Regarding Terror: The German Autumn and Contemporary Art

Fabian Winkler

Synopsis

This paper explores strategies and positions in contemporary art that have been at the center of many debates surrounding the 2005 exhibition *Regarding Terror: The RAF-Exhibition* at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. It discusses artworks that aim to go beyond the criticism of sensationalism, or historicization and glorification of traumatic social events, such as the crimes of the Red Army Faction in Germany. By emphasizing the power of art to transform and change audience members are enabled to shape more individual and nuanced perspectives on some of the forms of terrorism today.

Biography

Fabian Winkler is an artist working with the potential of new media technologies to create critical, transformative and sometimes playful cultural artifacts. He received degrees from the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany and UCLA, Department of Design | Media Arts. He is currently an Assistant Professor in the area of Electronic and Time-Based Art at Purdue University.

Essay

The *Rote Armee Fraktion*, RAF (Red Army Faction, or often publically referred to as the Baader-Meinhof Gang) was a terrorist organization in Germany that officially disbanded in 1998. However, their crimes, specifically those culminating in the tragic events of the German Autumn (1977) and their representation in German culture (literature, film and the arts) continue to spark controversial debates.

Apart from their violent actions of domestic terrorism, the RAF has also deeply split German society as only few other post WWII radical organizations have. While this can be certainly attributed to the fact that these events are part of more recent German history, it can be also argued that it is because of a lack of the RAF’s historic documentation and public debate outside of mass-media representations.¹ In his essay *Zwischen Popkultur, Politik und Zeitgeschichte -*

¹ *Zeitgeschichte-online*, a collaboration the between Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung (ZZF) the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SBB) is one of the few comprehensive resources that offers texts and materials about the history of the RAF online. Accessed October 29, 2011 <http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/site/40208724/default.aspx>
Von der Schwierigkeit, die RAF zu historisieren (my translation: Between Pop-culture, Politics and History – about the difficulty of historicizing the RAF), German historian Wolfgang Kraushaar talks about the lack of a historic discussion of the RAF as “white spots in the history of German terrorism.”

Although recent film productions, such as Uli Edel’s 2008 movie The Baader Meinhof Complex probably paint the picture of this era best known to an international audience, many German visual artists have, since the early 1970s responded in their work quite differently to the Rote Armee Fraktion’s ideologies and their acts of domestic terrorism. In an interview with Jörg Heiser in the Süddeutsche Zeitung German theoretician and philosopher Felix Ensslin described the approach of many artists’ dealing with the RAF in their works as an attempt at separation or individualization (Vereinzelung) of images rather than their duplication (Verdoppelung).

The ambitious exhibition project Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung (Regarding Terror: The RAF-Exhibition, curated by Klaus Biesenbach, Ellen Blumenstein und Felix Ensslin) at the Berlin Kunst-Werken (January 30 - May 05, 2005) attempted to “research and, for the first time, present together the media echo of the Red Army Faction and artistic positions directly or indirectly addressing the history of the RAF,” according to KW Institute for Contemporary Art’s exhibition website.

Rather than discussing the success or failure of this project to shine a new light onto the history of the RAF, I am more interested in investigating strategies and positions in contemporary art that have been at the center of many debates surrounding the RAF Exhibition. These strategies and positions are by no means only related to an exclusively German context or one that only deals with socio-political trauma, such as the one created by the violent crimes of the RAF – in fact my own art practice deals with neither topic: neither RAF, nor socio-political trauma. They are part of a larger discussion of contemporary art, one that addresses its function and its role in a society. By introducing concrete and controversial examples in the context of the RAF exhibition and providing possible frameworks for their discussion, my intend is to offer starting points for the constructive discussion of challenging contemporary works of art in a more general sense. In the context of the Re-visioning Terrorism conference at Purdue University (September 8-10, 2011) the interesting question is how can contemporary art respond to and – with a deliberately idealistic and utopian intention – make a contribution to the prevention of socio-political trauma caused by acts of terrorism? I argue that with a more subtle understanding of some of the positions and strategies of contemporary art dealing with the complex issues of terrorism, audience members can better re-evaluate their own responses to acts of terrorism. They are able to shape more individual perspectives and find ways to critique the often favored black and white stereotypes so ubiquitous in mass media representations.
In doing so I also try to address one main point of criticism that was brought forward about the RAF Exhibition in Berlin: the alleged lack of presenting the audience with a more contemporary context beyond the 30 year history of the RAF in Germany. During the exhibition’s press conference, this concern was specifically raised by the question: Can we use this exhibition as a model for dealing with other terrorist movements such as ETA or IRA?²

1. Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung *(Regarding Terror: The RAF-Exhibition)*

Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung was an exhibition at KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin (January 30 - May 05, 2005). It was organized by a curatorial trio consisting of Klaus Biesenbach (founding and artistic director of KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin); Ellen Blumenstein (independent curator, from 1998-2005 curator for KW Institute for Contemporary Art); and Felix Ensslin (curator, theatre director, and since 2009 a professor of critical theory on the Faculty of Aesthetics at the Art Academy in Stuttgart). Felix Ensslin is also the son of Gudrun Ensslin, one of the founders and core members of the RAF. The exhibition focused on artistic responses to the massive amount of media and mediated images about the RAF. The curatorial principle did not

² See Thomas W. Eller’s comments in his exhibition review on artnet.de:

“Man kann die Ausstellung als Versuch einer kulturellen Entspannungspolitik betrachten. Alles, was einmal etwas bedeutete, wird entleert. Die RAF wird in die sentimentale Ecke abgeschoben. Sprachlos waren denn auch die Kuratoren auf die Frage eines spanischen Gastes, ob die Ausstellung als Modell des Umgangs mit anderen terroristischen Bewegungen wie der ETA oder der IRA dienen könne. Der größte Fehler der Ausstellung offenbarte sich in diesem Moment: Die Aktualität des Terrors wird insgesamt ignoriert. Ein Projekt, das sich das Thema RAF setzt, kann nur erfolgreich sein, wenn es das Wagnis eingeht zu fragen, was die wirklichen Schubkräfte waren. Weshalb haben die Menschen für ihre Ideen gemordet? Wir wollen doch für den Umgang mit Gefahr und Terror heute lernen.” (My translation: “One could look at this exhibition as an attempt at a cultural policy of détente. The RAF is pushed into the sentimental corner. And so the curators were speechless when a Spanish guest asked the question whether this exhibition could be used as a model for dealing with other terrorist movements, such as the ETA or the IRA. The greatest mistake of this exhibition became obvious in this moment: the timeliness of terror is ignored altogether. A project with the topic RAF can only be successful if it risks the adventure of asking what the real motivations were. Why did people commit murders for their ideas? After all we would like to learn for dealing with danger and terror today.”)
allow the commissioning of new work specifically for the exhibition, but rather wanted to show what had already been created – for the first time in one space. The artistic positions featured in the exhibition were contextualized by an archival collection of news coverage about the RAF and their terrorist acts in print and TV media.

The show found a massive and powerful opposition in the families of RAF victims and high-ranking German politicians. Public opposition ranged from claims of glorification of terrorism to lacking scientific rigor in the representation of history.

However, rather than discussing the success or failure of this exhibition, I would like to focus on some remarks the curators made about their understanding of contemporary art. Specifically about approaches to contemporary art that allow exhibition visitors new insights into this controversial part of German history, not through mechanisms of identification or emotional occupation, but by creating a distance that leaves room for individual interpretation.

An art exhibition is not a historical exhibition. This becomes clear in the curators’ definition of “Vorstellung” (imagination) in the German exhibition title, which they define as the in-between space and interface between history and art.³

Ellen Blumenstein explains in her introductory essay to the exhibition catalog:


(Translation: “In a society art is often at the cutting-edge of handling social trauma. The nearest form of this politically/critically engaged art is the depiction of these traumata, which society is often not even aware of. Explicitly, art neither helps illustrate history nor should it be put into a political context. What matters is that the artist chooses a theme of importance to her/himself and society, s/he filters it and transforms it into a work of art which opens up new possibilities for individual reflection to the audience.”)

³ Vorstellung: der Zwischenraum und die Schnittstelle zwischen Historie und Kunst (Biesenbach, 13).
Interviewed by Jörg Heiser, Ensslin adds: “Aufgrund ihrer Brechungen wirft die Kunst jeden einzelnen Betrachter auf sich selbst und seinen eigenen Blickwinkel zurück, anstatt ihn an die wissenschaftliche Untersuchung der Fakten zu verweisen.” (My translation: “Visitors are not presented with a scientific approach to the representation of history which is based on facts but they see artworks that refract and mirror events and reflect them back onto the audience.”) This echoes Canadian new media artist David Rokeby’s metaphor of the mirror in interactive new media art works. His text “Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media” is based on the idea that (new media) artworks provide us with mirrors in which we see ourselves. What both, Ensslin and Rokeby are alluding to is the fact that by “seeing ourselves” we also see parts of the outside world that have defined our image of self: our social, political and cultural environment. This becomes part of the complex process of looking at art and it provides a filter through which we see the events or themes it portrays. Most importantly it results in individualized readings for each audience member that no longer only engage them on an emotional level (like, dislike, sad, happy, boring, etc.).

2. Dürer, ich führe Baader und Meinhof über die Documenta V (Dürer, I’ll guide Baader and Meinhof through Documenta V personally)

Joseph Beuys’ Dürer, ich führe Baader und Meinhof über die Documenta V (1972) was part of the 2005 RAF exhibition in Berlin. It is a work which too easily could be (and has been) looked at as an artistic affirmation of RAF ideals – after all, it places the names of Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin’s, two of the RAF’s founders and core members, in the same sentence as Albrecht Dürer’s, one of Germany’s greatest artists of the Renaissance. However, rather than promoting RAF ideals, it actually tries to achieve the opposite. Beuys created it as a humane gesture against the inhumane acts of the Baader-Meinhof gang. For a better understanding of the work it is important to know about the process of its creation. 1972 was the height of the police pursuit of the first generation terrorists of the RAF. It was also the year of Documenta V at which the Fluxus artist Thomas Peiter did performances in the exhibition spaces of the Kassel Fridericianum disguised as Albrecht Dürer. He also visited Joseph Beuys in his exhibition space, which was turned into a Büro für Direkte Demokratie (Office for Direct Democracy). One day, when Beuys saw Peiter in his Dürer costume he exclaimed: “Dürer, ich führe Baader und Meinhof über die Documenta V, dann sind sie resozialisiert!” (Bisenbach, 38). (My translation: Dürer, I’ll guide Baader and Meinhof through Documenta V, then they will be re-socialized).

Joseph Beuys’ art had the goal to change and transform. In this case, he proposed that art’s power to transform human beings is so strong it can even resocialize terrorists. Joseph Beuys’ often-quoted concept of social sculpture emphasizes this unique quality of art to change individuals. Social sculpture is based on the idea that every human being has the ability to be creative – as Beuys believed one of mankind’s defining skills, at the center of artistic production but also the foundation for every aspect of our political, scientific,
humanistic, etc. systems. If every human being is creative, i.e. has the power to create (thus the famous Beuys quote: “Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler” (“every human being is an artist”) then humans can use this creative force to shape social processes and achievements. Humans become ‘creators’ rather than remaining consumers. Social sculpture is ultimately a process of sculpting society through actions derived from creative ideas; it is participatory and bottom up rather than top down. Beuys tried to promote this principle from an ideologically neutral position. As his former student and former CEO of the Free International University (FIU) Johannes Stüttgen writes:

“[Joseph Beuys war] direkt gegen das Prinzip “Ideologie” selbst angetreten, da er in ihm das Grundübel der gegenwärtigen Zeit- und Bewusstseinslage erkannt hatte. […] Ideologien – so seine Diagnose – blendeten genau diese Eigenbestimmung, die nämlich im Ich des Menschen zum Bewusstsein kommt, aus. Sie schieben in das [Welt]Gefüge eine Fremdbestimmung hinein, die dieses zersetzt und das ’Ich’ ausschaltet. Beuys’ Intention galt der Erstarkung dieser Ich-Instanz in der Welt, der Zurechtrückung ihrer im Weltgefüge vorgesehenen, zentralen Leitfunktion” (Biesenbach, 36-37). (My translation: “Joseph Beuys personally opposed the principle of “ideology”, he recognized in it the basic problem of the contemporary state of awareness. […] Ideologies, so he diagnosed, disengage self-determination, which is located in the human ego. Ideologies introduce heteronomy to the world’s structure, which will eventually destroy the ego. Beuys’ goal was to strengthen the ego, and to return it to its central guiding function in the world structure.”)

Continuing with another work example from the 2005 RAF exhibition this paper explores the idea of art’s quality to exist in ideologically-neutral territory from a related but slightly different angle.

3. Gerhard Richter, October 18, 1977
This group of Richter’s paintings from 1988, also included in the RAF exhibition loosely follows a narrative starting with the youth portrait of Ulrike Meinhof, one of the RAF founders, the arrest of members of the group in 1972, representation of the gang member’s life in prison to the point of the death of four of them, Ulrike Meinhof in 1976 and Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe in the night of October 18, 1977 (an event referred to as Stammheim Prison’s Death

---

4 The titles of the paintings in the October 18, 1977 installation are: Youth Portrait (Jugendbildnis); Arrest 1 (Festnahme 1); Arrest 2 (Festnahme 2); Confrontation 1 (Gegenüberstellung 1); Confrontation 2 (Gegenüberstellung 2); Confrontation 3 (Gegenüberstellung 3); Hanged (Erhängte); Cell (Zelle); Record Player (Plattenspieler); Man Shot Down 1 (Erschossener 1); Man Shot Down 2 (Erschossener 2); Dead 1 (Tote 1); Dead 2 (Tote 2); Dead 3 (Tote 3); Funeral (Beerdigung).
Night) at the height of the German Autumn. The paintings’ narrative structure concludes with Baader, Ensslin and Raspe’s funeral on October 27, 1977. Again, it would be easy to see this work as an artistic chronicle of moments in the lives and deaths of Baader, Ensslin, Meinhof and Raspe. Also, critics, not only of Richter’s cycle but generally of controversial works of art engaging in a political or critical discourse often argue that by choosing a topic, it already becomes the object of the artist’s admiration, thus giving way to presumptuous glorification. This argument infers that art exclusively revolves around the topoi of truth and beauty in which the artist identifies her/himself strongly with the subject s/he chooses. I would argue against this rather simplistic notion of art. Rather, the artist, according to Joseph Beuys, has the opportunity to operate in an ideologically unoccupied space – the artist has to in order not to be used as a tool for propaganda. If s/he doesn’t, art merely becomes illustration and loses its sovereignty. Put differently, instead of taking sides, the artist creates a discourse, a tool for public debate that itself can become part of the artwork. This is an idea that Grant Kester, chair of the Visual Arts Department at UCSD explores in greater depth in his book “Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art.” And as Felix Ensslin puts it when asked by Jörg Heiser: “So erreicht Kunst eigentlich gerade das Gegenteil von Aufwertung oder Identifikation, nämlich eine reflexive Distanz.” (My translation: “Art then achieves exactly the opposite of valorization/glorification or identification with its subject, which is a reflexive distance”).

In the case of Richter’s October 18, 1977 cycle, his intention with these paintings goes well beyond that of creating an artistic chronicle of moments in the lives and deaths of prominent German terrorists. As Robert Storr, former Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art and Dean of the of the Yale School of Art writes about October 18, 1977:

“So far as the explicit but obscured subject is concerned, it is as if an all but unbearable truth had suddenly been brought forward into the light, only to be screened by shadows in a condition where the impossibility of seeing is both frustrating and a kind of a reprieve. Thus each canvas is an insistent reminder of what one may have forgotten or heretofore successfully avoided paying attention to” (Storr, 28).

Ambiguity and in-between spaces are more complicated than clear-cut gestures of affirmation or negation. Yet they clearly yield many opportunities for a more nuanced and fruitful discourse. However they are also a source of confusion. A concrete example of falsely reading an artist’s engagement with a topic as an affirmative illustration of the topic rather than a critical or discursive contribution was a relatively recent response to one of my own works, which I will now turn to.
4. In the Line of Sight

*In the Line of Sight* (see fig. 1) is a collaborative work by myself and Daniel Sauter, a new media artist and an associate professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). It is an art installation that uses 100 computer-controlled tactical flashlights to project low-resolution video footage of suspicious human motion. Each flashlight shines a light spot on the wall. All flashlights combined create a ten by ten matrix representation of the source footage, featured on a video monitor in an adjacent part of the gallery.

The flashlight matrix projects images that are difficult to decipher, deliberately vague, making the audience wonder what exactly the person is doing. Pictures taken by law enforcement and national intelligence under difficult circumstances, for example at night, from a distance, at low resolution, in passing, are constantly subject to analysis, debate, and scrutiny. Misinterpretations can lead to severe consequences.

![Fig. 1: Daniel Sauter and Fabian Winkler’s *In the Line of Sight* at Ars Electronica 2009, OK Center for Contemporary Art, Linz Austria.](image)

With this project the artists enter into a controversial debate about a range of security issues including semi-automated decision-making based on surveillance footage and the elusiveness of visual representation and pattern recognition in a digital world.

Smith & Wesson, the brand of the flashlights chosen for this installation, is best known for its product line of firearms. Conceptually, this fact references the
violent dimension of light, from searchlights in WW2 to tracer ammunition and propaganda architectures made of light. By walking between the light source and the projected images, the role of the visitors changes from observer to subject – with 100 flashlights pointed at them.

The comment, a Youtube user made about an explanatory video of this project simply read: “It's not art, it's the first stages of a system of control.” While this person clearly understood the context in which the artwork was created, he was not able to take the second step and engage in a critical discourse that the work wished to generate, respectively to overcome the idea that an artwork does not always have to positively embrace the topic it represents.

I strongly believe that the solution to this problem is not to make these works of art less intellectually challenging, but instead to create more of them: works that require a more active participation of the audience in the process of meaning creation, emphasizing critical distance and self-reflexivity.

5. Hans Haacke New York posters
Half a year after the attacks of 9/11, the New York public art program Creative Time commissioned conceptual artist Hans Haacke to create a series of posters commemorating the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Unlike the spectacle of Tribute in Light, the other Creative Time funded art project dealing with the trauma of 9/11, Hans Haacke's Untitled successfully created a visual metaphor for the way that this tragic event has become a lens through which everyday realities are viewed and understood. Haacke’s idea for this poster series was simple. The design consisted of a completely white sheet of paper from which only the silhouettes of the World Trade Center's twin towers was cut out. The final appearance of the posters in public space only varied by the different content of other placards (advertising for music events, commercial products, movies, etc.) showing through the architectural cutouts.

Hans Haacke’s posters for New York allowed the audience to individually reflect on the loss caused by a traumatic event such as 9/11 (the cutout shape) but even more so to look at what is still there: the larger cultural context, the many different facets that make up a society (the posters showing through the die cuts of the twin towers). These facets often do not add up to a uniform picture of a society but rather highlight all of its complex elements. Haacke’s poster project thus presents the audience member with a mirror in which to see her/himself and their culture and offers a space for personal reflection on possible responses to the tragic events. Similar to the previously introduced examples, this work also demonstrates that contemporary art does not have the function of doing the work

of interpretation for the audience. However, this and other works of contemporary art do help the audience to engage in an act of creation.

Being exposed to works of art such as the ones described above gives viewers the opportunity to create responses that are likely more varied, more meaningful and ultimately more helpful in the prevention of future acts of terrorism than any response influenced by popular media images which often turn the public into ideologically controlled consumers. These works give audience members the opportunity to re-evaluate their responses to acts of terrorism and help shape more nuanced and individual perspectives, which can put dominant interpretations in question.
Works Cited


