

Overlapping slogans, intersecting messages: how the streets of Berlin respond to Corona

“I don’t like to express myself; I like to use other people’s ideas and give them a platform.”

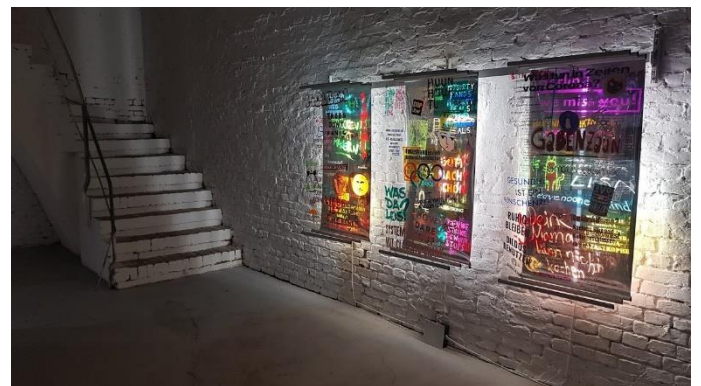
Atsushi Fukunaga’s *What You Might Have Seen in Berlin* invites us to consider the meaning of urban communication and the value of words and meanings at a time of global instability.

A review by Naama Simon.

Japanese artist Atsushi Fukunaga (1980, Hiroshima) has always been fascinated with sound, semantics, and meanings. His works often portray the convergence of messages communicated in the urban space and prompt an exploration of current societal issues.

What You Might Have Seen in Berlin, exhibited in the new premises of SOMA Art Space, is Fukunaga’s departure from his common themes of onomatopoeic words and urban sounds, and a deep dive into the visual communication that emerges from the streets of Berlin.

During a unique point in time, characterized by prolonged confusion and uncertainty, Fukunaga has been exploring the sites of urban communication and the impact of the coronavirus on spaces where visual representations take meanings. The result is a powerful depiction of this new sense of ‘normality’, a result that illuminates the main question at stake: How have the movement restrictions reshaped our understanding of public spaces, activism, and communication?



“What You Might Have Seen in Berlin”, 2020 #2. Polyester film, poster hanger, vinyl film, printed on paper, marker pen / 3 pieces, 120×60 cm each (credit: Naama Simon)

I meet Fukunaga on Friday, June 12th, the day before the opening of his exhibition. He casually greets me in his dusted overall and leads me down to the basement of a residential building in Kreuzberg, home to the new SOMA exhibition hall. He stops right before we enter the gallery and asks me to wait. “The first impression is the most important!” he says, and runs to plug in the lights that illuminate his installations before letting me in. I enter a small exhibition space divided into three parts. In the main hall, three installations of *What You Might Have Seen in Berlin* are displayed. The idea to turn existing slogans into vibrant collages began in an earlier project back in 2018, titled *Kreuzberg bleibt unhöflich* – a collage work incorporating graffiti and posters that Fukunaga discovered while walking in the streets of Kreuzberg. In *What You Might Have Seen in Berlin*, he presents three new installations, freshly created during the last few weeks. The installations include multiple layers of words and stickers arranged on acrylic sheet and mirror vinyl film that form intersecting dialogues between the words and the observer.

I dive into the sea of messages, overdosed with advocacy for diverse issues ranging from feminism, capitalism, and migration to climate change and animal rights – Fukunaga’s depiction of the urban landscape is condensed into an irresistible in-your-face representation



(credit: Atsushi Fukunaga)

of voices. The abundance of textual messages creates quite an overwhelming experience – perhaps a bit too much to take in at first glance. But once I stop and carefully observe each and every slogan – reading it and into it – I can fully understand Fukunaga’s goal: visualizing the urban landscape at a critical time and place. Indeed, the ‘corona communication’ that emerged from Berlin’s cityscape, is perhaps the most exact depiction of the new reality – street messages created in the spaces between quiet train stations, closed clubs, and abandoned playgrounds – are the focus of Fukunaga’s investigation.

Having been familiar with Fukunaga’s previous projects (*Echoic Billboard*, 2016; *Six Shadows of Mine Uttering in the Mountains*, 2018; *Storyteller*, 2018) I was curious about his decision not to incorporate sound in this project.

Fukunaga: *My concept has always been sound because I'm interested in onomatopoeic words and I was inspired by the visualization of Japanese words in Manga comics. Japanese is filled with onomatopoeia. For example, to describe the rain from strong to weak [demonstrates] ZaaZaa - Zaaaa - Saaa - ParaPara - PotsuPotsu / PichaPicha PotsuPotsu / PichaPicha – such are the sounds of raindrops. When I arrived in Berlin, I was exploring onomatopoeic sounds in other languages and created several sound installations. The Language is a communication tool, but it requires the knowledge to speak and understand it. However, since the onomatopoeia expresses sound, it can be established as a common language. I tried new methods and concepts using a visual expression around 2011, after the Fukushima problem [the nuclear disaster caused by the tsunami in March 2011]. My project 'Marvelous Catchphrase' (2016) includes phrases that I've collected over the years, some are direct quotes of the government. In this project and in the 'Kreuzberg bleibt unhöflich', language and words remain the central themes, but the focus is shifted toward the visual aspect.*

It is mid-June and art institutions struggle to recover from a three-month-long corona-paralysis. Due to the current restrictions, museums and galleries are faced with limitations on the number of visitors they're allowed to let in. People's reluctance to enter closed spaces, let alone take part in openings and exhibition events creates an additional challenge for exhibition spaces. I was wondering where all of this meets Fukunaga, both in his personal life and in his artistic endeavors.



(credit: Atsushi Fukunaga)

Fukunaga: *In 'Kreuzberg bleibt unhöflich' I wanted to create an image of Berlin's streets. The corona crisis offered an opportunity to slow things down, which I like in a way. It also brought this unusual situation that I wanted to depict through slogans and stickers that I found interesting.*

The intensity of Fukunaga's installations is powerful yet subtle. The observer's immersion in a vibrant sea of information is a well-balanced experience of stimulation and

interpretation. As such, instead of a passive reception of catchphrases, Fukunaga's multidimensional array of words, colours, and layers encourages an active engagement with the messages.

Intrigued by the multiplicity of layers and reflections, I asked Fukunaga about his use of acrylic sheets and mirror vinyl film.

Fukunaga: *[points to my reflection] You see yourself through the mirror! You become part of the layers. My method is like with the sound installations – I gather a huge amount of information into one space.*



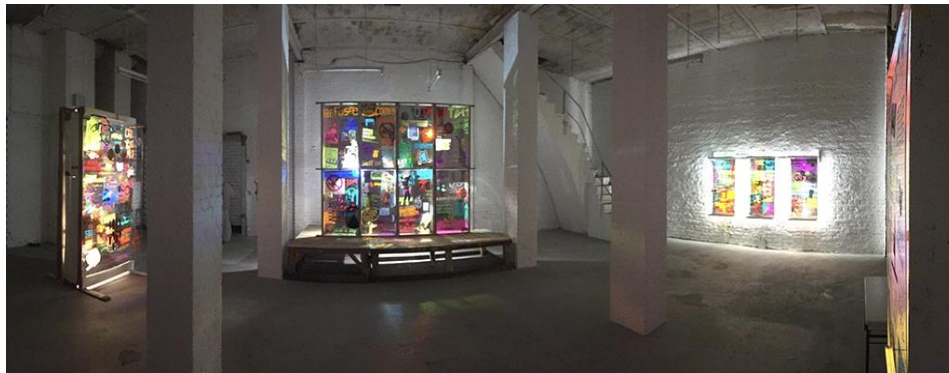
Fukunaga's work is a wide-ranging selection of slogans – humour, sarcasm, wit, nonsense, and sadness, all thoughtfully intertwined. When I ask him about a slogan he likes in particular, he leads me to the *Kreuzberg* installation and points to two overlapping slogans – a juxtaposition of the phrases *Stealing from the West* and *Easy Does It*; He smiles, and we both know why. (credit: Atsushi Fukunaga)

My curiosity urges me to ask him about another slogan that caught my eye: *Die Angst ist der größte Feind der Freiheit* [fear is the greatest enemy of freedom]. With our side conversation still lingering in my mind – about life in Japan, the Japanese government, and his upcoming return to Japan after 14 years in Berlin – I was interested to hear what he had to say about this one.

Fukunaga: *There are other ways to secure freedom other than using fear and army to control people. Although I agree with this slogan, if I'd found something that had an opposite meaning, I'd use it here and show the two viewpoints.*

The assemblage of diverse mottos, statements, catchphrases, and quotes-*Trees Don't Panic* next to *Dildo King* and *#KreuzbergerKartoffel* above *Religion is like history class without facts*- risks itself as a too explicit cliché of Berlin. But how often are we really faced with the meanings of such ordinary and familiar words, by which we daily pass by absentmindedly? Fukunaga's work brings forth an important realization that already surfaced during the

early weeks of lockdown – the urban infrastructure is an unparalleled space of communication and expression. It is an unfiltered hub of Berlin’s diversity and a symbol of the city’s lively social fabric. *What You Might Have Seen in Berlin* invites us to contemplate and re-evaluate non-physical and abstract forms of communication. These inspiring and colourful intersections of political and social messages treated carefully with wit and criticism offer an exquisitely curated glimpse into Berlin’s contemporary ‘street communication’, in all its shapes and colours.



(credit: Atsushi Fukunaga)

Atsushi Fukunaga

“What You Might Have
Seen in Berlin”

SOMA Berlin,

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