

## Protest Culture – Cultural Protest

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The workshop „Protest Culture – Cultural Protest,“ held at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt/Oder and at the Collegium Polonicum in Słubice, addressed recent forms of protest and the specific role that art and cultural practices of conviviality play in contemporary political contestations. From a comparative and transdisciplinary perspective, the workshop's aim was to share relevant questions and analytical tools for examining protest forms that combine political, artistic, and performative elements. We started with the observation that recent protests have frequently created new modes of political culture and public visibility that differ significantly from the ideological struggles and identity-based organizational forms of previous social and political movements. If identity politics, claims for recognition, and ideological struggles are no longer at the heart of contemporary political protest, we wanted to ask what new concepts of protest, political art, and aesthetics we have to consider to make sense of these ongoing changes.

The workshop started with the exhibition „Art of Protest – Protest of Art“ that showed videos, short films, photos, and documentations of artistic protest actions which were realized by students during a seminar led by JENNIFER RAMME (Frankfurt/Oder) who also curated the exhibition. The presented works dealt with issues such as surveillance; social control through work; forms of exploitation; and the relation between art, consumption, and resistance. The students' pre-

sentations offered diverse examples of artistic performances that functioned as disruption, or as temporary change or intensification of certain social processes and orders, and thus visualized the workshop's conceptual project of relating art, cultural performance, and protest.

Following a short introduction by SARAH DORNHOF (Berlin) presenting the workshop's major themes and hypothesis, the first panel „Semiotics, Visuality, and Embodiment of Protest“ brought forward central questions and notions for describing new forms of protest such as the Occupy Movement. TRAVIS MUSHETT (New York) presented his personal involvement in the occupation of New York's Zuccotti Park and drew on notions of anarchism and authenticity to relate forms of Occupy protest to the Situationist International. The idea of authenticity – as contested as it is today – was presented and also repeatedly taken up in later discussions as a specific experience of non- or anti-mediation, direct engagement, (re-)enactment, and immediacy that are at the center of many personal accounts of such forms of protest.

PABLO ABEND (Cologne) and ANNIKA RICHTERICH (Maastricht) discussed the double role of academics who participate in social movements as well as in defining and historicizing political protest forms. Informed by their on-the-ground experience with the Occupy Wall Street movement in Germany, Abend and Richterich suggested the metaphor of a socio-political laboratory to describe the way of experiencing and shaping collaborative political, artistic, and academic practices and reflexivity.

The performance artist MARCEL SPARMANN (Berlin) raised the issue of corrupting, manipulating, and re-appropriating the images and symbols that have widely replaced text-based messages in today's protests. Sparmann came back to the idea of authenticity to describe the bodily interaction in performances as the last functioning alarm system, not yet corrupted. Working on protest movements and performance culture, Sparmann develops workshop formats that aim at helping participants understand their own bodies within personal and social boundaries.

In her comment on these three presenta-

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tions, JENNIFER RAMME (Frankfurt/Oder) was critical about the notion of authenticity in relation to ideas of embodied, immediate protest forms. She questioned the implied assumption of a primary, non-mediated experience of the body, pointing instead at the permanent reproduction of differentiated bodies through social concepts and political norms. Even though recent protest movements have experimented with new forms of political culture and temporal communities, their force and effort to problematize and to undo hierarchies of differentiated bodies needs to be critically addressed and taken into account in empirical research.

The day continued with the second panel on „Cultural Hegemony, Protest, and Gender“ that started with IREM INCEOĞLU’s (Istanbul) talk on the Gezi Resistance in Istanbul. From an academic as well as activist’s point of view, Inceoğlu described how the (visual) language of that resistance movement was not limited to reclaiming a park as a public space but also created the „Gezi spirit“ – a collaborative, constructive, and respectful mode among protesters from very different political backgrounds which enabled new forms of mobilization and protest actions. In characterizing the movement, Inceoğlu emphasized the role of social media and the way in which the revolt extended the limits of cyberspace and became embodied in a public space.

Thinking about the hegemony of certain political discourses, JULIAN IRLenkÄUSER (Frankfurt/Oder) presented his research on Turkey’s „female objectors“ as a form to protest against hegemonic masculinity. In his view, the conscientious objectors movement is one example of the paradoxical reproduction of the very same hegemonic practices and structures that (leftist) resistance movements actually aim to overcome – like the exclusive visibility of men as the ones impacted by conscription and thus able to become „heroic leaders“ opposing it. In the context of the workshop, Irlenkäuser emphasized the importance of protest forms that coexist nearly invisibly in the shadow of other movements that receive more media coverage. To consider such forms of less visible protest can not only show differentiated political claims, but also draw attention to anti-hegemonic strug-

gles within political cultures of protest.

At the end of the day, the Moroccan activist YOUNÈS BELGHAZI (Salé) presented two films by Guerilla Cinema – a new filmmaking collective that opposes national film industry and regulatory structures in Morocco. Financed through crowdfunding, filmed without official permission, and using YouTube as a source of visual material as well as a platform for the film’s distribution, the film „My makhzen and me“ (Nadir Bouhmouch, 2012) documents the Moroccan February 20th movement and the context in which the protests in 2011 happened. Belghazi’s film „Basta“ articulates a critique of the national institution of film production and promotion, the Centre Cinématographique Marocain (CCM), and at the same time addresses politically sensitive issues such as rape, censorship, and political persecution through new activist film aesthetics. The discussion of these films raised practical questions about the relation between art and political activism and also demonstrated the need to account for regional particularities in contextualizing protest forms.

The last day began with the topic of „Post-migrational and Postcolonial Art,“ which focused more on artistic forms with political implications than on the more obvious forms of protest considered before. NADINE JÄGER (Frankfurt/Oder) presented the Berlin based theatre company Ballhaus Naunynstrasse as a new, translocal actor in the German theatre scene as well as in the discourse on migration and integration. The participants of the theatre group define themselves as postmigrant, thus undercutting the distinction between migrants and non-migrants and claiming their local rootedness while still being ‘en route.’ Whereas Jäger was critical of this boundary-shifting, yet finally ethnicizing and othering self-ascription, KATHARINA BLUMBERG-STANKIEWICZ (Frankfurt/Oder) in her comment did not agree with this skepticism and emphasized the resistance and self-empowerment of postmigrant art. In her view, the term „postmigration“ refers to the capacity and reflexivity of passing as migrant and non-migrant; it produces irritation and uncertainty that can be linked to a freedom of participation based on role-switching

and multiplicity rather than on identity based claims against discrimination and marginalization.

JUSTYNA WIERZCHOWSKA (Warsaw) considered the artist Joanna Rajkowska and the palm tree sculpture that she placed in the midst of Warsaw's cityscape. For the artist, the palm tree is a response to the absence of Jews in Poland and to the lack of discourse concerning this absence. Yet, the palm tree – without any explanation to contextualize it – appeared more like a question mark in the city space, very much open to interpretation, prone to abuse and open to positive, romantic sensation. To understand this artwork as one of postcolonialism – as Wierzychowska suggested – is provocative with regard to Poland, but as such it is able to raise questions about the specific discourse concerning the country's relationship to postcolonialism with its particular positions, actors, voices and, silence.

The last workshop panel „The Aesthetics of Dissent“ dealt with specific artistic means and historical references of protest forms as well as with the question of curatorial practice to present artworks of protest. FRAUKE SURMANN (Berlin) suggested the notion of „post-identitary in(ter)vention“ for the use of masks and multiple names in various forms of political protest countering contemporary societies of control and biopolitical regimes. Surmann regarded the masks used in protest movements like „Anonymous“ or „The Superfluous“ as an element of subverting any unequivocal ascriptions of identity by power institutions. As an empty signifier, the mask transgresses any fixed identity and opens space for the creative generation of new meaning.

Partly similar to the staging of democracy through the use of readily accessible materials, LISA KATHARINA BOGERTS (Augsburg) presented street art as creative articulation of dissent in areas with open access. Bogerts raised the question how street art can – from a transdisciplinary perspective – be analysed as a multiformat medium of mass communication that can emotionally affect and mobilize people and circumvent censorship or limited access. As an approach to this analytical question, Bogerts presented the exhibi-

tion project „Colorrevolution! Street Art and Protest Culture“ that she had curated for the 2013 Augsburg Peace Festival. The exhibition showed photos of street artworks that reflected artistic responses to social and political conflicts from different cultural backgrounds. Facing various difficulties of presenting street art in a gallery, the exhibition assembled photos of street art under thematic groups and with explanations that provided insight into the kind of protest and the political and social contexts associated with the images.

GRETA LINA KEINER (Gießen) critically commented on the political function and specific meaning of masks for the self-presentation of a protest movement – besides their post-identitary aesthetics. She also pointed at a specific subversive moment in both the use of masks and the exhibition of street art that can be seen in the ambivalent relation to the market economy of art. Surmann's as well as Bogert's presentations have shown that political protest can resist but also be part of an economy of art: the mask being a mode of becoming non-identifiable and at the same time a global merchandise object; street art being a medium for protest and democratic communication and at the same time an object of art that has already entered the market economy.

In conclusion, we can say that the notions of authenticity, immediacy, post-identitary, and (re)enactment repeatedly triggered discussions whether or not the latest protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street and various artistic interventions in public spaces have produced a new political discourse central to which are the performativity of images and bodies. This has, in particular, raised questions about the performance of media in and for the protests. On the one hand, protest today is often based on direct action and personal communication rather than on mass media coverage and representation of political struggle. On the other hand, media are indispensable for mobilizing, organizing, and spreading protest as well as for creating nets of communication and solidarity. Analysing contemporary forms of protest and artistic activism (as well as the role of academics in defining, comparing, and historicizing protest forms) might first of all require a new under-

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standing of the experience of time and space beyond the dichotomous distinction between media representation and immediacy. The workshop discussions showed that the use and the understanding of media has significantly changed in protest forms that rely on (re)claiming public spaces, voices, and images more than on ideological struggles and claims for recognition. Symbolic images and social media networks have not merely represented the protest and enabled its communication but were, in many cases, deeply involved in the acts of protest and the creation of new forms of coming together as well as artistic forms and aesthetics. What is left of protest movements is in many cases a new variety of media outcomes and formats that – to some degree – continue to present the pluralistic and many-voiced character of protests for dignity, liberty, participation, and democracy.

**Conference overview:**

Jennifer Ramme (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder), Art exhibition „The Art of Protest – Protest of Art“,

Sarah Dornhof (Free University, Berlin) Introduction

*Panel 1 ‘Semiotics, Visuality, and Embodiment of Protest’*

Travis Mushett (Columbia University School of Journalism, NYC), Authentic Occupy: Occupy Wall Street, Anarchism, and the Politics of Authenticity

Marcel Sparmann (University of Hildesheim/Berlin), Collapsing is like unquenchable thirst

Annika Richterich (Maastricht University) / Pablo Abend (University of Cologne), Occupy and Academia : Experimental Aesthetics of a Socio-Political Laboratory

Jennifer Ramme (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder), Comment

*Panel 2 ‘Cultural Hegemony, Protest and Gender’*

Irem Inceoğlu (Kadir Has University, Istanbul), Gezi Resistance and the Radical Democratic Trajectory in Turkey

Julian Irlenkäuser (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder), Turkey’s ‘Female Objectors’. Women’s Conscientious Objection as a Form of Protest against hegemonic Masculinity

serhat Karakayali (University of Hamburg), Comment

Younès Belghazi (Guerilla Cinema, Morocco), Film presentation „My Makhzen and Me“ & „Basta“

*Panel 3 ‘Postmigrational and Postcolonial Art’*

Nadine Jäger (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder), Ballhaus Naunynstraße – Postmigrational Theatre

Justyna Wierzchowska (University of Warsaw), Artistic Intervention or a Tourist Attraction? Multiple Readings of Joanna Rajkowska’s Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue (Warsaw, 2002-present)

Katharina Blumberg-Stankiewicz (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder), Comment

*Panel 4 ‘The Aesthetics of Dissent’*

Frauke Surmann (Free University, Berlin), Post-Identitary In(ter)ventions: The Multiple Name as a Collective Performance of Cultural Protest in Control Societies

Dmitri Heerdegen (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder), Reenacting Soviet Dissidence in Contemporary Russia

Lisa Katharina Bogerts (German Association for Peace and Conflict Studies, Augsburg), „Colorrevolution“ Street Art and Protest Culture

Greta Lina Keiner (Justus Liebig Universität Gießen), Comment

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