

VIOLENCE OF IMAGES — IMAGES OF VIOLENCE

Research at the Limits of what can be said and shown

— an Introduction by Elisabeth Schäfer and Zarah Gutsch

In the book “Because It Can Be Said: On Bearing Witness and Justice” (German original “Weil es sagbar ist: Über Zeugenschaft und Gerechtigkeit” from 2013; Engl. trans. E.S./Z.G.), journalist, philosopher, and author Carolin Emcke addresses the central question of how to speak about violence without aestheticizing, distorting, or trivializing it. Emcke’s approach is not primarily abstract or theoretical but deeply ethical and performative: speaking and writing are understood as acts of showing, as acts of responsibility, and as prerequisites for justice. At the heart of Emcke’s thinking is the figure of the witness. Bearing witness, according to Emcke, is not a neutral act of reporting but a deeply relational, fragile, and often endangered practice. To bear witness means not only to speak about what has happened but also to contribute to the articulation of that which might otherwise remain unspeakable. Especially in contexts of violence and structural oppression, language itself is brought to its limits — while remaining the only means of rendering the unfathomable accessible. Emcke’s insistence on the possibility of speech (“Sagbarkeit”) is not a naive belief in the complete representability of pain but an expression of an ethical imperative: that which occurs as violence must be given form — not to pacify it, but to render it witnessable and thus memorable. This ethos of speaking opens spaces for listening, understanding, and, ultimately, for political and cultural engagement.

Emcke’s perspective is of particular relevance in artistic and cultural contexts, where violence is often the subject of aesthetic treatment. She challenges us to reflect on the conditions and consequences of representation: Who speaks? Who is allowed to speak? Who listens — and who remains silent? What forms of speech — also beyond language — can open new ways of accessing the wounded realities of actual survivors of violence?

This volume takes up these questions and presents the results and perspectives of a research project funded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF as part of the PEEK program for the advancement and development of the arts. The project focused on the critical reappraisal of the so-called “Mühl Commune” at Friedrichshof (Burgenland, Austria) — which, following the project, we as editors now name as a sect, supported in this by Ulrike Schiesser, director of the Austrian Federal Office for Sect Issues. The research project was based at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and conducted in close cooperation with the Volkskundemuseum Wien.

Otto Mühl, considered part of the art historical canon as an “Austrian action artist and representative of Viennese Actionism,” founded this “commune” in the early 1970s — first in Vienna, then at Friedrichshof in Burgenland. For a time, the “commune” called itself the Action Analytical Organization (AAO). In 1991, Mühl was sentenced to seven years in prison for the serious sexual abuse of minors, rape, and other crimes. Although the experiences of the affected children were recognized in court and made public through the trial, a broad societal reckoning with this injustice has largely failed to materialize. Instead, since the 1990s, and with the support of prominent cultural institutions, numerous actors have worked to establish Mühl’s oeuvre on the international art market and position him as an Austrian icon of Actionism. In doing so, the clearly patriarchal and authoritarian structures of his sect, as well as the violent dimensions of his work, are overlooked. Art historical discourse continues to stylize Mühl as a nonconformist, antifascist artist and figure.

The research project brought together voices of those often referred to as the “first generation” of former communards who voluntarily joined the commune, but especially those of former children who were raised there involuntarily, as well as external contributors from the fields of art, museums, and academia.

The project centered on the question of how to exhibit works that originated within contexts of sexualized, physical, and psychological violence and abuse of power, without concealing or silencing their violent origins. The contributions in this volume reflect on how the art world, curatorial practices, and art historical research have often contributed to the romanticization of violent contexts — and how activist and scholarly positions can resist this.

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A special focus is placed on the perspectives of those who grew up in the sect and became both witnesses and survivors of a violent world. The project understands these experiences not merely as biographical material, but as contextual knowledge about the genesis of the works themselves — knowledge that has so far been marginalized in museum discourse.

Some of those witnesses who were raised in the sect had already formed the group MATHILDA prior to the research project, to resist the uncritical reception of Otto Mühl's work. Drawing from their own experiences of psychological and sexualized violence within the Mühl sect, they issued a public call in 2019 during a retrospective of Mühl's work at Sammlung Friedrichshof, inviting all former children to contribute their perspectives. Through these contributions, they intervened curatorially in the existing exhibition, supplementing it with a multiperspectival approach. Since then, MATHILDA has continued and expanded its critical engagement with Mühl's work, developing new analytical and educational formats to reveal and make visible the neglected dimensions of violence within it. This work has been carried out in collaboration with the Volkskundemuseum Wien within the PEEK project and, more recently, at the mumok Vienna.

Today, MATHILDA is no longer composed solely of those who lived in the sect as children — the editors of this volume are also members. It is now a fluid group of witnesses, artists, cultural practitioners, and researchers.

The contributions collected here demonstrate how collaboration between scholarship, art, and survivors can create interventions in curatorial canons and open spaces for unlearning and engaging with the complexities of violent histories.

We extend our sincere thanks to all who have supported and continue to support the work of MATHILDA, and to those who made this research project possible through collaboration, cooperation, critical engagement, and more. Realizing such a project inevitably involves making mistakes and encountering failure. Continuing research in contexts marked by trauma and histories of violence requires particular care, sensitivity, and ethical awareness. This kind of work moves in the tension between academic inquiry and personal involvement and touches on issues of

responsibility, power, and language. Continuous reflection on one's own position, methods, and the potential effect on affected individuals is essential. At the same time, such research offers the possibility to center marginalized perspectives, critically rework histories of violence, and create new forms of knowledge and memory. The ongoing nature of this work holds the potential to open spaces of solidarity, listening, unlearning, and rethinking.

We are especially grateful to the authors of this bilingual volume. David Ender contributed to the translation of nearly all texts into English, and in some cases from English to German as well: Thank you very much!

What follows is a brief overview of the contributions included in this volume.

Georgia Doll's poetically condensed text "Who We Are Today" is a literary approach to the trauma of a childhood spent within the Mühl sect. In evocative imagery, Doll describes how children in the sect were coerced into propagandistic roles and stripped of their self-perception — even to the point of reenacting Nazi-style stagings. The text is also a reflection on the inadequacy and necessity of language: on the silence that remains, on the missing words, on the images that imprint themselves indelibly. It denounces the art-historical romanticization and museal presentation of precisely this violence — and seeks a language beyond old narratives, one that calls for allies and a shared "we" among those who look and refuse to look away. New words are needed, new images, new forms of remembrance — so that what once happened does not continue unchecked.

Starting from the profound transformations within the contemporary art exhibition landscape, **Branislav Jakovljević** argues for a radical repositioning of the museum's role: moving away from the "white cube" toward an ethnographically informed practice that considers not only the aesthetic but also the ethical dimensions of art. Using the example of problematic works — especially those by Otto Mühl — Jakovljević demonstrates how traditional art historical narratives must be disrupted and replaced with contextualizing, reparative strategies. This perspective invites a critical engagement with how art can be shown and understood

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in the future — not merely as an artifact, but as a complex constellation of social, political, and ethical relationships.

Daniela Zyman analyzes the posthumanist implications of Otto Mühl's artistic and political practice, critically examining the deep contradictions of his actions within the so-called "antihumanist consensus" of the postwar period. Taking as her point of departure the question of how violence, dehumanization, and animalization are not only reproduced but aesthetically legitimized in Mühl's work — especially in *Oh Sensibility* — Zyman calls for a fundamental ethical and epistemological re-evaluation of subjectivity, art, and justice. She advocates for a "deciphering practice" that interrogates the constructs of the human, the exclusions inherent in universalism, and the affective orders of violence, aiming toward a radical resignification of the human — beyond patriarchal, colonial, and speciesist norms.

Andy Simanowitz confronts the personal, cultural, and institutional entanglement in the mechanisms of violence within the Mühl sect. From the perspective of someone who was raised in the sect against his will, he analyzes how art within this system was not only a vehicle for narcissistic self-dramatization but actively used as a means of manipulation, control, and sexualized violence. Mühl's works were and are never autonomous — they are ideologically charged, embedded in authoritarian structures, shaped by abusive rituals, and informed by National Socialist ideology. Simanowitz powerfully describes the aesthetic glorification of violence that continues in exhibitions and the art trade to this day and criticizes the silence of those who actively or passively contributed to cultivating this so-called "artistic" myth — including prominent figures in the international art scene. His text also sheds light on the ongoing psychological and social reproduction of power structures into the second generation and into the present. It is both an unflinching testimony and a poignant appeal: for an ethically conscious engagement with art originating in violent contexts, and against the tendency to look away — in museums, institutions, and families.

The question of whether a separation between an artwork and its creator is possible or appropriate is more relevant than ever — not only in the context of cancel culture but also amid rising demands for moral accountability in artistic practice. **Lea Sussemichel** interrogates the

limits of the autonomy concept in art, using paradigmatic cases — from Ana Mendieta to Otto Mühl to Picasso — to show how aesthetic and ethical judgments are deeply intertwined. She argues against the notion of a “pure” aesthetic and calls for a critical examination of the social constitution of art, its power structures, and its exclusions. In doing so, she contributes to a nuanced discourse about the role of art criticism in broader societal negotiations.

The panel discussion “Critical Curating,” featuring **Rainer Fuchs**, **Stella Rollig**, **Angela Stief**, and **Susanne Wernsing**, provides a multi-layered insight into current debates around museum representation politics, ethical curating, and the handling of problematic artistic legacies. Taking the controversial works of Otto Mühl as a starting point, the participants reflect on the challenges of curatorial reappraisal, on violence and aesthetics, on revealing silences, and on institutional responsibility toward those affected. What emerges is a clear message: critical curating means not only contextualizing and reflecting on historical narratives but also unlearning familiar curatorial habits and opening to multiperspectival approaches and ethical considerations — including facing resistance and backlash against such efforts.

Susanne Wernsing and **Susan Kamel** use this panel discussion as a springboard to explore the challenges and possibilities of critical curatorial practice in dealing with problematic artistic positions such as Otto Mühl’s. They situate the discussion within current museum studies discourses on decolonization, power critique, and multiperspectivity. The authors advocate for a re-visioning of the exhibition canon that makes marginalized perspectives and histories of violence visible. Drawing on the FWF PEEK project and the work of the MATHILDA group, they demonstrate how collaborative and activist curatorial strategies can foster new forms of knowledge production and social responsibility within museums.

Mikki Muhr reflects on the responsible handling of problematic artworks using the example of Otto Mühl at mumok Vienna. Based on her own experience in art education, she discusses issues of violence, abuse of power, representation, and institutional responsibility. At the center is

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a pedagogical approach to art that does not shy away from discomfort but instead embraces it as a starting point for critical thinking. Muhr advocates for an intersectional, feminist practice that brings marginalized knowledge into visibility, explicitly names contexts, and facilitates un-learning processes. Art mediation here is envisioned as a collective space for reflection and action, capable of revealing social power structures and initiating change.

Sabine Kock explores the complex challenges of curatorial engagement with artworks that have emerged from contexts of structural violence — exemplified by the case of Otto Mühl. Kock critiques the art historical tendency to detach works from their creators' biographical entanglements under the guise of "artistic autonomy," thereby depoliticizing abuse and violence. She draws particular attention to the experiences of the MATHILDA group, which opposes the reception of Mühl's work without critical contextualization. Kock calls for a curatorial sense of responsibility that does not retreat into abstract ideals of freedom but takes violence as an integral part of artistic production seriously. She advocates for an ethically and socially reflective form of art mediation that engages sensitively with survivors' perspectives and recognizes the historical and ongoing responsibilities of institutions.

Esther Hutfless examines the complex entanglements of art, violence, and trauma in the context of the Mühl sect. Central to their contribution is the critical question of how to approach artistic works that were produced within a system of systematic sexualized, psychological, and physical violence — especially against children. As a philosopher and psychoanalyst, Hutfless analyzes the structure of the AAO as an authoritarian regime of violence that committed severe human rights violations under the guise of sexual liberation and artistic avant-gardism. They advocate for a thorough contextualization of such artworks and a clear alignment with the survivors. Art must not be viewed or marketed in isolation from its context of origin when it functioned as a tool of domination and abuse. Their text calls for an ethically informed, socially responsible perspective in both art history and public engagement with histories of violence — beyond aestheticism and market logic. This stance is a plea for a new culture of remembrance: one that centers the

voices of survivors, names structural violence, and asks how society and institutions confront — or evade — their responsibility.

Elisabeth Schäfer critically examines the reception and museal elevation of Otto Mühl's artworks, which were created within a context of systemic violence and authoritarian power structures in the so-called Mühl commune. They focus particularly on the exhibition of so-called "ash paintings" — works made from the burned diaries of sect members — and questions the ethical and aesthetic responsibilities of institutions. Schäfer argues that these works not only depict traces of violence but also aesthetically exploit and perpetuate it. Through their museal preservation and display, the perpetrator is discursively elevated, while the voices of the victims remain marginalized or are erased entirely. Schäfer's text is a pressing appeal to the cultural sector not to retreat into neutralizing forms of aestheticization, but to radically contextualize art from violent origins. Schäfer calls for an ethically informed reception that confronts history, honors the survivors, and takes societal remembrance seriously.

The final contribution in this volume consists of two visual essays and accompanying texts offering insight into the work of **MATHILDA**. In her text, **Zarah Gutsch** outlines the development of the group and its curatorial approach, positioned between aesthetic reception and documented perpetration.

The texts assembled in this volume reconstruct past events without smoothing them over and experiment with forms of speaking, showing, and unlearning that aim not to reproduce traumatic experiences, but to contextualize them. By interweaving voices that have thus far gone unheard with artistic research, theoretical analysis, and curatorial practice, they challenge conventional canons, conceptual frameworks, and exhibition politics. This volume thus serves as a space for the question of how we can remember violence without perpetuating it.

THE EDITORS OF THE BOOK:

Ida Clay (born 1980 in New Zealand) lived involuntarily in the Mühl sect at Friedrichshof from 1981 onward. She studied at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne and completed a Master's degree in Screenwriting at AUT Auckland. From 2020 to 2023, she worked as a project collaborator on the FWF PEEK project [AR 568], which focused on a critical reappraisal of the Mühl sect. She works across disciplines on exhibitions, symposia, and collective research methods, and is a founding member of the group MATHILDA. Ida Clay lives in Berlin and works as a marquetry artist.

Zarah Gutsch, born in 1983 at Friedrichshof / Burgenland, grew up in the Muehl sect until the age of seven. She studied cultural and theatre studies at the University of Leipzig, followed by photography in the field of fine arts at the Academy of Fine Arts and Book Design (HGB). She worked as an independent collaborator on the FWF PEEK project [AR 568] and is a co-founder of the group MATHILDA, for which she has been active in conceptual and curatorial work since 2019.

Paul-Julien Robert is an Austrian director and photographer. He was born on the Friedrichshof and lived there until the age of 12 in Otto Mühl's "commune." He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and at the University of the Arts Berlin. In 2012, his film *My Fathers, My Mothers and Me* received the Vienna Film Award in the category "Best Documentary." The film also won Best Documentary and Best Editing at the Austrian Film Awards in 2014, and received the Grierson Award at the 57th London Film Festival. From 2020 to 2023, Robert was the lead researcher of the FWF PEEK project [AR 568] at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

Elisabeth Schäfer is a philosopher. She researches and teaches on deconstruction, queer feminist philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, body, violence and trauma, *écriture féminine*, writing as artistic research and resistant practice, and on artistic positions on climate change. From 2023 to early 2025, Elisabeth Schäfer held a postdoc position at the Department for Psychotherapy Science and Studies at the Sigmund

Freud Private University Linz, where she completed her habilitation cumulatively together with the framing essay *Sprachwunden: Deconstruction. Alterity. Trauma. Translations between Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, Gender Theory and Art*. Since then, she has been working as a private lecturer and deputy head of department at the SFU PTW LINZ. Website: <https://elisabethschaefer.com>