

Crisis and Form: Politicizations of Art (Essen, 22–24 Apr 26)

Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen (KWI), Goethestraße 31, 45128 Essen, Apr 22–24, 2026

Registration deadline: Apr 10, 2026

Mona Leinung

In 1936, in the face of the fascist aestheticization of politics, Walter Benjamin called for a politicization of art – so that the masses, per his famous dictum, would finally attain rights and not merely expression. In the technological upheavals of his time, he saw a chance to free art from its “parasitical dependence on ritual”, and to unleash democratic energies. Almost ninety years later, at least the promise of technological reproducibility has been fulfilled: we all carry a film studio in our own pockets, amateurs turned content creators. However, the production and property relations that Benjamin identified as an obstacle have only gotten worse: platform capitalism, algorithmic governmentality, and generative AI have splintered the public sphere into fragmented spaces, and contributed to an upsurge in authoritarian tendencies.

Today, on theoretical and practical economic levels, the question of the emancipatory potential of art seems to be exhausted before it is even posed. Adorno’s idea of aesthetic autonomy, Rancière’s distribution of the sensible, Bürger’s critique of institutions – all of these central concepts of critical art theory have long since merged with institutional routines, or have themselves become part of the global art market and its capitalist logics. And yet, the expectation of emancipatory art is historically relatively recent and by no means a given. For centuries, art served as a representation of authority, propaganda, religious edification, or simply as adornment – this was no betrayal of its true purpose, but rather a determination of its societal function. If art, as Thomas Brasch asserted, was never a means of changing the world but a way to survive it, what are the consequences for the politicization of art under present conditions?

This question becomes all the more urgent as we are currently engaged in new entanglements of perception, experience, and technology – albeit in different form, if no less profound than in Benjamin’s time – to which traditional art theory no longer offers any response. Our conference takes this crisis as an opportunity to explore what the politicization of art can mean today. In recent years, the concept of form has been brought back into play. Form encompasses forms of artistic presentation as well as its medial constellations and the forms of its institutionalization; unlike in classical formalism, it cannot be conceived in contrast to content. Instead of seeking lifelines for the autonomy of art, we will investigate concrete aesthetic ways of functioning: How can institutions curate relevance? Which affects are mobilized by the aesthetics of crisis? What does “protocol art” do in network states? How does AI transform aesthetic judgment? Are art and its theory ready to acknowledge that they can shape and curate crises, but not remedy them?

DAY 1, WEDNESDAY , APRIL 22, 2026

10.00 – 10.30

Welcoming Remarks

Prof. Dr. Christian Grüny, Prof. Dr. Mirjam Schaub

Thematic Focus I: Form as an Expanded Concept

10.30 – 11.15

Art and the Politics of Social Form

Prof. Dr. Peter Osborne (Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Kingston University London)

11.15 – 11.45 Coffee Break

11.45 – 12.30

The Fear of Form. How Form became Political

Prof. Dr. Sylvia Sasse (University of Zurich)

12.30 – 14.00 Lunch Break

14.00 – 14.45

Concavity and the Lost Center of Sculpture

Dr. Ruth Ezra (University of St. Andrews)

14.45 – 15.30

Native Americans in Paris: A Political Mania of the 1960s and 1970s

Dr. Danilo Scholz (Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities Essen)

15.30 – 16.00 Coffee Break

16.00 – 16.45

The Logic of Disruption and its Odds

Prof. Dr. Mirjam Schaub (University of Applied Science, Hamburg)

17.00 Apéro

18.30

Optional evening event organized by the KWI

"Wenn und Aber. Philosophische Fragen zur Zeit"

DAY 2, THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 2026

Thematic Focus II: Digital Media Ecologies and Political Art

10.00 - 10.45

"Acquiring Taste": AI and the Work of Aesthetic Judgment

Prof. Dr. Markus Rautzenberg (Folkwang University of the Arts)

10.45 – 11.30

Protocol Art: Pattern Formation and Aesthetic Deformation in Network States

Dr. Johannes Bennke (Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf)

11.30 – 12.00 Coffee Break

Thematic Focus III: Between Art and the Crisis of Democracy

12.00 – 12.45

Crisis without Critique

Prof. Dr. Felix Heidenreich (University of Stuttgart)

12.45 – 13.30

Mimesis and Reenactment. On the Crisis-ridden Formation of Political Art

Prof. Dr. Maria Muhle (Academy of Fine Arts Munich)

13.30 – 15.00 Lunch Break

15.00 – 15.45

Curating Relevance

Hans Christ & Iris Dressler (Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart)

15.45 – 16.30

Performing Crisis: Aesthetics of Masculinity

Prof. Dr. Christian Grüny (University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart)

18.00 Conference Dinner

DAY 3, FRIDAY, APRIL 24, 2026

Thematic Focus IV: Perspectives of Alternative Aesthetic Models

09.30 – 10.15

Generative AI and the Aesthetics of Digital Fascism

Prof. Dr. Roland Meyer (University of Zurich / Zurich University of the Arts)

10.15 – 11.00

Survivalism: Speculative Tech and Future Horizons

Dr. Ella Klik (Bar-Ilan University)

11.00 – 11.30 Coffee Break

11.30 – 12.15

Inclining Forms: Reimagining Philosophy's Self-Images

Dr. Hannah Wallenfels (diffrakt, Centre for Theoretical Periphery)

12.15 – 13.00

Open Discussion & Final Remarks

Dr. Johannes Bennke, Prof. Dr. Markus Rautzenberg

13.00 Departure

Reference:

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