

## Sabian Baumann

### Closer to the Moon

Sabian Baumann's drawings are tragicomic dreams. This time they take place at night, closer to the moon, under the pale daylight that is reflected to the earth.

Since Sabian Baumann has been working on political art projects for the past three years, some of these contents will be visible on the following pages.

Therefore Sabian Baumann invited Kamran Berhouz and Simon Harder (see CVs below) for a conversation about intersectional feminism and the artistic work of Baumann. The starting point for the conversation was the political art project *die grosse um\_ordnung* (the big re\_order) initiated by Baumann, whose main event took place in May 2018 on Helvetiaplatz in Zurich. An arc is spanned into the exhibition by the examination of the installation/drawing *Tired Activist Gets Energy Upload By Good Ghost*, which can be seen in the gallery space. A manifesto which was written 2018 in response to *die grosse um\_ordnung*, as well as a letter by Kamran Berhouz precedes the following excerpt of the conversation between Sabian Baumann, Kamran Berhouz and Simon Harder.

The filmic documentation *die grosse um\_ordnung* (30 min.) can be seen on a laptop by request.

*Tired Activist Gets Energy Upload By Good Ghost* is dedicated to all (art) activists\*, dead or alive, who belong to my “inner collective” and to whom I feel infinite gratitude.

Sabian Baumann

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A thousand thanks to

Mark Müller for the generosity and support, David Hürlimann for the transcript, Diana Bärman for support, Kamran Berhouz and Simon Harder for the exchange of ideas before, during and after the conversation.

Kamran Behrouz (1984) is a visual artist, born and raised in Tehran, currently working and living in Zurich. Their PhD, entitled *Cosmopolitics of the Body* is a critique of “universal humanism” and an analysis of the performativity of queer/trans/intersex/nonbinary bodies in diaspora, exile and refugee camps.

Simon Noa Harder lives and works in Bremen and Zurich as a cultural scientist, art educator and cultural worker. Their transdisciplinary projects are related to questions about art education, artistic interventions, trans\*feminism and intersectionality. Currently they work on their PhD *Transformations and Art Education. Negotiating In\*Visibilities*.



My Dear, You told me “people like you” and it struck me through my bones and refreshed some old wounds..

You’re right, **“people like me”** are different

People like me are usually homeless or displaced. They are mostly annoying.

People like me are mostly genderless and born in countries like Iran, Iraq or Palestine: countries that you have no idea about them! People like me have usually no countries, some of them are refugees, some of them are nomads, some live and die in exile, some live in their hometown without no one ever knows that they’re ‘people like me’.

People like me are born as Muslims but they never had a chance to choose it or not. People like me are labeled by birth. People like me are kind of barcodes. People like me having a birth certificate which is not exactly what they really feel about themselves: their gender, nationality, religion and discriminations are already fixed and pre-given. People like me never choose any of those.

**People like me have to become invisible to survive, people like me have to become willful only to become visible.**

People like me usually hide their identity!

Let me tell you how people like me really look like:

They are not white nor black, sometimes brown but not always,

People like me usually disappear within your politics, within your identity and prejudice.

People like me find their shelter in black queer feminism.

You can find people like me in rallies for women’s rights, queer rights, black lives matter but you don’t find other people rallying for people like me, cause people like me are barely visible. People like me are those people who both blacks and whites are not considering them as people, simply because they are not black nor white.

People like me are becoming non-bodies.

They are fading within your bureaucracy, sometimes they’ve been banned to enter another country, sometimes even deported or detained for hours and hours... people like me are racially ambiguous...they’ve been assumed to be white or brown, depends on your politics... depends on your decision, depends on your own color.

Depends on your privileges.

People like me are subalterns, but “can subalterns really speak?” YASS Queen people like me are bold. People like me actually know how to speak, they learned that very well, cause no one gonna speak for them. To be honest People like me no longer give a fuck if you speak out for them, cause people like me learned how to defend themselves.

So it’s time for people like me to speak out for themselves, but people like me are exhausted!

People like me do not need you to speak for them

People like me speak out for themselves

People like me oppose your ignorance People like me fight your injustice

**All that People like me need from you is to listen**

To Sabian 💖:

I wrote this so called manifesto, couple of days after the “die grosse um\_ordnung”. It was rather personal that I shared it on Instagram. It was kind of related to my experience during and after the event. The whole “die grosse um\_ordnung” was an amazing experience for me. Even though I had an intense conversation with Effi (one of the performers) couple of days after the event, because I was irritated because I felt PoC [People of Color] performances had less time on the stage compared to the final performance, which I assume it was made by Milchjugend people. I was irritated because I felt once again the stage is occupied unequally with white people, although Effi claimed the amount of time was the same for the two performance Labs. At the beginning of the performance, when the mediator asked us to take one step to the front if we are QPoC [Queer People of Color], I wasn't sure if I am allowed or not. I know it reflects on my own psychological traumas and displacement but still, I believe repression is not only an individual experience but rather a social condition.

I remember—a PoC drag queen—a friend of mine told me that “she/he is so happy that **people like you** also enjoys her/his drag shows” after I told them how much I enjoyed their shows. Funnily during “die grosse um\_ordnung” at Helvetiaplatz I was sitting next to this friend, so till that moment I felt we are in a same boat. It was ironic cause I expect to hear this from a white cis hetero man and not a drag Person of Color. The phrase “people like you” triggered something in me, even though, I assume my friend didn't mean it exactly that way, it triggered a trauma in me! And suddenly I realized why I didn't feel at home during “die grosse um\_ordnung”: I never cared much about my pronoun but I've always been told “people like you”, and it hurts, cause I never realized who “we” are exactly?

I was a very feminine so-called ‘boy’ when I was a child and when people pointed out that something is wrong with me, I didn't really get it for a very long time. They only refer to me as “people like you”! So now I realize why I was triggered and why I felt not exactly at home in “die grosse um\_ordnung”, even though it was a space, supposedly designed for me and “people like me” to feel home.

Of course, during the the event I felt better than usual because Helvetiaplatz was filled with all those queer and PoC people that I like, but I did not know where to stand and the public performance was a reason for me to be reminded again.

When I was younger, I believed there is a WE, a shared umbrella of queerness and queer theory, under which I am safe. But now I'm 35, living over the past 9 years in exile and I know there is no such thing as WE or at least not yet. I loved Sabian's drawing “Tired Activist Gets Energy Upload By Good Ghost” cause to me it's a self portrait, it's the portrait of Sabian's WE, with Audre Lorde. Deleuze and Guattari started “A Thousand Plateaus” with this sentence: *“The two of us wrote Anti-Oedipus together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.”* The drawing exactly reminded me of this sentence and Sabian's crowd. But sadly, the exhausted and burned out activist, in the left side of the drawing is also Sabian themself. It is also me, or other artists or activists or my other queer friends who are stuck in Turkey over the past 5 years, waiting for their asylum's result.

So, If we can't be WE through our identities or privileges, we can at least relate to each other through our traumas. WE are all carrying a trauma. Our trauma is not one and the same because our bodies and privileges are not the same, but WE are in this “together”, and apparently we are all exhausted!

Thank you Sabian, for the event and the drawing and your sense of care, and for letting me reflect on my feelings, freely, without any shame or judgment.

Love,  
Kamran

## ***die grosse um\_ordnung* (the big re\_order)**

Privileges for all - a political art action, Zurich 2018

*die große um\_ordnung* (the big re\_order) was a transdisciplinary, intersectional, participatory and art-activist project that addressed structurally determined inequalities and advocated the redistribution of privileges. It wanted to create a public for the rights of marginalized people, to stimulate and deepen an art activism with the corresponding contents, discussions as well as new coalitions. For this purpose, it started with the individual and the local community.

More than 80 local political groups as well as cultural workers and politically committed individuals, including those from anti-racist, disability-critical and transgender activism, were specifically invited to participate in the action.

Although the project was locally based, it reflected global power relations and broadened the view of the dominance of deregulated capitalism.

The capitalist economy produces what is considered “normal”. It determines what is considered valuable or worthless. Everything that doesn’t conform to the norm is forced to assimilate, be excluded, exploited or systematically worse off. Ultimately, almost every problem related to gender, disability, environmental exploitation, racism, national and social barriers and much more is structurally determined.

The project *die große um\_ordnung* took place in May 2018 in the form of a performance on Helvetiaplatz, a discussion *intersectionality and language* and a workshop *intersectionality and activism* at Gessnerallee Zurich. Further public workshops were held in preparation.

*die grosse um\_ordnung* continued with the group exhibition *refaire le monde \* PROPOSITION*, which was on display at the Helmhaus Zurich in autumn 2018, and with the *Zukunft(s)archiv* (Future Archive) project, which will open on 4 April 2020 in the Shedhalle.

Contributors to the performance *die grosse um\_ordnung*:

niv Acosta, choreographer, artist, activist and the Performance Laboratory with Brandy Butler, singer, activist, Rahel El-Maawi (see below), Meloe Gennai, performer, activist, Edwin Ramirez, stand-up comedian, activist and Hermes Schneider, artist, activist.

Simone Aughterlony, performance artist and the Performance Laboratory with Effi Mer Delamaskis, performance artist, Yael Gesù, Chris Gustafsson, Khadija Makki, Dominic Schibli and Oli Skyler. Oli and Dominic are members of the *Milchjugend*<sup>1</sup> (Milk Youth), Khadija Makki is head of *Spot25*, *HAZ*<sup>2</sup>

Further performers\* and place moderation

Doro Schürch, performer, Malika Khatir, actress, Jörg Köppl, artist, Mustafa Asan, Roma Jam Session art collective (RJSaK), Firdes Atmaca, Mathilde Escher Heim

The project was initiated by Sabian Baumann and developed together with Simone Aughterlony, performance artist, Diana Bärmann, cultural scientist, Rahel El-Maawi, socio-cultural activist, Doro Schürch, performer, Tim Zulauf, artist and theatre creator

Production: verein für um\_ordnung in co-production with Gessnerallee Zurich

[www.diegrosseumordnung.ch](http://www.diegrosseumordnung.ch)

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<sup>1</sup> The Milk Youth is the largest national youth organisation for lesbian, gay, bi, trans\* and asexual youth and for everyone in between and outside.

<sup>2</sup> The Spot25 is the youth group of the HAZ and an association for the different-sex youth from 14-27 years from Zurich & surroundings. We have searched and found the performers in this environment.

**Excerpts of a conversation between  
Sabian Baumann, Kamran Behrouz and Simon Harder**

The conversation has taken place on February 11th, 2020

SB: Sabian Baumann, KB: Kamran Behrouz, SH: Simon Harder

**SH:** For more than twenty years you have been pursuing your artistic work as well as so called collaborations in different constellations. In your monograph published in 2009 Andrea Thal writes and I translate: “In alternating groups and collaborations Baumann performed as an organizer, a gender-activist, an initiator and a producer in the pro-sex and the queer movement. These activities functioned as selfempowerment and they allowed acting self-determined and without having to wait for the rare occasion that an event location picks up the topics or for the invitation of an exhibition venue”<sup>3</sup>. *Die grosse um\_ordnung (the big re\_order)* was a selfinitiated collaboration. And it was an ambitious artistic-activist project. It aimed for intervening in power relations and redistributing privileges. Dissens, conflicts and ambivalences are quintessential and must be integral parts of such a project. What were important ambivalences and challenges concerning intersectional feminism you experienced with that work within the ambiguous or self-contradicting field of art-activism?

**SB:** The arts and also activism is often based on a lot of elf-exploitation. This applied also partly at *die grosse um\_ordnung*, which was also work for the institutions. The Gessnerallee had to offer gender-appropriate toilets and language, the greatest possible accessibility etc., it was about many details. Most art institutions embrace innovation, critical and political art-projects like critic of capitalism and queer art, but it doesn't change the institution, even if there are exceptions. The critical contents of art might be an inspiration on a symbolic level, but the context of the visual arts, economically seen, stays the same or gets worse. It's just a part of the neoliberal market. Art has even become more of a financial investment. The costs for the preservation and exhibitions of the art of dead artists and the prices of the dead and most established artists got higher. On the other hand young artists are having a harder time because medium-sized and small galleries are closing down.

You ask why I did it in the art context? That's because I am an artist. I have always found both, activism and art, help against feelings of depression and senselessness, partly because you are not only helping yourself, at best. And more specific why did I change the context and did it in the performative arts? I'd like to answer with Simone Aughtery: “Dance goes through the body - every experience of this world goes through the body.” The system manifests itself in the body, the body is constituted by the system and it can oppose the system.

It was important to me to work with people who have different internal perspectives on discrimination and that I could also work with people who take on an ally role, who therefore have no internal perspective, as an exemplary attempt, so to speak. I have worked a lot on gender issues and have an internal perspective on trans, but I experience no racism, for example. I could bring together the team of *die grosse um\_ordnung*, because we got funding and fees could be payed. I find that very important, because it bothers me that activism (and a lot of art) is always something where people exploit themselves, but it's for the benefit of the whole society. In a capitalist system getting payed/having money is inclusion. To be in alliance with such a variety of perspectives meant learning. It was a learning process and connecting process on a micro level and also on a research level. To avoid splitting and form alliances we need to understand better and first of all respect each other and confront differences. There is a following project the *Zukunftsarchiv* (Future Archive) that still tries the same, to connect people and to push this learning processes. We are about 10 people, and it can only go on if people and groups support it. It does not depend on me and it's not been my idea, I just gave the frame, or rather the Helmhaus Zurich gave the platform.

My biggest fear was to mean well but not do well, that people get hurt, because I say and/or do things wrong. I asked myself, is it presumptuous to think you can involve all these groups that are totally political engaged and they have so much knowledge and how can I just go and ask them to cooperate? But then I thought: in the best

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<sup>3</sup> Thal, Andrea (2009): Changing the Terms: Aktivismus, Selbstbestimmung und Kollaborationen als Teil künstlerischer Praxis. In: Thal, Andrea; Rutishauser, Georg (Ed.): Sabian Baumann. Zürich, fink, p. 160.

case it's community and alliance building, creative jobs for people, a playground for experiences and experiments, public learning.

There has not been as much hatred and contempt as the right spits out today, for a long time, it is important to take on a position now, without a left that tears up and loses itself in trench struggle.

**KB:** I guess the conflict is very clear, you bring so many people and elements together, I mean you expand the bubble, each of us living in a different bubble, my bubble nowadays is very small because I can't handle the rest because things are not really working well in this case let's say, even in a queer context, and it's very funny that you mention this, because when I came there [to the show of *die grosse um\_ordnung*], a performer said in the very beginning: People of Color come to the first row!... or something like that. I was there with some other friends who are latinos and partly visible PoC people and I didn't know what to do because I didn't have a space there. It was very funny, it was a place [Helvetiaplatz] that I always pass by because. I live close and there are so many people that I knew. I mean I saw people from school, like my professors, friends, what ever. But there was no space, at least for myself, I mean, personal space, not "space".

I am being critical about own bubbles, it's always about identity politics like: oh we, but on the end of the day, there is no "we", I'm on my own, I mean I can literally be alone and nobody - even in one week - realizes it. So there is no "we", you know what I mean, in a practical sense, in a humanitarian sense. Though the event for me was amazing, but at the same time, I think, we have a very long way to go.

[...]

**KB:** First of all the gap we were talking about.... Yes, of course, this gap exists. As a queer non-binary person doing good research in Switzerland in an Art University, translating everyday all the interviews into English and basically hand my dissertation to probably the most white crowd ever to just evaluate if I'm PhD or not, this is insane.

So for me there was from the very first moment this gap. So that's why I'm writing in Farsi as well. The Farsi version is the translation that is not about that very intellectual person. You know what I mean? I think that gap only happens to getting smaller by a translation. I mean the translations doesn't necessarily have to be a text.

**SB:** Yes. I guess I understand. I mean most people have to please the context they live in. It's existential. So, as an artist you wouldn't like to criticize your privileged, white, cis-gendered curator, it could damage your career, if the curator wants to be mean. And talking about translation, *die grosse um\_ordnung* was a try to translate complex theory, making a simple ambivalent metaphor like, for example, the pyramide of privilege.

[...]

**SH:** The work "Tired Activist Gets Energy Upload By Good Ghost" has a special position in this exhibition because of its aesthetics. It is drawn on tissue and resembles to a demonstration banner. On this drawing you work with a method Yvonne Volkart – relating to Craig Owens – called "allegorical". It is a method that aims to let resonate what has been suppressed by hegemonial cultural orders through a fragile, synthetic, hybrid aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> In this work you merge representations of Audre Lorde, Leslie Feinberg, Black Pather, Laotse, Hulk, Hermaphroditus, a fish that changes its sex during its life and a robot. Why do you work with these more or less iconic characters?

**SB:** I always say that the self is also like a group of people. The self is like a collage of all we read, all we know, it is part of the collective memory that exists within and outside of us. Most of these figures are important to me. And there are little things there too, for example, on the right there is also *Little Boy*, the atomic bomb that dropped on Hiroshima and some bones and the anarchy sign, there's all kind of stuff in this image. It's just

like a dream and also expresses feelings. These are part of my influences and it is also maybe an image of an alliance, because that's what I did with *die grosse um\_ordnung*, trying to create the greatest possible alliance

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<sup>4</sup> Volkart, Yvonne (2009): Die Gleichzeitigkeit des Anderen. Allegorie als Verfahren im Werk von Sabian Baumann. In: Thal, Andrea; Rutishauser, Georg (Ed.): Sabian Baumann. Zürich, fink, p. 110f.

for me at the moment. Thinkerbell, the fairy, with the sex and one leg of Hermaphroditus in this picture is representation for gay men, fairy is an English slang word for it. The “Good Ghost” is consisting of many protagonists.

**SH:** Is it a self portrait?

**SB:** Maybe all of my pictures are kind of self portraits, but on the other hand everybody can read his\*her own story into it. The images are very open. There is no final interpretation, because every person will read different things into it, and I want to give this space as well. The references in “Tired Activist...” have something to do with *die grosse um\_ordnung*, with me, with whom I collaborate(d), but they are also part of the collective knowledge.

**SH:** Audre Lorde, who used to call herself a Black poet, an activist, a mother and a lesbian amongst others became a very important figure for different social movements. For Nicola Lauré al-Samarai she was one of the most important persons for the Black feminist movement as well as for the Black movement in Germany.<sup>5</sup> Lorde was one person that was very important to make thinkable the existence of being German and being Black that got and gets denied in a “exclusive *white* mindscape”.<sup>6</sup> For Nicola Lauré al-Samarai its “silver tongued silence” (beredte Wortlosigkeit) negates the “Black German existence til the deepest layers of language”.<sup>7</sup> Jovita dos Santos Pinto shows that in the 1990s Audre Lorde motivated the formation of the Black feminist movement in Switzerland.<sup>8</sup> Romeo Koyote Rosen describes that in these times in Zurich also *white* lesbians found an empowering figure in Audre Lorde whilst Rosen couldn’t share this veneration. Rose writes: “I read [the books, sh], but nothing happens. There is only this uncomfortable feeling, that I cannot manage to deal with my Black history. Neither I have an engagement with myself nor an engagement with *white* Lesbians who adore Audre Lorde. There are no questions [...]. The fight, living as a lesbian absorbs all vital energy”.<sup>9</sup> I’d like to ask: What does Audre Lorde – standing for important figures of Black Movements – become when her representation is merged with representations of Hulk, Black Panther, Leslie Feinberg etc. by a *white* artist in a context that is structured by *white* codes. What does it mean that the great majority are U.S.-American references? What postcolonial entanglements show themselves in the fissures of the allegorical method? And what is the role of the title? Whom does it refer to: Who is the “tired activist” that gets “uploaded”?

**SB:** I think I just did this image out of a very personal intention and also because icons stand for certain content which is not personal at all. Audre Lorde declared herself for alliances and mutual support of discriminated communities. I can understand what Romeo Koyote Rosen says. I don’t have this inside perspective and I don’t have the expectation that all PoC need to like all PoC writers, because I don’t like all the white ones either. The USA are still world power number one, whether we like it or not, they have lots of imperial influence and power in general. And Switzerland is a total import country concerning feminism, there is so much import from the United States, from Germany, France, from everywhere. The world is globalized, our genes and lives hybrid, that is irreversible, knowledge cannot be deleted, but to contextualize knowledge differently, which is what I do in my drawn collages, changes the fragments, they are reinterpreted.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lauré al-Samarai, Nicola im Gespräch mit den Aktivistinnen Katja Kinder, Ria Cheatom und Ekpenyong Ani (2016)<sup>2</sup>: «Es ist noch immer ein Aufbruch, aber mit neuer Startposition»: Zwanzig Jahre ADEFRA und Schwarze Frauen/Bewegung in Deutschland. In: Kein Nghi Ha; Nicola Lauré al-Samarai; Sheila Mysorekar (Ed.): *re/visionen. Postkoloniale Perspektiven von People of Color auf Rassismus, Kulturpolitik und Widerstand in Deutschland*, p. 350.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Lauré al-Samarai, Nicola (2009): *Inspirited Topography: Über/Lebensräume, Heim-Suchungen und die Verortung der Erfahrung in Schwarzen Deutschen Kultur- und Wissenstraditionen*. In: Eggers, Maureen Maisha/Kilomba, Grada/Piesche, Peggy/Arndt, Susan (Ed.) (2009)<sup>2</sup>: *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte. Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland*. Münster, Unrast, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. dos Santos Pinto, Jovita (2013): *Eine Geschichte Schwarzer Frauen in der Schweiz*. In: Berlowitz, Shelley; Joris, Elisabeth; Meierhofer-Mangeli, Zeedah; im Auftrag des Treffpunkts Schwarzer Frauen (Ed.): *Terra incognita? Der Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen in Zürich*. Zürich, Limmat, p. 174f.

<sup>9</sup> Rosen, Romeo Koyote; Keller, Jasmine (2019): *Herzwerk. Queer und interracial leben in der Schweiz*. In: Wa Baile, Mohamed; Dankwa, Werena O.; Naguib, Tarek; Purtschert, Patricia; Schilliger, Sarah (Ed.): *Racial Profiling. Struktureller Rassismus und antirassistischer Widerstand*. Bielefeld, transcript, p. 295. Translation Simon Harder