

Crisis and Form: Politicizations of Art

Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities

Essen, Germany

April 22–24, 2026

Calls for a politicization of art abound, and they come from different directions. It is the task of a philosophical critique of art and a media philosophy to describe and analyze art's emancipatory and reactionary endeavors. What modes of emancipation does art have to offer? Does it still promise radical autonomy, and if so, how can this autonomy be conceptualized today? These questions are becoming increasingly urgent. What if the suspicion turns out to be true that art is not in itself subversive and emancipatory? Art is always entangled in the very conditions it unveils, but there is a nagging suspicion that it could effectively affirm and stabilize the capitalist conditions of its own production.

The current crisis is, among other things, a crisis of democracy. Western-style liberal democracy seems to be in retreat; even those accustomed to criticizing it now seem to be called upon to defend it against authoritarian and xenophobic tendencies. In this way, democracy is threatened from the outside and increasingly also from within. Platform capitalism shatters the public into fragmented spaces shaped by algorithmic economies of attention and commercialization, which further erodes the tenuous foundation of democratic deliberation. Additionally, large language models (LLMs) and other AI systems are fundamentally changing our world. This calls for critical engagement with such new types of "content" and the medial conditions and modes of their production and distribution, and also for a new type of theory that draws on and develops concepts from media philosophy. What is the role of universalist aspirations in this crisis, and what forms can they take today?

Art and artists are called on to find answers to these disturbing developments. In 1935, Walter Benjamin diagnosed an aestheticization of politics and a concurrent politicization of art. Do these categories still apply to the contemporary situation, or how would they have to be reconceptualized? Art is supposed to reveal the opaque mechanisms of the media and political institutions it encounters, investigating the threat of manipulation and potential for change. But can art in fact fulfill this task if, as Thomas Brasch noted, art has never been a means of changing the world, but rather of surviving it? This three-day conference aims at elucidating how art

is connected to the political crises of our time. Even though the autonomy of art has been disputed, simply instrumentalizing it for a particular political agenda is hardly convincing. Art's relationship to society and its own institutional conditions is itself in a state of crisis, which must be investigated. After all, art cannot be properly understood apart from the conditions it originates in. To conceptualize this, various recent theories have revisited the concept of form. "Form" encompasses forms of artistic (re)presentation as well as their medial constellations and institutional form(at)s. Unlike classical formalism would have it, art cannot be separated from content. What does it mean to respond to our crises in a formal way? In what way is reworking the forms of (re)presentation related to reworking the forms of their institutionalization? How is the present "in-formed"?

The task is thus to identify aesthetic practices, theories, and approaches in media philosophy that reflect the entanglement of art with its conditions, situate it in the history of ideas, and develop concepts for the contemporary situation. How does art reflect on its own conditions of production? What concepts in media philosophy can grasp the political, technological, and social changes of the present? Do we have to abandon the narratives of classical modernity (subversion, the new, the disruption of habit, self-reflection) faced with the crisis of democracy and the rise of authoritarian forces? In times when disruption has become the order of the day, do we not need alternative projects? How can developments like the aesthetics of care relate to this crisis? Can art and its theory face the fact that they can aestheticize and curate crises but never cure them?

The conference is a cooperation between the Media Philosophy Working Group in the German Society for Media Studies (Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft, GfM), the German Society for Aesthetics (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ästhetik, DGÄ), and the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, KWI) in Essen. The proceedings will be published in an open access publication.

Supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for the Promotion of Science.



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für Ästhetik e.V.



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Crisis and Form. Politicizations of Art

DAY 1, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 2026

13.00 – 13.30 *Welcoming Remarks*
Prof. Dr. Julika Griem, Prof. Dr. Christian Grüny, Prof. Dr. Mirjam Schaub

Thematic Focus I: Form as an Expanded Concept

13.30 – 14.15 *Art and the Politics of Social Form*
Prof. Dr. Peter Osborne (Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy,
Kingston University London)

14.15 – 14.45 *Coffee Break*

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 – 16.15 *The Logic of Disruption and its Odds*
Prof. Dr. Mirjam Schaub (University of Applied Science, Hamburg)

16.15 – 17.00 *Survivalism: Speculative Tech and Future Horizons*
Dr. Ella Klik (Bar-Ilan University)

17.00 *Apéro*

18.30 **Optional evening event organized by the KWI**

Truth and Judgment at the Limits of Liberalism
Prof. Dr. Dorit Geva (University of Vienna)
„Wenn und Aber – Philosophische Fragen zur Zeit“
Lecture and Discussion, moderated by Mona Leinung

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 (Filmuniversity Babelsberg Konrad Wolf)
- 11.30 – 12.15 *Mimesis and Reenactment. On the Crisis-ridden Formation of Political Art*
Prof. Dr. Maria Muhle (Academy of Fine Arts Munich)
- 12.15 – 14.00 *Lunch Break*

Thematic Focus III: Between Art and the Crisis of Democracy

- 14.00 – 14.45 *Curating Relevance*
Hans Christ & Iris Dressler (Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart)
- 14.45 – 15.30 *Performing Crisis: Aesthetics of Masculinity*
Prof. Dr. Christian Grüny (University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart)
- 15.30 – 16.00 *Coffee Break & 5min walk to the Folkwang Museum*
- 16.00 – 17.00 **Optional afternoon event:
Guided Tour Folkwang Museum**
- 18.00 **Conference Dinner**

DAY 3, FRIDAY, APRIL 24, 2026

Thematic Focus IV: Perspectives of Alternative Aesthetic Models

- 10.00 – 10.45 *Generative AI and the Aesthetics of Digital Fascism*
Prof. Dr. Roland Meyer (University of Zurich / Zurich University of the Arts)
- 10.45 – 11.30 *Inclining Forms: Reimagining Philosophy's Self-Images*
Dr. Hannah Wallenfels (diffrakt, Centre for Theoretical Periphery)
- 11.30 – 12.00 *Coffee Break*
- 12.00 – 13.00 *Open Discussion & Final Remarks*
Dr. Johannes Bennke, Prof. Dr. Markus Rautzenberg
- 13.00 **Departure**

Convenors

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