

# Andrea Luka Zimmerman

## *Building Resistance: Performing the Reality of Life as Protest*



Andrea Luka Zimmerman is a Jarman Award-winning filmmaker and artist whose engaged practice calls for a profound reimagining of the relationship between people, place, and ecology. Focusing on marginalised individuals, communities, and experience, their engaged practice employs imaginative hybridity and narrative re-framing, alongside reverie and a creative waywardness.

*There is no word in any traditional European language which does not either denigrate or patronise the urban poor in its naming. That is power.*

— John Berger

I grew up here in a relief settlement at the edge of Munich. We were the first ones in. We had sheep, which was strange on a council estate, but we didn't have much else. I did have a social worker though, and we had lots of tins in the house. Let me just say that I have an ambiguous relationship with the smell of dog food, although I have a big dog. Today (5.1.2021) another old tree was felled in the name of progress. The 'Happy Man Tree' on the Woodberry Down estate was 150 years old, but got 'in the way' of a new block of flats. Initially, the developers thought that no one would care about it, and then, despite a major campaign, cited as the excuse not to delay a couple of months (when they could redraw the plans) that residents had been 'waiting for 20 years' for decent housing. The vast majority of these new flats will be unaffordable... Umberto Eco observed that one can use the same words in the same order and they can mean entirely opposite things. What is it in language that through it one can think but also unthink?

I I have lived on the Haggerston Estate in Hackney much of my adult life, and for most of that time in the same 'Neo-Georgian' flatted dwellings as the old buildings on Woodberry Down estate, and here too the narrative for 'regeneration' was the same, that people simply deserved better... How many times can you hear this and still not know what it means?

II This was Jeff Munro, resident of Samuel House, Haggerston Estate, for thirty years: 'I've got a little dog here, and my little dog has got more sense than all the governments have ever had. They're nothing but a load of thieves. Oh, they are! They're thieves. They're the ones that get away with those big crimes and the money. They're the ones! And if we get a small offence, like we diddle a bit of money out of Social Security, they come down on us like a tonne of bricks, but they can take millions. They can take millions, and they do.'

So how these mid-century flats are treated, flats that were once deemed luxury for their time and yet have been subjected to perennial underinvestment for decades means that the people inside them are ground down over those decades, because no repairs are done to fix holes in roofs or leaky windows, with all the damp, mould, and rot that follows... We were told that our buildings and our entire estate were unfit for purpose. We were told that it was the buildings themselves (not the administrative structures). The buildings were and are beautiful, and the people living in them are and were no different to other people. Yet the perception of both was to their detriment – abject housing leading to an abject people; sink estates that needed to be saved by the very governing hierarchy that ground them down. But we know all this. And yet, it keeps on being told, about council estates large and small...





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III These comments were taken from interviews with passers-by (my flat on the top floor, in the middle, Jeff's flat on the ground floor): 'Nobody lives there, nobody, nah. If they do, it's only a few houses occupied. They must be clearing it. '; 'It looks completely derelict, and I wouldn't want to live in it.' 'Frightened. Yeah, it looks a bit intimidating. Frightened and lonely because of all the, all the derelict, empty properties. '; 'Well if it was redeveloped, it would be all right. Otherwise, probably not quite up to my standards, I must say.'

Literally overnight, before a vote on the future of the estate, Hackney Council put orange boards over the windows of flats that they had just emptied and which they made forever uninhabitable by pouring concrete into the pipes. Our objections went unnoticed. There was a symbolic violence to that gesture. Living in a flat facing the canal, we could, from our open windows, overhear the stream of comments from pedestrians on the towpath, and we experienced first-hand how the estate had been turned into a bizarre tourist attraction – almost an early version of the so-called 'ruin porn' genre, evidence of the contemporary fetish for modern dereliction, a local 'Detroitification' that could be 'enjoyed', without threat, between latte stops. Suddenly people photographed the estate, not for its beauty, but for its abject quality. Orange as it was, the estate had turned into a projection screen for fears and prejudices about housing estates and perhaps even more, about those living in them.

IV There was an urgent need among the residents to resist these forces, to respond in some way to what seemed to be an inevitable narrative, #ProgressIsComing. As the new buildings rose on these demolished plots– buildings with decent safety doors for the first time ever– we were told that we needed even more security. When they presented it to us, it seemed they wanted to protect us from ourselves, or was all this for the benefit of the incoming tenants and new owners?

Our rebuilt estate was hailed as 'the future of mixed social housing', yet what was mixed before is now segregated. We, the social housing occupants, enter through 'poor' doors. The private flats are all in their separate blocks, gated and with CCTV. You cannot encounter a 'stranger' now.

V We can't precisely 'see' how power works, and mostly we don't even notice it until we are subjected to its full force. Power is evasive, slippery. The opposite is what power calls powerlessness, a feeling that accompanies the sense of being invisible, insignificant, a voice that does not count. This narrative of inevitability masks the conditions by which we end up in this dilemma in the first place, be it through laws or policy, the perversely impacting power of corporation and the derogatory machinery imposing a marginalisation of everything that does not fit this fable of progress.

Those that do not fit into these new worlds – be they the less wealthy, the economically disadvantaged, the drifters, the animals, anyone who lives a life that is not part of the productivity of these types of ideas – they are the ones to be narrativised as marginal, and difference is reduced to a place in the historical queue, whether that means the working class, the global majority, or all those not yet arrived in the promised land where, according to the law of capital, we should all be actively headed. This is what interests me: this movement, which is very subtle, of perception. So, for instance, the privatised city, privatised space (including quasi-militarised private cars, private healthcare, private everything), has as its mirror image the 'other'. It produces clichés and stereotypes that are reinforcing the idea of the abject and public fear, and which marginalise even further by making people feel unwelcome, unable to participate, in fact undesired: strangers in their own time and place. But should we be that surprised? After all, with working-class properties, once the roof goes so the house, and we're left with a landscape of history made up of solely 'stately homes' and 'seats' of power... Which is why so much of our tradition has been intangible, has been poetry and music. You can't lock up or tear down a song.

VI Misconceptions about one another are largely structural, then internalised as if they were personal, inevitable traits or failings. It has so much to do with relatability. And misconceptions, of course, are shared across these intersections. This story of building resistance, in architecture and in spite of it, feels ongoing, circular, exhausting, exhilarating, depending on the type of mood I wake into. As we are starting another lockdown, I cannot but think of all those who live in cramped accommodation, without accommodation, in prison actually or psychically or domestically, without safety for their lives. Had I been locked into a flat as a child with a violent parent, I may not have survived. I cannot ever forget that fact. In her essay 'Narrative Reckoning and the Calculus of Living and Dying' (2019), poet Dionne Brand challenges this calling for 'when things return to normal' as if that normal was not in contention... 'Was the violence against women normal? Was the anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism normal? Was white supremacy normal? Was the homelessness growing on the streets normal? Were homophobia and transphobia normal? Were pervasive surveillance and policing of Black and Indigenous and people of colour normal? Yes, I suppose all of that was normal. But I, and many other people, hate that normal. Who would one have to be to sit in that normal restfully, to mourn it, or to desire its continuance?' There was no 'normal' before this, and thus there cannot be a return to it. There has to be another way, building resistance.

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