The Continuing Adventures of the Yes Women

David Graeber & Nika Dubrovsky

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On November 9, the newly formed Yes Women art group crashed the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall celebrations at Alexanderplatz (an event attended by almost no one), by projecting an image of six of the 300,000 divorced women from the former GDR who had been robbed of their pensions.

Despite the widespread impression that the impoverished East, still limping from their former oppression under Communism, has been sucking up money and resources from the prosperous democratic West for the last 30 years, this is certainly not the way most East Germans have experienced things. In practice, promises of freedom, equality, and brotherhood turned out to mean deindustrialisation, as 4,000 factories were closed. Those with secure wage labour jobs were thrown into precarity; most middle-class GDR residents and almost all highly trained professionals either moved to the West or were reduced to low-paid "service workers." Where once children in the GDR were taught to see themselves as heirs to the anti-fascist resistance, now they are taught to internalise a sense of collective pan-German guilt. Teaching people to see themselves as the heirs of Nazis has had the paradoxical effect of turning many into actual Nazis, as the resulting climate of disillusionment and bitterness is cleverly manipulated by right-wing parties to increase hatred of strangers, accused of stealing jobs.

"Normalcy" has turned out to be a very unpleasant experience. Perhaps the greatest victims were hundreds of East German women who were deprived of a significant proportion of their pensions – and are still living, in most cases, in dire poverty – because they had been divorced.

We tend to think of East Germany mainly as a state controlled by secret police but in many ways its social legislation was far more progressive than in the "democratic" West. This is particularly true when it comes to gender equality. In the 1970s, for instance, when West German women still needed their husband's written permission to get a job or even buy a car, East German women were not only guaranteed penalty-free divorce, but the care work they had spent on their families was calculated into their pensions.

With reunification, this was no longer the case; however, where a West German woman who had divorced received a portion of their husband's pension, an East German woman didn't get that either.

For 30 years now, these women have been fighting for their rights. They have gone through every possible political and legal channel; participated in innumerable demonstrations and petitions; even managed to get the UN to demand compensation. The German government has remained adamant. Many women activists report officials who've literally laughed in their faces, as they delay and postpone – basically, waiting for them to die. And die they have. Thirty years ago, there were 800,000 of these women. Today, there are roughly 300,000 left.

It's not just politicians. Most of the press, and thus the educated public, doesn't take their cause particularly seriously. You can still read columns in German newspapers that effectively say, "darlings, what do you want from us? You want the best of both worlds, to pursue an 'abnormal' lifestyle and then let the rest of us take care of you? If you'd pursued a normal life, you wouldn't have these problems."

The Yes Women

The Yes Women were formed after a long series of brainstorming sessions (involving, among others, a member of the famous activist spoof artists the Yes Men) trying to figure out a way to change German people's minds about this issue.

Most of us were artists. But what can artists do about a situation like this? Anything? We tried to apply for grants. That didn't work out very well. We imagined a fabulous parade with costumes provided by Vivienne Westwood during German fashion week. She told us she was deeply moved by their situation but had to concentrate all her energy on climate change. Several equally desperate attempts to advance the project failed. So, we created the Yes Women. As the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Wall approached, we decided to take our own projection to Alexanderplatz, in the very centre of Berlin.

Photographer Anastasia Khoroshilova visited Malderburg to take pictures of women's association activists; a designer from Riga, Lyudmila Ivakina, helped to make a poster based on sketches by Nika Dubrovsky. David Graeber came up with a slogan. So it happened that in the guerrilla projection on the day of German reunification, one American and two Russians found themselves on a desperately dark and empty Alexanderplatz, in former East Berlin, in the midst of the official laser show full of explosive events and very large talking heads, stood with an inexpensive handheld projector projecting a collage of divorced GDR women-activists standing shoulder-to-shoulder with a slogan: "Never mind us!"

Almost everyone ignored us. A few smiled in vague support. At least we were a little more interesting than the vast heroic tableaus over their heads, which for Easterners mainly spoke to broken promises. Then we wrote a piece in ArtNet describing our intervention.

It's not clear whether it will make a practical difference. It might. But the women we worked with always stressed to us this wasn't just an issue of material well-being. It's a matter of justice. How is it that, in a society that is one of the wealthiest, and claims to be one of the most socially enlightened countries in the world, such things are possible? Women from the association told us several times that even if they do get reasonable compensation, we must never forget the 500,000 women who have died in the past 30 years who will never see the "celebration of justice."

One hesitates to use disease as a metaphor, especially in this moment in history, but cruelty and indifference really is a bit like an infection: it is a violation of social trust that ensures the cruelty will reappear, perhaps in entirely unexpected ways. Taking care of the elderly and abandoned is ultimately taking care of ourselves. This is why the Yes Women group adopts slightly different tactics than our namesakes and inspiration.

The Yes Men are heroic figures, who practice what's sometimes called "subversive affirmation," driving prevailing ideas to their apparently ridiculous conclusions. The Yes Women in contrast practice sincerity and straightforwardness in a context of increasing desperation – as in the graffiti on the remains of the Berlin Wall, represented here, which shows a portrait of 6 members of a group of women divorced in the former GDR. Like the Yes Men, we are trying to use artistic tools to bring about concrete social change; but we're doing so not by a spoof, or even quite a stunt, but by drawing attention to the women's history, to reach the heart of every German, European and, ultimately, world citizen.

Where do we go from here? We'd like to put into question the very idea of art. How does it create the public space in which it is understood and interpreted? How might it do so differently? What sorts of artistic intervention might cause people to ask these questions in a way that can't

be recuperated by curators and galleries as just another marketable commodity? There's an old joke that, in the Spanish civil war, the anarchists might have lost all the battles, but they had all the best songs. But for that very reason, in the end, in a way, they won. What sort of songs might we sing today, what can we spray on a real or imaginary wall, that will create a space in which the same people currently shrugging their shoulders at the plight of such women might actually begin to care?

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