

**Nils Alix-Tabeling**  
***But Who is Ulrike Mandrake?***

Dortmunder Kunstverein, Dortmund, Germany  
24 June – 10 September 2023  
Opening 23 June 2023

*Curated by Rebekka Seubert*

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In his exhibition “But Who is Ulrike Mandrake?” Nils Alix-Tabeling links issues of social justice to questions of human, animal and environmental coexistence on our planet. Referencing a séance, the title-giving figure of Ulrike Mandrake is brought into the space through a special spatial arrangement of chairs, an audio work and vertical objects resembling antennae. The name of this fictive figure derives from the first name of the journalist and RAF terrorist Ulrike Meinhof (1934–1976) and the poisonous medicinal and ritual mandrake plant. The root of the mandrake not only resembles the human form but here also stands for an intellectual history of civil disobedience that pervades the exhibition like a rhizome, like a botanical continuity.

The sculptural, painterly, acoustic and performative works in this exhibition draw on the artist’s symbolic and visual vocabulary: on science fiction, fashion, history, furniture, shamanism and witchcraft. Nils Alix-Tabeling combines finely worked wooden sculptural elements with found objects, textiles with natural substances (medicinal herbs, goat gut), 3D printing, plaster casts and metalwork. Along with references to social issues, these detailed works often make use of a camp aesthetic and humour to address social ills: on closer inspection the dorsal markings of the copulating fire-coloured beetle (fr. ‘gendarme’) in the painting “Aubépine, Spiral, Violence” (2023) show the word ‘police’. As in earlier pieces, which dealt with witch-hunting, Jeanne d’Arc and LGBTQ+-free zones in Poland, the works examine the history of institutional violence against female and queer bodies. A recurrent element is the ‘wurm’ (old eng. ‘snake, dragon, tapeworm’), a symbol for the patriarchal structures that recurrently challenge the desire for an egalitarian society. In the sculpture “Tape Wurm Slain by Ulrike Mandrake’s Arrow” (2023) a worm is brought down by a magic arrow with the face of Ulrike Meinhof.

The white chairs (“Untitled”, 2023) remind the posture of people at prayer; the heads in between the chairs’ legs are strangely deformed, and the cushions have the appearance of brains. The clinical aesthetic of these objects recalls institutional furniture, and reflects the way state facilities treat the bodies of nonconformists. The audio work “Conversation From Prison” (2023) coming from just over the chairs, conveys a fictional dialogue between two German political activists; the terrorist Ulrike Meinhof and the communist politician Rosa Luxemburg. Both women were imprisoned for several years, the first for attempted murder, the second for her verbal criticism of state systems. The ‘brain-cushions’ stand as pars pro toto for different thoughts that have motivated past generations to political action, taking varying degrees of radicality. Through the fictive figure of Ulrike Mandrake, Nils Alix-Tabeling raises questions around current coexistence amidst global upheaval, since the climate crisis has put civil disobedience back into the debate. In a 1970 speech on this subject, political theorist Hannah Arendt spoke out against terror, violence and destruction. In the pressing issues of her time – ongoing racist discrimination and the Vietnam War – she saw an erosion of the ‘consensus universalis’ that was leading to a social emergency: “Perhaps an emergency was needed before we could find a home for civil disobedience, not only in our political language, but in our political system as well. An emergency is certainly at hand when the established institutions of a country fail to function properly and its authority loses its power.” (quoted from: Hannah Arendt, ‘Civil Disobedience’, 1970). Nils Alix-Tabeling’s exhibition draws a line that connects the past, present and future of civil disobedience.

*Nils Alix-Tabeling (\*1991 in Paris) studied visual arts at the Académie de La Cambre, Brussels and at the Royal College of Art, London. His works were part of international exhibitions such as at Palazzo Bollani, Venice (2022), Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2019) and Kunstraum, London (2019). This is his first institutional exhibition in Germany.*

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