

Cultures of Resistance: Creativity and Political Opposition in Twentieth-Century Germany

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Imagination is the chief instrument of the good...art is more moral than moralities. For the latter either are or tend to become, consecrations of the status quo, reflections of custom, reinforcements of the established order. The moral prophets of humanity have always been poets even though they spoke in free verse or by parable...;Art has been the means of keeping alive the sense of purposes that outrun evidence and of meanings that transcend indurated habit.

-John Dewey, *Art as Experience*¹

In November 2014, 250 Neo-Nazi activists again converged on the tiny town of Wunsiedel, Bavaria, for their annual pilgrimage to the former burial place of the Nazi Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess. After years of anguish and ineffective attempts to stop the annual invasion, locals decided to meet this unwanted political agitation with creativity and humor. Their clever gambit was to initiate a clandestine walkathon, for which local individuals and businesses could “sponsor” one of the rightwing activists—without the invading marchers’ knowledge or consent—at ten Euros per kilometer. The Neo-Nazis unwittingly raised 10,000 Euros through participation in the event the villagers named “Rechts gegen Rechts” (Right against Right); all funds were donated to an organization that supports those seeking escape from such extremist groups. The organizers were able to transform the political march into a performance art piece by meeting marchers with a set of banners with double meanings and puns like, “If Only the Führer Knew,” the name of a famous satirical novel about Adolf Hitler. Bananas passed out to the unwitting walkathon participants were labeled, “Munition 1” and “Mein Mampf (Bavarian dialect for “my munch”) a play on the name of Hitler’s memoir “Mein Kampf.”² This reframing lent a deep sense of ironic comedy to a situation that, for years, had been a source of tension.³ Yet the Rechts gegen Rechts action is only one example in a long-standing tradition of using art as a political weapon, a tool wielded powerfully against fascism by myriad artists like John Heartfield in his photomontage “Adolf the Superman eats gold and spouts junk” (1932), Max Beckmann in his painting *Birds’ Hell* (1938), Charlie Chaplin, with his daring 1940 Hitler spoof *The Great Dictator*, and Walt Disney Productions’ 1943 pro-US animated short, *Der Fuehrer’s Face*, which, improbably, starred Donald Duck. While artistic interventions may not eliminate offensive political groups or politicians, they help diffuse tensions and raise awareness, and may increase participation from people who are reluctant to engage in overt political demonstrations but wish to have their opposition recognized.

The marches in Bavaria are symptomatic of what appears as a stark, worldwide lurch to the right that has seen the election of right-wing populists such as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Donald Trump in the United States, and center-right politicians like Norway’s Erna Solberg collaborating with that country’s far-right “Progress” party. Shortly after Britons marginally voted to leave the great experiment of the European Union with “Brexit” in 2016, the far-right Austrian Freedom Party won more than twenty-six percent of that country’s 2017 elections, the anti-immigrant and radically homophobic Jobbik party continued to make news as Hungary’s third largest, and Alternative for Germany—with its platform of thinly-veiled Neo-Nazism—entered the national parliament for the first time, with record results. Both France and the Netherlands likewise have recently witnessed serious leadership challenges from their right-wing parties. While they are

¹ Cited in James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.

² Jon Blistein, “Neo-Nazis tricked into Raising Thousands for Anti-Extremism Charity,” *Rolling Stone*, Nov. 18, 2014.

³ Elena Cresci, “German Town Tricks Neo-Nazis into Raising Thousands for Charity,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 18, 2014. Rechts gegen Rechts is now an annual event that has spread to other European countries: <http://rechts-gegen-rechts.de/>

located in countries that have very different cultural and political traditions, these candidates and parties share a nationalist, anti-immigrant, and populist approach that seems to have growing appeal. Citizens, politicians, and academics on the left have been reeling as they wonder why such fringe beliefs are gaining currency. And while the trend is global, the turn of events is perhaps most disturbing in Germany, given its history: its stormy first democracy in the Weimar Republic; its infamous National Socialist period of the 1930s and 1940s; and its split Cold-War existence, with Marxist-Leninist Totalitarianism in the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany's barely-hidden ties to the Nazi past.

Resistance

"Resistance" has become a fashionable term across several disciplines including sociology, political science, art theory and art history, yet scholars rarely offer a clear definition of resistance, which means that it is difficult to construct an analytical framework using the term. In spite of the lack of consensus, political scientists and sociologists still have the most developed vocabulary of resistance so it is helpful to look to their literature first. Political scientist James C. Scott, one of the world's most renowned scholars of political resistance, explains resistance as one way people respond when they feel oppressed by the more powerful in society.⁴ Scott sees at least two types of resistance, what he calls "everyday resistance," which is informal, often spontaneous, and generally the purview of the poor and under classes, and organized, formal political activity. Both forms of resistance attempt to register disagreement with public policies or particular politicians. In addition, resistance can occur at the individual level or in groups. Scott was concerned with researching the plight of the peasantry and how they engaged in class struggles. Nevertheless, Scott's understanding of resistance as a response to injustice, engagement in an "ideological struggle," and a reaction against an "appropriation of symbols" that rankles, certainly applies to the arts.⁵ Sociologist Kurt Schock defines resistance as "the sustained use of methods of nonviolent action" and "non-routine political acts" against oppression and injustice, which can include forms of artistic expression.⁶

Dissident culture appears when power relationships are out of balance; when those in positions of political, economic, and social control abuse the public trust in some way. This can include extreme differences in economic circumstances because of policies that seem to favor the rich over the poor, indiscriminate police violence, unchecked racial tensions, and perceived inequities in public amenities, social programs, and opportunity, to name just a few factors that provoke resistant action. As Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner have shown, resistance always describes directed action of some kind and embodies oppositional intent. It can be "expressive behavior that inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or prevents alternatives to cultural codes."⁷ Expressions of resistance can take many forms; everyday resistance can range from foot dragging, to throwing a spanner in machine works, marching in the streets to spraying graffiti on urban surfaces. It can involve online actions like tweeting opinions and images, posting material on Facebook and Instagram, and signing and sharing online petitions. In the arts, resistant activities can range from creating posters to collages, from performance art to songs, from poetry to painting, from installations to film, in short,

⁴ See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), XV-XXIII and James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁵ Scott, *Weapons*, XVII.

⁶ Kurt Schock, "The practice and study of civil resistance," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (May 2013) 277.

⁷ Victoria L. Pitts, "Reclaiming the female body: Embodied identity work, resistance and the grotesque," *Body ad Society*, 4:67, cited in: Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner, "Conceptualizing Resistance," *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (December 2004), 538.

any medium can become the vehicle for a message of resistance if deployed with oppositional intent.⁸

Hollander and Einwohner also identify intent and visibility as critical elements in resistance. “Early scholarship on resistance, which focused on large-scale protest movements and revolutions whose members confront their targets directly and openly, took for granted that resistance is visible and easily recognized as resistance.”⁹ Yet the everyday resistance that James Scott studied, and much cultural resistance, is often quietly subversive and largely invisible except to those in-the-know. Scholars debate whether visibility and recognition are necessary to classify an act as resistant. Here, intent plays a role; if the action was meant to be resistant but not recognized by its target or by others, some scholars like Scott accept it as resistant since some forms of quiet resistance are intentionally concealed, like stealing from an employer as retaliation for substandard wages. These debates recognize that resistance has two different audiences: “targets (i.e. those to whom it act is directed) and other observers (who may include onlookers at the time of the resistance, the general public, members of the media, and researchers).”¹⁰

While intent can be debated in many realms, the question of intent is less contentious in the arts than in other areas of resistance, since art is almost always intentionally created. When we refer to art here, we mean a broad range of works in a “field of activities, objects, and experience” like “artifacts (sculptures, paintings, and decorated objects, such as tools or the human body and scores and texts considered as objects) and performances (dance, music, and the composition and recitation of stories).”¹¹ Art has an even broader range than that described by Denis Dutton; it encompasses traditional media like drawing and print making and newer media like photography, collage and film, high art like opera and classical music as well as popular art like posters, cartoons, and advertising.

What can Art Do?

Political activism in Germany has long been abetted by artistic production. Art can be used as an instrument of political activism to provoke a response in the body politic, register a protest, and to resist or to attempt to change unwanted policies. Dissident culture appears when power relationships are out of balance, when those in positions of political and social control abuse the public trust in some way. Art then becomes an instrument with which to challenge existing mechanisms of power and cultural meanings. “Art condenses meaning and demands and draws supporters to the cause through metaphors for and depictions of oppression or the oppressor.”¹² Unlike language, which is direct except when used poetically, art is often indirect, working with metaphors and analogies that must be read and interpreted. This unique property is part of art’s potency as a tool; it allows people to choose their level of engagement and understanding.

There are several ways that artistic resistance can operate.¹³ Firstly, artists can make objects that help us see the world in new ways by how they frame the world and comment on it. This, in turn has the potential to inspire people to organize and to act. It can sit at the center of resistant actions

⁸ Hollander and Einwohner, “Conceptualizing Resistance,” 533-554.

⁹ Hollander and Einwohner, “Conceptualizing Resistance,” 539.

¹⁰ Hollander and Einwohner, “Conceptualizing Resistance,” 541.

¹¹ Denis Dutton, “A Naturalist Definition of Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (Summer 2006), 368-369.

¹² Ariane Dalla Dea, “Representation of Resistance in Latin American Art,” *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 39, No. 3, (May 2012), 6.

¹³ I am indebted to Stephen Duncombe for his insights here. Duncombe wrote about “cultural resistance” more broadly but his categories apply to art as well. See Stephen Duncombe, “Introduction,” *Cultural Resistance Reader*, London: Verso, 2002), 5-7.

or simply be the catalyst for them. Artistic resistance can also itself be political resistance when it critiques a set of accepted cultural symbols and meanings. Making art can also be a form of political resistance in and of itself or it can be a type of escapism, a way of expressing dissent without engaging politically. According to this view, action in the arts is ineffectual and will always pale in comparison with “real” political activity. Finally, artistic resistance may not exist at all. As Duncombe asserts, “The dominant system is one of such complete ideological and material hegemony that any cultural expression, even if it appears rebellious, is, or will soon be repackaged and transformed into a component of the status quo.”¹⁴ If this last is true, then creating art as a form of resistance is futile.

What art can do as a means of resistance is a function of its content, form, reception and interpretation, and the specific type of making activity.¹⁵ “Content” refers to the meaning embedded in the artwork. Art theorists and historians have historically seen art as a medium of communication or expression. In this paradigm, art is a “vehicle by means of which the intentions, values, attitudes, ideas, political or other messages, or the emotional state(s) of the maker...were conveyed....”¹⁶ “Form” describes the physical nature of an artwork. It is the style, technique, and media used; it is circumscribed by the elements that comprise the work such as line, color, texture, composition, and scale. Form varies depending on the art so that architectural form differs from painterly form and sculptural form, for instance, since architecture is both spatial and object-like and has painterly surfaces as well. In Heinrich Wöfflin’s view, form is even more than the perceptible aspects of art, it is the very essence of it. “Reception” is concerned with the ways an artwork is apprehended by its audience and “interpretation” operates on two levels in any work of art, the artist presents an interpretation of the world and, in turn, that vision is analyzed by viewers. Interpretation depends on many things including the intersection of artistic conventions with personal artistic vision, the belief system and cultural orientation of the artist and viewer, for instance, but always refers to the ways in which an art object is read and understood.¹⁷ Finally, for some artworks, the actual act of making is itself a statement. Consider for instance, forms of performance art, whether in a formal setting like a theater, or in the public realm. The pro-Clinton dance performance, *Pantsuit Nation*, is one recent example. A group of mixed race dancers, many of them women but not all, dressed in pantsuits, led a flash mob dance performance in New York City to Justin Timberlake’s “Can’t Stop the Feeling,” as an expression of political support for the candidate.¹⁸

Examples from Germany

The confluence of Germany’s charged political landscape since the early 20th century with a deep national veneration for the arts, culture, and intellectual pursuits makes Germany rich in examples of artistic resistance. Berlin in particular has been the site for many activist protests and installations, and the production and exhibition of resistant art of all kinds. Its status as the capital city before 1945 and since 1990, located at the heart of divided Germany during the Cold War, and considered the center for experimental culture before 1933, during the Cold War, and since 1990, has made Berlin an obvious target for political activists of all kinds.

It would be impossible to catalogue every instance of artistic resistance that occurred in Berlin over the last one hundred years, however, tracing the history of different types of artistic resistance in several locations illustrates the breadth and depth of work being made in Germany and the reason

¹⁴ Duncombe, *Cultural Resistance Reader*, 6.

¹⁵ Duncombe, *Cultural Resistance Reader*, 7-8.

¹⁶ Donald Preziosi, “Art History: Making the Visible Legible,” in *The Art of Art History* ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 15.

¹⁷ See Robert Stecker, “Art Interpretation,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52:2, (Spring 1994), 193-

¹⁸ Sarah L. Kaufman, “Pantsuit Power flash mob video for Hillary Clinton: Two women, 170 dancers and no police,” *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2016,

why we chose Germany as the subject of this volume. Four examples that encompass the different types of artistic resistance follow: art that alters the way we see the world, art that is intended to inspire action, art that critiques conventional symbols, and the act of making art as resistance. Of course, resistant art often performs multiple functions simultaneously, nevertheless, these four categories do help

At the end of the First World War, a sizeable cadre of German artists addressed the many changes in society, politics, and the city through their art. Otto Dix's many well-known paintings, lithographs, and drawings of the war and its aftermath present both the war and its consequences in blisteringly honest terms. His famous 1924 portfolio of fifty etching, aquatint, and dry points, *The War* shows the horrors of combat in a way that was not permitted during the prosecution of the war when any attempt to represent it truthfully would have been blocked by censors.¹⁹ Dix created the images from memory and photographs of battle. Dix had volunteered for the war effort in 1914, became a machine gunner, and served at the Battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest of the conflict, where he helped to slaughter thousands of British soldiers. The images in *The War*

Helmut Herzfeld's first protest against the insanity of war was to change his name to John Heartfield in order to signal his repudiation of Germany and Germanness.

Josephine Meckseper – everyday objects re-presented and a critique of consumerism.

Considered a symbol of the complicated history of Germany, especially its division, the Brandenburg Gate has been the site of interventions of many kinds over the years. It is simultaneously a piece of urban architecture, a political symbol, and a canvas on which artists have created resistant work. Designed by the great German architect Carl Gotthard Langhans, and erected by the Prussian King Frederick William II in 1791, the gate sits at the juncture between the Tier Garden park and the majestic promenade along Unter den Linden to the museum island and Prussian royal palace. Langhans modeled the gate after the Propylaea in Athens, the monumental entry to the Acropolis. Constructed from sandstone, it features 12 Doric columns that frame five portals – the central one is wider than the others and was originally reserved for the royal family.

Gottfried Schadow's famous copper Quadriga sits atop the gate; it depicts a goddess riding a horse-drawn chariot. As Brian Ladd emphasizes, "the Brandenburg Gate, with its quadriga, has long been Berlin's most famous symbol rivaled only by the more ephemeral Wall."²⁰ The gate replaced an older city gate that was flanked by customs houses. Originally, called the "Gate of Peace," it has been employed by rulers and politicians for differing purposes; victory marches, military parades, and royal processions passed through its portals and the site of military ceremonies. After Napoleon's defeat in 1814, the gate was renamed, "Gate of Victory" and Karl Friedrich Schinkel made several modifications to the quadriga.²¹

At the end of the Second World War, when the allies partitioned Berlin, the Brandenburg Gate stood just inside the Soviet sector, which was some distance behind the inner wall when that was constructed in the 1960s.

The Brandenburg Gate has been the locus of numerous installations to commemorate historical events. In 2005, Gruppe 180 placed an enormous panoramic view showing the destroyed

¹⁹ Museum of Modern Art in New York City owns the portfolio and has made it accessible online at:

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/63263?locale=en>.

²⁰ Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 74.

²¹ Ladd, *Ghosts of Berlin*, 74.

Pariserplatz in 1945, in front of the renovated gate to commemorate the end of World War II. Viewers were able to see the historic photograph and the real gate at the same time, so that the past was superimposed upon the present, literally making history visible.

The Reichstag – speeches in front of it like Ernst Reuter and JFK
Christo wrapping and the Lichtgrenze – changing the way we see familiar sites and altering a symbol

Summary of Contents

Germany, above all, appears to offer clear lessons for confounded readers of the present. Against this backdrop of our own time's alarming rise in right-wing populism and resurgent nationalism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and demagoguery, *Cultures of Resistance: Creativity and Political Opposition in Twentieth-Century Germany* investigates ways in which historical and contemporary cultural producers—including diverse artists, filmmakers, composers, theater directors, and architects—have sought to resist, confront, confound, mock, or call out situations of political oppression in Germany. Essays address a broad spectrum of historical moments and media, as well as a range of targets and strategies. The project is divided into four sections that consider different strategic approaches and bring interdisciplinary topics into conversation: Art as Critique, Weaponizing the Past, Art as Revolution, and Artistic Resistance. The book's essayists include Peter Chametzky, who examines the ways in which Willie Baumeister used satirical drawings on postcards to undermine the Nazi regime; Sabine Kriebel reflects upon the effectiveness of John Heartfield's interwar and anti-Nazi photomontages as potential models of political critique for today; Barbara McCloskey, who engages with a recently-discovered Communist children's book illustrated by George Grosz; and Joy Calico, who explains how Helmut Lachenmann employs avant-garde operatic techniques in *Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* (The Little Match Girl) as a form of modern political resistance that reflects on the unresolved history of the 1970s Baader-Meinhof Gang. Collectively, this book's essays seek to explore historical examples in order both to understand the past and to come to terms with the present. *Cultures of Resistance* potentially offers answers to the question of how to successfully resist and create positive change through art today.