Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz

En

Katrin Plavčak

Painting Reality in Surreal Times

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Katrin Plavčak

Painting Reality in Surreal Times

Katrin Plavčak's paintings reveal a rich visual world of colours, shapes and figures – yet the cheerfulness of the colour palette and the subjects depicted appears to belie, for one brief moment only, the seriousness with which the artist addresses scientific, social and political issues.

Painting Reality in Surreal Times reflects on life and painting in times of upheaval and raises questions about how we view the world in the face of >fake news, political instability and impending crises. The exhibition invites visitors not to accept the status quo blindly but to rebel against it and, confronted with the challenges of our time – from social media and artificial intelligence through to the climate crisis – not to undermine themselves, but instead to respond with self-determination and resistance.

Four key themes provide a common thread running through the "surrealities" of our time; these take a critical look at the growing tendency towards violence in geopolitics, reflect on the importance of >democracy, explore gender roles, and even venture into the realms of real-life spirit worlds.

Plavčak's artworks draw on pop culture, psychoanalysis and references to art history, thereby creating an exhibition space much like an idiosyncratic and humorous cosmos that encourages visitors to reflect and at the same time simply to look.

Trigger Warning:
The works in this exhibition and the accompanying texts address potentially distressing themes such as violence, discrimination, war, and loss. They also contain explicit depictions of nudity and sexuality.

Note:
Terms marked with an arrow (>) are explained in the glossary at the end of the programme booklet (starting on page 32).

The GHOST World

The ghost world hosts what is invisible in reality; fear is firmly lodged in the head as foreboding; and the dead assume their places. As long as our attention is focussed on the essential, panic cannot take root in us. The trolls of digital surveillance, too, hang around in this place. They look up at night at stars that make themselves known as satellites through their movement, which sets them apart from the suns of the galaxy.

Rembrandt Bugatti, 2023

Rembrandt Bugatti (1884–1916) was a highly acclaimed Italian sculptor of the early modern period. He owed his first name to the Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn, while he shared his surname with his older brother, the legendary automobile designer Ettore Bugatti. Unlike his brother, however, the sculptor's greatest passion was not automobiles but exotic animals, which became the defining subjects of his sculptural practice.

Rembrandt Bugatti himself occupies the central position in Plavčak's *Rembrandt Bugatti*, but animals are scattered all over the painting. A leopard strolls through the background, marine creatures inhabit an aquarium complex, and several flying foxes are confined to a cage, with one soaring freely overhead. Other animals have escaped their enclosures and can be discovered throughout the composition. A snake is slithering out from beneath the car. In the far distance, runaway orangutans are dancing both inside and in front of their cages. The rearing elephant adorning the automobile was originally designed by Rembrandt Bugatti for his brother, who used it as the hood ornament for the celebrated Bugatti Type 41 Royale. It is this legendary vehicle that Katrin Plavčak depicts here. In Bugatti's animal-centred world, even the automobile assumes almost zoomorphic qualities.

Rembrandt Bugatti's life ended tragically: during the First World War, he worked at Antwerp Zoo as an assistant in the military hospital established there, while continuing to use the zoo's animals as models for his sculptures. The traumatic experiences he endured – most devastatingly, the euthanisation of the remaining animals after food supplies ran out – deeply affected him. Combined with mounting health problems and financial hardship, these events are widely regarded as having contributed to his suicide in 1916. One of his final sculptures depicts a tiger crushing a snake.

Big Smoke Cooking, 2025

Big Smoke Cooking is one of the humorous works in Plavčak's œuvre, alongside paintings that address contemporary geopolitical events, reflect on questions of identity and gender, or examine concepts of >democracy.

Someone is here busy cooking but has become so absorbed in a book that the food is left to burn. Between sizzling fried eggs and an abundance of pots and pans a thick column of black smoke rises from the stove, taking the shape of a ghostly figure. The smoke djinn is at its wits' end that it cannot startle the reader, whose attention remains fixed on the book. Consequently, the genie itself leans in with a curious expression and begins reading along.

At the same time, the towering column of smoke appears omnipresent, demanding space while silently observing unnoticed. Within Plavčak's pictorial universe, it evokes the increasing surveillance that permeates everyday life. In the digital age, the world of spirits seems to assume a new role, becoming a tangible image for the largely invisible – and therefore all the more uncanny – processes that accompany us everywhere.

Gesprächsgegenstand, 2022

The three main figures in this work are deeply engaged in conversation, while a dog sits at the table, appearing to take part in the discussion as well. Here, the topic of the conversation materialises quite literally as its *Gesprächsgegenstand*, the "object of conversation". As there is no evidence of a heated discussion in the faces of the actors, the fiery object seems rather to emerge from the nuances and frictions of their exchange of views. Only the dog notices the man discreetly holding a lighter beneath the lambent flame, quietly fuelling the discussion.

For Plavčak, an engagement with the spirit world does not necessarily imply the existence of actual ghosts. Rather, it serves to explore the dynamics of human relationships, of what remains unsaid, or invisible threats that overshadow everyday life. The artist frequently draws inspiration from psychoanalysis to give form to what normally remains unseen.

Die Fernsehhand, 2014

Die Fernsehhand is inspired by *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, the 1954 novel by Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola (1920–1997). Its protagonist is a young boy who flees into the wilderness after his village is attacked. His mother had repeatedly warned him of the dangers of the >bush – with good reason, as he soon discovers. Although he has escaped the violent slave raiders, he now faces dangers of a very different kind. The bush is inhabited by countless spirits who hold the boy captive for eight years and prevent him from returning to the human world.

Throughout his captivity, the boy is successively imprisoned by various spirits and forced to serve them. Condemned to live inside a hollow tree, he cooks for them and witnesses the extraordinary cities of the spirit world. His imprisonment ultimately comes to an end through the intervention of the "television-handed ghostess" (a.k.a. "the woman with the television hand"), who shows him the way out of the bush. She thus repays his kindness after he has given her one of his mother's prescriptions, which cures her of a painful illness.

Tutuola's novel consists of a series of interconnected yet non-linear episodes that resist a strictly chronological reading. Narrated from a child's perspective and unfolding through dream-like, surreal sequences, it combines elements of folklore, myth and fantasy. The novel is widely regarded as a landmark of African magical realism and inspired Brian Eno's and David Byrne's 1981 collaborative album *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*.

Ocean & Space, 2026

The interconnected textile work *Ocean & Space* consists of two groups of eleven fabric panels: one black, the other blue. Arranged side by side, the blue panels form the work *Ocean*. Small appliquéd motifs combine to depict a ship crowded with countless people. Hoping to be saved, they struggle to board the dangerously overloaded ship. A few cling to the railings on the outside, while others – reduced to blurred, featureless heads – float lifeless in the water. Some manage to stay afloat by grasping life rings. None of the figures has distinct facial features; only two open mouths convey fear and distress.

The context of the work lies in the daily tragedies experienced by refugees who risk dangerous sea crossings – for example across the Mediterranean – in the hope of reaching safety and a better life in Europe. In media coverage, however, individual stories often become blurred into statistics. Refugees are reduced to anonymous numbers of the drowned and their personal fates are barely acknowledged.

Plavčak subtly evokes the uncertain future awaiting many who survive the voyage through an atmosphere of looming danger. Above the dark blue sea stretches a pitch-black sky. From the ship's mast, a pair of oversized eyes gazes down upon the passengers and their suffering. The refugees are under constant surveillance; the vessel is likely visible on radar screens, yet this visibility does not necessarily lead to rescue.

The second part of the textile work, *Space*, presents a striking counterpoint to the refugee scene. Instead of the desperate struggle for survival at sea, it depicts humanity's conquest of outer space – a pursuit for which no expense or effort seems too great. Six Starlink satellites are appliquéd onto black fabric panels, standing in for the more than 10,000 satellites launched by >SpaceX. While the fleet's primary purpose is to provide internet access to remote regions of the world, it has also become an important instrument of contemporary warfare, including its use in drone navigation.

The Demo Crazy Weld

Democracy is under pressure in many parts of the world. In a milieu shaped by grim geopolitical surrealism, basic democratic values are called into question. Are the people still the sovereign? Is freedom of the press still wanted and secured? What about the power of the individual? And who really still makes far-reaching political decisions when people sabotage themselves by disappearing into digital worlds where fact and fiction have become interchangeable? *The Demo Crazy Weld* raises the question of what weakens our democracies and how to keep them legitimate in the face of the drop-off in voter turnout. What comes next?

Social Media, 2018

For Katrin Plavčak, the term "sabotage" represents an important guiding theme – not only in this exhibition, but throughout her entire artistic practice. In the face of political tensions, the climate crisis, artificial intelligence and the challenges of everyday life, there is a growing risk of losing oneself or surrendering individual decisions to algorithms.

Social Media, a distorted portrait expressive of anxiety, reflects on whether the social media bubble surrounding us has a positive impact on our sense of well-being and our understanding of the world. Plavčak raises the question of how social media shapes our perception:

> "How unreal, how surreal does the world become through fake news? What do we accept as truth when something is presented to us often enough as reality through social media and the news?"

The artist concludes:

> "Here, our concentration and our ability to think are being sabotaged on a massive scale. It is the sabotage of reality, of democracy and of journalistic reporting. On the other hand, I would like to see a form of sabotage that emerges from anarchism and rebuffs social media. The kind of sabotage which made French workers during the Industrial Revolution throw their wooden clogs into threshing machines in order to block them. What can we throw into these machines of surreal world-making in order to bring them to a halt?"

Democracy Fatigue Syndrome, 2018

Democracy Fatigue Syndrome graphically illustrates the consequences of the widespread disillusionment with democracy. In the foreground, a figure has fallen asleep. Behind them, the guitar Roger yawns in his role as election official. Roger, Katrin Plavčak's own guitar, is a recurring motif in her pictorial universe and can at times be read as the artist's alter ego. Here, Roger is so exhausted that he has to lean against the ballot box for support. The other figures, too, are no longer able to cast their only partially completed ballots into the voting box, leaving the pieces of paper to be blown this way and that among the weary crowd. In the distance, an airplane passes overhead, trailing a banner reading, "We need your vote". The only person whose gaze might catch the message is snoring, oblivious to its appeal.

What, then, is the solution, and how might democratic fatigue be countered? Plavčak points to David Van Reybrouck's book *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy*, in which the author proposes introducing randomly selected citizens' assemblies that would participate in political decision-making alongside an elected parliament over a sustained period. According to Van Reybrouck, elections are inevitably shaped by media spectacle, populism and the limited time horizon of electoral cycles. As political campaigns become increasingly performative, he argues, politics loses its legitimacy and is met with growing public distrust.

The catalogue accompanying this exhibition includes a conversation between Gabriele Mackert and Katrin Plavčak, in which the artist reflects on political participation and describes her own artistic practice as a long-term engagement that situates current events within a broader historical and social context. As she puts it, she does not "work in legislative periods" (p. 177 exhibition catalogue). Thus, she articulates the kind of sustained, forward-looking commitment she would wish to see from political decision-makers.

Zum grünen Baum (Alphabet des anarchistischen Amateurs), 2019

Zum grünen Baum (Alphabet des anarchistischen Amateurs) brings together the protagonists of the anarchist movement in Graz, whose activities began in 1887 with the founding of the *Gruppe der Autonomisten* (Group of Autonomists) by Johann Rismann (1864–1936), which was subsequently expanded into a network of more or less associated political groups. *Zum grünen Baum* (At the Green Tree) refers to the pub where the meetings of the *Arbeiter-Bildungs- und Unterstützungs-Verein* (Workers' Educational and Mutual Aid Association) took place. In 1922, it hosted the first Austria-wide congress of the *BhS (Bund herrschaftsloser Sozialisten* / Federation of Anarchist Socialists), that brought together local anarchist groups.

Plavčak portrays those individuals who played the most influential roles within the movement and whose vision of a self-determined life reached a broader public. Most of the sixteen figures were organisers of various local groups. They are joined by two prominent international anarchists, Voltairine de Cleyre (1866–1912) and Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin (1814–1876). Although neither was directly connected to the anarchists in Graz, both provided important intellectual input.

Works such as this are not intended as political propaganda or as an uncritical endorsement of particular ideologies. Rather, the artist invites viewers to engage in a discussion of ideas that seek to imagine alternative forms of community, political organisation and self-determination. As in *Democracy Fatigue Syndrome*, Plavčak embarks on an artistic exploration of models of active political participation and collective agency. The painting was created for the exhibition *Art & Alphabet of the Anarchist Amateur*, held at rotor in Graz in 2023, and was inspired by >Herbert Müller-Guttenbrunn's (1887–1945) publication of the same title; the author is also visible in the painting.

To identify the individual figures in the painting, it is worth consulting the accompanying catalogue. Pages 132–133 reproduce a preparatory drawing in which Plavčak sketches the faces of the protagonists and identifies each of them by name.

Das große Vermögen, 2014

>Mondragón is Spain's largest >cooperative and the largest industrial cooperative in the world, based in the town of Mondragón in the Basque Country. At the Mondragón Corporation (Mondragón Corporación Cooperativa, MCC), the focus is not on capital but on the workers themselves, who, as members of the cooperative, participate in its profits.

In the painting, a group of people collectively pushes forward a large 'fortune', represented by a crash cymbal. Among them, we see sculptures by the artist >Jeanne Mammen (1890–1976), a knight and a cross-eyed man.

>Muhammad Yunus (*1940), the founder of the Grameen Bank and a pioneer of microcredits, a Russian coal miner, the murdered Russian journalist >Anna Politkovskaya (1958–2006), the CEO of the Mondragon Group José María Aldecoa and a political activist from the Philippines, >Walden Bello (*1945), float in the sky like coins. At the center of the painting the politician, sociologist, and author> Jean Ziegler (1934–2026) is depicted.

The European Parliament, 2018

The European Parliament is directly elected by EU citizens every five years. In 2018, the year in which the work was created, another election year was approaching: the Parliament was to be newly constituted the following year. In 2019, voter turnout reached its highest level since 1994: more than 50% of eligible voters cast their ballots – almost 8% more than in the previous election five years earlier. Nevertheless, only one in two EU citizens made use of their right to vote.

In Katrin Plavčak's work, the European Parliament becomes a colourful gathering of people, parties and opinions, whose apparent chaos pushes the actual political challenges into the background. A particular focus is placed on women who, as chairpersons and presidents of various parties, cover the entire political spectrum. Among them are also leaders of populist parties, which are not necessarily known for advocating progressive women's rights.

In the painting, the distribution of seats in the EU Parliament appears as a pie chart, similar to the ones used in election analyses. Those in power are depicted as surreal figures and are pushed to the margin by a crowd of agitated, questioning and demanding citizens. A particularly striking intervention in the scene is the depiction of the artist >Agnès Varda (1928–2019), who mockingly 'thumbs her nose' at the spectacle – an allusion to an iconic scene from her film *Faces Places*.

The Ladies and Gentlemen Welty

In *Die Damen Herren Welty*, the yawning void of the gender pay gap reminds us that the rights fought for by feminism cannot therefore be taken for granted. Emphatically masculine actors on the world stage anachronistically engage in warfare and, blinded by their vanity, treat nation states as their private property. Not even in their dreams do they pay regard to their citizens or the climate crisis. Complex co-existence in our socities demands acceptance of both diversity and solidarity. Otherwise we will fracture into minuscule groups that will fall victim to manipulation. Feminism without men will not work. How can we get rid of outworn gender clichés, leave patriarchy behind and cycle off into a peaceful future?

She's so hot she makes me sexist, 2009

Discovered in 1908 and approximately 29,500 years old, the small limestone figurine known as the *Venus of Willendorf,* now housed at the Natural History Museum Vienna, is an undisputed symbol of fertility. The figurine embodies an ideal of beauty that no longer dominates contemporary standards. Precisely for this reason Plavčak titles her painting *She's so hot she makes me sexist*, depicting Venus as self-assured and proud, riding a winged horse. Venus confidently claims her space and, placed in a different context, is presented here not only as a celebrated archaeological artefact but also simply as a nude. As Venus demonstrates, voluptuous bodies have always existed – they are beautiful, and at certain moments in history they even represented the prevailing ideal of beauty.

The winged horse and the meander pattern framing the composition quote the cover of a well-known 1958 record released by the Czechoslovak label *Supraphon*. Both the label and its designer, Miroslav Ludvíček, are quoted within Plavčak's painting.

The title of the work quotes a lyric from the song *Boom* by the New Zealand comedy duo *Flight of the Conchords*. The song exposes the persistent tendency to place the blame on women, suggesting that they are themselves responsible for being harassed or even assaulted because they dress or behave provocatively:

> 'I want to tell her how hot she is /
> But she'll think I'm being sexist /
> She's so hot, she's making me sexist, bitch'.

Even though the figure of Venus is portrayed as confident, autonomous and proud, the title and this external attribution once again cast her as a sexual object – an objectification allegedly self-imposed.

I wonder where she is... (Alice Neel), 2016

The American painter >Alice Neel (1900–1984) frequently finds her way into Katrin Plavčak's pictorial worlds. *I wonder where she is* portrays a humorous episode inspired by Neel's artistic practice. When models came to her studio to be painted, Neel would encourage them to take off their clothes. If they were reluctant to be portrayed in the nude, discussions often followed. Neel found an elegant way of sidestepping these conversations: she would simply leave the studio for an unspecified period, hoping that by the time she returned her models might have shed a few garments of their own accord.

In Plavčak's painting, Neel's models are left wondering where the artist has gone and when she might return, while Neel herself watches the scene from outside through the studio window. The predicament of the couple waiting for their portrait session is conveyed through thought bubbles floating above their heads. The studio depicted is in fact Plavčak's own former studio in Berlin.

The New Guy, 2016

An unconventional couple appears in *The New Guy*: a woman and a man walk together arm in arm. It is above all the man who attracts attention with his extravagant outfit. While the woman is dressed relatively inconspicuously, the man wears a patterned jumpsuit, boldly combined with cowboy boots. His long hair falls casually over his shoulders. According to her own account, Katrin Plavčak wanted to depict a couple in which the man is presented as the extravagant figure, dressed in a way that does not conform to conventional gender expectations.

Plavčak's paintings often depict a scene from a larger narrative – this is also the case here. She explains the moment as follows:

> 'When the two of them go for a walk, everyone is surprised and wonders why this woman suddenly turns up with such an interesting man.'

The scene can also be read as a play with terms that are often used disparagingly – particularly towards women. It is frequently older, wealthy men who suddenly turn up with particularly attractive young women on their arms – the women are then given attributes such as 'trophy wife' or 'arm candy' or judged as having entered into such relationships solely to gain status and financial security. They are called out as 'gold diggers' and portrayed as lacking intelligence or ambition to strike out on their own. What happens when the situation is reversed? Why does this arrangement appear so much more unusual to us, and which stereotypes are projected onto the people involved?

An example for a similarly unconventional couple is French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife Brigitte Macron, who is 24 years older than him. Their age difference is discussed far more frequently than, for example, that between American President Donald Trump and his wife Melania Trump, whose age difference is the same but runs in the opposite direction.

Er nahm das Kopftuch, 2016

In German, the expression "Sie nahm das Kopftuch" (She took the headscarf), describes the moment a Muslima begins to cover her hair with the hijab. Plavčak's title, "Er nahm das Kopftuch" (*He took the headscarf*), twists this expression and instead imagines a moment of solidarity in which a Muslim decides to wear a headscarf. It can also be understood as the artist's suggestion that men, too, could wear headscarves. In this painting, Plavčak presents the headscarf as independent of gender.

This raises the question if a headscarf carries a conservative connotation also when worn by a man – or whether, in this context, it can also become a courageous (perhaps even queer?) fashion statement and an aesthetic intervention. In the painting, however, the headscarf worn by the male figure is examined from all sides in the same way as headscarves worn by women. One of the protagonist's eyes appears to shift towards a pair of eyes looking at him. Yet in this pictorial world, the headscarf seems far from unusual: two more figures wearing headscarves can be seen in the background.

Extase, 2011

In a moment of complete ecstasy, an older woman attempts to seduce her apparently not that keen partner. The expressions on their faces transform the scene into an exaggerated moment of sexual tension, charged with a certain sense of drama. Perhaps this moment reflects the resignation that can seep into a long – perhaps decades-long – relationship, hollowed out by everyday routines, aging and the increasing number of responsibilities that distract us from making time for the more beautiful aspects of life. Seeing aging bodies in a moment of desire remains somewhat unusual. The fact that it is the woman who desires the man, while he withdraws from the encounter, is also far from a common motif in art history.

In the background of the scene, an iron can be seen. Forgotten in the heat of the moment, it burns itself into the fabric waiting to be ironed. Behind it, various objects are piled up and stored away. Plavčak describes the accumulation of objects stacked on top of and beside one another as the storage problem of the artist – over the course of a lifetime, things inevitably accumulate. For artists, artworks are added to everyday items, perhaps also turning into lumber.

Is she a lady?, 2015

Is She a Lady? was commissioned in 2015 by *The Function Room*, London. Katrin Plavčak painted the work on site at the >Cock Tavern (an unmistakable double meaning), situating its protagonists within the pub itself. The painting depicts renowned women artists and writers who, despite the male dominance of the art world, have played a decisive role in shaping the history of art. From left to right, the figures portrayed are Hannah Höch (1889–1978), Mary Shelley (1797–1851), Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979), Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943), Mary Moser (1744–1819), Anni Albers (1899–1994), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), Maria Lassnig (1919–2014), Nina Hamnett (1890–1956) and Laura Knight (1877–1970).

Among these artists are three figures with a particular connection to the location. Mary Wollstonecraft lived across the street from the pub and was the author of one of the earliest feminist philosophical tracts, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, first published in 1792. Her daughter, the writer Mary Shelley, is also depicted; in 1818 she published the novel *Frankenstein*, at first anonymously. In the background stands Sheila Gavigan, the landlady of the *Cock Tavern*.

The gathering at the Cock Tavern is, of course, entirely fictional. The women portrayed lived in different centuries and could never have met in real life. Bringing together figures from different historical periods and geographical contexts within a single pictorial world is a recurring feature of Plavčak's work. In the exhibition catalogue, the artist describes the playful freedom created by this approach as follows:

> 'A painted picture is a curious field where all sorts of protagonists from different times can mingle – let them all come in!'
> (exhibition catalogue, p. 173)

The Argument is Violence

The use of violence always puts an end to communication. Violence pushes through interests without paying attention to physical and mental injuries. In war it is the key means of the exercise of political power either in the guise of armed force subject to military law, or of criminal energy as exemplified by rape, torture and expulsion. Even the mere threat of violence or the media coverage of acts of brutality leaves an impression on us as a society and has the potential to strengthen the position of the aggressor by instilling fear. Courageously confronting brutal rulers distinguishes activists and demonstrates how powerful is the will to defend freedom. Cartoonists, too, have shown across the ages that they refuse to be intimidated by whatever potentates may decide to throw at them.

Nawalny, 2025

Portraits of whistleblowers, activists and members of the political opposition form an important part of Katrin Plavčak's artistic practice. For the artist, depicting particularly courageous individuals who challenge existing conditions is a way of giving them lasting visibility and honouring their memory.

The portrait of Alexei Navalny (1976–2024) occupies a central position within this body of work. It draws on widely circulated media images of the Russian opposition politician after he became the victim of a so called *zelyonka attack*. In colloquial Russian, *zelyonka* refers to the brilliant green colour and to a blue-green antiseptic liquid that can be found in most Russian household medicine cabinets. From the 2010s onwards, attacks involving the liquid targeted government critics with the intention of intimidating and humiliating them. Navalny was attacked with the substance twice in 2017. The second attack was particularly vicious, as a chemical substance had been added that caused extensive damage to his right eye. In 2020, Navalny only narrowly survived an assassination attempt with the neurotoxin *Novichok*. In 2024, he died while imprisoned under extremely harsh conditions in a Russian penal colony. Tissue samples contradicted the Kremlin's claim that he had died of natural causes. A *Joint Statement by Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom on the Death of Alexei Navalny* stated that his death was highly likely to have resulted from poisoning with the neurotoxin Epibatidine: 'Navalny died while held in prison, meaning Russia had the means, motive and opportunity to administer this poison to him.'

The image of Navalny's face covered in brilliant green became a symbol of resistance and of his life story, which was defined by his opposition to authoritarian rule. The Russian opposition movement adopted the colour as a symbol of resistance.

Joint Statement by the UK, Sweden, France, Germany and The Netherlands on Alexej Navalny's death:

Dinosaur Politics, 2009

Dinosaur Politics is a painting from 2009 that depicts the global political landscape of the time, in which its leading figures appear as hybrid creatures. Transformed into dinosaurs and sent back to prehistoric times, only their faces remain identifiable. Among those portrayed are Russia's long-time dictator Vladimir Putin (*1952), the then Chinese President Hu Jintao (*1942) and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel (*1954). The politicians are shown in motion: some fighting, others twisting and writhing; at the centre stands Putin, presenting his dinosaur rear end to the viewer.

The palette is characterised by a – for Plavčak unusual – lack of colour. Subdued shades of grey and brown evoke the darkness and sense of hopelessness surrounding certain political debates. This is also evident when viewed from a temporal perspective: although the work was created seventeen years ago, many of the conflicts of the time are still ongoing today.

Flooding the zone with shit, 2026

The title of this large-scale painting, which was created especially for this exhibition by the artist, *Flooding the Zone with Shit*, quotes Steve Bannon (*1953), former chief strategist to Donald Trump (*1946). In 2017, Bannon stated that the Republicans' real opposition was not the Democrats but "the media", adding that "the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit".

The strategy aims to overwhelm the public sphere through constant presence in the media, diverting attention from criticism and confusing political opponents. Since the beginning of Donald Trump's second term, this approach has been reflected in the rapid release of large volumes of information to the media. It includes the swift succession of controversial issues – for example, public debate may shift from immigration to another equally polarizing topic within moments. At the same time, different party representatives release contradictory messages. An unusually high number of announcements, executive orders and personnel decisions have likewise been issued in rapid succession throughout Trump's second term. The Democratic Party has at times responded with similarly fast-paced communication strategies.

For journalists, this communication strategy presents a significant challenge: keeping track of the constant flow of information, communicating and analysing the most relevant developments, while ensuring that other important issues do not disappear from public attention. Trump supporters, by contrast, often reject negative characterisations of his politics and praise his direct, rapid style of communication.

In Plavčak's painting, a tidal wave of excrement engulfs an entire city, creating a truly dystopian vision.

Cuz, it's so sad, bro / Darnella Frazier, 17 (George Floyd), 2020

In 2020, images of the killing of 46-year-old African American George Perry Floyd (1973–2020) circulated around the world: white police officer Derek Chauvin (*1976) in the middle of the street pressing down his full body weight with his knee on Floyd's neck, causing Floyd's agonising death by suffocation. Three other police officers stand by without intervening. That a video of the incident was recorded at all – and that those responsible for Floyd's death could subsequently be held accountable – is owed to then 17-year-old >Darnella Frazier (*2003), who captured the event as an accidental witness.

Plavčak's work depicts this scene by placing Frazier in the foreground. The viewer encounters the image of the act itself through the painted screen of her mobile phone. The title of the work quotes Frazier, who, in an interview she gave the day after Floyd's murder and the publication of the video on social media, expressed her shock at what had happened and described how deeply traumatic it had been for her to witness the event.

In the background of Plavčak's painting, several Black people can be seen standing, quite literally 'behind' Darnella Frazier. This deliberate composition shifts the focus not only onto the violent murder itself but also onto the collective hope for change that emerged in its aftermath. Founded in 2013 following the killing of teenager Trayvon Martin, the *Black Lives Matter* movement gained renewed momentum after George Floyd's murder, sparking an international debate on systemic racism and police violence.

From Kainis to Kainois and back, 2018

From Kainis to Kainois and back draws on a story from Greek mythology. Kainois is said, once upon a time, to have originally been a girl called Kainis. When she was raped by the sea god Poseidon, she wanted to make sure this would never happen again to her. So she asked Poseidon to transform her into a strong man. Her wish was granted. Now a man, Kainois was invited to a wedding, where he fell out with other guests, >Centaurs. One of them hammered him through the floor into the underworld. There he changed back into a woman.

In Plavčak's painting, the story is spread across the two canvasses of a >diptych. In this rendering, the different stages of the mythological story are presented simultaneously in separate scenes.

Die Zahl der Toten, 2026

The installation *Die Zahl der Toten* was created specifically for this exhibition. Presented as a 360-degree panoramic image, the wooden elements, mounted on legs, depict an – at times cheerful and at other times sombre – landscape where a great deal is happening. On one panel, a figure rides a motorcycle down a hill through an urban setting and directly into a threatening war scene. The following panels reveal the depths of human aggression: here, war is raging.

On another panel, someone appears to be sleeping peacefully in a small house, while a Starlink satellite circles the dark night sky. Only at a second glance does it become apparent that someone has secretly made themselves "comfortable" under the bed. The scene offers an unsettling glimpse of the "monsters under (and here also above) the bed": invisible, technologised entities that constantly accompany and monitor us.

Like a book, the panoramic image unfolds from one story to the next, addressing a recurring theme in Plavčak's pictorial worlds: the coexistence of beautiful, carefree moments with horrifying and unsettling aspects of human existence. The title *Die Zahl der Toten* (*The Number of the Dead*) refers to media reports, for example those covering catastrophes in war zones, which barely mention individual fates and instead dissolve them into a mass of nameless dead in supposedly distant regions.

As a panorama, the work cannot be taken in at a glance; viewers always have their backs turned towards part of the work. Here, Plavčak draws on a historical means of democratising perspective: the central perspective is transformed through the different positions occupied by viewers into a democratic poly-perspective. In the nineteenth century, large-scale panoramas became popular as spectacles for mass audiences. The works often travelled from city to city so that large numbers of people could view them. Their artists were often unknown.

Stuck'n'Plug-Painting: Jolly Dentists (with speakers) Refuge for rich people x ALF im Interview White Gods, 2022

Plavčak's *Stuck'n'Plug-Paintings* introduce the third dimension to the medium of painting. Each of these plug-in sculptures consists of two wooden panels, painted on both sides, which are slotted together crosswise. As they can be combined in various ways, the modular system constantly inspires new narratives and thematic connections. The series of *Stuck'n'Plug-Paintings* was created primarily between 2018 and 2022, though the possibility of continuing the series remains.

Some of the *Stuck'n'Plug-Paintings* feature additional elements, such as the modular sculpture *Jolly dentists talking (with speakers) / Refuge for rich people* x *ALF im Interview / White Gods*, which has speakers built into it. The 'jolly dentists' depicted are dentists who are happily profiting from rotten teeth within the capitalist system. They share their delight at this with visitors of the exhibition through short, eerily distorted utterances.

On the back of the panel, a mountain landscape is depicted behind a painted grid (or wire fence?). It refers to special resorts where people with the necessary bank balance could seek refuge in the event of life-threatening ecological, social or political crises.

On the second wooden panel, ALF is interviewed and asked whether he is a 'legal alien'. The term 'illegal alien' is used in the USA to refer to undocumented migrants. The popular American television character also features in Plavčak's painting *Legal Aliens* – there, ALF is the local who is pondering who can find a place for themselves in space.

On the reverse side of the panel *Alf in an Interview*, in *White Gods*, the hand of a Black person 'moves white, indifferent people out of the picture' (to quote Plavčak), thereby raising the question on who is allowed to take up how much space.

The texts for the spoken elements integrated into the sculpture were written by Katrin Plavčak and Nicholas Hoffman.

Glossar

Terms:

Anarchism
A political and social philosophy that seeks a society without hierarchical rule or coercive state structures. Anarchist movements emphasise self-organisation, mutual aid and voluntary cooperation. The term is often equated with chaos or disorder, which is an unwarranted simplification.

Bush
A term denoting densely vegetated, usually undeveloped landscapes with shrubs, trees or woodland. The term is considered problematic in some political contexts because, in colonial discourse, it was often used to portray African landscapes as "wild" or "uncivilised". In connection with the work *Die Fernsehhand*, which refers to Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, "bush" denotes both a real landscape in West Africa (without specifying a particular location) and a mythical realm inhabited by spirits and other supernatural beings.

Centaur
A mythical creature from Greek mythology with the torso of a human and the rump of a horse.

Cock Tavern
A historic pub on Fleet Street in London, whose origins date back to the sixteenth century. The traditional establishment was a meeting place for figures such as Samuel Pepys and Charles Dickens and represents the long history of British pub and debating culture. Today, it is also known as a venue for various discussion clubs. The pub's name can, if desired, be read as having a gender-critical dimension: "cock" is also a colloquial term for penis.

Cooperative
An association of people who voluntarily organise themselves to pursue shared economic, social or cultural goals. Its members are also its owners and participate democratically in decision-making. Cooperatives are based on principles such as self-help, solidarity and shared responsibility.

Democracy
From Ancient Greek *dêmos* ("people") and *krátos* ("rule"): "rule by the people". A form of government and society where citizens influence political decisions through elections and participation. Its fundamental principles include freedom, equality and the protection of fundamental rights.

Diptych
A work of art consisting of two connected or thematically related panels. The two parts may tell a story together or be related to one another in terms of content and form. The term derives from the Greek and means "folded in two."

Fake News
Deliberately disseminated false or misleading information presented as genuine news. Fake news is intended to deceive, influence opinions or garner attention.

Mondragón
A federation of cooperatives in the Basque Country (Spain), founded in 1956 and today one of the largest cooperative networks in the world. Its companies are owned by their employees and are based on democratic participation, shared responsibility and solidarity. Mondragón is regarded as an example of an alternative economic model, although its adaptation to global competition is also a subject of debate.

Roger the Guitar
Roger is the name of the acoustic guitar that Katrin Plavčak received as a gift from a friend. The artist writes: "It has a character, as if it were alive, but it is not a fetish object; it is a counterpart." Roger repeatedly appears in Plavčak's paintings, sometimes as an alter ego or "other self" of the artist.

SpaceX

A spaceflight company founded by Elon Musk that develops rockets, spacecraft and satellite systems. Supporters regard it as a driver of progress in space exploration and as a means of providing global internet access. Critics point to the privatisation of space, the impact of satellites on Earth's supraterrestrial orbits and the military use of satellite technologies for communication, surveillance and warfare.

People:

Michail Alexandrowitsch Bakunin

Russian philosopher and revolutionary (1814–1876) and one of the founders of modern anarchism. He rejected state rule and centralised power and advocated a freely organised, egalitarian society. Bakunin was an important figure in the international labour movement and a rival of Karl Marx within the socialist movement.

Walden Bello

Filipino sociologist, critic of globalisation and human rights activist (born 1945). He criticises the effects of neoliberal economic models, free trade and the power of multinational corporations. Bello advocates social justice, democratic control of the economy and sustainable development.

Voltairine de Cleyre

US-American writer, public speaker and anarchist (1866–1912). She was one of the most prominent proponents of anarchism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and advocated individual freedom, self-determination and social justice. She combined anarchist ideas with feminist and anti-authoritarian positions.

Darnella Frazier

US-American citizen (born 2003) who, as a teenager in 2020, filmed the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis. The publication of the video sparked worldwide protests against racism and police violence. Frazier received recognition for her courage and was honoured with an award, but was also subjected to hatred and criticism. She described the event as traumatic and as a profound turning point in her life.

Jeanne Mammen

German artist (1890–1976), known for her drawings and watercolours depicting urban life in Berlin, social roles, gender relations and political tensions from a critical perspective. She later developed an abstract visual language and became an important representative of modernism. Her first solo exhibition took place in 1930 at the Galerie Gurlitt in Berlin, founded by Fritz Gurlitt, the father of Wolfgang Gurlitt. Wolfgang Gurlitt's collection forms the foundation of the Lentos Kunstmuseum.

Herbert Müller-Guttenbrunn

Austrian writer, journalist and satirist (1887–1945), who espoused anarchist and anti-authoritarian positions. In 2007, Beatrix Müller-Kampel edited *Alphabet des anarchistischen Amateurs*, a collection of his pointed, socially critical aphorisms arranged in alphabetical order.

Alice Neel

US-American painter (1900–1984), known for her expressive portraits of people from her social environment. She explored themes including identity, gender, class and social inequality and is regarded as an important representative of twentieth-century American figurative painting.

Anna Politkowskaja

Russian-American journalist journalist and human rights activist (1958–2006). Her reporting on the war in Chechnya and human rights violations in Russia made her a target of pro-government forces. She was murdered in Moscow in 2006. Her family appealed to the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled in 2018 that Russia had failed to adequately investigate the circumstances surrounding her murder and that the government had dragged its feet over the investigation.

Johann Rismann

A tailor and anarchist from Graz (1864–1936). In 1887, he founded the "Autonomists", considered the first explicitly anarchist group in Austria. In 1893, Rismann, together with August Krcal and Ferdinand Barth, was charged with high treason after the three had published a pamphlet on the history of the labour movement. They were acquitted.

Agnès Varda

Belgian-French film director, screenwriter and artist (1928–2019). A leading figure of the French Nouvelle Vague, she was known for combining documentary observation with poetic storytelling. In 2017, she made the film *Faces Places* (*Visages, Villages*) together with the street artist JR. Katrin Plavčak quotes a scene from the film in *The European Parliament.*

Muhammad Yunus

Bangladeshi economist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate (born 1940). He founded the Grameen Bank and developed the concept of microcredit, through which people with low incomes can obtain funds to purchase materials and raw goods for their trades and build a livelihood.

Jean Ziegler

Swiss sociologist, politician and critic of globalisation (1934–2026). He focused particularly on global poverty, hunger and the political and economic causes of social inequality. Ziegler served as the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and became known as the author of numerous critical writings on the global economic system.

Katrin Plavčak

(b. 1970 in Gütersloh, lives and works in Vienna and Stuttgart) has been a Professor of Painting and Drawing at abk Stuttgart (State Academy of Fine Arts) since October 2022.

She studied painting under Sue Williams and Wolfgang Hollegha at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, previously graduating from the Sozialakademie in Vienna.

Since 2000 Plavčak has exhibited in Austria and abroad, including at the Vienna Secession (2009), Deutsche Bank Kunsthalle in Berlin (2013), the Stanley Picker Gallery in London (2019) and Kunstverein Heilbronn (2022). The public art Falco memorial was inaugurated in Lower Austria/Gansbach (Austria) in 2018. In 2020 she created the mural *History never stops* (2.5 × 55m) for the Nye Jordal Amfi ice hockey stadium in Oslo (Norway).

Besides painting and sculpture, Plavčak is also a musician. Since 2017 she has been part of the trio Kinky Muppet (Katrin Plavčak: guitar/vocals; Nicholas Hoffman: bass/baritone guitar/vocals; Oliver Stotz: drums/samples). The electro-operetta *DIgiTAL BLooD* (composition: Annesley Black and KINKY MUPPET) premièred at Kunstverein Heilbronn on 7 April 2022. She also performs with Ulrika Segerberg in M.O.G. (Mothers of God), a duo that improvises with contact microphones, sewing machines and loopers.

Extended stays in Mozambique, Chengdu (China) as well as New York have influenced her artistic development. From 2012 to 2014 she was part of the feminist artist group *ff*. Together with Caro Bittermann and Claudia Zweifel, she runs the website thehistoryofpaintingrevisited.weebly.com, a growing archive documenting female painters in the history of art.

Imprint

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