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Autonomy’s Double Bind

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In this essay, Rose-Anne Gush discusses the exhibition *Illiberal Lives* at Ludwig Forum in Aachen, examining how unfreedom subtends art’s freedom, with attention given to its conflicted and ambivalent national impulses and representations. Her remarks center on the exhibition’s conceptualization and on specific positions within it that reveal this unfreedom in liberalism’s unfulfilled promises. The essay critically reflects on works evoking images and practices that attempt to exist beyond the capture of liberalism’s institutions.





Illiberal Lives, installation view, Ludwig Forum Aachen, 2023. Photo: Mareike Tocha

In the current conjuncture, the most fertile soil for fascism and its forms of unfreedom and reaction is stricken by crisis and concomitant collapse. The poly-crises of liberal (social) democracy are born of capitalist social relations, visible in their various forms not limited to economic, ecological, and social spheres and intensifying globally since 2008. Against the backdrop of insurgent fascist politics across the world, in 2023, the Ludwig Forum, a gigantic former umbrella factory in Aachen, stages the exhibition *Illiberal Lives*, which seeks to address how unfreedom endures in art, following *Illiberal Arts* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2021. The curators of the *Illiberal Lives*, Eva Birkenstock, Anselm Franke, Holger Otten, and Kerstin Stakemeier, invited ten artists to relate their work to the Ludwig Collection.[1] The history of the collection of Peter and Irene Ludwig – who amassed wealth through chocolate production – goes back to the 1960s when they institutionalized works by artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, before, in the midst of the Cold War, directing their gaze towards Eastern Europe, buying up art, and thus bringing two sides of the iron curtain into contact.[2] *Illiberal Lives* animates the politics of the collection, reflecting on global shifts and perspectives that it remains witness to.

On entering the huge exhibition space, the viewer encounters Wolfgang Mattheuer's *Jahrhundertschritt* [Century Step] (1984-5, produced in the GDR) a bronze figure obliquely reflecting this history, as it symbolizes the fraught social divisions and inheritances of its time. It is incorporated in one of Henrike Naumann's expansive site-specific installations of sculptural interior architectures that form the central axis of the exhibition, taking over the main hall. From Mattheuer's sculpture's mutilated center, limbs jut out; his right hand gestures a fascist salute, his left black-booted leg is marked as one section of a swastika. In contrast, his left hand is raised clenched in solidarity and his right leg, painted white, steps towards Magdalena Jetelová's *Der Setzung anderer Seite [The Positioning's Other Side]* (1987), a colossal gate made from a rare African hardwood called Sipo. On the other side of this portal, looking back, is a bust of Peter Ludwig by Lev Kerbel, famous for his Soviet sculptures, placed on a mass-produced cupboard within Neumann's installation. Mattheuer's schizophrenic figure, split between regimes, unable to find coherence or direction, presents an image of psychic and social turmoil, ambivalence, splits and ruptures, that I read as a red

thread through the exhibition.

Henrike Naumann's installations, sprawled across the central hall of the space, address the split within Mattheuer's *Jahrhundertschritt* to the domestic space of the home with its lingering ‹national rebirth› in reunified Germany. Another work, *Ruinenwert – Einstürzende Reichsbauten* (2019–23) presents fascist interior architecture in rustic, wooden, bulky benches, stools, and tables connoting national nostalgia colliding with post-modern designs – sweeping violet sofas, fake furs slung over cushions, and swirling shapes that point to the surrealism of Dalí and its commodified derivatives. The interiors are punctuated with objects pregnant with latent violent functions such as baseball bats and guns. The curators describe Naumann as leading us «through a living landscape of the national private sphere, in which fascism quite literally constitutes the horizon of the subsequent generations, both here and there,» on each side of the iron curtain.[3] Her readymades are sourced using adverts on Ebay, or they are site-specific, yet in each context Neumann finds and presents a material history of domestic objects and waste, revealing today's ‹afterlife› of fascism through its domestic-design history.



Illiberal Lives, installation view, Ludwig Forum Aachen, 2023. Photo: Mareike Tocha

Illiberal Arts catalogue

Illiberal Lives, like *Illiberal Arts*, contributes to a larger debate over art's complicity with modern capitalism and its unfulfilled liberal values. The press release of *Illiberal Lives* describes it as exploring the «dissolution of the liberal promise of progress» and the conceptualization of freedom that accompanies it. It claims that art's liberal role as a space for the expression of bourgeois freedom faces challenges. My initial engagement with the *Illiberal Arts/Lives* project took place when I read a conversation between several authors included in the *Illiberal Arts* exhibition catalogue. They discussed the exhibition's concept paper, in particular its claims regarding «real death of liberalism» in art and its present social reality. This idea is extended to the second iteration, as mentioned above. The authors struggled with the definition of «the present» in its interminable instability. They chose to address specific ideas including property rights, the liberal conflation of politics and law, the

artistic concepts of life-work, among others. They also raised the problem of monumentalizing the institution of art, raising its status, only to denounce it, without a clear path towards material transformation. One author, Marina Vishmidt, highlighted how we, as individuals, shape the institution. When we want to critique it or argue against it, we have to also consider that we produce and reproduce it; we are implicated in it. This extends from the institution of art to the institutions of law and capital to ideology itself, as permanently reproduced; we are unable to step outside of it.

On reflecting on the reception of the first exhibition, David Joselit highlights this challenge faced by the curators. He writes that they «placed themselves in something of a double bind, since they want to see the world of art as a repressive infrastructure for enclosing artistic labor as property, while as curators they implicitly celebrate, or at least consent to publicizing, the art world's cultural legitimacy.»[4] This dual role is a necessity if they are to produce an exhibition, and it gives them an opportunity to explore this contradiction.

The philosopher Gillian Rose identifies a similar double bind in her examination of liberalism as determining modern consciousness. She describes it as the «diremption in our agency and in our institutions» where individuals simultaneously possess inner freedom and outer unfreedom.[5] It is this level of bourgeois «freedom» that *Illiberal Arts/Lives* wants to question with regards to the art world's treatment of artistic labor as property.

The discussion around artistic autonomy is treated materially in the catalogue of *Illiberal Arts*. In their concept, the curators assert that art history was developed as a colonizing discipline. Museums became the national repositories of its «educational canon.» Art criticism held the power to sediment aesthetic judgement, *and* aesthetic forms. These traditions were institutionalized, gaining autonomy through this process.[6] Here, autonomy registers in the liberal/modern sense, where the subject's capacity for both self-alienation and self-possession means that they can partake in «objective universality.» They can claim the juridical category of possessive individualism, protected by reason, which paradoxically, the curators say, shaped the development of the nation state and justified «whiteness» as identity (and property) and the law that enshrines and legalizes it.[7] I read their position as close to that of Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, who links the origins of modern art to the consequences of imperial plunder. She argues that the history of the appropriation and relocation of the objects of colonized peoples, *and* the subsequent movement of these peoples, laid the groundwork for and gave rise to the modern art museum, the museum that the curators both elevate and critique.[8]

As one counterposing model on the level of artistic production, the curators look to the notion of «life-work,» a concept they borrow from Lu Märten, who suggests that the whole life of a person can be considered artistic. In contrast to the liberal-humanist form of self-possession, this model dissents from art as the liberal aesthetics of self-alienation.[9] As «life work,» art would dismantle itself as a form of artistic work, it would lack autonomy in the sense given by possessive individualism.[10] The question remains: What form can art take outside of this structure?

Blaise Kirschner's *UNICA* (2022)

I started this essay exploring the ambivalences in Wolfgang Mattheuer's *Jahrhundertschritt* , and Henrike Naumann's investigation of fascist-furniture through her waste-scapes. I want to explore two further positions – Blaise Kirschner's and Bassem Saad's – focusing on their navigation of (un)freedom and wasted life-work. In Blaise Kirschner's *UNICA* (2022), a two-channel video installation, we witness an artist working in her studio under emotional turmoil.

In her frenzy she sketches intricate patterns, body parts, organs, intestines, hands with testicles, asses (present in the exhibition as *PATTERN#01B* [2021] and *PATTERN#02* [2020–21], among others).



Illiberal Lives, installation view, Ludwig Forum Aachen, 2023. Photo: Mareike Tocha

Concurrently, a second figure inhabits a motion capture studio, choreographing movements for a character named Unica, a survivor in a post-apocalyptic horror film. Her task is to inspect objects that endured the catastrophe. We see her look at blank pages, frames where images should be, functioning as stand-ins for a projected reality. While shaping this simulated world, every one of her actions is tracked and quantified. Despite her minimal dialogue, on several occasions she tells her director what she will *eat*, breaking the spell of virtuality: the body that is captured (by sensors and cameras) demands sustenance. In the narrative, the artist is revealed as the actor's mother. What follows is the mother's recollection of a dream induced by looking at autopsy reports detailing the removal of body parts for transplantation. In her dream, she vividly describes a beautiful girl in an operating theater. The girl possesses a human head but a snake's body. The doctors removed all of her organs, and her body parts. Yet, this girl could still see, without eyes, and she could plan without a brain, she contained a higher intelligence and an inhuman strength, which was born of and fed by her anger. Her sustenance is drawn from this rage. It is through her encounter with these organs that the artist struggles with her rage, appearing to also encounter a kind of freedom in this moment of undoing.

In the third location, Teufelsberg, a hill made from 26 million cubic meters of debris from bombed-out Berlin, absorbed into the landscape after WWII. The actor searches for clues in an abandoned house, she fumbles through shards of porcelain that reveal this landscape to be made of former homes. Like Neumann, Kirschner addresses the material waste of fascism in the site of Teufelsberg as a monumental ruin, testament to a catastrophe, the timing of which comes under question.





Stills from Blaise Kirschner, *UNICA*, 2022 courtesy of the artist

Kirschner's film pays homage to the surrealist artist and poet Unica Zürn, known for her anagrammatic writing and drawing. Both characters are in fact Unica, as A – the actress/survivor and B – the artist. Zürn wrote while incarcerated, *unfree*, in psychiatric institutions, as in the case of *Das Haus der Krankheiten* (1958), which included Zürn's plan for said house, where each room is substituted by a body part. Yet, for Zürn the body was a container for mental illness, in which art and life were inseparable. Her art was a transcription of her unfreedom, her incarceration in these institutions, perhaps in a sense of the «life work» associated with Lu Märten. Kirschner's rendering of Unica expresses the ambivalence in her work between the anagrammatic, the abstracted – Zürn wrote using a method of discontinuous seriality that could fragment and multiply into endless new forms – and how it is experienced in the body.[11] Kirschner inflects Zürn's language of the body with the abstractions of CGI, updating her impulses for the present, while maintaining the body's intensity, as something malleable, unfixed, that can be recast, non-defining, and as such, anti-fascist. And yet, the ambivalence in our (dis)embodied relation and mediation of the virtual and

emotional/physical can produce rage and its violent potential that remains within us when we are desensitized, a rage that one must necessarily navigate.

Bassem Saad's *Congress of Idling Persons* (2021)

Waste – furniture as waste, Teufelsberg as wasteland, and the museum itself – constitute one route through the field of social contradiction produced by *Illiberal Lives*. Waste is also a figure of illiberal life that potentially remains unsubsumed by the contours of liberal institutions. Bassem Saad's installation includes two videos. In *Congress of Idling Persons* (2021) Saad offers a militant poetics, moments of sociality, of collective freedom, where the riot takes precedence, where looting – as an attack on property – comes to the forefront. The 2022 version of *Kink Retrograde*, present in *Illiberal Lives*, is an update of the 2019 version – its rehearsal. Set within the scene of a landfill outside of Beirut, the narrator (Sanja Grozdanic) tells us that the film's author was concerned with survival in conditions of extremity. Saad directly experienced the 2015 waste revolts that took place in Beirut after the closure of the Naameh dump and the piling up of trash on the streets. The revolts intensified when the state failed to provide a solution – failed its duty of protection – to this ecological disaster.

In *Kink Retrograde*, Rayyan Abdelkhalek performs useless self-care and yogic rituals within this toxic landscape. Wearing protective clothing, he plays with toxic groundwater. In time, we see a white powder reminiscent of cocaine being divided on a phone screen; we hear an analysis of varying average durations, ranging from the biological half-life of cocaine in a human and the functional life of an incinerator facility to contracts such as the average employment contract in Beirut and the change in average life expectancy in Syria between when the war began and 2014 (it was reduced by 22 years) in the context of famine and ecological pollution from chemical weapons. As such, *Kink Retrograde* is a brief but powerful investigation of liberalism's eroding social contract that we as individuals maintain in our consent to relinquish some freedoms in exchange for some protections by authorities that supposedly govern us. Saad questions the level of consent in this relation. Do we really know what we are consenting to? The landfill is taken as an object lesson to explore this question, as a wasteland of an event about which the citizen is unknowing; their consent is taken. The ideas of risk involved in kink (given in the title) sexual practices as tethered to attempts to prevent harm, where agreements on, say, safe words function to maintain consent, when consent is being purposefully played with, orients us to consider the use of contracts between people.





Stills from Bassen Saad, *Kink Retrograde*, 2022, courtesy of the artist

Three lenticular photo prints whose titles *(Suppose that Rome is not a Human Habitation)* are derived from Freud's supposition that Rome can be considered metaphorically, not as a place of human habitation but a psychical entity. Freud asks us to imagine that everything that came into existence throughout Rome's development *remains alongside* its newer developments, the ruins among the ruins, the before and after of a siege. Saad's invocation of Freud suggests that we cannot hold all experiences, all temporalities in a singular thought image, just as our unconscious represses painful material to the recesses of our body-mind. The lenticular images allow us to see three perspectives that simply adjust as we adjust our view: we adjust our perspective.



Illiberal Lives, installation view, Ludwig Forum Aachen, 2023. Photo: Mareike Tocha

In *Illiberal Lives*, disparate life forms, forms of praxis that are in excess of, or that counter (legislative, inclusionary) liberal politics are explored. They make explicit the diremptions within autonomy and heteronomy, but they remain frozen in the museum. We can testify to

illiberal life, but the conditions that make this possible include our complicity in the corruption and violence of our social institutions. The double bind persists.

[1] Pauline Curnier Jardin, Johanna Hedva, Ho Rui An, Blaise Kirschner, Jota Mombaa, Melika Ngombe Kolongo, Bassem Saad, Miko?aj Sobczak, and Jordan Strafer. Works from the collection include Switch (1964-5) by Lee Lozano, photography by Klaus Paier, and Jeff Koons' Large Vase of Flowers (1991).

[2] Notably, the Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, as it stands now, opened in 1991, bringing substantial collections from Cuba and Latin America writ large to Germany, as well as setting up exchanges for artists from these places. The Ludwig Forum testifies to the extractive tendencies of capitalism in the core on the rest of the world (with its collection from Europe, North America, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia) and its art, and it is part of producing and institutionalizing what has come to be known as Global Art. See: https://ludwigforum.de/en/museum/history/

[3] *Illiberal Lives* booklet (Aachen: Ludwig Forum, 2023), p. 8.

[4] David Joselit, «David Joselit on *Illiberal Arts*», Artforum 60/4 (December 2021), https://www.artforum.com/print/202110/david-joselit-on-illiberal-arts-87220 [https://www.artforum.com/print/202110/david-joselit-on-illiberal-arts-87220] (accessed 3 September 2023).

[5] Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (London: Verso, 2017), epub.

[6] Kerstin Stakemeier and Anselm Franke, eds., *Illiberal Arts* (Berlin: b-books, 2021), p. 241.

[7] Ibid., p. 242–3. The curators follow Cheryl Harris's essay «Whiteness as Property» to make this argument.

[8] «The work of potential history is to argue that their status and identity as art objects must be reversed and revoked, in order to enable the rights inscribed in these looted objects to be recognized. Once recognized, these rights can become the basis for providing the victims of mass looting a place – not just an ‹asylum› – close to their objects, or enabling them to unite with these objects under various arrangements.» Ariella Azoulay, Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism (London: Verso Books, 2019), epub.

[9] Stakemeier and Franke 2021, p. 242.

[10] Ibid., p. 249.

[11] Esra Plumer, Unica Zürn: *Art, Writing and Postwar Surrealism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), p. 141.

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