

Berlin Art Exhibit About Drug Dealers Triggered a National Debate over Race and Artistic Freedom

In a year of global shocks in politics and culture, the most controversial art exhibition of 2017 in Germany opened this fall in a small Berlin city museum dedicated to local histories. A US-French artist Scott Holmquist used interviews with African immigrant park drug dealers as the basis of an installation. At once playful and sober, the show has been the subject of more press reports than any solo exhibit in Germany this year, triggering outrage and amusement – and garnering support.



Entry view.

Contributing to its notoriety has been the artist's menagerie of sponsors and supporters, which include a cannabis business based in Humboldt County, California, a Berlin soccer club, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (which is affiliated with Germany's Left Party), Berlin's Green Party, and the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum where the show entitled *Other Homelands: Origins and Migration Routes of Berlin Park Drug Sellers* opened November 21 and runs through January 14, 2018.

For the first time in the museum's exhibition history city officials hired a special security detail for the opening, and banned TV cameras. In another first for the museum, alcoholic beverages were not served for fear the legal drug could fuel dangerous passions.

The exhibition attracted quadruple the usual number of daily visitors in its first weeks open, more than any other in the museum's history, according to museum staff.

According to museum officials, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation received threatening telephone calls in the days after the first national report on the show, which mentioned the foundation's support of the exhibition.

Controversial upcoming exhibit events

Deemed by museum officials too inflammatory to be allowed on museum grounds, Scott Holmquist Studio was obliged to find outside venues for two events conceived as part of the exhibit. "Drug Dealers as Objects of Societal Hatred" will now be held January 6 at the Südblock Aquarium. And "Work, Drugs and Racism in Public Spaces," focusing on drug dealing as labor, will be hosted by the Rosa Luxemburg Salon on January 11. In response to the national uproar over the exhibit, city officials have themselves organized a panel discussion, focused on changing perceptions and use of Görlitzer Park, the most notorious site in Berlin for public drug dealing. It will feature local Green Party political figures and community leaders and is scheduled to take place at the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum on the closing day of the exhibit, January 14.

Political efforts to stop the exhibit

Timur Husein, an elected city representative of Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU, compelled a vote in a city assembly on a motion to force the museum to withdraw its financial support and cancel the exhibit in the weeks before it opened. In news reports, Mr. Husein described the exhibit as a "slap in the face of drug victims." Green Party members, who control the city district in which the museum is located, argued against the proposal. Mr. Husein's motion was defeated.

"An expression of complete depravity"

Another prominent member of Chancellor Merkel's party, Burkard Dregger, also spoke out against the exhibit nearly a month before it opened, describing it as "an expression of complete depravity" in *Bild*, Germany's most widely read daily newspaper.

“Important and courageous”

Defending the exhibit in the national outlet, *N-TV*, Hamburg University Professor Bettina Paul, an expert on drug criminality, characterized the exhibit as “important and courageous.” Professor Paul received what she described as “hate mail” immediately following publication of the *N-TV* report.

In another defense of the exhibition, the editor of Berlin’s left-center daily *Tagesspiegel*, well-known columnist Harald Martenstein, wrote in his *Zeit Magazin* column, “Of course it is legitimate to make an exhibition about dealers.”

Asked if he expected such an uproar, artist Scott Holmquist responded, “Not so soon. It was never my intention for the work to be lost in the noise of public ranting. This exhibit was supposed to be easily approachable and neutral, even a bit whimsical. It has a Travel Portal! But to the extent it exposes – and I hope undermines – the racism seething and hidden in plain view behind this outpouring of drug dealer hatred, I’m gratified.”



Dealer origins in images and native language.

Anchoring colonial pasts and presents

“I have not seen work that so effectively bridges themes that are both in the news and date back hundreds of years, for instance concerning refugees and historical colonial exchanges between Africa and Europe. And this work does so without resorting to either graphic hyperbole or personalizing kitsch,” said Sári Stenczer, a Hungarian art historian, curator and self-described cultural exile from her country, now living in Berlin. Ms. Stenczer joined Scott Holmquist’s studio in the last year.

Exhibit is the third part in a series

Other Homelands: Origins and Migration Routes of Berlin Park Drug Sellers is the third part of an exhibit and intervention series that began in 2014 with *The Third Wall and Last Hero*, also installed at the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum. The second part was a formal proposal in 2016, through Berlin’s Pirate Party, for a public monument to immigrant park drug dealers in Berlin. The fourth intervention is planned for early 2018 and will involve a performance enacting the unveiling of a monument to park drug dealers, as it occurs in a distant future Berlin.

The exhibition

As visitors enter the exhibit, they see twelve hulking and blank, human-shaped cardboard silhouettes, some grouped, some standing alone, all at varying angles. Once past the first figure, visitors discover on the reverse side depictions of the dealer’s place of origin and migration route. Along one wall, printed materials from periodicals are arranged on desk-like displays and easels. Across the room is a large map jutting out of a desk with computer monitors. This is the “Travel Portal”. Further to the right is a steel figure, its shape identical to those of cardboard except for the vitrine on its chest containing images, a text and a map (like the reverse sides of the other figures). Beside the steel figure is a large wall-mounted architectural plan of mechanical renderings, elevations and aerial photographs that depict the placement of figures like those in the exhibit in two Berlin parks, Viktoria and Görlitzer. From overhead, visitors hear altered ambient outdoor sounds of the places described on the figures, urban and rural, produced for the exhibition by Tom Ritchford, musician sound artist.

Travel Portal

The "Travel Portal" is a workstation composed of a desk, stools and computers. It is dominated by a large centerpiece travel map tipping North to East, with West Africa prominently featured at the top and center and Europe at the far right. Swooping red lines mark flight routes from Berlin to each of the subject dealers' place of origin. Computer terminals list travel options and links to airlines, hotels and restaurants for each location.

"The "Travel Portal" belongs to the more physical approach, even if it involves the dramatic abstractions of internet travel planning and the graphic deformation of space in a map. It's about visitors imagining themselves catapulted through space, as objects themselves, with all of the comfort of being relatively rich Europeans able to visit each dealer's place of origin, and then return, requiring only a credit card and a few clicks of a mouse," said Holmquist. The "Travel Portal" is online for the duration of the exhibition.



Travel Portal.



Collected media on public drug dealing.

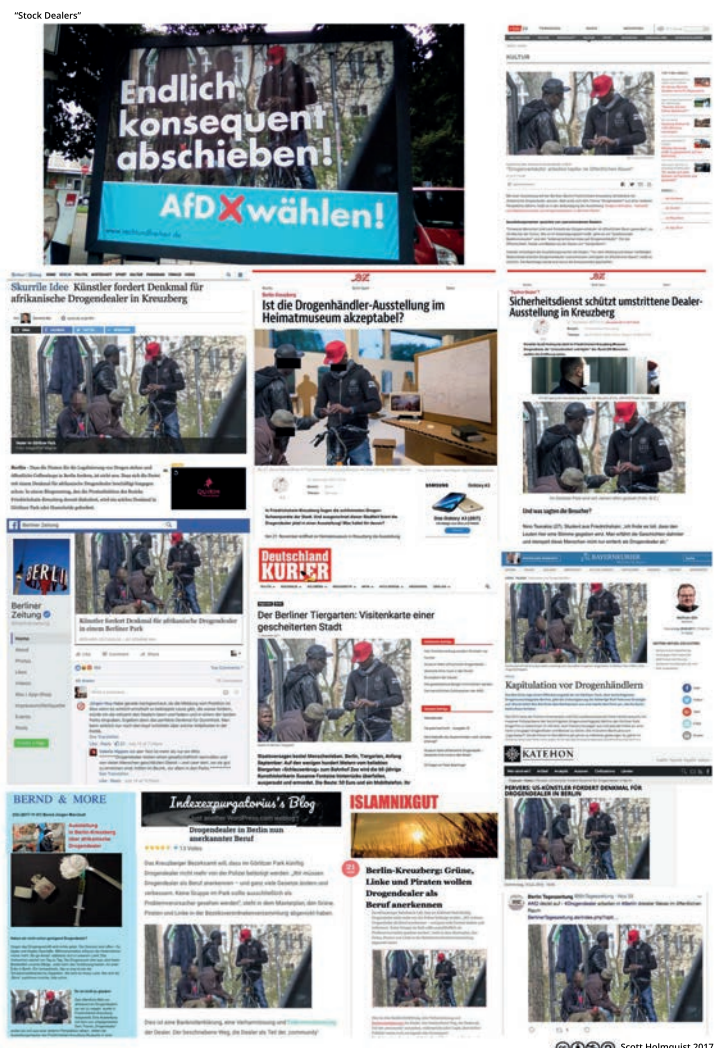
Active media collection

Desk-height displays and tableaus on cardboard easels presenting selections from more than 500 articles on public drug dealing in Germany. The entire collection is assembled in binders on a reading table at the back of the space, along with related academic articles and books. The collection is updated bi-weekly and includes more than 90 articles about the exhibit itself.

"The massive media collection, in one sense, radiates the spirit and thoughts of Germany on the subject of public drug dealing, from 1994 to the present, and it is also directly available, reproduced for visitors to touch and read," said Holmquist.

Stock dealers

The media swallowed the exhibit itself when, on the day it opened, Berlin's largest daily, the tabloid *B.Z.*, inserted a stock photograph of black park dealers, already used by several other outlets to illustrate the exhibit, into a photograph depicting a model of the exhibit that was part of an early press release for the show. This new collage by *B.Z.* was then integrated by the artist into a collage in the exhibit, previously named "AfD Poster," because of the use of the stock dealer photograph in a poster campaign for the extreme right party, Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany), that promised rapid expulsion of immigrants like those depicted in the stock image.



Silhouette figures

Twelve cardboard figures, all slightly larger than life-sized, are bolted to thick cardboard stands and arrayed from near the entry to the back of the space. The front is blank. On the back (the surface facing away from the entrance), each figure displays photographs from the place of origin of one dealer, a text with information about this place (printed in the dealer's native language), and the dealer's migration route, a hand-drawn map with an unfamiliar West-East orientation. At the base of each figure, there is a tablet of sheets with the African-language texts translated into German and English.

"The flat figures standing marshalled along these tables are about the physicality of actual places, a kind of grounding or short circuit of the more abstract emotional sparks coming off the tables and people who look at them," said Holmquist.



Backside of dealer figures and selected articles from media collection, right.



Steel figure, outdoor prototype and architectural installation plans.

Productive confusion

"The discursive gap between the media incitement against 'Black African dealers' and the naïve description of their places of origin creates a productive confusion, unfolding the very space needed for constructive debate," wrote Dr. Massimo Perinelli in an article on the Rosa Luxemburg Institute website. Dr. Perinelli is the Migration Director of the Rosa Luxemburg Institute and a former visiting scholar at City University of New York. He is also co-organizer with Scott Holmquist's studio of the upcoming podium discussion at the institute's Salon on January 11.

On the exhibition's origins

"When I requested Scott's exhibit proposal, I was convinced the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum was, and remains, the best location in Berlin for a show on park drug dealers," said Martin Düspohl, founding director of the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum, now curator of the "Revolution" and "Free Space" theme-rooms at the Humboldt Forum. "Our permanent exhibit tells the story of district residents, in particular immigrants, pushing the limits of legality, with squatting for instance, but also aims to help drug addicts – all to advance social justice in our district."

Humboldt County, California, cannabis business support

"Redwood Roots, Inc, and its family of cannabis farms, is proud to support an exhibit that dignifies the work of those on the front lines in the war on drugs: street and park dealers. Sellers of cannabis, both on the streets and in dispensaries, have borne the brunt of anti-drug bigotry and police repression. We recognize that their sacrifices helped to build what is now our business," said Holly Carter, a spokesperson for the company.

About the artist

Scott Holmquist has worked with subjects associated with production and commerce in illegal drugs since 2004 when he began research for a series of artist books about Northern California cannabis-growing communities, books which "monumentalized the insurgency of cannabis growers against the U.S. government," in the words of well-known *Süddeutsche Zeitung* journalist Lothar Müller, writing about the 2014 *The Third Wall and Last Hero* exhibition. The "chronic freedom series", parts of which were completed in 2011, is part of collections including the Getty Museum and South Africa's Jack Ginsberg Collection. The idea for the "Last Hero," a monument to black park drug dealers, was in part inspired by 2013 *Peace.Love.Insurgency* co-exhibitor Kenseth Armistead's Spook™ project, telling the true story of James Armistead Lafayette, "a slave who becomes a spy for America's first director of central intelligence, George Washington."

Panel Discussions

"Why can't we talk about drugs? Because they are illegal. Why are they illegal? Because they are drugs. An argumentative circular conclusion." Dr. David Nutt (*brandeins*, 10/2017)

The events will deal with the myths, systems and stigmas surrounding the figure of the drug dealer and the civil law dealing with drug trafficking. This topic seeks to assess the extent to which drug sales in parks offer a demand-driven service that many people welcome, as no ban has ever defeated the need. In particular, the visibility of drug trafficking in public parks reminds the collective consciousness that the core debate must revolve around the framework of economic interaction and not the problematization of social (and marginalized) groups.

The first podium discussion deals with legitimized racism, the second with drug trafficking as an act of work and the third with the characteristics of Görlitzer Park. The political handling of drugs is based on no rational or scientific knowledge. With his exhibition, the artist Scott Holmquist pursues the goal of objectifying the manifold fears, not only those that legitimize racism, but also those that lead to political consequences in dealing with drugs.

"Of course we know the dramatic consequences of drug addiction, therefore we are not for the unconditional legalization of drugs. However, neither prohibitions nor penalties have solved the problem so far. We need a fair trial for every substance. A scientific analysis followed by a sober decision." Dr. David Nutt (*brandeins*, 10/2017)

Drug Dealers as Objects of Societal Hate

Organized by Scott Holmquist Studio, as part of the *Other Homelands* exhibition, a discussion of bigotry against – and hatred of – drug dealers that serves to legitimize different forms of racism. In addition to considerations of media stereotypes reinforced by drug selling's illegality. It will raise questions of public perception and new approaches to the subject.

Saturday, 6 January 2018, 6 p.m.

aquarium (in Südblock) Skalitzer Str. 6, 10999 Berlin

Participants: **Josephine Apraku**, cultural scientist in African studies, co-director of the Institute for discrimination-free Education (IDB); **Leandra Balke**, sociology student, University of Hamburg; **Maximilian Plenert**, board member at Akzeptanz e.V. and scientific associate at the German Cannabis Association; **Tahir Della**, activist at Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland and global association, Berlin

Moderation: **Jost Neumann**, communications consultant

Drug Dealing as Labor (original title)

This panel will consider the emotionally charged debate over the selling of illegal drugs in public spaces as work, and as it is characterized in media, where a range of fears and racist stereotypes are excited and bolstered. It aims explore to the topic's complexity with a focus on the issues of visibility, crime, drug use and trade, working conditions and disenfranchisement. Panelists will address not only address problems but seek to advance imaginable political solutions.

Thursday, 11 January 2018, 7 p.m.

Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Salon, Franz-Mehring-Platz 1, 10243 Berlin

Participants: **PD DR. PHIL. Monika Mokre**, political scientist and refugee-activist, Austrian Academy of Sciences; **Ralf Köhnlein**, Fixpunkt e.V.; **Scott Holmquist**, artist; **Moro Yapha**, educator and activist at "We Are Born Free" Radio

Moderation: **Antje Kretzschmer**, criminologist and cultural scientist

Görlitzer Park in the Backlight – Conversations about Neighborhood, Scandal Pictures and Politics

Organized by the District separate from the exhibition, which makes the statement, "Today's Görlitzer Park has been repeatedly portrayed as a dangerous – not least because of public drug trafficking. At the same time, it has always been and where new arrivals to the District gather. More recently, the city-district has struggled with reduced public resources, neighborhood gentrification and the accompanying displacement of tenants. A simultaneous influx of more well-off residents on the one hand and refugees, with or without residence status, on the other. As a result, factual, "home-made" and media-constructed problems have flourished unresolved. Often concealing the normal everyday life in and around Görlitzer Park. The panel discussion will look beyond the scandals associated with Görlitzer Park"

Sunday, 14 January 2018, 5 p.m.

FHXB Museum, Adalbertstraße 95a, 10999 Berlin

Participants: **Florian Fleischmann**, Foundation Board for the Park Council of the Görlitzer Park; **Cengiz Demirci**, Parkmanager, Görlitzer Park; **Clara Hermann**, City Councilor for Cultural Affairs, Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg; **Stefan Höhne**, TU Berlin, Center for Metropolitan Studies

Moderation: **Shelly Kupferberg**, freelance journalist

References:

[Timur Husein city records](#)

[Timur Husein in *Welt*](#)

[Burkard Dregger in *Bild*](#)

[Professor Bettina Paul in *N-TV*](#)

[Harald Martenstein in *Zeit Magazin*](#)

[Massimo Perinelli](#)

[Interview with Scott Holmquist in *Neues Deutschland*](#)



Steel dealer figure detail.

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