Nuances of Populism: Political and Cultural Dimensions

Panel 1

MODERATION
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Populism and Anti-Populism in Politics and Art

Oliver Marchart

In his lecture Populism and Antipopulism Marchart discussed the question whether populism is a part of democracy or its opposite. He provided a brief outline of the structure and history of populism and addressed the question whether, not only populism is problematic but also the common forms of antipopulism. Political antipopulism, as it dominates the media public sphere, now corresponds, in the field of art, to a sentiment against any form of all too ›populist‹ or ›popular‹ art. In the second part of the talk – following his book *Conflictual Aesthetics. Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere* – Marchart addressed the reservations of large parts of the art scene toward political, activist, and thus necessarily complexity-reducing art.

Social Sadism as Free Speech

Ana Teixeira Pinto

In recent years a great many artists and institutions have rallied around the defense of ›artistic freedom‹, allegedly threatened by a moralistic creep. Freedom is here understood as the freedom to, if needed, offend others. In her lecture Social Sadism as Free Speech, Teixeira Pinto argued that appeals to liberty in this narrow sense can (and often do) clash with freedom in a broader sense, contributing to political unfreedom. What does it mean to advocate for a plurality of individual voices whose freedom is – paradoxically – predicated on muting or suppressing collective diversity? From this perspective the online cultural wars can be construed as a proxy for a greater battle around de-Westernisation, imperialism and *white* hegemony.

Fig. 2: Ganzeer, *Tank vs. Bread-Biker, Cairo,* 2011

Oliver Marchart

Day in and day out, the media speak of a populist wave. But the term populism, as it is commonly used, is commonly used is accompanied by misunderstandings. Among these misunderstandings is the idea that populism has something to do with a certain definable political ideology; just as socialism as a political ideology means, for example, that one cares about social justice, or liberalism means defending individual rights. But populism is not an ideology. For there is no substantive political core to what is considered populist beyond the mere fact that populists speak on behalf of the people, which is only a nominal definition of populism. Thus, according to this definition, populism has something to do with invoking the people. Beyond that, nothing else can be said. However, in liberal democratic societies, this invocation of the people is the task of all parties, unless they see themselves as mere single-issue parties that do not speak in the name of the general public, but only in the name of a specific group. And this is not recommendable in today's democracies — you might recall that the FDP (the Free Democratic Party) was once kicked out of the Bundestag because it was no longer perceived as a party that stands for the general public, and thus speaks in the name of the people, but as a party that speaks on behalf of the hoteliers. For this reason, all parties that do not wish to specialise in managing a small core clientele always speak on behalf of the people. So, what is specific about populism?

Some argue that there is a certain populist style. If you consider politicians such as Donald Trump, Matteo Salvini, or Boris Johnson, you can see that they seem to share a certain style of politics. The concept of style may be of interest to art historians, but from a political science perspective I do not think it is very viable because it is too diffuse and very difficult to define. Therefore, it would be a good idea to understand populism more as a certain logic of mobilisation, and the minimal definition widely used in political science comes from Cas Mudde, perhaps the most renowned populism researcher at the moment, who points out that populism invokes two homogeneous antagonistic camps: the ›pure‹ people on the one hand and the corrupt elite on the other. These two camps are, of course, morally over-coded – the people are pure, the elite corrupt. This mobilisation against an elite portrayed as corrupt, whoever that elite may be, is what characterises populism. In addition, another characteristic can be observed, which was repeatedly emphasised by Jan-Werner Müller, for example, populists attach importance not only to inciting the people against the elite, but also to claim of themselves: »We and we alone represent the people.« From this, one can already see that populism, at least in the eyes of its critics, is anti-pluralistic. That is, it does not accept other positions that could legitimately speak in the name of the people.

From a completely different, namely a post-Marxist tradition of populism research, Ernesto Laclau has also pointed out that populism is always characterised by invoking the people against a power bloc; the antagonism of the people vs. the power bloc. Although one might think that this is a handy, and above all ideologically neutral definition of populism, if we look at the way the term populism is used, at least in continental

Europe (unlike, for example, Latin America and even the USA) we see that it usually has a pejorative meaning. The assertion that someone is a populist is almost always used to devalue that person's political position. This may be sympathetic to us in many cases, but it becomes problematic when populism is actually only a logic and not an ideology. Because what I then try to delegitimise politically, with populism as a swearword, is a position that is initially undefined in terms of content, which can be left or right. For populism *per se* has no content. Instead of discussing the right-wing extremist content of a certain political position in my criticism of populism, I simply speak of populism, which in many cases almost amounts to a trivialisation of right-wing extremism. At the same time, it ignores the fact that there can certainly be left-wing or emancipatory forms of populism. In political science, for example, a distinction is often made between two-position and three-position populism. Two-position populism has only two components, the people and the elites. In three-position populism, however, a third figure is added, and these are the others, such as refugees and migrants. Three-position populism is therefore often an extreme right-wing form of populism, because it is not only about attacking a power bloc but also about treading not only upwards, as it were, but above all downwards – namely on third parties. If, in contrast, you consider the Spanish Podemos party as an example of leftist populism, you will find that this third position does not appear in the Podemos discourse, and that the assertion of a homogenous people is also not part of the Podemos discourse, but that the Spanish people are seen here as a pluralistic society, which certainly includes refugees. There are thus by all means also forms of non-xenophobic populism.

Why is this hardly ever referred to in the public debate? My guess is that this has something to do with the half understanding of democracy in our liberal democracies today. The understanding of democracy is halved because it ultimately aims to defend a democracy without demos. Populism, however, is a form of political articulation that belongs to democracy. Populism invokes the sovereign, and in a democracy, invoking the sovereign, namely the people, cannot be illegitimate *per se* for democracy is based on precisely this. So how can there be democracy without populism? This answer is certainly shared by others in populism research, though not by all. There can be no democracy without populism. Populism accompanies democracy, as was once said, like its shadow. I am thus not so sure whether, as some media claim, we are already on the verge of the end of the populist wave. Populism, as we see it today in Germany, Austria, and other countries, is far from having reached its end. Populist parties keep popping up in waves. If the wave goes up in certain crisis situations, it flattens out again in phases of calming down. But populism goes hand in hand with democracy.

In light of this observation, it is possible to launch at least a qualified defence of populism, because, in a democracy, it is legitimate to speak in the name of the sovereign. The problem, however, is that the right-wing extremist versions of populism are now never described as such. If I had more time I could go into more detail. I have often discussed with journalists why the media actually calls certain parties right-wing populist and not right-wing extremist. Their answer was: We cannot get this through. We would like to, but we cannot broadcast that. This reveals the hegemony that predominates in today's society. In

order for us to be allowed to criticise the right-wing extremism of ›mainstream‹ parties at all, we have to use a euphemism – the term populism. We must not call a spade a spade.

This brings me to the second part of my lecture, namely populism in art. As you have seen, I have set out to rehabilitate populism. And in my recent book *Conflictual Aesthetics, Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere*, I also try to defend populism in relation to artistic practices, in particular in relation to artistic activism as a valuable form of art production. In doing so, I also question the criteria we apply to art – and by ›we‹ I do not only mean art critics, but society as a whole, the art sector, and the art system as such. What is considered valuable art, what is considered less valuable art? The first term that comes to mind when one thinks of populism in art is propaganda. According to widespread assumptions, political art is often propagandistic. And when we think of the term propaganda, we usually think of manipulation. But that is not the original literal meaning of propaganda. The word propaganda was used for the first time in 1622, when the Pope set up a commission of cardinals with the title *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*. This commission was literally dedicated to the propagation of the faith. When the Catholic Church speaks of faith, you can be sure that it means the true faith, not the lie. Although there was talk of propaganda in the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century, in contrast to Göbbels, there was no thought of manipulating people – it was taken for granted that the truth was to be propagated; that *truth*, of course, which was guaranteed by the laws of history and confirmed by the politburo, but nevertheless the truth.

Here, I show you an example of artistic activism, namely Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping. The artist Bill Talen imitates a southern preacher, that is to say a propagandist, in the form of the fictional figure Reverend Billy. Together with his gospel choir he repeatedly performs the »First Amendment Song«, often at political demonstrations. They do nothing else but sing the First Amendment in gospel manner, that is to say the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America, which guarantees the right to public freedom of expression. The situation becomes paradoxical when one is arrested by the police for this very reason. In this way, a performance that consists of nothing more than a demonstration of the right to freedom of speech is prevented by those forces of law and order that are actually there to protect this right. Reverend Billy is thus engaged in propaganda, but a form of propaganda that distorts a system that does not adhere to its own conditions of truth. Thus, when truth is propagated here by artists, even if in a paradoxical way, one could ask why artistic activism has such a bad reputation within the art sector? What is so bad about the propagation of truth? In my opinion, the problem is that, in the art sector, it is generally overlooked that artistic activism has accompanied art production since the invention of modern bourgeois autonomous art. From the very beginning, it was tested how one could move from an autonomous position to a heteronomous position, that is to say, how one could commit oneself to a cause or be in the service of a cause. While art was previously always heteronomous and thus subordinated to the church and the royal court, modern bourgeois art has become free through the development of the art market, the emergence of bourgeois patronage, etc. This is how the idea of artistic autonomy develops. And in the historical moment in which

this notion becomes solidified, autonomy can also be discarded autonomously. One can make the autonomous decision to heteronomy, that is, one can join a cause. The modern party-affiliated artist of the twentieth century is an offshoot of this historical develop-ment, which already began with Jacques-Louis David in the context of the French Revolution. David was not only a propagandist of the French Revolution, but, as an artist, he became a politician, a member of parliament, who joined the Jacobin Club and only narrowly escaped the guillotine after the fall of the Jacobins. David was a propagandist and politician; he thus gave up a bit of his own autonomy. From this historical point, an art history of heteronomous, political, and activist art could be written, from David to Courbet (who joined the Paris commune); to Russian revolutionary art; to the 1930s (when, for example, the New York Workers Dance League defined dance as a revolutio-nary weapon in the class struggle); and finally to contemporary forms of artistic practice that are still committed to a political goal or political movements to this day. Some names have already been mentioned, for example, the Centre for Political Beauty and Christoph Schlingensief – all these positions are widely known.

So where does the rejection come from, if political art and activist art have al-ways been part of art? I think this rejection has something to do with the logic of populism and the logic of propaganda. Because the canon of values by which we are accustomed to measuring art is precisely one that does not support this form of politics based on simplification. We usually assume that the more complex, the more opaque and ambigu-ous an artistic work remains, the more valuable it is. Under no circumstances should it be completely open to interpretation. It must remain a space of the unintelligible, otherwise the gap between work and interpretation would be closed. This conviction runs counter to the principle of politics – because politics, and not just populist politics, is ultimately based on the principle of complexity reduction. One must make oneself understood. To do so, complexity must be reduced, that is to say, it must be simplified. This is exactly what po-pulism is accused of, although it is indeed part of every political articulation. If a space of ambiguity remains, if I do not make clear what my political position is and what I should be elected for, I will most likely not be all that successful as a politician. However, I now think that this logic of political simplification is not as under-complex as it generally appears. In fact, I would suggest that complexity as a value, as it is held up in the art sector, is much simpler than the political simplicity I just mentioned. Why? My thesis is that, in the canon of values of the art sector, most works of art are actually not complex at all, but are rather based on a pseudo-complexity, a simplifying complexity. This is because artistic positions are characterised above all by their recognisability. It is thus a matter of labelling one's own position as an artist. Although these positions can ultimately be differentiated from one another on the art market, they are at the same time interchangeable in that they can be mediated via the general equivalent of money. This means that, in the final analysis, there is no incompatibility between artistic positions, at least not from the perspective of the art market. In contrast, the political form of complexity does in fact mean incompati-bility. The political terrain is one of contradictions, of conflicts and confrontations between irreconcilable positions.

As an example, I would like to show you a work by the Israeli performance collective Public Movement, which refers to precisely this incompatibility of political positions. The work, the title of which is *Positions*, is itself not particularly complex. A rope is stretched across a public square, and the audience is distributed to one or the other side of the rope. Binary watchwords are then called out: male/female, left/right, Israel/Palestine, etc. Depending on what you choose, you have to select one of the sides. What becomes obvious is that none of us is always on one side of the dividing line. We have to cross this line permanently, and new splits between the participants are always emerging. For example, the group of those who have found themselves together on the side of the political left splits as soon as they are called upon to decide between Israel and Palestine. In this way, an awareness of the complexity of antagonisms is created. A complexity of conflicts that are ultimately irreconcilable. This complexity – the complexity of conflict – is true complexity, I would argue. And I would like to conclude with a third example.

To summarise once again: I had first attempted to present artistic propaganda as a propagation of truth using the example of Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping. One quality of artistic activism can thus be to speak the truth. It is in this sense that Foucault had taken up the Greek concept of *parrhesia*, which distinguished Attic democracy, namely ›speaking the truth‹ vis-à-vis a power that lies. The second reference consists of the overlapping of lines of conflict in one and the same person, but also in different groups which, as it turns out, are not identical with themselves. From this, I concluded that conflicts are always complex. With my final example, I would like to point out that, thirdly, conflicts are also complex because lines of conflict are constantly shifting. Conflicts are not stable, they change. Here, I would like to show you a piece of graffiti by the Egyptian street-art artist Ganzeer, who was painting political graffiti on walls in Cairo during the so-called Arabellion of 2011. We see the graffiti of a tank. Incidentally, Ganzeer himself understands his own work as counterpropaganda. In this work, the tank became a moving target. In the course of the development of the Egyptian revolution, the meaning of the tank shifted, and at the same time more and more layers of meaning were applied to this tank. I quote Ganzeer:

»A few months after I painted it, protesters were attacked by the military in front of the television centre. So another artist updated my work by drawing a lot of demonstrators in front of the tank, some of them being run over it. Once again, other people came and painted over everything. So once again, other people came and painted over everything except the tank itself, which now stood completely alone. They wrote something next to it along the lines ›the people and the army hand in hand‹, thus turning it into a pro-military work. Shortly after that, some other artists came along and painted a big military monster eating people right next to the tank. So it switched back to being an anti-military piece again.«

This is thus what happens as soon as I enter the public space with a political position; I put my position up for *discussion*. It is overrun by conflicts and can change its meaning over time. Ganzeer's work thus changes from anti-military to pro-military and

from pro-military back to anti-military again. Artistic propaganda is thus a complex matter. For nothing is as complex as the attempt at political simplification.

Fig. 3: *I really don't care* – **First Lady Melania Trump Visits Immigrant Detention Center On U.S. Border.**

Ana Teixeira Pinto

Illiberal Arts

In recent years a great many artists and art institutions have rallied around the defence of ›artistic freedom‹ and ›free speech‹, allegedly imperilled by the moralistic creep of ›identity politics‹ or what is colloquially known as ›cancel culture‹. I am here thinking for instance of the controversy surrounding Dalston in London's LD50 gallery, which was boycotted for organising symposia with far-right ideologues like Brett Stevens (Amerika), Peter Brimelow (VDare), Mark Citadel (Return of Kings), or Nick Land (XenoSystems). Then there is the exhibition featuring Boyd Rice in Greenspon Gallery. Or the 6th Athens Biennial, titled *ANTI*, where one of the invited artists was accused of attempted censorship for denouncing the harassment he was subjected to by a *posse* of artists who had previously been informally involved with LD50. Another example is a recent talk about ›cancel culture‹ at *Spike* magazine, Berlin, where a discussion was centred around Mathieu Malouf's ›Tankie Meme‹, a sculpture trafficking on anti-Semitic imagery. Spike's subsequent summer issue on ›Immorality‹ is also relevant here.

Diverse as they may be, there is a twofold thread running through all of these controversies: 1. the insistence that far-right idioms, memes and tropes be read as aesthetic material, at one remove from the sphere of the political; and 2. the idea that (mostly) *white* artists appropriating far right imagery subtract from the far-right surge rather than adding to it.[1] There are, in my view, many problems with this approach, the first of which would be the adoption of a vocabulary (i.e. the adoption of terms such as ›cancel culture‹, ›social justice warriors‹, ›political correctness gone mad‹) and the arguments that truck with it, all of which were lionised by the far right to attack LGBT and transgender students. The myth of a free speech crisis on campus[2] has been manufactured as part of a broader culture war waged by the populist right against those who seek to root out oppression. In an era when the global far right has been in the ascendancy, ›freedom of speech‹ and its proxies ›academic freedom‹ and ›artistic freedom‹ became part of an ideological arsenal, by means of which those who are trying to widen the discussion around topics of gender and race are demonised for ›shutting down debate‹.

Freedom of speech is, juridically speaking, not an absolute right, hence the concept of ›hate speech‹, which is not legally protected free speech in Europe. It is however not the purpose of this article to engage in comparative law analysis, rather I would like to ask: what does it mean to advocate for a plurality of individual voices whose freedom is – paradoxically – predicated on popularising positions inimical to collective diversity?

The concept of ›free speech‹ is, in all the above-mentioned examples, intimately tied to the freedom to, if need be, offend others. In order to be truly free one must be able to transgress social norms – how else would freedom assert its autonomy? In a

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1   See Morgan Quaintance, »Cryptic Obliquity«, *Art Monthly* 426: May 2019.https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/call-response-by-morgan-quaintance-and-stephanie-bailey-may-2019.

2   ›Non-platforming‹ has been in effect since April 1974 when a resolution was passed granting student unions the right to deny a platform to »openly racist or fascist organisations or societies«.

great many passionate defences of free speech, to now quote Keston Sutherland, the conjunction between these two elements – freedom on the one hand, transgression on the other – »is presented as a parenthetical addition that, however, must imperatively be insisted on: we cannot say what free speech is without right away adding that giving offence is, or may be essential to it.«[3] It might then follow that giving offence is portrayed as an unsought yet unavoidable side effect of ›saying it like it is‹. From this perspective it is easy to see how (to now paraphrase Sutherland) it might be, under these circumstances, seen as one's moral and historical duty to hurt other people in order for speech to free itself from the constraints of civility. As I watched a friend struggling to hold back tears as she gazed at *Tankie Meme* in disbelief, the logic of this argument hit me in all its brutal concreteness. If the measure of freedom is transgression, the measure of transgression is the amount of pain one inflicts. As writer Morgan Quaintance put it: (the) »re-presentation of aesthetics of oppression (however indirect or cryptic) for impact and affect[4] does not further or broaden the ›conversation‹, rather it furthers and broadens the narrative that oppression is inevitable. ›If we behave like those on the other side‹, as Jean Genet argued, ›then we are the other side. Instead of changing the world, all we'll achieve is a reflection of the one we want to destroy‹ «[5]

It would be trivial to point out that complaints about political correctness are also too eager to brush off the pervasive oppression that unchecked microaggressions can inflict. Rather, I would argue that appeals to liberty in this narrow sense can (and often do) clash with a desire for freedom in a broader sense, contributing to political unfreedom. In other words, the conflict between ›freedom of speech‹ and ›identity politics‹ is not a conflict between freedom and unfreedom but a conflict between two divergent conceptions of freedom, namely *freedom to harm* and *freedom from harm*. Those who argue for the enjoyment of disinhibitions predicated on inhibiting others argue for a professional *milieu* able to secure their individual freedom to disenfranchise, to exploit, to demean, to delegitimise, and ultimately to silence critique.

Rather than discussing free-speech, or the lack thereof, I am therefore interested in examining the conditions under which the pain of others can become the measure of our freedom. I am interested in ongoing attempts to render aesthetic experience a direct extension of moral outrage. In other words I am interested in sadistic cathexis,[6] and the social function it performs. I am interested in the circumstances under which cruelty can mask as principled stance and recruit the rhetoric of morals – the defence of freedom – to buttress an utterly immoral edifice. Finally, I am interested in how the defence of liberal values can acquire a use-value for those with an illiberal agenda. What follows is my attempt to unpack this question by means of a few points that I feel are worth considering.

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3   Keston Sutherland, »Free Speech and the Snow Flake«, in: *Mute Magazine*, 1 April 1919: https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/free-speech-snowflake (26 November 2020).

4   Morgan Quaintance, »Cryptic Obliquity«, *Art Monthly* 426: May 2019, https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/call-response-by-morgan-quaintance-and-stephanie-bailey-may-2019.

5   Jean Genet, *The Balcony*, a play published in 1956.

6   I am here borrowing from China Miéville's *On Social Sadism*, Salvage, December 17, 2015.

Possessive Individualism

Principles, as Donald Kinder and Tali Mendelberg argue, are best understood according to how they are ›put to use‹, how they are employed, and for what ends. Arguments for ›freedom of speech‹ tend to place the whole normative weight on the value of the individual and his/her liberties, with essentially no emphasis on social obligations. The term that best describes this position is ›possessive individualism‹, a term coined by C.B. Macpherson to refer to the conception of the individual as the sole proprietor of their own capacities, owing nothing to society for those capacities.[7] The human essence (to paraphrase Macpherson) is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of self-possession. The relation of ownership entails a very specific conception of the individual and his/her roles in the social world, which consists of nothing but exchange between proprietors. Market society is the social world this ideology engenders. In turn, market society structures a set of assumptions that are ill-suited to recognising the structural dimension of racial and gender inequality. As a result: »today prejudice is expressed primarily in the language of individualism«[8], such that it is: »virtually impossible to invoke individualism« and by extension individual freedoms »without race also being implicated in the conversation.«[9] Prejudice is always expressed in a language that *white* Americans and *white* Europeans find familiar and compelling. In other words, racial animosity is alway expressed in the language of principle.[10] This is why the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*'s controversial publication of twelve cartoons depicting Muhammad was understood as a legitimate exercise of free speech rather than an expression of animosity towards Muslin minorities in Europe. This is also why the public debate about the Muhammad cartoons was adjacent to a surge of fantasies of reverse colonisation involving the subjugation of *white* people. Individualism is at once the way race is experienced and the way race is occluded. Individualism also allows one to acknowledge that inequality exists without accepting that it exists as the result of historical injustice, thereby focusing on questions of ›temperament‹ and ›culture‹ to explain the lack of commitment to ›humanist values‹.

Artistic autonomy

The term ›aesthetics‹, introduced into the philosophical lexicon during the eighteenth century, is predicated on a discontinuity; the aesthetic experience is in some way severed from sensory experience. From Kant onwards (and here I am mostly paraphrasing Jacques Rancière) detachment becomes the hallmark of the aesthetic. This entails a

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7   See C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

8   Donald Kinder and Tali Mendelberg, »Racialized Politics: The Debate about Racism in America« in: David O. Sears, James Sidanius, Lawrence Bobo (eds.), *Studies in Communication, Media, and Public Opinion*, University of Chicago Press 2000, p. 73.

9   Id.

10 Id.

double negation, its object is neither an object of knowledge nor an object of desire.[11] It is this sleight of hand that allows one to think about an aesthetic value as a universal value. But by introducing the notion of ›disinterest‹ Kant also brought the concept of taste into opposition with the concept of morality. At the beginning of his *Critique of Judgement* he illustrates his reasoning with the example of a palace, in response to which aesthetic judgement isolates the form alone, disinterested in knowing whether a mass of the working poor had toiled under the harshest of conditions in order to build it. The human toll, Kant says, must be ignored in order to aesthetically appreciate an artwork.

In its strict meaning, as Peter Bürger notes, the term ›artistic autonomy‹ is an ideological category that blends together an element of truth (the praxis of art is not totally assimilated to social praxis) with an element of untruth (the hypostatisation of this fact, the result of an historical process is misrecognised as the ›essence‹ of art). The category ›art‹ in western modernity could be thus construed as designating the alienation of artistic labour from other forms of labour. In this conception, to quote Nicole Demby: »the formal progression of Western art is both teleological and divorced from history, the product of Oedipal overcoming or individual psychological reaction or the whim of genius«.[12] Contemporary art, lionised as an unassailable realm of cultural expression, functions, by virtue of its manufactured ahistoricity, as a container for this concept of absolute freedom: »a realm of abstract representation in which new subjectivities can hypothetically be imagined«[13], allegedly able to break free from the constraints of capitalist hegemony, whilst, as David Lloyd argues, through its compensatory qualities naturalising forms of life lived under the rule of property.[14]

The ongoing boundary disputes and attendant panic rocking the art world evacuate the notion of artistic autonomy. But heteronomy is extremely, to quote Andrew Wiener: »difficult to negotiate because it radically impacts not just the form and content of art but its definition, indeed its very ontology«.[15]

Ironic nihilism

Ironic nihilism is the existential philosophy of the alt-right. But there is a wider cultural convergence between theory, lifestyle and an attitude of scornful or jaded negativity in the genre known as post-irony, which arches back to what Mark Greif termed ›the *white* hipster‹. The *white* hipster: »fetishised the violence, instinctiveness, and rebelliousness of lower-middle-class ›*white* trash‹«, signaling that: »*whiteness* and capital

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11 See Jacques Rancière, »Thinking between disciplines: an aesthetics of knowledge«, in: *PARRHESIA #1*, 2006 pp. 1–12.

12 Nicole Demby, *Art, Value, and the Freedom Fetish*, https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/art-value-and-freedom-fetish-0.

13 Id.

14 David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, New York 2018, p. 77.

15 Andrew Stefan Weiner, »The Art of the Possible: With and Against documenta 14«, in: *The Biennial Foundation*, 14 August 2017, available at http://www.biennialfoundation.org/2017/08/art-possible-documenta-14/ 26 November 2020.

**Fig. 4: A Trump supporter mocking the Black Lives Matter movement.
Ironic Nihilism is the (official) existential philosophy of the alt-right.**

were flowing back into the formerly impoverished city.«[16] Figures like *Vice* founder Gavin McInnes (who told a *Times* journalist in 2003 »I love being *white*, and I think it's something to be proud of«),[17] or hoaxer Sam Hyde (whose show *Million Dollar Extreme Presents: World Peace* opened on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim with Hyde in blackface), stand at the intersection between stoner, nerd and *white* supremacist.

Like any other cultural modality of expression, irony is context-specific. Contemporary irony must be understood as part and parcel of a wider historical trajectory in which capitalism as world ecology shifted from a weak utopia to a strong dystopia. As David Foster Wallace argued, the attachment to irony reflects a shift from the conceptualisation of art as a creative instantiation of real values to the conceptualisation of art as a creative deviance from bogus values. But this self-congratulatory celebration of one's capacity to see through deception and hypocrisy does not necessarily serve an exclusively negative function. Anyone asking an ironist what s/he really means, will, as Foster Wallace

16   Mark Greif, »What Was the Hipster«, in: *New York Magazine*, Oct 24, 2010: http://nymag.com/news/features/69129/ (26. Nov. 2020).

17   See i. e. David Beers: Gavin McInnes Said His Proud Boys Were Built for Violence. Now Trump Is Sending Them Signals, 01.10.2020, https://thetyee.ca/News/2020/10/01/Gavin-McInnes-Proud-Boys-Violence/ (02.02.2021).

put it: »end up looking like a hysteric or a prig.«[18] It is irony's ability to derail ethical questions that facilitates its reversal of social functioning, shifting from authority-challenging to authority-affirming by evacuating the political. Irony affirms the ideology it claims to devalue or disregard by means of a negation of any potential or putative alternatives. This form of diluted and malign irony also serves an individuating function which precludes collective formation by eroding investment in community-building while maximising the subject's (individual) self-contentment and sense of superiority.

Friedrich Nietzsche understood nihilism as a question of *valuation*, a backhanded compliment to truth. Nihilism and love go together, for nihilism could be defined as unrequited love for the absolute truth. Geopolitically speaking, the present moment could be defined as a process of de-Westernisation - the West is rapidly losing its position of dominance - and by the emergence of China as the probable victor in the ongoing dispute over control of the colonial extraction matrix. As pressures on *white* privilege mount, ironic nihilism and the cultural wars fought under its banner could be seen as a proxy for a greater battle around de-Westernisation, Imperialism and *white* hegemony; a means to recover the totalising dimension of *white* eschatology which by means of irony is simply negativised.

Transgression

Though often associated with a theme of conflict with the social order that defines the counterculture, the desire to subvert or transgress moral codes does not necessarily have a politics, it is, rather, contingent on the current consensus. Whereas the traditional usage of the term ›alternative‹ signals a position that is skeptical of, and in a great many ways incompatible with power, the ›alternative‹ in alt-right is largely unmoored from the politics of transgression as traditionally aligned with a progressive project. Instead it points towards a counterculture that yearns for tradition, or, in other words, a libertarian resistance with an authoritarian programme - a trend that is now known as ›the alt-lite‹. The typical alt-lite shtick, has been to flirt with racist idioms and tropes ironically in order to claim plausive deniability and dodge responsibility for one's choices, aesthetic or otherwise. This strategy hinges on what Gregory Bateson called a more complex form of play. For a game to be a game the participants have to agree on the protocols that frame their interaction. So-called edgelords, to quote John Durham Peters, like to: »claim the prerogative to define an interaction as play when their conduct makes that frame completely unclear«.[19] Their ›game‹ is constructed not upon the premise ›this is play‹ but rather around the question ›is this play?‹, a type of interaction that finds its ritual forms in hazing or initiation practices. Privilege denotes the prerogative to define and control the frame of interaction: »When a troll bites, he always claims it is a play bite, even if the victim bleeds. Semiotic violence *is* violence regardless of its putative nexus to real, material violence.

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18   David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1997, pp. 66–69.

19   See John Durham Peters, »U Mad?,« in: *Logic*, 6, January 2019 https://logicmag.io/play/u-mad/.

Occluding violence is a violent act, albeit one that does not often appear as such because the institutional weight falls on its side. Hence the insistence that chauvinistic epistemes be read as irony, no matter how hurtful or distressing others might experience them to be.
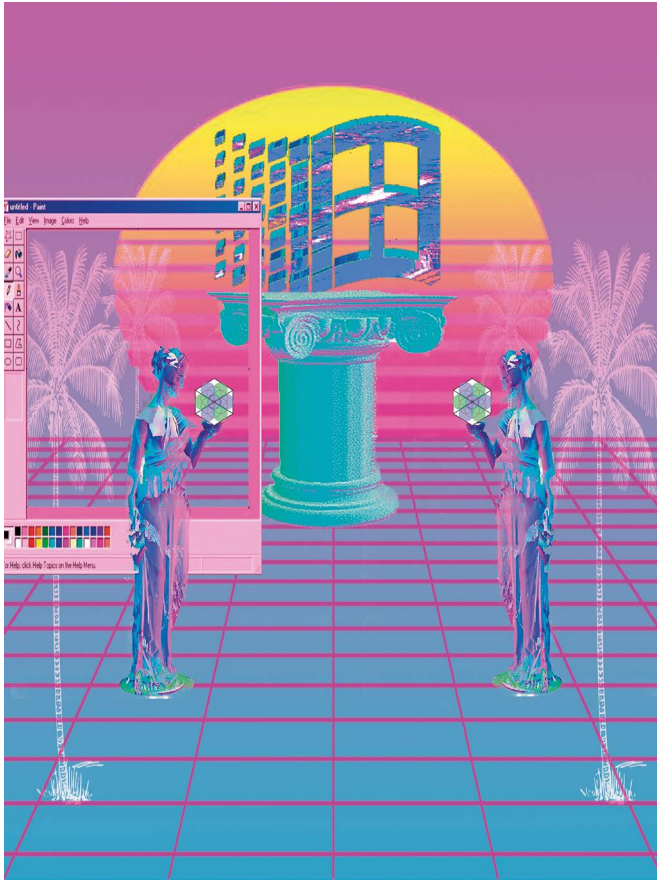

Fig. 5: The Vaporwave style combines images of Greco-Roman marbles with Tron like grids, pastel colours and palm trees, tying the mythical origin of Western civilization to the American dream and the tech industry.

Overidentification, Pastiche, Affirmation, Mimicry

The movement now known as ›the alt-right‹, which, despite ongoing attempts to forge alliances with the traditional far right still remains intensely supra-structural, was fuelled by its aesthetics rather than by its politics. The contemporary art *milieu* proved particularly susceptible to this far-right creep because several of its conventions of plasticity and meaning-production devices, – e.g. irony, transgression, over-identification, affirmation and pastiche – lend themselves to appropriation by virtue of their ambivalent nature and hence have a use-value for the alt-right. Vaporwave, for example, a genre brimming with selective nostalgia began as a form of postmodern pastiche. As the ethos of the tech industry transmogrified, shifting from the market-besotted optimism championed by Bill Gates to the digital feudalism represented by Bay Area neo-reactionaries and cybermonarchists, Vaporwave transmogrified along with it, spawning two *white* ethno-nationalist subgenres, Fashwave and Trumpwave. Though Fashwave has an ominous feel, most of its constitutive elements are already present in the retro-futuristic imaginary of Vaporwave (the whitest style ever, according to Andrew Anglin the founder of the Daily Stormer) in the way it combined images of Greco- Roman marbles with Tron-like grids, pastel colours and palm trees, tying the mythical origin of *white* civilisation to the American Dream and the joyful promises of the early internet years. Drawing heavily from internet imageboard culture the post-internet style could be construed as a global visual idiom that conflates the vectors of Silicon Valley commodity space with the strategy space of the US empire.

If a great many contemporary artists can at present oscillate between the positions of Andy Warhol and Arno Breker, that is because art audiences have been trained to recognise affirmation as a critical gesture ever since Pop was marketed as a significant conceptual turn. As a result, their works can play two dissonant registers at once, in a back and forth dance that could also be described as the (wholly undialectical) relation between law-making and law-breaking in the social media's carnival.

Contemporary art hasn't been able to think through certain contradictions between what it purports to do and what it inadvertently does because its means and modes of ideation are particularly ill-suited for this task. As Lauren Berlant has argued, the attachments that help reproduce what is damaging in the world are at the same time that which holds the world together as coherent representation. Giving up one's attachments, however cruel or toxic, would mean giving up the world and one's position in it. From this perspective ›freedom of speech‹ can perhaps be best understood as the expression of a wounded narcissism, unable to divest from the pleasurable investment in the (increasingly besieged) notion of its own universality.[20]

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20   See David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, New York 2018.

Jörg Heiser

There are different definitions of populism: the Laclau/Mouffe faction emphasises the antagonism between the people and the hegemony or the power bloc; the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde calls populism a ›thin ideology‹ attached to other ideologies. But they seem to agree on the idea that populism builds on the idea that there is ›the people‹ and there is the establishment. But what *is* ›the people‹? We have the example of Podemos in Spain, which has been described as left-wing populist. And I had to think of the famous piece by Hans Haacke, »Der Bevölkerung«, which is here at the Reichstag, where obviously, especially in Germany, the notion ›Dem Volke‹ [To the People] is a highly contaminated one in the wake of the Third Reich, and Haacke instead uses the term »To the Population«. And then the question, ›who belongs to the people?‹ Sahra Wagenknecht of the German Die Linke made numerous remarks coming from a, let's say leftist-populist position, geared towards an antagonism between ›home-grown‹ workers (whatever that is) and immigrant workers, which points to a kind of impasse in this notion of ›the people‹ for the left. What do you make of that?

Oliver Marchart

I would not take Sahra Wagenknecht as ›the left‹. I was once on a podium in Munich at Residenztheater talking on exactly that topic. I made a similar point in defence of populism and I realised afterwards that everyone assumed I was a supporter of Sahra Wagenknecht, which is not at all the case. So, I'm not saying that every kind of populism which is on the left is a good thing, because there is a lot on the left which I do not subscribe to as a leftist. E. g. re. Antisemitism.

However, you can have a democratic populism, that would be my case, which is not based on the exclusion of ›the third term‹ as I called it, which is basically against the power bloc but does not need any other scapegoats such as immigrants. And then the question is, not simply ›where is the people?‹ because in democracy, obviously, there is no such thing as ›the people‹, right, it's a construct based on the democratic idea of populist sovereignty. But nobody has ever shaken hands with ›the people‹. Therefore, Brecht and Haacke have a point when saying: okay let's talk about »Bevölkerung«. Nonetheless, »Bevölkerung« is not the sovereign. Bevölkerung is a sociological category, and you can shake hands with certain members of Bevölkerung, but you cannot shake hands with ›the people‹. So, you cannot have democracy without ›the people‹, and nonetheless ›the people‹ is never there. It's never there as pure presence.

The consequence is that, if you want to have democratic politics, you have to make ›the people‹ present in some way. In that sense, ›the people‹ will have to be constructed. So, it's not a substantive category. It's not an entity that really exists, but it is there, it is there in the fundamental laws of democracy, in the constitutions, and it is there in political discourse. So, we always construct ›the people‹ no matter whether we want to or not. And so, my case would be, you can construct ›the people‹ in a democratically legitimate, populist way, but I would of course not defend a racist or right-wing extremist form of populist construction of the people.

Jörg Heiser

I'm picking up the term that you introduced and that comes from Florian Cramer, ›weaponisation of carnival‹, which made me of course think of the famous killer clowns we have in power now in the UK and the US and in other parts of the world. The question that pertains from that is, there seems to be a very successful strategy on the right to defuse and subvert, even invert the logic of ›the people‹ vs. the establishment by making one part of the establishment look like they're part of the people when, in fact, they are not at all. I mean, the Eton boy Boris Johnson as a populist seems a contradiction in terms. The question that comes from that is, okay, we've recognised that mechanism, but what made it so successful?

Ana Teixeira-Pinto

I would say there are several layers to this question. On the one hand there is an emotional investment or structural affect that hinges on *whiteness*. The *white* working class is still invested in welfare chauvinism and sees it as their only open avenue to preserve a modicum of social status. This is not completely irrational, because it's easier to, as Sahra Wagenknecht does, advocate for forms of welfare chauvinism than to think in transnational terms, or to try to organise in a global environment, because it's very difficult to scale up movements, and because we live in a world in which there is a differentiation between economic violence and political violence. Economic violence is never seen *as* violence. This is why, for instance, we have a separation between migrants and refugees. Refugees are entitled to protections, but economic migrants are not entitled to protections, because we cannot recognise that people fleeing starvation or drought are also victims of violence.

Oliver Marchart

My first point is in reaction to what you said about Boris Johnson. Stuart Hall, during the time of Thatcherism, coined the notion of ›authoritarian populism‹. Some faction from within a power bloc attacks the power bloc, pretending to be on the side of the people against the power bloc, while actually being part of it. That's very much a sign of right-wing populism. I totally agree with your definition of Boris Johnson as an Eton boy employing a right-wing populist strategy, but you need to have a class society for this to work in the first place, where people actually agree with such a ludicrous exhibition of your own class privileges. People have to buy into that. I don't think that would work in the German system.

Jörg Heiser

Let's say the common denominator here is the focus on the question of how to draw the line between a kind of justifiable populism, and the one that is building on cheap affect-gratification by way of fear, greed and xenophobia, and on the authoritarian mechanism you just described. But that brings me to the question in regard to online campaigning, no-platforming, ›cancel culture‹ and so on, where a similar question arises I think, how to draw the line between a justified campaigning against someone or something in or outside of an institution because of, say, their attack on other people's human rights on the one hand; and on the other, a kind of cheap affect-gratification by identifying

scapegoats and lightning rods, while claiming righteousness or irony or ›freedom of expression‹. How do we draw that line?

Ana Teixeira-Pinto

Well, I would say it's fairly easy, because you cannot argue that racism is an opinion. Racism is not an opinion, it's a crime, like antisemitism or misogyny. The circulation of these materials does not subtract from them, it adds to them. This is tied to the nature of digital environments. Social media is a huge machine for the elimination of the negative, every time you click on something, every ›Like,‹ contributes to the dissemination of this toxicity. You cannot hate-like something because it just circulates it more and more widely. There is an inability or illiteracy in terms of how to engage with social media. We still are not equipped with the proper tools in order to understand how to actually divest, how to disengage, instead of trying to invest or engage and by virtue of this investment or engagement actually contributing to the problem.

Oliver Marchart

I liked your use of Florian Cramer's term ›weaponisation of transgression‹, because it's really what happens. If you look at people like Donald Trump, he's transgressing every boundary, every line that was considered a rule of the game in democracies, every day. And his audience actually enjoys it. So, there is an enjoyment in transgression. Maybe this can happen because there was a problem and there has always been a problem with transgression as well as with carnivalisation in the first place. Because the carnival in this Bakhtinian, romantic idea, the revolutionary idea of turning things on their head, was always there to stabilise hierarchies, to stabilise power relations, because to let people do that in symbolically framed ways for one day a year is precisely a way of keeping things going as they are.

Ana Teixeira-Pinto

That would be what I call social sadism, the pleasurable investment in the circulation of this grotesque imagery. It functions as a release, but precisely because it functions as a release somehow it never touches upon the actual political, economic, geopolitical underpinnings.

Jörg Heiser

But I think what these two aspects of the same kind of crisis also pinpoint is the question of the legal system. Because, as you mentioned, Trump, Boris Johnson, are constantly subverting the legal system. They're subverting the constitution, they're doing everything and they're actually ignoring a lot of red lines in terms of corruption etc. They do this purposefully and they also do it with a kind of almost unveiled support of their core support group.

And this reminds of another kind of incident when Margaret Atwood, the famous Canadian science fiction writer, intervened into a discussion around the case of #MeToo in Canadian academe and said, what does this actually mean for the legal system if we see it as a kind of broken legal system in the face of hate speech and sexual harassment?

I quote Margaret Atwood: »If the legal system is bypassed because it is seen as ineffectual, what will take its place? Who will be the new power brokers?« She didn't answer that question herself, it was actually answered with a big shit-storm against her. But it also brings to mind the big companies who run social media and who are actually defining the algorithms according to which many of these debates actually unfold. How do we position ourselves to that?

Ana Teixeira-Pinto

That is the most relevant question, but the answer cannot be that we are just going to return to the ›golden decades of social democracy,‹ when things were apparently so good in the West. Because those decades were also conterminous with violent racism at home and imperial violence abroad. We have to accept that there is a huge restructuring ongoing. If the legal system is not adequate, we have to work harder, so that it becomes adequate, so that it can address these questions.

Jörg Heiser

Concerning the legal system, if you mention Boris Johnson, then actually, the disbandment of the parliament was nothing short of a *coup d'état*. And I don't see him punished for that. He should be in jail. I don't know where is the legal system there. And that's a huge problem with what liberals tend to call or tend to defend as ›the rule of law‹. So, I'm very much in favour of the rule of law, the problem is, I mean, I'm being polemical now, it doesn't exist. I think of it in the same way as what Gandhi said when asked what he thought about English civilisation, he said: »I think it would be a good thing«. So, the rule of law would be a good thing, but if you think of police violence, it goes unpunished as a rule. There are good reasons why there is a movement, Black Lives Matter, in the States. But even here, police violence is never prosecuted. And so, where is the rule of law? And if we start here, I think we have to start with the democratisation of society. We have to start with the legal system, we have to implement the rule of law, we have to bring people to justice, like the police, not only some burglars.

So, I think what we need is a radical democratic politics, a democratisation of democracy in order to get this done. And the problem is (and here we come to the real problem of right-wing populism as we see it now) I think there it does express a certain desire for democracy, it does express a certain desire for popular sovereignty. People feel they do not have a say? They have only vague ideas about it, they don't know what to do with it, but they feel they do not have a say, even though that system is called democracy, but where is the rule of the demos? And I think it is a symptom, if you wish, of the appalling shape of contemporary democracy.

Ana Teixeira-Pinto

It's true, it's a *white* democracy. That image where a protester holds a poster that reads »Green Lives Matter« is clearly a way to degrade or debase the Black Lives Matter movement. We cannot pretend that there is no racial element in this motivation or in these forms of populism. There is clearly a racial element and this has a lot to do with the promises made by capitalism. In moments of degrowth you might not be able enjoy

the promise of wealth acquisition but if you are *white* you can still enjoy your position of superiority in this colonial matrix. In my view this is very much part of this psychology of the new far right.

Jörg Heiser

I guess now is a good moment for questions from the audience!
Question from the audience:
What do you think about the direct democracy, the referendum?

Oliver Marchart

There is a problem because we see all these right-wing extremist – I tend to call them extremist rather than populist – parties being very much in favour of direct democracy. Because they want to use it as a strategic weapon, and we see that with the populists in power, with Orbán for instance. He would ask the people, but only when it is against Soros or immigrants and so on. So, just as a propaganda tool, in the bad sense of the term propaganda. However, today or the day before, there was a very interesting commentary by Jan-Werner Müller, a populism researcher who made a case for direct democracy. Because what we see is that, for instance in the case of the Brexit referendum, it was not really an expression of the people's will. It was a machination of a part of the elite. So, this is not necessarily an argument against direct democracy, it is an argument against the elite using that tool in order to ›weaponise‹ direct democracy, to take the term up. So, I'm not so sure about it. Maybe in certain countries like Switzerland, where you have a long-standing democratic tradition and people are taking it seriously, you can have that. Of course, from time to time they may vote in the most abstruse ways, I agree, but many times they actually act quite responsibly with that tool.

Jörg Heiser

There was for example an interesting campaign after the far-right party in Switzerland wanted to make it basically almost impossible for asylum seekers who had been extradited to appeal to a court. Then there was a half-year campaign by people making newspaper ads and so on to counter that, and they eventually won the popular vote for this, which was kind of a turn of the tide in Switzerland about two years ago in regard to the rise of the SVP. And it's good, but like you said, we have to be aware that Switzerland is a very wealthy, very small country, with a very long tradition of direct democracy, and the counter example would indeed be Brexit, if you think of the way it was heavily ideologically subverted. And we also know that billions in money went into basically a false campaign that was targeted on social media.

Ana Teixeira-Pinto

I don't know if you're aware, but there is no archive of what materials are being circulated in social media platforms like WhatsApp for instance. So basically, there is a huge investment in these kinds of ads but there is no way to have any kind of scrutiny or supervision about what is the content of these ads. This controversy emerged around the Cambridge Analytica scandal, but the other social media platforms were never

scrutinised. When you have all of this inscrutable power in the hands of big data companies you have absolutely no way of actually guaranteeing that this is a democratic vote.

William Messer

As hard as it is to identify Boris Johnson as a populist, it is unimaginable to identify Donald Trump as a true populist. It turns out that there is a connection between low self esteem and a kind of aspirational connection to power and priviledge that skips over all the middle ground. But one of the things I'd like you to address, because you continually remind us of racism, is the issue of *white* victimhood. If you could talk about how that plays into all of this.

Ana Teixeira-Pinto

Trump is not a populist: Trump is a fascist. I mean it in a very literal manner because one of the markers of a fascist regime is to create two-tier forms of citizenship, (and this was basically what Carl Schmitt implemented in Germany, and what led to the denaturalisation of the German Jews) in order to denaturalise citizens, that then can be disposed of or deported, then this is exactly what Trump is doing. I would never use the term populism to refer to Trump or any of the other present-day fascists to be honest. Again I think *whiteness* plays a gigantic role, as this whole discourse hinges on fantasies of reversed colonisation, that always entail the subjugation of *white* people. There is an element of truth to it because the West is coming under pressure and is losing control of its position of hegemony, is losing control of the colonial extraction matrix it established. But there is also an element of anxiety in that the West fears being victimised the way it victimised others.

Jörg Heiser

This leads us straight to the topic of the next panel.