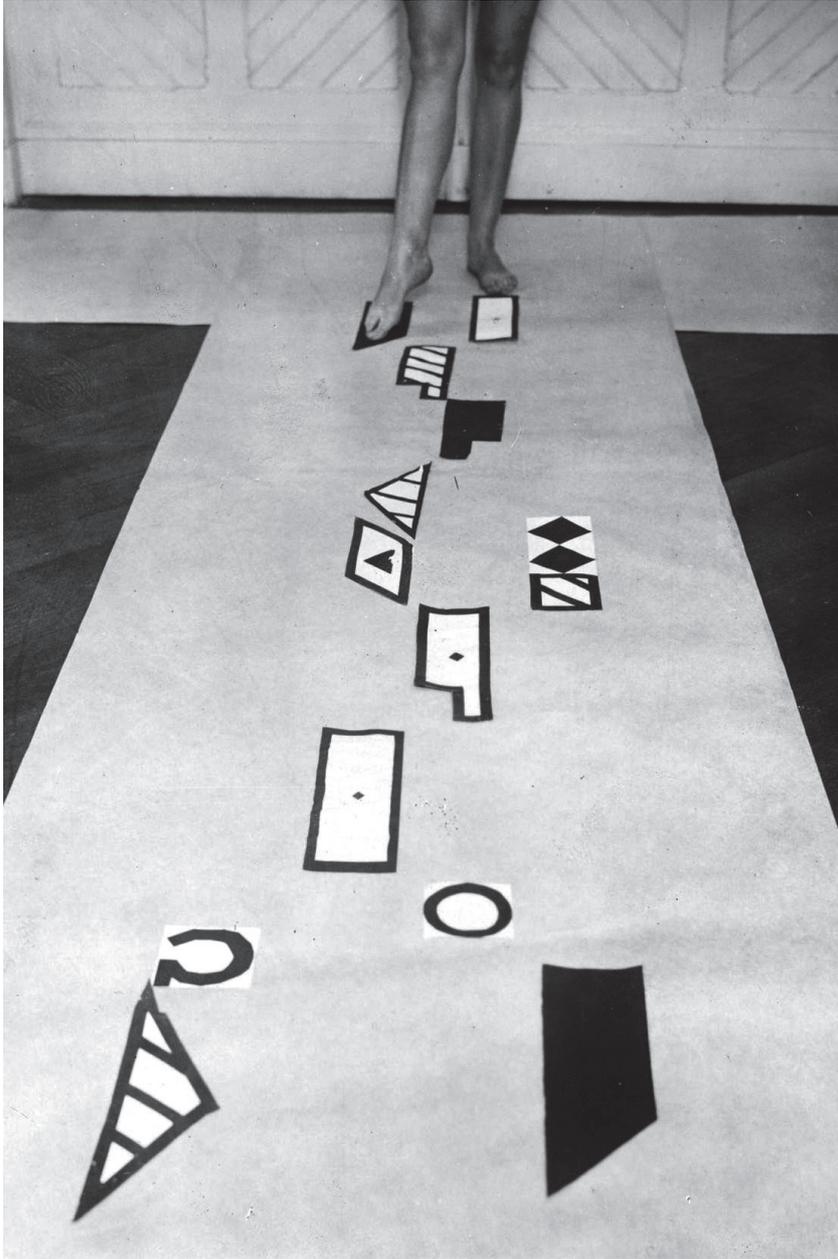


LARNE ABSE GOGARTY CHARTS THE RISE OF THE RIGHT IN ART

While some argue that LD50 gallery's embrace of neoreactionary thought was an exercise in free speech, the fact that access to its programme of events and talks was restricted suggests otherwise. Meanwhile, white supremacists are actively developing an aesthetic based on post-internet art in order to draw in new recruits, a development that needs to be directly challenged.



The Art Right

student learning Rudolf von Laban's dance notation techniques at Mary Wigman's Institute in Berlin, 1931

In February, a flurry of discussion and activity emerged in the London art scene and beyond concerning the activities of a small, previously unremarkable East End gallery called LD50. Opening in 2013, LD50 was initially located in Bethnal Green before moving a couple of miles north to Dalston in Hackney. It has held exhibitions by artists including Deanna Havas, Jake & Dinos Chapman, Juliette Bonneviot & Christopher Kulendran Thomas and Jesse Darling & Brace Brace. In hosting these collaborative shows, billing itself as a 'project space', and by organising public programmes on fashionable art theory

subjects such as genetics and technology, LD50 cohered with London's contemporary art landscape and its location in Dalston, a neighbourhood that has been tagged by estate agents as the 'coolest place in Britain' for at least the past five years.

However, despite visible signs of growing wealth, Hackney remains the 11th most deprived local authority in the UK. Though this is an improvement on being ranked second in 2010, it is easy to surmise that after more than five years of austerity measures, such so-called 'progress' is at least partially enabled by the shifting of poorer individuals and families out of the borough. Hackney has a long history of repression and resistance. Stoke Newington Police Station, for instance, was notorious for racist police brutality through to the 1990s. More recently, following the police shooting of Mark Duggan in the neighbouring borough of Haringey in 2011, the riots that erupted represented a flash point within the grinding forms of dispossession that persist, despite the borough's bourgeois makeover.

So, when it emerged that LD50 had been organising talks by right-wing extremists, it was unsurprising that the demonstration called against the gallery was well attended, with many locals taking part who had long-standing involvement

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anti-fascist protest outside LD50 gallery in Hackney, 25 February
 photograph by Paul Price

in anti-racist work. Hackney residents also took to LD50's Facebook page to stress that 'you don't really get Hackney. It's not a playground for fascists and sympathisers'. I begin this article here because it is important to situate LD50 as materially located in the real world. While anti-fascist groups and local residents viewed the events organised by LD50 as something to be challenged, the art world mostly prevaricated over the 'complexity' of the situation, often viewing the campaign against the gallery as a worrying impingement on free speech.

The story of LD50 broke after the artist Sophie Jung published online a private conversation with Lucia Diego, the gallery's director. In the conversation, Diego explained that she wasn't sure if she opposed President Trump's travel ban and bemoaned the recent rehang at MoMA which highlighted works by artists from countries included in that ban (Artnotes AM404), suggesting that this amounted to diminishing 'Western culture and tradition'. In the comment thread that followed, people quickly related Diego's message to the gallery's recent hosting of a so-called 'alt-right' exhibition and far-right speakers. Things swiftly escalated, as Diego responded by posting the entire thread on the gallery's website, which was then uploaded to the nationalist website

Amerika.org which is run by Brett Stevens, one of the speakers hosted at LD50 in August 2016.

Diego's posting of the thread on LD50's website – and her feeding of this information to Stevens – closely corresponds with the tactics of websites such as Redwatch, which was inspired by the earlier print magazine of the same title published by neo-Nazi terrorist group Combat 18. Redwatch uploads photographs of and identifies leftist activists, anti-racist campaigners and trade unionists with the purpose of intimidation and inciting violence. The uploading of the Facebook thread by Diego is comparable, particularly due to its continued presence on Amerika.org, a website run by a man who has said that he is 'fond' of Anders Breivik (the far-right terrorist who killed 77 people in Norway) because he shot 'members of Us' – by which he means whites – that had 'turned to leftism'.

From this point, the campaign against LD50 grew as further details emerged about the talks organised by the gallery. In contrast with the public nature of LD50's programme on genetics, the conference on reactionary and neoreactionary thought was secretive. While LD50 noted on its Facebook page on 18 July 2016 that it was very excited to announce that 'Nick Land will be with us at LD50', no specific details were given. On 24 July, LD50 sent a mail-out inviting recipients to 'a conference on Reactionary and Neoreactionary thought' that noted that the events were 'by invitation only'. Those who wished to attend had to follow a link (since deleted) and then enter a password provided in the email.

This level of security directly contradicts Diego's later statements on Vanessa Feltz's BBC London breakfast show on 24 February where she claimed that the talks



police guarding the entrance to LD50 gallery in Hackney during the anti-fascist protest on 25 February photograph by Polly Hancock

'didn't really cause any struggle in the neighbourhood or amongst anyone. Everyone was quite happy to learn about this at the time'. However, since the talks were not made public on the gallery's website or Facebook page until after they finished, this is patently false. The only public announcement of the talks was posted to Amerika.org where an open invitation kept the name of the venue secret, but described it as being 'hosted at a gallery in east London' and as being organised by a 'brave group of arts community members'. This announcement explained that if readers wished to attend, they should email an address hosted by Amerika.org that would be redirected to the organisers 'who will remain anonymous until they are able to verify your good faith participation'. This announcement – coupled with the password-protected invitation – evidences the secrecy LD50 built up around the conference. It also demonstrates an organisational partnership between Stevens and Diego, directly contradicting Diego's statement that the role of the talks was to simply 'explore contemporary discourse'. Instead, the only public promotion of the event appeared on a far-right website run by a man who admires the far-right terrorist and mass-killer Breivik.

There were five speakers associated with reactionary and neoreactionary thought hosted at LD50 between 24 July and 7 August 2016. In chronological order, these were Iben Thranholm, Peter Brimelow, Brett Stevens, Mark Citadel and, finally, Nick Land. While Thranholm's talk was organised before the conference, the last four speakers were programmed

together. Citadel's bizarre, meandering talk decried the left, comparing public accusations of racism to medieval heresy, while complaining about nation states that were not based on ethnicity. Like Thranholm, his ideology is based on a crusader-like Christian traditionalism that emphasises western supremacy and traditional gender roles. Stevens's talk at LD50 was entitled 'The Black Pill' in reference to debates within the 'manosphere'. Within this online community of men's rights activists, anti-feminists and so-called 'pick-up artists', an analogy has been developed from the movie *The Matrix*: taking the 'red pill' refers to accepting the truth of the manosphere's ideology, and the 'blue pill' indicates those who disagree with their misogyny, often equated with 'beta males'. Stevens draws on a further elaboration of this dichotomy with 'The Black Pill', referring to a total nihilism that rejects 'illusion' and 'positive action'.

Brimelow runs the far-right nationalist website VDare.com, named for the first white child born in America. His talk is the only audio recording that includes audience questions, which makes it helpful in gauging the composition and response of those attending. One audience member asks Brimelow whether the 'root cause of the present situation in the US and Europe is the result of Jewish, Talmudist, supremacist ideology and of course the financial power the Jewish community clearly has'. Brimelow responds by stressing that 'in the US, Jews are about 2-3% of the population yet are immensely powerful ... it has displaced the WASPS and the Ivy League, the Ivy League is now basically a Jewish institution, looking at the numbers. But on the other hand, Trump's key speechwriter, Steve Miller, is Jewish, you find them on all sides of every question'. At another point, he describes the 'problematic Jewish portion of the democratic vote'.

That the majority of the audience was sympathetic to Brimelow is also audible in their agreement with Brimelow's argument that nation states should be ethnically specific. This event cannot be described as a neutral exploration of ideas, not least because the audience is audibly invested in far-right politics, with only one dissenting voice that quickly retreats. The invitation was secretive and private. As with Stevens's promotion of the events and collaboration in assisting with the email administration, Diego closes the event with Brimelow by saying 'thank you so much for your time' and 'we'll be in touch', indicating a continuing correspondence with LD50.

The final talk in the series was delivered by Land, who is a long-term darling of the art world and academia because of his work with the Cybernetic Cultures Research Unit in the 1990s. Land is a key proponent of accelerationism's central tenet that capitalism must exceed its own limits through a devouring, all-encompassing growth (see Tim Dixon's 'Art and Accelerationism' AM403). His later theoretical work – before moving to China to work as a journalist after the closing of the CCRU – engaged with esoteric Kabbalist number systems and the QWERTY keyboard. This work remains attractive to many in the art world and in academia, offering the frisson of esoteric obscurantism and cold nihilism. Land's current interests have seen him become a philosophical guru for elements of the so-called 'alt-right' groups of white supremacists and nationalists. His exceptionally turgid text 'The Dark Enlightenment' describes the 2012 Trayvon Martin murder as 'too good to be true' for progressives, decries the 'politically awakened masses as a howling irrational mob', and coldly emphasises measurable intelligence as a mark of supremacy among humans. He takes a conspiratorial view, describing western society as being maintained by 'The Cathedral', a term used to describe values of democracy,

tolerance and equal rights. Land's presence at the conference epitomises one of the means by which the art world regularly flirts with elements of fascist thinking. The combination of Land with Brimelow, Stevens, Thranholm and Citadel is a coherent attempt to link already-present art-world discourses with their ideological cousins – in other words, it presents a milieu.

After the conference was over, LD50 held an exhibition entitled '71822666' for the name of a thread on 4chan predicting Trump's election victory. The invitation included a photograph of pop star Taylor Swift with a quote from Adolf Hitler and the logo of the Afrikaner Resistance Movement and the Blood and Honour group, both neo-Nazi organisations. While Swift has no professed allegiance to such groups, she has become a symbol for white supremacists and white nationalists who describe her as a 'perfect Aryan goddess'. The exhibition was composed of tweets and memes by contributors including @realDonaldTrump alongside 'alt-right' Twitter personalities such as @BronzeAgePerv, @kantbot2000 and @Kekpriest. Also included was mass-shooter Elliot Rodger's video manifesto, which detailed his anger at having been rejected by women, produced before he killed six people in Santa Barbara in 2014. On Instagram, LD50 described these contributors as 'our new artists'. The exhibition combined these aspects with candles, altars, flowers, a robot-like sculpture and Top Trump-style playing cards that listed the 'attributes' of various neoreactionary and 'alt-right' figureheads, including both Land and Richard Spencer. The show's combination of far-right material with new technologies and esoteric, new-age imagery precisely signals how LD50's rightwards turn coheres with the broader field of contemporary art the gallery had engaged with since at least 2013.

In Morgan Quaintance's article 'Cultic Cultures' (AM404) he examines the appeal of the occult within London's young art scene, stressing feminist and queer engagements, while arguing that we need to consider the appeal of magic and mysticism for the far right. The same concern applies to the accelerationist obsession with new technologies – and particularly the idea of 'the singularity' – meaning that artificial intelligence will grow exponentially and become so powerful that it will result in the wholesale transformation of human life. Notable artists who engage with these tropes include Daniel Keller, Ed Fornieles, Yngve Holen and Simon Denny, as well as publications and curatorial collectives such as Dis; indeed, we could view the 9th Berlin Biennale (Reviews AM398) as being the apex of this aesthetic in its blending of online health and lifestyle cultures, marketing tools, new technologies (particularly those that adapt the human body), conspiracy theories and new-age subcultures.

Importantly, this aesthetic also characterises musical subcultures that grew online in the early 2010s, principally vaporwave, a nostalgia-heavy and techno-orientalist genre inspired by anaemic corporate mood music. As with LD50's turn towards neoreactionary thought, a similar phenomenon has emerged through the development of the micro-genres 'fashwave' and 'Trumpwave'.

Defences of far-right, white-supremacist ideas made in the name of free speech imagine that such debates can be held neutrally. What they fail to understand is that while the art world likes to imagine itself as a free space for the liberal exploration of ideas, this is a delusion only permissible to those who never have to feel vulnerable on the street.

While currently a small subcultural phenomenon, it is becoming a key soundtrack for the far right with Andrew Anglin, founder of one of the principal neo-Nazi sites *The Daily Stormer*, praising it as 'the whitest music ever' for its ostensible lack of 'African rhythmic influence' as reported in a Thump.com article by Eli Kerry and Penn Bullock. 'Alt-right' figurehead Richard Spencer has spoken approvingly of the genre, stating that he listens to the artist Cyber Nazi while working, emphasising that he is pleased that 'we have our own culture, even if it's small!'

The significance of building a cultural wing is described by posters on the 4chan /pol/ forum, a central arena for the 'alt-right'. One poster links to a googledoc entitled 'Westhetica', which acts as a kind of instruction manual for the production of 'alt-right' (with the title emphasising 'western') aesthetics. The anonymous author suggests 'synthesising' ... futuristic themes with a classical greco-roman base ... 80s retro neon vibrancy ... postmodernism and distinct irony' alongside new-age imagery. These are all classic vaporwave and post-internet associated tropes, and the document further stresses the idea that 'emphasis on aesthetics helps separate the notion of white identity from fat spergs/skin heads and dorky cuckservative stiffs in order to gain wider appeal'. The aim is to 'appeal to the more Bohemian type of people ... They could be drawn in by the aesthetics and then get redpilled with incremental exposure to the ideas of the alt-right'. This stands as an attempt to

promotional imagery for vaporwave act Winner's Club



Mary Wigman
Hexentanz
(Witch Dance)
 1926 photograph
 by Charlotte
 Rudolph



rebrand the culture typically associated with white supremacist movements in order to assist in the goal of entryism among the young, white bourgeoisie.

If we think more carefully about the aesthetic tropes of mysticism and technological accelerationism, we can see that they are also steeped in the history of entanglements between the avant-gardism and politics dating back to the inter-war years in Europe. Rudolf Laban, a Dada Zurich associate and the founder of modern dance, established and lived in the esoteric, back-to-nature Monte Verità commune near Ascona in Switzerland where he worked with others such as Mary Wigman, whose work engaged with ritual, witchcraft and East Asian dance. After 1933, both Laban and Wigman accommodated and collaborated with the Nazi regime, Laban becoming head of the German Tanzbühne and Wigman choreographing a mass dance for the notorious 1936 Berlin Olympic games. While both Wigman and Laban had fallen out of favour with the Nazis by the latter half of the 1930s, what is important here is the convergence of their mysticism with Nazism, a connection resting on the invocation of an idealised archaic, 'pre-modern' era. In terms of the accelerationist impulse that undergirds the cogency between contemporary art and far-right aesthetics, a well-known precedent lies in Futurism's valorisation of speed, war and death that was famously described by Walter Benjamin as the aestheticisation of politics.

The third element emphasised in the Westhetica document is irony, the primary tonal register for many artists associated with post-internet practice, as described by Quaintance in his article 'Right Shift' (*AM*387). Irony has typified much popular culture since at least the 1990s, often associated with the influence of *Vice* magazine, which has since grown into a much larger media platform and dissociated itself from the rampant misogyny and 'jokey' racism that defined its millennial so-called edginess. If Land cannot be called an 'eccentric' intellectual

after reports that Steve Bannon (chief strategist in the Trump administration) admires his work, racism and misogyny should never have been imagined as being considered 'ironic' while states and capital consistently maintain and reproduce these structures. This is what is missed by commentators such as former *AM* contributor Daniel Miller (or 'DC Miller' as he sometimes calls himself) when he defended LD50 in a one-man counter-protest and on Facebook by declaring 'A non-conformist in the art world – they aren't extinct – incredible! – who would have thought?' Racism and misogyny are not 'non-conforming' ideologies and I don't need to waste space here describing the reality of how they are reproduced in and through the art world which, unfortunately for certain fantasists within its orbit, happens to be part of the wider world.

This is also the problem with the 'free speech' argument mobilised by JJ Charlesworth and Jonathan Jones in their defences of LD50 published respectively in *Art Review* and the *Guardian*. Like Miller, Charlesworth seems to believe that culture in the West is governed by a strangling political correctness. He dismisses the Shut Down LD50 campaign as being based on 'wild assumptions' which he believes he has broken down by speaking to Diego. This is a peculiar argument, made even more so by Charlesworth's claim that no 'conference' was held, after Diego told him so. His acceptance of her claims rests on an argument that three of the talks (Branholm, Brimelow and Land) were Skype calls, with the other two talks presented as recorded texts read by 'digital avatars'. The idea that a conference is not a conference because some people called in through Skype is laughable, let alone the fact that had Charlesworth bothered reading the material gathered by Shut Down LD50, he would have seen the already-discussed invitation to a 'conference on Reactionary and Neoreactionary thought' sent out by LD50.

Jones's defence positioned the Shut Down LD50 campaign as 'absolutist' and dogmatic, a threat to the values of art. Charlesworth, Jones and Miller all defend the gallery from the perspective of free speech, yet if nothing else I hope this article clears up the fact that there was nothing 'free' about how these ideas were presented. The audio of Brimelow's talk confirms that the audience was already on board with anti-semitism and ethno-nationalism, and this is what makes it a conference. It was a gathering of like-minded individuals with the desire of furthering their interests and connections.

Defences of far-right, white-supremacist ideas made in the name of free speech imagine that such debates can be held neutrally. What they fail to understand is that while the art world likes to imagine itself as a free space for the liberal exploration of ideas, this is a delusion only permissible to those who never have to feel vulnerable on the street. Even more galling is the idea that vulnerability exists in the figure of the 'endangered' white man who is imagined as particularly 'at risk' – and thus heroic – where he defends free speech. This notion is particularly dangerous in that it has become a central tenet of the contemporary far right and the current US administration, and it is being persistently mobilised to increase the risk of violence to those who do not conform to such an identitarian position. That the art world is an arena for the furthering of such positions should come as no surprise, and unfortunately those of us who want to halt their growth probably need to be prepared to repeatedly intervene with strength and clarity in the coming years. ■

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