

The Art of Confronting Evil

Germany's Center for Political Beauty.

BY LINDA MANNHEIM



BJÖRN HÖCKE, A LEADER OF GERMANY'S FAR-RIGHT PARTY ALTERNATIVE für Deutschland, or AfD, didn't know who his new next-door neighbors were when they arrived in the rural village of Bornhagen in 2017. Höcke had had a busy year. At a rally in Dresden that January, he had claimed that Berlin's Holocaust Memorial was "a monument of shame in the heart of [the] capital." Germany spent too much time remembering and atoning for its Nazi past, he told his followers, and had to make a "180-degree turn" away from doing this.

Politicians and newspapers across the country condemned Höcke's remarks. He was in the news and had people talking about a relatively small rally. It was the response, some would say, that he wanted. Back in Bornhagen, however, Höcke retreated from public life. He told people it was his "refuge."

Then the new neighbors took down the large tent they had erected on their land, and Höcke discovered what had been underneath it: a replica of Berlin's Holocaust Memorial, complete with scaled-down versions of the coffin-like slabs commemorating the murdered Jews of Europe.

Höcke's new neighbors were members of the Center for Political Beauty, a Berlin-based art collective known for its audacious and confrontational work. The CPB had leased the property next to Höcke's home and built the replica, using money raised through crowdfunding. Soon reporters arrived, and news about what had happened in the village of 309 people spread around the world.

Founded in 2009, the CPB creates performances and exhibits that are reported on and discussed in almost every German media outlet as well as internationally in *Al Jazeera*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *Haaretz*, *Hürriyet*, *Le Monde*, and Reuters—to name just a few. Its work is part of a tradition of politically engaged

"action art" that involves the audiences. But it is rare for the work of an arts collective to be this visible, to gain this much attention from both non-arts audiences and arts publications such as *Art Net*, *Widewalls*, and *Artforum*.

"With spectacular actions, the group works to bring art out of its symbolic comfort zone and harness it directly to left-wing progressive causes," noted *Frieze* in 2016. The CPB's "large-scale productions... pit society, politics, and the media

against each other, without a permanent stage or ensemble," explained *Der Spiegel* in 2015. "Breaking taboos and crossing borders are the CPB's trademarks," asserted *Stern* that same year.

In 2014, the CPB launched a website that invited Germans to provide temporary homes for Syrian children seeking asylum. Kindertransporthilfe des Bundes evoked the 1938 Kindertransport that helped 10,000 children escape from Nazi-occupied Europe to foster homes in the United Kingdom. The program the CPB was promoting didn't exist. Syrian children, aware they were involved in a theater piece, helped make videos appealing to potential foster families in Germany. The 800 German families who volunteered to care for unaccompanied child asylum seekers phoned a hotline staffed by actors. But the piece attracted widespread attention, raising awareness of why Syrians were fleeing their country and demonstrating that many Germans were eager to welcome asylum seekers. When the volunteers found out the purpose of the fictional campaign, 70 percent became sustaining members of the CPB. I found this piece particularly moving; my father was one of the

children who escaped from Germany on the Kindertransport.

Just after Germany's elections in September 2021, the CPB revealed it had persuaded the Alternative für Deutschland to hire it to distribute its flyers by setting up a simple website and renting office space for Flyerservice Hahn—a fictional logistics service. It offered the AfD an excellent deal and, week after week, the party gave its campaign literature to Flyerservice Hahn to be distributed. The CPB, of course, did not distribute the flyers. You can view videos that the CPB has posted of AfD flyers being fed into shredders and see photos it has tweeted of people lying in waste bins filled with pro-AfD literature. When the AfD threatened it with legal action, the CPB crowdfunded legal support and exceeded its target of 100,000 euros within days. Then, on January 13, the apartments of CPB members in Berlin were searched under Section 269 of the Criminal Code—suspicion of falsifying evidence-relevant data. The CPB is not being investigated for fraud, however, because it never billed the AfD.

THE CPB WAS FOUNDED BY Philipp Ruch. Born in Dresden in 1981 to an East German mother and a Swiss father, Ruch was 8 years old when his family got permission to leave the GDR—about four months before the Wall fell. Ruch's psychologist parents settled in Switzerland, where he grew up and eventually attended business school before working for a film promotion company. He wanted to write film scripts and thought he could find a quiet place to do so back in Germany. But when Ruch returned there, he said, he felt "profound alienation." He began

Art is his weapon: CPB founder Philipp Ruch, who switched from studying political theory to practicing cultural guerrilla warfare.



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The CPB "works to bring art out of its symbolic comfort zone and harness it directly to left-wing progressive causes."

—Frieze

Pillar of Shame:

This CPB project, which includes 200 shoes taken from the mass graves of the victims of Srebrenica, is a monument to UN failure.

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“As an accomplice you will make an invaluable contribution to inciting public unrest in the service of aggressive humanism.”

—the CPB’s website

Home, sweet Holocaust Memorial: The CPB erected this scale model of the Berlin memorial near AfD leader Björn Höcke’s backyard.

you operate with burnt things,” Ruch told a *Taz* reporter in 2015. “We’re digging through Germany’s burnt hopes.”

Ruch has said he does not want to bring attention to himself through the collective’s work, but he is its most visible member; it is his ethos and personal history that are the most widely known. His heroes include “Varian Fry, who helped thousands escape from the Vichy regime, Elie Wiesel, [and] Rupert Neudeck, who saved 37 refugees from the Mediterranean.” Group members have repeatedly referenced former German chancellor Willy Brandt’s spontaneous act of contrition on behalf of Germany when, during a visit to Poland in 1970, he dropped to his knees in front of a memorial commemorating the Warsaw Uprising.

“Ethical action, the sight of people with a backbone, has always been incredibly beautiful,” Ruch said in 2015. “Take for example Willy Brandt’s genuflection in

work on a PhD in political philosophy at Berlin’s Humboldt University and wrote his dissertation on “Honor and Vengeance: A History of Emotions in Ancient Law.” After working at the Max Planck Institute’s History of Emotions Research Center, making short films, and considering a career in party politics, he told *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, “Then it was clear. My medium is art.”

The CPB collective lists more than 50 artists and support workers on its website, including a chief negotiator (Ruch), a chief escalation officer, a chief of staff, and a privy councillor, as well as more conventional roles like planning staff, art directors, and photographers. Some of its events have involved members of Berlin’s Maxim Gorki Theater, and others have involved volunteer participants; you can sign up to be a “Stand-by Humanist” on its website. “Anyone who calls the artists from the Center for Political Beauty ‘political activists’ is denying them their status as artists. Yet art is precisely about holding up a mirror to society,” said Shermin Langhoff, the Gorki Theater’s artistic director. The CPB’s art addresses both Germany’s brutal history and its failures to aid people in need in the present day. At events and TV appearances, CPB members appear with soot-streaked faces. “You inevitably get dirty when

Warsaw. To want to separate ethics and aesthetics is ridiculous. To feel beauty, to want to feel it, scares people nowadays—that is clear. Beauty can shatter a life. Many try to flee from this and declare beauty to be a subjective thing. I disagree: political beauty is something objective. In retrospect, it can always be recognized.”

The CPB is able to take risks and perform acts that push propriety to the edge because of the German laws that uphold artistic freedom—and because it doesn’t rely on an official funding body or corporate sponsors. Its work is crowdfunded, and its website invites supporters to become “accomplices.” “As an accomplice you will make an invaluable contribution to inciting public unrest in the service of aggressive humanism.... Nowhere else will you receive more unrest and dissent for every donated Euro.”

It also, of course, has detractors. One of the CPB’s most heavily criticized works was 2019’s *Search for Us!*, a tall black urn placed near the Bundestag that the CPB said contained soil from former death camps and the ashes and bones of Holocaust victims. A number of Jewish groups and family members of Holocaust victims protested the disrespectful use of victims’ remains. The CPB apologized and gave the remains to the Orthodox Rabbinical Conference, but it did not take down the installation. Journalist Anna Prizkau has accused the collective of having “a real, absolute obsession with victims, with the dead, with people in danger, in wars.” Sarah J. Halford, interviewing the CPB’s André Leipold, summed up criticism of the group (but wasn’t making the criticism herself): “The right says that [the CPB’s] work is immoral, that it goes too far, so it’s disgraceful. The left says that the work uses refugees as props for the sake of art, so it’s disgraceful.”

The trouble with such criticism is that it suggests that the refugees involved with the CPB’s work have no agency. May Skaf, who played a leading role in the CPB’s *Eating Refugees* (2016), was a Lebanese Syrian actress who helped lead a revolt against the Assad regime. Are these critics (who are not themselves refugees) asserting that Skaf, or others who managed to escape from war zones, don’t have the capacity to assess the CPB’s motives and decide whether to work with it?

THE DAY I HEARD ABOUT THE UNVEILING of the replica in Bornhagen, I was giddy with joy. The outrage directed at Höcke and the AfD by pundits and politicians up to that point was a good thing—but it also treated Höcke with a level of seriousness he didn’t deserve. The thought of him waking up one day and discovering the Holocaust Memorial right outside—that was hilarious. It was the kind of revenge you see in a cartoon. It was exactly what the CPB had promised on its



“First Fall of the European Wall”:
This 2014 CPB action contrasted the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall with Europe’s rejection of refugees today.



“Political beauty is objective. In retrospect it can always be recognized.”

—Philipp Ruch

website: “Forceful protest without violent force.”

What if the CPB’s actions created sympathy for Höcke? pundits asked. But they didn’t—except among the people who were already sympathetic to him. Höcke himself whined about the unfairness of the CPB’s actions, claiming it was a “terrorist organization.” The CPB promptly posted his statement on its website, along with other condemnations—both a boast about who dislikes it and a way of proclaiming, “Yeah, we know we’re gonna get grief for this.”

Höcke’s followers threatened the CPB on Facebook and in real life, at the replica Holocaust Memorial; police had to guard the site. In 2017, the CPB was found to be one of the organizations on a “death list” kept by a career soldier in the German Army who was exposed as a right-wing extremist. Ruch himself was investigated by a state prosecutor “on suspicion of forming a criminal association”—a provision of German law that has previously been used only to investigate serious crimes. The investigation, initiated by a prosecutor with right-wing sympathies, was ultimately shut down. “The success of our actions is not measured in pats on the back but in the blows we get for it,” the CPB has noted. Its website counts 30 court cases it has been involved in “in the name of artistic freedom”—none of which it lost.

Recently, on Deutschlandfunk radio, Ruch talked about whether the CPB has actually changed anything. “You know,” he said, “if you look at how we fought for three, four years

against the federal government’s anti-refugee policy from 2014, we didn’t change one millimeter. This policy is still in place today and people are drowning in the Mediterranean. And right-wing extremism in Germany, which historically has been responsible for the Holocaust in this country, is now back in parliament, now in its second legislative period. And so they could always accuse us of having achieved little.... We can also say that this is not the question. We have to do it anyway.”

The CPB’s actions, in addition to putting discussions about refugee policy in the news, shift the way we talk about these subjects. A common way that refugee stories are told in the media is: Terrible things are happening that we can’t do anything about. The CPB’s narrative is: Actually, you can do something about this. You can allow refugees to fly into Europe without visas. You can stop racist and xenophobic groups from sending out flyers to recruit others. And you can help children in danger find safety by finding foster homes for them, just as the organizers of the Kindertransport in Britain did in the 1930s.

This kind of encouragement, along with the message that propriety isn’t useful when people’s lives are at stake, does bring change—even change that doesn’t translate easily into policy. And the sense that you can counter the far right through playful means is a powerful antidote to the cynicism and complacency that allows injustice to grow. The CPB isn’t proposing any easy answers, and work like theirs risks going wrong sometimes. But it is presenting possibilities and providing heartening examples during a perilous era. Over the long haul, that matters.

Suffer the little children: The CPB’s project demonstrated that many Germans were eager to welcome Syrian refugees.

