

“SIGNALS, RESONATING REVOLUTIONS”:

Unveiling the power of inflatables in public space and memory work

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Foto: Signals, resonating revolutions by Tools for Action in the context of 100 Jahre Revolution – Berlin 1918/19. Photo by Luca Girardini

ABSTRACT The participatory art work “Signals, Resonating Revolutions” by *Tools for Action*, has experimented with new forms of public assembly in the context of the commemorations of the November Revolution 1918/19 in Berlin. This anthropological essay seeks to analyse this art work on its efficacy on memory work in public space. Building on ethnographic data, I will argue for the art work to powerfully unveil and counteract the politics of space and memory. To do so, the focus will be threefold: first, the multilayeredness and fluidity of memory making will be revealed; second, I will scrutinise the material agency of the experiment being an ephemeral counter-monument; third, the impulsive movements in public space, being of carnivalesque and agonistic nature, will be analysed. Finally, *Tools for Action*’s art work demonstrates a playful, critical and efficacious approach for future commemoration in public space.

KEYWORDS *art, public space, memory, counter-monument, communication, carnival, materiality, politics*

Running, jumping, bouncing, laughing. I laugh. I laugh a lot seeing others wiggling with the inflatable sculptures on their backs. A swirl of red light: when I twirl around with that guy, I imagine how it looks from afar. I cannot turn my head all the way to see the sculpture on my back, to see my red light. But I hold the switch: click, click. And again. Am I on or off, now? Flicking lights in a domino effect, forming a snake, making a circle, running away pretending to be a shooting star, and again twirling. The grandpa shouts, "the revolution is on the street!" All the time, on the fringe of the red mass, these small blue lights accompany us. Pointing at the red bouncing crowd, people curiously ask me: "What is this? What are you doing here?" Seeing the group with some distance it looks as if they are doing gymnastics: in a circle holding hands, bending to the right, then to the left. I catch up, squeezing into the circle. We bend to the front and our inflatables touch over our heads – creating a space, a secret space. Faces shine red, and happy. Seeing one another in our secret space.

"Signals, Resonating Revolutions" is a participatory and experimental performance¹ by *Tools for Action*², an art and activism collective based in Berlin. They developed and built a hundred red inflatable light sculptures in order "to celebrate the joy of assembling and to test new forms of collective communication in public space". The opening vignette captures some of my own experiences in this experiment. I witnessed and will focus in the following on the first performance, which took place in the afternoon on the 11th November 2018 in Berlin-Mitte as the opening event of the project "100 Jahre Revolution Berlin 1918/19"³. Nevertheless, "Signals, Resonating Revolutions" is continuing with actions on selected dates and places, such as on the 15th January 2019 to commemorate the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Conceptualised as a "commemorative season" "100 Jahre Revolution Berlin 1918/19" celebrated the 100th anniversary of the upheaval and societal change following the November Revolution in 1918, which led to the first free and democratic republic of Germany – the "Weimar Republic", a milestone in the manifestation of human rights, such as the women's suffrage. The whole project was organised by *Kulturprojekte GmbH*, a subsidiary company of the state of Berlin, which develops, coordinates and promotes cultural projects in the city.

This anthropological paper builds upon and emerges from the foundation of my ethnographic fieldwork, my own experiences. I seek to scrutinise and highlight the power of the inflatables for public space and memory work. Therefore, I will support the thesis, that the performance calls attention to and counteracts the politics of space and memory. This overarching argument will be sustained by a deep analysis of three specific characteristics of "Signals, Resonating Revolutions": memory, material and movement. Firstly, I will with unravel the involved dynamics of memory making.

¹ I describe "Signals, Resonating Revolutions" interchangeably as performance, experiment, and art work, in order to highlight its various characteristics being central to this analysis. In correspondence, the objects are also tools, sculptures and of course inflatables. The multifarious functions of this art work can hardly be described by limiting oneself to only one term.

² For "Signals, Resonating Revolutions" Artúr van Balen, Tomás Espinosa, Freya Schmidt, Sarah Drain formed the team of *Tools for Action*.

³ See <https://100jahrerevolution.berlin>

Secondly, I will look at how materiality and its qualities ignite emotional, communicative and social traits. Thirdly, the role and implications of moving bodies in public space will be analysed. Finally, I will conclude with drawing connections between these three characteristics of the art work, to then suggest further research impetuses developing from my analysis.

memory in the (re-)making

Setting out “to bring light into the darkness around the beginnings of German democracy,” *Tools for Action*’s performance works towards a critical and experimental approach to the commemoration. The light sculptures, literally shedding light on the landscape of Berlin, are thought of as “new tools for creative resistance”⁴. The whole project “100 Jahre Revolution Berlin 1918/19” emphasises the “relevance” of the November Revolution “to modern-day Germany”⁵. In the following, I am interested in the underlying, political dynamics of memory work and how they shape perceptions of the past, present and future. Due to the limited scope of this essay, it is not my aim to thoroughly investigate the reasons for the historical underrepresentation of the November Revolution as well as the persisting disagreement between political ideologies of the Social Democrats and the Left (to delve deeper into these dynamics see Niess, 2013).

“100 Jahre Revolution Berlin 1918/19” obviously focalises on the revolutionary character of the historical happenings. Against the backdrop of today’s political developments in Germany and Europe, where nationalism, fascism and political apathy are on the rise, this spotlight became even more relevant and especially potent. Several events in the course of this “commemorative season” look at the current state of politics in Europe. Hence, I understand “100 Jahre Revolution Berlin 1918/19” as well as “Signals, Resonating Revolutions” as an exemplification of how commemoration and thinking about the past is based on the experience and understanding of present happenings. Moreover, according to the historian Wolfgang Niess, there is a future-directed, utopian power to commemorating the November Revolution. Occupying one’s mind with these uprisings and their achievements goes for him hand in hand with an examination of unrealised options, including those brought forward by minorities. Hence, against this historical backdrop experimenting with these shiny, inflatable tools for creative public assembly is a potent way of daring more democracy, evoking critical, bouncing utopias (Niess, 2013: 588).

What is more, a multilayeredness of histories and mechanisms of narration and memory making are at work: In order to understand the myriad modes of the making of collective memory, the multiplicity of overlapping historical narratives has to be traced. The date 9th November in the context of the German historical narrative is coined by polarising political and ideological moments: the celebration of the revolutionary proclamation of the free democratic republic in 1918 coincides – not by hazard, but out

⁴ See <https://www.facebook.com/events/189570258599682/>

⁵ See <https://100jahrerevolution.berlin/en/>

of fascist political strategy (see Tworek and Weber, 2014) – with the commemoration of the pogrom against Jews in Nazi Germany in 1938. Further, the Fall of the Berlin wall happened on the same date in 1989 – to only pick out a few exemplary famous incidents of German context. Hence, the celebrations of the November Revolution including *Tools for Action's* collective experiment needed to take place two days later, on the 11th of November 2018, as the uprisings could not be celebrated at the same time as the killing and persecution of hundreds of Jews was commemorated. The institution in charge, in this case *Kulturprojekte GmbH* as an arm of the *Senate Department of Culture* of Berlin, had to align these acts of public commemoration in accordance with what is understood to be common sense and value. Clearly, this case shows, that the negotiation of this multilayeredness is a political act. Such negotiations are conflict-laden, as they necessarily prioritise the commemoration of certain histories.

Further, being historically overshadowed by the failure of the Weimar Republic, as it led to the Nazi regime and the Second World War, the 1918-19 revolution is in German history often referred to as the “forgotten revolution.” As Forty (1999) points out, the act of remembering is dependent on preceding forgetting. “100 Jahre Revolution Berlin 1918/19” as well as the experiment by *Tools for Action* address ways of remembering and forgetting simultaneously, as a commemoration of the revolution itself works against oblivion. Thereby, the process of forgetting is also heightened and raises crucial questions on these differential modes of making memory and understanding history. In addition, turning to this “forgotten” part of German history with a whole “commemorative season”, shows that narrations of history themselves are subject to continuous change and flux (see Macdonald, 2006: 118).

By directing the performance along chosen prominent sites of the November Revolution, the shiny, inflatable tools highlighted that specific relationship between history and urban space. Landscapes, and the urban in particular, are coined by change and reflect a multitude of histories. Hence, the experiment is nurtured by the place, powerfully pointing to their ambiguity of history. Moreover, during the experiment it became apparent that landscapes are “medium *for* and outcome *of* [human] action and previous histories of action” (Tilley, 1994: 23; emphasis of the original). Thus, they are able to act as a reminder of the past and as background for current actions and commemorations. This efficacy of the urban landscape on the (making of) memory is highlighted by Aldo Rossi when saying, that

“the city itself is the collective memory of its people, and like the memory it is associated with objects and places. The city is the locus of the collective memory” (Rossi in Hebbert, 2005: 587).

Moreover, the urban landscape carrying this collective memory works as inspirational canvas (one which is not “blank”, but used, with innumerable layers covering and adding to each other, parts flaking or being ripped off! (cf. Wright and Herman, 2018)) for imagined futures – for utopias⁶. Objecting the capitalist modes of city life, David

⁶ Artúr van Balen highlights the efficaciousness and agency of inflatable objects, as they historically as well as in contemporary artistic and activist practices “inspire the imagination of alternative worlds”, of utopias. To delve deeper into this argument see their exhibition “Floating Utopias” <http://www.toolsforaction.net/floating-utopias-exhibition-and-symposium/>

Harvey points to an “advantage” in engaging with the urban, and to its potency of creating utopias, because “it’s always about trying to make something other than what exists” (Mahon, 2012). Against this backdrop the connections of citizenship, place and memory resonate with Lefebvre’s claims on “the right to the city”, being societal utopia and collective postulation of citizenship. He understands the city as space for gathering, exchange, and debate, a “tool of thought and action” (Lefebvre, 1991: 289). Hence, space is “inherently political, [and] indivisible from the imbalanced social relations that structure it” (Schacter, 2008: 50-51). In this manner, not only social relations, but also the relationship between humans and immaterial heritage, namely memory, is structured and over time different narratives are prioritised.

Above all, I want to point out that the engagement with the multilayeredness of historical happenings, the unveiling of narratives, and the mediating character of urban landscape all nurture our thinking about futures and utopias, which are continuously in the making; in turn, our thoughts are directed on the efficacy of our acts in the present.

momentous, material impact

Understanding a phenomenological and synaesthetic approach (Abram, 1996; Tilley, 1994) as vital in everyday (ethnographic) situations, I want to try conveying the main material features of the sculptures – how they feel, smell, look like and sound – into written word in order to augment the reading experience and enrich my argument.

The inflatable sculpture has the shape of a head-high ovoid; the design evokes a plethora of associations from tampons, to phalluses or body bags. As intended by Tomás Espinosa, who drafted the design, the sculptures queer all definitions. They are made out of pieces of transparent as well as red polyvinyl chloride (PVC) foil, sealed together with double-faced adhesive tape. For inflation and deflation valves are inserted, and LED strips in the core let the sculpture shine from the inside. Shoulder straps, switch and battery complete the material assemblage of the object.

When I touch the foil, it feels a bit oily; that makes it difficult to unwind from the heavy roll. Also, there’s this slight gas station smell to it. I stick tape on the foil in order to make patches sealing the seams of the objects. I’m told to stick the bands of tape closer together. Using my finger to fixate the tape my nail bed hurts a bit. There must not be any gaps, otherwise the objects will slowly lose air through the spots where the pieces meet – not good! Connecting cables for the LEDs to work, Artúr shakes their head and goes, “sometimes it’s all so absurd!” I can’t believe they’d already been building for roughly six weeks full time.

These are some of haptics, feelings, and smells I registered when helping to build the objects. In their synesthetic variety they constitute the vital micro level of materiality. Details are crucial in the making of these sculptures: the process is equally coined by skill, preciseness, labour and creativity. The phases of designing, building, testing and improving the objects were all – literally – in the hands of *Tools for Action*. Building these tools for public assembly, not only a laborious, time-consuming process, but is also a technique and skilled craft. This experiment, as well as many revolutions,

required compartmentalised, underground, persistent, creative and accurate work (cf. Solnit, 2016: xii).

Moreover, *Tools for Action's* inflatables demonstrate effectively the agency of objects, and art works in particular, which Alfred Gell (1998) evinces. I believe the objects with their specific materiality and shape to be efficacious due to the sociality and relationality they inherit by creation. The collective's intention to make tools for new forms of public assembly inspired the development and making of the objects. Further, being made for playing, bouncing, connecting people and igniting emotions, these objects open a "channel for further social relations and influences" (ibid., 2006: 172-173) once they're activated by the participants – who are obviously not only spectators, but exert their agency in synergy with the inflatable on their back. Simultaneously, the inflatables "mediate social agency back and forth in the social field". Carrying an intention and purpose, the objects are also "vehicles of personhood" in Gell's sense (ibid., 1998: 81).

As touched upon in the opening vignette, the light sculptures on people's backs made the participants – a mass of over a hundred people – and their movements visible and traceable. In the dark of that winter afternoon, their presence on the streets was highlighted in red. The objects, each being a source of light, acted as signals and way of communicating and resonating with each other in public space (the title of the experiment being a condensation of these features). The streets were noisy, busy and wide, and the light in particular functioned as a connection between a group of people, which had just met. Moreover, the individual option for switching the light on your own back on or off gave rise to variations of this communication: I myself tried to spontaneously respond to what I saw by for example coping flicking rhythms. Due to the shape of the object and its place on my back, it was hard to check whether my light was switched on or off. We coordinated the flicking of lights as a group, developed formations such as a light wave and domino effect. Within the vicinity, we used verbal communication to work and resonate with each other.

Here it already becomes evident, that the art work "Signals, Resonating Revolutions" actively used the power of the visual: Seeing as a sense dominates the others and is socioculturally prioritised. This power builds on spatial reach, since we are able to see farther than we can hear, feel, smell or taste. Moreover, this hierarchy of the senses forms and manifests in language and vocabulary, as we do not only speak in visual terms, but also find ourselves at a loss of words for specific sounds, smells and tastes.

In addition to that, as I subconsciously noted in my journal, the object and its carrier become one in terms of their visual communication channel. When wondering whether "I was on or off" the light sculpture became an extension of my presence in public space. Although the objects need to be activated by participants, they then have an impact on the people's ways of communicating and relating with each other. From a subjective perception, or rather feeling, it is not primarily the objects shining and blinking, but the individuals themselves reacting to and resonating with each other. Here, to resonate means to relate, to position and to try to understand one's own impact on the visual impression of the crowd. Thus, the experimental art work sheds a light on people's role

in public space by transferring forms of societal communication and public gathering to a visual level, literally highlighting them.

Furthermore, being inflatable, the sculptures have a certain charisma. Even though the PVC foil is quite sturdy (as the inflatables are made to be reused in further performances), they have the characteristics and the agency of a balloon. Bouncing with, bumping against and touching an inflated object of this size ignites emotions, curiosity, and euphoria. The contact with the inflatable comes with a unique sound, only characterised as pneumatic, as air trapped in this specific shape. Also, the colourful and shiny design of *Tools for Action's* inflatables stick out a mile. The materiality of the sculptures prompts people (adults in the same way as children) to stare, touch and maybe even to poke it. Moreover, the sculptures come with a ubiquitous threat of deflation – what if they pop? (But actually, only a sharp item could make them burst.) Inflatable and balloons share a common feature: their ephemerality is tangible – their fate is literally up in the air. This possible, imposed ephemerality adds up to the whole temporary and performative character of the experiment. An ephemeral counter-monument is created, claiming new ways of remembrance.

In line with Young's (1992) argument, that all durable and solid monuments carry "fascist tendencies" (ibid.: 274), *Tools for Action's* experiment challenges linear and permanent perceptions of memory making. I consider the notion of the counter-monument to be fruitful in this context, because it "asks us to recognize that time and memory are interdependent, in dialectical flux" (Young, 1992: 294). Consequently, the art work points to the efficacious nature of acts in the present: societal communication, civic participation and public gathering are enacted in the now and have an impact on (imagination of) futures. In addition, the experiment and the inflatables themselves created a queer way of countering memory making, actively working against a reduction of individuals to "passive spectators" (ibid.: 274). Instead, the participants are indispensable, as they activate the sculptures. Above all, the experiment and the efficacious inflatables widen communication channels and heighten the subjective and emotional qualities of memory work.

in motion

In addition to widening and altering communication in public assembly, the objects let the activators – the individual wearing the inflatables – run, jump, bend, bounce and whirl around laughing. Sustained by my own bodily experience, I argue that these inflatable objects, and the whole experiment, have the agency to trigger agonistic counter-practices of movement and assembly in public space. By occupying space in motion through the mass body, "Signals, Resonating Revolutions" creates a carnivalesque experience.

Following a route along historical revolution sites in Berlin-Mitte, the mass performed various formations in freewheeling, permanently reforming groups. The starburst, for example, swiftly spreading out from a small circle and strategically unfurling its human power hardly tracked down. Moreover, the creation of "secret spaces", which I

described in the opening vignette, plays with notions of being private in public, as the participants bow forwards for the light sculptures to build a shield over their heads – people see each other red, happy shining faces. These formations profited not only from light as analysed above, but became potent through bodies in motion, forming a mass. So, a dynamic and unpredictable group movement, traversed by playful euphoria, developed.

Here, the notion of carnival is enlightening, because it encapsulates this efficacy of the playful mass body, “challeng[ing] authority through creative experimentation” (Schacter, 2014: 162). Gathering in a large group and moving together, the experiment creates joyful moments of community. The carnival, as Rafael Schacter reveals, is multifarious: “inversive” and reformative, “subversive” and overturning, as well as “perversive”, setting any binaries aside. Working between these nuances, carnival renders societal possibilities visible and works as “process for social transformation” (Bell in Schacter, 2014: 186-187). Reflexive in nature, the carnivalesque appearance and experience push boundaries, underpinned by a stark “belief in the transgressive utilization of public space” (Schacter, 2014: 180).

In the opening words to their anthology *The Art of Civil Action* Gielen and Dietachmair (2017) understand activist art, respectively artistic activism, as “tools to innovate processes of signification.” Being vital to culture, these “effective tools” add “an emotional and deeper understanding of civil concerns” (ibid.: 13). The experiment at hand works exactly as such a generative and transgressive tool, helping to understand “civil concerns” of memory and commemoration. Moreover, distinguishing clearly between the notion of “civic space”, as following state “objectives” and being controlled, as well as “civil” in terms of an “open”, “dynamic” space where positions are not fixed (ibid.: 15). Drawing from my experience, *Tools for Action*’s objects as well as the experiment negotiate exactly in this realm between civil and civic. On the one hand, their communicative counter-practices and movements are carnivalesque, innovative and productive of meaning – clearly acting out civil space; whereas on the other hand, they are funded, and therefore, controlled by state institutions. Hence, the experiment and *Tools for Action* engages in what Chantal Mouffe (2007) calls “the ‘agonistic’ struggle” (ibid.: 3), deemed fundamental to democracy, and its “political dimension” (ibid.: 4) is significant. I understand the experiment as “critical art”, because it “foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate” (ibid.).

Engaged by the organiser of the city-wide commemoration “100 Jahre Revolution Berlin 1918/19”, *Tools for Action* found itself struggling with bureaucratic and political decision making. Not only the date of the experiment was subject to negotiation as previously mentioned, but space the performance was allowed to occupy was too. Due to juridical and bureaucratic matters⁷, the movements of the experiment were officially

⁷ In order to use public space, approval by the city council for either a demonstration or a cultural event has to be obtained. As *Kulturprojekte GmbH* is a municipal cultural institution, they only have the right to the latter. That form comes with long process time and high fees, as the organiser would have to pay for any costs incurred (i.e. police and street cleaning). Eventually they were given approval, but not allowed to occupy the streets – priority was given

bound to the pavement⁸ and were only allowed to spread out in pedestrian areas. This produced artistic, ideological, but with over a hundred participants also practical difficulties for *Tools for Action*. Eventually, during the experiment, the crowd was accompanied by police officers and cars (adding blue lights to the bouncing red mass) blocking traffic for the mass to cross streets. The gathering was clearly not conforming to the boundaries of pavements, even though the regulation was passed on to the participants. In the end, the officials had no option but to escort this moving mass of bodies.

In broader terms, I understand the relationship between *Tools for Action* and *Kulturprojekte GmbH* as a clash between the notion of experiment on the one hand, and the notion of event management on the other. The first being curious, artistic, playful and open-ended; the latter rather regulatory, selective and output-driven. These oppositions manifest for example in their different organisation and working structures: *Tools for Action* is a collective of internationals multi-locally engaging in art, activism, and political education. They identify as queer and see their work to be led by experiences of direct action. Moreover, their working philosophy is centred around DIY and opensource practices. On the other side of the spectrum, *Kulturprojekte GmbH* is a company and partner of the federal city-state Berlin, known for their spectacular mega projects.

The collective's artistic way of negotiating this conflictual opposition, as well as the experiment's creative, agonistic and unpredictable ways of moving and assembling in public expanded the "civil" notions of space, aiming at a variety of narratives and voices, aiming at discourse and dissensus. Thereby, a way of questioning singularised – supposedly uniting – historical narratives is playfully enacted in public space. Above all, the carnivalesque experiment reveals that behaviour in public space, commemoration and writing of history – all seems to be common sense – are based on hegemonic structures. Thus, any order or narrative is necessarily political. The flicking and bouncing inflatables are tools which facilitate and enrich public assembly and explorations of what dissensus means. The objects and the whole performance is efficacious, because public space is a "battleground" (Mouffe, 2007: 3) of narratives and practices, fostering plurality and discursiveness. "Signals, Resonating Revolutions" has a reflexive, overturning, and unsettling attitude, producing "new knowledge" (Kapferer in Schacter, 2014: 170) in a civil, emotional, bodily and synaesthetic manner.

conclusion

to the traffic. The collective sarcastically described the relationship with their employer as integration course into German bureaucracy, adding another ironic and playful layer to the carnival.

⁸ The German the word for pavement is *Bürgersteig*, and *Bürger* is the masculine gender of citizen. Thus, the restriction to stay on the pavement carries a (b-)ordering notion of citizenship and civic behaviour in public space.

This essay set out to scrutinise the characteristics of memory, materiality and movement involved in the experiment “Signals, Resonating Revolutions”, making it especially potent.

I hope to have drawn attention to the way, the experiment underlines the active traits of commemoration, being a political act of the present, forming imaginations of the future. The context of urban landscapes – as political space full of historical traces – mediates memory work and helps creating a future-directed, utopian power of the experiment. Moreover, the shortcomings of understanding history as linear development, as well as reducing histories to single dates and narratives, have emphasised that remembering is paralleled with forgetting. “Signals, Resonating Revolutions” highlights this multilayeredness.

Looking at the material characteristics of the inflatables, as well as the experiment itself, the synergy of material and human components became critical, as the light sculptures enact agency. The haptic and visual traits facilitated and amplified the social qualities, manifesting in alternative ways of communication in the crowd and the visualisation of the impact of assembly in public space. In interplay with emotional and multi-sensoric experiences counter-practices in public space arose and turned the commemorative experiment into an ephemeral counter-monument, playfully challenging singular narratives. Moreover, I have shown how the pneumatic sculptures ignited emotions and actions, since its heightened ephemerality – the imagination that the object could burst – was especially efficacious and contributed to the overall temporality and euphoria of the experiment.

Jumping, running and wiggling, the mass bodies claimed public space, and hence, pushed boundaries of ways of commemoration. Against the backdrop of bureaucratic and institutional barriers leading up to the experiment, the euphoric mass movement demonstrated its transgressive, reflexive, and agonistic character – turning it into a carnivalesque experience. Moreover, the involved negotiations of notions of experiment with imposed notions of curation shed light on the political and conflictual nature of memory work and public space. Nevertheless, “Signals, Resonating Revolutions” widened civil possibilities in public space by creating these tools, which by means of their design and materiality playfully engage, disturb and gather people.

Above all, communication and social relations within the present-day city and its historical entanglements became tangible through light and movement. This essay analysed and stressed how *Tools for Action*'s social experiment reveals the political character of public space and memory work. The inflatables are tools for counter-practices; they challenge not only conventional movement patterns, but also generate knowledge and innovative practices of remembering as well as public assembly. The experiment makes us curious about the utopian ideas and civil dynamics which will develop at future activations of the tools, when the revolutions resonate again.

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