



Christian Geiger

geiger@hs-duesseldorf.de
MIREVI Lab, University of Applied
Sciences Düsseldorf, Germany

Andi Zielecki

andi.zielecki@hs-duesseldorf.de
MIREVI Lab, University of Applied
Sciences Düsseldorf, Germany

Timo Stampa

timo.stampa@lavalabs.de
LAVALabs Moving Images, Duesseldorf,
Germany

Das Trampeltier (The Clumsy One)¹ is an immersive installation that transposes Max Ernst's *Hausengel* (House Angel), one of the surrealist artist's most renowned works, into the present day. Painted by Max Ernst in 1937 during his stay in southern France, the painting *L'Ange du Foyer*, also known as *Triumph of Surrealism*, is a direct response to the events of the Spanish Civil War, particularly the air raid by the German aircraft squadron "Condor" on the Basque city of Guernica (Gernika) in Spain (Ulrich Bischoff, 2005). We have designed an interactive XR experience that enables users to interact with a digital replica of the painting's creature. To this end, we have created several scenes to provide an aesthetic experience in which users can interact with a 3D version of the house angel, named *Trampeltier*, in a playful and entertaining way in augmented reality. Our work is based on historical information about the Spanish Civil War and Max Ernst's work, as well as various populist strategies and fascist tendencies. We have disguised these in a game-oriented interactive experience with a real-time interactive creature, thus making them indirectly accessible. We believe that the *Hausengel*, born 90 years ago, is still an important witness to how certain political strategies can develop in a fragile, radically changing society.

Keywords: Augmented Paintings, Max Ernst, Playful Experience, Illustration of Autocratic Concepts.

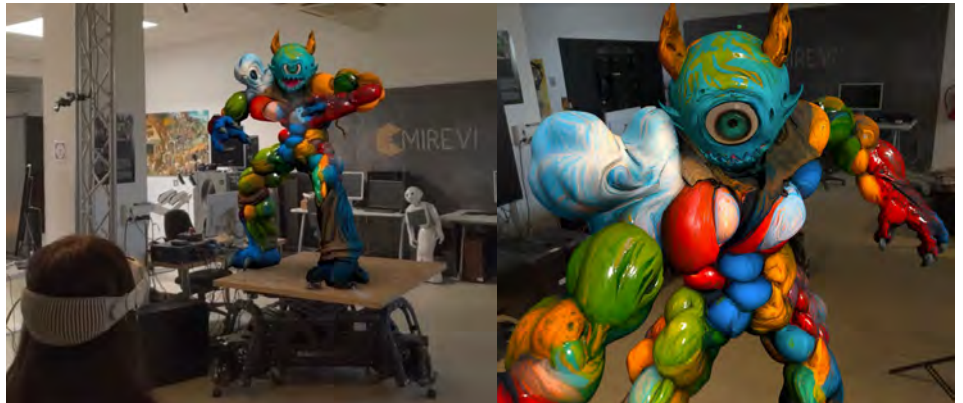
DOI [10.34626/2026_xcoax_034](https://doi.org/10.34626/2026_xcoax_034)

1. "It's [...] a kind of clumsy animal that destroys and ruins everything in its path." Max Ernst to Werner Spies, translated from the original: "Das ist [...] eine Art Trampeltier, das alles, was ihm in den Weg kommt, zerstört und vernichtet."

Fig. 1. Trampeltier's little sister coming to 3D life by jumping out of the frame. For this printed publication we used a self-designed 3D creature as double ("the younger sister") for the images. The interactive 3D experience features our animated 3D version of the original creature painted by Max Ernst.



Fig. 2. Trampeltier's little sister explores the environment and interacts with the user.



Motivation and Context

Max Ernst's *L'Ange du Foyer* (1937) is a surrealist allegory of fascism, painted in response to the bombing of Guernica. We refer to the third version of the piece, which was recently exhibited at the 2025 *Rendez-Vous of Dreams* exhibition at the Hamburger Kunsthalle (Parkinson 2025) in Germany. The art-historical reception of this work oscillates between political and aesthetic interpretations. Werner Spies interprets the outstretched limbs as an allusion to the swastika, while the green companion "Loplop" symbolises futile resistance (Spies 2005). Ingrid Kasten emphasises the work's constitutive ambiguity and the discrepancy between the title and image (Kasten 2013). We agree with her that Max Ernst regarded ambiguity as a defining feature of his art, and we designed our experience accordingly: the *Trampeltier* (Clumsy One) is never unambiguous, never reducible to a single ideological statement.

Our research has identified connections to autocratic structures and populist strategies, contextualizing these within a sensory-overloading aesthetic experience that uses immersive technologies and playful interaction between the user, the digital creature "Trampeltier", and digital content. Umberto Eco described the original fascist movement as having 14 features, including strong emotionality, the rejection of ra-

tional thinking, and the manipulation of masses through constant outrage towards simplistic enemy stereotypes (Eco 1995). Finchelstein has shown that certain forms of populism represent a reformulation of fascism that embraces democratic structures in order to change them from within (Finchelstein 2017). Mudde and Kaltwasser define populism as a “thin ideology” that pits the “pure people” against the “corrupt elite” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Neither fundamentally good nor bad, populism can correct or threaten democracy by delegitimizing liberal institutions. The intersection of populism with new media art and XR is a relevant research field. Kazlauskaitė’s study of “Polish virtual reality storyworlds” analyses XR/VR as a new locus of the politics of space, time and memory (Kazlauskaitė 2024). It reconstructs an “experiential geography of populism,” in which VR spaces are designed as “lived story spaces.” Social media platforms provide the structural conditions for political activism in all directions. As can be seen on X, Truth Social, Gab, and Parler, such platforms quickly offer individuals or extreme groups an efficient mouthpiece. Gray and Bay demonstrate that XR is shifting towards more immersive platforms, and that the characteristics of these platforms (as in the social media economy) can favour the concentration of social and economic power among a few actors. They argue that this highlights the need for proactive regulation (Gray and Bay 2023). Gray and Tang also use a content analysis of government documents to demonstrate how China is strategically embedding XR in a digital economy agenda. This makes XR visible as a state-framed policy area and helps to shape spaces of opportunity and control relevant to activism (Gray and Tang 2024). The importance of XR for digital literacy in the education domain is discussed in (Chang, Kuo and Du 2023).

Based on this research, we position populism as being in opposition to liberal democracy, guided by current trends in Europe, Russia and the US. We have chosen to use an immersive XR experience with an exploratory gaming element to demonstrate selected strategies and concepts of autocratic profiles. Despite its eerie appearance, the digitally simulated house angel in XR appears charismatic. By exaggerating scenarios, recipients are encouraged to question the seemingly entertaining presentation of populist perspectives — recognising the mechanisms of manipulation through direct experience rather than didactic instruction.

Concept of *Das Trampeltier*

Based on our research into XR-based experiences that illustrate populist strategies, we have selected patterns typical of populist agendas. These are presented in a playful way to encourage initial engagement and enjoyment. A central design principle is the twist: each scenario begins in a mode that feels entertaining or reasonable, before a structural reversal triggers critical reflection. The experience comprises four core scenarios.

Reinterpreting and Dominating Narratives

Interpretive authority is a central populist communication tool: telling stories from one's own perspective while ignoring or modifying controversial views. Influence occurs indirectly, with the recipient giving their perceived consent, and opponents are thus convinced to adopt populist positions. The “Trampeltier” tells the fairy tale *The Caring Bear and the Ungrateful Chickens*, in which a paternalistic bear prevents a neighbouring chicken coop from reorienting towards a western fox. The allegory maps closely onto recognizable geopolitical dynamics, encoding historical patterns — language erasure, forced collectivization, the logic of protective debt — into the bear's self-presentation as a loving father figure. Recipients can influence the story via spoken keywords and apparently decide its direction at several choice points. The twist is that the “Trampeltier” always steers the story towards its autocratic-populist conclusion: the illusion of equal participation is itself the message, and all paths converge on the same ending.

Fig. 3. Scenario *Dominating Narratives*:
Selecting a Story to “Tell the Truth” and
Telling the Spanish War.

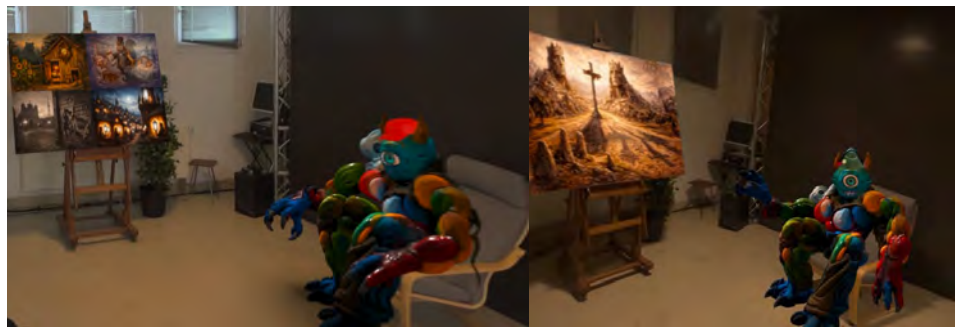


Fig. 4. Scenario *Dominating Narratives*:
Telling the Fairy Tale *The Caring Bear and the Ungrateful Chickens*.

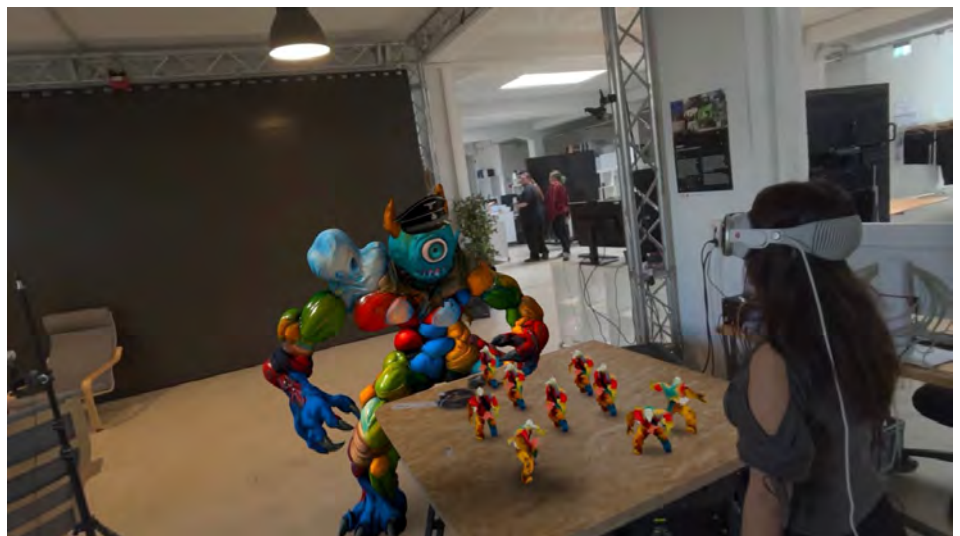


Gaining Majorities That Follow Uncritically

This strategy operates via what Timothy Snyder refers to as “anticipatory obedience” (Snyder 2017): “Most of the power of authoritarianism is voluntarily given. In times like these, individuals anticipate what a more repressive government will want and offer their services without being asked.” This self-reinforcing process enables rapid regime change, as people voluntarily offer their services. Populist mobilization uses emo-

tional appeals and crisis rhetoric. In uncertain times, people turn to ideologies that claim to provide uniform answers, while traditional certainties lose their ability to provide guidance. The construction of a homogeneous “people” creates conformity logic, where dissent appears as betrayal and critical questioning is systematically delegitimized. In the project, recipients use gestures to place small trampler figures on a table, where they peacefully converse in groups with different heartbeats and harmonious animations. Afterwards, the “Trampeltier” bangs on the table, causing the groups to become disorganized and line up like a military unit, marching in unison. The creature then gives commands, such as “Follow me”, and the foot soldiers continuously pursue it across the tabletop until they fall off.

Fig. 5. Scenario *Uncritical Majorities*: Trampeltier’s sister commands her followers.



Rewriting History as a Mythical Past

According to Jason Stanley, the construction of a “mythical past” is the first pillar of fascist politics, whereby history is strategically rewritten to legitimize current hierarchies (Stanley 2018). Mussolini formulated this logic in 1922 at the fascist congress in Naples, Italy: “We have created our myth. The myth is a belief, a passion. It is not necessary for it to be real” (Stanley 2018). This mythical past links nostalgia to the central tenets of fascist ideology: authoritarianism, hierarchy, purity and struggle. When the creature glorifies the Spanish Civil War on the Falangist side, it operates according to this logic: violence is not viewed as historical trauma, but as a heroic national purification that restores lost order. The creature recounts its war experiences in a monologue, responding to user questions but strongly relativizing answers that do not align with its ideological perspective. Vintage Spanish Civil War photographs appear simultaneously in the picture frame — often contrasting heavily with the creature’s euphemistic words. As a conditional extension of this scenario, a more detailed monologue on the bombing of Guernica activates only if the user raises the subject directly. This conditional disclosure rewards critical engagement: the deeper layer of manipulation becomes visible only to those who probe, and its content — the systematic delegitimization of historical testimony and the

relativization of Guernica as “just war” — is designed to be recognized as such through the contrast between the creature’s warm rhetorical style and the factual violence it euphemizes.

Breaking the Fourth Wall: The Creature Reflects

As an independent closing scenario — accessible after any of the three main experiences — the “Trampeltier” turns to address its own condition. Standing before the now-empty frame of Ernst’s painting, from which its silhouette has departed, the creature reflects on Max Ernst’s act of representation: a German expatriate in Paris, it argues, who painted “monsters” from a safe distance without understanding what he depicted. It reframes Ernst’s anti-fascist gesture as appropriation — the conversion of real suffering into aesthetic material for a comfortable intellectual milieu. The creature then turns this critique on the present project itself: The researchers, disparagingly referred to as “students” who liberated it from the frame, gave it a voice and a stage, believing they were warning against it — exactly as Ernst believed. The monologue ends with the creature’s triumphant declaration that it has been freed, not contained, by its re-animation in XR. This reflexive turn functions as a meta-commentary on the ambivalence of critical art practice: the attempt to make autocratic logic visible necessarily gives it presence, voice, and a certain charisma. The creature always has the last word — and the question of who has ultimately won is left deliberately unresolved.

Experience Design and Prototype

The user stands in front of a real oil painting — a true-to-scale copy of the original, commissioned from a professional copyist and displayed on an easel. The necessary props for the full experience are two nearby chairs, a mirror, a flashlight device and a table. The user wears an Apple Vision Pro and can move around freely. The glasses recognize the scene because they have been calibrated in advance using a marker as a calibration anchor to position the digital content.

After starting the experience, glowing position rings and particle systems appear on the floor to indicate interactive positions visually. When the user stands in one of these positions, the corresponding experience begins: a stream of particles flows towards the real image, awakening the “Trampeltier”, which then jumps out of the frame. A digital overlay subsequently obscures the real image. The other scenarios start when the user enters the respective floor field, indicated by a blue glowing ring and a light particle stream.

The animated content was created using suitable generative AI services, including Tencent Hunyuan3D v3.0, with automatic rigging via Mixamo Autorigger. Post-processing of 3D animated content was done in Blender. Two-dimensional image content was generated via prompt-based generation using FLUX.2 Pro. Real-time conversations are based

on an STT–LLM–TTS workflow: Deepgram transcribes voice input into text; Claude Haiku 4.5 generates a contextual response with low latency; ElevenLabs converts this back into speech. ElevenLabs v2.5 Turbo is used for real-time output, while ElevenLabs v3 Alpha is used for pre-produced voice lines. The 3D environment was implemented in Unity3D 2022/V6 and configured for Apple Vision Pro.

The ambivalence of the experience is reinforced by the colourful 3D figure design and deep, sonorous voice, which are contrasted with the monstrous appearance, individual sounds and dramatic lighting. Conversations incorporate subtle references to populism and fascist stereotypes, as well as rhetorical phrases that simulate emotional closeness. Prototype feedback has confirmed both technological fascination and the twist effect.

Conclusion

Das Trampeltier proposes an immersive XR experience as a critical creative form capable of making autocratic and populist strategies perceptible through direct encounter rather than explanation. The four core scenarios — narrative domination, the production of uncritical majorities, the rewriting of history, and the creature’s reflexive self-declaration — form a coherent arc from seduction to meta-commentary. Each scenario is designed so that the manipulation is recognizable in retrospect, or for attentive observers in the moment: the illusion of choice in the fairy tale, the visible collapse of free movement in the majorities scenario, the contrast between rhetoric and photographic evidence in the history monologue, and the creature’s own candid admission in the closing scenario that it has been liberated rather than contained.

The project positions itself within a broader research context that treats XR not as a neutral medium but as a political space — one that can reproduce the immersive logic of authoritarian spectacle or turn that logic against itself. Whether *Das Trampeltier* ultimately achieves the latter remains, intentionally, an open question. As the creature itself observes: to give the monster a voice is already to set it free.

Acknowledgements. This work was developed within the framework of the research project Theatre of Extended Realities, a collaboration between Theater an der Ruhr (Mülheim), MIREVI (Hochschule Düsseldorf), the Academy for Theatre and Digitality (Dortmund), and Dr. Jonathan Harth. It was funded by the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia as part of the NEUE WEGE program, in cooperation with the NRW KULTURsekretariat. The character production research was partially funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR) within the “The Future of Value Creation – Research on Production, Services and Work” program, managed by the Project Management Agency Karlsruhe (PTKA) (funding code: 02L19C402). The authors are responsi-

ble for the content of this publication. We used claude.ai, scite.ai, deepl.com and perplexity.ai for translation, research and text refinement.

References

Bischoff, Ulrich.

2005. *Max Ernst 1891–1976: Beyond Painting*. Taschen.

Chang, Chu-Yang, Hsu-Chan Kuo, and Zhengyi Du.

2023. "The Role of Digital Literacy in Augmented, Virtual, and Mixed Reality in Popular Science Education: A Review Study and an Educational Framework Development." *Virtual Reality* 27 (3): 2461–79. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10055-023-00817-9>.

Eco, Umberto.

1995. "Ur-Fascism." *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/>.

Finchelstein, Federico.

2017. *From Fascism to Populism in History*. University of California Press.

Gray, Joanne E., and Morten Bay.

2023. "Platform Power, XR, and the Metaverse: New Challenges or Old Structures?" *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2023i0.13424>

Gray, Joanne E., and Wenjia Tang.

2024. "The Chinese metaverse: An analysis of China's policy agenda for extended reality (XR)." *Policy & Internet* 17 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.418>

Kasten, Ingrid.

2013. "Bild, Meditation und ästhetische Erfahrung: Max Ernst: L'Ange du Foyer ou Le Triomphe du Surréalisme." *Paragrana* 22 (2): 181–8. <https://doi.org/10.1524/para.2013.22.2.181>

Kazlauskaitė, Rūta.

2024. "Pictures in Our Heads: Politics of Space, Time, and Memory in Polish Virtual Reality Storyworlds." *Memory Studies* 18 (4): 1004–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980241283895>

Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser.

2017. "Populism and Democracy." In *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. *Very Short Introductions*, New York, online edn, Oxford Academic, February 23, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780190234874.003.0005>.

Parkinson, Gavin.

2025. "Träume." In *Rendezvous der Träume: Surrealismus und Deutsche Romantik*, edited by Annabelle Görgen-Lammers, 122–23. Hamburger Kunsthalle / Hatje Cantz. <https://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/en/press-releases/rendezvous-dreams>.

Snyder, Timothy.

2017. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Tim Duggan Books.

Spies, Werner.

2005. "Max Ernst: L'Ange du Foyer." In *Melancholy: Genius and Madness in Art* (Exhibition Catalogue), edited by Jean Clair. Hatje Cantz, 60–63.

Stanley, Jason.

2018. "The Mythic Past." In *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*. Random House.