

The World Will Not Grow Too Small for Them: Das Ich

A conversation with Bruno Kramm



This band needs no introduction. For decades, it has been a defining force within the dark scene—and has shaped the fusion of drama and music like few others: Das Ich, the band formed by Bruno Kramm and Stefan Ackermann.

New Sounds for the Scene

With the arrival of the new year, 1991 saw the release of the band's first album, *Die Propheten*. Eleven tracks marked the beginning of what has now become a 35-year presence, laying the foundation upon which fourteen further albums have since been built. Yet it was also a foundation that brought its own weight: "Our very first album was already described as a milestone, with 30,000 copies sold. Before that, we pursued our passion in isolation—suddenly, we found ourselves in the spotlight."

Although the success was deserved, it also led to a kind of paralysis. Stefan and Bruno were striving for perfection, seeking to do justice both to themselves and to their listeners. Initially, this resulted in a desire to emancipate themselves from the scene, in order to avoid falling into the same clichés. What ultimately proved decisive was a shift in focus. The result was *Staub*, an album marked by sharp social and societal critique—a direction that would shape every subsequent release.

Practicing Death

Anyone who has shaped a genre called Neue Deutsche Todeskunst inevitably engages with death on multiple levels. Whether in the musical adaptation and staging of Gottfried Benn's *Morgue* poems or in lines such as those from 'He Mensch' (*Egodram*, 1998): "Wir üben heute schon den Tod von morgen/Dass einer Tod meint und doch vom Leben spricht.», death is omnipresent throughout the band's oeuvre. The apparent opposition between life and death



reaches another climax in 'Vanitas', when Das Ich quote "All is vanity" (Andreas Gryphius), a Baroque sonnet.

Despite this omnipresence—so formative within the dark scene and visible in both music and imagery—the band's lyricism is remarkably multifaceted. Ecological themes, critiques of society, religion, and power, as well as psychological subjects, are only some of the fields Das Ich explores. Countless intermedial references appear, drawing on Gottfried Benn, the Bible, Georg Trakl, and many others.

These references are not always immediately apparent, yet they are integral to the works and form part of their particular allure. At the beginning of each piece stands a metaphysical idea that evolves: "Then it grows like a garden you do not tend; in the end, you see where you have to prune and tame the plants."

The Age of the Machine

Das Ich draw inspiration not only from literature but increasingly from social transformation and contemporary developments. One example appears on their latest album. Bruno Kramm engages intensively with artificial intelligence, as reflected in his speeches and his work within Germany's AI association. 'Genesis (Urknall)' tells the story of creation—but not from a human perspective; instead, from that of an AI. It challenges human hubris when it becomes evident that an AI might be measurably more intelligent than humans.

Kramm's engagement with machines extends far beyond AI. "Our subculture has always claimed not to be mass consumption—but it is dangerous that art and culture are being devalued by AI." He traces a line from sensors measuring emotional states—feeding personalized "sound padding" into streaming services—to a future where stars may be replaced by the self: via VR/AR, the consumer becomes the protagonist on stage or screen.

He argues that today's cultural industry fundamentally manifests and expands perfect capitalism. Tailor-made music, films, and books risk enclosing audiences in comfortable artificial worlds—making encounters with reality all the more jarring. In a world stripped of shared values, where even scientific disciplines are dismissed as mere opinion and content is endlessly replicated by AI, orientation becomes essential. "That we would take away from ourselves this beautiful gift—the ability to create—is sad," he says. "Oligarchs have appropriated the world's knowledge and now believe they can establish a new digital monarchy by virtue of their wealth."

The Wounds of Our Folly

Art must now find a way forward—away from the wall we have driven ourselves against. Kramm invokes Adorno: music is the art form closest to effecting change, especially in igniting the idea of revolution.

He describes an experiment in which he created characters for a drama and had multiple AI models generate an improvised play based on them. "You can learn a great deal about consciousness and cognition. But AI accelerates the levelling of art, culture—and social perception." The more people grow up within such uniformity, the harder it becomes to



engage with anything that deviates from it. This generates fear—and fear is rarely a reliable guide, as history has shown.

“There is too little reflection today on why things are the way they are,” he adds. “Many people fear change and retreat into the closed idyll of the 1960s.” In a globalized world, he considers this backward-looking tendency disastrous.

Distillate

This is precisely where Das Ich intervene, exposing wounds and insisting that art must be uncomfortable and point toward the ugly. Their latest album *Fanal* therefore focuses not only on protagonists but also on antagonists. The influence of Dadaism and Expressionism remains central: screaming, untamed expression, exaggerated representation—these are essential elements of Das Ich.

Not everyone responds positively to the intensity of their live performances, yet they remain key to understanding the band. A trip to Japan confirmed their artistic direction: there, they encountered *Ankoku Butō*, the “dance of darkness,” a postwar form of dance theatre without fixed structure. “We felt affirmed and inspired.”

Becoming part of a live performance is worthwhile: “We are still surprised by how few have attempted to imitate our performance. Stefan has an unparalleled ability to transform texts into gesture and expression. He has perfected this art in his own way.” Over time, rituals have developed around individual pieces. Performances always involve the audience—through eye contact or even moments when spectators become prompters.

The audience also becomes part of the concert in another way: “The surge of energy that meets you on stage is incredible—you can become dependent on it.” This closeness, extending beyond the concert itself, may be one of the last defining traits that keeps the Gothic subculture alive. “In the faces turned toward you, you can glimpse what kind of person someone is, how they have grown.” Shared experience becomes visible in these moments.

Rest—and Scream...

In a 2021 conversation with Dr. Tristan Behrens, Kramm argued that the kind of music Das Ich create cannot easily be replicated by AI, as it contains too many ruptures and unfamiliar elements. Listening to their albums confirms this: little feels conventional or repetitive. Each album is anchored in a core idea—a sound, a line, a sentence.

“The spaces and places where pieces are created are crucial. Every room you make music in speaks to you.” He describes sitting on a rock by the shore of a skerry island, playing cello and absorbing the atmosphere.

Ambient sounds play a vital role as well. This may include the abrasive rubbing of pumice stone—or the buzzing of millions of mosquitoes, once recorded for a track that ultimately did not appear on *Fanal*: “It sounds truly disgusting and eerie.”



By contrast, he finds the studio uninspiring: “Nothing is created there. There is nothing worse than sitting in the studio and patching songs together at the end.” He admits to procrastination.

Despite the variability of creative processes, the collaboration between Stefan and Bruno remains central. If one rejects a piece, it is discarded—almost reminiscent of Zen Buddhism, where a beautiful garden is created only to be destroyed. Currently, they are working on a new album.

This time, inspiration came from Plato’s *Phaidon*, centered on the immortality of the soul and the apparent duality of life and death. The project began with a single line: “Flesh is the wall that holds me. I am an I that falls outward.” The audience may anticipate what is to come.

For the first time, the upcoming album will also include a cover version of a piece important to the band. To claim that Das Ich have not evolved would be as misguided as asserting the continued scientific validity of Freud’s tripartite model of the psyche.

Inside the Self

Although the band calls itself Das Ich—positioned as a critical consciousness between moral authority (superego) and instinct (id)—the name also imposes limits that must be transgressed. In their early days, it was taboo for a Gothic band to sing in German, a language associated either with the Third Reich or with Schlager. From the outset, one thing was clear: this band sets its own rules.

Over the years, despite shifts in content and style, one constant has remained: their work reflects an intense engagement with its subject matter and resists a world in which facts are no longer recognized as such. *Fanal* serves as a signal: its stories draw on historical contexts and figures while functioning as warnings for the present.

The new album will undoubtedly continue where *Fanal* culminated—in a kind of big bang: precise, lyrically powerful, and highly relevant. And when *Phaidon* raises the hemlock cup, we will follow his final words in rapt attention.

Upcoming

Those who have found a home at the Zitadelle Spandau during the Danse Macabre Nights should remain attentive in the coming weeks. As already announced in the last edition, new horizons are about to unfold.

Das Ich are going on tour and will perform on August 1 in Mexico City (Orus Festival), followed by Granada, Spain, on September 25. Further dates include October 9 (Rockfabrik, Übach-Palenberg), October 17 (Dark Void Festival, Club Vaudeville, Lindau), and November 20 (Helsinki Industrial Festival).