

Censorship of "In Berlin Nichts Neues/Nothing New in Berlin" by the nGbK and KiU

Censorship of my work "In Berlin Nichts Neues, Nothing New in Berlin," mobbing, and racism by the nGbK and Kunst im Untergrund

5 December 2025



I made a new work titled [In Berlin Nichts Neues](#) within the framework of Kunst im Untergrund, which was intended to be shown in September 2025 at the Bülowstraße metro station upstairs. My work deals with Turkish and Kurdish migrant movements from the 90s and more specifically with diverse anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-fascist underground magazines that were made after the collapse of the GDR in the period of 1990-2000 by these groups. The work consisted of two parts: an installation featuring billboards and floor stickers, and a performance scheduled for September 20, 2025. Billboards featured texts from different magazines, displayed in speech balloons, on top of a studio-shot photo depicting two people printing with a Risograph machine, which was produced specifically for this occasion. Since the project's initial conception, I wanted to work with found material, such as texts and others, since the effect I wanted to evoke was how indifferent the texts feel today and how similar they are between the 90s and today in the background of the rise of fascism, racism, and state repression in Germany. During production, the team of Kunst im Untergrund had made suggestions for my work, such as to change the length of the text, saying it is too long to read, or that I could include the sources of the texts, which I all declined to do, and did not do, as it was the opposite of my intention. There was no objection to my choice afterwards. The print file was first sent to the KiU team and then forwarded to the printing company. The billboards were hung, and stickers were attached at Bülowstraße, staying for 10 days. Some of the floor stickers and one billboard included found footage material, such as comic elements found in magazines, along with text, to create a “publication-like” effect. It included a version of the comic character Avanak Avni (Avni the Gullible) in different constellations, a woman figure making a hammer and sickle crochet, and a capitalist man figure adorned with logos of mostly German companies such as Rheinmetall, Deutsche Bank, Shell and Volkswagen.

After 10 days, the team Kunst im Untergrund (curators Sandra Teitge, Marenka Krasomil, Franziska Zahl) sent me an e-mail, attaching an e-mail from a person that wrote to the printer company Draussenwerber, since only their contact is visible on the stickers, complaining about one of the figures on my floor stickers and that for him this has some similarities to the 1920 antisemitic caricatures and asking about more context of the work. The team wanted me to answer the person directly, and they began to panic. Firstly, I told them that I cannot answer every comment from third persons who express their thoughts, and they should take over the communication. If they would like to answer, I would send them my resources. Fast forward, in approx. 2-3 days, the nGbK board decided that my work should be removed from the billboards and floor stickers as well, where the figure is part of the work. The director of nGbK, Annette Maechtel, called me to teach me about the German sensibility when it comes to the possibility of reading an image as antisemitic. She forced me to choose between having my work produced again without the [capitalist man cartoon] figure or having it removed. Since there is no single direct connotation or characteristic of my work that could make one think of anything antisemitic, I became aware that it was all about an unfounded fear of being called “antisemitic,” which is connected to funding money and the possibility of losing it.

Kunst im Untergrund team decided to commission, in their words, an expert, a white German, who is an artist and academic who works with cartoons. He reported on how he reads the figure and that there is nothing antisemitic to be found, not even one characteristic that would enable such a reading; rather, it falls into the category of working-class depictions of capitalists, providing examples such as Diego Rivera and Ad Reinhardt. According to him, declaring it as antisemitic would be malicious, or willful (mutwillig). Furthermore, he added that the mentioned companies on the figure (like

Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, etc.) have, on the contrary, associations with Nazi-Germany.



nGbK wasn't interested at all in any opinion other than their own; they dismissed the person's analysis. I agreed to the compromise that only one billboard would remain and that the others would be removed. I accepted this compromise because I had been working on the project for a few months, even though I did not agree with any of the points made by the director. While the Kunst im Untergrund team was saying that they can't really understand these claims of nGbK and they can't see anything related to antisemitism in the work, though, after nGbK made their decision, the team Kunst im Untergrund shifted their opinion instantly to "since it can be read as antisemitic, the posters need to be removed." They did not support me in any way, other than commissioning an expert person, whose opinion was ultimately ignored anyway. The team even asked me, "Why did you even apply [to KiU]? If you don't accept what has been told to you, you knew that you are in Germany?" and then suggested that I should not work with institutions if I don't want to engage with German sensibilities. After they decided to remove the work, the next day, it turned out that all three of my floor stickers had disappeared from the metro station in one day. Since the printing company was part of the panic-making group and was in communication with the nGbK, this has come to me as quite strange and unlikely to have happened through vandalism. The company said they did not remove them. One day after that, the company removed both billboards, although only one was going to be removed according to the nGbK. They said then, this was a mistake. I demanded from the Kunst im Untergrund team that the billboards be reproduced and hung back where they should be displayed. After this, the Kunst im

Untergrund team began to demand new conditions from me, namely that the texts be mentioned as quotes and that the sources be included in the image. They passed on the requests from the printing company Draussenwerber to me, comments such as, “this work is too political, we can't print it,” and “the references need to be there,” which is quite shocking to me that a printing company is in the position of making demands or commenting about the artwork as such. Even though they had seen the print files before going to the print, they demanded that I change my work so that I could show it, which was already on display for 10 days. They added that I need the copyrights for the figures I used, and that without them, they can't allow printing, although they had seen it in August before going to print. They then added a new demand that I include the project information and the funding body in the poster, which was not a requirement in any of the previous works. I demanded that they should be responsible for adding any information if they wish to, but not within the image frame, possibly at a nearby place to it. They insisted on their new endless demands, and I refused to change my work to be able to show it (again). I canceled my performance on 20.09.25 after all this, which I see as censorship, mobbing, and racism. They erased all the announcement posts referring to my work or performance on the website and Instagram; only after I wrote to them did they put the performance announcement back as cancelled.

During all interactions with nGbK and KiU, they maintained a position that did not treat me as their equal and presented their demands as non-negotiable. This attitude reflects the white Germans' self-positioning as experts on antisemitism and supposed moral high ground, because of their history. This self-positioning frames people of color, and in particular, people from West Asia, as inherently antisemitic, who need “filtering” by white Germans, before they speak their minds.

As a response to my e-mail expressing my disappointment and frustration, I was told by the KiU team that they are sorry.

My reflections:

- How can artists trust the nGbK and Kunst im Untergrund with their work if a single person's e-mail could easily cause the team to censor a work, and if they are incapable of dealing with reactions from third persons properly?
- During negotiations with the Kunst im Untergrund team, one of the excuses I was given was that the production company Draussenwerber had an agreement with BVG. As a result, they could not show any political messages as part of the art project. If this is true, then 1) this disqualifies Draussenwerber from being a partner of any art project, 2) if Kunst im Untergrund wants to continue to work with them, they should clarify it in the open call and mention that this is an “open call for non-political art.”
- Although it was clear that the KiU team had commissioned new work, there was no meeting planned to discuss my visual work extensively or the thoughts behind it. The only demand from me was to send the visual work to the team via mail. Only after the censorship demand was made, everything about the work was brought to me as an excuse not to reproduce it. If they don't have the capacity to engage with a new commissioned work, to then question the work after it was being produced, 1) this is highly unprofessional, 2) the open call should have been only for finished works.
- One of the excuses presented to me was about a comic figure named Avanak Avni, which had already been appropriated by Turkish and Kurdish German groups in

magazines from the 1990s, originating from Turkey, and drawn by cartoonist Oğuz Aral. I was asked to obtain the copyrights for the image, which is practically impossible, since the image was an iteration of the original character that the cartoonist didn't draw. Many anti-fascist movements appropriated the character in many international contexts. Since they didn't engage with the work until the censorship, they were unaware and lacked the capacity or capability to deal with transnational contexts that may be more complex than the strict Western categories.

- Through my work, I wanted to connect the past with the current state repression, and nGbK showed me that repression may be even worse today than in the 1990s.
- During the 2 years of genocide, many artists' works have been censored in Germany, and almost all of them happen to be non-white Germans or immigrants, as is the case in my own experience; this is, of course, not a coincidence but is directly connected with racism. We are experiencing an increased use of weaponized accusations of antisemitism to censor a broad array of works that take left-wing, anti-colonial, or migrant positions.
- Documentation of my work was promised but not provided, unlike the other artists' works in the project.
- I was treated unfairly, and I have experienced racism and mobbing during this process.

İpek Burçak, 2025