Aesthetic Practices of the New Right –

Fake and Post-Truth

as a challenge

for transgressive art

and cultural practices

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New concepts of authoritarian (affective) populisms and right-wing extremisms challenge democratic politics within their strategic critiques of so called multiculturalism, modern cosmopolitanism and democratic liberalism; hence the politics of the New Right use aesthetic practices in an attempt to resonate within subcultures but also to reach the cultural mainstream and broader publics (see digital culture wars). The fusion of right-wing (post-truth) politics, subversive tactics and popular cultures is already in progress. Therefore the essay analyses on

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the one hand non-conforming and transgressive aesthetics within the context of New Right movements active in Europe (example: the Identitarians) and traces their histories (example: Casa Pound). On the other hand it discusses artistic positions that employ methods like subversive affirmation and over-iden-tification and analyses more thoroughly the Viennese feminist group Burschenschaft Hysteria. Considering the popular and/or transgressive aesthetic practices of the New Right (and the Alt-Right) we can critically review artistic and cultural practices, which use appropriation, mimicking, fakes and over-identifica-tion as methods to distort sociopolitical phenomena. What are the current (political) possibilities of mimetic and transgressive art/cultural practices? In what extend those art/cultural practices can advance their cause of complexity and ambivalence so as to go beyond simplistic relativism, post-ironic confinements and nihilistic reactionary trends?

Ästhetische Praktiken der Neuen Rechten. Fake und Postfakti-zität als Herausforderung für transgressive Kunst- und Kultur-praktiken – Neue Konzepte autoritärer (affektiver) Populismen und Rechtsextremismen fordern die demokratische Politik her-aus, in dem sie den sogenannten Multikulturalismus, den mo-dernen Kosmopolitismus sowie den demokratischen Liberalis-mus strategisch kritisieren. Daher verwendet die Politik der Neuen Rechten ästhetische Praktiken, um innerhalb der Sub-kulturen Resonanz zu finden, aber auch um den kulturellen Mainstream respektiv eine breitere Öffentlichkeit zu erreichen (siehe digitale Kulturkriege). Die Verschmelzung von der Politik der Postfaktizität, subversiver Taktiken und Populärkulturen ist bereits im Gange. Der Aufsatz analysiert einerseits die non-konforme und transgressive Ästhetik der Neuen-Rechte-Bewe-gungen im Europa (Beispiel: die Identitäre) und zeichnet ihre Geschichte und Vorläufer nach (Beispiel: Casa Pound). Auf der anderen Seite werden künstlerische Positionen diskutiert, die Methoden wie Fake, subversive Affirmation und Überidentifizie-rung anwenden, und insbesondere die Wiener feministische gruppe Burschenschaft Hysteria in den Fokus gestellt. In Anbe-tracht der populären und/oder transgressiven ästhetischen Praktiken der Neuen Rechten (und der Alt-Right) werden jene künstlerische Praktiken kritisch beleuchtet, die Aneignung, Fäl-

schung und Überidentifizierung als Methoden verwenden, um gesellschaftspolitische Phänomene im Anspruch zu nehmen. Welche sind die aktuellen (politischen) Möglichkeiten mimetischer und transgressiver Kunst- und Kulturpraktiken? Inwiefern können diese Kunst- und Kulturpraktiken ihren Anspruch auf Komplexitätserhöhung und Ambivalenz vorantreiben, dass sie über simplen Relativismus, post-ironische Beschränkungen und nihilistische reaktionäre Trends hinausgehen?

CHORUS: *Telling lies, telling lies Telling lies, telling lies Telling lies [Ooh, ah, visionary] [Ooh, ah, missionary] Telling lies [Feels like something's gonna happen this year] Telling lies [Ooh, ah, visionary] [Ooh, ah, missionary] Telling lies [Feels like something's gonna happen this year] Telling lies …*

David Bowie

1. Introduction

The lyrics out of David Bowie's album *Earth Healing* (1977) praise lies. Although in a completely different context about 40 years ago Bowie's song "Telling Lies" honours untruth, falsehood and bluffing as a visionary and missionary practice. Nowadays constructing lies or more explicitly deception, falsehood, and mockery are acts, that have the power to transgress, that means to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or convention. If we consider transgression as a reflexive *act of denial and affirmation*, then to transgress is to "announce and even laudate the commandment, the law or the convention" (Jenks 2003: 2). Now constructing lies and mockeries could be considered as transgressive (or even subversive) acts, since these deceptive practices manifestly appear across variant sociopolitical and cultural spaces. That said, this essay considers the acts of faking and mocking to make sense only situation specific as it seeks to highlight the distinctions but also the inclinations of trans-

gression both as part of the cultural practices of the New Right and as critical methods in contemporary art and cultural practices.

To bring this into a context: the present state of post-modernity along with the political, economic and technological changes brings us to consider different concepts of truth and factuality. Indeed the notion of truth itself and the standards of the episteme have been challenged throughout the philosophical thought from Aristotle to Foucault. While what is at stake here is the way in which politics authorises truth. What does it mean to 'construct truth' or deny facts in the political public realm? Admittedly, speculative rhetoric, distraction maneuvers and the concealment of specific information have always been components of liberal politics as *the art of persuasion*, while politicians attempt to appear truthful. The art of persuasion underlines the assumption that liberal and/or democratic politics are based on agonistic interests and truthful arguments within a so-called rational public discourse (Habermas 1962, Arendt 1981 and 2005). At the same time, being able to persuade in real politics underscores the phenomenon of using rhetoric schemata when speaking truthfully to – or in the name of – the people.[1] Hence in its elaborated form the appearance of truthful points of view is part of right-wing populism (Pfahl-Traughber 1994, Mudde 2007, Wodak 2014), which advocates conservative and/or authoritarian concepts in the name of the people. Finally, a lack of truthfullness is part of the political speech in totalitarian regimes: classical propaganda (or mass manipulation) is based upon the shifting of discourses through generalizations, affective arguments and obvious false statements (Arendt 1951, Kracauer 1931/1963, Rosenberg 1934). Nowadays there is a slight shift from the old-school propaganda and speculative right-wing rhetoric to a contemporary art of lying, which attempts to obtain more space in the political realm and in the media. Considering post-truth phenomena such as fake news, alternative facts, social bots and hoaxes, it looks

like that seemingly infinite number of alternative realities or narratives can co-exist and antagonize over ontological certainties.

Nowadays objective is *not* to establish an alternative theory of truth in response to truthiness and "identitarian politics"[2], but rather to analyze the current post-factual techniques, their perception and their political function and tackle their ideological precursors. Taking this consideration as a starting point, my attempt is to study the aesthetic practices of New Right movements from a semiotic analysis perspective. These practices can be also examined through the lens of artistic methods focused on two particular aspects: the aesthetics of fake, mimicry and truthiness as such and the genealogy of practices endorsing transgression and ambivalence for subverting the status quo. The first aspect refers to reactionary aesthetics and the counter-cultural strategies of the New Right and the second one relates to art and cultural practices of ambivalence, fake and subversive affirmation. To this extend, art practices (historical avant-gardes and contemporary art practices) can be used as a compass for understanding the notions of fake and truthiness in the present political realm. Nevertheless, post-truth as an international media trend, as form of ideological supremacy (McIntryre, 2018) and as political tool of the alt-right poses a challenge for the already established aesthetics of appropriation, mimicking, subversive affirmation and over-identification within the cultural field (see i. e. *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, *Reverend Billy*, *The Peng Collective*, *Front Deutscher Äpfel*, *Burschenschaft Hysteria*, *Metahaven*). Taking these into account, this essay seeks to grasp the bigger picture of polysemic transgression, neo-reactionism, and cultural appropriation – the latter means the polished adaptation of culture jamming and leftist subversion tactics by the New Right and the alt-rights. Most notably, in the first part of the essay, I will discuss transgressive and in some extend popular aesthetic practices of the CasaPound organization and the Identitarians, both seen as precursors of the European New Right movements. In

the second part I will draw attention on art practices, which favour mockery, subversive affirmation and over-identification willing to comment, sabotage or simply distract sociopolitical phenomena. In that sense my interest lies in contemporary aesthetic practices, which deal with popular cultures, anti-establishment critique and reactionary politics – in other words, those subversive practices that can be still relevant to the post-modern and leftist critiques of our times. A fruitful case study in this regard would be the Viennese group *Burschenschaft Hysteria*, which engages in feminist politics and anti-fascism.

2.   Truthful concepts today

What does it mean to be or appear truthful in a post-modernist society? And how do post-fact practices influence the political realm? The tactic of constructing lies, spreading disinformation or the denial of facts seem to gain more space within public spheres since the so-called age of post-truth politics turned up (Davies 2016, McIntyre 2018). In that sense, truthiness (the appearance of particular truths) becomes a crucial element in the metapolitics of the New Right and so-called the alt-right.[3] To be more specific, the term metapolitics denotes the efforts of far-right and reactionary positions to take intellectual control of public debates by shoving up a political agenda that strives towards a conservative cultural revolution.[4] New Right's metapolitics based on post-truth techniques challenge both liberal democratic politics and its core principle, which is the validation of conflicted interests and truthful arguments within the public realm – at least as this has been understood since the eighteenth century –, and democratic politics *per se*. Notably, truthiness indicates also a possible transformation of the current *truth regime* (Harsin 2015, Bratich 2004) or at least a shift in the interpretation of (political) events, since the post-truth media phenomenon (fake news, Trump elections)[5] went viral. Whether we found ourselves within the so-

called post-truth era or we are just witnessing the continuation of right wing political propaganda and the proliferation of affective populisms, the phenomenon of truthiness urges to consider the notions of fake and transgression more thoroughly.

The New Right in Europe and the alt-right in the US use various strategies in an attempt to resonate within subcultures but also to reach the cultural mainstream and broader networked publics. Nowadays we can argue that a neo-reactionary consciousness is spread in social media and nerd cultures.[6] Popular aesthetics and subversive tactics are established within alt-right nerd cultures (i. e. community forums like *4chan*, *reddit* and *The Red Pill*) and connect to the neo-reactionary culture-jammers before the Millennium such NRx. Yet the continuity of non-conforming, reactionary transgressive aesthetics reveals the bonds not only between alt-rights (i. e. Cuckservatives, Gavin McInnes, Milo Yiannopoulos), the Manosphere and its edge lords (Mike Cernovich, Roosh V, Paul Elam, the MGTOW on-line community et. al.)[7] but also their proximity to the subversive cultural strategies of far right and neo-fascist movements.[8] The common ground of those alt-right figures is the imagery of white identity politics, reactionary ideology and anti-feminist rhetoric, which spreads out through counter-narratives, fake news, conspiracy theories and the promotion of misogyny. Another example, which points out the current attempts to popularize reactionary ideology within the European context, is the media strategies used by the Identitarian movement. Because of the updated media tactics of the New Right (and alt-right), their focus on metapolitics and the proliferation of digital social hubs for public destruction, it is crucial to re-evaluate the aesthetics of subversion and transgression within the cultural field as well as to work on art and theoretical practices that engage anti-fascism (i. e. Traverso 2017, Teixeira Pinto 2017, Dimitrakaki and Weeks 2019). Going back to Bowies' speculation on lying as a visionary practice, I would propose to retrace the aesthetics of fake, subversion and

transgression and think of their political impact nowadays. As I will argue in the following lines, it's because of the overlapping of tactics (fake, subversion, transgression) between reactionary political agents and progressive cultural agents that we need to reconsider the complexity of those tactics next to the affective responses and internalized manifestations they bring up – or at least discuss their political impact within different contexts.

3. Aesthetic Strategies of the New Right in Europe

Johny Depp's figure in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the portrait of Che Guevara and the Eurovision winner 2014 Conchita Wurst appear on different advertising posters of *Casa Pound*, the Italian neo-fascist movement/organization. On *Zentropa's*[9] digital amalgam outlaw figures such as Charles Bronson, Corto Maltese and Captain Harlock, are pasted next to quotes by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Jack Kerouac, Friedrich Nietzsche and Ezra Pound. These are a few striking examples of semiotics appearing in reactionary digital media. New Right movements work diligently on their image strategies in order to gain legitimacy and broader acceptance despite the political extremism of their sentiments. *Casa Pound* in Italy, the Identitarians, the think tank *GRECE* in France and the *Zentropa* network use non-conform media strategies such as rhetorical construction and semantic confusion, mimicry, and insinuation as they seek to distort political conventions and reach wider publics. Mimicry and insinuation serve the purpose of being able to express edgy political content in public, thus camouflaging certain ideological positions – or at least avoiding some political statements that could possibly be sanctioned in court. For example the Identitarians use an elaborated verbal language for tampering structural racism into the mainstream (dt. salonfähig). When referring to refugees/migrants they make use of the term "Remigration" instead of deportation (dt. Abschiebung).[10] Another

popular right-wing strategy for introducing reactionary content into youth cultures is to create a *semiotic confusion* by appropriating specific images as well as ideas from various political fields (i. e. left wing or leftist autonomous movements). One example of a typical mimicry of an ideological content is the appropriation of anti-capitalist and workerism slogans, as happened in the case of an identitarian group in Bochum. By cause of the jobs cuts at the auto industry Opel in Ruhrgebiet (2013) an identitarian group created a video entitled "identitarian solidarity with the workers of Bochum". The Identitarians in Bochum seemed to offer support to the local workers (in fact through a tactical media appropriation of leftist attributes) while attempting to introduce a far nationalist agenda and gain respect among the workers (Bruns, Glösel, and Strobl 2014: 189–190).

Appropriation is another cultural strategy of the New Right, which involves reversal and the blurring of boundaries. On net platforms (mostly tumblr blogs) associated to the New Right images of Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Antonio Gramsci and Dalai Lama appear next to right wing authors like Ernst Jünger, Julius Evola and Dominique Venner but also next to images of Tintin, the Starship Troopers and the avatar figure from James Cameron's film *Avatar*. The tactical appropriation of discourse and semiotics from different fields, in other words this mixture of well-known right- and left-wing intellectuals with non-conform fictional characters and popular narratives, is typical for youngest reactionary groups. New Right visuals often contain traditionalist or ancient signs, in some cases mixed with a neo-baroque style (i. e. images emphasizing emotions, movement and drama, religious imagery, ornaments) and *völkisch* elements. Elsewhere their visuals appropriate popular aesthetics inspired by comics, films and novels. Through this semiotic amalgam New Right groups attempt to increase ambivalence and degeneracy, despite the visibility of racist, misogynist and/or antisemitic content.

But is the tactic of appropriation of visual codes and symbols of dif-ferent milieus actually a young one?

The appropriation of subversive tricks among right wing stakeholders is considered a common practice that has already called leftist *sub-version*, as the critical capacity to act against the political status quo, into question. In other words, leftist subversion as an act to challenge the status quo has been appropriated and extensively used by right wing or authoritarian groups (Diederichsen 1999, Ernst, Cantó, Richter, Sennewald et. al. 2015, Weiss 2017). Already in the 50s stu-dents of Armin Mohler[11] in Tübingen created the group "Konservative Front" and launched alternative guerilla actions. Initiated by Marcel and Robert Hepp (meanwhile both well-known figures of the New Right in Germany) the group organized flash-mobs, go-ins and other interventions for disturbing seminars and gatherings of the Left at the university of Tübingen.[12] Along with other reactionary actors Hepp brothers conceived several actions in order to hamper the reflection and evaluation of the Nazi history in the university.[13] The strategy of appropriation, mimicry and guerilla-action as these have been used by far right-wing groups is not a young phenomenon. Nowadays, what is worth looking at more thoroughly concerns the transformation of these strategies and the updated aesthetics of neo-reactionary politics. In these sense, we will find overlapping dimensions of the aesthetic and the political in the revival of the fascistic doctrine and the identitarian concept of restoration and re-conquest (of Europe). Interestingly, however, the neo-reactionary semiotics promote regres-sive concepts as vanguard to appeal to youth subcultures. Two case examples, *Casa Pound* and the Identitarian movement, state most suitable the overlapping of visual language, ideology and lifestyle, es-pecially in regard to political and aesthetic transgression.

4. The Cult of Fascism: Casa Pound

Casa Pound, founded in 2003 in the wake of a squat in the Esquilino district in Rome, is a multi-facial organization, which describes itself as "Fascists of the 3rd Millennium". *Casa Pound* don't use fake in a classical sense but rather a tactic of (selective) mimicry and appropriation of left-wing strategies. A synthesis of signs, symbols and quotes mostly by far right but also left wing milieus creates its visual identity. *Casa Pound* aims to spread the fascist doctrine and the cult of nation in an unconventional way therefore it acquires subversive techniques in such a way that specific semantics can infiltrate the cultural mainstream. *Casa Pound's* cultural activity takes place in youth centres, student organizations and sports clubs, but also in the arts. Notably, the associated theatre ensemble *Teatro non Conforme: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti* is inspired by the work of Marinetti and Vladimir Mayakovsky. By quoting Marinetti as a highly ambivalent avant-garde figure, *Casa Pound* already reveals its ambition: to praise reactionary ideology as avant-garde legacy and utopian vision. Following the futuristic ideals *Artisti per Casa Pound* plead in favour of the fusion of art and life.[14] *Casa Pound's* visual propaganda combines vitalistic signs, neo-avant-garde and reactionary imagery with slogans that criticize modernity, capitalism and globalization.[15] *Casa Pound's* visual arsenal disclose different cultural semiotics as featured in the following examples:

1. *Casa Pound* uses the image of Barbanera (Blackbeard) on a poster for pre-announcing the inauguration of a new "space for non-conformism". The legendary Barbanera, whose character appears in cinema, literature and other forms of fiction, was a British pirate (born Edward Teach in Bristol) in the Caribbean Sea between 1716 and 1718. Blackbeard's character as the typical cruel pirate became popular through the action movie *Blackbeard, The Pirate* (1952) featuring Robert Newton

as Barbanera. The Blackbeard also appears as the main an-tagonist in the films *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (2011) and *Pan – Journey to the Non-existent Island* (2015), but also in the Disney film *Blackbeard's Ghost* (1968) and the video game *Assassin's Creed IV, Black Flag* (2013). Barbanera's footprint in the collective imagination is the one of a vicious pirate, who staged an infernal atmosphere around his ship (by using fire and sulfur to create smokes) for exerci-sizing 'psychological terror' on his enemy. For *Casa Pound* Barbanera renders a symbolic figure for the fearless, brave man who is ready for cruel actions, so his figure serves as an inspiration for its members.

2. The word "Cinem-Azione" appears in capital black letters on a poster depicting the protagonist of the biographical drama *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985). The film narrates the life of Yukio Mishima, a post-war writer in Japan who stands for militarism, traditionalism and masculinity. The movie high-lights Mishima's story, who becomes a single fighter (accom-panied by his loyal followers) for reinstating the emperor as the head of state at the time of Japan's modernization. But Mishima fails his goal and commits suicide. Once again *Casa Pound* praises the prototype-figure of the male fighter, who in this case combats modernity and the status quo, and he is even ready to sacrifice himself for a high purpose (read Na-tion, Autocracy, Tradition).

3. The last graphical image I want to highlight is one with *Casa Pound's* emblem pasted on the rainbow colours, which stand for peace and LGBTQI+ rights. *Casa Pound's* emblem "la tar-taruga" is a turtle motive in octagram form. *Casa Pound's* Tar-taruga-logo appears in almost every image produced by the organization. Tartaruga (Latin: tartarucchus) was the term for

the battle formation of the Roman legionaries and according to Plutarch it stands for the power of God.[16] Besides the turtle motive is inspired by Gabriele Adinolfi's book *Tortuga, l'isola que non c'è* (The Turtle, An island that does not exist). Adinolfi, a former member of the right-wing terrorist group *Terza Posizione*, based his book on "Neverland", the island of Peter Pan in J. M. Barrie's novel. Regarding the specific image analyzed here, one can assume that *Casa Pound's* image-creator pasted Tartaruga on the rainbow flag so as to misappropriate it and take the rainbow away from its emancipative tradition. Whereas another assumption is, that the appropriation of the rainbow colours serves to construct an image of a modest tolerant and alleged open-minded organization.

All three images (and other similar ones) justify the fascist profile of *Casa Pound*. We can clearly observe an iconography of national or authoritarian sovereignty inspired for example by the antique Rome (as a mighty empire), or Sparta as the exclusionary oligarchy of the superiors. At the same time, popular figures such as Barbanera and Corto Maltese but also prophetic novels like 1984 by George Orwel are placed next to portraits of Julius Evola, Dominique Venner and albums by the extremist hard rock band *ZetaZeroAlfa* (*Casa Pound's* official band). Within the aforesaid context we also encounter leftist figures like Bettino Craxi (former leader of the Italian Socialist Party) and Che Guevara. This fusion of right and left wing pioneers is not only an optical one. Far right stakeholders look(ed) very thoroughly upon their leftist/revolutionary adversaries. Nevertheless *Casa Pound's* appropriation of leftist discourse and aesthetics seeks to create an ambivalent visual identity, which oscillates between antithetic fields.

5. The Identitarian Movement

Inspired by *Casa Pound*, although with different aesthetics, the Identitarians promote reactionary views and launch themselves as the defenders of Europe. The symbol of the Identitarian movement is the Greek letter Lambda, which commemorates the Battle of Thermopylae.[17] Their ideological background is committed – among other reactionary views – to the tradition of the Conservative Revolution. The Identitarians began as a youth movement in France named *Génération Identitaire* (2012). Later on Markus Willinger wrote the manifest "Generation Identity: A Declaration of War Against the '68ers" (2013), which is considered the main ideological paper of the movement in the German-speaking countries. The Identitarian movement has strong connections to the most significant think tanks of the New Right in Germany such as the Junge Freiheit, Institut für Staatspolitik, FIRST!, Secession and the Blaue Narzisse. Since 2016 the Identitarians are classified as a far right, white nationalist movement[18] while they advocate cultural racism disguised in concepts such as the so-called "remigration" and "ethnopluralism". One image on an Identitarian blog promotes a clear message in this regard: it depicts high mountains behind a waterfall and contains the slogan "Europeans Unite & Take Back Europe From Traitors Subversives Degenerates and Invaders". What is insinuated through this slogan is the opposition to liberal politics, leftists, LGBTQI and migrants/refugees, which are considered to betray or destroy the old Europe. Another indicative image features the ideological opposition of Identitarians to the concept of modernism. The image (a collage in photoshop) shows well-known contemporary glass-buildings and skyscrapers around the world (i. e. Shanghai, Abu Dhabi, London, New York). The buildings are placed close to each other forming a contemporary metropolis on a landscape in front of the desert. The slogan on the image reads: "Modernism – No tradition, No Identity, No Heritage, No Craft".

This image implies the connection of the late capitalist metropolis to its modernist heritage and highlights the similarities of big scale architecture around the globe. Through this soft, simplistic critique of modernism and capitalism (designated by the image) the identitarians proclaim the return to national identity and tradition.

The Identitarian movement employs symbolic politics in media environments while cultivating affective responses over similar attitudes (for example unstable attitudes concerning xenophobia). Besides Identitarians undertake concrete actions[19], such as the disruption of a *theatre* performance directed by Elfriede Jelinek at the University of Vienna[20] and the mission "Defend Europe" in the Mediterranean (an action to attract media attention in 2017[21]), for feeding their media impact. The main strategy in social media focuses on visual attraction via composed images implying political and cultural messages, which emerge either straight forward or through insinuation. The *Lambda*-symbol is pasted in almost every picture and the word identity is prominent. The images circulating in identitarian blogs and other web platforms show a variety in cultural themes and motives: classical romantic paintings of family and war, male rockers on motorbikes, Asterix with Obelix fighting the Romans, but also black-white photographs of women who cleared away the rubble in the post-war era (the so-called "Trümmerfrauen"). Hence it is crucial to underline that identitarian groups struggle to establish a non-confirming cultural identity through visual aesthetics. For this reason they fancy different styles at the same time: antiquity, romanticism, artistic avant-garde, pop culture and hippsterism. Associated to the Identitarian movement the blog *buendischer-waldgang* furnishes a more sophisticated aesthetic profile. Historical painting, heroic pictures, antique marble statues and the legendary forest travellers (Waldgänger) are placed next to quotes by Nietzsche, Jünger and Dostoyevsky. Wolfgang Ullrich analyzes the popular figure of the "Waldgänger" within this context as follows:

> The forest traveller stands in opposition to the mainstream culture, to the present and the civilization, as well as to the ruling powers such as politics, science and technology. He is the one who turns away and metaphorically retires into the forest, as the "only one", as the elite and vanguard of a new era, (...).[22]

Since the beginning of the Identitarian movement the appearance in social media has been essential to the organisation putting all efforts to gain more attention within the like-and-following economy on the web. In the last couple of years the Identitarians seem to promote a cooler and hippster look. For example Martin Sellner, Alex «Malenki» Kleiner and Melanie Schmitz promote authoritarian ideas as the new "Zeitgeist" while staging themselves as instagram influencers, so their followers get a glimpse of the identitarian lifestyle (fashion, music, sports, books, youth culture etc.). Besides these latest attempts for mainstreaming reactionary content, Sellner is pretty clear when he states their strategy on info-wars: "we will win the emo-war, if we put aside the level of pure facts".[23] The emo-war can be seen as part of culture wars for achieving cultural hegemony from the right.[24] For that we should quote Gramsci's thought on cultural hegemony.

According to Gramsci cultural hegemony as imposed by the ruling class (Bourgeoisie) forms the intellectual and cultural norms of a society. In a *war of positions* the working-class or the proletarians should struggle to oppose the ruling class and create a working-class culture. Conversely, the New Right appropriates Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony in such a way that it serves the attempts of right wing to become a dominant ideology and form the cultural norms of society. In other words, reactionary and authoritarian powers seek to take over the pre-political sphere of culture in order to become hegemonic. Nowadays the tactics of the online (far) right groups are updated to a digital age and the New Right (and alt-right) seeks cultural hegemony through the implementation of transgression, mimicry and similar techniques. Although transgression hasn't been the main

component of right-wing strategies in the previous decades, since "the transgressive irreverent style of the 60s counterculture was everything the right hated in previous culture wars" (Bell 1999, cited in Nagle 2017: 70), it is now used for evoking affective responses to particular symbols towards a "normalisation" of reactionist attitudes.

To conclude the case study of the Identitarians it's important to make one last point: Neo-reactionary groups like the Identitarians perceive themselves as vanguard (intellectual) figures, almost as prophets of a new fascistic era. As they make a strategic and well-calculated use of the media (social media, magazines, newspapers) they strive to promote a specific lifestyle, which can infiltrate mainstream publics with fascist aesthetics. In that sense is once again fascism that pursues the *aesthetics of politics*. Here we can think of the alienation of mankind in fascism and Walter Benjamin's subject matter in the epilogue of his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*: "Its (mankind) self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which fascism is rendering aesthetic"[25]. My point here is to perceive the cultural strategies and the aesthetics of the Identitarians from a double perspective. Namely from the perspective, that recognizes the updates of their image (now promoted as young, unconventional, edgy people or everyday cool hipsters), and from a second one, which locates their foundations in the long tradition of racism and fascism in Europe.

6. Contemporary Art Practices

In subversive affirmation there is always a surplus,
which destabilises affirmation and turns it into its opposite.

Inke Arns, Sylvia Sasse[26]

All art is subject to political manipulation except that
which speaks the language of the same manipulation.

Laibach[27]

What is generally termed reality is,
to be precise, a frothy nothing.

Hugo Ball

Considering the cultural practices of the New Right (and alt-right) in the age of post-truth and disinformation we can critically review artistic practices, which use appropriation, mimicking, fakes and over-identification as methods to distort sociopolitical phenomena. To subvert the status quo through deconstruction has been the core principle of the Avant-garde(s) of the previous century, which was mainly but not explicitly associated with leftist theories. Art and aesthetic practices as means of subversion and political provocation have been present throughout the so-called Western art history: Dadaists, Surrealists and the Russian Avant-garde as well as the Situationists and the Neo-Avant-garde in former Yugoslavia did use methods of creative appropriation (*détournement*, deconstruction, concealment, fake, subversive affirmation) quite efficiently for criticizing and provoking the bourgeois, capitalist and/or totalitarian ideology. In many cases avant-garde artists and cultural producers appropriate, mimic and transform forms, symbols and attitudes of their political adversaries. In that sense Avant-garde-artists developed methods of critique that articulated the urgency to demolish and subvert the ruling society (Schober 2009, Ray 2009, Jenks 2003). In other words, subversion through art and aesthetic practices contained the potential to

counter hegemonic cultures[28] and deconstruct the repression of the capitalist way of living.

In the aftermath of the avant-gardes of 20th century contemporary art practices drew on the previous techniques of fake and subversion as a continuation of social critique and emancipatory acting. Out of this wide spectrum of art practices I choose to focus on over-identification, which is an elaborated version of leftist subversion based on ambivalence and confusion. The tactics of subversive affirmation and over-identification, originated in Eastern European socialist countries in the 1960s and transferred to the West in the 1990s offer a critique of the aesthetic experience (Arns and Sasse 1995) which challenges directly the object that is being criticized. For example the art collective *Neue Slowenische Kunst* over-identifies with the authoritarian regime in former Yugoslavia, the Yes Men imitate the habitus of neoliberal politicians and multinational chiefs as they perform a distorted version of their attitude (i. e. content of speech) at economical conferences and political institutions. Another striking example is Christoph Schliegensiefs theatre happening "Ausländer raus!" that challenged xenophobia and the politics of the far right populist party of Austria (FPÖ) back in 2000. Since many years Reverend Billy's persona as a TV-Evangelist praises with his choir against the goals of multinational companies. Nowadays artist's groups and media activists such as *The Peng Collective*, *Class Wargames*, *Metahaven*, *Laibach*, the *Front Deutscher Äpfel* and *Burschenschaft Hysteria* use appropriation, subversive affirmation and fake in order to interrupt, to provoke and possibly re-value present cultural and sociopolitical phenomena.[29] Artists using over-identification manage so to speak, to set smart traps and create irritation through the inversion of modes of communication whereas the audiences are confronted with identity limits of oneself and of the others.

To be more specific: over-identification as an artistic method relies on mimicry and the *overdoing*. This overdoing of an attitude, of a speech or of certain community rituals causes cognitive distortions, which occur between conscious and unconscious processes (Zizek 1993). The subject of the identification stands at the same time for the object of affirmation and the subverted position. Non the less over-identification as a technique to call the status quo into question includes often the risk of becoming innocuous[30] or even getting neutralized.[31] In some cases over-identification can be mistaken on its intentions as it reproduces specific aesthetics, and artists can be criticized for giving extra visibility to reactionary content. In the worst case scenario over-identification as an actual performance can be misleading and deluding as happened with a reactionary performance by "Julius Evola" during the conference *The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures* held at the Athens School of Fine Arts.[32] Given the risks over-identification always takes while appropriating the master's attitude, it is crucial to think on the balance between the edginess (i. e. of alt-right attitudes) and the potential to disrupt learned dispositions. Several questions occur in this regard: How far fake, appropriation and over-identification as techniques within cultural institutions can go? Which publics are tended to be confused or alienated? And how can we still make use of metaphoric and ambiguous language within a post-truth context?

Artist group *Metahaven* ask whether metaphors are too big to fail, referring to the shifts in (political) language, as the latter is "supercharged through its social media amplifiers"[33]. On the one hand – as *Metahaven* propose by reflecting on the work of linguist/philologist Victor Klemperer – artists, theorists, activists etc. should take into account the constitutive and performative functions of concepts (and words) and question language's relationship to reality. On the other hand, we could argue that getting around the complexities of ambiguity – when the 'same language' is used in certain contents but with

different intentions – has become a complicated task for critical prac-
titioners.

More specifically, over-identification as a technique comes into ques-
tion: Because of the great extent of affirmation of the criticized object
and the reversal of the roles over-identification stands now closer to
the transgressive methods used by the New Right. On both sides the
common goal is to go beyond the bounds of the convention through
fake and mimicry. In my view there should be a way to de-substan-
tialize neo-reactionary and fascist trends, without quitting using am-
bivalence, fakes or over-identification as techniques. For there is al-
ways a crucial point of differentiation – let's call it the *missed point* –
which can be detected (or at least recognized on a second level)
while appropriating and distorting cultural practices of the New Right
(and alt-right). So the goal lies into *the art of making the ambivalence*
to work out. What is at stake is to consider the options for a critical
engagement within contemporary countercultural practices, which
cherish the complexity of ambiguity beyond a simplistic relativism or
post-irony, and at the same time undertake vigorous action against
the existing reactionary practices (see for example the case of the
LD50 gallery in London[34]).

It probably comes as no surprise to state, that over-identification is a
male-dominated space within the art field, meaning that the perfor-
mance of power-male attitudes is predominant. For example *Laibach*,
Front Deutscher Äpfel, *The Yes Men* and *Reverend Billy* are groups
and personas, which over-identify with certain authorities/identities
that embody power and request submission (totalitarian chiefs, CEOs
and neoliberal politicians, priests etc.). Hence, I would like to put an
emphasis on over-identification projects by feminist artists and ac-
tivists like *Burschenschaft Hysteria* (hysteria fraternity) and the
project Aysenur Babuna.[35] These projects reveal not only the political
configurations of identities – cultural, ethnic, ideological, national –

but also the gendered power relations among them. Due to the space limitations of this paper, I will focus on the Viennese feminist movement *Burschenschaft Hysteria* for discussing newest techniques of over-identification.

7. Burschenschaft Hysteria

Hysteria with the symbol of the hyena mimics far right nationalist fraternities in Austria, but instead of the idea of *fraternity* it focuses on *maternity* (both as reversed essentialism and emancipatory act). Hysteria takes over the reactionary tone as well as symbols and rituals used by far right and conservative groups while reproducing their manifestations.[36] Hysteria goes public with performative demonstrations like the comradeship marches (Kameradschaftsmärsche) in the centre of Vienna. Another key tactic of Hysteria is to distort actual far-right gatherings: an ad hoc appearance of Hysteria-members at the annual "Akademikerball" at the Viennese Hofburg in 2017 caused different reactions.[37] The actions of Hysteria constantly provoke the white male dominance pursued by reactionary and far-right political groups in Austria. On the web Hysteria employs a concise language, which is appropriated on purpose and is expressed in an ironic but serious, playful but also provocative way. It uses over-identification in a more up-to-date form combined with gender and post-truth politics.

Hysteria acts both within the cultural field and the so-called contemporary art world. Distinct members of Hysteria like the author Stefanie Sargnagel and visual artist Verena Dengler are established in the art and literature scenes in German speaking countries. The fake pop art artist Tanja Playner from Graz (associated to Hysteria network) is a compelling case of a post-truth phenomenon. Playner is a semi-fictional figure that appears mainly in social media and art-platforms in a post-factual sense.[38] On the artist's website we find the banner:

famous contemporary artist – pop art artist Tanja Playner. Happy Art
for your life - every day and around the world – Art in New York, Art in
Berlin, Art in Vienna, Art in Salzburg, Art in Hongkong, Art in Moscow,
Art in Abu Dhabi, Art in Milan, Art in Cannes, Art in Paris, Art in Mu-
nich, Art in Sydney, Art in London.

Playner seems to have earned visibility through her art works and ap-
pearance at prestigious events: we see her in art openings, giving
presentations, meeting celebrities and everyday people.[39] The media
phenomenon *Pop Art by Tanja Playner* brings a new element in
trolling legacies – so the argument here. Her persona manages to
circulate as a well-considered hoax within the art field. Playner
evokes ambivalence – she is at the same time fake and real, familiar
and unfamiliar. This type of fake-persona relates to transgression as
a practice that reproduces and the same challenges post-truth phe-
nomena. In this sense we can discuss whether the creators of Tanja
Playner can debunk dominant cultural practices and contest truthi-
ness with its own means.

Last but not least, Hysteria challenges pop and popular culture as it
partakes in mainstream cultural events. For example the fictional per-
sona Hyäne Fischer, associated to Hysteria, has been a candidate
with the song *Im Rausch der Zeit* for representing Austria in the Euro-
vision song contest held in Israel 2018. Hyäne Fischer dressed in the
Eva-Braun-style sings about tradition and homeland in a retro-avant-
garde manner in front of an alpine panorama accompanied by her fe-
male friends. Although Fischer was not selected to represent Austria,
her song made a you-tube hit (ca. 308.000 clicks till now). If Fischer
had been selected by the jury a further twist could have been made,
namely: To persuade the jury that a pop music persona like Fischer
(embodying a traditionalist far-right profile) is an appropriate repre-
sentative of Austria would have taken real politics a step further. It
would actually bring the Austrian political authorities to acknowledge
their far-nationalist agenda in public. But what is obvious often be-

comes a political riddle, since far- and centre-right parties in Austria (and elsewhere) have learned to partly cover their fascist ideology within liberal democratic contexts. This is also why over-identification cannot go that far as Hyäne Fischer and the Hysteria movement would love (myself not excluded). Nevertheless the activities of *Burschenschaft Hysteria* open up space for political confrontation in times of ferocious antifeminism and so-called gender-nationalism.[40] In that sense – so the conclusive argument, over-identification can be still a valuable transgressive technique as long as we pay attention to its context and the ways it can be perceived.

8. Staying with the Challenge

As long as fakes, subversive visuals and other non-conforming aesthetic practices circulate within New Right websites and alt-right social hubs – aiming to denunciate the democratic status quo and normalize discriminatory, reactionary and fascist content – there is a challenge posed over the domination of the pre-political space of culture. For the time being it seems that dimly elaborated New Right cultural strategies are heading to disrupt the *status quo* while taking advantage of post-modernist techniques for proclaiming anti-progressive politics and newest conservative revolutions. After all, both the methods of historical right-wing propaganda and the limits of political correctness are being currently tested. For that we are witnessing the on-going attempts within social hubs, media networks and cyber-subcultures to evoke emotional responses, most notably related to constructed enemies, racist doctrines and masculine fantasies.

Although it is possible to detect the trajectories of reactionary practices and fascist aesthetics throughout the previous decades, the current New Right wave brings up new issues. Taking this into account, we eventually need to rethink the aesthetic practices that contain both the institutional consistency of critique and the power to tran-

scend hegemonic discourses through fake, subversive affirmation and transgression. The challenge for critical art and cultural practices in the early 21st century is to avoid post-ironic confinements, simplistic affirmation or nihilistic (reactionary) trends that end up into a superficial reproduction of neo-authoritarian attitudes. Nonetheless a critical balance between the increase of complexity, doubt and ambivalence and the risk to take (political) position is needed for art and cultural practices to be still able to dismantle the existing reactionary practices and far right ideologies.

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Vita

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1   Think of populism as a thin-centered ideology, which juxtaposes liberal democracy (and not democracy per se) and considers society to be mainly separated into two antagonistic camps the "people" and the "elite". (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, Laclau 2005).

2   Identitarian politics favor a particular racial, ethnic, or national group, typically one composed of Europeans or white people. The term identitarian derives from the French right-wing Nouvelle Droite. In contrast to *identity politics* – which is the ability for each identity (sexual, social, cultural, ethnic or other identity) to engage in politics and express its own demands – identitarian politics comprehend the discriminatory and reactionary model among transnational far-right networks.

3   I make use of the designation New Right as an inclusive, descriptive term for far right political groups and parties (from young conservatives to national revolutionists and white supremacists) even so acknowledging the conceptual differences in Germany, France, USA, the United Kingdom and other countries. In some cases the far-right (i. e. Identitarians) welcomes the term New Right, since they can benefit from the differentiation, which place New Right organizations (and their ideological profile) at a "safe distance" to fascism and the old Nazis. Similarly the term *alt-right* is an euphemism for white (male) supremacy, anti-democratic/neo-reactionary movements and far-right subcultures, but at the same time is useful for understanding the accountability of conservatism within the political and cultural mainstream.

4   Cf. Salzborn, Samuel (2019): On the ideology and strategy of the new right, in: Radical Right Analysis, April 17, 2019, online at: https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2019/04/17/on-the-ideology-and-strategy-of-the-new-right/ (last access 01. April 2020).

5   Barthel, Michael and Amy Mitchell, Jesse Holcomb (2016): Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion, in: Pew Research Center, December 15, 2016, online at: https://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/ (last access 01. April 2020).

6   On the transgressive nerd-cultures (especially the alt-right networks), the traditions of conservative net activism and other subversive cultural practices see: Limor Shifman 2014, Andrea Nagle 2017, Geert Lovink and Marc Tuters 2018, Florian Cramer 2013, Mark Terkessidis 1995.

7   Paul Elam is men's rights activist (A Voice for Men) and Roosh V is a writer/blogger known for his alt-right views and misogyny as pickup artist. Michael Cernovich is a political commentator, men's rights activist, anti-feminist, and conspiracy theorist. Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) is an anti-feminist community. On the Manosphere and it's alt-right edge lords see: Andrea Nagle, 2017: 39–40.

8   On the cultural theory of right-wing subversion see: Diedrich Diederichsen 1999, Andreas Speit 2002, Regina Wamper, Helmut Kellershohn and Martin Dietzsch 2010, Sofia Bempeza 2017.

9   Zentropa is a reactionary digital network active in Europe. Cf. Bempeza 2017: 69–70.

10 Cf. Goetz 2017: 106–107.

11 Armin Mohler was a Swiss-born far right political writer and philosopher associated with the movement "Neue Rechte".

12 Robert Hepp, former member of the right extremist group „Schutzbund für das Deutsche Volk", is the author of the book *Die Endlösung der deutschen Frage* (1988) advocating historical revisionism and other far right views. Marcel Hepp is co-publisher of the CSU newspaper Bayernkurier. Cf. Weiss 2017: 125–127.

13 The *Konservative Front* founded a fake German-Israel student's group for irritating the class audiences when the history of Holocaust has been discussed in the university. Cf. Weiss 2017: 125.

14 The neo-futuristic artist group *Artisti per Casa Pound* conceives its actions as a tool for social change. Cf. Bempeza 2017: 72–73.

15 The neo-reactionary movements of our times challenge fundamental theories and traditions such as the Enlightenment, Modernism but also Globalization as a western purchase achieved mainly through universalism and colonialism. Cf. Yuk Hui, 2017. "On the unhappy consciousness of neo-reactionaries", e-flux Journal #81, April 2017. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/125815/on-the-unhappy-consciousness-of-neoreactionaries/

16 Cf. Koch 2013: 29.

17 The Battle of Thermopylae, is used within far right contexts to accentuate the heroic battle of Greece against Persia (read the "barbaric East"). The battle has been also commemorated by the Golden Dawn Party, which staged fascist rituals in front of the monument in Thermopylae.

18 In 2016 the *German Federal Office for Protection of the Constitution* classified the Identitarian movement as an extreme-right organization.

19 Public actions include flash mobs, temporary building occupations, event disruptions, placing banner interventions etc. Cf. Judith Goetz, 2017: 96.

20 An Identitarian group violenty disrupted Jelinek's theater piece, which staged migrant and refugees as actors. See: (n. A.) Rechtsextreme stürmen Jelinek-Aufführung in Wien, in: Zeit Online, April 15, 2016, online at: https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2016-04/identitaere-bewegung-wien-theater-elfriede-jelinek-die-schutzbefohlenen (last access 01. April 2020).

21 Walsh, Alistair (2017): Defend Europe, Identitarians charter a ship to return migrants to Africa, in: Deutsche Welle, July 15, 2017, online at: https://www.dw.com/en/defend-europe-identitarians-charter-a-ship-to-return-migrants-to-africa/a-39702947 (last access 01. April 2020).

22 Quote translated by the author. Ullrich, Wolfgang (2017): Die Wiederkehr der Schönheit. Über einige unangenehme Begegnungen, in: Pop Zeitschrift, November 11, 2017, online at: http://www.pop-zeitschrift.de/2017/11/07/die-wiederkehr-der-schoenheit-ueber-einige-unangenehme-begegnungenvon-wolfgang-ullrich07-11-2017/ (last access: 01. April 2020).

23 Quoted in: Re:Publika Panel 6.5.2019,"The Kids are Alt-Right. Wie die Neue Rechte Influencer erschafft und nutzt." with Patrick Stegemann and Sören Musyal. Quote translation, the author (SB).

24 On the cultural wars between left and right see Trent Schroyer 1973, Andrew Hartman 2015, et. al.

25 Benjamin, Walter (1935): Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Repro-duzierbarkeit, in: Gesammelte Schriften (1980), 469.

26 Arns, Inke and Sylvia Sasse (1996): Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strat-egy of Resistance, in: East Art Map, Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe, edited by IRWIN, London/Ljubljana: MIT Press.

27 Quote by Laibach in the film "Predictions of Fire" (1996).

28 Here we can think a recent example of certain trolls and memes in the Greek me-dia sphere, which employ the method of subversive affirmation for transgressing the limits of hegemonic identities. Cf. Mylonas, Yiannis and Kompatsiaris Panos (2019): Trolling as transgression: Subversive affirmations against neoliberal auster-ity, in: International Journal of Cultural Studies, Special Issue Transgression: 1–22.

29 See i. e. the projects: *Metahaven: Uncorporate Identity* (2010) and *The Sprawl – Propaganda about Propaganda* (2015), *Laibach in North Korea* (2015), *Front Deutscher Äpfel: Deutsch-O-Mat* (2016), *The Peng Collective: Deutschland geht klauen* (2018), *Class Wargames: Commands & Colors – Napoleonics*.

30 Attempts like the curatorial concept of 9th Berlin Biennale or the project New Eelam embrace a full-on appropriation of corporate capitalism and creative markets.

31 Cf. Nadège (2017): Feminist Autonomous Infrastructure in the Internet Battlefield: From Zombies to Ninjas, in: Gender it, February 22, 2017, online at: https://www.genderit.org/articles/feminist-autonomous-infrastructure-internet-battlefield-zom-bies-ninjas (last access: 01. April 2020).

32 Controversial writer DC Miller was assigned anonymous behind the performance "Julius Evola in Athens" at the ASFA BBQ 2018, The Garden of Dystopian Plea-sures, curated by FYTA and The Ministry of Post-Truth, online at: https://fytafytafy-ta.wixsite.com/dystopianpleasures/evola

33 Metahaven (2019): Sleep Walks the Street, Part 1, in: e-flux Journal #103, October 2019, online at: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/103/286824/sleep-walks-the-street-part-1/ (last access: 01. April 2020).

34 Teixeira Pinto, Ana (2017): Artwashing – Nrx und „Alt-right", in: Texte zur Kunst, July 4, 2017, online at: https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/artwashing-web-de/?highlig ; Ellis-Petersen, Hannah (2017): Art gallery criticised over neo-Nazi artwork and hosting racist speakers, in: Guardian, February 22, 2017, online at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/feb/22/art-gallery-criticised-over-neo-nazi-art-work-and-hosting-racist-speakers (last access: 01. April 2020).

35 Aysenur Babuna is a feminist entrepreneur and Islamic activist, who is active be-tween Germany, Greece and Turkey. Her work is focused on different intercultural and interreligious projects and is part of an unidentified Islamic Sisterhood. "Ay-senur embodies a queered bimbo with a positivist quasi-critical discourse of flawed political correctness. Unintentionally queer and sexualized, superficially naive and Orientalist, Aysenur Babuna functions as a subversive agent against intellectualism and the art world' s voyeuristic quest for dogmatic radicality and lust for ultimate subjects of antithetic history." Quote by the artist Persefoni Myrtsou on her project (unpublished interview with the author).

36 Burschenschaft Hysteria, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcuMW4YC2vA

37 https://www.vice.com/de_at/article/paqnvg/die-burschenschaft-hysteria-ubernimmt-den-akademikerball-schon-wieder

38 Playner's Biography (since 2013) on artnet: http://www.artnet.com/artists/tanja-playner/biography

39 http://www.pop-art-tanja-playner-art.com/index.html

40 See the social media trend #WomenAgainstFeminism. On gender-nationalism see: Janine Dahinden, Carolin Fischer, Joanna Menet, Anne Kristol (2018): What is Gender-Nationalism? online at: https://www.gendercampus.ch/en/blog/post/gender-nationalism-as-a-new-expression-of-political-nationalism/ (last access: 01. April 2020).