

GALERIE

Aufbau Ost

01.04.2016 – 14.05.2016

An Exhibition by Henrike Naumann

Curated in the context of POW by Solvej Helweg Ovesen and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung

Solvej Helweg Ovesen

Curator of POW,
Galerie Wedding – Raum für
zeitgenössische Kunst,
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Post-East/West-Otherness

Aufbau Ost is an exhibition about the post-otherness of Germany. The post-East and post-West Germans, the united generation growing up in the 1990s. The post-East Germans went through a process of othering after the former GDR was transformed into a liberal democracy in 1990. The former West also changed – although it did not recognize it so clearly - with the post-communist and postcolonial critique. Post-West Germans also have (had) to reorient their worldview as capitalist normality destabilized and a post-migrant society in a broad meaning had become a reality.¹ It is an exhibition about how the societal re-construction of the former GDR materialized and how the void of an authentic ideological structure was filled by a.o. individual far-right radicalization. While the German unity was celebrated in Berlin in the 1990s and 2000s, many cities in the former GDR were both depopulated and disintegrated. Due to the rapid turn in political values, faster than human intrinsic change could happen, the expected new freedom of liberal democracy never arrived and was at times exchanged with the freedom of liberal economy e.g. the freedom to choose a new IKEA bed, carpet, or kitchen or the mere celebration of hate.

The exhibition shows a series of video and sound installations (2012-2016), which document or reenact individual moments of radicalization in the former GDR city of Zwickau in Saxony, where the artist Henrike Naumann grew up. Entering this subject through observations of facets of German subculture like the techno scene, gangsta rap and the consumption of drugs, the artist maps the »psychograph« of different existential routes leading to far-right or Islamist positions. She explores xenophobic positions based on the dehumanisation of migrants, as well as non-Muslims (by sympathisers of so-called IS).

Aufbau Ost is an excursion into the 1990s, into the symbolic and aesthetic self-staging of pain, hate and consumption envy expressed in a video installation such as **Triangular Stories**, 2012, but also in a sound piece like **Desolation**, 2014. **Triangular Stories**, 2012, stages two videos each about three teenagers as they curiously experiment with Ecstasy and discover a joyful, frighteningly invigorating play with violence and transgression. The VHS videos is exhibited inside a neo-Nazi decorated youth room. The installation and the videos draw similarities to the moment when the core-members, Beate Zschäpe, Uwe Böhnhardt and Uwe Mundlos, of the later National-Socialist Underground (Nationsozialistischer Untergrund, NSU, publicly known 2011-2016) Zwickau terror cell, found each-other and from then on took a more and more radical position. NSU later

¹ The concept of »the former West« was coined by artistic director of BAK, Utrecht, Maria Hlavajova, who initiated the extensive discursive project called »The Former West«, 2014-2016. In her introduction, she explains: »The so-called West, blinded by the (default) victory of neoliberal capitalism on a global scale, failed to recognize the impact of the massive shifts put into motion by the events of that year (1989), and continues to adhere to its own claims of hegemony. The term ›former West‹, never articulated as a counterpart to the widely used ›former East‹, thus does not refer to the status quo, but is rather an aspired to, imagined ›farewell‹ to the ›bloc mentality«.

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committed nine murders of Germans with migration background. The work **Desolation** on the other hand references the German gangsta rapper Deso Dogg (Denis Cuspert, 1975-2015) from Berlin-Kreuzberg. In this sound-based work we hear Deso Dogg as a rapping demagogue recruiting young Germans to adhere to Islamist values and to follow him to Jihad. Deso Dogg gave up his music career in 2010 after already dedicating himself to radical Islam in 2007. In 2011 he went to fight for so-called ISIS in Syria and remained a successful recruiter of young Germans.

Aufbau Ost is an exhibition that in its stance is critical towards extremist, fundamental and radical right-wing positions. However it asks if it is possible to create a space between »us« and »them«, a space of empathy, where the understanding of individual motivational circles² behind a person's radicalization can be experienced? Is it possible or perhaps also necessary to understand what it means to feel as a foreigner in one's home country in order to see where the hate or envy comes from? Can this exhibition be an entry point to generate more detailed knowledge about the post-East- or West-otherness in Germany? And can we go even further back and try to understand the reason why extremists have become extreme? In which form and how did (neo-) Nazism survive the two different ideological systems of Communism and Neo-Liberalism (Democracy)? What are the critiques of liberal capitalism and democracy from an extremist perspective and the other way around?

Interview – Henrike Naumann and Solvej Helweg Ovesen

SHO Aufbau Ost (economic reconstruction of East Germany) – this title refers to the unification of Germany. It is a very specific politico-economic term referring to the pact signed by the former BRD states to support and build up the former GDR states. The title however sounds well-meaning, but maybe also ironic? What is your personal perspective on the transformation of East Germany since the fall of the wall?

HN The title »Aufbau Ost« points to the contradictory attempt of creating social change and implementing democracy and human rights in East Germany through the means of consume culture and an economy hype.

SHO What exactly happened in East Germany in the 1990s – in terms of consume, and in terms of social structures? What interests you about it, nowadays?

HN In the eastern states of Germany one can observe how the mechanisms of democratic Neoliberalism operate, or rather fail. The post-socialist society experienced a profound devaluation and reinterpretation, and the people affected by this process were often not engaged in this redefinition anymore. An atmosphere of uncertainty resulted in an atmosphere of hate, which we now witness severely.

2 The concept of »motivational circle« I described in regards to right-wing extremist radicalization processes in »Right-Wing Extremist Radicalization Processes: The Formers' Perspective«, Daniel Koehler, 2014: »The major finding is, that non-politicized ideals (e.g. justice, freedom) combined with a strong desire for expression are used by radical right-wing groups to attach these to a concrete political program and assignments (political struggle) to foster a specific internalization of a political ideology and expected behavior. This creates a closed motivational circle pushing the individuals to the maximum degree of radicalization possible in every individual case.« <http://journals.sfu.ca/jed/index.php/jex/article/view/64/0>

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SHO What is the first image that comes to mind when you think of your hometown Zwickau?

HN The peculiar aesthetic that I grew up with. The remnants of GDR design, combined with the cheap IKEA charm of the 1990s. The combination of materials and objects, which somehow do not match at all. A place in which I feel comfortable and which I long for, but which I can't bear to go back to.

SHO Your work focusses on extremist German youth cultures, but also on the loss of cultural traditions, social structures and simple binaries such as East and West Germany. The union of Germany caused the social displacement of many Germans – many fled from East Germany to the West. At the same time a hate culture emerged among groups of former GDR citizens towards migrants and refugees. From which perspective do you investigate the sub-cultural – and therefore human – developments in the 1990s in cities like your hometown Zwickau.

HN When I look at my home town I see the vacancies which resulted from the migration of many young and critical people, including myself. But I also see many dedicated people, who are leading a daily and frustrating battle against hate and stupidity in the East German province.

SHO Right now there are many discussions about the radicalization of youth all around the world. Which processes of radicalization are happening in the far-right scene in Germany? How do you research them and how do you approach your topics – in theory and in practice?

HN An important part of my research takes place on private profiles on social media. I am interested in the radicalization of the individual and aim to allow the visitors of an exhibition – even if it may be difficult – to put themselves in this individual's shoes. That is something that one rarely ever does. I do not want to downplay the severity of the attitudes, but I want to reduce the distance between »them« and »us«. The only way to effectively counter the hate is to understand where it comes from.

SHO You studied production design at the Film University Babelsberg. The exhibition offers several spatial mis-en-scènes, f.e. the room of a teenager, a world of symbols of far-right everyday life that is at once innocent and full of hate. Furniture, wall paper, wall tattoos, Facebook posts with swastika pastry, neon lights, textured wallpaper and carpets create an ambivalent atmosphere. What does interior design say about a person and a certain period?

HN In my work furniture and spaces become the manifestation of social systems. Similar to aesthetics and taste, political opinions are very diverse and are subject to subjective assessments. The same chair may be incredibly valuable for one person, and trash in the eyes of another. The things that were in vogue 20 years ago are unfashionable today. Or vice versa. In a way my fascination with the 90s results from this. It is an aesthetic that creates controversy among people, and that's exciting! I have focused on interior designs intensively and asked myself time and time again: How can one live like this? But for every person their interior is the most normal thing in the world, the same holds true for me. Questions about it only come up when one engages with or demarcates oneself from the living spaces of others. And when one considers different life plans and values from this angle, it becomes obvious that this kind of analysis is the beginning of all forms of social change.

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SHO Structure (and the lack of it) is a keyword in the concept of the exhibition **Aufbau Ost** – both in terms of aesthetics and from a psycho-social point of view. How did you conceive of the idea to create artwork in the framework of this tension?

HN I love materials with structure. Textured wallpaper, grid furniture, absurd patterns of cloth. Materials which one cannot immediately grasp, but which force you to look at them time and time again, even though you do not want to. Especially furniture of adolescent rooms is aesthetically extremely interesting or simply unbearable. That made me reflect on the concept of youth in general. Why does mismatching furniture represent our adolescence? Which value do the structures that surround us in our youth have – both aesthetically and politically – for the rest of our lives?

SHO The younger members of the far-right scene in Germany are a product of the 1990s. How do you investigate the history of the last decades in your works and what does »Generation Loss« mean in this context?

HN »Generation Loss« signifies the loss of information when one out-writes one VHS tape onto the next, a medium, with which I have worked with continuously over the past years. The transfer of ideologies across generations can be observed in the case of East Germany. The grandparents experienced war and National Socialism, the parents experienced the failure of »real existing socialism« in the GDR, and the children experienced the lack of structure after 1989. Far-right ideology was able to persist throughout the existence of the GDR – and blossomed after 1989.

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