UNLIKELY

From A-Z: an Alphabetarium of Resistance

by Andrea Luka Zimmerman

View Andrea Luka Zimmerman's Biography

From A-Z: an Alphabetarium of Resistance

ANDREA LUKA ZIMMERMAN

To map a place is to reveal and simultaneously undo. Some maps seek clarity and borders, perceptions of common understanding, counteracting thresholds and 'non-spaces'. Maps are the prerequisite for bordering forms of geopolitics and increasingly activate technologies of surveillance. Maps attune one to a particular way of knowing that reinforces what is valued as knowledge, what is deemed knowable, usually for the extraction of goods or accessibility, such as for tourism and against vernacular forms of memory. To find the unknown within structures of the known requires time. To make one's own memory in a place, spatially and otherwise disoriented upon arriving: when you get lost, you will start to know it.

Here I map the initials of my name, from A to Z and *in-between*.

I arrived in London in 1991, with poor English and, constantly having to move – 13 times in the first five years – I quickly got to know the city, and many connecting back streets (in both place and structural terms). Right from the moment I arrived, people would call me AZ. The A-Z, in pre-digital times, first published in the 1930s, was 'the' street map to London. I received many A-Z keyrings.

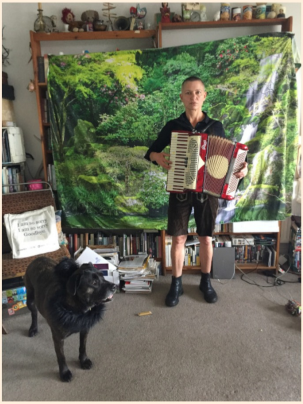
My last A-Z holds spectres of London now re-drawn so unrecognisably that, as far as I can see from my window, there is no building older than this millennium. Those that do not fit into these newly drawn maps, be they the less wealthy or the economically disadvantaged (these are not the same), the dis/abled, drifters, elderly, non-citizens, animals, plants and other creatures alive or hybrid – anyone who lives a life that is not deemed worthy of a place in the mapping of the 'new' worlds, which are – of course – 'secure by design'; are narrativised as marginal.

Finding oneself in the 'no more' places leads to another kind of mapping, quotidian and troubled, containing slippages, displacements, in/voluntary and enforced exits, repeated evictions, refusal, resistance, expulsions, and always and still those desires, a coming together, senses of belonging, and the worked-for futures of knowing: in short, the necessary processes of considering "to whom and what are we of consequence" (Diaz, 2022)[1].

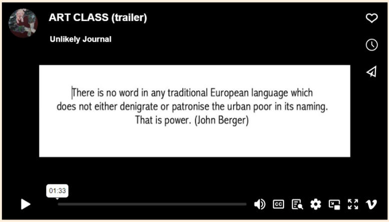
Towards a shared life, without "the want to own, govern, administrate the Other." (Morrison, 1998)

A

Art Class



How much of oneself are we asked to bring to the table, are we asked to disclose for the benefit of others, who may remain restfully in structures that have offered them a privileged welcome? Writer, curator and artist Morgan Quaintance terms this "marginal melancholy" (2021).

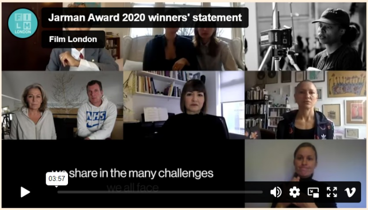


There is no word in any traditional European language which does not either denigrate or patronise the urban poor in its naming. That is power. (John Berger)

To bring this subtext into the context, I made *Art Class* (2020, 49 mins), exploring the perennial tension between the two key words in its title. The film speaks to the limits of access that working-class artists have to cultural production and to the relevant institutions circulating these outcomes. *Art Class* favours wit over weaponising and reflection over rhetoric but does not pull its punches when it comes to the real obstructions to working class creative progress, or to the strategies necessary to overcome such outmoded hindrances.

Art Class premiered at the 2020 Film London Jarman Award. All of us shortlisted shared the award as a means to resist this kind of reduction of our practices to hierarchies of externalised value.

Andrea Luka Zimmerman interview - Film London Jarman Award 2020 shortlisted artist
Film London
07:47


Jarman Award 2020 winners' statement
Film London
we share in the many challenges
we all face
03:57

B

Burden of the Tongue

I grew up on a large council estate in Munich, in one of the increasingly popular 'Entlastungsstädten'[2]. I lived in the 18-storey Wohnring[3]. My block was the orange one.

Even now, opening a tin of dog food flashes a smell-memory back to the only meal I had cooked for me as a child: spam with rice and tinned mushrooms. Only when I arrived in London did I learn that mushrooms can be eaten raw. I know this sounds unusual, but such was the reality of my growing up, amongst people who boiled everything for hours, and fed salad to rabbits.

Being an immigrant, people cannot identify my class from how I speak. In the UK, language is groomed by public schools, which, by a perverse language turn, are private.

C

Collaboration

My first collective was *Vision Machine Film Project*[4] (1999-2010). We explored how to make films as a practice of self-(re)imagining. In the early 2000s we offered a free film school for local people in the East End of London, and worked in the United States and Indonesia to track the aftermath of state-sanctioned violence.

Our collaboration, as many that work *through* something together, was also troubled in many real, vivid ways. I come from a place where I had to source nourishment in unexpected places and knew where to look for it and was suddenly working with people who were fully economically enabled. To learn to see that in each other, to acknowledge and even understand the structural aspects instead of thinking of one's lack or unexamined, paralysing privilege, showed me how we need to make space for difference in ways that will never be easy, but always necessary, and to make space inside oneself for what one does not know and may never know, but still to know it is real.

D

Dogs

> *"A mistake, King, is feared more than an enemy. There is no such thing as a defeated mistake. Mistakes either exist or they don't. And if they do, they have to be covered over. And we are their mistake, King, never forget that".*
>
> – John Berger (1999)

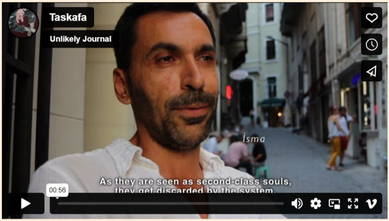
Jeff refused to leave his flat and his two little dogs because the public retirement homes wouldn't – and won't – allow pets. He was known to be a thrifty East End gangster, teaching me about bricks – which ones are easy to chisel out and make a hole big enough to climb though. Once I came home from work and every other person on the estate was wearing similar leather jackets. A van had been 'opened'. He believed in redistribution. He would pay other people's electricity bills, and always asked if I needed anything. I met him when he was already struggling to walk. He was always in pain. We spent countless hours talking and became friends, filming for many years.

Estate: Jeff
Unlikely Journal
00:47
Estate, a Reverie - extract

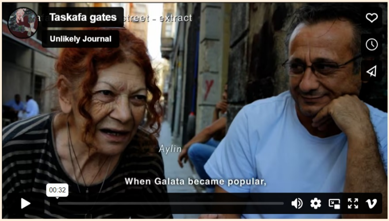
I walk into my local park with my dog, Ella. Somebody picks up their small boutique dog. "Did you pick up your dog because of mine?" "Yes, because my dog cost £3000". In our neighbourhood, but in particular on our now rebuilt estate, we can see the changes made by gentrification most acutely not by the changes in cars or clothes or hairstyles. It is the dogs that mark the change more than anything. Generally, what was once the majority canine population (Staffies or variously shaped crossbreeds) has now been replaced by almost exclusively smaller dogs, and pedigrees (Dachshunds, Frenchies, Iggys, numerous kinds of poodle-doodle, etc.). Being practical, even generous, one could say that this is because it is easier to have a smaller dog when one lives in a flat, but...

...I know that a dog's 'reputation' does not necessarily match the dog's temperament. In fact, dogs are often used to discriminate against a certain kind of *person.* Sometimes the owners of the smaller breeds speak to me, or to my neighbours with dogs similar to mine, and find out that we are writers, or filmmakers or whatever is 'acceptable', that they did not expect, and they start visibly to relax. And then they have no problem telling me this, even.

I always thought of urban animals as witnesses in the face of power – the power we grant them, and how we appropriate them. Hope, here, is always the process of finding beauty, especially in those places deemed ugly, pathetic and insignificant. It is a being with and in the world, beyond the only human, and knowingly entangled. This I explored in *Taşkafa, Bir Sokak Hikâyesi / Taşkafa, Stories of the Street* (66 minutes, 2013).



As they are seen as second-class souls,
they get discarded by the system.



When Galata became popular,

Taskafa old age
eet - extract
Unlikely Journal
00:59

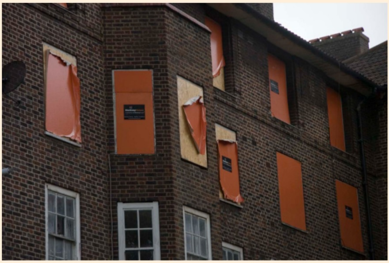
Taskafa trailer (new)
Unlikely Journal
02:25

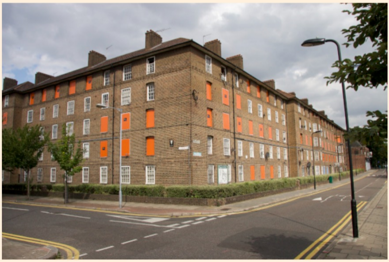
E

Estate

Estate (trailer)
Unlikely Journal
a landed property
02:32

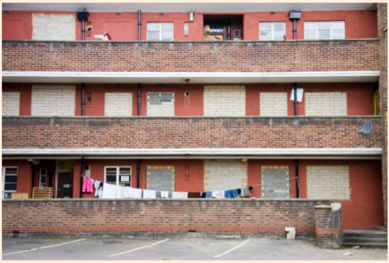
Estate, a Reverie (83 minutes, 2015) was made over seven years.



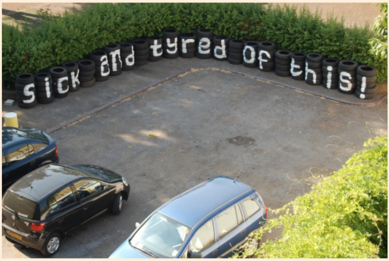


I moved into the estate (in Haggerston, Hackney, London) and into a hard-to-let flat[5] in 1997. Windowpanes cracked, ceiling leaks, mould growing all over. Having not had a secure and enduring place to live in most of my life, this flat meant so much.

I joined the campaign to get the estate repaired. In 2008, Hackney Council placed orange boards over the windows of all the flats they had emptied months before. Council workers poured cement down all pipes, smashed up what remained, rendering impossible a future use.



Immediately the estate became an object of judgmental curiosity – and fly tipping meant several hundred tyres blocking the estate entrance.



We asked passers-by if they would consider living in this place:

0:00 / 2:38

Meanwhile, this created a sense of continuous suspension, never really knowing whether we would receive repairs, how long we would remain, or if the estate would be demolished.

Many questions arose – a shift in perception and the nature of structures to policy – would this have happened in a middle-class neighbourhood? Why were we suddenly equated as failed people rather than as residents who lived in a failed system? The abjectness of the building now became a warning to others *about us* – a contagious effect where people became so afraid of entering the estate that virtually all deliveries stopped. The financial crash of 2007/8 coincided with this. All over our neighbourhood posters loomed of sinister looking persons pointing fingers at passers-by: 'Benefit Fraud'. Responsibility for the financial turmoil became a blaming the poorest and most affected. We became strangers in our own time and place.

Pamela House

I started filming in order to understand this sense of being 'out of time', when the decision was confirmed to demolish the estate, and our campaign had not been able to save the buildings, our home.

Estate: Eric allgone
Unlikely Journal
07:31

Estate: Bruce
Unlikely Journal
04:53

Estate is, inevitably, *about* housing, and about the policies that lead us to live lives at the mercy of governmental and financialised capital decisions. But, much more, I hope, it concerns how we belong (or not) in the world and what structures of meaning exist to define personal and social lives. How can we express the fullest possibility of our being? And how might we find joy in this resistance.

Estate: Party
Unlikely Journal
Estate, a Reverie - extract
04:16

The place simply didn't conform to the processes of gentrification. *Estate, a Reverie* is advocating for and towards lives more fluid than finance and power and property want to allow. This possibility was formed by the shared time of living in an environment confirmed for erasure. The film became a counter memory, inserting itself into a visuality that is mostly absent in mainstream discourse.

F

Feeling

Film language is a tool
of evocation
feeling
and violence

Aiming a camera scope
with the pistol grip
I shot
They shot
Shot (n)
Shooting

I have you in sight

With insight or not
Yet you are not in sight
In ways that I can
Touch

Target
They target
You
Targeted
I shoot
But when I shoot it does
Not arrive
As a maiming wound
In the knee
In the spine

Images maim differently

Words maim differently

This is important
Words are different even when
They are the same

They hit you
They hit you
They silence
They silence
They erase
They erase
They violate
They violate
They slice
They cut

They resist
They resist

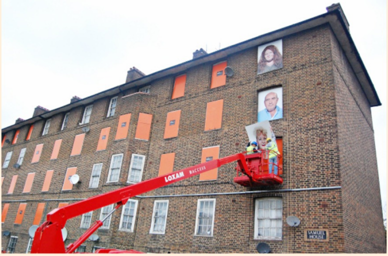
They are
A shadow
And light
(Gareth Evans, 2022)

To try to de-militarise and de-financialise the language (English), to try to remove from it all those words that demean and defile the ordinary, the non-human, the more-than-human.

To try it for a while, and realise the lack, of all the words that should exist, to make the world anew.

G

Grounding

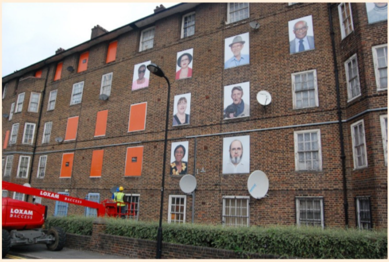


In 2008, our estate was covered up with orange boards, reminding me of my childhood in the 'orange block'. It was a realisation that no matter how organised a community we were, to resist this gentrifying process, this could not have been foreseen. By the time we had recourse to make a complaint it was too late. Told these boards prevented squatters from getting into the building made no sense, as what squatter would climb up four floors on the balcony-absent facade of a building and risk their lives to squat in a flat that is bricked up on the other side and smashed to pieces within?

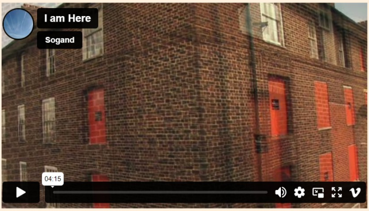
Everyone hated these orange boards and we needed to intervene directly on them.

One of the 'decanted'[6] flats was used for a security dog – barking-its-head-off lonely – attached to dog wardens patrolling the estate as one of several ill-fated security measures put in place by the housing association. We used this flat as a studio.

Needing 67 portraits, we said we will stop when 67 are done. This first weekend, our neighbours returned with more neighbours, and food, and so on, and we put tables outside, and more people started to gather, and so this was the weekend where we started and finished the photographing.



When we installed *i am here* (2009-2014) – we had the first of many community parties inside the estate, encouraging people to encounter estates as places of life, resisting the mainstream image of abjection.



H

High Production Values

I am struck by the ongoing internationalisation of aesthetics in film festivals, resulting in many lively discussions on the need to fail, to refuse standardised forms of meaning-making, to work with an imperfect form. Films now look the same regardless of where they are made, because the funding demands, market and technical requirements, modes of making and theories behind structure / definition / intention / commercial potential (whether mainstream or arthouse) are the same, aligning with what filmmaker and theorist Peter Watkins some decades earlier, in relation to television – and especially the news – termed the 'monoform'.

In 1985, in an interview for the BBC's arts series *Arena*, writer Jean Genet said, "I enjoyed making a clumsy kind of theatre. And by being clumsy, perhaps there was something new about it."

In filmmaking, clumsiness is often seen as undesired or something to be instantly overcome. Filmmaker and curator Therese Henningsen and I started thinking about how clumsiness may instead be seen as an integral part of one's working process, both in the encounter with the person(s) filmed as well as in the form a film may take. What if clumsiness becomes central to a methodology where the preconceived and the unexpected intersect. How might an emphasis on hesitation, awkwardness and not knowing present both possibilities and challenges: ethically, relationally, formally, and in terms of production structures?

I

Incomplete

Filmmaking to me is not confessional but shared and contested, troubled and alive. Sometimes stories, even poetic or lyrical ones, need context and sometimes they don't. I am drawn to bodies that can *show* us what they carry; words are often not enough. And