
ERIK NIEDLING

**DOKUMENTATIONSZENTRUM
THÜRINGEN**

April 27 – June 11 2022

EXILE, Vienna

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Documentation Center Thuringia

The Documentation Center Thuringia (DZT) is dedicated to researching radical political movements in Thuringia that glorify oppression and violence. Founded by artist Erik Niedling and writer Ingo Niermann, the DZT examines both what was and what is, as well as what could be. Unlike documentation centers dedicated to Nazi history, the DZT does not confine itself to surveying particularly catastrophic past events, but understands the pursuit of oppression and violence, as manifested in National Socialism and its underlying racism, sexism, ableism, and totalitarianism, as something always undergoing transformation. In order to resist it successfully, the DZT strives to apprehend not only its existing forms but also its potential future mutations.

In this sense Ingo Niermann's 25-part video series *Deutsch Süd-Ost*¹ (2020), produced for Steirischer Herbst, is a Who's Who of prominent "last white men"—representatives of the New Right, *Reichsbürger*, controversial artists and intellectuals—who segregate themselves in an alternative present in the depopulated south of Thuringia, where, inspired by their new sociotope, they develop maverick trends in music, fashion, sex, nutrition, eugenics, terrorism, and tourism. *Deutsch Süd-Ost* is a tragicomic mental laboratory that

¹ Trailer at Paranoia-TV.com, most episodes on YouTube

² Erik Niedling with Ingo Niermann, *Burial of the White Man*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2019

playfully processes and transforms right-wing ideas.

In the DZT's first exhibition – *Dokumentationszentrum Thüringen* – Erik Niedling explores the question of how Thuringia became a rallying point for right-wing radicals and neo-Nazis after the fall of the Wall, and chronicles how, in order to violently oppose them and the annexation of the socialist Eastern Germany by the capitalist Western Germany, he and his friends founded the "Anarchist Faction" as teenagers. Niedling gathers archival material and historical artifacts and presents his personal story as a fragment in world events.

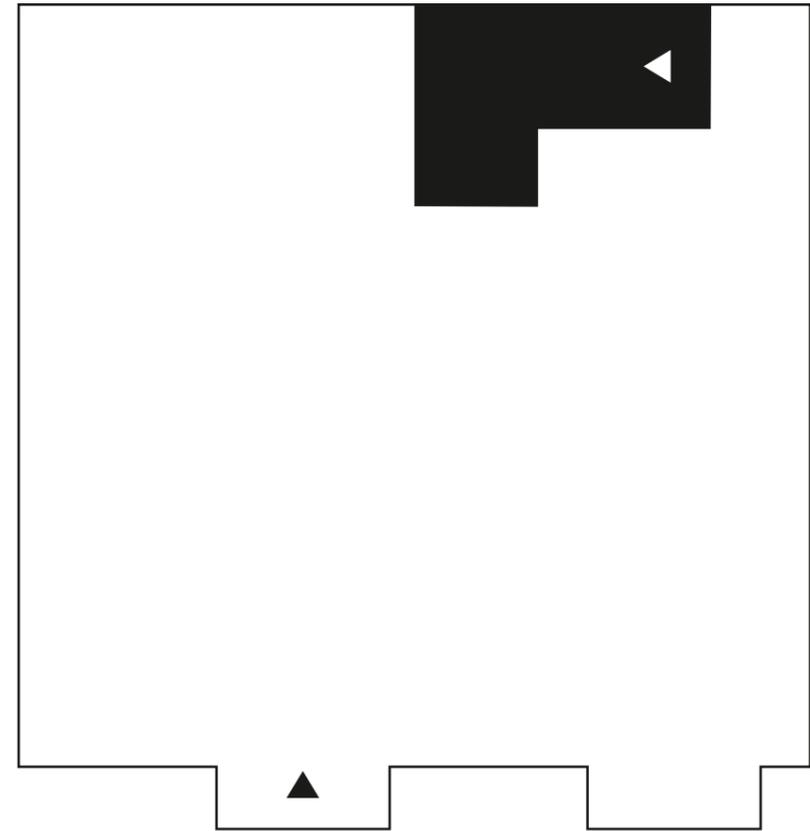
At the center of the exhibition is the film *In the Heart of Germany*, in which the artist Amy Patton reads a script (see pp. 8–14) recounting the history of divided Germany, the period of reunification, and the activities of the Anarchist Faction over a montage of tranquil images of Thuringia. A present-day encounter between Niedling and an old comrade-in-arms, who today belongs to the QAnon movement, gives a glimpse into an ominous future.

Two display cases contain Anarchist Faction documents, press photographs, and artifacts directly related to the film's narrative. On the walls are four photographic stills taken during

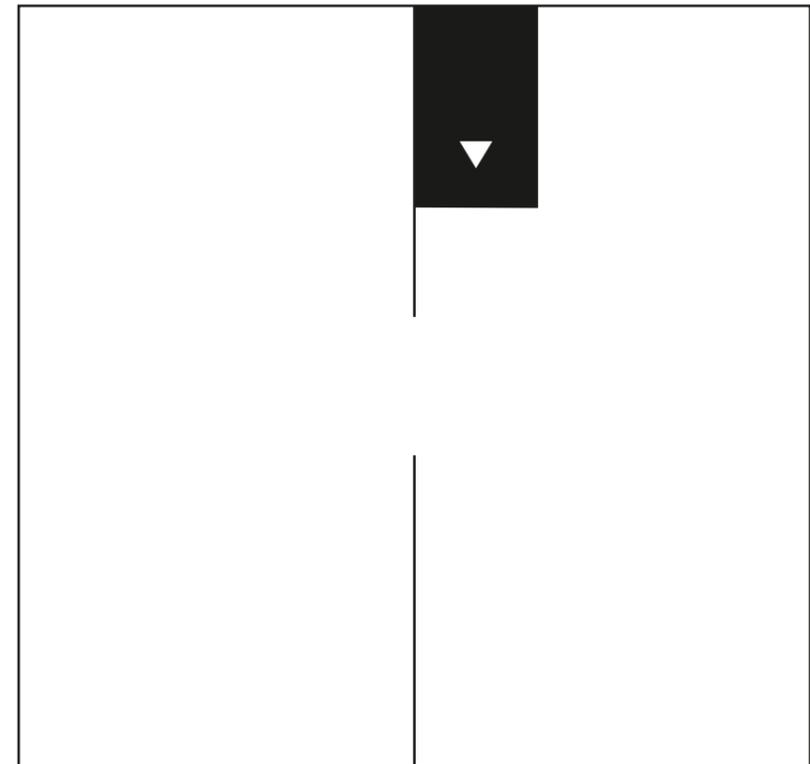
the making of the film. Furthermore, Niedling shows two *Flag Paintings*, executed in the state colors, red and white, which are omnipresent in Thuringia, on GDR-era canvases found during the artist's research, and a painting from the *Burial of the White Man* series which shows a black triangle on a white ground. Also on view are two artifacts that came into his possession during excavations on historical grounds. The first is *Information Board*, a decommissioned noticeboard from the radical right-wing Thuringian party Der III. Weg (founded 2013), the second is *Target*, a fragment of a steel girder riddled with bullet holes that Niedling excavated on a former firing range in Erfurt's Steigerwald, which was used by neo-Nazis as a training ground after the fall of the Wall.

The Thuringia Documentation Center sees itself as a complement to the *Burial of the White Man*,² which Niedling and Niermann anticipate annually on May 8, the day of Germany's defeat in World War II, on Thuringia's Kleiner Gleichberg. Here, the largest pyramid in the world is one day to be cut out of the mountain and subsequently disappear under it again, symbolically burying the archetype of the White Man, which bears a particular responsibility for oppression and violence.

GROUND FLOOR



TOP FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR

Erik Niedling: *Display case I*, 2022.
80 × 140 × 15 cm

- Logo design for the Anarchistische Fraktion (Anarchist Faction, AF), 1990
- Manifest of the AF, 1990
- Founding charter of the AF, 1990
- Admission regulations of the AF, 1990
- Claim of responsibility of the AF for an attack on the Kyffhäuser Monument, 1990
- Poster design for the AF, 1990
- Press photographs of the AF's actions: slogan graffiti on house wall (photo: Axel Usko, 1991), plates of party offices corroded with iron (III) chloride (photo: Andrea Schicker, 1990), facade hit with paint bombs (photo: Andrea Schicker, 1990)
- Article "Neofaschismus in der DDR" (Neofascism in the GDR) in *Neue Erfurter Zeitung*, issue 4, Erfurt, 1990
- Photo of the members of the AF in Berlin, 1990
- Audio cassette with Erik Niedling's interviews with young neo-Nazis, 1991

Erik Niedling: *Display case II*, 2022.
80 × 140 × 15 cm

- DIY throwing star, 1990
- DIY nunchaku, 1990
- Folded flag of the GDR, 1989
- Sleeve of a bomber jacket, 1990
- DIY slingshot, 1990
- *Schwarze Texte: Politische Zensur in der BRD – 1968 bis heute* (Black Texts: Political Censorship in the Federal Republic of Germany – 1968 til today), ID-Archiv im Internationalen Institut für Sozialgeschichte, Amsterdam, 1989
- Insert in the second edition of *Schwarze Texte: Politische Zensur in der BRD – 1968 bis heute*, 1989
- Sticker with anarchist slogans, 1990
- Sticker with the anarchist star, 1990
- GDR passport of Erik Niedling, 1990
- Wegerein-K in petri dish, 1990

TOP FLOOR

Erik Niedling: *In the Heart of Germany*, 2022. Video, 22:57 min

Erik Niedling: *Target*, 2021.
Steel, Gun oil, 53 × 19.5 × 7 cm

Erik Niedling: *Information Board*, 2021.
Wood, paint, wax, soot, steel, thumbtack, 117 × 65 × 6 cm

ONLINE AT EXILE TV

Erik Niedling: *Helmut Kohl in Erfurt*, 2022. Video, 10:46 min

Erik Niedling: *Thuringian Photograph (Equestrian Statue)*, 2022. Archival inkjet print, 58 × 46 cm (framed)

Erik Niedling: *Thuringian Photograph (Waterfall)*, 2022. Archival inkjet print, 58 × 46 cm (framed)

Erik Niedling: *Thuringian Photograph (Car)*, 2022. Archival inkjet print, 47 × 57 cm (framed)

Erik Niedling: *Thuringian Photograph (Statue)*, 2022. Archival inkjet print, 47 × 57 cm

Erik Niedling: *Flag Painting (Thuringia)*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 80 × 60 cm

Erik Niedling: *Flag Painting II (Thuringia)*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 80 × 60 cm

Erik Niedling: *Untitled III (Burial of the White Man)*, 2021.
Oil on canvas, 60 × 50 cm

ERIK NIEDLING AND INGO NIERMANN

In the Heart of Germany

After Germany lost not only the First but also the Second World War, it was divided among the victorious powers. The Western territories were integrated into the American-led capitalist system, and the East became part of a communist alliance headed by the Soviet Union. Four years after the end of the war, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was established in the West, and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) proclaimed in the East shortly thereafter. Both states saw themselves as champions of good in the Cold War against the forces of evil.

In the southern part of the GDR was a large expanse of forest comprising the administrative districts of Erfurt, Suhl, and Gera. Prior to the division of Germany, the region was known as Thuringia. The Thuringians were a headstrong people who lived largely from logging and the manufacture of machinery and weapons. They found it hard to accept becoming part of East Germany – allegedly in exchange for West Berlin – since they had first been occupied by the Americans and so had gotten to know the charms of Coca-Cola and Lucky Strike.

What communism had to offer instead was absurdly cheap rents and basic foodstuffs, full employment and equal rights for men and women. But along with these immense achieve-

ments came other, more dispiriting developments. For example, it became nearly impossible to leave the hermetically sealed national territory for the West, and even travel into neighboring communist states was strictly regulated. Also, ideological loyalty was considered the highest of virtues, and people had to make do with a limited range of goods.

Responding to growing pressure from its inhabitants, the GDR opened its borders to the West on November 9, 1989. People expected their lives to change overnight. A golden future suddenly seemed within reach. But it didn't take long for disagreements to begin about the best way to make use of this newly won freedom.

While one camp sought to affiliate itself with the West, another yearned for a new land of love and equality out of the conviction that besides exploitative capitalism and actually existing socialism another, third way was possible. Within each of these groups, smaller cells formed with more and more radical ideas about what was to be done. Heralds of salvation popped up all over the place and tried to rally support. The clash between ideological fronts was particularly intense in Thuringia. Neo-Nazis from over the border in West Germany fraternized with their East German

comrades. The West German chancellor, Helmut Kohl, promised a cheering crowd on Erfurt's Domplatz "flowering landscapes" if they followed his call. The situation became increasingly out of control; the power vacuum filled with a combination of dispirited civil liberties campaigners, coots waving German flags, carpetbaggers from the West, and incorrigible utopians.

On February 5, 1990, a handful of teenagers seeking to intervene in these events met in the basement of a prefab-housing block in Erfurt's Herrenberg district. Erik, Mario, Balazs, Alexander, Daniel, and Thomas, who had known one another since childhood, resolved to take a stand against the increasingly influential neo-Nazis and to torpedo plans for German reunification, in order to pave the way for a new society that would be fit for the future. At this meeting the Anarchist Faction (AF) was launched into being: a tiny, below-the-radar group of underage activists.

The AF staged ambushes to capture trophies by cutting off the right sleeves of skinheads' bomber jackets. They demonstrated against imperialism alongside the Black Bloc, and zealously drafted their own rules, manifestos, and goals: "We advocate order without dominion, freedom without violence, and nonauthoritarian

forms of organization. Anyone who recognizes and identifies with our ideals can join our AF. Termination of membership in the AF is through resignation, expulsion, or death.” Following the example of West German urban guerrilla groups, Larissa, the only girl who had joined the group, typed up Erik’s and Mario’s drafts on an old typewriter, and a succession of actions began, each leading to the next.

Throwing eggs at West German politicians was soon followed by lobbing paint-filled test tubes at the places where the Nazis met up and the local branch of Deutsche Bank. Hastily planned operations included drizzling ferric chloride onto the bright new brass signs outside the mushrooming branch offices of political parties from the West, filling the gas tanks of party vehicles with sugar, and spraying the AF logo on walls. Piles of lovingly designed posters with political messages reading “Never Again Greater Germany” and “Multinationals own the world; soon they’ll own our country, too” were photocopied in radical left-wing infoshops on regular trips to Berlin’s Kreuzberg district, and wheat-pasted all over Erfurt.

During one of the group’s night-time missions, two policemen challenged them before pursuing the fleeing suspects and firing two warning

shots. When the tabloid newspaper BILD expressed outrage about the troublemakers’ antics, the attention strengthened the resolve of the AF’s members, and they decided to launch a large-scale attack, a true blow to the system whose effects would resonate far beyond the region.

There was no shortage of possible objectives: the slash-and-burn clearing of a significant part of the Thuringian Forest monoculture, redirecting the manmade Trusetal waterfall, sawing down a high-voltage pylon next to a newly opened car dealership, or occupying the bell-tower at the Buchenwald concentration camp memorial complex. Yet a consensus did not build around any of these ideas. Everyone had different opinions about how to make the biggest possible impact without endangering human lives. And according to the AF statutes it was imperative that decisions were made unanimously.

Painting an enormous “A” with a circle around it on the monumental painting at the Panorama Museum in Bad Frankenhausen, then the largest painting in the world, was quickly off the table, as it would have been impossible to finish the job without the risk of discovery. The idea of tracking down and digging up the five-meter-tall statue of Field Marshal Hindenburg, rumored to be buried

at the base of the Kyffhäuser Monument, then rolling it down the mountain and into the valley, was enthusiastically received at first but rejected after calculations estimated its weight to be at least nine tons — far too heavy for such an undertaking. The kidnapping of Michael Kühnen, a well-known neo-Nazi active in Thuringia right after the fall of the Wall, seemed unrealistic because no one had a driver’s license or access to a vehicle, both of which (after reading the books of Peter-Jürgen Boock, a former member of the Red Army Faction) seemed indispensable.

After weeks of deliberation, the AF’s members agreed on a mission that would immediately be understood, even from afar, as a beacon of protest against imperialism and resurgent fantasies of Germany as a super-power: blowing up the enormous equestrian statue of Kaiser Wilhelm I on the Kyffhäuser Monument.

Everyone thought this was a good idea even before they had access to explosives or the requisite know-how. But as luck would have it, both would soon be within reach. Erfurt was also home to a group of young monarchists, who had far fewer scruples about the use of violence and who experimented with homemade explosives on the abandoned military training grounds nearby. Its leader took a passionate interest

in Erik’s collection of Iron Crosses — finagled off the grandson of an Erfurt ornithologist in a pre-unification swap for posters from the West German teen magazine Bravo — and in exchange for these militaria schooled the AF in the use of Wegerein-K, a weedkiller widely used in the GDR that was, when mixed with powdered sugar, ideal for making explosive devices.

According to somewhat hazardous calculations by Mario, the only AF member with any grasp of basic chemistry, they needed to mix twenty-five kilograms of Wegerein-K in a ratio of 1:1 with powdered sugar and pack it into sealable plastic canisters. These would, when ignited, explode with a detonation speed of three kilometers per second and a pressure differential of 280 millibars, the equivalent of about one kilogram of TNT in terms of its explosive force. To avoid raising suspicions, they decided to purchase the Wegerein-K from nearby drugstores in ten tranches of five jars per trip.

A group excursion to the Kyffhäuser Monument was followed by a planning session to hash out the details. They would fill five ten-liter plastic water canisters with the explosive mixture; fashion a fuse out of cotton thread, glue, and gunpowder from fireworks; and insert a sparkler through a hole drilled in the cap of

one of the canisters to serve as the detonator. The explosion of the first canister would ignite the other four.

The plan was to stow the explosive devices in five frame backpacks Thomas would steal from the warehouse of VEB Thüringer Stahlbau (his employer during school holidays) and transport them to Bad Frankenhausen on a Deutsche Reichsbahn passenger train on October 2, 1990. The AF planned to cover the remaining thirteen kilometers to the monument on foot and then, after it closed to the public at 6 p.m. and the sun had set, to scale the perimeter wall, climb up the base of the monument, and secure the canisters directly under the body of the bronze horse with duct tape. There was little danger of detection, as the area would be deserted except for the old caretaker couple who lived at the far end of the sprawling grounds. Detonation was set for 11:59 p.m., and they had composed a letter claiming responsibility:

Down with imperialism – away with its forerunners!

The Kyffhäuser Monument was erected in 1896 to honor the first German Emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm I. Wilhelm advocated using force to put down the 1848 March Revolution in Berlin. As king of Prussia, he waged

“Wars of Unification” against Denmark, Austria, and France that created the blueprint for German expansionism, which resulted in two World Wars and cost millions upon millions of lives. While Lenin monuments are slated for removal, many of the thousand-plus Kaiser Wilhelm monuments in the FRG and in the GDR remain untouched. To this day, the Kyffhäuser Monument reinforces the idea that the German Empire was the “golden age of our people” when in fact it was characterized by militarism and imperialism. For these reasons we have destroyed the equestrian statue of Kaiser Wilhelm in an act of civil disobedience.

The struggle continues!

Anarchist Faction (AF)

Everyone in the AF was sure that no one would be harmed and that the action would attract global attention, thus making it clear that not all East Germans were eager to run headlong into capitalism’s embrace. Nobody talked about possible personal consequences; the cause was all that mattered. In order to raise the 187 marks required in their calculations for Wegerein-K, the 48 marks for powdered sugar, the 79 marks for canisters, and the 57 marks for five tickets to Bad Frankenhausen and back, along with a small buffer for odds and ends and unforeseen

expenses, Erik sold what was left of his militaria collection to an antique dealer on Erfurt’s Krämerbrücke. Since the two hundred marks mobilized this way left them short, they resolved to carry the newly installed cigarette vending machine out of the foyer of the local youth hostel. They were deeply disappointed when – after they finally managed, through massive use of force, to pry the machine open in the nearby Steigerwald – they found almost three hundred packs of cigarettes, but hardly any cash. It was clear the machine had just been refilled. Vietnamese cigarette dealers paid one mark per pack – just enough to finance the operation.

The currency union announced on April 24, 1990, through which the West German deutschmark would replace the East German mark as of July 1, 1990, further complicated matters. Right away, it was clear the exchange meant the laboriously collected money would no longer be enough to buy the materials they needed at Western prices. Earlier than originally planned, they gathered everything together and assembled the explosives. In an effort to avoid unnecessary risk until the day of the operation, the AF took the canisters to the Steigerwald, buried them in the overgrown terrain of a former shooting range, and laid low until late September.

When the AF heard that neo-Nazis were planning a large-scale attack on the antifascist Autonomous Youth Center (AJZ) on the night of October 2, they decided unanimously that defending it was more urgent than any symbolic act. The operation was rescheduled for the night of November 9, the anniversary of both the opening of the GDR border and the Kristallnacht pogrom. On the night of October 2, as announced, some fifty neo-Nazis attacked the barricaded AJZ. Following a tactical briefing and the disposition of the nearly one hundred defenders of the AJZ, the members of the AF were positioned on the roof of the AJZ along with filled glass bottles, slingshots, and a bucket of steel nuts. The attack began just before midnight and involved firecrackers, stones dug out of the sidewalk, and a successfully averted attempt to batter down the large gate leading to the AJZ’s inner courtyard. An adjacent building caught fire, causing a blackout across the entire neighborhood. The siege came to an end only as a result of major police operation. The next day, the area in front of the AJZ looked like a battlefield, and the German Democratic Republic became subject to the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany.

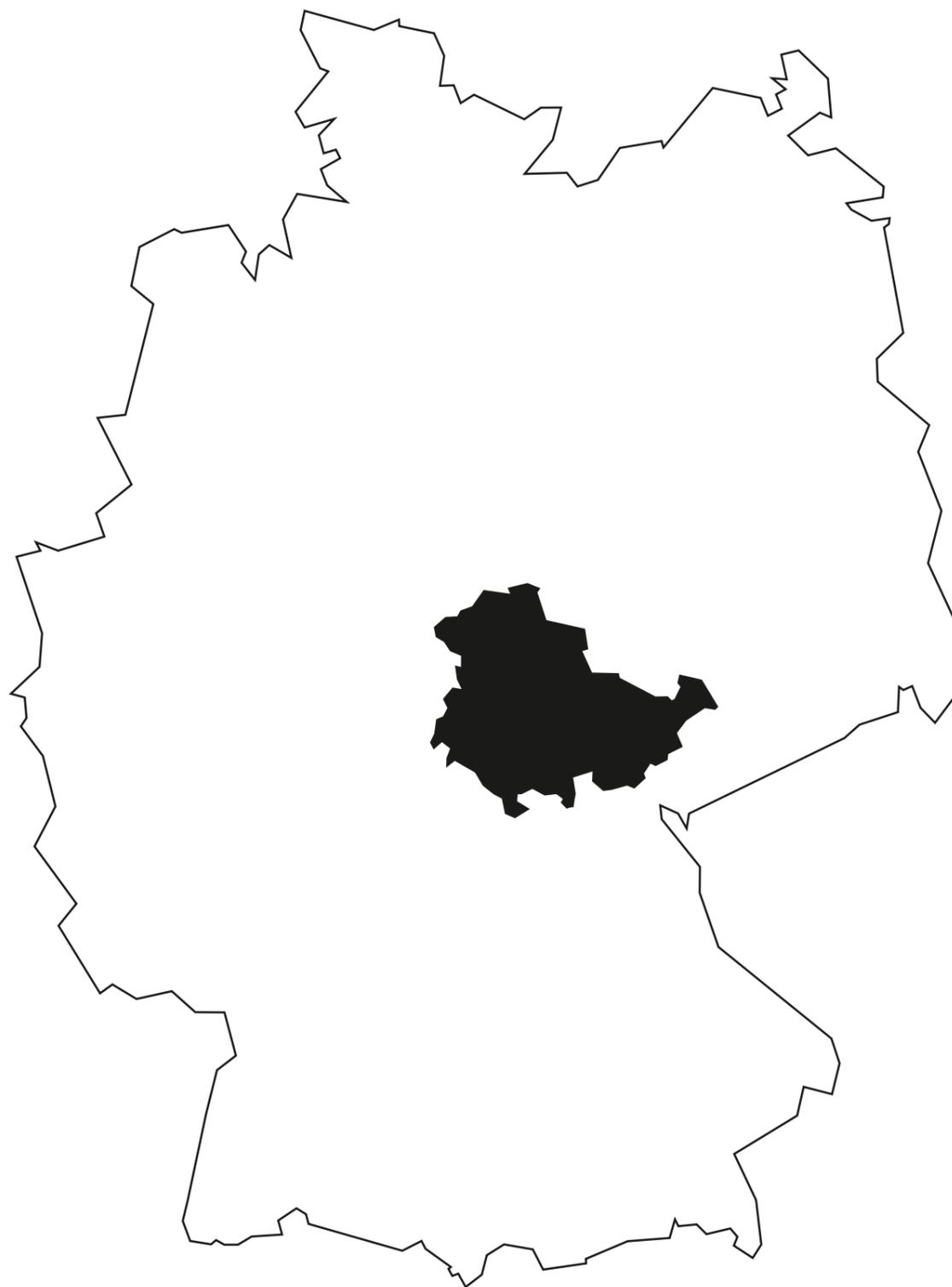
When the AF went to retrieve the explosives from their hiding place in early November, all that was left

was one of the tarps in which the canisters had been wrapped. Mutual accusations and wild theories about the whereabouts of the canisters escalated into a heated argument, and the members of the AF agreed not to see one another for a while. They were drawn in more and more by the allure of the West, and the AF was disbanded shortly thereafter.

Thirty years later, Thuringia had become a gathering place for fascists, Nazis held seats in the German parliament, and the right way to make a society fit for the future had yet to be discovered. Erik, by now a father and an artist, founded the Thuringia Documentation Center and got in touch with the other former members of the AF. Larissa lived with her husband and two children in Bavaria and ran a restoration workshop; Balazs had spent many years as a mountain guide in South America and now lived in Berlin with his wife and worked as an industrial climber. Daniel did Jiu-Jitsu and speculated on the stock market so that he would someday no longer have to work. Thomas led a regular life in north Erfurt, as had always been the plan. Alexander had developed schizophrenia, which he inherited from his mother, and had spent the past twenty years living in a psychiatric institution.

Finally, Erik visited Mario, who grew his own food and lived with his wife

and six children on an old farmstead in the Eichsfeld region of northern Thuringia. A texture of old and new, finished and unfinished had settled on everything and everyone. Brick dust, furniture, appliances, cats, mice, dogs, and people seemed to constitute their own universe. Mario and Erik sat down at a table in the kitchen, where a black flag with a large "Q" printed on it was hanging on the wall – a hallmark of the QAnon movement, whose adherents see former US President Donald Trump as a savior. Mario and Erik spoke about the AF, their actions, and the ways in which the group had failed. Erik brought up the unresolved question of the whereabouts of the canisters. Mario broke into a gentle smile, just like he used to, and said that at the time of reunification he had not only been a member of the AF, but paradoxically part of the monarchist cell as well. Mario was still locked in a vendetta against the West German state, which he considered illegitimate. He and his wife were a hundred percent convinced that mankind was living in nothing more than a simulation; soon it would come crashing down and a golden age would dawn. After all, every fairy tale deserves a happy ending.



Erik Niedling (*1973 in Erfurt, East Germany) lives and works in Erfurt and Berlin. Selected solo exhibitions at EXILE, Berlin (2017), Haus am Lützowplatz Berlin (2015), Neues Museum Weimar (2012), Galerie Tobias Naehring, Leipzig (2011), Angermuseum Erfurt (2010). Recently his work was on view in group shows with EXILE at Kleiner Gleichberg (2020), Manifesta 12, Palermo (2018), La Casa Encendida, Madrid (2017), CAM Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louise (2015), De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam (2014), M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (2013) and Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst GfZK, Leipzig (2011).

Erik Niedling –
Dokumentationszentrum
Thüringen

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