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## Berlin's Killjoys Feminist Art from the Global South

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**ABSTRACT:** In this reflection piece, I look at the feminist artistic landscape emerging in Berlin with its growing, diverse migrant community. I examine the ways in which women\* artists challenge the imposed notions of their migrant status in the city and their states of belonging within it. I demonstrate this through two feminist initiatives I have been involved in that aim to amplify the voices of women\* artists whose creative practices disrupt carefully constructed frameworks relating to borders of inclusion and exclusion. I argue that the artistic practices of women\* in these networks are killjoy because they unapologetically get in the way, dismantling carefully constructed frameworks that delineate borders of inclusion and exclusion. By reflecting on homemaking practices in exile, I exemplify how feminisms from the global south decentralize claims to truth by taking the means of production into their own hands. By framing the chapter around the recent protests in Berlin unfolding in solidarity with the feminist revolution in Iran, I reveal the possible limits of such actions when they do not embrace intersectionality. Ultimately, I propose to invest in feminist artistic practices that destabilize exclusionary politics by creating visibility and bridging theory and practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Berlin; migration; women\*; feminism; home; killjoy

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# Berlin's Killjoys

## Feminist Art from the Global South

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### INTRODUCTION

On 24 September 2022, the Women\* Life Freedom Collective,<sup>1</sup> based in Berlin, called for a protest against the Islamic Regime of Iran to show solidarity with the protesters of Iran. This new wave of protests in Iran began in reaction to Zhina Mahsa Amini's death following injuries suffered in police custody. Zhina Mahsa was a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman who was stopped by the morality police because she was not wearing her hijab in accordance with the country's laws on Islamic dress code. She was taken into police custody and died in the hospital three days later. Although the coroner's report states that Zhina Mahsa died of a heart attack, her family denies she

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1 Please refer to their Instagram page: <<https://www.instagram.com/womanlifefreedomcollective/>> [accessed 30 September 2022].

had heart problems, insisting that she died of skull injuries caused by blows to her head.<sup>2</sup>

During the protest held in Wedding's Nettelbeckplatz, performance artist Shahrzad Sdred ripped off her hijab, decrying the system that forced her to cover her body. She then ensued with her performance, removing each item of clothing one by one. Sdred cried out to the crowd: 'I had to cover my body there because I was a woman. But I have to cover my body here too, because it is not white enough. I reject your standards!' Discussions on Zhina Mahsa in the German media prompted a reaction from another Berlin-based Iranian artist, Rosh Zeeba, who commented on the coverage by stating in an Instagram story: 'Can we talk about Iran without Islamophobia? Why ask Alice Schwarzer her opinion instead of having a more intersectional approach? Imagine practicing feminism from a non-western point of view...'<sup>3</sup>

As I recently discovered, Alice Schwarzer, whom Zeeba refers to, is a German journalist and prominent feminist. Yet, one wonders: what if German media had reached out to other journalists from the Iranian diaspora already residing in Berlin, the exile capital of Europe? In this respect, Zeeba's reaction speaks to many feminists from the Global South, who have been criticizing white feminism for being depoliticized in that there is a gap between the values they claim to hold and their willingness to do the work needed to connect thought and action. Indeed, Feminista Berlin, during one of their rallies, called

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2 Reuters, 'Events in Iran since Mahsa Amini's Arrest and Death in Custody', *Reuters*, 12 December 2022 <<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/events-iran-since-mahsa-aminis-arrest-death-custody-2022-10-05/>> [accessed 6 February 2023].

3 The Instagram page of Rosh Zeeba is: <[instagram.com/rosh\\_zeeba/](https://www.instagram.com/rosh_zeeba/)> [accessed 6 October 2023].

on the German minister of foreign affairs, Annalena Baerbock, to implement the feminist foreign policy she claimed she would foster when she was appointed.<sup>4</sup>

This call joined a growing trend in which it is demanded that Global North governments adopt feminist foreign policies to critically address structural power imbalances and find more sustainable solutions with more inclusive decision-making processes.

However, the urgent condition of the current situation in Iran demands immediate action rather than waiting for such slow-moving policy changes. Iranian diaspora groups argue the actions of Germany and the EU so far have had no real consequences for Iran, as executions are accelerating, persecution and military attacks on marginalized groups continue, and the arbitrary arrest of protestors is ever-growing. They state that the symbolic actions taken by Germany absolve it from responsibility while undermining democratic forces in Iran, thereby exemplifying a gesture of critical complicity (on the side of Germany). It was only in January 2023, three months after the protests began and following the fourth execution, that Germany decided to summon its Iranian ambassador. Thus, there is a long way to go before the so-called feminist foreign policy is applied to its full effect.

#### UNPACKING UNDERSTANDINGS OF HOME

The plight of Iranian artists refers to a reality beyond the context of these recent protests. They relay the experience of a duality related to the limits set on their so-called freedoms in the West — limits that essentially remind them of their otherness, as expressed by Sdred and Zeeba. My

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4 Please refer to their Instagram page: <<https://www.instagram.com/feminista.berlin/>> [accessed 12 December 2022].

observations and interactions as an embedded researcher in feminist activist circles of Berlin have shown me that women\* activists in exile often have the ability to move beyond the boundaries of the given culture and question them. These women\* activists in exile recognize the cultural constructedness of the given cultural boundaries because they are explicitly positioned at the margins of this constructedness and thus experience how mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operate and impact their day-to-day life.

For example, Özlem Sarıyıldız's aptly titled video *Welcomed to Germany?* (Figure 1) asks its protagonists to reflect directly on these mechanisms.<sup>5</sup> Özlem is an activist and artist from Turkey who has been living in Berlin since 2017. In the mentioned video work, she asks a variety of new-wave migrants from Turkey about their experience in Germany. Queer musician Gizem Oruç's answer, 'Being a migrant is a full-time activism', summarizes the lived experience of the constant struggle for belonging in Germany.<sup>6</sup> *Welcomed to Germany?* and its spotlight on peripheral subjectivities in this new space of living have led me to think about the notion of home.

Feminists have long challenged socially imposed understandings of the home: starting in the 1970s, feminists actively rejected the so-called private haven of the home, which was defined as secure, safe, and stable. They brought to light the lived realities that haunted those confined within four walls. By revealing the dynamics of gender domination at work in the home, which limited the role of women\* to domestic and reproductive labour, feminist approaches have shattered

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5 *Welcomed to Germany?*, dir. by Özlem Sarıyıldız (Utopictures, 2018).

6 Ibid.



Figure 1. Özlem Sarıyıldız, *Welcomed to Germany?*, 2018, screenshot from video. Image credit: Özlem Sarıyıldız, utopictures.com.

the supposed wholesomeness of the home and the concurrent expectations implicit within it. Indeed, home entailed a place where women\* served men, a place of captivity for the sake of the nourishment and care of men, who, on the contrary, had ultimate authority within the household yet limited responsibility for the domestic and child-rearing duties that take place within it. It was revealed that, during the pandemic, the home became a domestic prison for many women\*, who were abused and violated, and as a result felt homeless at home.

Drawing from my personal and professional experiences, home becomes an impossibility for subjects forcibly displaced from their point of origin and yet who are not welcomed in their new environments. Nation states have

become increasingly concerned with the notion of home in reaction to the accelerated waves of migration. The need to assimilate the figure of the migrant in order to protect the identity of the nation state has unveiled discriminatory practices within restrictive migration policies. In turn, these policies have become the defining feature of what constitutes home for millions in transit, creating permanent states of transience.

Thus, as supported by empirical evidence from my research subjects, while many leave home to escape oppressive politics and deeply entrenched gender norms, as well as to gain economic independence and political freedom, they are met with further pressures in their new living environments. This sense of temporality is accentuated further by the ways in which these adopted homes try to discipline the migrant: the constant state of being surveilled and the need to complete administrative processes that, far from welcoming, impose the notion that one could be expelled at the slightest wrong turn. Having to narrate convincing stories of victimhood creates a vicious cycle that prolongs and postpones the process of belonging.

While Berlin has irrevocably changed as a result of becoming a strategic and political locus of migration and exile in recent years, many feel that it only accepts those who do not push the boundaries of the discursive comfort zones of German society. While this has allowed some people a fresh start, it has not arrived without its challenges. Newcomers in Berlin navigate the menace of daily racism, rising right-wing politics, and the housing crisis — which is itself accentuated by racism. They fight daily to construct an alternative narrative and future, searching for safe spaces where they can critically and emotionally engage their new present reality. This process of homing, as conceptualized by Paolo Boccagni, entails an 'existential struggle towards a

good-enough state of being at home', thereby highlighting the processual constitution of home.<sup>7</sup>

#### BUILDING NEW HOMES: FEMINIST APPROACHES

As a researcher focusing on audiovisual production by activists in exile, I have been conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with video activists from Turkey.<sup>8</sup> In the meantime, I found myself contemplating the concept of home, as I was also living between two localities. Even though my main interest in the project was reflecting on how the experience of exile had impacted their activism, one of the interview questions I asked all participants was about their understanding of what home is, and their approach to homing. I explored how their feelings relating to belonging, inclusion, and acceptance changed over time; indeed, what I encountered was very much the sense that being-at-home was a 'shifting ideal and condition', 'an active, processual and potentially never-ending endeavour'.<sup>9</sup>

I was also particularly interested in this question because my fieldwork in 2021 overlapped with the sixtieth year of migration from Turkey to Germany since the first German-Turkish Recruitment Agreement in 1961. There have been extensive studies on the Agreement's long-term impacts on so-called guest workers (*Gastarbeiter\*innen*) who immigrated from Turkey. Their social realities were marked by the dual nature of transience and integration: searching for economic prosperity and personal freedoms

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7 Paolo Boccagni, 'Homing: A Category for Research on Space Appropriation and "Home-Oriented" Mobilities', *Mobilities*, 17.4 (2022), pp. 585–601 (p. 585) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2022.2046977>>.

8 For more information on this research project, please refer to the project website: <<https://www.videoact.eu/>> [accessed 10 May 2023].

9 Boccagni, 'Homing', pp. 586 and 591.



and yet faced low wages, strenuous working conditions, and the general lack of hospitality coming from the host country.<sup>10</sup> Their problems were not considered to be the problems of the greater German society, but those of temporary guests, who were expected to leave at the end of their two-year contracts. As a result, while cultural segregation was part of the exclusionary reactions of German society, it also became a strategy for migrants to combat official policies and create safe spaces in their new German contexts. This allowed guest workers to have some stability and orientation as they navigated the new political, cultural, and economic landscape they were inhabiting. However, women faced a dual displacement since they became prisoners within their own communities. Whether they were guest workers themselves or coming to Germany as brides, women occupied a space where they were marginalized, facing oppressive patriarchal traditions within the diaspora and being perceived as victims by the larger German society. As such, the voice of women became central to understanding the experience of home as plural, complex, and shifting, oscillating between the real and the imaginary.

The disruptive power that feminist approaches made way for directed me to explore another project in conjunction with my research. To better understand how the city transforms itself as a result of migration and how belonging within it is experienced, I joined the Women\*

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10 See studies that provide social and political analysis of the problems of social integration through the perspective of migrants, effectively questioning the prevailing notion of German tolerance and its implications for the integration process: Rob Burns, 'Images of Alterity: Second-Generation Turks in the Federal Republic', *The Modern Language Review*, 94.3 (1999), pp. 744–57 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3736999>>; *Turkish Culture in German Society Today*, ed. by David Horrocks and Eva Kolinsky (New York: Berghahn, 1996).

Artists' Web Archive project (WAWA),<sup>11</sup> which was initiated by the Apartment Project.<sup>12</sup> WAWA presents an online archive of women\* artists based in Berlin. It aims at the creation, indexing, and distribution of information on Berlin-based women\* artists from Afghanistan, Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen.

These countries have undergone severe conflicts and wars in the past decades, leading to willing or forced migration. Many women\* artists moved to Berlin's transnational space to continue their creative professions. Such mobility has reshaped the dynamic and diverse artistic landscape of Berlin. Thus, WAWA's goal is to keep traces of this changing scene and provide more visibility for new artists. Moreover, when coming to Germany, women\* artists coming from these countries carry with them the experiences of othering they have faced as a result of cultural practices and traditions. This gender-based othering is then compounded with race-based othering in Germany. In this regard, it felt crucial to foster a sense of togetherness and community where a collaborative environment can emerge out of these encounters among artists.

As members of WAWA, we have been organizing face-to-face meetings with other members to introduce the archive and our initial ideas. We asked all members: 'What kind of archive would you like to be part of?' This archive is thus designed collectively and horizontally, facilitated by the WAWA team, and hosted by the Apartment Project. The archive enables the participant to search through

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11 Women\* Artists' Web Archive, 2023 <<https://wawa-network.org>> [accessed 15 January 2023].

12 Apartment Project Berlin, 2023 <<http://berlin.apartmentproject.org>> [accessed 21 January 2023]. This space, established in the Neukölln neighbourhood of Berlin in 2012, primarily focuses on collaborative artistic practices with a focus on displacement, belonging, and (migrant) identities.

artists, geographies, themes, and disciplines. Each artist summarizes her/their creative practice with keywords that make up the section themes and presents herself/themself through the disciplinary and geographical categories to which she/they feels a sense of belonging. Moreover, the archive puts together a regular newsletter, providing information regarding the events and activities in which each member is involved, thereby multiplying our venues of togetherness. In essence, we strive to achieve visibility for women\* artists by creating a network of care gestures and activating an embodied archive through online and offline spaces that facilitate discussion, collaboration, and sharing.

One of the ways in which we aim to activate this archive is through an exhibition. Titled *Beyond Home* and conceived with my colleagues Selda Asal and Özlem Sariyıldız, the exhibition will bring together perspectives of migrant feminists that make visible the contradictory understanding evoked by the home and deconstruct the image of the home that has been historically imposed and perpetuated in patriarchal contexts. It aims to open up a space for home-making experiences that break the monopoly on decisions about which belongings are accepted in a given culture and society. As such, our exhibition intends to dismantle the patriarchal discourses and practices concerning the home and allow those who are spoken for and silenced to speak back. By presenting the variety of approaches to the concept of home and its lived experience in Berlin's artistic and intellectual community, the exhibition will showcase the tensions embedded within the process of homing. In this way, it will shed light upon the workings of power that allow some notions of home and identity to be accepted and others to be violently relegated to the margins.

Hence, for our exhibition, we embraced the understanding that to 'render a new order of ideas perceptible',

we need to ‘disorder ideas’.<sup>13</sup> Our following realization was that this could be possible only if the violence of the patriarchal order and its institutions is exposed. Indeed, we are inspired by what Sara Ahmed has called a ‘feminist killjoy’, which is an individual who raises uncomfortable questions, necessary truths, and unpopular opinions and thus disturbs the conventional order of things so that transformation can ensue. Ahmed characterizes this movement as a shelter in and of itself because it allows for an understanding of

how to live better in an unjust and unequal world  
[ ... ] how to create relationships with others that  
are more equal; how to find ways to support those  
who are not supported or are less supported by  
social systems; how to keep coming up against  
histories that have become concrete, histories that  
have become as solid as walls.<sup>14</sup>

Our exhibition will showcase killjoy stories from multiple subject positions that go beyond romanticized clichés of the home, forced positionings of either here or there, and imaginative journeys that feed displacement discourses. In this manner, this exhibition aims to create new alliances through collective togetherness, questioning structures of power relentlessly, revealing them continuously, and engaging with them structurally. While this may cause us to ‘bump into the world that does not live in accordance with the principles we try to live’, it will be a vessel through which repressed experiences will come into the open, providing an opportunity to shift and impact understandings.<sup>15</sup>

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13 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 251.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 255.

At the time of writing this piece, in early 2023, we plan the exhibition to take place in the summer of the same year at Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien. Significantly, this space is a public institution, part of the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg District Council. Its funding comes from the Capital Cultural Fund, established by the German Federal Government and the State of Berlin. Using available public funding mechanisms allows underrepresented and intersectional experiences to carve out a space in the public arena. Otherwise, we often end up overlooking, if not flattening, substantive differences between the conditions and trajectories of particular movements across spatial borders, most often reducing their positions and demands to a rubric of European liberal ideals. What differs here and goes beyond the pigeonholing of migrant struggles is that these stories are disseminated without the controlling framework of European narratives; this is an approach that insists on combatting the persistent challenges with artistic equity. Feminism from the global south indeed has such a bottom-up approach: instead of waiting passively to be (mis)represented by its counterparts, it has taken the means of production into its own hands in order to decentralize claims to reality.

## CONCLUSION

So, what becomes of this new home? What becomes of the city of Berlin in which we live and come together? Does the lack of a home create a common bond? Does one become a community with those who have this shared experience? Well, yes, and history shows us that too: many marginalized groups have showcased alternative forms of homemaking, resisting the limitations within public spaces. They have undertaken collective homemaking practices that be-

come embodied forms of resistance and affirmations of life. Queer practices of homemaking, for example, have become sites of construction and expression of queer identities when the heteronormative and fascist governance, which violently represses their bodies and voices, doesn't allow otherwise. Similarly, for BIPOC women\*, despite all the vulnerabilities it entails, the home becomes a reprieve from the racism present in the public sphere. Consequently, these communities in Berlin are resisting the restrictive walls imposed upon them by drawing on collective solidarity, going beyond their safe spaces and voicing their demands in the public sphere.

Looking at the ongoing protests against the Islamic regime in Iran, we see each protest gaining momentum, with diverse crowds coming together. For three months, Feminista Berlin organized a protest in front of the headquarters of the Green Party, with sit-ins lasting twenty-four hours each day, condemning the passivity and critical complicity of German foreign policy towards Iran. In order to create a more just society, the protestors demanded that the officials uphold the values they preach; however, the protestors were not addressed by any representative of the Green Party.

Despite these political authorities ignoring such demands, Berlin is progressively becoming the biggest hub for Middle Eastern feminism. Feminists across Europe came to Berlin for the largest feminist march against the Islamic regime on 22 October 2022. Since then, the protests have grown into expanding solidarity through demonstrations, performances, readings, forums, and public interventions. These feminist killjoys will continue to occupy, create, and destabilize the imposed norms, rendering all uncomfortable until hypocritical structures are done away with in the name of human rights, equality, and freedom of speech.

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