

DISPARATE PRESENTATIONS OF DISPLAY: A REVISIT

- A From all the exhibitions that you have seen lately, which did you find either particularly problematic or particularly compelling and why?
 - B Which types of exhibitions and their design do you view critically?
 - C How do you draw the line between exhibition and propaganda?
 - D Do you think of exhibition design as a service or as a political practice?
- (Questions developed for interviews with contemporary exhibition makers that never took place)

PROPOSED

In the early twentieth century, the designer Herbert Bayer considered exhibition design to be primarily "ideology-free" form of communication.¹ Experiments and developments in exhibition design, however, would soon take on explicitly political functions in service of ideologies and political agendas: fascism, communism, capitalism. As Michael Tymkiw has described, exhibition design has been employed for different and opposing ideological ends—at times through one and the same format means.² This work deals with two exhibitions, which, though they could not have been more disparate in their objectives, nevertheless shared the same designer.

DISPARATE

EXPO '58 happened in Brussels from *APRIL 17 - OCTOBER 19, 1958*, and involved more than 40 countries from around the world displaying an unwavering faith in technology and scientific progress. It was an international event with more than 40 million visitors. The core message of the German presentation was that Germany was now a normal country. In the words of Paul Sigel: "The pursuit for normality . . . expressed a desire to reconstruct a societal order after its gradual dissolution during the 1930s and the turmoil of the war and postwar experience."³

1 Johannes Paulmann, "Representation Without Emulation: German Cultural Diplomacy in Search of Integration and Self-Assurance During the Adenauer Era," *German Politics & Society* 25, no. 2/83 (2007): 60.

2 Michael Tymkiw, *Nazi Exhibition Design and Modernism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 238.

3 Paul Sigel, *EXPONIERT: Deutsche Pavillons auf Weltausstellungen* (Verlag Bauwesen, 2000), 181.

DISPARATE PRECEDENTS OF DISPLAY: A FOOTNOTE

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"*GEBT MIR VIER JAHRE ZEIT*" ("Give me four years' time") meanwhile, was primarily a national project. The "Leistungsschau" took place from *APRIL 30 – JUNE 20, 1937*, at the exhibition grounds at „Messedamm“ in Berlin. It comprised eight exhibition halls, outdoor exhibition spaces, a cinema, and a daycare facility. The exhibition celebrated the achievements of Hitler's four-year plan for the German economy and aimed at mobilizing viewers for the upcoming war effort.

EXPO '58 and "*GEBT MIR VIER JAHRE ZEIT*" were both state-sponsored exhibitions with political agendas. In formal terms, they do not have much in common. What unites them is that they are two major exhibition projects from Egon Eiermann's oeuvre.⁴ To be precise, Eiermann was responsible for the cinema and the main hall of "*GEBT MIR VIER JAHRE ZEIT*." The Expo pavilions, meanwhile, were a collaborative project with Sep Ruf.

Egon Eiermann is considered a formative architect and designer of a so-called second modernity." His designs became the flagship of democratic values for the young Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). He had the privilege of designing both the representatives' offices in Bonn and the German Embassy in Washington. His designs for office furniture remain popular and widely recognized today—characterized by their lightweight construction and practicality.

EXPO '58 / PURSUIT OF NORMALITY / UNPLEASANT CONTINUITIES

At the World's Fair in 1958 Germany was represented by eight pavilions with connecting walkways in a garden landscape. *EXPO '58*, set in Brussels, was meanwhile promoted under the slogan "*BILAN DU MONDE, POUR UN MONDE PLUS HUMAIN*." Due to Germany's defeat in 1945 and the preceding era of Nazi rule, the country's representation on the international stage seemed challenging. In response to this politically urgent task, a content commission (Inhaltskommission) was formed on the initiative of the German Design Council (Rat für Formgebung) in 1956. Hermann Wenhold was appointed Commissioner General for the German contribution.

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⁴ "Egon Eiermann" is a name that subsumes a network of people, ideas, and a specific style very much associated with post-war modernism. The person Egon Eiermann was an agent among various partners, collaborators, teachers, and predecessors. Not to forget a whole bunch of co-workers at Büro Egon Eiermann, drawing architectural plans and elevations with steady hands and building models from cardboard and wood.

The architects were selected directly out of the content commission as it appeared advantageous that they were already part of the delicate process of representing Germany after WWII. The choice fell to Egon Eiermann and Sep Ruf. In addition to designing the pavilion itself, they were responsible for the furniture and interior design of the restaurant, a wine bar, and an event space. They were also members of the art commission.⁵ Their heavy involvement on many levels shows that Eiermann's and Ruf's work was significant for the German contribution in 1958 even beyond the architecture itself.

The basic idea of a group of pavilions connected by corridors drew heavily upon Sep Ruf's previous project, the Academy of Fine Arts in Nuremberg (1952–1955). The design of the facades, meanwhile, is strongly associated with Egon Eiermann's specific style: delicate horizontal and vertical struts, an all-around walkway, and a cantilevered roof. The supporting steel structure was based on a 10m x 10m grid of pillars. Floor and roof were projected 3.30m beyond the supporting pillars, the glass facade was set back approximately 1m from the outer edge. The windows ended about 50 cm below the ceiling, ensuring ventilation. The ground floor, which formed a pedestal for the glass cubes, consisted of light brickwork. The color scheme of the pavilion was predominantly in monochrome, with only the doors to the connecting corridors glowing in a solid blue, matching the displayed canoes of company Klepper.⁶ The architecture conveyed a sense of floating, being elevated from the ground:

"In Germany," as the catalogue then summarized one of the motifs guiding the German exhibition, "people play as others do elsewhere." The message was unambiguous (...): Germany is a normal country, and in Germany everyday dreams may be fulfilled.⁷

The pavilions of *EXPO '58* represented an antithesis to the National Socialist gestures of representation. In this way they served as a form of visual denazification.⁸ Horizontality instead of verticality; transparency instead of marble. The architecture clearly referred to a pre-1933 modernism, e.g., the Barcelona Pavilion (Mies van der Rohe, Expo '29), associated with the democratic period of the Weimar Republic.

For the FRG it was important not only to portray its distance from the Nazi regime but also from the German Democratic Republic (GDR). With

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⁵ Paulmann, "Representation Without Emulation," 180 ff.

⁶ Sigel, EXPONIER, 188 ff.

⁷ Paulmann, "Representation Without Emulation," 181.

⁸ Paul Betts cited in Greg Castillo, "Making a Spectacle of Restraint: The Deutschland Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels Exposition," *Journal of Contemporary History* 47/1 (2012): 106.

their accession to NATO on May 6, 1955, the turn towards the West became the highest political imperative.⁹

The articulated distance from the National Socialist past was contradicted by actual continuities in personnel and professional networks. Hermann Wenhold, the Commissioner General, had held the title of Wehrwirtschaftsführer in Nazi Germany, thanks to his achievements in the colonization of Polish territories.

Sep Ruf and Egon Eiermann, too, had been integrated into the military-industrial complex under the Nazi regime, although not in a representative capacity like Wenhold. Besides the exhibition "*GEBT MIR VIER JAHRE ZEIT*," Büro Eiermann had several armament factories on its list of works, and Ruf, among his other projects, had been involved in the construction of military barracks. They had therefore served the regime by providing highly functional infrastructure.

"GEBT MIR VIER JAHRE ZEIT" 1937 / EXPANDED VISION / IDEOLOGY OF MODERNISM

The oak has long been considered a "German" tree. Its hard wood and characteristically late falling leaves made it a symbol of immortality and steadfastness. For this reason, oak leaves are often found on medals, symbols and coins. Since 1957 a ruling says that orders and medals from the time of National Socialism may only be worn without the swastika, which was obligatory at that time—with a few exceptions. This was therefore replaced by three oak leaves on the Iron Cross and its extension stages.¹⁰



"With this work [*GEBT MIR VIER JAHRE ZEIT*], Eiermann placed himself in the service of the National Socialist state as clearly as never before: weeks before the opening, the show was advertised as the "most politically significant of the year." In the early summer of 1937, it was indeed the major

annual propaganda event in the Berlin exhibition halls. The appointment of the honorary presidium, which brought together all government and party VIPs, further underscored the importance of the event. And while the Reichsausstellung Schaffendes Volk, held in Düsseldorf the same year, was opened by Goering, Hitler himself made this task his honorary duty in Berlin. Even more than its great predecessor exhibitions, "*GEBT MIR VIER JAHRE ZEIT*" was regarded as a distinctly political event. Declared as a comprehensive "report of the Reich government on the first four years of National Socialist reconstruction work," it was also intended to be "by its very nature a grateful homage" to Hitler."¹¹

The art historian Michael Tymkiw has inquired into why the designs for "*GEBT MIR VIER JAHRE ZEIT*" did not receive any public attention in the postwar period, at the latest with Eiermann's commission to represent Germany at the *1958 EXPO* in Brussels together with Sep Ruf. His answer is that it would simply have been too uncomfortable. The mixture of National Socialist ideology with modernist elements—here above all the cinema—was just as undesirable: for instance, the references to communist propaganda in Hall II. The giant zigzagged display and the excessive use of photomontages seemed to reference El Lissitzky's design for the Soviet contribution to "Pressa" in 1928.

Indeed, for "*GEBT MIR VIER JAHRE ZEIT*" Egon Eiermann consciously drew upon a modernist understanding of space that dated back to the 1920s. Protagonists of this development, amongst others, including El Lissitzky and Herbert Bayer—both of whom had been associated with the Bauhaus. The decisive impulse, however, was, attributed to El Lissitzky's spatial designs for Soviet propaganda exhibitions between 1928 and 1930.¹² Based on innovations in film, photography, and techniques of enlargement and photomontage, El Lissitzky created spaces that can best be described as "immersive." His exhibition designs, one of them at the *PRESSA* in Cologne, were characterized by the use of large-scale photomontages and an experimental approach to the perspective of the viewer.

Building upon El Lissitzky's experiments, Bayer theorized his own approach of an "Expanded Vision." In the article "Fundamentals of Exhibition Design"

⁹ Paulmann calls this a "double negation." Paulmann, "Representation Without Emulation," 187.

¹⁰ <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eichenlaub#Deutschland>

¹¹ Sonja Hildebrand, Egon Eiermann: Die Berliner Zeit. Das Architektonische Gesamtwerk bis 1945 (Vieweg, 1999), 138.

¹² Jorge Ribalta, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona and Museu Coleção Berardo. Public Photographic Spaces: Exhibitions of Propaganda from "Pressa" to "The Family of Man," 1928—1955. (Actar-D, 2008), 17.

from 1939,¹³ he elaborates on exhibition design as a new medium with high propagandistic potential. To explore the possibilities of exhibition design the experience of the viewer should be intensified through adapting the exhibition to the human perceptual apparatus. Bayer contributed to multiple National Socialist exhibitions, however from 1938 onwards he also applied his experience to propagandistic exhibitions in the United States.¹⁴

The Nazi regime had persecuted the protagonists of the Bauhaus movement, *NEUES BAUEN*, and modernism more generally. Yet they were also keen to incorporate modernist means and methods to their advantage e.g., in exhibition design and industrial buildings. If we can accept that modernism was integrated into both NS architecture and visual culture, how can we clearly define an easily distinguishable "NS-style"? This question posed itself soon after Germany's defeat and the incipient process of denazification.

In 1946, Rudolf Lodders, an architect of Eiermann's generation, claimed that a few German architects had sought and found "refuge" in the industrial building sector and managed in that way to keep Germany's architecture alive.¹⁵ The theory of this refuge in industrial architecture was often accompanied by the belief that whoever used modern form couldn't have been a Nazi: "The modern form itself rehabilitated the architect and immediately legitimized him as a democratic spirit or even a resistor."¹⁶

Michael Tymkiw has not only analyzed Nazi exhibition design, he also looked closely at its impact on post-war exhibition design in FRG and GDR. As he writes, of their commonalities:

[...] the numerous points of overlap between West German and East German exhibition spaces, including their shared rootedness in the Nazi past, underscore the basic but essential fact that formal features of exhibition spaces and the concepts underpinning such features may circulate in different contexts and may be deployed for substantially different ideological ends, revealing what one might call the ideological ambivalence and even promiscuity of forms. [...]

13 Herbert Bayer, "Fundamentals of Exhibition Design," *PM: An Intimate Journal for Advertising Production Managers, Art Directors and Their Associates* (1939), 17–25. Also published as an extended version in 1961.

14 Ulrich Pohlmann, "El Lissitzkys Ausstellungsgestaltungen in Deutschland und ihr Einfluß auf faschistische Propagandaschauen 1932-1937," in *El Lissitzky: Jenseits der Abstraktion: Fotografie, Design, Kooperation*, (Sprengel-Museum, 1999), 60.

15 Winfried Nerdinger (ed.), *Bauhaus-Moderne im Nationalsozialismus: Zwischen Anbiederung und Verfolgung* (Prestel, 1993), 173 ff.

16 *Ibid.*, 174.

an incomplete and slanted history of exhibition design may arise whenever we situate particular exhibition spaces solely or predominantly in relation to precedents that share the same or similar ideology.¹⁷

Which is to say: exhibition design practices are messy, they can't be defined as illustrations of ideology, and they are not independent from ideological contexts. The same formal features can be deployed for disparate political ends.

Tymkiw describes the ideology of modernism as "a dogmatic understanding [...] that fuels the myth of the heroic avant-garde by uncritically harnessing modernist practices and principles to the ideals of the political left with which many academics (including this author) feel sympathetic."¹⁸

RECEPTION HISTORY / RETROSPECTIVE 1984 / RETROSPECTIVE 2004

A first retrospective of Eiermann's work was realized in 1984 as a book. It was edited among others by two former co-workers of Büro Eiermann. One of whom, Rudolf Büchner, highlights Eiermann's cinema in the '37 propaganda show for its excellent design. His analysis ignores the content and occasion of the show completely:

Here, too, we find the provisional, the just-inserted and soon to be removed, the exhibition characteristic. The design corresponds completely to its functional requirements: the ability to walk past and around or the ability to linger undisturbed, for one of the rooms a lot of light, for the other as little as possible. The frieze of gilded oak leaves instead of a cornice and the decorations made of the same leaves to the right and left of the canvas are by Ludwig Gies. They are amiable additions to the cool austerity of the room.¹⁹

In his reference to the "characteristics" of the exhibition in itself—in German "das Ausstellungsmäßige"—Büchner follows Alfons Leitl's commentary on *GEBT MIR VIER JAHRE ZEIT* in the magazine *BAUWELT* from 1937. Leitl

17 Tymkiw, *Nazi Exhibition Design and Modernism*, 238.

18 *Ibid.*, 7.

19 Egon Eiermann, Wulf Schirmer and Immo Boyken, *Egon Eiermann, 1904—1970: Bauten und Projekte* (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1984), 20.

praised Eiermann for the excellent implementation of "das Ausstellungs-mäßige." Apparently, in 1984, it was not a problem to quote content from a politically-aligned publication without engaging with the actual message the exhibition was intended to convey.

A second retrospective of Eiermann's oeuvre was staged in 2004 in Karlsruhe and Berlin. *GEBT MIR VIER JAHRE ZEIT* wasn't featured this time. But it is referred to in an article from the exhibition monograph titled "Six Reasons to Love Eiermann's Work: And One Reason Not to" by Wolfgang Pehnt.²⁰ Pehnt advocates Eiermann's non-dogmatic approach, his steadfastness, his moral relationship to history, and diplomacy in the representation of German democracy. The one and only cause for disappointment is attributed to Eiermann's facade for the department store Merkur, formerly Schocken, in Stuttgart (1959–1961).

Of his contribution to the propaganda show, he states:

Those who worked for the arms industry, at least in the early years of the war, could avoid being drafted to the front. In this regard, the industrial architect Egon Eiermann followed a similar path to other colleagues, and like his more prominent counterparts Gropius and Mies, Eiermann participated in a propaganda exhibition of the regime. It took place in Berlin in 1937 under the macabre title "Give me four years' time."²¹

How neutral can it be to build military infrastructure? How does one ensure the continuity of modernity by employing it for the fascist propaganda machine? Can form and content be so neatly separated?

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20 Wolfgang Pehnt, "Sechs Gründe, Eiermanns Werk zu lieben. Und einer es nicht zu tun," in Annemarie Jaeggi (ed.), *Egon Eiermann (1904–1970): Architect and Designer; the Continuity of Modernism*; [published on the occasion of the exhibition "Egon Eiermann (1904–1970): Die Kontinuität Der Moderne," Städtische Galerie Karlsruhe, (18 September 2004–9 January 2005), Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin, (29 January–16 May 2005)] (Hatje Cantz, 2004), 17–29.

21 *Ibid.*, 19.





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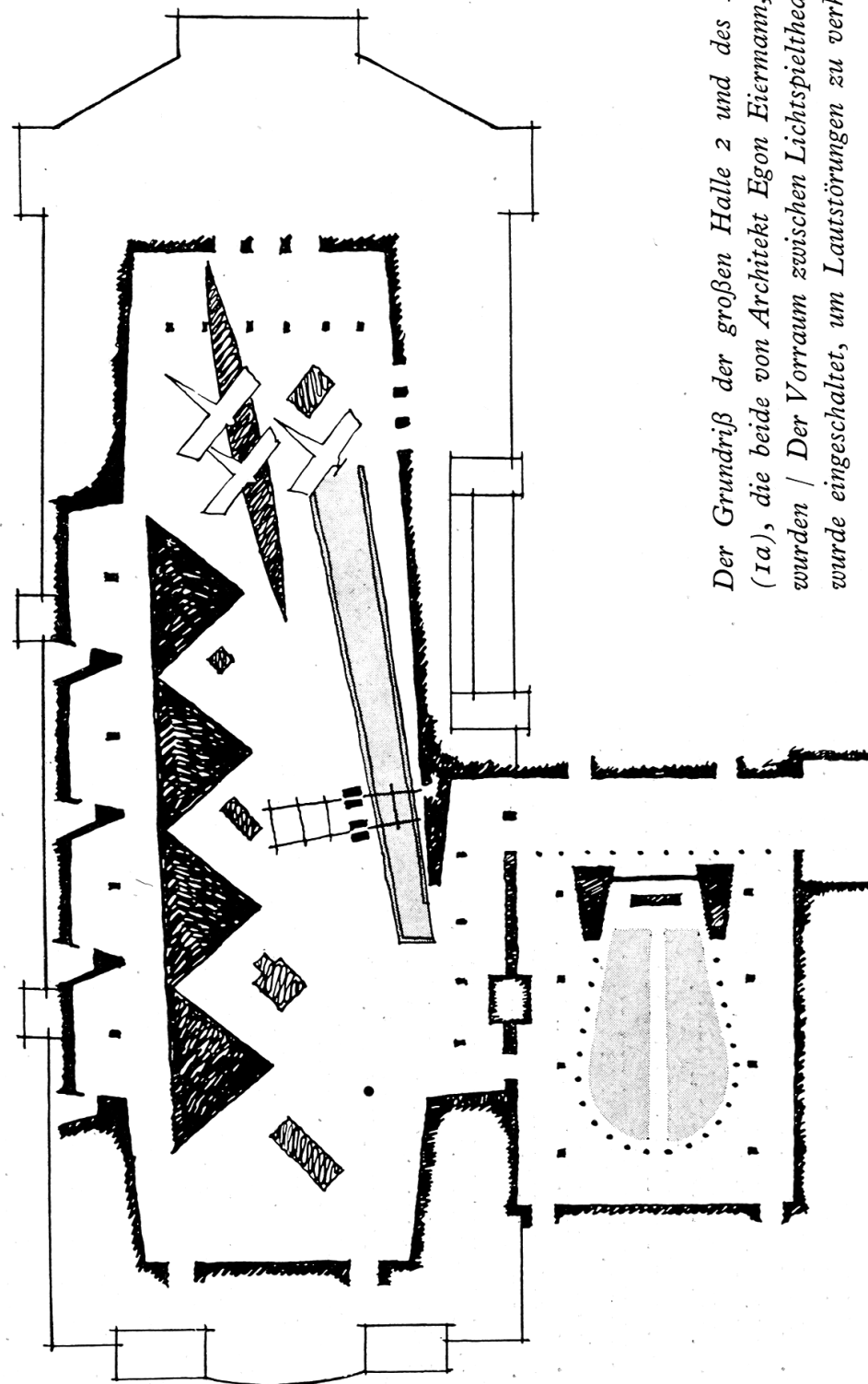
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7







Der Grundriß der großen Halle 2 und des Lichtspieltheaters (1a), die beide von Architekt Egon Eiermann, Berlin, gestaltet wurden | Der Vorraum zwischen Lichtspieltheater und Halle 2 wurde eingeschaltet, um Lautstörungen zu verhindern | Bild 4

PROPAGANDA / MYTH OF NEUTRALITY / ANTI-NEUTRAL DESIGN

An [exhibition] itself is a little machine; what is the relation (also measurable) of this [representational machine] to a war machine, love machine, revolutionary machine, etc.—and an abstract machine that sweeps them along?²²

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All kinds of styles and forms can be employed purposefully to serve different and even opposing political systems. There is no de-politicized space. There is no de-politicized space in architecture. There is no de-politicized space in the arts.

The Dutch artist Jonas Staal has written that: "For contemporary liberal and capitalist democracies, the 'myth of neutrality' is the perfect vehicle for shaping attitudes and beliefs, because it is precisely when we think we are free of propaganda that we are most susceptible to it."²³ Indeed, Staal goes as far as to make his own political agenda part of his art: emancipatory propaganda art. He writes:

Propaganda essentially is a 'performance of power.'

Propaganda is an enactment of the infrastructures of power, whether political, economic, technological, or artistic in nature. The aim of this performance of power is to construct reality after the interests of its proprietors. Art does not stand idly by in this struggle between propagandas. To what reality do we dedicate our competences of visual literacy, of compository theory, of morphological analysis?²⁴

Similarly, Jesko Fezer writes of how the "new right" (such as the AFD in Germany) likes to appear as normal or neutral. Nationalism is presented as the standard or norm. Other opinions are marked as deviant.²⁵ This apparent neutrality is an attempt to shift the discourse within the context of a wider societal negotiation of power.

²² Variation on a quote from Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 4.

²³ Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (The MIT Press, 2019), 188.

²⁴ <https://phdarts.eu/Dissertations/Jonas-Staal-Propaganda-Art-From-The-20th-To-The-21st-Century>

²⁵ Jesko Fezer, *Umstrittene Methoden* (Adocs, 2022), 142.

This is referring to specific party politics. What about the context of architecture and design? In relation to architecture and design, the "norm" serves as a central point of reference. The scientific and professional perspective often presents itself as neutral, claiming for itself objectivity and universality. However, when it comes to shaping the environment and designing space within powerfully structured conditions, any non-intervention or neutrality implies affirming existing hierarchies.²⁶

What does this mean for a design practice that acknowledges its entanglement with political structures of power? What would an anti-neutral design practice look like? One that takes its own situatedness within a societal context into account? To quote Jesko Fezer, "it would relinquish its claim to neutrality and thus to an unmarked position, openly entering into societal disputes over hegemony."²⁷

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²⁶ Jesko Fezer, *Umstrittene Methoden* (Adocs, 2022), 541 ff.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 546.

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IMAGE CREDITS

1
EE_137_GP_018 / saai, KIT Karlsruhe, Egon Eiermann Archive / Courtesy: Eberhart Troeger
World exhibition Brussels April 17 – October 19, 1958: German pavilion
Furniture designed by Egon Eiermann

2
EE_137_GP_051 / SAAI, KIT Karlsruhe / Courtesy: Eberhart Troeger
World exhibition Brussels April 17 – October 19, 1958: German pavilion
Exhibits at the German pavilion

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Exhibition "Gebt mir vier Jahre Zeit" 1937
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542866357 / Courtesy: Ullstein Bild
World exhibition Brussels April 17 – October 19, 1958: German pavilion
Seating islands

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/ Heinrich Hoffmann
Exhibition "Gebt mir vier Jahre Zeit" 1937
Inspection of the models for the exhibition, "Gebt mir vier Jahre Zeit", from left to right: City Councilor Wolfemann, Lord Mayor and City President Dr. Lippert, Reich Minister Dr. Goebbels, Ministerial Councilor Haegert (partly hidden), and State Secretary Funk.

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EE_137_GP_103 / saai, KIT Karlsruhe, Egon Eiermann Archive / Courtesy: Eberhart Troeger
World exhibition Brussels April 17 – October 19, 1958: German pavilion
View from the garden

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6901505099 / Courtesy: Ullstein Bild
/ Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo / Scherl
Exhibition "Gebt mir vier Jahre Zeit" 1937
View of the exhibition

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/ Mauritius
Exhibition "Gebt mir vier Jahre Zeit" 1937
View of the exhibition

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EE_137_GP_145 / SAAI, KIT Karlsruhe / Courtesy: Eberhart Troeger
World exhibition Brussels April 17 – October 19, 1958: German pavilion
Outdoor seating furniture

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Bauwelt, 1937, issue 20, page 2
Exhibition "Gebt mir vier Jahre Zeit" 1937
Floor plan of Hall II and the cinema in scale 1:1500.

*DISPARATE PRECEDENTS
OF DISPLAY: A FOOTNOTE*

July 28, 2023, 6pm
Brauwerstr. 2, 76135 Karlsruhe

Exhibition Design and Scenography
Diploma: Teresa Häußler

Performance: Anna K. Seidel
Outside Eye: Caroline Kapp, Manon Haase
Graphic Design: Mona Mayer
Single line font EE_7475: Barbara Acevedo Strange, Moritz Appich
Coding: Frank Bublitz
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Jana Barthel and Danny Klein.



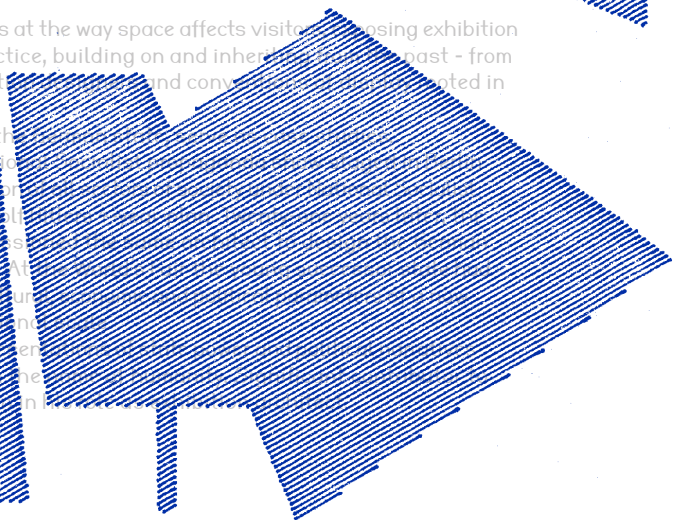
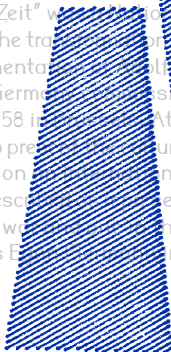
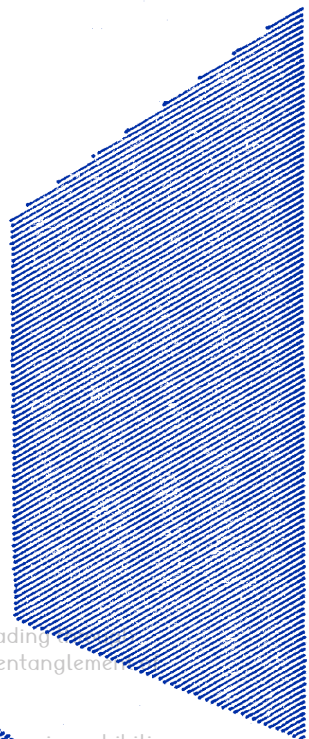
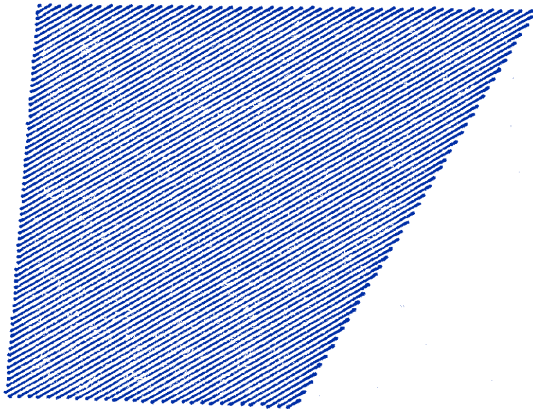
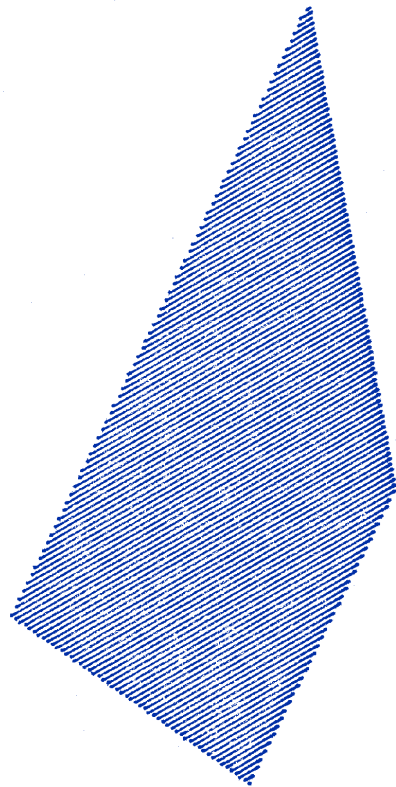
The project addresses the political dimensions of exhibition design, leading through two exhibitions designed by architect Egon Eiermann. It explores the entanglement of design and politics, National Socialism and forms of representation.

Disparate Precedents of Display looks at the way space affects visitors, exposing exhibition design as a genuinely political practice, building on and inheriting from the past - from past exhibitions, influential exhibition designers and conventions of display rooted in disparate political systems.

Two exhibitions, commissioned by the German state, serve as case studies.

"Gebt mir vier Jahre Zeit" was a National Socialist propaganda show staged in Berlin in 1937. It celebrated the transformation of all sectors of society under National Socialist rule since the implementation of Adolf Hitler's 4-year-plan. Twenty-one years later, the Federal Republic of Germany commissioned the same architect to design the German Pavilion at the Expo '58 in Brussels. At the World's Fair the young successor state had its first opportunity to present the cultural, economic and political parameters of a now democratic Germany on an international scale.

Both shows can be described as representations of state power and political narratives - one in the name of war and one in the name of humanity. Significant contributor to both exhibitions was Egon Eiermann in his role as exhibition architect.



This project addresses the political dimensions of exhibition design, leading to a series of exhibitions designed by architect Egon Eiermann. It explores the entanglement of art and politics, National Socialism and forms of representation.

The book 'Precedents of Display' looks at the way space affects visitors, proposing exhibition design as a genuinely political practice, building on and inheriting from the past - from the Bauhaus to the 1930s, influential exhibitions and conventions, and contemporary digital systems.

The book is commissioned by the 'Kunsthalle Bremen Zeit' which has supported the tradition of art exhibitions in Bremen. It is a complementary project to the 'Kunsthalle Bremen' exhibition 'The Republic of Germany 1918-1933' which was held at the Expo '58 in Bremen. It provides an opportunity to present the history of art in Germany on a national scale and to explore the role of art in the country. The book can be described as a series of essays on the name of war and the role of art in the exhibitions was first published in 1933.