

POINTS of RESISTANCE

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A point — a concentrated sharpness through which thought, light, matter, action, opinion, pressure or power may be transmitted — capable of puncturing, penetrating or *resisting* the mass that surrounds it. Inevitably, a product of its chaotic ambience, it is both a *reaction* to it and, of necessity, its opposite. As a metaphor for truth, it promotes clarity that resists the turbidity of the mass, but it also suggests a *point of friction* capable of causing a change of direction — or maybe a complete volte-face. At its greatest intensity, a similar reaction may be engendered by art.

Without clarity, *resistance* lacks both form and meaning, and its energy may be either dissipated or misled. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Berlin has been known as an international capital of culture and countercultures but the interaction between them has sometimes caused disastrous and tragic results. Throughout this sad trajectory, both *resistance* and art have played unpredictable and fluid roles — carving out zigzags that continue into the present — veering both further and closer as each action provokes its opposite.

In a world where power vaunts its chronic deficit of empathy and imagination as “strength”, *resistance* cannot be minimised by the easy scepticism of “false facts” or “fake news.” A number of the works in this exhibition therefore link, in radically different ways, the nightmarish actions of the past with dystopias in the future.¹ Such forms of *resistance* are triggered by their contexts — by the manipulative and synergetic self-interest of governments and (social) media barons, who in corrupt and inequitable exercise of power attempt to subvert human freedoms and rights and, in the process, obliterate individual possibilities for self-realisation, truthful reflection and considered critique. When confined in enclosed, irreconcilable worlds — impervious to the openness of truth or to its nuances — the distinction between a “freedom fighter” and a “terrorist” quickly evaporates, and the only possibility of *resolution* becomes either the complete obliteration of the “enemy,” or the unstable knife-edge of war-like co-existence. In such conditions, as there are at this moment in Myanmar, Syria, Yemen or the Tigray province of Ethiopia,

¹ This could apply, for example, to such diverse works as Margret Eicher’s tapestry *It’s a Digital World* (2020), Doug Fishbone’s video *The Jewish Question*, (2019), and to both Nina E. Schönefeld’s video *BTR* (Born to Run), (2020) and her sculptural installation *Truth Lamp* (2021).

effective *resistance* becomes arduous, tragic and life-threatening, yet, in the face of brute force, it may also assume a detached, autonomous, moral position, akin to that of art.²

As an image of authoritarianism, and its desire to curb freedoms of speech *Microphone* (2021), a bronze sculpture by Mariana Vassilieva, concisely makes this point: the head of a hand mike on a stand has been, almost imperceptibly, transformed into a hand grenade. Indeed, within this paradox of feedback the consequences of public speech, whether free, inflammatory or not, may be perilous, as would be its further amplification.

The life and death of theologian, pacifist and anti-Nazi activist, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a painful illustration of a particular low point in world history.³³ Before his incarceration in Berlin's Tegel prison, he had worked, during the early 1930s, in the *Zionskirche* where this exhibition now takes place. Throughout this time, his actions echoed his conviction that *resistance* to evil was a common responsibility, as was clearly shown in his public speeches, network of contacts, and association with the 20 July Plot.⁴ But, as his oppressors had clearly shown in their rise to power, by subjugating morality, law and religion to their cause, ideas of "resistance" and "evil" could not only be interpreted in radically different ways but also made to seem synonymous.

Writing in a Nazi prison, immediately before his transfer to the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp where he was executed during the final days of World War II, Bonhoeffer reflected on such questions. In its justifications of a "master race", the machinations of National Socialism had conflated fact with untruth and good with evil, a reversal that could only be achieved by an enabling tsunami of uncritical stupidity that had spread like a virus amongst the populace; this created an intellectual and social vacuum that, being impervious to reason, education, moral belief or faith, made "evil" also synonymous with "enemy". In the nationalist-Aryan ideal, the cause of diversity had perished. In the darkness of his gaol cell, Bonhoeffer posed himself this question: if the stupid were to inherit the earth, how could life ever change?

2 This is the autonomy proposed by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), part of his philosophical and moral argument for linking the idea of beauty (and its opposite) with that of an individual moral conscience in art. In such icons of early modernity, as Jacques-Louis David's painting *The Death of Marat* (1793) or Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19), expressions of conscience may also have political implications, but this is also implicitly true for all aspects of artistic representation. In its nature, the idea of autonomy is hostile to dictatorships and this, as much as the subjective content of art, made dictators, such as Hitler or Stalin for example, suspicious, and even fearful, of any manifestation of "good" art. See David Elliott, "The Battle for Art" in *Art and Power: Art under the Dictators 1930–1945*, London, Thames & Hudson. 1995.

3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), German Lutheran pastor, theologian, anti-Nazi dissident and founding member of the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*).

4 The *20 July Plot* was a failed attempt organised by the German military in 1945 to assassinate Adolph Hitler. All those associated with it were executed.

Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within it the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind ... a sense of unease. But against stupidity we are defenceless. Neither protest nor the use of force accomplishes anything; reason falls on deaf ears; facts that contradict one's prejudice simply need not be believed — at such moments the stupid person goes ballistic, and irrefutable facts are pushed aside as inconsequential, or incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, becomes utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, goes onto the attack.... On closer inspection it becomes clear that every strong manifestation of power, whether political or religious, calculatedly smothers a large part of the people with stupidity. ...⁵

Bonhoeffer did not survive to experience the aftermath, but, disquietingly, the distinctions he makes here are prescient harbingers of equally paranoid conflicts in the present.⁶ Whether associated with the extremist ideologies of far right or far left, whether provoked by cultural difference, poverty or fundamentalist religious belief, their impact is aggregated by disinformation and conspiracy theories, both openly and covertly disseminated throughout media, social media and the internet. In all this, Berlin still maintains a central role.⁷

During the span of its relatively short life, the *Zionskirche* has been associated with opposition to the dictatorships of both National Socialism and Communism, but, on occasion, has also tacitly supported them. Even at the beginning, it was a hub that reflected many of the conflicted histories and stories that still run throughout this exhibition. The style of its highly decorated, historicist building was in keeping with the newly constructed *Rosenthaler Vorstadt*, which was itself a florid expression of Berlin's late nineteenth-century industrial and colonial expansion from provincial Prussian capital to the grandiose

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, <https://www.dietrich-bonhoeffer.net/zitat/604-dummheit-ist-ein-gefaehrlich/>

6 The threat of malicious prejudice lurks beneath the, sometimes forlorn, sense of hope expressed in all the works shown in *Points of Resistance*. Representations of this duality may be discerned, for instance, in Thomas Draschan's video *Continental Divide* (2010), Franziska Klotz's oil painting of riot police, viewed through a haze of tear gas, *Leviathan* (2020) and in Michael Wutz's violently surreal video *Tales, Lies and Exaggerations* (2011).

7 Although a minority, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), founded in 2013, is the largest German nationalist, right-wing, populist party presently in the Bundestag. It is known for its opposition to both the European Union and immigration and has international affiliations with other like-minded groups. Since 2017, it has been increasingly open to working with far-right extremist groups, such as *PEGIDA*, which share racist, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic and Neo-Nazi platforms. In 2020, former Berlin artist and art dealer Sebastian Bieniek founded the Sabmyk Network in emulation of QAnon; it has recently become one of the most active international propagators of conspiracy theories online. See: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000125230412/sabmyk-network-qanon-nachfolger-mit-wurzeln-in-deutschland>

metropolis of the unified German *Reich*.⁸ Financed by reparations from the victorious war against France (as were many other new buildings in Berlin at this time), it was consecrated in March 1873 in the presence of Kaiser Wilhelm I and Otto von Bismarck, the “Iron” Chancellor, but, even at this most triumphant moment, it precariously straddled fault lines of opportunity, education and class. Sited on a former vineyard, then Berlin’s highest point, it was the “jewel in the crown” of the pentagonal square of *Zionskirchplatz*, but also not far from the grinding poverty of the quickly growing working-class districts of *Prenzlauer Berg* and *Wedding* that abutted it.

After the religious perversions of the Nazis, and the fire bombings of World War II, the ruins of the church were sequestered in the DDR, close to the border and, after 1961, to the wall that divided the city. By 1953, its partly restored shell had been reconsecrated, and the activities associated with it slowly began to include the illegal discussion of civil rights. In 1986, as a reaction to the Soviet nuclear power plant disaster in Chernobyl (Ukraine), an *Umwelt Bibliothek* (Library for the Environment) was created in the church’s Rectory as a centre for peace and environmental studies, where politically banned literature could also be found. This quickly became a spearhead of a network of protest groups across the country who demanded freedom of expression and civil rights. Readings, discussion groups and exhibitions of the work of banned artists also took place there. In 1989 the Berlin wall famously “fell”, and the Iron Curtain with it, but in spite of, or perhaps because of, the hubristic boom of neo-liberalism that took place in its wake, many unaddressed inequities, divisions, prejudices, memories and ghosts still remain.⁹

Points of Resistance, an exhibition of 75 works made by 54 artists of 16 different nationalities, reflects a clear and widespread desire for a discourse that articulates artistic positions towards power; it will be the first of a series to take place under this name. *Baseball Bats and Bricks*, a collective show of the work of twelve Berlin-based artists, provided the initial inspiration for this idea.¹⁰ Expressing a sense of urgency, amplified to a larger scale here, these artists challenged the current critical and discursive framework by

8 Otto von Bismarck’s foreign policy as Chancellor was critical in this. After the short decisive wars fought with Denmark, Austria and France that enabled the formation of a united German Empire, Berlin, its capital, now played an important world role: The reallocation of the Ottoman Empire’s Balkan territories was agreed at the *Congress of Berlin* in 1878 and the colonial partition of Africa was ratified by the “Great Powers” at the *Berlin Conference* in 1884–85.

9 *After the Wall* (1999), Lutz Becker’s montage of the different sounds of the demolition of the Berlin Wall, evokes many such ghosts in *Points of Resistance*. This was originally produced for an exhibition of the same title that, with Bojana Pejić, I curated for Moderna Museet (Stockholm), Ludwig Museum (Budapest) and the Hamburger Bahnhof/Max-Liebermann-Haus (Berlin) during 1999–2000. Chto Delat’s *Perestroika* Songspiel (2008), also in this exhibition, examines the social and political development in the USSR during the immediately preceding time.

10 *Baseball Bats and Bricks* was shown in October 2020 in the *Botschaft Uferhallen* (a creative cultural complex in Wedding’s former Tram Workshops). Conceived in association with Dirk Teschner of *Kunst gegen Rechts*, the exhibiting artists were Fritz Bornstücker, Thomas Draschan, Else Gabriel, Marc Gröszer, Gudny Gudmundsdottir, Franziska Klotz, Karsten Konrad, Jan Muche, Manfred Peckl, Celine Wawruschka, Hansa Wißkirchen and Michael Wutz. Those in bold type are also shown in *Points of Resistance*.

repudiating the virulent rise of Germany's *Neue Rechte* (New Right) through a reassertion of “the civilising functions and universal languages of culture.”¹¹

Points of Resistance expands the breadth of this ideal in a concatenation of overlapping and interlinked narratives that touch, often ironically, on fragments of stories, both individual and shared. In *TBQ* (2017–18), a three-channel installation filmed in Tel Aviv, Rome and Istanbul, Turkish artist Nezaket Ekici and Israeli Shahar Marcus solemnly challenge the unique claims of redemption made by the three Abrahamic faiths by acting out together semi-serious rituals of propitiation for the holy books of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Australian artist, Kate McMillan's video installation, *The Lost Girl* (2020) projects forward to a dystopian time, beyond language and culture, when a young girl, shrieking in a cave and clad in plastic detritus retrieved from the ocean, evokes colonial dread and environmental despoliation in the stark poverty and intermittent beauty of her water-bound abode.

In *Tempest (Study for The Raft)* (2005), Bill Viola focusses on a single traumatic event when a group of nineteen men and women, of a variety of ages and economic and ethnic backgrounds, are suddenly assailed by a prolonged high-pressure water jet and beaten to the ground. Filmed silently and in slow motion, every small body movement or facial expression becomes accentuated, and it appears as if each person was participating in their own private world. But once their ordeal has started, their individual bubble is burst as they try to clasp each other for help, safety and comfort. When the water abruptly stops, dazed, battered, and in confusion, they slowly regroup, and together, in solidarity, begin to compose themselves in order to recover from their enormous shock. In this profoundly balletic study of humanity at work under duress in which the source of their distress is never stated, Viola gathers together previously unconnected individuals in a reference to Théodore Géricault's masterpiece *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19). Cast adrift in the ocean off the coast of West Africa, many of the men in the painting had already died, yet as a speck on the far horizon a ship — and the possibility of rescue — has just been spied. Based on an actual story of cowardice and corruption in the French navy that, once it had been revealed by the rescuers and survivors, created a political scandal, Géricault emphasises that there is hope even amongst death and pain. In Viola's work, however, there is no such rescue — or even a horizon — and the torrent of water may beat them again; their only hope is in humanity itself.

In her two-channel video installation *Memory of a Square* (2005), Gülsün Karamustafa both links and separates, over a period of fifty years, the developing story of a family's life in a central Istanbul apartment. Their day to day interchange is shown alongside documentary images of the, often traumatic, political events that took place in Taksim Square, a symbolic gathering point of the Turkish Republic, which is

11 From the typescript concept for *Baseball Bats and Brickbats*, Berlin, October 2020. See also note 4. Through the propagation of popularist nationalism, racism, authoritarian violence and conspiracy theory, the New Right, both in Germany and internationally, is polarising both culture and life by extinguishing all forms of critical thinking. To achieve this, it promotes feelings of grievance and betrayal through “new iconoclasm” and “culture wars,” that attack paradigms of openness and diversity by defunding cultural institutions and resources, disrupting critical events, and, in a chilling echo of the *Entartete Kunst* (“Degenerate Art”) of the Nazis, by attempting to ridicule, or even destroy, works of art that it finds inimical.

adjacent to the apartment. Some of the demonstrations were joyful, but violence soon raised its ugly head: in the Pogrom of September 1955;¹² the military coup of May 1960; the “Bloody Sunday” of May 1969; and the “Taksim Square Massacre” on 1st May 1977, when unidentified rightist gunmen randomly opened fire on the celebrating crowds. In this juxtaposition of two worlds, the domestic and the political, Karamustafa shows how, for all its periodic sadness and conflicts, the domestic space somehow remains aloof from the fluctuating violence of the square even though it may be damaged by it. Ever fragile, the family and state are still divided; Taksim remains to this day a site of violent exchange.¹³

In their video *Perestroika Songspiel* (2008), St Petersburg-based collective Chto Delat cast a more sardonic eye on historical change in an ironical, Brechtian commentary about the currents and events that marked the transition of Russia from a Communist command economy to a pseudo-democratic kleptocracy.¹⁴ As in a medieval drama, the action is played by stereotypical symbolic figures: the democrat, the oligarch, the nationalist patriot, the worker, whose short dramatic interludes are punctuated by the commentary of a “Greek chorus” — a choir that explains and debates the fears, hopes and deeper motives of the main characters — while children, dressed as animals, add a fairy tale element by scurrying backwards and forwards across the action. In an unconscious echo of the denouement of Fritz Lang’s silent film *Metropolis* (1927), and in a chilling reflection of the condition of power in Russia today, this story concludes when the nationalist patriot allies with the democrat and the worker under the “benevolent” power of the all — powerful oligarch.¹⁵ Order is, for a moment, restored, and a strong hand put in charge. Russia is at peace again, but at what cost? The absurd failure of idealism is marked by the ironical liturgy of the choir.

In his series of digital photographs *Pretending to be in Control* (2018) and his two videos *Melania* (2019–20), American artist Brad Downey examines the absurd triggers and mechanisms of power from a different point of view. The photographs present incongruous images of riot police in full combat gear acrobatically frolicking in a bucolic landscape, their insect-like carapaces interlocking like children playing — or lovers. Prompted by his abhorrence of Donald Trump’s racist immigration policies, and his realisation that Melania Trump had come to the US as a Slovenian immigrant, Downey visited her homeland and

12 The pogrom was directed mainly against Greek Orthodox Christians but also affected some Jewish people and Armenians.

13 The Atatürk Cultural Centre, an iconic modernist building from the 1960s that expressed the secularist ideals of the Republic occupied a side of the square and was closed in 2008; a large mosque was planned in its place. Following furious protests, this idea was abandoned but the building has been demolished and a new commercial-cultural centre is being planned. In 2013 around Gezi Park, next to Taksim Square, widespread protests against commercial development and the removal of its green space took place that were violently suppressed. The protests quickly snowballed and, spreading across the country, focussed on broader issues of the government’s erosion of human rights and the principle of secularism as well as on its persistent despoliation of the environment.

14 *Perestroika* means ‘restructuring’ and is associated with the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s campaign for *glasnost* (‘openness’) that, from 1986, transformed the political, cultural and social map of the Soviet Union.

15 Siegfried Kracauer illuminates further this aspect of paternalistic power derived from wealth in his discussion of Fritz Lang’s German films in *From Caligari to Hitler. A psychological history of the German film* (1949).

discovered there Maxi, an amateur sculptor who specialises in making wooden portraits using a chainsaw. Felicitously, perhaps, he had also been born on the same day, in the same year, and in the same hospital as Melania Trump, and Downey commissioned him to make a large celebratory portrait statue in order to publicly acknowledge her humble origins and success. The first part of Downey's video *Melania* consists of a series of interviews with the sculptor that show how his work was conceived and developed. Finally, in 2019, it was unveiled in Rožno, not far from where Melania was born, on American Independence Day, July 4th. As a precaution, Downey had made casts of the wooden original, and subsequently produced a miniature edition and a full-size version of it in bronze. His second video chronicles the impressive media reaction to the sculpture both locally and worldwide. The fact that it was not intended to be mimetic, and had "primitive" expressionist qualities, had outraged many people and amused others and exactly one year after its inauguration, unknown perpetrators incinerated and destroyed the work. Downey has since replaced its charred remains with a bronze version and it is now a tourist attraction that not only stands in acknowledgement of one of Slovenia's most famous daughters but also of the diversely communicative powers of media and art.

A similarly critical reversal of all usual expectation is the premise behind AES+F's video, *Inverso Mundus* (2015). After a celebratory prelude in which street cleaners defile the city by pumping shit around its streets, a bloodless coup takes place in which the homeless and poor become transformed into the powerful and rich, but played by the same enervated, melancholic actors. Out of this "class war", the process of transformation is extended to include not only a war of the sexes, as women objectify and torture men in a parody of the Inquisition, but also a war of the generations, as children slug it out with the elderly in ritualised bouts of kick-boxing — and a war of the species, as a vengeful pig becomes king of the abattoir, slaughtering and gutting his previous human tormentors.

This imagery echoes traditional proverbs and sayings that were frequently illustrated in popular prints and paintings. Mindful of the strange "medieval" mutant flying hybrids that play a supporting role, and of the bodies — human, social and political — that are a recurring subject in all their work, AES+F employ estrangement as both a visual and a narrative device.¹⁶ Educated under Communism, like a number of the artists in *Points of Resistance*, they grew up under *perestroika* and began to realise more keenly than before that the mechanics of power are equally pernicious within whatever system one happens to be enmeshed, and that different strategies are necessary to negotiate one's fate within them.

Living within a critical climate that too easily interprets sequences of images in terms of viewers' personal prejudices, AES+F insist that the ambivalence that distinguishes *Inverso Mundus* should be regarded as a form of entertainment that, while hardly full of belly laughs, illustrates the contemporary

¹⁶ Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984), a leading figure in the Russian Formalist School of literary criticism with strong links to Futurism, first outlined the literary device of estrangement (*ostranenie*) in an essay *Art as Device*, Moscow, 1917. Using the example of Tolstoy and other Russian writers, he defined it as a way in which social or political criticism could be enabled by 'removing the automatism of perception'. During the 1920s this idea surfaced in Soviet and German theatre in the form of critical, satirical parody; Bertolt Brecht's (1898–1956) idea of the *Alienation Effect* was particularly influenced by this.

apocalypse in “a light, sweet and amusing way”. Unconcerned by irony, they present a sarcastic parody of a world ruled by capitalism, populated by robotic, inverted doppelgängers, rather in the same way that, during the Middle Ages, the *sacra parodia* mirrored and questioned the encompassing power of the Church.¹⁷

In whatever form or medium it appears, all the art in this exhibition confirms that although it is useless in the brute face of power, it nevertheless possesses a discrete power of its own. It should never instruct, yet it holds knowledge; it should never moralise, yet it is unavoidably moral. Its function is to be nothing other than itself — which means that it must “do” nothing. Even though its palette may be the whole universe and the emotions that rattle around it, its power is derived from the disinterestedness of its activity. The artist has only one responsibility: to make art that is as good as possible, and only they may decide if and when their task is complete. We have to trust their sensibility, artistic integrity and intelligence and, on balance, history has shown that this trust has not been misplaced.

Because of its acuity, disinterestedness, humanity and commitment and humanity, all art, if it is any good, is inevitably a point of resistance to something.

¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), Russian literary theorist and philosopher, examined the historical and social contexts of parody in his book *Rabelais and his World* (1965).