

Crisis and Form: Politicizations of Art

Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities

Essen, Germany

April 22–23, 2026

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

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

This question becomes all the more urgent as we are currently engaged in new entanglements of perception, experience, and technology – albeit in different form, if no less profound than in Benjamin’s time – to which traditional art theory no longer offers any response. Our conference takes this crisis as an opportunity to explore what the politicization of art can mean today. In recent years, the concept of form has been brought back into

play. Form encompasses forms of artistic presentation as well as its medial constellations and the forms of its institutionalization; unlike in classical formalism, it cannot be conceived in contrast to content. Instead of seeking lifelines for the autonomy of art, we will investigate concrete aesthetic ways of functioning: How can institutions curate relevance? Which affects are mobilized by the aesthetics of crisis? What does “protocol art” do in network states? How does AI transform aesthetic judgment? Are art and its theory ready to acknowledge that they can shape and curate crises, but not remedy them?

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

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DAY 1, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 2026

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

Thematic Focus I: Form as an Expanded Concept

13.30 – 14.30 *Art and the Politics of Social Form*
Prof. Dr. Peter Osborne (Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy,
Kingston University London)

14.30 – 15.00 *Coffee Break*

15.00 – 15.45 *Native Americans in Paris: A Political Mania of the 1960s and 1970s*
Dr. Danilo Scholz (Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities Essen)

15.45 – 16.30 *The Logic of Disruption and its Odds*
Prof. Dr. Mirjam Schaub (University of Applied Science, Hamburg)

16.30 – 16.45 *Coffee Break*

16.45 – 17.30 *Survivalism: Speculative Tech and Future Horizons*
Dr. Ella Klik (Bar-Ilan University)

17.30 *Apéro*

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

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

DAY 2, THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 2026

Thematic Focus II: Digital Media Ecologies and Political Art

- 09.00 – 09.45 *“Acquiring Taste“: AI and the Work of Aesthetic Judgment*
Prof. Dr. Markus Rautzenberg (Folkwang University of the Arts)
- 09.45 – 10.30 *Protocol Art: Pattern Formation and Aesthetic Deformation in Network States*
Dr. Johannes Bennke (Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf)
- 10.30 – 10.45 *Coffee Break*
- 10.45 – 11.30 *Inclining Forms: Reimagining Philosophy’s Self-Images*
Dr. Hannah Wallenfels (diffrakt, Centre for Theoretical Periphery)

Thematic Focus III: Between Art and the Crisis of Democracy

- 11.30 – 12.15 *Performing Crisis: Aesthetics of Masculinity*
Prof. Dr. Christian Grüny (University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart)
- 12.15 – 14.00 *Lunch Break*
- 14.00 – 14.45 *Curating Relevance*
Hans Christ & Iris Dressler (Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart)
- 14.45 – 15.30 *Generative AI and the Aesthetics of Digital Fascism*
Prof. Dr. Roland Meyer (University of Zurich / Zurich University of the Arts)
- 15.30 – 16.00 *Open Discussion & Final Remarks*
Dr. Johannes Bennke, Prof. Dr. Markus Rautzenberg
- 16.00 – 16.30 *Coffee Break & 5min walk to the Folkwang Museum*
- 16.30 – 17.30 **Optional afternoon event:**
Guided Tour Folkwang Museum „New Worlds. Dialogue of the Arts“
- 19.00 **Conference Dinner**

Convenors

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Venue

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Directions to the KWI building can be found here:
<https://www.kulturwissenschaften.de/kontakt-anfahrt/>

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