

## Right-wing terror and art

by Gerald Heidegger, ORF

The attack by the right-wing extremist Stephan B. in the German town of Halle on the Saale, in which two people were killed, has left deep wounds due to the scale of the planned crime. "Anti-Semitism and right-wing ideology are deeply rooted in Germany," says one of the survivors of the attack, journalist Christina Feist, on the margins of the court case now underway: no one dares to talk about it. The German painter René Schoemakers also shakes the taboo of secret right-wing terror, recalling the structure of references used between the individual attacks.

"The German collective memory is very much focused on the "German Autumn", i.e. the terror of the RAF - and is suppressing the terror from the right, which is also greater in terms of numbers," states the German painter Schoemakers, who works in Kiel and has been dealing with the sign language of right-wing terror in his works of art in a parodying form for years.

Since reunification in 1990, the victims of right-wing extremist violence have been recorded in Germany. Officially, the authorities have counted 94 fatalities since then. The Amadeu Antonio Foundation, which specializes in right-wing extremist crimes, assumes a higher number: There have been at least 198 victims of right-wing violence since 1990, because, as the Foundation criticises, many cases are wrongly not classified as political violence.

### Confused individual perpetrators or networks?

In an interview with ORF.at, Schoemakers also stated that right-wing perpetrators are always perceived as confused individuals, which they certainly are. It is forgotten to ask about the reciprocal, especially symbolic references between the attacks. Schoemakers argues that self-resonance and imitation are the central moment behind these acts.

The assassin of Halle tried to present his planned mass murder of Jewish citizens on Yom Kippur Day 2019 via livestream and references to gamification to the largest possible audience. He was looking for followers, companions - and as so often imitators. In fact, the number of recipients of this brutal action was smaller than the assassin apparently assumed.

In his sign language, the assassin of Halle referred to the terror of Christchurch; the Christchurch assassin in turn referred to the Norwegian Anders Brejvik and his staging and conspiracy theories. In any case, the right-wing terror in Germany shows a family tree that goes back over the border between the FRG and the GDR to the 1970s.

In his picture cycle "Three Bearded Men", Schoemakers reminds us of Karl-Heinz Hoffmann, for example, who founded the "Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann" (Hoffmann Paramilitary Exercises Group) named after him in 1973. "Today, Hoffmann moves around the country like a nice old grandfather," says Schoemakers. Also the subject of this work: the former RAF (Red Army Faction) lawyer Horst Mahler, who had already moved to the extreme right-wing field in the 1990s.

### The Banality of Evil

For Schoemakers, his "German Autumn" begins at the Theresienwiese in Munich and the Oktoberfest bombing in 1980, and in the investigative pictures spread by the media, the image of the stand with the

sign "hot sausages" always caught the eye at the place of horror. Schoemakers cites this close proximity of brutality and banality as the driving force behind his work. Schoemakers reconstructed the scene of the Oktoberfest assassination with children's toys and painted it afterwards. His hyperrealistic-looking acrylic paintings have numerous integrated alienation traps: on the one hand, by reconstructing the real landscape in the seemingly harmless world of children's toys; on the other hand, Schoemakers infiltrates numerous alienations into his paintings that lead the scene even more into the absurd.

Schoemakers believes that the entire right-wing repertoire is a carnival of crazy symbols. To isolate these and to carry them into other contexts is one aspect of his art. In the painting "Anders (Mummenschanz)" there is a daughter of the artist in the fantasy uniform of Anders Brejvik. "The confusion of the assassins is the starting point of my work", Schoemakers describes his approach: "In the end, the artist creates his own world." With a subtle difference, as Schoemakers states: "...the imaginary world doesn't spill over into the real world like the assassins. Artists shouldn't be addicted to a world view, they should deconstruct it," says Schoemakers.

### **The Pink Panther and the NSU**

This approach demands a lot of active work from the viewer; mostly it is multi-part works that explore something like a topography between horror and apparent harmlessness. Schoemakers' works were last shown in Austria at the Museum Angerlehner in Thalheim near Wels. His "Weltgeist" series will be exhibited at one of the scenes of NSU terror, in Dortmund at the Museum of Art and Cultural History next year. In Dortmund the kiosk owner Mehmet Kubasik became a victim of NSU terror in 2006.

The family of Kubasik, which for years was itself partly under the suspicion of the investigators, acted as joint plaintiff in the NSU trial. Beate Zschäpe was convicted of complicity in the attack in Dortmund. NSU supporters Ralf Wohlleben and Carsten Schultze were sentenced to prison for aiding and abetting the murder of, among others, Kubasik for procuring the murder weapon (the sentences are not final).

The central motif of Schoemakers' work on the topic and iconography of right-wing terror in Germany is the figure of the Pink Panther. In the 15-minute confessional video of the NSU, Paulchen Panther (as the Pink Panther is called in Germany) leads to all the crime scenes of the National Socialist Underground. The reason to choose the Pink Panther? The NSU serial killer Uwe Mundlos is said to have been a fan of this figure.

The elaborate power of the video was the subject of the Munich NSU trial against Beate Zschäpe and possible other people behind Mundlos and Uwe Böhnhardt. "The effort to cut and assemble all this must have been considerable", wrote the "Süddeutsche Zeitung" in 2016 and, on the basis of the investigations of the German BKA, raises the question "whether there were other persons who participated in the creation of the film".

### **Self-empowerment without borders**

In Schoemaker's works, the head of the innocent Paulchen is cut off. The artist himself sits on the German throne of the individual who empowers himself to communicate his quirky ideas to the world. In Schoemakers' work the fighter is naked, of course - and painted only with the camouflage paint of war.

For Schoemakers, brutal self-empowerment is not least a very German theme. "Weltgeist" is the title of his series of paintings on the right-wing scene.

"Only the self-empowerment of the absolute self can bring salvation," Schoemakers exaggerates. This is one of the reasons why the painter sits naked on the throne that Hegel had already set up in his "Phenomenology of Spirit". The idea of absolute freedom, of absolute self-consciousness, the artist finds, always at the expense of the general public. (It may seem like a footnote in this context, that Horst Mahler also justified his anti-Semitic turn by reading Hegel during his first period of imprisonment in the 1970s).

For Schoemakers, assassins are characters who are absolute in their actions. The artist has the chance to deconstruct precisely these fantasies of self-empowerment back into their fundamental elements and make the absurdity of the initial situation visible.

Schoemakers does not always succeed with this approach, as he admits himself. His works are classified as photographs by the filtering mechanisms of platforms like Instagram. These do not only filter out nudity. The Breivik uniform is also recognized by these filters, Schoemakers says - and is immediately recognized as problematic. Of course, artificial intelligence can't determine the context of the work.

### **"Never wanted to be a political artist"**

"The Unencumbered Self" is the name of a series by Schoemakers. But the unencumbered self, which can realize itself as pure spirit and come to itself, as conceived in the " Oldest System Program of German Romanticism" by the Tübingen roommates Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling, cannot exist for Schoemakers. Rather, art reminds us of Kant to recognize the limits of world perception and understanding.

Schoemakers does not want to be considered a "political artist" who has adopted "a theme", even though his exhibitions appear to point in this direction: "I never wanted to be a political artist. I've always started out from my immediate surroundings, painting only the members of the small family - only sometimes as a Breivik, sometimes as Karl-Heinz Hoffmann. Me and my wife as Luther and Katharina von Bora etc. It is my way of trying to understand, to deconstruct what I encounter. It describes my mimetic approach to the world as a painter. I have to tinker, build, paint, capture in pictures what I encounter." That's why, he says, he has to climb naked onto the throne as "Böhser (bad) Paul".