

Franz Wanner. Suspended Presences

March 24 – July 19, 2026

A pair of Plexiglas safety goggles stands at the beginning of the exhibition of Franz Wanner (b. 1975, Bad Tölz). The glasses were unearthed during excavations on the grounds of the former Sachsenhausen concentration camp. It belonged to a person who was used for forced labor in the arms industry and wore it to protect themselves. To date, no information has been recovered about the imprisoned person who was forced to work in the arms industry and who used the glasses to preserve their eyesight. Their desire to protect themselves is evident to this day.

The material of which the glasses were made was brought to market in 1933 by the German company Röhm & Haas under the trademark "Plexiglas." In the 1930s, the synthetic material was reserved almost entirely for the war industry. Propaganda exhibitions by the National Socialist state touted the technical possibilities of the shadowless material. Today, a wide variety of objects are made of Plexiglas, from police shields to museum display cases. For his exhibition, Wanner detaches these objects from their original function to mark the gallery space as a scene of crime. During the Nazi era, forced laborers were exploited in museums including the Lenbachhaus in the name of "art protection," for example to evacuate artworks during air raids.

Franz Wanner is interested in the gap between reality and self-representation of the Federal Republic of Germany. To this end, he researches its history and closely examines how it is embellished, sanitized, and utilized for present-day purposes. The exploitation of labor is the central theme of his exhibition at the Lenbachhaus: under Nazism, forced labor was widespread in all areas of society. The recruitment agreements with Italy, Turkey, Greece, and Yugoslavia starting in the mid-1950s were founded in part on the extensive structures of Nazi forced labor. As a result, people who were recruited from 1955 onwards and moved to Germany were partly housed in former Nazi barracks, which were referred to as "guest worker camps"; the legal basis for the agreements was based on a Nazi decree from 1938.

Through his questioning of state institutions such as the secret service and the police, his research into the interconnection between university research and the arms industry, and Germany's active role in the European Union's defensive migration policy, Wanner asks how and where the Nazism of then continues in today's neoliberal imperative.

As artist in residence at the Harun Farocki Institute, Franz Wanner developed the exhibition "Mind the Memory Gap" for the KINDL – Center for Contemporary Art in Berlin. The exhibition at Lenbachhaus is based upon this earlier presentation.

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Curated by Stephanie Weber