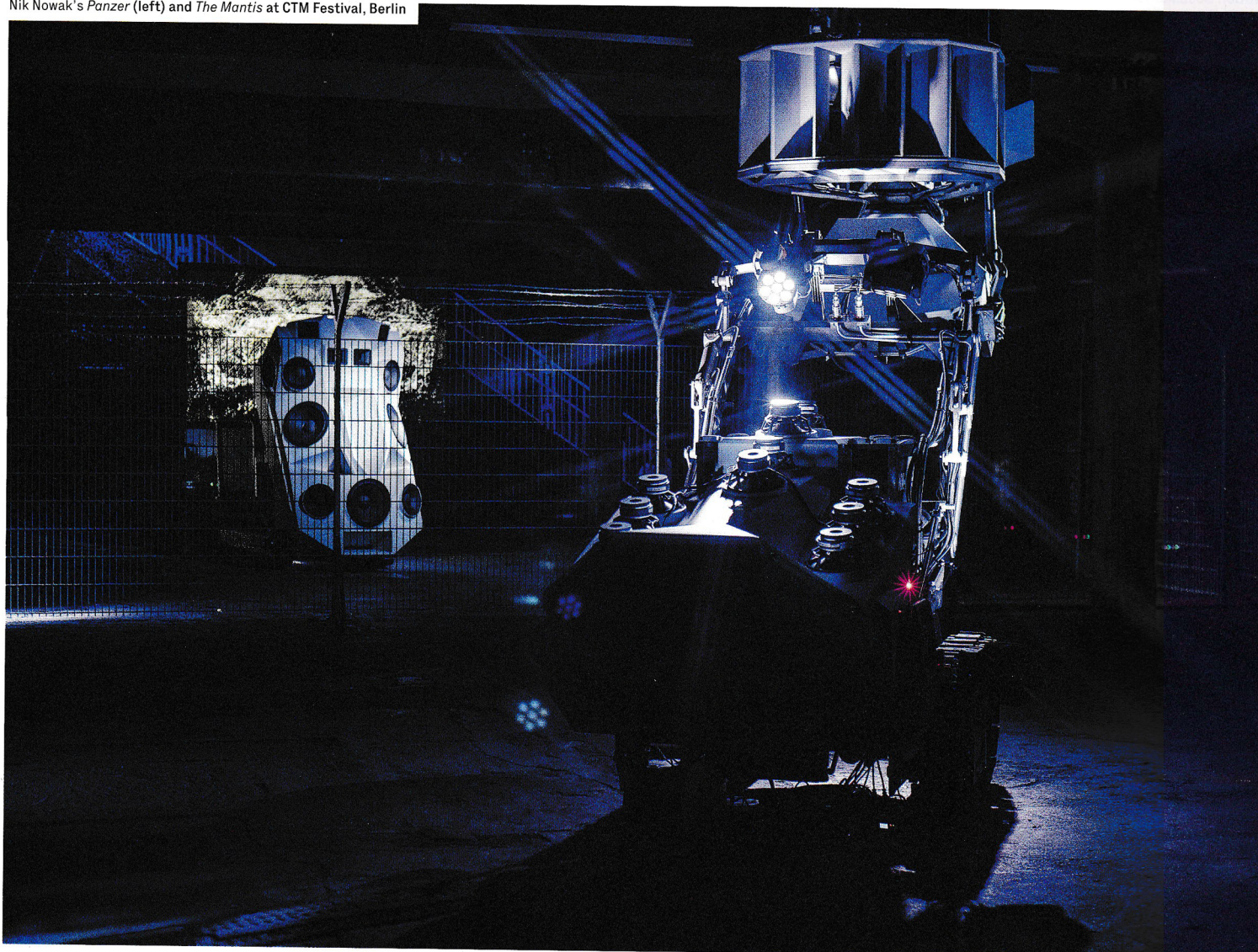


On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc

Nik Nowak's *Panzer* (left) and *The Mantis* at CTM Festival, Berlin



Nik Nowak, Kode9 & Moritz Stumm *The Mantis*

Halle am Berghain, Berlin, Germany

In the work of Nik Nowak, the exploration of power structures and the weaponising of everyday technologies make for both aesthetically appealing entertainment and politically ripe commentary. You couldn't accuse Nowak's *The Mantis*, a collaboration with Kode9 and Moritz Stumm as part of this year's CTM festival in Berlin, of being subtle in its execution, but its reference to the city's past and global contemporary politics is compelling.

One part sculpture, one part mobile sound system, *The Mantis* is designed to move about on a small tank-like tractor unit. Taking its name from the insect, in installation mode it sits with its 23 eight inch speaker cones, 21 inch subwoofer, and four tweeter horns raised high in the

air to do battle with Nowak's previous work *Panzer* across a barbed wire fence. The combination of speakers pushes Kode9's throbbing mix through the three power amplifiers to produce 7500 watts of sound across the concrete hall.

With their sharp angles and matt colours, *The Mantis* and *Panzer* bring to mind stealth bomber technology. In the enclosed space of Berghain's concrete walls, and with the music of Kode9 pumping out, their presence is imposing and anything but stealthy.

The installation references the early days of the Berlin Wall and what came to be known as the loudspeaker war. In the mid-1960s the East Berlin propaganda machine was in full force, using speakers to fill the air between the two halves of the city with Communist propaganda. It was so loud at times that it disrupted crowds that

had gathered for public events. With US funding, the West Berliners replied in kind. The SaS (Studio am Stacheldraht or Studio at the barbed wire fence) equipped a flotilla of heavy trucks and Volkswagen buses with state of the art loudspeakers to return the favour, the SaS chief boasting that, if the whole battalion was deployed at once, they would emit enough noise to cause physical disturbance and make people vomit.

Moritz Stumm's video projection is a scratch video mix of stills of SaS Volkswagen buses mixed with industrial footage of marching soldiers from Communist countries across the globe, 60s advertising footage and engineering documentation of speakers. The theme is the language of propaganda – both (not so) subtle capitalism and overt military.

Although the Berlin Wall was breached in November 1989, the current political

climate across the globe couldn't be more ripe for reflection in Nowak's *Mantis*.

Except the propaganda war today is as likely to take place across social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, as it is in the real world. Artists such as Nik Nowak (and Mark Pauline's Survival Research Labs) assure us that military technology and its applications in public spaces aren't so far removed from our ability to appropriate for our own use. But, while we've come a long way in political history the propaganda wars are still alive and well.

Mantis, aesthetically accomplished and sonically sublime, leaves you with an uneasy feeling in the pit of your stomach. A feeling that maybe the next propaganda war has already been lost, before we even knew who was the enemy.

Mark Hancock