

We Need to Talk

A Museum's Response to Political Polarization in Post-Unification Germany

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01
Hilke Wagner
and Kathleen
Reinhardt,
"Information Sheet:
Andreas Angelidakis,
Demos, 2016 and
4xKION, 2020."

02
"Albertinum erhält
Kunstwerk von
Andreas Angelidakis,"
press release,
Staatliche Kunst-
sammlung Dresden,
February 14, 2018,
[https://
www.skd.museum/
presse/2018/
albertinum-erhaelt-
kunstwerk-von-
andreas-angelidakis/](https://www.skd.museum/presse/2018/albertinum-erhaelt-kunstwerk-von-andreas-angelidakis/).

03
Wagner
and Reinhardt,
"Information Sheet."

As I step into the *Lichthof*, the large atrium in the center of Dresden's modern art museum, the Albertinum, I am greeted not only by the standard coat check, guest book, and gift shop, but also by a multitude of foam and vinyl blocks made to look like "leftover fragments"⁰¹ of an ancient Greek structure. Intended to evoke an Athenian *agora*, these imitation stones visually hark back to the very foundation of Western democracy.⁰² Arranged in varying formations in the open, echoey space, some blocks are utilized as seating for those passing through while others have been put to work as tables, desks, scattered surfaces. The piece, by Greek artist Andreas Angelidakis, is suggestively entitled *Demos* and aspires to "encourage interaction ... [as] visitors are invited to move the pieces, to use and arrange the fragments anew [in order for them to be used] as a platform through which diverse relationships can be negotiated." The work is exhibited in the Albertinum for the stated purpose of enabling a negotiation between audience and speaker, shifting the "relationship between stage and public, participation and display."⁰³ The decision by the Albertinum to display the work in the *Lichthof*, through which all visitors must pass, even if they decide not to buy a ticket, makes explicit the Albertinum's self-conception as a democratic institution in a democratic state. *Demos* stands for the museum's commitment to those political values that we take to be essential to the construction of, and participation in, a modern liberal democracy: reason, liberty, and freedom.

Through the installation's theme and location, the Albertinum also communicates its aspiration to be a space open to and intended for a diverse plurality of people. The two principles of democracy and publicity are, of course, commonly held to be foundational for public institutions

in liberal-democratic societies. That a modern-day museum would wish to emphasize its openness, to declare it as a key cultural and political value to visitors, is not necessarily surprising.

What is surprising however, are the lengths the Albertinum has gone to in recent years to instantiate those principles, even challenging another shibboleth of contemporary liberal German society—the imperative that mainstream political parties refuse to engage with, or to be seen to engage with, the far right, specifically, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD).⁰⁴ Though this imperative does not explicitly prevent politicians from engaging with the AfD’s voter base, in practice this stance has signaled to these voters that the AfD’s victim narrative has some truth to it. Moreover, the “norm of non-cooperation” has been eroded, at the time of writing in early 2025, by frantic, scrambling overcompensation from centrist parties, in particular the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU), to appeal to these voters as it became clear just how many are willing to embrace far right policies.⁰⁵ The questioning of this once unbreakable taboo and the resultant shift to the right have arguably left Germany shaken and destabilized.⁰⁶

While these power struggles and political machinations are being played out on a national stage, the Albertinum tackled the threat of the extreme right by approaching people not as voters but as members of a shared public. *Demos* was originally used by the Albertinum to host a series of events between 2017 and 2019 that enacted the principle of

- 04 Damien McGuinness and Laura Gozzi, “Scholz Urges Firewall Against Far Right After Election Win,” *BBC News*, September 2, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd05pdmzgp5o>.
- 05 Emily Schultheis, Chris Lunday, and Nette Nöstlinger, “Germany’s Merz Sparks Firestorm by Breaking Postwar Taboo,” *Politico*, January 29, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-friedrich-merz-cdu-political-tightrope-far-right-votes-afd-migration-crackdown/>.
- 06 Jörg Lau, “A Political Gamble Backfired Spectacularly—Bringing the Far Right Closer to Power in Germany,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/feb/03/a-political-gamble-backfired-spectacularly-bringing-the-far-right-closer-to-power-in-germany>.

openness while simultaneously questioning its utility and consequences. The events began with an open public discussion forum, held in the *Lichthof*, and developed into a series of talks, forums, and exhibitions. These events were a response to a flare-up, in 2017, of what could be called a simmering ‘culture war’ in the city of Dresden, involving long-held resentments, far-right rhetoric, and the tenacity of East-West divisions in present-day Germany. What began, harmlessly enough, with an opinion piece about the amount of East German art the museum had on display versus in storage rapidly escalated into what became known as a *Bilderstreit*, a term which, literally translated, means ‘image conflict.’ In many ways, however, ‘icon controversy’ better captures the historical reference to Byzantine Iconoclasm, a period known in German as the *Byzantinischer Bilderstreit*. And the debate was indeed about icons, though in the modern rather than the Byzantine sense. Not only was the controversy sparked by a fear that the museum had removed iconic GDR art from its walls, the role of the museum itself as a representative space was called into question. At its core, this conflict was about who is represented in and feels represented by modern Germany.

This text investigates the success of the museum’s response in de-escalating these politically motivated tensions, asking why and to what extent the Albertinum was actually successful. As noted above, the principle of public openness makes the mere fact of a museum taking on the mantle of an ‘arbiter of culture’ (or of a ‘culture war’) by hosting participatory events for the public seem rather trite. A museum claiming to be open and a space of open exchange is almost a cliché today. And if these actions were successful, if they truly were able to mend the city’s political divisions, then the case of the Albertinum would become a surprising confirmation of yet another cliché: that, if only we would all just sit down and talk it out face to face, we could resolve our greatest conflicts. This view is reminiscent of the most nostalgic evocations of classical Greek democracy, those which focus only on the free men inside the *agora*, hashing out the problems of their *polis* together as equals. It is an image that must resolutely ignore the less palatable realities of this democracy, for example, the

exclusion of women and slaves, for whom participation was unthinkable.⁰⁷ The reality of these democracies makes clear that we should not take the *polis* as a political ideal.⁰⁸

Yet this model plays an interesting role in more recent thought on our political structures. Specifically within the work of Hannah Arendt, the *polis* functions as an avenue through which the relationship between “political action, freedom, and the public realm” can be explored.⁰⁹ Though her use of the *polis* has itself been criticized as elitist, as nostalgically idealizing an antiquated system, this is to obscure its potential for clarifying the essence of politics.¹⁰ Arendt’s work on the necessity of plurality as a precondition of politics, as well as her conception of the political as arising from this plurality of people coming together “in both word and deed” to form a “space of appearance,”¹¹ echo the aims and enactment of the Albertinum’s event series. Following this intuition, this text utilizes Arendt’s conception of the *polis*, the public realm, and the space of appearance as a lens through which to investigate the series and the reasons for its resonance with people across the political spectrum. Indeed, the series offers an instantiation of Arendt’s space of appearance and thus a radical approach to navigating far-right extremism. As it becomes blindingly obvious that far-right politics is no longer simply ‘on the rise’ but by now has most certainly ‘risen’, it is imperative to consider strategies for mitigating its appeal and influence. Arendt’s work offers us a framework to do so, one that slots neatly into our democratic ideals while also highlighting the weakness of current representative structures. The space of appearance can show us how to move beyond the nostalgic understanding of an imagined polis and grasp the potential of what it might mean for people to come together “in both word and deed”¹²—namely, that our ability to shape and change our shared systems demands that we direct our attention not merely towards our elected representatives, but turn to face each other instead.

07

Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Polity Press, 1992), 91.

08

Hanna Pitkin, “Justice: On Relating Public and Private,” *Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (1981): 346.

09

Roy T. Tsao, “Arendt Against Athens: Rereading the Human Condition,” *Political Theory* 30, no. 1 (2002): 97–98.

10

Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 90–92.

11

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 199.

12

Arendt, *Human Condition*, 199.

The *Bilderstreit*

13

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Hilke Wagner for her willingness to meet with me and for her openness throughout our interview.

I have come to the *Lichthof* to interview the museum's director, Hilke Wagner, about the discussion series *Wir müssen reden. 'Bilderstreit' mit Blickkontakt* ("We Need to Talk: 'Bilderstreit' Face-to-Face") and the role she played in bringing it about.¹³ In 2017, art historian Paul Kaiser published an opinion piece in the local daily *Sächsische Zeitung*. Titled *Wende an den Wänden* (change/turnaround on the walls),¹⁴ it charged the Albertinum with giving preference to West German art, sequestering the museum's collection of East German art into the depot.¹⁵ In our interview, Wagner remarked on the aggrieved tone of the piece and that she could understand the outrage people felt upon reading it. While she did not believe that Kaiser had intended for his piece to appeal to right-wing interests, Wagner noted that "the AfD quickly understood that this was something which could be instrumentalized."¹⁶ Very soon after publication of the piece, an AfD representative introduced a written question in the Saxon state parliament. Directly referring to Kaiser's article, the deputy requested confirmation of the claim that "only a small amount" of East German art was being shown in the Albertinum's permanent exhibit, and asked for further details as to which works exactly were on display. This was

14 The word *Wende*, used in common parlance in Germany to refer to the process of unification, can be translated as "the turn, the transition," "the change," or "the transformation." *Vor und nach der Wende* (before and after the turn) are used to distinguish pre- and post-unification. The language itself is interesting, implying a lack of agency, an occurrence missing a subject, a perhaps natural process which could just as easily occur, rather than be enacted. This differs in the other moniker *die friedliche Revolution* (the peaceful revolution), a phrase which indicates something done *by* agents, rather than done *to* them.

15 Paul Kaiser, "Wende an den Wänden," *Sächsische Zeitung*, September 18, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170926234643/http://www.sz-online.de/nachrichten/kultur/wende-an-den-waenden-3775440.html>.

16 Hilke Wagner (Director, Albertinum), my interview, September 25, 2024 [my translation].

17 Eva-Maria Stange, "Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Karin Wilke, AfD-Fraktion: Drs.-Nr.: 6/10834: Thema: Abhängen von DDR-Kunst in der Galerie Neue Meister Dresden," State Ministry for Science and the Arts Saxony, October 18, 2017, <https://s3.kleine-anfragen.de/ka-prod/sn/6/10834.pdf>.

promptly answered by the state minister for science and the arts, who refuted the claim, stating that it “does not correspond with the facts of the matter,” and providing an appendix listing in detail the 77 East German works exhibited at the time.¹⁷

Anlage zu Frage 2 der Kleinen Anfrage 6/10834

**Derzeit ausgestellt, in der Zeit zwischen 1949 und 1989
in DDR entstandene Werke**

Adler, Karl-Heinz	Schichtung von Rechteckscheiben, 1960	1
	Quadratschichtungen, 1957/1960	1
	Schichtung von Halbkreisen, 1959	1
	o.T., 1980	1
	Farbschichtung mit weißen Pünktchen, 1984	2
	Nebelraum mit weißen Pünktchen, 1984	1
	Vertikale aus dunklem Raum aufsteigend, 1984	1
	Schattenlineaturen, 1989	1
	Serielle Lineaturen 1-3, 1989	3
	Diptychon, Diagonale Verspannung, 1987	1
	Sichtung von Rechtecken mit Ausschnitt, 1962	1
	Konstruktion 1 und II. Farbschichtung (I=blau; II = braun), beide 1987	2
Arnold, Walter	Skulptur	1
Bonk, Hartmut	Skulptur	1
Bretschneider, Frank	Plakat AG Geige	1
Cremer, Fritz	Skulptur	1
Djurovic, Goran	Lila Gedichte, Mappe mit 14 Holzschnitten, 1984	1
Ebersbach, Hartwig	Gruppe 37,2, 1982	1
Eschefeld, Sonja	Skulptur	1
Förster, Wieland	Skulptur	6
Factor, Jan / Hans Scherecker	Bearbeitung des Parallelepipedes / Gedichte eines alten Mannes aus Prag (Textgrafiken), 1986	1
Freudenberg, Michael	Brandung, 1989	1

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18
Stange,
"Kleine Anfrage"
[all typographical
errors in original].

Adler, Karl-Heinz	Schichtung von Rechteckscheiben, 1960	1
Glöckner, Hermann	Kreideschwünge, 1981	1
	sowie 7 weitere Werke, Malerei + Skulptur	7
Götze, Moritz	Everything is under control (1989), Rimski Abdul Goldfinger flieht als Königsberger Klops (1987), Plakat Galerie am Schaufenster (1987)	3
Hegewald, Andreas	AUS REISE, 1982	1
Heinze, Helmut	Skulptur	1
Howald, Walter	Skulptur	1
Kazzer, Hans	Skulptur	1
Kerbach, Ralf	Die Unzeitgemäßen, 1-4, 1982	4
Kuhle, Wolfgang	Skulptur	1
Leiberg, Helge	Status Quo - Factory 4, 1984	1
Lücke	Krater, 1972	1
	Anayse Baselitz, 1974	1
Makolies, Peter	Skulptur	1
Müller, Wilhelm	Weiß-Grün, 1981	1
Naumann, Hermann	Skulptur	1
Ponndorf, Egmar	Skulptur	1
Schlegel, Christine	Faltrollo (1985), Hard Pop Stephan (Film), 1985 Strukturen (Film), 1984	3
Schönefelder, Baldur	Skulptur	1
Schmiedel, Wieland	Skulptur	1
Schreiber, Siegfried	Skulptur	1
Schulze, Hans-J.	Faltrollo, 1985	1
Schweiger, Detlef	Findling	1
Sommer-Landgraf, Charlotte	Skulptur	1
Steger, Hans	Skulptur	3
Stötzer, Werner	Skulptur	2
Weidanz, Gustav	Skulptur	1
Wolff, Willy	Skulptur	4
insgesamt		77

[01] "The facts of the matter."¹⁸

Wagner's appointment was also questioned, with the representative asking whether her selection was made with the knowledge that she wished to open the Albertinum up to the "most recent contemporary art" and whether that aim played a role in the selection process.¹⁹ Though this question about Wagner does not make any mention of her West German background, it seems to imply as much in context of the previous questions. Moreover, it slyly insinuates that Wagner is far too focused on contemporary art and therefore has neither the interest nor the desire to engage with the shared history of Dresden and East German culture as a whole.

Thus, as the tensions in the city rose to fever pitch, Wagner found herself to be a focal point. She was a real, tangible person upon whom decades of frustration about the process and consequences of German reunification could be unloaded. She describes receiving hate mail, being spat on in the street, and even finding herself surrounded by people cursing at her during a visit to the theatre. For her, this level of animosity was shocking and traumatizing, to the point where she did not leave the house for two weeks. She describes being "utterly confused," admitting to a certain naiveté on her part at first. The cries that she "go back to the West" and the strength of feeling on the East-West divide drew on sentiments she, as a relatively new citizen of Dresden at the time, did not fully understand. However, she quickly recognized that the situation had been politically instrumentalized, as the initial criticism did not reflect the reality of the Albertinum's permanent collection. Indeed, at the moment that the *Bilderstreit* broke out, she actually had *more* East German art on display than had been usual in recent years. The parliamentary question also led to some rather bizarre moments. For example, while tallying up the number of East and West German artworks, Wagner had to ring up artists from the former GDR who had fled to the West, asking: "Say, this painting ... did you do that before or after you left the East?"²⁰

Yet Wagner also readily admits that the question drew her attention to concrete failings within the museum. For example, when she arrived at the Albertinum, there was no one on the team specifically responsible for East German art. Indeed, only one staff member was allotted one day per week to take care of the entire contemporary art collection,

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The answer also acknowledges the desire to make the Albertinum more modern but reminds the representative that the director of the museum's collection ultimately holds responsibility for its program. The response takes pains to further note that this freedom of art is enshrined in the German constitution.

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Wagner, interview.

21

Recounted in German as “*Sie widern mich an*,” also translatable as “you make me sick.” Wagner, interview.

22

Wagner, interview.

the section to which art from the GDR was assigned. So, although there was plenty of East German art on—and to—display, there was no curatorial capacity within the museum itself to engage specifically with this art in its own context. Wagner described this state of affairs as a “massive structural problem” extending far beyond a single museum. Still, at this point in 2017, the broader structural issues were the furthest thing from Wagner’s mind. Instead, it was filled with frustration, even rage, as the hate letters directed at her started piling up. And so, one evening, while she was supposed to be counting the museum’s collection of East German art, she found herself looking closely at one of the letters. This one simply stated: “You disgust me.”²¹ It was from an older man, as most of them were, and, as is more common in that generation, he had signed his name. With the name, she was able to locate a phone number and, almost impulsively, called him up. She admitted to me that, at this point, there were no “grand intentions” of dialogue and reconciliation, only the simple need to defend herself. The letter writer was “shocked,” even amazed, to have actually received a call, and, according to Wagner, a “really good” conversation then developed between the two. She described the anger fading, and on the way home from the office that night she noticed that the sense of hate had left her. Wagner felt invigorated by the experience, thinking: “I have to try that again.”²²

She began by calling the rest of the letter writers whose numbers she could locate, and over and over again (with one or two exceptions), experienced the same thing as before: a conversation that left both sides relieved of the burden of rage stoked between them. Furthermore, she was learning more and more about this conflict of which she had become a focal point. Although the ostensible causes were the treatment of East German art and Wagner’s status as a West German outsider, she realized the issues ran much deeper. “In the end,” she told me, “it wasn’t about the museum. It was about the personal experiences after the *Wende*.” She noted a real sense of loss, an open wound around the issue of East German representation in contemporary culture, a feeling that their culture had been completely devalued, and this was a wound the far right had quickly picked up on and sought to exploit. By jumping on these populist themes and

inflaming outrage, they had managed to achieve two goals: to portray themselves as the only champions of ordinary East German voters and to deepen the sense of division between East and West.

Wagner's analysis of her own experiences reflects the reality of the AfD's tactics. In 2019, the AfD ran political adverts in the eastern state of Thuringia, urging potential voters to take matters into their own hands and "*Vollende die Wende*" (Complete the turn/change) by voting AfD, appealing to the sense that the former GDR had been left behind in the process of reunification. Within this context, the unfounded claim that the Albertinum had moved its collection of East German art into art storage was representative of the idea that East German society as a whole, and therefore ex-East German citizens, had been forgotten in present-day Germany. Reunification, in this view, was not a peaceful synthesis of East and West so much as a rolling hegemonization by the West. Petra Köpping, an SPD politician and Saxony's minister of state for equality and integration from 2014–2019, addresses this view in her 2019 book *Integriert doch erst mal uns!* (First, integrate us!). The title, a phrase Köpping "heard time and time again in conversations with citizens,"²³ reflects the sense that modern-day Germany is a society in which East Germans perceive themselves to be foreign. A 2022 study by the University of Leipzig, which surveyed 3,546 people in Germany's eastern states, further supports these conclusions. It notes that, 33 years after the fall of the Berlin wall, one quarter of those surveyed consider themselves to be the "losers of reunification," while two-thirds reported feeling a longing for the GDR, and three-quarters identified explicitly as East German.²⁴

23 Petra Köpping, *Integriert doch erst mal uns! Eine Streitschrift für den Osten* (Christoph Links Verlag, 2018).

24 Oliver Decker et al., "EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken und die Unzufriedenheit mit der Demokratie," *Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut*, June 27, 2023, <https://efbi.de/details/efbi-policy-paper-2023-2-autoritaere-dynamiken-und-die-unzufriedenheit-mit-der-demokratie.html>.

The AfD's strategy of positioning the party as the representative of the East in present-day Germany has borne fruit, with the AfD receiving twice as many votes in the East compared to West German states.²⁵ In the 2021 Bundestag election the AfD received 19.1% of the vote in East Germany, as opposed to 8.2% in the West.²⁶ In the state elections held in the same year as the outcry against Wagner's appointment, 2017, the AfD gained 27.5% of the vote in Saxony, the state of which Dresden is the capital.²⁷ In the more recent 2024 elections, their share increased, with the AfD receiving 30.6% of the vote, a close second to the conservative CDU's 31.9%.²⁸ The presence of the AfD and its supporters within Dresden is thus not at all negligible, which goes some way towards explaining exactly how an opinion piece and parliamentary question could lead to such tumult.

Furthermore, the AfD has been accused by leading politicians of using extremist rhetoric and being responsible for the increase in right-wing violence.²⁹ There has long existed—almost since the party's foundation in 2013—within German political culture a refusal to engage with the AfD, so as to not signify acceptance of the party or their tactics, though this refusal has begun to ring more and more hollow of late.³⁰ Mainstream political parties have historically refused to form coalitions with the AfD on principle, resulting in a so-called firewall (*Brandmauer*) intended to protect the German democratic order.³¹ What Wagner came to realize however, over the course of her many phone calls, was that the far right had been able to instrumentalize this approach. Through this very act of exclusion and their success in positioning themselves as the only ones listening to the

- 25 Frank Decker, "Wahlergebnisse und Wählerschaft der AfD," *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/parteien/parteien-in-deutschland/afd/273131/wahlergebnisse-und-waehlerschaft-der-afd/>.
- 26 Matthias Janson, "So haben Ost und West gewählt," *Statista*, September 29, 2021, <https://de.statista.com/infografik/25874/zweitstimmenanteil-der-parteien-bei-der-bundestagswahl-2021-in-ost-und-westdeutschland/>.
- 27 Alexander Sarovic and Dawood Ohdah, "Senioren retten die etablierten Parteien," *Der Spiegel*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/ergebnisse-sachsen-wahl-afd-punktet-bei-den-jungen-a-1284494.html>.

concerns of East Germans, they were able to confirm the impression that mainstream modern Germany simply does not care about the East. Her phone calls disrupted this narrative somewhat—but only somewhat. This was not a conflict occurring solely at the level of individual grievances but one that reflected much broader societal tensions. What was desperately called for was a release valve—a way to defuse the mounting hostility. On the face of it, concerns had been met, the enquiry answered, and an official tally of the number of GDR artworks on display provided, one that clearly showed the claims of sequestered art to be unfounded (see fig. 1: “The facts of the matter”). Yet this response went, if not unnoticed, then certainly unfelt by the citizens of Dresden. The bureaucratic approach had been far less effective than Wagner’s personal calls. The clarification regarding the museum was not enough to affect the image people had of themselves being sequestered away in broader German society, consigned to storage and left to gather dust.

As such, Wagner felt a need to attempt to approach this problem in a different manner and setting, allowing for a plurality of opinions to be voiced openly and in the presence of all. In this way, by aiming to bring people together “in the manner of speech and action,”³² the Albertinum enabled a space of appearance to come into being. Indeed, it is only through analysis of the Albertinum’s event *as* a space of appearance that we are able to fully make sense of the situation. For it is by applying this framing that a crucial element of the event can be seen most clearly—namely, that it is only by engaging with others that we are able to disrupt the imageries founding political division.

- 28 Paul Kirby and Jessica Parker, “German Far Right Hails ‘Historic’ Election Victory in East,” *BBC News*, September 2, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn02w01xr2jo>.
- 29 Kate Connolly and Bethan McKernan, “German Far-Right Party AfD Accused of Fuelling Hate After Hanau Attack,” *The Guardian*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/21/german-far-right-party-afd-hanau-attack>.
- 30 Schultheis, “Merz Sparks Firestorm.”
- 31 McGuinness and Gozzi, “Scholz urges Firewall.”
- 32 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 99.

**“The Space Where I Appear to Others
as Others Appear to Me”³³**

- 33
Arendt,
Human Condition,
198.
- 34
Arendt,
Human Condition,
199.
- 35
Arendt,
Human Condition,
199.
- 36
Hannah Arendt,
The Life of the Mind
(Harcourt, 1978),
19–20.
- 37
Arendt,
Life of the Mind, 62.
- 38
Arendt,
Human Condition,
208.

What does it mean however, to claim that a space of appearance was created? Arendt’s concept may, at first glance, appear non-complex in its explicit, literal meaning. As Arendt states in *The Human Condition*, the space of appearance in “the widest sense” refers to “the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.” Arendt goes on to specify that such a space “does not always exist” but comes into being when people gather together “in the manner of speech and action.”³⁴ As such, the space of appearance might be understood to refer simply to the act of gathering people together to talk and act. To that extent, it seems fairly uncontroversial. For within the structure of our modern democracies, we of course value the ability of citizens to gather, to discuss, and to act as involved and engaged agents in political matters that concern them.

However, this reading ignores the long philosophical history which the concept draws upon, and as such fails to grasp its complex ontological, phenomenological, and political implications.³⁵ Arendt’s use of the term ‘appearance’ stems from her understanding, following Kant, of the world itself as being one of appearances, whose “infinite diversity” is reflected in humanity’s own diversity of perspectives and experiences. We exist in the world only insofar as we are of the world; we perceive appearances and are perceived as appearances simultaneously.³⁶ As there is such variety in the world and between individuals’ perspectives, as diversity of interpretation is “inherent in the nature of human activities and experiences,” we must collaborate to establish reality.³⁷ To be in a space of appearance therefore implies much more than simply existing within the view of others. Appearance in this sense is that which confirms existence, and it is the space of appearance that establishes “the reality of one’s self, of one’s own identity, [and] the reality of the surrounding world ... beyond doubt.”³⁸

Furthermore, it is also highly debatable whether Arendt’s use of the word ‘space’ within the concept ought to be understood literally. A figurative reading, such as that offered by Roy Tsao, claims that the space of appearance is “created

through the activities of action and speech themselves,” and as such “can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere.”³⁹ This reading allows for the space of appearance to be freed from any strict conception of a set space and time, and Tsao focuses here on the consequence that such a space therefore must not adhere to fixed areas and institutions, such as the *polis*. David Marshall takes the figurative reading somewhat further, separating it entirely from physical space. He argues that

In reality, the ‘space’ of the ‘space of appearance’ was often a topos, a *place of debate* that has become a commonplace, a reference point for a culture of disputation. What is more, the figurative sense of ‘space’ that emerges here is a *purely relational one*. There is no abstract, Euclidean space that underlies and coordinates the topos.⁴⁰

If we take Marshall’s approach, recognizing a space of appearance thus becomes less about pinning down a specific physical location than about understanding the points of contention, conflict and need for interaction.

To complicate matters further, in her work Arendt gives flexible and sometimes contradictory definitions of “public space,” the “public realm,” and their relation to the space of appearance.⁴¹ The quotation above, however, offers us a way in which to understand the distinction. Here we can distinguish between a fluid space of appearance, the metaphysical ground upon which all publics must occur, and the public realm; one of “well-organised meetings in town halls and parliaments, the established manners of debates, and the acknowledged freedoms and rights of speech.”⁴² From these flexible, unregulated spaces, however, a public can come into being through organization.

39 Tsao, “Arendt Against Athens,” 116.

40 David L. Marshall, “The Polis and its Analogues in the Thought of Hannah Arendt,” *Modern Intellectual History* 7, no. 1 (2010): 148.

41 Hans Teerds, “‘The Space Between’: An Architectural Examination of Hannah Arendt’s Notions of ‘Public Space’ and ‘World,’” *The Journal of Architecture* 27, no. 5–6 (2022): 764–65.

42 Teerds, “The Space Between,” 765.

**“The Implacable, Bright Light
of the ... Presence of Others”⁴³**

43
Arendt,
Human Condition, 51.

44
Wagner, interview.

45
Wagner, interview.

In my time with Wagner, I was able to question her about the specifics of the first event of the series, both to get a sense of the Albertinum’s intentions at the outset as well as an account of what it felt like to be in that room as events unfolded. The Albertinum aimed to provide a release valve, yes, but for whom and to what ultimate purpose? What did it actually mean to bring disparate groups together, what were they supposed to release? How did they hope to create a space for constructive dialogue without creating an opening for further polarizing tactics from the far right?

Wagner emphasized that a main concern for the first session was that it should lack any form of spatial hierarchy: no raised speaker’s platform, no sense of there being a front or behind. They decided the format should be that of a “long table,” with a moderator capable of approaching tense moments with a sense of humor. The invited speakers, who were sat at the table in the center of the room, were warned that they might not get a chance to speak at all—despite the fact that the meeting would have no time limit. The point was to let the public take the topics into their own hands, for it to be a chance to “come into conversation,”⁴⁴ rather than to talk *at* or lecture the audience. As for the public, Wagner had made sure the event was open to those across the political spectrum. These included the letter writers, artists who had been deemed subversive in East Germany, and ordinary Dresden citizens. In total, the audience that day numbered just over 600 people.

Looking back, Wagner recalls this first meeting as both a success and “awful.” The former because “it worked, people really did feel confident in setting the agenda, and if they hadn’t participated, it wouldn’t have worked.” The latter because “there was screaming, people ran out, some even turned their backs on me when I spoke.” Yet Wagner described it as being successful in fostering a sense of “catharsis.”⁴⁵ The space had allowed for an emotional experience as well as a dialogic one. What occurred in the Albertinum’s *Lichthof* thus allowed for an informal organization of word and deed—a space of appearance.



[02] The seating arrangement for the first event, the long table provides a focal point.



[03] The event's moderator, the singular sustained vertical point within the gathering.

WE NEED TO TALK



[04] "First of all, everyone who needs to say something must have the opportunity to do so."⁴⁶



[05] View of the *Lichthof* from amongst the crowd—at eye-level.

Arendt argues that what is most important is not to reach a consensus regarding the topics of debate, but to come to understand the others' point of view as important to them, and how their beliefs and judgments reflect the selves appearing in this public. Not insisting on consensus should not be understood to equal agreement with, or even acceptance of, certain views. The Arendtian model, by allowing for plural opinions to be exchanged without insisting upon some presumed rational winner of the debate, is better suited to explore the nuances and alterability of such views. As mentioned above, the AfD has successfully managed to appeal to the frustration of many people in eastern Germany, particularly to their sense of not being heard and of their opinions as existing outside of a supposedly united Germany that was formed without their input. Thus, an effort to create a mainstream consensus, something we might call a Habermasian approach to the aim of a public space, would not succeed in persuasion or reaching acceptance. Rather, it might appear as yet another attempt by an institution or public body to convince those dissatisfied with the current state of things that they ought to accept a view which does not reflect their lived experiences. Yet if we follow Shmuel Lederman's discussion of Arendt's public sphere, it becomes clear that another analysis is possible. Lederman argues that

acting and speaking with others in the public sphere forms a unique human experience, whose value goes beyond any specific goal to which the actors and the speakers strive; in other words, that speech and action in the public sphere with our fellow citizens are ends in themselves rather than (only) means to other ends.⁴⁷

As such, an Arendtian approach highlights the deeper utility of the Albertinum's strategy, namely, that by removing the 'middle-man' of party politics, the discussion that took place was able to move beyond the superficiality of the original debate (counting paintings and scrutinizing artists' biographies) and actually reflect the deeper concerns the speakers held. So many of these concerns had indeed been used as "means to other ends," used to gain votes and deepen division, now attendees were confronted by their fellow citizens as "ends in themselves."⁴⁸

46
Wagner, interview.

47
Shmuel Lederman,
*Hannah Arendt
and Participatory
Democracy:
A People's Utopia*
(Palgrave Macmillan,
2019), viii.

48
Lederman,
*Arendt and
Participatory
Democracy*, viii.

49
Arendt,
Human Condition,
220.

50
Hannah Arendt,
On Revolution
(Penguin Books,
[1963] 1973), 268–69.

51
Arendt,
Human Condition, 51.

The fact that this confrontation was not necessarily a pleasant one further highlights another Arendtian concept, that of the importance of plurality in her political philosophy:

The calamities of action all arise from the human condition of plurality, which is the condition *sine qua non* for that space of appearance which is the public realm. Hence the attempt to do away with this plurality is always tantamount to the abolition of the public realm itself.⁴⁹

Arendt's model avoids this concept of forced consensus and as such public space is considered as a space for political growth and development. This approach is far more effective in combating the rhetoric of the AfD, which attempts to utilize and increase a sense of division to further its own political aims. This approach to political discourse allows for the frustrations of those to whom the AfD and other right-wing parties wish to appeal to be expressed, heard, and addressed. Crucially, these frustrations, through exposure in the public realm, can be developed and altered far more successfully by this approach than if forced into adherence with the most rational view—as, for example, Habermas advises. Arendt writes that “opinions are formed in a process of open discussion and public debate, and where no opportunity for the forming of opinions exists, there may be moods—moods of the masses and moods of individuals ... but no opinion.”⁵⁰

Though it may be idealistic to assume that dialogue alone is capable of altering the views of these voters, I agree with Arendt that the role of public space is not to change opinion. Instead, it must allow for the development of moods into opinions, by forcing individuals to confront the underpinnings of their moods and develop them from that which is internal and private into something more public, and therefore tangible. Arendt notes that “there are a great many things which cannot withstand the implacable, bright light of the constant presence of others on the public scene,” noting that it is specifically the irrelevant which disappears in this light.⁵¹ The first “release valve” event was, therefore, able to provide attendees with a way of separating legitimate concerns from inflamed rhetoric. By gathering people together in this manner, the Albertinum and Wagner

were able to interfere with tactics aimed at creating polarization, to constitute a “web of narratives” not influenced solely by the far right.⁵²

From that first meeting an entire event series was developed, with the topics and themes tailored to points raised by attendees to the initial event. Artist talks, theoretical lectures, and more public discussions were organized. As audience members returned to the series again and again, the sense of a defined public deepened. The permanent loan of *Demos* was organized to allow for the *Lichthof* to be rearranged while remaining non-hierarchical each time. One attendee even commented that the *Lichthof* “feels like our living room, here we discuss what really moves us,” a sentiment which echoes Arendt’s definition of public spaces as places where citizens can express plural opinions and engage their political selves.⁵³

Public Things; Private Selves

The very title given to the series, “We Need to Talk,” reflects the three elements Arendt deems necessary for the constitution of public space—plurality of opinions, public things, and speech about these things. By ‘public things,’ Arendt means both material and ideal objects, so a public thing might be anything from the village well to the constitution of a nation.⁵⁴ What is common to all such public things, however, is their ability to be contested, engaged with, and/or of interest to all participants in the public realm. Therefore, these things must have an existence independent of all members while being “a subject of collective interest” to them.⁵⁵ Bonnie Honig ascribes even greater political potential to public objects, arguing that “democracy is rooted in common love for, antipathy to, and contestation of public things,” which act as “sites of attachment and meaning.”⁵⁶ This does not mean, however, that such things are necessarily imbued with any sentimental value. She understands public infrastructure to be a public thing, meaning even such prosaic material objects as pipelines are necessary for common action to be possible.

The public things available for discussion in this case were provided both by the setting itself, i.e. the museum, its status as an institution, and its collection, and by setting a topic and agenda for each forum. The role, valuation, and

52
Arendt,
Human Condition, 99.

53
Wagner, interview.

54
I am drawing here on
Bonnie Honig’s analysis
of Arendt in *Public
Things: Democracy
in Disrepair*
(Fordham University
Press, 2017).

55
Bhikhu Parekh,
*Hannah Arendt and
the Search for a New
Political Philosophy*
(Macmillan Press,
1981).

56
Honig,
Public Things, 4–6.

57
Wagner, interview.

58
Arendt,
Human Condition, 52.

even definition of East German art were discussed. Wagner reflects today that the debate wasn't even just about East German art, it was about *the ability to define* what counted as such. She recalled how, when organizing an exhibition in honor of Karl-Heinz Adler, an artist who had been considered subversive in the GDR, she was told by an East German colleague that she was "clearly being provocative." She wanted, he claimed, "as a West German, to explain to us what good East German art is. Well, we already know that ourselves."⁵⁷ The Albertinum responded to that challenge by curating exhibitions focused on female subversive artists or highlighting the global connections between the GDR and the so-called Third World. Each exhibition, each talk that responded directly to the claims made and the anger vented in the initial discussion session, further contributed to establishing this common world of public objects.

Finally, the political underpinnings of these forums reflect the primary purpose of the public space as an arena fostering authentic politics. Thus, growing from this first 'valve event,' a space of appearance, a ground was formed upon which a public could be built. In one sense, Arendt uses the word 'public' to describe the state we find ourselves in when seen and heard by the widest audience. However, she also uses the term to denote "the world itself, in so far as it is common to us all and distinguished from our privately owned place in it."⁵⁸ As such, the term 'public' can also refer to our common world, the shared space which we enter in order to move beyond the private, confused intimacy of our inner selves. It is in the public realm that we can attempt to transcend the solitude of the soul and utilize speech to express our rational nature and develop an understanding of our shared reality.

Despite the evocative philosophical analysis of the Albertinum's events as constituting a public space, it is important to also focus on the practical. Did the events achieve what Wagner had originally hoped, could they be called a success? She says today that, even though the experience was hard personally, she has come to see that this initial outpouring of hate was not really about *her* at all, it was about a much bigger problem—one she agrees needs addressing. Her only real regret, the only thing she feels she could have done

differently but that was simply not a part of this whole process, was to understand the way she was turned into a symbol. But of course, it is hard not to take personal attacks personally. And perhaps that was not a bad place to start. Feminist activists and thinkers were the first to fight for an acceptance that “the personal is political” in the 1960s and 1970s, in order to challenge the “oppressions experienced by women in the private realm.”⁵⁹ And of course it would be remiss here not to observe that a classic critique of Arendt is her apparent insistence on the division between the private and public, between the political being that exists in the world common to us all, and the “sheltered existence” or “twilight” of our “private and intimate lives.”⁶⁰ As the political philosopher Seyla Benhabib puts it, “‘the personal is not the political’: that is the message of Arendt’s life and work.”⁶¹ Yet the events at the Albertinum clearly contained a personal, private element, however intertwined it may be with the more public disputes on art, culture, and who attains representation in the two. The letter writers who began this campaign were influenced, as noted earlier, by their own personal experiences and grievances post-unification. Wagner’s own impulse, to pick up the phone and defend herself, was also initially a private emotion. It is hard here to draw a “crisp distinction between public and private.”⁶² What seems to have been achieved, however, in Arendtian terms, was bringing the light of the public to bear on these private moods.

Finally, the case of the Albertinum is not a clear narrative of triumph over the far right, of rational dialogue persuading hardened extremists to abandon their positions. Indeed, in my conversation with Wagner, she mentions that the most difficult event was the very last discussion session. This final talk was infiltrated by members of a far-right group (she is unsure which), who had tactically dispersed themselves amongst the audience. Wagner recalls noticing them at the very beginning, for by that point the attendees had become familiar, even bonded over the course of time. These new faces entirely disrupted the final event. However, despite the sour note the series ended on, Wagner views it as a clear success. Personally, because it allowed her “to understand the situation.” And publicly? “It led to a reconciliation.” She emphasizes that, though this was only a very small-scale

59
Renee Heberle,
“The Personal Is
Political,”
in *The Oxford
Handbook of
Feminist Theory*,
eds. Lisa Disch and
Mary Hawkesworth
(Oxford University
Press, 2016), 593.

60
Arendt,
Human Condition, 51.

61
Seyla Benhabib,
“The Personal Is Not
the Political,”
Boston Review,
October 1, 1999,
[https://www.
bostonreview.net/
articles/
seyla-benhabib-
personal-not-
political/](https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/seyla-benhabib-personal-not-political/).

62
Benhabib,
“The Personal Is Not
the Political.”

63
Wagner, interview.

64
Subsequent to the completion of this article, a paper has been published by Mafalda Dâmaso, examining the Albertinum's *Wir müssen reden* series. Taking a Fraserian approach, Dâmaso explores the relationship between the museum and its public and considers questions on cultural policy and audience development in polarized times:
Mafalda Dâmaso, "We Must Talk: Audience Pluralisation as a Regenerative Path to the Management of Cultural Disagreement," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 31, no. 4 (2025): 434–50.

event, it "broke up this polarization. It showed me that, on a small scale. It's possible to break through a spiral of rage and hate."⁶³

Right Back Where We Started?

My trip to the Albertinum ends, as all visits to this museum must, back in the *Lichthof*. My time here has been insightful, even hopeful at points; however, my final questions to Hilke Wagner, about the organized disruption of the final event, have dampened that impression somewhat. As I prepare to leave the building, this question of scale is at the front of my mind. After all, it's unclear whether the event series has made a lasting impact on the broader political makeup of the city. This, to be clear, was never the explicit aim of the talks and, as noted previously, the AfD's share of the vote has only increased in the time since the discussion series took place. Simultaneously, however, the ability of the far right to promulgate a narrative of victimhood *was* disrupted. The Albertinum may have only brought about change on a small scale, on the level of subjective understandings of person, culture, and representation. But this allowed for a shift in the way citizens of Dresden related to the museum and to each other.⁶⁴ In some cases, this may have been only a momentary reconsidering of mood, a momentary reappraisal of opinion. In others, it was perhaps more. It is not within the scope of this essay to quantify the what and the where of the lasting effects that the "We Need to Talk" series may have had. But we can note that it is the small-scale, even fleeting, acts of coming together that are perhaps most lacking in our political systems today. As division and polarization continue to increase, as the extreme right grows in strength and acceptability, it is necessary to approach this danger head-on, aware that it is reproduced differently and in different degrees in a plurality of people. We still need to talk.

