

## **”What is the Sound of Protest?”**

I'd like to begin with a quote:

“Ich bin mit der Gesamtsituation unzufrieden”, which roughly translates as “I am dissatisfied with the whole situation”

It's a line from a Bully Herbig film - Michael Herbig (or Bully), in case you don't know, is a German comic actor and the quote comes from the film “Der Schuh des Manitu” in which he plays a Native American Indian. I'll leave you to ponder the many things that are wrong with that image. At the point in the film where he utters his immortal understatement he is tied to a tree and is facing almost certain death when he turns to his sidekick and says...

“Ich bin mit der Gesamtsituation unzufrieden”

“I am dissatisfied with the whole situation”

I first came across the quote when my partner Kay came to visit a friend here in Berlin and brought back to the UK a present of a t-shirt from a tourist shop in Prenzlauer Berg, which had the quote emblazoned on the front of it. She knew that my art practice was inspired by protest and politics and so the quote on the t-shirt, stripped of its original context, was extremely apt. This t-shirt, now faded and full of holes, has been a constant companion for the last 5 years.

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My practice as an artist has always considered the language and semiotics of protest movements and the wider political process. I am fascinated by the utopian gestures of the various historical revolutionary movements that date back to the birth of modernism and particularly by the futurists attempts to politicise art through the use of the manifesto as an aesthetic device. This link between art and politics is problematic and complex and embodies for me a tension between the notion of the artist as social activist and the artist as aestheticist.

Back in 2008, I was invited to be a panellist in a public discussion for The Battle of Ideas in London, debating the question “Is the Avant Garde passé?”. I made reference to the notion of “beauty” in relation to re-evaluating and repurposing everyday urban noise as art. The kind of sounds in a city that we tend to block out and ignore. A prominent art critic on the panel joked that he hadn't heard an artist talk about the notion of beauty in over 20 years.

I take my cue in this from the Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse and his book “The Aesthetic Dimension” in which he posits the idea that for art to be truly revolutionary it has to engage with a notion of beauty first and foremost.

So by asking the question “What is the sound of protest?” I am seeking to further my own investigation into the hidden and undiscovered sounds of protest that may lurk just below the audible surface. Could the sound of a coffee machine in an artisan coffee shop signal a resistance towards the globalisation of the high street and is the sound of birdsong a protest against urban development?

So, the weekend before last, I invited a group of Berlin based artists to come with me on a series of field recording trips; to act as my guides and to discuss with me the idea of ‘Berlin as a site of dissent’. Berlin, of course, has seen countless conflicts over the years, with many neighbourhoods physically and culturally marked by their association with historic protest movements.

On that Saturday morning, as on every Saturday you could hear, see and smell the sounds of the Prenzlauer Berg Farmers' market in Kollwitz Platz; with stalls selling all kinds of fast food, organic produce, artisan clothing and tourist tat. The sun was shining and it was hard to imagine that only a couple of decades before that this had been one of the most rundown areas of the former East Berlin.

The absence of visible or audible protest is perhaps as powerful a reminder of disharmony and discontent as an angry protest march. Here in an area that I once named “Latte Central” the normality and pleasantness of the situation seemed to signify a comfortable acceptance of the social norms; a quiet acquiescence to a neoliberal, globalised culture that has penetrated and dissolved all signs of otherness and disquiet.

The one noticeable interruption to the flow of capital were a pair of buskers, who through their expert musicianship had gathered around them a crowd of watchful market-goers eager to participate in an act of collective listening; an act that was less about the content of the music and more of a crowd-sourced trance or a coming together. It was doubly ironic then, that these rehashed hits of the 80s and 90s, represented somehow a disturbance in the fabric of reality. Was this the sound of protest?

After exploring the area surrounding the market in silence we set off towards Mitte to the Volksbühne, hoping to discover more audible signs of protest at the former home of Bertolt Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble. And it was here that I had my second epiphany of the day as I took myself on a slow walk around the back of the building. An air conditioning unit from a structure on the opposite side of the street was emitting a strange ethereal noise that was endlessly echoing around this narrow corridor of steel and concrete, creating a magical shifting soundscape that evaded and confused my sense of direction. Was this the sound of protest?

The following day we assembled in a very different environment outside the U Bahn at Kottbusser Tor to explore an area of Kreuzberg. We started with a discussion around a coffee table opposite a support centre for refugees that has become the focus of a movement to protect and defend refugee rights. The contrast between this area and the day before could not have been more marked... In silence we explored the streets, heading off the main road almost immediately and down past the local Die Grünen offices, once perhaps seen as a sign of hope, now seamlessly integrated into the gentrification process alongside the independent coffee shops and the vintage clothing stores. We were headed towards what we thought would be the remnants of a protest camp in Oranienplatz. We arrived to emptiness; no trace or sign of occupation, no posters, no people, no litter - NOTHING. Just an empty square - the sound of the traffic, uninterrupted. Was this silence the sound of protest?

We headed off towards the Kreuzberg Flowmarkt in the Prinzessinnengarten. This urban garden has been threatened with redevelopment for many years and has been saved for now by community action and solidarity, its vibrant and flourishing fortnightly market buzzing with young families, stallholders and only a few tourists. An oasis of small resistance alive with the flow of a different kind of capital. Here amongst the unwanted remnants of cupboards, lofts and wardrobes, in between the rows of reconditioned bicycles could be heard a faint, but nevertheless, distinct voice.

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**Joseph Young (2015)**