

THE NARCISSIST, ART AND THE OTHERS

An Explication of my Animosity

— by Andy Simanowitz

In our childhood, the paintings of the artist guru hung in front of our eyes. His presence intruded into our being, his views filled the eye sockets of our parents. From this close proximity, our parents vastly overestimated his greatness, mistook him for the whole world, and hoped to house their children in this world and to grow this world in their children. So when disreputable art sellers and cultural institutions over the last thirty years adorn themselves with the rotten eggs of this presence, hang them in their exhibition spaces and do business with them, we are lost for the words we were never given to speak. In the hope of finding those words, I attempt an explication of my fundamental animosity. In the following, I will throw three darts at the dartboard with the grimace of the cult leader. The first aims at the function that art had for Otto Mühl in his sect; the second at the continuing effect of National Socialism in Mühl himself, and thus also in his actions; the third at the entanglement of various individuals with Mühl as a person and with his deeds.

I. WHY OTTO MÜHL WAS NOT REALLY A PAINTER

“You ask if artists should be responsible world citizens. I definitely think they should. [...] I think the artist ought to try to be no different from any other mortal in this respect.”

Boris Lurie, letter to Thomas Hess, May 31, 1962

In the explanatory text of an exhibition at the Friedrichshof in Burgenland in 2019, Mühl salesman Hubert Klocker writes: “Many of the works created in these years are related to films made in the commune, which examine the role and fetishization of the artist in the value structure of capitalism, using the example of figures such as Van Gogh, Picasso, the

artists of Vienna at the turn of the century, and Andy Warhol.”¹

The statement falsely suggests a reflective, exploratory engagement with these artists and — this is especially false — a critically distanced relationship to their fame. When the films described in the exhibition text were made in the 1980s as parts of a thematic turn towards renowned historical figures, Mühl had already been a cult leader for ten years. His rampant hubris as the greatest artist, therapist, man of letters, thinker, and revolutionary of all time had inscribed itself in the small, segregated community. He openly expressed his delusions of grandeur — glorifying their leader, the cult members believed and recited the delusions, becoming echoes and mirrors for an exaggerated self-assessment that escalated in the closed system of meaning of the cult. Especially against the background of Mühl’s obsession with seeing himself in proximity to renowned historical figures, what is often referred to as a “commune” can be understood as a socialized narcissistic personality disorder with traumatizing consequences for all involved.²

This can be substantiated with a formal detail in the mentioned films and also in the general function of Mühl’s painterly activity in the commune. Theo Altenberg was the main actor in the tribute films made at Friedrichshof to Van Gogh, Picasso, and Richard Gerstl (later renamed “Back to Fucking Cambridge” due to the momentum the film developed through the participation of renowned artists). In the painting scenes, however, Altenberg was replaced by a strange stunt double: Otto Mühl. This absurd detail exposes the films as all too obvious vehicles of unbridled narcissism: In the internal reality they create, Mühl himself is allowed to be Van Gogh, Picasso, or Gerstl.

Yet in a certain sense Mühl was not a painter at all. The attention he received in the 1960s was not directed at painting, but at his actions. That he began to paint “again” in the “commune,” as is often said, is misleading. To understand his painting activities, one must remember that Mühl’s charismatic rule in the sect was based on his followers’ belief in the supernatural artistic talent of their leader. A group of vagabond

1 Accompanying text of the exhibition *Otto Muehl. Arbeiten 1955–2013* at the Friedrichshof collection.

2 Cf. Shaw, Daniel (2022): “The Heart of Cult Recovery: Compassion for the Self”, *ICSA Today* 13 (2), p. 2–9. Also see online: <https://www.mumok.at/presse/koerper-psyche-tabu-1>, accessed 2026/03/12.

idealists, for the most part twenty-five years younger than Mühl, had become equally attached to the utopia of irresponsible pleasure gratification as to Mühl's permanent, performative self-exaltation, and had withdrawn into a parallel society. Painterly activity developed there as a collective ritual in which the followers murmured and marveled at their leader's obsession with being the greatest artist of all time.

To believe in the "commune" meant to a large extent to believe in the artist Otto Mühl. This is precisely where sexual abuse inextricably coincides with art, and especially with Mühl's painterly activity. The children in the sect were brought up to admire Mühl, which was also and above all admiration for Mühl as an artist and especially as a painter. They were placed in the cheering crowd of adults while Mühl painted. And they saw explicitly every day, and were taught that as women and girls, admiration was shown to this "greatest artist of all" through sexual availability. If they refused, they were raped.

The renowned personalities as subject matter, just like the easily recognizable aberrations through the styles of outstanding painters in his presumably "manifold and complex oeuvre,"³ are a symptom of the function that the painterly activity fulfilled in the "commune." Accordingly, the colorful relics of this despotic system of rule only succeeded in being marketed as serious painting at the moment when the system was temporarily destroyed by Mühl's imprisonment. Since then, the evidence of a staggering abuse of power has continued to be exhibited, discussed, and sold trivially as "painting."

II. IDEOLOGIES OF INEQUALITY

"The domain of the soul has its vampires."

George Steiner, Lessons of the Masters, 2003.

In 2016, mumok in Vienna hosted an exhibition curated by Eva Badura-Triska entitled *Body, Psyche, and Taboo. Viennese Actionism and Early Viennese Modernism*. The accompanying text to the exhibition reads: "In 2016 mumok is taking a fresh look at one of the mainstays of our own collection — Vienna Actionism — by relating this to equally radical

³ Thus, the sales-friendly exaggeration in the explanatory text cited above.

positions taken by some of its Austrian predecessors. [...] The central concepts of Body, Psyche, and Taboo that make up the title of the exhibition indicate that this show is a presentation of both the intellectual and the formal links between Vienna Actionism and artistic developments in the early twentieth century. [...] Both early modernism and the period around 1960 in Vienna were characterized by a revolutionary sense of a new start in society and in culture and the arts. Conventions of representation and artistic genres were redefined, a faith in the power of art to shape and remold society led to new utopias and radical forms of provocation against the traditional order. It was not by coincidence that the protagonists of Vienna Actionism saw the iconoclasts of the early twentieth century as role models, with their radical references to the body and violations of taboos, and in their interdisciplinary and synergetic forms of art.⁴

Just like in the accompanying text, also in the exhibition one searched in vain for an engagement with the Nazi mass murder and destruction of culture, which lie as a radical rupture between the two periods of Austrian art history in question. The agenda of asserting continuity where there were mass murder and destruction does not only determine this exhibition. It can likewise be traced in the overarching cultural policy decisions in which the mumok as an institution is grounded. In 2001, the museum opened in a new building in the Museumsquartier, a newly created cultural area in the former imperial court stables from the 18th century. Manfred and Laurids Ortner had been commissioned to architecturally execute the cultural-political agenda. They placed two stone cuboids in the spacious inner courtyard of the stables: the Leopold Museum as a home for the Klimt and Schiele collection of the family of the same name⁵; and the mumok, which has since housed part of the collection of the German industrialist couple Peter and Irene Ludwig,

4 Press release on the exhibition *Körper, Psyche und Tabu. Wiener Aktionismus und die frühe Wiener Moderne*, see online: https://www.mumok.at/sites/default/files/cms/pt_wa_jahrhundertwende_d_1.pdf, accessed 2023/05/31. English version: https://www.mumok.at/sites/default/files/cms/pt_wa_jahrhundertwende_e.pdf.

5 As if he were intentionally collecting paintings on which naked, underage girls are depicted, Rudolf Leopold complemented his Schiele collection with many works by Mühl, among them works, for which Mühl had nude photos of his abuse victims projected onto canvas in order to reproduce them true to life. On the special relationship of Rudolf Leopold and the cult complex, see: <https://www.leopoldmuseum.org/de/presse/presseunterlagen/90/Otto-Muehl-Sammlung-Leopold>, accessed 2023/06/15.

with a focus on art from the period after 1945 to the present day. In line with the exhibition highlighted above, the project description on the architecture firm's website seeks to ignore the "Anschluss", Austrians willing integration into Nazi Germany, choosing rather to emphasize the integration between the period before and the period after National Socialism — as if nothing had happened in between: "The location in the area of the former court stables [...] offers the ideal linking of contemporary culture to the historical tradition, which is located in the immediate vicinity with the Hofburg and court museums."⁶

The cultural-political perspective that I hereby briefly touched upon is intended to embed what follows in a larger context. While the Museumsquartier and mumok, the Ortner brothers and Eva Badura-Triska, focus on a continuity that fades out the mass-murderous, National Socialist interlude, I would like to use a concrete example to point out the continuing effect of National Socialism on Mühl's thoughts and actions. In the documentary film "Meine Keine Familie" by Paul Robert, there is a scene that turns the stomach of many viewers. It shows the violent, public abuse of a child of about ten years old by Otto Mühl, and comes from the documentary inventory of the sect. The scene shows a process that was, in essence, commonplace in the sect over a period of several years, and to which all children were subjected from infancy onwards. Since the film, also beyond this scene, makes substantial use of archival footage that is in the possession of the Friedrichshof cooperative, Robert had to submit a rough cut to the then cooperative chairman Peter Schär before the film was released. Peter Schär called in Mühl salesman Hubert Klocker to evaluate the film and decide on its release. They agreed to let the film pass but demanded that one part be cut. In the rough cut, Robert had not only included the abuse of the child, but also Otto Mühl's justification that followed the abuse. This had to be removed in order to get clearance for the film.

What happens in this scene that is likewise based on archival footage, and which Schär and Klocker did not want released to the public? Mühl suffered a defeat in the preceding situation. The child did not follow his instructions and, in tears and in pain, protested with what was least

⁶ See: https://ortner-ortner.com/de/baukunst/projekte/kultur/mumok_wien, accessed 2023/05/31. Translation by E. S.

tolerated in the sect: his own willpower. Mühl is visibly upset. Although the violent treatment of the child is not publicly questioned by any of the people present — on the contrary, the individual acts of violence are repeatedly cheered and applauded by the crowd — he probably still suspects doubts about his actions in the crowd. Be that as it may, one recognizes in the justification the traces of Mühl's long-standing relationship with the mother of the abused boy, to whom he addresses his justification. She belonged to the first sectarian circle that Mühl recruited around him while still living in Praterstrasse in Vienna's Second District, and — this is decisive for the content of his justification — she is Jewish. For in this irritated, unsettled state, Mühl regresses into the illogicalities of National Socialist racial anti-Semitism, the ideology of his childhood. In the following transcription, the corresponding views and terms as well as the semantic field from which they originate are highlighted.

FRIEDRICHSHOF — SD EVENING — 1984⁷

OTTO MÜHL is sitting on a leather chair in a large hall surrounded by a large crowd of people. They sit on rows of folding chairs, some with children on their laps, the rearmost standing. They all face the open center of the hall, the stage, at the edge of which there are a few men with musical instruments. A crying boy, about 10 years old, is just leaving this center, while a man begins to mop the floor with a rag.

MÜHL: Tomorrow, we'll do it again. Every day. He'll learn to play. Where is A.? A. get into the middle!

A., the boy's mother, gets up from her chair in the crowd and enters the center.

MÜHL: He will learn. He's got to get over that. The way you slowed him down, I can only **drive him forward** with water. He's schizophrenic, that guy. But I am a follower of Kneipp.

The audience laughs.

7 Scene descriptions and transcription by Zarah Gutsch based on video recordings of the archive of the Friedrichshof Cooperative, seen on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUSZtf48gvk&t=127s>, last accessed on 13.04.2025.

The term "SD Evening" was a term used by the sect for the nightly guru-led gatherings. SD here abbreviates "Selbstdarstellung" which translates as "Self-Performance". The Nazi use of the abbreviation "SD" for the "Sicherheitsdienst", the intelligence agency of the SS, did not preclude its use in the sect.

MÜHL: I know, it looks very bad, even vicious. You must have thought of the **concentration camp**. It seemed to me like a **concentration camp**. He's really playing a **Jew in a concentration camp**.

MÜHL imitates whining. Approving shouts and clapping from the audience.

MÜHL: I felt like an **SS** man myself, that's what he made me into. You have that **in you too, this Anne Frank**. **They all have this** mentality, these damn **fucking Jews!** That is really something very bad, to carry such a **horror into the children** for decades. You were not in the concentration camp yourself. Only from talking she has heard it. This **fucking** paranoia of the **Jews**. I myself was in danger of death. But I never talk about it. Although sometimes I cry into my pillow. Light laughter from the audience.

MÜHL: That's what you've done there! Yes, look. What do you say to that?

A.: Yes, it's bad. I am bad.

MÜHL: No, HE is bad. He might as well be a **criminal**, then you can't just let him **stab you to death**. You **can't let it grow**, you have to do something about it. But the Kneipp cures will get him through. I got B. through the last time, too. But it was easier. But he goes to excess, he goes on a hunger strike. He'll get cancer. What kind of pressure do you think he lives under? What do you prefer? Cancer or this **harsh treatment with water**? Envy **eats him** up when he hears the others sing. He would like to himself so much and chokes himself down and must play contemptuously. And what happens then? Leukemia! Then **he eats himself**.

To A., who continues to stand in front of him in the middle.

MÜHL: Sit down! You're going to **Berlin**, but promptly. We can't have this no more. You can't sit like a **leech** on his veins. And pump the **poison** into him. That has a **devastating effect**.

An umbrella term in use today for anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia and the like is the term ideology of inequality. Like all terms that attempt to subsume the aforementioned phenomena, which each ultimately have their own specificity, this one has its weaknesses. In relation to National Socialism and Mühl's sect ideology, however, the term captures hitherto mostly unnoticed structural similarities.

Mühl's sect — despite acknowledging its authoritarian structures — is often still seen as an endeavor that pursued a liberal, progressive agenda. This misses the traces of National Socialist thinking that Mühl was to internalize in the Hitler Youth and as a Wehrmacht soldier. The transcript and the highlights make these traces visible; more generally, they can be grasped in Mühl's obsessive relationship to the concepts of illness and healing, and in the role Mühl assigned himself as artist and ruler to heal society and individuals of the illnesses that presumably afflicted them. Art and healing became for Mühl an ongoing performed public gesture. A crucial question in Mühl's work is what meaning one attaches to the quotation marks he uses to give his actions and communications a constant "as-if", ostensibly marking them as artistic and therapeutic. His entire public performance, whether in the form of texts, recorded conversations, or the material produced as art, is permeated with various ideologies of inequality — with sexism, homophobia, racism, and, as in this case, anti-Semitism. Apostrophized as art and therapy, his behavior is considered provocative and critical. As seen in the example documented above, this apostrophizing enables him to make his inhuman views acceptable in circles receptive to them.

III. ENTANGLEMENT IN NARCISSISTIC CIRCLES

"a good part [of the commune's assets] is sponsorship for the unsuccessful o.m. [Otto Mühl]. his breakthrough on the art market (which after decades of trying has yet to materialize) has long since cost millions. he is having rows and rows of art market greats flown in to visit the fh [Friedrichshof] and el cabrito [La Gomera, Canary Islands]. so far largely without success. only szeemann expressed sympathy. but will this also translate into a rise in prices? may it be granted to him, the spurned one, who is so indifferent to the art market that he has had nothing better to do for years than to let the artistic flag flutter after market opportunities. with the money of the honestly working sect members."

Diary entry Dieter Reichert, 1989/10/16, quoted from Benoît Tremsal, Die Kunstpraxis in der Mühl-Kommune, 2016, translated by Elisabeth Schäfer.

The head on the dartboard at which I am throwing my darts clearly shows the grimace of the megalomaniac art teacher⁸ Otto Mühl. At the same time, I am not just concerned here with a single person.

8 A very fitting formulation by Zarah Gutsch.

The transformation of art into traumatizing narcissism was systematic in two ways. The sect emerged as the first narcissistic circle. In order to exist as a cult, hard ideological outer boundaries had to be established — inside the “healthy” “commune” member, out there the “sick” “nuclear family gnome”.⁹ But these borders were illusory; they were limited to their intended function and were non-existent in a very fundamental way. Thus, the narcissistic cult organism actively worked to create a second narcissistic circle in the general public. Sect service providers like Theo Altenberg, like Bernd Stein, and Terese Schulmeister, and like later Peter Schär, Gitta Verlei, Danielle Roussel or Martin Christopherson (my father), proselytized for their guru in the Austrian and international art and culture scenes.

It was precisely the first narcissistic iteration, the first sect at the Friedrichshof, that was appealing enough to make missionary activity successful. This is evidenced by the cast of the film *Back to Fucking Cambridge*. For the film, interested people were invited to Friedrichshof to shoot vignettes directed by Terese Schulmeister and Otto Mühl with Mühl’s underage victims of abuse, in which pedosexuality is normalized as the artist’s way of life.¹⁰ Theo Altenberg and Terese Schulmeister, whose post-commune lives consisted primarily of rejecting any guilt, dismissing any call to responsibility for the crimes in which they participated as petit-bourgeois, and gambling away their leveraged symbolic capital in their own artistic dilettantism, list the most important names of the cast, some of them world-famous, on their respective websites:

Lucio Amelio, Christian Ludwig Attersee, Anni Brus, Günter Brus, Horst Christoph, Georg Jiri Dokoupil, Helmut Federle, Erich Fischer, Rudi Fuchs, Johannes Gachnang, Joachim Goppelt, Franz Graf, Gotthard Graubner, Emmi Hudzinsky, Kurt Kalb, Maria Lassnig, Viktor Matejka, Oswald Oberhuber, Rafael Ortiz, Nam June Paik, Dieter Roth, Norman Rosenthal, John Sailer, Jochen Schmidt, Harald Szeemann, Wilfried Zeller-Zellenberg.¹¹

9 “Kleinfamilienwichtel” was a standard expression in the „Commune“.

10 See, among others, the picture series in the middle of the book with its accompanying text by MATHILDA in the publication on hand.

11 See <https://www.theoaltenberg.com/film-video.html> and <https://www.tereseschulmeister.at/film/>, accessed 2023/06/06.

To my knowledge, with the exception of Ani and Günther Brus not one of these people has so far deemed it necessary to critically reflect in any form on their support of the cult and their own involvement in the mechanisms of abuse, let alone apologizing to the victims.

In 2018, five years after Otto Mühl's death, my wife and I visited my father, who at the time continued to live in the last remains of the cult in Portugal. Mühl had moved there with a remnant of his disciples after his seven-year prison sentence, claimed that the first "commune" had failed because of its size, and picked up where he left off: with narcissism, art, and sexual abuse of minors.¹² Deprived of their center by his death, those left behind now lived in an oscillating schizophrenia between their love for Mühl and the dawning realization of their traumatizing dependence.

We are faced with one side of this schizophrenia — the remnants of the dependency dynamic practiced over decades — in the following telling scene during our visit. We've had success at fishing and arrive back at the property with enough fish for a communal dinner. Our arrival triggers a rehearsed enthusiasm among the group. Danielle Roussel and the two sisters¹³ see the fish in the kitchen. The three women react in chorus. The vocabulary of their reaction is well known to me: "pau" ("wow"), "Wahnsinn" ("awesome"), "toll" ("great"), "irre gut" ("crazy good") — these are the cheering words that soundtracked every action of Mühl's and had passed from there into the sect's disparate language. Prompted by the reaction of the three women, others become active. The grill is prepared, photos are taken. A busy, excited whirl surrounds us.

I focus on the tone, the expression on their faces, the temperature of their eyes; there is wonder, admiration and surrender. What is eerie here? Is one not allowed to be thrilled and amazed that someone has fished with success? One may be — but what is surrender doing in the texture of the reaction? You can get to the bottom of this if you pay attention to how enthusiasm and service provision are distributed among those present. Martin, my father, is also happy about the fish, but I don't see a gleam in his eyes. I don't see his eyes at all, because they are lowered on the tasks he has taken on. I also do not see the eyes of Thomas Erfurt.

12 See: Pflaum, Vilma (2015): *au f z e ich n en*. Art book presentation limited to 100 copies.

13 Owing to their special relation with the abuse incidents first as underage girls and then for many years as grownups, I refrain from giving the two sisters' names.

They are covered by the camera with which he is taking pictures. The enthusiasm, the rapture, is distributed binarily according to traditional gender roles. It is the women who are charged to swarm. The men have a different role to play. Their role consists of silent and diligent material support. Just as Thomas provides the photographic documentation at dinner, Martin dutifully takes his position at the grill when we arrive with the fish.

The injunction to us children to denigrate our experience comes not only from the great cultural institutions, it comes from our own parents. Thus, my mother later tells me to look at the scene differently: the prodigal son comes back to visit after many years and is greeted with joy; his father grills for him, the father's friend captures this beautiful moment in pictures. But I want people to remember how often Thomas held the camera for Otto or carried the paint buckets; how often Martin lit the barbecue for Otto, grilling the fish he had chosen and bought for him at the market. And I want it to be remembered that the women, these women in particular, learned the rapturous language game on Otto and were made to perform it over thirty-five years — in the case of the two sisters, from puberty into their fifties. Both are conditions for and forms of abuse — the men who spent their lives carrying the artist's bedstead and mattresses up to his studio, and the women who taught the adolescent girls that the artist must be met not only with wonder and admiration, but also with surrender and self-sacrifice.

On Theo Altenberg's website there is a reference to his participation in another cult film called "Andy's Cake." The film was shot shortly before Mühl's arrest, and the release date already falls in the time of his imprisonment. Again, certain circles of the Austrian art and cultural scene are involved; many of the names cited above in relation to "Back to Fucking Cambridge" are duplicated, and some new ones are added — including Hubert Klocker. The sisters are also among the actors in the film. The roles they have to play in the film once again, hardly differ from their roles in life.

VIOLENCE OF IMAGES—IMAGES OF VIOLENCE

And just as my father made a life out of servitude, moved to Portugal with Mühl following his discharge from prison, became entangled in further abuse there, stuck by his guru until beyond his death, and today enjoys the comfort of the sea and the sun, Hubert Klocker and others have also made a nice life for themselves dependent on the narcissist and on his art, in which the wounds he inflicted on others live on.

— **Andy Simanowitz**, born in Bradford in 1980, joined the sect at the age of two after his parents were recruited in London. From the late 1990s, his father lived with Otto Mühl in Portugal, and his mother lived with the Actionist Herbert Stumpfl in Vienna. Simanowitz has an MA in Religious Studies and has worked in the education department of the Jewish Museum Berlin since 2012.

LITERATURE

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