

“Fascinating Fetishism: Exhibiting Contemporary Art in Nazi Architecture”

Lecture given by Prof. Karen Fiss the 6th of July, 2017 at the Hochbunker, Friedberger Anlage 5-6, Frankfurt

Thank you all for attending tonight. I very much appreciate the Initiativ 9 November and the Sigmund Freud Institute for providing this opportunity to speak here. I admire the efforts of the Initiativ 9 November to keep this space in active dialogue with the past, the present, and the future.

I have never given an academic lecture in German before –it is an intimidating prospect for me! I sincerely hope it is comprehensible to you through my American accent. I am very much indebted to Erika Hahn for translating the text of my lecture – this was exceedingly generous of her, and I certainly couldn’t have done it on my own. And thanks to all of you for your patience with my limited language skills.

[SLIDES] My talk tonight will focus on two former Nazi bunkers in Berlin that have been remodeled for the purposes of exhibiting contemporary art – the private collections of Christian Boros and Desiré Feuerle - installation views which you see here). These bunkers are just two examples of the current trend of appropriating historical sites to stage contemporary art in quote “evocative” environments. This practice marks a turning away from the longstanding dominance of the neutral white cube favored by modernism. Rather than privileging the “autonomy” of the art object, contemporary practices now seek site-specific environments that can stimulate a multisensory and unique visitor “experience.”

I am critical of this trend. But in my field, I am nearly alone in finding it problematic. It’s not that I believe that all buildings constructed by the Third Reich are taboo- but repurposing depends on the history of the site and the proposed new function. The contemporary art world, which is expanding at an unbelievable rate –an insatiable market and an explosion of venues and international exhibitions – turns out to be one of the most zealous exploiters of “Nazi cool.” Instead of thoughtful exhibitions that engage the history of the Third Reich and the Shoah in ways that stimulate critical thinking and dialogue –to reflect on the continued relevance and importance of this history - what can be learned to act more politically and ethically in the present – these contemporary art installations redeploy the Third Reich as an asset to make them appear edgy and avant-garde.

Why are these optimal sites for art? Contemporary art prides itself on challenging societal norms and boundaries. Nazi buildings are potent readymades; they provide a unique theatrical backdrop. The cultural currency of cool exploits the stage set for its potential erotic transgression, while making such transgression socially acceptable at the same time. Furthermore, in a world increasingly experienced as virtual, a Nazi structure, preferably with some remaining bullet holes or other indexical marks, offers an oddly stimulating encounter with the real - not recreations or digital renderings, but something authentic.

When the political content of fascist history is expunged from its material existence through the mitigation of aesthetics, its trappings are turned into theater. What happens to the memories, loss, and trauma that have been truncated? I think these questions are fundamental from the perspective of the current generation that regards itself at a safe temporal distance from the Third Reich.

I promised Dr. Leuchner that I would in some way address the politics of place marketing – I will do so briefly at the end of this talk, as it is my general assertion that the exigencies of Germany’s reunification narrative accelerated this process of normalization too quickly. Reunification happened at the same time as the meteoric expansion of the global contemporary art market in the 90s– art spectacles became an ideal medium to facilitate the process of normalization.

So, before going into some detail about the bunker art collections of Boros and Feuerle, I should mention that there are indeed many bunkers being repurposed either as high-end residences or cultural spaces in Germany and in other countries. [SLIDES] Per Strömberg has written about bunker conversions in Sweden – what he calls “Funky Bunkers,” as part of the trend to convert postindustrial sites into quote “temples of high culture.” In Germany, the number of recent bunker conversions for private development has been spurred by the fact that the government sold off 2000 bunkers in 2007. [SLIDES] Zum Biespiel, in Bremen, Architect Rainer Mielke has converted thirteen bunkers into homes including his own. [SLIDES] Luczak Architekten converted this loft complex in Köln. Other bunkers have become homes for cultural organizations - [SLIDES] here in Frankfurt, of course, there is the Cultural Cargo Dock which houses the Institute for New Media. [SLIDES] In Hamburg there is the suggestively named Übel und Gefährlich, a flak tower converted into a creative complex, which includes a radio station, studios, an art gallery and a popular electronic music club. [SLIDES] There are plans now, entirely privately funded, to build a 20-meter Aufstockung on top of the Hamburg tower with a park, community gardens, Ateliers, eine Sporthalle, and a hotel.

[SLIDES] Tonight, though, my focus will be on the bunkers of Christian Boros and Desiré Feuerle - which opened to the public in 2008 and 2016 respectively – and have garnered enthusiastic praise in the German and international press. I haven’t found a negative review of either one, and they have quickly become top-rated tourist attractions. [SLIDES] In its first four years, more than a hundred and twenty thousand visitors came to tour the Boros. Even now, one has to reserve several weeks or months in advance to secure a spot on a guided tour.

[SLIDES] Christian Boros bought the Reichsbahnbunker, located in Mitte, in 2003 – he says “It was love at first sight.” The bunker was originally built in 1942 by the Third Reich to protect up to 3000 people from Allied air attacks. It was designed under the supervision of Albert Speer by Karl Bonatz, who ab 1949, would become the Stadtbaudirektor for West Berlin. Bonatz designed the bunker to look like a Roman fortress mit Rustika-Eingängen “im Germania-Stil,” as the Frankfurter

Allgemeine Zeitung described it. Its walls are eighteen meters high and up to 3 meters thick. After the defeat of the Third Reich, Die Rote Armee used it as a Kriegsgefängnis where interrogations took place, and under the DDR it was converted into a Lagerung for Südfrüchten aus Kuba. After Germany's reunification, Der Bunker entwickelt in 1992 mit Techno-Musik und Fetisch- und Fantasy-Parties sein Image als "härtester Club der Welt."

[SLIDES] Boros hired a young architectural firm in Berlin named Realarchitektur to design the conversion. They have developed a specialty in this field, converting several other bunkers into high-end real estate, including the Feuerle, which I will discuss next. Realarchitektur removed numerous walls and ceilings to reconfigure the three thousand square meters of exhibition space. [SLIDES] Many of the works he owns were created as site specific installations for the bunker. Boros prefers large or sensational works, such as those by Olufar Eliasson, Michael Sailstorfer and Ai Wei Wei. [SLIDES] On top of the bunker, Boros commissioned a deluxe penthouse as his family's residence – a modern glass box intended to evoke Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie, which stands not far from the Bunker. [SLIDES] The immense apartment, decorated in minimalist/modern style, also has a pool and gardens.

London's *Independent* newspaper credits Boros with rescuing Berlin from one its ugliest buildings "with a touch of flair." Boros told the reporter in 2005 as construction began: "It will be like James Bond- very cool – with exposed concrete and glass." The FAZ similarly confirmed: "Die Architektur ist spektakulär und erinnert an die James-Bond-Filmsets, u ber die Boros seine Diplomarbeit schrieb."

[SLIDES] The private collection of Desiré Feuerle opened just last year in a bunker in Kreuzberg. Feuerle employed the same firm as Boros, Realarchitektur, to work with the British architect John Pawson on the project. Feuerle's collection juxtaposes imperial Chinese furniture and ancient Southeast Asian- mostly Khmer - sculptures with contemporary art. Feuerle made his fortune running an art gallery in Köln and it was for this kind of anachronistic juxtaposition that his gallery was known.

[SLIDES] There is nothing historical about the installation of artworks – like the Boros, there are no labels or contextual materials to mar the pure experience of admiring the objects. Rather, Feuerle explains that his approach is entirely sensory and experiential. When visitors first descend into the bunker, they are led into a completely dark Sound Room to listen to minimalist music composed by John Cage. Visitors then visit the Incense room - a mirrored cube, with the scent of burning wood in an evocation of the traditional Chinese ceremony. [SLIDES] In the Lake Room, visitors look out onto a windowless underground pool. One architecture critic likened the pool to "the Cisterns in Istanbul... It has an elemental grandeur that is completely mesmerizing." The editor of Apollo magazine wrote "This brutalist industrial building is a work of art in its own right. From the outside it looks like a monumental Donald Judd sculpture. The result is, as Feuerle says himself, a Gesamtkunstwerk."

Pawson is consistently praised for the reverence he paid to the original structure, keeping his interventions to a minimum. "Its form is so simple, beautiful, and understandable, says Pawson. "This is engineers' architecture. If someone said to me, you can have whatever you want, this is it. You can't find concrete of this kind of quality anymore. Its patina is stunning." The Berliner Morgenpost compares the bunker to a monastery. Feuerle confirms: "It's meditative and healthy for my soul.... When you have a building with heritage, you need an architect who won't feel a need to put their own stamp on it... A minimalist architect respects the building."

One needs to ask, what heritage is being respected here?

[SLIDES] Boros's bunker was built by slave labor. No German or English language publication I have found mentions that slave labor was used, nor do the tour guides working at the Boros. Rather, the tour narrative stresses the heroism and machismo of the project - that 750 cubic meters of concrete had to be removed from the site and that diamond saws were needed to cut through the thick concrete. Only recently, was a single line of text added to the Sammlung Boros website regarding the fact that it was built with forced labor. No further research has been done to find out who these people were, or how many perished from being worked to death.

I also became curious about the site of the bunker. The bunker was built on a site that once housed many Jewish businesses, which were all destroyed or Aryanized in the NS-Zeit. [SLIDES] I was able to determine this by searching a database created by Humboldt University researchers - results I show you here.

[SLIDES] Feuerle's bunker was a BASA telecommunications bunker- that's all that's mentioned in the press. Also likely built with slave labor, this bunker had a very significant role in the war: it served as the headquarters and central traffic control center for the Deutsche Reichsbahn. This bunker was built to hide and protect telecommunications equipment designed by Siemens und Halske to coordinate all train movement in the Reich. [SLIDES] It is noted that dieser technologische Vorsprung bot der deutschen Kriegsführung im Zweiten Weltkrieg logistische Vorteile bei der schnellen Verlegung von Truppen. Given the central role of the Reichsbahn in deportations, did this equipment facilitate the transportation to death camps as well? The technical equipment was considered so important that upon the fall of Berlin in May 1945, it was deliberately flooded and destroyed by the Germans so that it wouldn't fall into Soviet hands.

So let's reassess the rhetoric used to describe these two buildings:
Gesamtkunstwerk? Mesmerizing, monumental, elemental grandeur, monastery?
Feuerle's use of the term Gesamtkunstwerk carries a heavy legacy going back to Wagner of course.

Andreas Huyssens, a cultural theorist to whom I am greatly indebted, explains why the Gesamtkunstwerk as a monumental form should remain suspect. In a seminal essay entitled "monumental seduction" he reflects on the continued appeal of fascist

aesthetics: [SLIDES] “Monumental form is suspect because it is seen as representative of nationalism and totalitarianism. Hitler and Speer saw buildings as tools of mass psychology and domination. The monumental is ethically suspect in the attempt to overwhelm the individual. It is psychoanalytically suspect because it is tied to narcissistic delusions of grandeur and to imaginary wholeness.’

Huyssens argues that a mania for monuments was particularly striking during the events marking the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. It was at that moment that Germany, which had been guided for decades by a deliberate antifascist antimonumentalism, resorted to monumental dimensions for public commemorations. Also significantly, around that time, a rhetoric of *Erlosung* all but replaced earlier discourses of *Wiedergutmachung und Versöhnung*.

Monumentality betrays the purported historical function of a monument – as a site of remembrance in the absence of the victim. Bunkers are Nazi military propaganda embodied in concrete architecture. [SLIDES] Certainly in the case of Boros – this violence was architecturally embedded in its outward design as a fortress. In Feuerle’s case, the bunker was hidden, but also intended to protect the railways for the war effort. What does it mean to aesthetically revere such spaces? Is this a restoration of a space previously unappreciated for its minimalist grandeur and beauty? Recovered because its form now suits today’s cool postindustrial aesthetic? I would argue that by approaching the bunkers as restored noble ruins, it re-glorifies Nazi engineering, exploiting the ongoing fascination with Nazism. The wartime significance of these sites is subsumed in the fetishism of their technical and material properties. [SLIDES]

The architects made clear they had no interest in creating a memorial. They suppressed the human cost and trauma of war, and exploited the thrill of historical authenticity and aura to amplify a hyper-masculine and brutalist visual aesthetic. [SLIDES] Pawson says quote “it would be difficult to imagine a place more charged with atmosphere than these monumental concrete structures. I wanted the visitor to be seduced by an experience, something very different from what you’d get in a conventional gallery space.” He recalls: “When I visited the bunker for the first time, I didn’t think in terms of problems or memorials. For me it was all about the visceral experience of mass.”

Petersson also deflects the significance of the Boros bunker’s Nazi past in favor of formal concerns: [SLIDES] Quote “We made no attempt to reference or crystallize a particular moment in the bunker’s history – “do I say what happened 100 years ago is more valid than what happened 20 years ago? I don’t want to make that decision. I just want to work with the space.”

[SLIDES] Most telling is the text written by the jury that awarded the Boros bunker the Bund Deutscher Architekten Preis in 2009 –a plaque displayed at the Bunker’s entrance. The text emphasizes an **optimistic** assimilation of history: [SLIDES] “die Architekten sind selektiv vorgegangen und haben bezogen auf das Kunstwerk oder

die Installation über Erhaltung des Zustands entschieden. Auf diese Weise konnte der Eindruck einer bedrückenden Omnipräsenz der Geschichte vermieden werden. Das Projekt überzeugt durch eine Integration der Geschichte, die man als optimistisch bezeichnen kann- nicht zuletzt dank der wohl überlegten räumlichen Inszenierung und sorgfältigen Detaillierung.”

The fetishization of form and d materiality is just one component of the aestheticization and dehistoricization of these bunkers. As Susan Sontag explains in her seminal essay, “Fascinating Fascism,” this rehabilitation occurs because of the belief that “it’s impossible to reject art if it’s beautiful.” But there is another component to this fascination –an erotic one. Fascist art is unique in the field of totalitarianism for being both prurient and idealizing.

The fascist ideal, says Sontag, is to quote “transform sexual energy into a spiritual force for the benefit of the community. The erotic is always present as a temptation.” Unquote. Sontag’s article focuses on the rehabilitation of Leni Riefenstahl’s films – something I’ve also written about. [SLIDES] “The trick,” Sontag explains, “is to filter out the noxious political ideology of her films, leaving only their aesthetic merits. If the message of fascism has been neutralized by an aesthetic view of life, its trappings have been made theatrical and sexualized, and somehow the sexual lure of fascism seems impervious to deflation by irony or overfamiliarity.”

[SLIDES] This erotic dimension is clearly exploited by both Feuerle and Boros. For Boros it was available already as a “readymade” – the 1990s fetish club left its marks on the space – something Boros emphasizes every chance he gets. It’s at the core of the “frisson” reviewers and visitors find so exciting and unique, and only amplified by the type of sensational art he collects. [SLIDES] An article in *Architektur aktuell* titled “Kunstschauder im Bunker Boros” captures the affective power of threat and pleasure: “So verbinden sich Irritationen und Event, leichtes Schaudern vor der Geschichte und hoher Kunstgenuss im Boros-Bunker zu einer wohl kalkulierten Einheit der Inszenierung.” The Boros lends itself to photo shoots for expensive leather fashion, such as this one published in OC32 featuring the actress Cate Blanchett. She poses with specific artworks in the Bunker - [SLIDES] sucking on an arrow by Awst & Walther, or literally tied up and hanging from a tree sculpture by Ai WeiWei. As Sontag says, it’s the kind of thrilling transgression that comes with affluence – a theatrical excess ordinary people don’t encounter normally.

[SLIDES] Feuerle adds to this dimension the taste for an exotic Other. He says he collects Khmer art and Chinese furniture they are sensual and erotic, so he says he wanted to show it with works of art that gave him the same feeling. [SLIDES] To this end, he chose black-and-white photographs by the Japanese artist Nobuyoshi Araki. The furniture and ancient sculptures are paired with Araki’s photos that depict Asian women naked or partially clad, bound and strung up. [SLIDES] Not one reviewer I read found Feuerle’s exoticizing, sexist and racist fetishism as problematic in the least.

So to move onto the final section of my talk – how do these art collections relate to the branding of Berlin? I regard the Boros and Feuerle bunkers as being products of a marketing platform as well as promoters of that new brand. After a decade of repressing the so-called “difficult past”, the place marketing organization for Berlin, which was a private-public partnership, made a decisive change in 2000. It started heavily marketing the National Socialist and Cold War history of Berlin. In the midst of Berlin’s acute financial crisis, branding catered to the desires of tourists, 80% of whom say they come to Berlin to see Nazi and DDR sites. The focus of the new tourist campaign was a “memory district” that emerged in the center of the city with the openings of the Jewish Museum, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and Topographie des Terrors. [SLIDES] As Claire Colomb notes in her book, *Staging the New Berlin*, an advertisement for Berlin in 2007 described the new Memorial to Murdered Jews of Europe as quote “a perfectly magical place of remembrance for the victims of the Holocaust.” The ad featured the logos of the BTM and the Deutsche Bahn which sponsored the campaign. So advanced the centralization and normalization of memory.

Along with the new hypervisibility of Holocaust memory, Berlin was also marketed as Europe’s Capital of Cool. [SLIDES] For the first time, the marketers mainstreamed underground subcultures previously considered unsuitable for Berlin’s image. This ties into an international trend of stimulating economic development around a “creative city agenda” – the topic of my next book –to transform Berlin into a post-Fordist service metropolis. The city center became a consumption-oriented and business friendly hub to attract investment and higher income residents. This urban entrepreneurialism exploited the cultural experimentation happening in previously overlooked areas. The turn to marketing Berlin as a “creative city” gave place marketing a much more visible role in the gentrification and commodification of these hip urban spaces. Branding continued to mask the harsh restructuring of the Berlin economy after reunification, and social inequality continued to worsen.

How do I see Boros and Feuerle as part of this?

[SLIDES] Well, first of all, Boros is an advertising man – so he knows exactly how to master spin and exploit trends in social taste and cool. He does a lot of cultural and political branding –here are some of his clients – and he has political aspirations of his own. He says he sees himself holding a political position in the next few years – preferably as Kulturminister.

But more importantly, I don't think these sensationalist bunker rehabilitations would have been possible without that special combination of the artworld and official culture in the capital condoning the Third Reich as spectacle to be consumed.

Huyssens argues that quote “the radioactive waste of undesirable German history was offloaded onto the de facto memory district in Berlin, leaving the rest of the city unburdened to considerations of the past embedded in its structures and voids.” Unquote. The bunkers, left out of the circumscribed memory district, were thus

freed to take on new lives, unburdened from ethical concerns regarding their historical provenance.

I would also argue that Berlin and these collectors share similar techniques of mystification in their branding strategies. In Colomb's book chapter titled "History Sells: The Staging of Difficult Pasts," she describes how Berlin used innovative staging to reframe controversial development projects – a strategy she calls "festivalization." [SLIDES] Construction sites are usually hidden from view behind fences, but in Berlin, they were instead opened up and turned into entertaining showcases for the public. People were invited to witness the technical power and ingenuity at work. By fetishizing the architectural and material aspects of construction, they deflected attention away from the political and economic issues underpinning the development projects. The branding spectacles masked the lack of regulatory power of the local state over private capital. Quote: "Investors and developers created these spectacles so that the site would not be experienced as a space of domination and power, but instead would arouse curiosity and a sense of play." And of course, Boros and Feuerle wouldn't have been able to purchase bunkers at such a low cost without the privatization of government land.

In conclusion, I maintain that these sites should have been considered differently. There are obviously too many bunkers to turn them all into memorials to the victims of National Socialism. That's not my point. But these sites should also not be glamorized uncritically. The bunker of the 9 November is a poignant counter example, as is the Topographie des Terrors and the Denkort Bunker Valentin, which opened in Bremen in 2015. [SLIDES] The exhibition at this Denkort aims to deconstruct the myth about the Nazi submarine miracle weapon, while encouraging visitors to critically reflect upon the history of forced labor at the construction site. A slideshow showing photographs of the slave laborers who worked and died at the site personalizes and commemorates their lives. The Bunker Valentin also houses a memorial for the survivors and their family members.

There is no attempt at any of these counter-sites to create an immersive, "lived" experience [Erlebnis] – which, unfortunately, more and more historical sites and museums are pursuing in order to stay economically competitive in the tourist market. The curators at the Bunker Valentin cannot deny that some visitors still experience awe over its size and Nazi past – but the historical exhibition makes every effort to engage visitors in a dialogue about the bunker's complicated history and mythology. It's crucial that a rupture takes place, a critical distance created, between the Nazi past and the bunker's present. [SLIDES] I would argue that the Boros and Feuerle, despite the high design interventions, deliberately collapse the temporal divide – inviting Nazi mythology and the affective experience of fascinating fascism to enervate and glamorize their art collections in the present. They want to channel as much residual imagination, desire, and fantasy as the Nazi stage set will offer. Visitors remain completely blind to the inhuman conditions and loss of life of the slave laborers that built the Boros, and very likely built the Feuerle. The contemporary art spectacle silences these victims inscrutably. Normalizing a

military building, built by slave labor, on the site of Aryanized Jewish businesses, is a definitive statement asserting history as a mutable commodity. In these monumental spaces, new capitalist kings are crowned.

Aestheticization and packaging reveals the proximity of monumental memory and monumental forgetting. We need to constantly deconstruct, demystify and debunk such counter-histories, just as we need to be vigilant against the rewriting of history through “alternative facts.” For both practices are the pernicious afterlife of the fascist legacy currently manifest in the resurgent populist nationalisms threatening our streets and civil society.

Thank you.