

Antifascism in Schools and at the Art University

A Modular Sculpture for Democracy and Against Fascism

Martin Krenn 2025

When I received the invitation to develop a concept for the intergenerational artistic research project "The Arts of Resistance" (TAoR), it was particularly important to me 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 has to 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, but rather 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 how complex fascism is and he 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, executed by the Nazi regime under Hitler, was characterized by antisemitic 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 analyzed by Ecco, often creep more or less unnoticed into democratic discourses, such as the devaluation of analytical criticism or the trivialization of irrationalism, as well as a distrust of the intellect in general. In this sense, the task of an art university is not only to promote free expression in art, 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 the teachers and students of 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; rather, 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 (2022: 12-13), 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 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 would have lost their bearings and must therefore regain their former "greatness." 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 radicalized by this ideology. Authoritarian right-wing politicians resort to fascist ideas, either openly or covertly, to gain electoral advantage. However, Mason notes an important distinction between fascists and populists and right-wing conservatives. The ultimate goal of fascists is a global race war that would create a world of ethnic monocultures and eliminate modern society.

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Our project aimed to use a dialogic sculpture to reveal the fascist beliefs that are increasingly being relativized in social discourse and to expose the authoritarian, populist, and anti-democratic methods of modern fascism. To this end, a collaboration was initiated between us, the Zusatzqualifikation Kunstvermittlung (Art Education and Mediation program) at the HBK Braunschweig, "Demokratie leben!" Braunschweig ("Live Democracy!" Brunswick), and the Volkshochschule Braunschweig (college of further education Brunswick). 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 together with me a concept 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, characteristics of fascism as defined by Ecco were introduced, and three classroom stations were set up on the topics of first Braunschweig during the Nazi era, second Braunschweig today, and third art against fascism.

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

Using this material, the students discussed with the pupils the current state of democracy and the threats it faces from fascist ideology. 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 antifascist 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 one modular sculpture 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 of representatives from all participating institutions at the HBK Braunschweig. In the period between the school workshops and the production of the sculpture, I attended together 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 offered the opportunity to meet with all project participants and to 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 situation in 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. 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 allowed the participants to apply the knowledge and experience they had gained beyond the project in their future engagement against discrimination, intolerance, and authoritarian structures.