The newly created works are placed in correlation with works from the Museum's holdings that view historical memory

through a contemporary artistic prism. Igor Grubić's experimental documentary *Monument* (2010–2015) presents meditative



portraits of devastated antifascist monuments in the former Yugoslavia, viewed through the changing cycles of nature and the passage of time. The film captures the fragility of monumental forms and raises the question: What remains after society rejects what it once worshipped? Nemanja Cvijanović's powerfully symbolic work *Do Not Fuck With Social Democracy!* (2011) uses a white flag, a historical sign of surrender, which is transformed into a red, revolutionary surface, indicating a moment of vulnerability in which an individual becomes susceptible

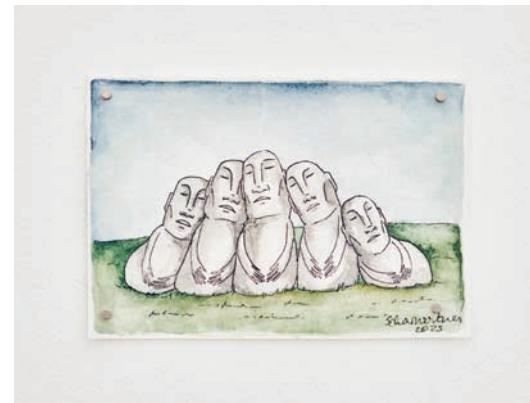
to the manipulation of seductive ideologies. The work serves as a visual trap, encouraging reflection on the role of the individual in democracy. Marina Rajšić's small object *Suspended Lipa Particles* (2022) continues the artist's exploration of the potential for regeneration through the memory of a place. Using the powder of the leaves of a linden tree, a kind of symbol and bearer of the name of the Croatian village Lipa that was almost completely destroyed during World War II, the artist creates a small cube that is both permanent and degradable, ready to be reactivated in the future, and materialises the potential of care and renewal as a form of resistance.

The project and the exhibition *The Arts of Resistance* bring together diverse voices which remind us that memory and resistance are not fixed entities but dynamic, evolving processes that are constantly negotiated. In highlighting both historical and contemporary forms of artistic resistance, the exhibition foregrounds the importance of solidarity across generations, geographies, and disciplines. It insists that

antifascism is not merely a legacy to be commemorated, but an ethical stance and cultural practice that demands our ongoing attention and action. By connecting newly created works with the MSU collection, the exhibition reinforces the idea that contemporary art can serve as a lens through which historical memory is not only preserved but reimagined and reactivated. Through sound, text, image, sculpture, and performance, the artists and participants challenge us to question dominant narratives, to feel the urgency of the present, and to imagine alternative futures rooted in justice and care. In doing so, the project highlights the Museum's broader mission—to serve not only as a repository of art, but as a site of education, critical reflection, and civic action. It affirms the Museum's commitment to using art as a tool for dialogue and empowerment—transforming cultural memory into a catalyst for resistance, resilience, and democratic values in practice.



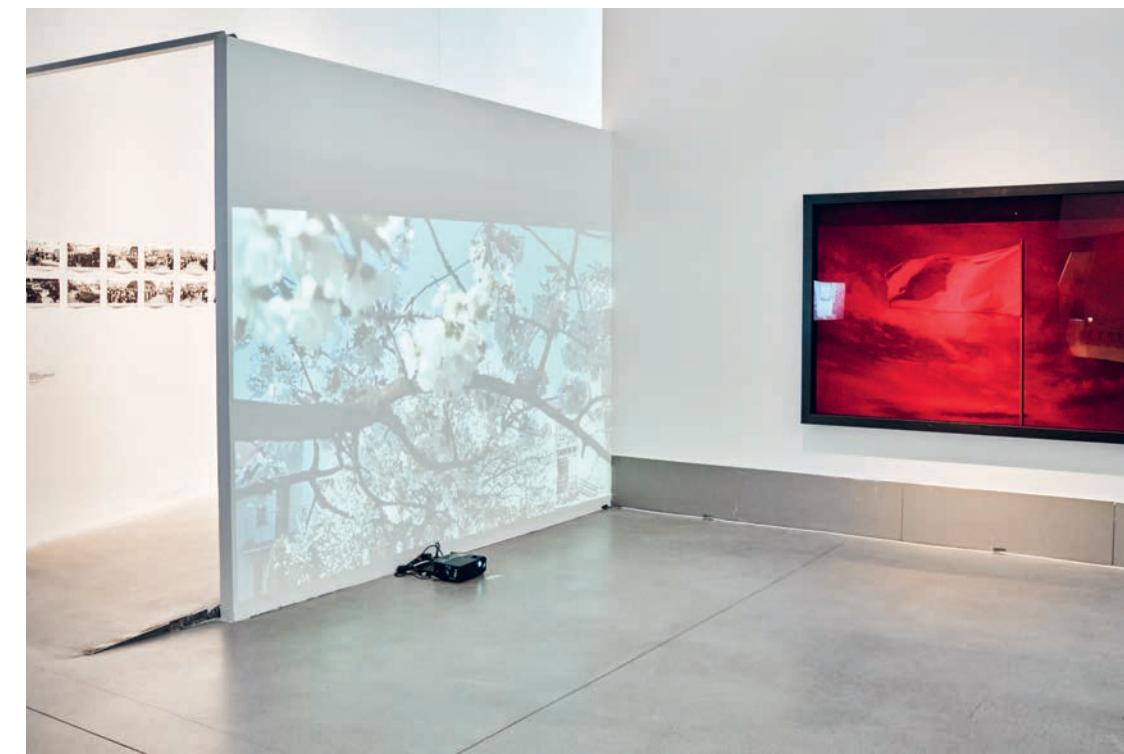






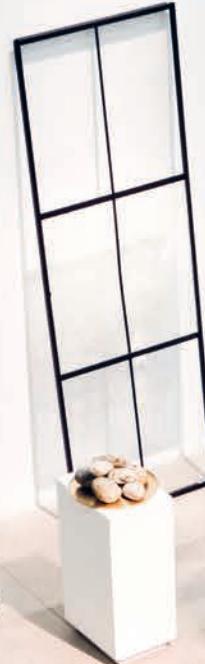
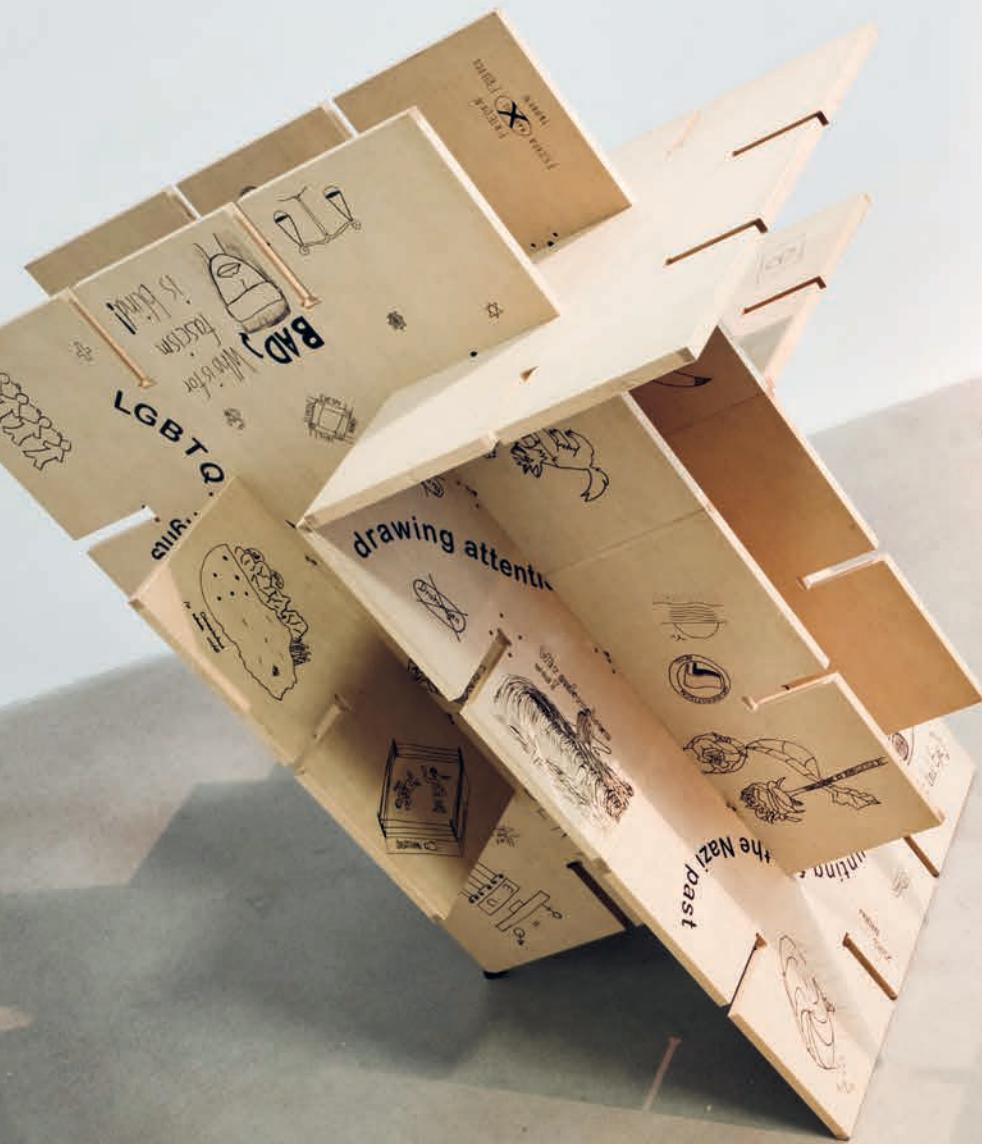
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The Arts of Resistance



Exhibition MSU

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I love the energy.  
And I love

that you addressed

emotional burnout  
right from the outset

Peace,

I began to realise,

is one of the most

demanding things

to sustain.

# Symposium

09/05/2025

*The Arts of Resistance Symposium*

MSU Zagreb

This one-day symposium held at the Školica Hall of the MSU Museum of Contemporary Art featured artists and scholars discussing resistance and remembrance with local examples, such as the Cartography of Resistance project in Zagreb or the development and activities of the Memorial Centre Lipa Pamti (Lipa Remembers) in Lipa, Croatia. In communication with the local population, these projects actively contribute to researching, remembering, and shaping the region's identity and support discovering new and sustainable possibilities for promoting tolerance and non-violence.



10:00 Welcome speech by Vesna Meštrić, Director of MSU

10:05 Ana Škegro: Presentation of *The Arts of Resistance* project

10:20 Reflection of the co-creative processes by the individual groups of the TAoR project.

11:00 Josip Jagić: Cartography of Resistance

11:15 Sanja Horvatinčić: Traces of Resistance: Material Culture of the National Liberation Struggle

11:30 Coffee break

12:00 Vana Gović, Damir Gamulin Gamba: Remembering as an Act –

The Example of the Memorial Center *Lipa Remembers*

12:30 Nika Petković: Slana – a Radical Landscape

12:45 Closing discussion

13:00 Collective visit to

*The Arts of Resistance* exhibition

# Virtual



We must always strive  
to prevent exclusion.



Together against  
hatred and oppression.

80  
anniversary of the  
liberation  
Mauthausen Committee  
Austria

2025 marks the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Mauthausen concentration camp and its numerous satellite camps. Each year, the annual commemoration and liberation ceremonies within the network of Mauthausen Committee Austria (MKÖ) remember the horrendous crimes of the Nazi regime and commemorate the victims who suffered and lost their lives in these camps. The 2025 international liberation and commemoration ceremonies are therefore combining a commemoration of the victims with an urgent appeal to all generations: Peace is not a given. It needs to be defended and promoted daily.

[befreiungsfeier.at](http://befreiungsfeier.at)

International Liberation  
and Commemoration Ceremony  
at the Memorial Mauthausen

30/06/2025

## Commemoration



The fight against fascism is not a thing  
of the past that we only read about  
in history books.



These days,  
if you have a dream  
of stopping fascism,  
you don't have to travel back  
in time or kill anyone –  
just treat those around you  
with acceptance,  
kindness,  
dignity,  
and respect.



# Se- lective

13

# Populism

“Ur-fascism is based upon a selective populism, [...] individuals as individuals have no rights, and the People is conceived as a quality, a monolithic entity expressing the Common Will. [...] the Leader pretends to be their interpreter. Wherever a politician casts doubt on the legitimacy of a parliament because it no longer represents the Voice of the People, we can smell Ur-fascism.”

## Partners

In 2012, Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond founded the association HASENHERZ or the Pleasures of Moving Images and Words, which hosts a nomadic screenings and discussions series inspired by Arnold Schönberg's Verein für musikalische Privataufführung. The HASENHERZ series has taken place at various venues, including the Kulturzentrum bei den Minoriten Graz, Kunsthalle Wien, Whitechapel Gallery London, Videonale Bonn, Europäisches Forum Alpbach, Brücke Museum, Center for Contemporary Art Tel Aviv, Festival Diagonale'17, Kunsthaus Graz, among others. In addition to the screening and discussion format, the association also conducts artistic research projects. Anderwald's + Grond's work has been shown internationally, such as École cantonale d'art de Lausanne, Centre Pompidou in Paris, Himalayas Art Museum in Shanghai, Tate Modern in London, Herzliya

Museum, and mumok in Vienna. Anderwald + Grond have engaged in youth work for many years, including

the Art Works!  
European Culture

of Resistance and Liberation

## HASENHERZ

of Moving Images and Words.

Vienna

project, which was recognised by the European Commission as a model of best practices in response to the COVID-19 crisis and received the Honourable Prize from the Comité International de Mauthausen as part of the Hans Maršálek Award.

# University of Applied Arts, Vienna

The University of Applied Arts Vienna takes on the challenge of positively influencing art, research and society. It continuously shapes and directs the present toward the future. Teachers and researchers, students, alumni, employees, and partners unite as a collective that takes a stand for an open society, applying artistic and scientific competences as the key to furthering that goal by inventing new forms of work, education, and art; by creating spaces for intellectual and creative endeavours, encouraging an open discourse that is both critical and empathic; by researching and evaluating the challenges facing society; by exploring radical solutions and developing new ideas to co-design and cope with transformations in technology, media, and society. The complex challenges ahead will require co-operative and multi-faceted approaches. We are not looking for simple answers, but for new questions and

creative strategies arising within the context of our day-to-day activity.

# Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

The Museum of Art Zagreb is an acclaimed museum with a focus on post-1950 contemporary art and artistic research. For many years, the museum has been engaged in ambitious youth work and participated in the EU project Museum as Toolbox, which together with young people aimed to find out what a museum of contemporary art can look like in their eyes and what it has to do with contemporary life itself. MSU Zagreb primarily attempts to be a public and autonomous venue where the categories of social engagement, responsibility, and equal opportunities for everybody are tested and examined on a daily basis.

The HBK Braunschweig is one of the leading art academies in Germany and, as the only state art academy in Lower Saxony, has a special responsibility for the development of art and culture as an indispensable component of a lively, self-reflective society capable of change.

HBK Braunschweig also has a design department with independent research and teaching as well as scientific and educational research and teaching units, and is an internationally orientated university with the right to award doctorates and habilitations. HBK Braunschweig aims to comprehensively develop, research, and reflect on the potential of art and culture and to explore the tension between open-ended development and goal-orientated application in both practical and theoretical terms.

# University of Art Braunschweig

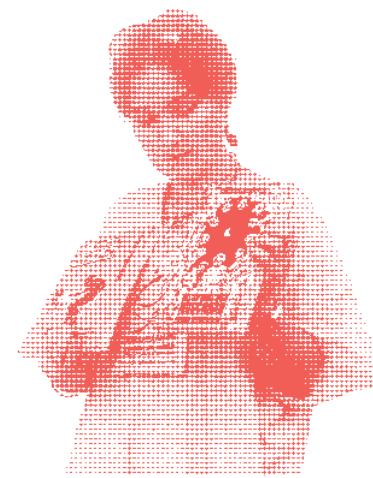
# Ur-Fascism

# 14

speaks  
Newspeak.

“Ur-fascism speaks Newspeak. [...] All the Nazi-or fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning.”

Gelavizh  
Abolhassani



is an Iranian scholar, artist, and visual-graphic designer. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Visual Art from the University of Science and Culture in Tehran, Iran, and her Master's degree in Graphic Design and Communication from the University for the Creative Arts in London, UK. She earned her doctorate (Dr. phil.) in Philosophy of Arts from the University of Applied Arts Vienna (Die Angewandte). Her research explores the historical ties between art and theory, with a particular focus on art and artist autonomy in both Iran and Austria. She has showcased her art projects and theoretical artistic research at multiple exhibitions and events, including lectures, across Iran and Europe.

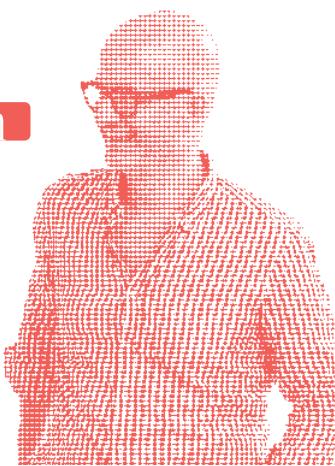
Ruth Anderwald +  
Leonhard Grond



are artist-researchers and guest professors at ARC Artistic Research Center, mdw University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, and affiliate members of CSS Centre for Sensory Studies, Concordia University, Montreal/Tio'tia:ke. From 2021 to 2024, they have been professors for the Ph.D. in Art programme at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna. Their projects include EU-funded *The Arts of Resistance* (2024–25, CREA2027), ART WORKS! (2019–21, Erasmus+), and FWF PEEK-funded *Navigating Dizziness Together* (2020–24, AR 598), *Dizziness–A Resource* (2014–17, AR 244). Having curated for Whitechapel Gallery London, Kunsthalle Wien, or U-jazdowski Castle Warsaw, with curator Sergio Edelsztein, they develop *Illegocene–The Age of Dizziness* (2025–28), a KSB-funded networked exhibition, performance, and discursive series with contributions by Amanda Beech, Colectivo Los Ingrávidos, Tim Etchells, a.o., in cooperation with KINDL Centre for Contemporary Art, Kunsthaus Graz, MSU Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, and Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, Poland. [www.on-dizziness.com](http://www.on-dizziness.com).

## Contributors

## Alexander Damianisch



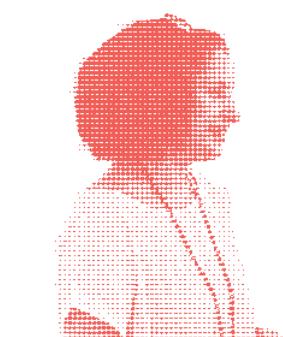
the European League of Institutes of the Arts. He engages in teaching, moderation, writing, and consulting, is an active member of the ELIA Future Readiness working group, and has pioneered Special Interest Groups within the Society for Artistic Research (SAR). His most recent publication is entitled “UNDERSTANDING: Proposing Pragmas Relating Poetics to Politics of Understanding”, published in *Uncertain Curiosity in Artistic Research, Media and Cultural Studies*, edited by Lisa Stuckey and Alexander Damianisch. Cham: Springer 2025. He also facilitated dialogues with high-level funding agencies as a former member of the SAR executive board. Previously, he served as the inaugural director of Zentrum Fokus Forschung at Angewandte. Prior to that, he developed and led Austria’s artistic research funding program (PEEK).

## selma banich



is a performing artist born in Yugoslavia and currently based in Zagreb. She has worked independently and in collaboration with other artists, curators, groups, and initiatives in the Balkans, across Europe and in the US. She works with the medium of performance art, specifically through actions and interventions in public spaces, and engages in public practices within communities. She was previously involved in numerous dance, theatre and opera productions as a choreographer. She also performs on film. The art films she was involved in were screened worldwide. Her artistic and social practice is based on process-oriented, research-driven, and activist work, and is politically inspired by anarchism and feminism.

## Preeti Kathuria



is a writer, curator, and researcher. She holds postgraduate degrees in History of Art from the National Museum

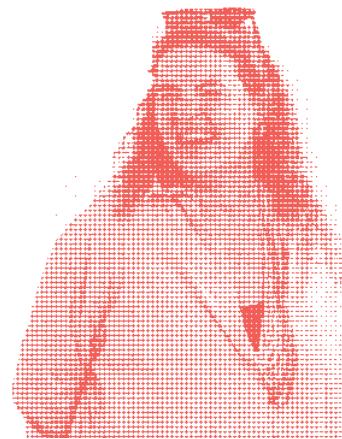
Institute, New Delhi and in Curating Contemporary Art from the Royal College of Art, London. She has worked as an Assistant Editor of Contemporary Art at the Lalit Kala Akademi (National Academy of Art), New Delhi, and has written on contemporary art for various art journals and magazines. Besides critical writing and editorial work, she has taught visual art at several universities and colleges. At present, she is a PhD researcher at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna.

## Martin Krenn



is an artist, artistic researcher, and curator. He works as a professor of art mediation/education at the Institute of Fine Art, Braunschweig University of Art. Krenn uses various types of media, including text, photography and video. Most of his projects in public space take the form of social sculpture. By consistently expanding the field of art, he tries to initiate discussions about socio-political topics and thereby challenges conventional thinking.

## Ruth Mateus-Berr



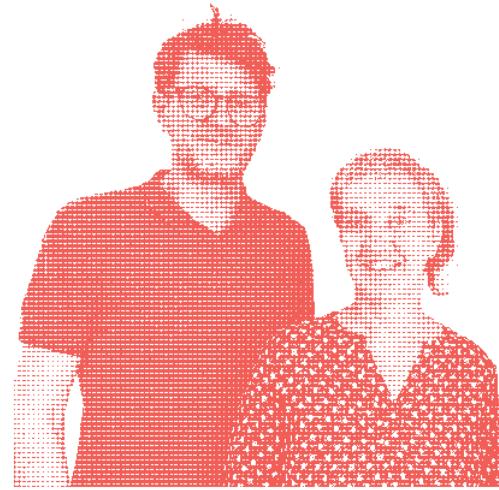
is an Austrian conceptual artist. She has created drawings, paintings, sculptures, videos, installations, and performed and worked with various media. She is a professor at the University of Applied Arts Vienna and a multi-sensory design researcher, continually exploring new fields. Her award-winning works explore artistic research, critical design, digital humanism, social development goals, urbanism, art and dementia, and health. Her latest artistic research project, “DEMEDARTS” (funded by FWF PEEK AR-609), aims to foster greater empathy for people with dementia in our society.

## Jo O'Brien

is an artist, educator, and researcher whose work explores the queer-crip potential of confusion as both a form of resistance and a call for collaboration. Their artistic research practice encompasses material and social forms of art-making, as well as access-oriented pedagogy and community building within the university context. Jo's work is often collaborative, and their pedagogical research has been supported through fellowships and grants. Their doctoral project at the University of Applied Arts Vienna examines the relationship between legibility and illegibility, confusion, and community. Jo is also a Lecturer in the Faculty of Culture and Community at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.



## RAHM architekten



founded in 2003, consists of Adele J. Gindlstrasser and Hans Schartner. They work on a wide variety of projects with diverse requirements, ranging from detached houses to wooden observation towers, as well as emergency shelters for people experiencing homelessness and exhibition designs. The general refurbishment of the WUK, the open workshop and culture centre, was recently completed on behalf of the City of Vienna. A free-standing, mirrored lift tower in the courtyard now enables barrier-free access to the building, among other benefits. RAHM architekten also enjoys working with artists on projects in public spaces, such as with Mehmet Tanik on the "Street Kitchen" or Martin Krenn on the Peace Cross in St. Lorenz.

## Robert Rotifer

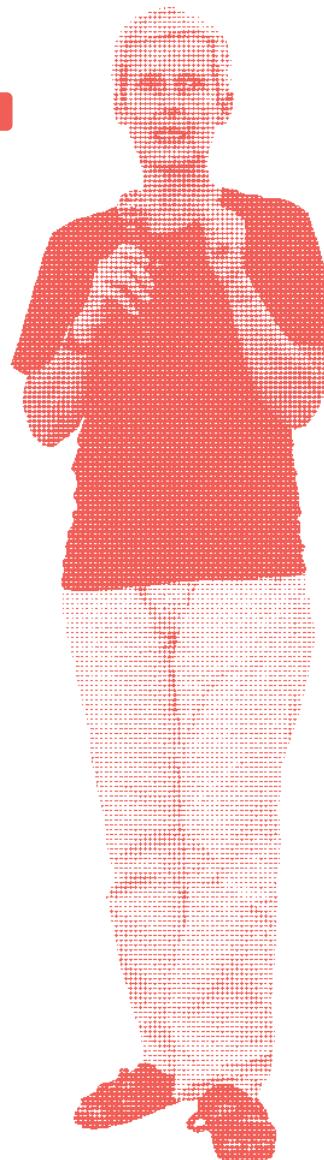
is an Austrian musician, music journalist, and radio presenter living in Canterbury. His grandmother is the resistance fighter, politician (KPÖ), and philanthropist Irma Schwager. The video for *The Frankfurt Kitchen*, a combination of live-action film and Rotifer's paintings animated by Lelo Brossmann (Heinz aus Wien), was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010 and has been included in the collection there.



The Arts of Resistance

## Jo Schmeiser

explores the interfaces of art, film, theory and politics. Focusing on issues including racism, sexism and anti-Semitism, and reflecting critically on their form and structure, she often works collectively. Films: *WIDERSTANDSMOMENTE/MOMENTS OF RESISTANCE* (Plaesion Film: 2019, A/D), *LIEBE GESCHICHTE/LOVE HISTORY* (Klub Zwei: 2010, A). Publications: *Conzepte. New Versions of Political Thought* ([www.conzepte.org](http://www.conzepte.org): 2015).



## Ana Skegro



is a Senior Curator, Head of Media Art Collection, Head of Experimental and Research Department at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MSU) in Zagreb and Mentor of the MSU Youth Club. The Youth Club brings together a group of young people aged 17 to 27 who are taught by the Museum of Contemporary Art's educators and curators about contemporary art and culture, as well as the importance, role, and work of the Museum. These young people are encouraged to actively participate in designing and implementing different programs from various areas of museum activities.



## Barbara Staudinger

Born in Vienna she studied History, Theatre Studies, and Jewish Studies at the University of Vienna, and earned her doctorate in 2001. From 1998 to 2013, she worked at the Institute for Jewish History in Austria (St. Pölten), and from 2005 to 2007, she served as a curator at the Jewish Museum in Munich. From 2013 to 2018, she worked as a freelance curator in Vienna and was a member of the curatorial team for the Austrian exhibition at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial (opened in 2021). From 2018 to 2022, she served as Director of the Jewish Museum Augsburg Swabia. Since July 2022, she has been Director of the Jewish Museum Vienna.

# On the Future of Antifascist Work <sup>in</sup> Jewish Museums

Barbara Staudinger  
Director of the Jewish Museum Vienna

Museums in general—and Jewish museums in particular—are likely to play an increasingly important role in the defence of democratic values in the future. Founded as civic institutions, museums have historically represented the self-image of a bourgeoisie that insisted on democratic participation. Jewish museums, in turn, have historically represented the desire of a minority for social recognition and inclusion. The struggle for tolerance and against exclusion remains central to Jewish museums. And in a world that is becoming ever more polarised and increasingly relies on the exclusion of certain groups, they represent a counter-image: How can—and how do—we want to live together in the future?

The ways in which Jewish museums around the world, through their exhibitions and educational programs, answer this question and shape this counter-image vary widely. Yet they all revolve around the same core themes: humanistic values, human dignity, and the necessity of empathy. They also share the understanding that these values stand in direct opposition to everything fascism seeks to achieve. Jewish museums, therefore, work—almost by definition—against fascism, as all the values they represent are antifascist. But is that enough?

We live in a present that is increasingly marked by fascist tendencies worldwide. Increasingly, states are redefining democracy to establish authoritarian structures under the guise of democracy. More and more governments are clashing with individuals and institutions that speak out, question, or even attempt to resist these developments. This does not paint a bright picture for the future of

museums—and certainly not for Jewish museums. To avoid being co-opted by such regimes, museums, including Jewish museums, must increasingly defend themselves using their most effective tool: direct engagement with the public.

Jewish museums, in particular, can form alliances with other minorities, build bridges, and connect people. They can create intergenerational connections, as Jewish history—especially after the Holocaust—is one that is understood in terms of generations. And they do this not because Jewish museums claim a higher moral authority, but because their very existence demonstrates what can happen when we fail to resist fascism. Jewish museums in Europe, and especially in Germany and Austria, were founded on the promise of “Never Again”—and we take that promise seriously.

In the spirit of this “Never Again”, the Jewish Museum Vienna, together with artists Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond (HASENHERZ), the Holocaust and Genocide Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa, and the Austrian Cultural Forum in Pretoria, is developing a workshop that addresses the generations following genocide, apartheid, and the Holocaust. How can members of the second, third, and fourth generations live with the legacy of their ancestors? What can we learn from this, and what consequences should it have for our lives in today’s society?

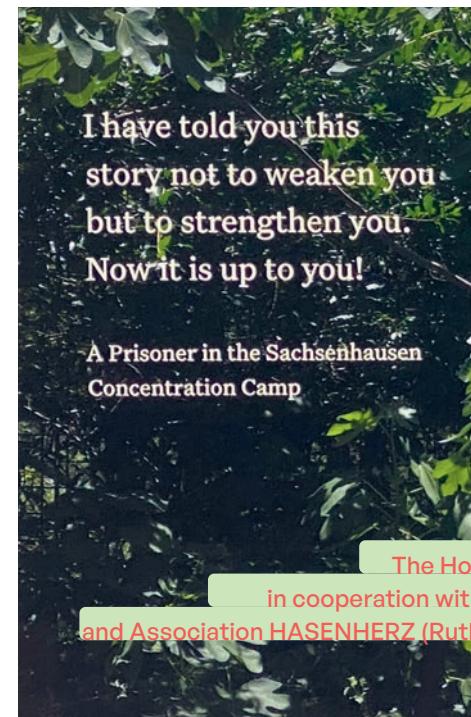
Connecting people, building relationships, and working toward a shared future: this is how I envision the antifascist work of cultural institutions—and especially of Jewish museums—in the years to come.

# Resist Together! Follow-up initiative Modes of Coexistence

starting in December 2025

Remembering the past is meaningful in itself; however, its impact on our agency is particularly significant in relation to the future. Remembering genocides and their potential prevention is no exception. Anchored in the interdisciplinary project *The Arts of Resistance*, the initiative Resist Together! Modes of Coexistence develops a toolkit from workshops that combine historical research, critical analysis, and co-creative

artistic practice in a dynamic process. By imagining and enacting a culture of resistance against cruelty and violence, the initiative, starting with a workshop in Johannesburg in December 2025, opens pathways for shared understanding, fostering local and intercontinental collaboration and cultivating innovative, interdisciplinary approaches to art, activism, and remembrance cultures.



The Holocaust and Genocide Centre Johannesburg (Tali Nates),  
in cooperation with the Jewish Museum Vienna (Barbara Staudinger)  
and Association HASENHERZ (Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond)

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Barbara Staudinger)

Ana Škegrov: p. 127 (big photo)

eSeL.at – Sarah Tasha Hauber: p. 29, 30,  
31 (small photo), 155 (Jo O'Brien)

eSeL.at – Robert Puteanu:  
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(selma banich, Alexander Damianisch),  
153 (Ruth Mateus-Berr, Martin Krenn),  
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Martin Krenn: p. 17, 19, 103 (top right)

MSU Youth Club: p. 102, 103 (bottom  
right), 143 (cutout)

RAHM architekten: p. 154 (portrait)

Thukral and Tagra: p. 87–90

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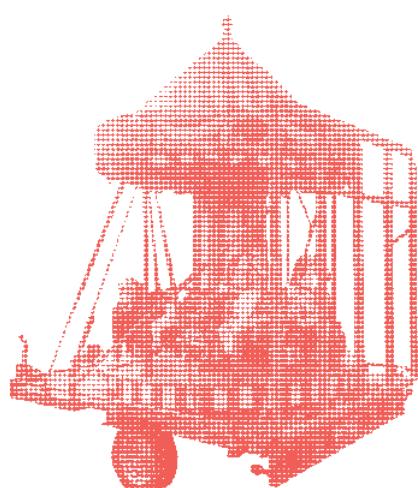
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Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien  
University of Applied Arts Vienna

## msu

muzej suvremenе umjetnosti /  
museum of contemporary art  
zagreb

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the generous support of





*Resistance requires not only critical thinking, but also new aesthetic approaches. This project addresses this significant challenge.*  
Ilija Trojanow, writer, translator and publisher

*I would have loved to take part myself: To learn about historical fascism, to detect and recognise its current forms, and how, despite our different origins and strategies, we fundamentally belong to the same side. These days, the way frontlines are drawn is so unbearably ugly and banal, it seems not just reasonable to develop an art of resistance, it could also be beautiful.*

Eva Menasse, writer

*The Arts of Resistance constitutes a collaborative and intergenerational artistic research inquiry into the historical and contemporary (artistic) means of resistance against fascism, initiated by Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond as part of their long-term engagement with the topic.*

With contributions by Gelavizh Abolhassani, Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond, Alexander Damianisch, Jo Schmeiser, Preeti Kathuria, Martin Krenn, Ruth Mateus-Berr, Jo O'Brien, Robert Rotifer, Ana Škegrov, and Barbara Staudinger.

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