

# The Dirty History of Cleanliness, from Racist Purity to Recent Right-Wing ‘Hygiene Demonstrations’

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# Frieze

**Pablo Larios:** In recent weeks, so-called ‘hygiene demonstrations’ – done to protest social distancing measures during Covid-19 – have erupted across Germany. These have drawn an unlikely assortment of groups: anti-immigration extremists, conspiracy theorists, right-wing populists, as well as leftist anti-capitalist protesters, privacy activists and anti-vaxxers. You direct the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden. How has hygiene been politicized?

**Klaus Vogel:** The notion of hygiene dates from the second half of 19th century, when technological and scientific achievements greatly improved living conditions for broad sections of the population. It’s important to distinguish hygiene – as a civilizing, progressive achievement – from the way it has been ideologically and metaphorically instrumentaized. For instance, by deeming ‘unhygienic’ the poor, or foreigners or other people society wants to exclude. These kinds of distortions reached a racist, criminal climax with so-called ‘racial hygiene’. This led to the Nazi policy of extermination. The fact that right-wing populist groups today are protesting against necessary hygiene measures in the name of justice and individual freedom is a macabre point in history.



ODOL advertisement, 1895. Courtesy: Deutsches Hygiene Museum, Dresden

**PL:** What stories about hygiene and health are told at the Hygiene Museum in Dresden?

**KV:** 'Hygiene' in the above sense is not specifically addressed in our permanent exhibition, 'Adventure Man'. But, following [Theodor] Adorno and [Max] Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we approach the concept dialectically. The museum's is guided not by a model of the healthy, 'hygienic' human being, but rather a commitment to the imperfection of human being: a person who can be sick, weak or disabled without losing rights or dignity.

**PL:** What historical precedents do you see for today's hand-washing, social distancing and mask-wearing?

**KV:** A look at the history of disease control reveals many parallels with the measures taken today in terms of cleanliness or the isolation of affected individuals. Of course, they differ in their details, due to different knowledge about specific pathogen characteristics. However, a basic pattern recurs as the most effective interruption of transmission paths and thus the spread of disease.



Erik van Lieshout, *Art Blasé*, 2020, mask edition. Courtesy: the artist and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

**PL:** What objects, texts or stories from today do you anticipate being relevant for future generations as they look back on this period?

**KV:** Some museums have started to collect industrially or self-produced masks. But more important than these everyday objects are the stories associated with them. The intense and energized reflection of the pandemic across the media spectrum seems to suggest a paradigm shift for our societies – for instance, a re-adjustment of the relationship between freedom and responsibility. Whether this is really the case or whether we're merely experiencing a critical phase of world events, we'll only know in several years' time.

*Dr. Klaus Vogel is director of the German Hygiene Museum and honorary professor at the School of Fine Arts in Dresden, Germany.*



*LKVM (Lorenz Klingebiel & Vangeli Moschopoulos), 20–30 Seconds (Solidarity II), shirt. Courtesy: LKVM and Everpress*

Defying this year's run of cancellations and postponements, Manifesta 13 will take place in Marseille, France, in August. The artistic directors of Manifesta 13 (Katerina Chuchalina, Stefan Kalmár and Alya Sebti) have just released the names of participating artists:

Yalda Afsah, Antonin Artaud, Aoziz (Béatrice Pedraza, Ludovic Mohamed Zahed, Andrew Graham), Mounir Ayache, Yassine Balbzioui, Georges Bataille, Roland Barthes, James Benning, Minia Biabiany, Black Quantum Futurism, Hannah Black, Anna Boghiguan, Mohamed Bourouissa, Benjamin de Burca & Barbara Wagner, Center for Creative Ecologies (Isabelle Carbonell, Hannah Meszaros Martin, T. J. Demos), Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Ali Cherri \*, Dennis Cooper and Gisèle Vienne, Julien Creuzet, Pauline Curnier Jardin, Martine Derain, Lukas Duwenhögger, Jana Euler, Ymane Fakhir, Peter Fend, Théodore Fournoy, Pierre

Guyotat, Samia Henni , Stine Marie Jacobsen, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho, Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Ken Okiishi, Sara Ouhaddou, Selma & Sofiane Ouissi, Philippe Pujol, Arthur Rimbaud, Cameron Rowland, Sara Sadik, Judith Scott, H el ene Smith, Lionel Soukaz, Reena Spaulings, Deonna Waldemar, Arseny Zhilyaev



Yvette Mutumba (left). Photograph: Benjamin Renter. Adam Szymczyk (right). Photograph: Marie Haefner / PW-Magazine

And good news from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Its director, Rein Wolfs, has just announced the appointment of Yvette Mutumba and Adam Szymczyk as curators-at-large of the institution. Mutumba is the co-founder and editor of the publishing platform *Contemporary And (C&)* and *Contemporary And Am eric a L atina (C&AL)*. Szymczyk was the artistic director of Documenta 14, and teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, Austria.

Main image: Protesters at Berlin's Rosa Luxemburg Platz demand end to coronavirus Lckdown measures, 2020. Courtesy and photograph: Adam Berry/Getty Images