

Feminist Dissent

Taking Sid/tes in Making 'Purple Noise'

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Illuminated in purple, a noisy concert filled the workshop space of *Hartware MedienKunstVerein* in Dortmund early on a Sunday morning in February 2019. While live-streaming the concert on Periscope via smartphones, other devices were used to take photographs of the side-swapping performers and audience, and uploaded on Instagram. Tweets got published on Twitter, and pictures of diversified gender symbols spread on the social media channels of the techno-feminist artist group *#purplenoise*. During all this, a new hashtag and concept was created: *#noisefeminism*. The so-called 'noise concert' was the result of participants of the workshop *#imakenoise – Playing with störfaktors*¹ experimenting with the distorting of sounds they had recorded in and around the art space. Together with three members of *#purplenoise*,² the aim of the workshop was to discuss and practice "noisification as a technofeminist strategy for dealing with social media"³ as Cornelia Sollfrank, initiator of the art project, summarized. Following the practices and discourses of the art project, I argue that *#purplenoise* combines participatory tactics and feminist claims for their taking of various sites and sides. It makes use of digital mobile media to critically reflect on the harmful normalization of social media practices while using these very media to do so. Thereby, *#purplenoise* aims at collectively disobeying what they frame as 'algorithmic despotism' that entangles its users in complex power relations through social media and its platforms. Siding with feminist convictions, various offline and online sites are claimed to be occupied with so-

1 The workshop *#imakenoise – Playing with störfaktors* took place as part of the exhibition *Computer Grrrls* that brought together "more than 20 international artistic positions that negotiate the complex relationship between gender and technology in past and present." The exhibition was curated by Inke Arns and Marie Lechner and on display at HMKV Dortmund from October 27th, 2018 to February 24th, 2019, cf. https://www.hmkv.de/exhibition/exhibiti-on-detail/computer_grrrls.html, last access 5.17.2021.

2 The workshop was conceptualized and carried out by Charlotte Bonjour, Johanna Thompson, and Cornelia Sollfrank, all members of *#purplenoise*.

3 Sollfrank, Cornelia (2019): Twitter-Post by coco sollfrank @csollfrank, February 25, 2019, <http://twitter.com/csollfrank/status/1099960295559229441>, last access 5.17.2021.

called ‘purple noise’, with social media content going viral. In doing so, *#purplenoise* intends to queer the norms of and propose alternative practices for and by using social media in ways that I would like to frame as ‘feminist dissent’. Understanding dissent as an “interfering, interrupting modality,” (Bippus/Ochsner/Otto 2016: 275) it can be conceptualized as “disruptions in participation processes, which can be located in the media configurations themselves.” (Bippus/Ochsner/Otto 2016: 262) Accordingly, ‘queer thinking’ and the practices of queering become a mode of dissent. As such, queer thinking constitutes a tactic to think and act critically in contrary to ‘straightening’ concepts and aims at destabilizing gender hierarchical, heteronormative, binary conceptualizations. This article traces the techno-feminist art project *#purplenoise* across various sites and sides of dissent, online and offline alike. Exploring how these artistic discourses and practices engage in strategies of participation, dissent, and queering, the analysis reflects the interrelations between art and digital, mobile and “affective infrastructures,” (Berlant 2016: 414). As the focus point, I pose the question: How can the taking of sides and sites be envisioned and put into practice in participatory art as ways of queer thinking and feminist dissent?

“Techno-Feminist Intervention”: Art Practices of *#purplenoise*

In its manifesto, *#purplenoise* defines itself as “an erratic techno-feminist intervention operating on a global scale to noisify social media channels.” (*#purplenoise* 2019a) Initiated by Cornelia Sollfrank, net-artist and cyberfeminist in the 1990s, researcher and technofeminist till today, and realized together with Janine Sack, Christina Grammatikopoulou, Johanna Thompson, and Isabel de Sena, all situated in the fields of art, culture and research, the self-proclaimed movement launched in 2018 with a street protest. Invited to the City of Women Festival in the Southern-German city of Esslingen, they took the opportunity to put their manifesto into practice: they claimed the streets, wearing purple-colored clothes and so-called ‘feelers’ on their heads, holding protest signs featuring new hashtags and self-created gender symbols, using megaphones to declare their demands while simultaneously producing ‘noise’ in form of, mainly visual, content for their various social media channels (see fig 1).⁴

Sollfrank explains this doubled intervention as follows: “We organized a street protest and worked on the representation of this protest on social media in order to investigate the dynamics between the two spheres that have grown together into

4 A video of the protest can be found on YouTube: Purple Noise (2018): “Purple Noise Demonstration in Esslingen”, uploaded October 21, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AloTclumf_o&t=24s, last access 6.06.2019.

an 'expanded space', as Grammatikopoulou calls it." (Sollfrank 2018: 7) Organizing events in physical sites, like street protests and workshops in art institutions, and at the same time inviting participants to join in on their producing and sharing of online content for and on their social media sites, constitute core practices of *#purplenoise*. In various manifestations, they occupy these diverse sites with a range of tactics in order to pursue their declared aim, namely the "feminist noisification of social media" (*#purplenoise* 2019a). These techno-feminist aims, practices, and tactics include:

Figure 1: Twitter-Post with a picture showing Cornelia Sollfrank and Christina Grammatikopoulou proclaiming demands of #purplenoise at the street protest in Esslingen on September 28, 2018.



<https://twitter.com/PurpleNoise1/status/1054035140190572544>, last access 10.21.2018.

“The desire to fuck over social media, to bring down platform capitalism, to reconquer public space, to escape the social control exercised by monopolies, to refine political manipulation, to use affect in order to build the common, to turn power into care, to produce more just realities, to win the battle over Donna Haraway, and to create new narratives about the future. The explosive mix of #*purplenoise* consists of real anger, ruthless action, social (dis-)information, technical intelligence, political radicalism, and true love.” (#*purplenoise* 2019b)

According to these wide-ranging, theoretically charged aspirations, #*purplenoise* intends to dissent from the capitalism-driven side of socio-technical infrastructures that social media platforms and its few powerful corporate monopolies constitute, and to fight for inclusive public rights, spaces, and commons, by using affect and care as ways to create new feminist narratives for possible futures. Their alleged strategies to do so make use of various affects and consist of political, social, and technological practices.

“Noise On All Channels”: Virality and (Purple) Noise

On their Twitter account, #*purplenoise* connects its self-definition with a call for participation: “We are a new global feminist movement. Use this platform to say something about gender imbalance in this world, and you will be heard! NOISE ON ALL CHANNELS!” (#*purplenoise* 2019c) By referencing to feminist topics and intending to spread these widely, this introductory reveals the main objective summed up by the artist group’s name: the critical and large-scale feminist dissenting of gender iniquities. As such, its naming evokes connotations: the color purple is, among others, associated with feminist and counterculture movements, as the Women’s Suffrage movement. Noise, as a term, is used in diverse fields such as music, communication (studies), and technology to broadly describe wanted or unwanted disturbance of signals. #*purplenoise* claims to use two main concepts, noise and virality, which can be understood as strategies of dissent and participation. According to Sollfrank, the use of these notions are inspired by art theorist and #*purplenoise* member Grammatikopoulou’s text *Viral Performances of Gender* (Sollfrank 2018: 7). In it, she analyzes interrelations between protests and contemporary feminist art and their online and offline interventions, framing them as “viral performances of gender” and specifying “viral noise” as their common communicative strategies (Grammatikopoulou 2019: 89). More concretely, she defines noise as “the interception and confusion introduced deliberately across communication platforms in order to make a message less clear to its recipients” (ibid.: 90) and virality as content “shared horizontally [...] from a source to users who then re-share it millions of times” that “can express and reproduce existing power structures, but also trans-

forms them in unexpected ways.” (Ibid.: 91) As tactics, virality and noise can thus be employed by diverse actors pursuing contradictory aims. Feminist artists in the digital age “seem to be aware of the contradictions emerging in the conflict area between activism, trolling and marketing, and use exactly these contradictions as an integral part of their work.” (Ibid.: 90) Inspired by ‘viral noise’, *#purplenoise* situates its practices at these blurry borders within and beyond social media, aiming at creating disturbance in order to challenge existing power relations surrounding social media. *#purplenoise*, consequently, intends to use ‘viral noise’ as a tactic, and at the same time as a tool for spreading feminist objectives as well as to dissent against suppressive social media practices.

“The Site” Of Dissent: Social Media and Smartphones

In holding workshops, giving talks, and organizing interventions such as the street protest and events held at (media) art institutions, *#purplenoise* creates infrastructures for generating content to distribute on their social media channels, via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and the like. This large-scale sharing and spreading is first and foremost made possible through social media platforms and digital mobile devices, mainly smartphones. Acknowledging the all-encompassing ubiquity of these, *#purplenoise* aims at finding strategies to utilize, while challenging social media platforms as well as their related actors and practices:

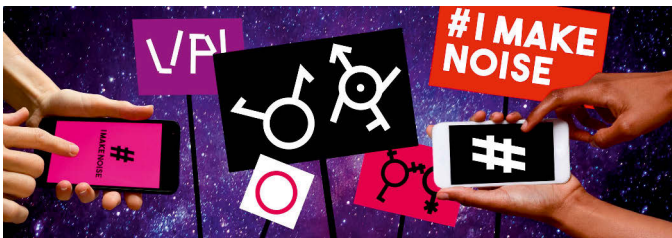
“To use social media or not to use social media is not the question any more. They have become ‘the site’ where not just ordinary users but also the political establishment, law enforcement, secret services, marketers and hate groups can develop their greatest impact.” (Sollfrank 2018: 7)

As “the site,” social media platforms constitute the central infrastructure and site of negotiation of *#purplenoise*. By claiming to dissent suppressive social media practices, they aim at disobeying social media understood as “private enterprises, driven by greed and hunger for data and power, being elusive, non-transparent, secretive and unpredictable.” (Sollfrank 2018: 7) Via the strategy of ‘viral noise’, the art project aims at dissenting the control of information, actors, and practices implied by the algorithms at the core of social media by practicing disobedience: “We click, we feed and we disobey/algorithmic despotism!” (*#purplenoise* 2019a) Interconnecting practices of participation and dissent, *#purplenoise*, consequently, poses the questions: “What is the disturbing noise you produce? How can we join forces beyond the despotic rule of algorithms?” (*#purplenoise* 2018) In order to analyze how this cooperation takes place and in what ways sites and sides of dissent are taken, I want to have a closer look at the concrete practices and tactics of *#purplenoise*.

“Nonspecific Disturbances”: Viral Imagery and Queering

Positioning social media as sites of private and public, corporate and activist negotiation, *#purplenoise* appropriates strategies of social media for their very own purposes. In order to use social media in a way that allows for their aim of noisification, the initiators of *#purplenoise* applied the “reverse engineering [of] successful campaigns” and, thereby, noticed the need for “certain recognizable elements, amongst them hashtags, iconic imagery, a manifesto and memes.” (Sollfrank 2018: 7) Thus, invitations to participate in *#purplenoise* are articulated by means of written and visual levels, distributed in public and online spaces. In order to spread and localize their claims across platforms, *#purplenoise* uses hashtags such as *#purplenoise*, *#imakenoise*, *#iusemyfeelers*, and *#algorithmicdespotism*. These are mobilized on their channels, in print media, performances, and their manifesto. Using activist strategies, purple-colored manifestos, postcards, and stickers are distributed, protest signs are created, and posters are hung, featuring visual elements and/or hashtags. The website of *#purplenoise* as well as its social media channels, especially Instagram and Facebook, feature photographic material taken during workshops and protests as well as graphics specifically produced for *#purplenoise*’s visual strategy. The latter consists of mounted photographs of a smartphone being held by a human hand with the index finger of the other hand touching the screen showing a hashtag or a ‘noisified’ gender symbol on its interface (see fig 2).

Figure 2: Website title picture of #purplenoise showing gender memes and hashtags.



<http://artwarez.org/projects/purplenoise/>, last access 5.31.2019. *#purplenoise* can now be found under: <https://purplenoise.org/>

Represented as such, and used to document the artistic practices and activities via photographs, videos, and audio including live recordings, smartphones are an integral, ever-present, and seemingly self-evident part of *#purplenoise* as both focus and strategic tool alike. Smartphones encourage engagement and invite participation, they structure, coordinate, organize, and document participatory practices. Thereby, the smartphone becomes a mobile media of storage, communication, and

distribution, inviting participation, and constantly producing and synchronizing communities practicing dissent.

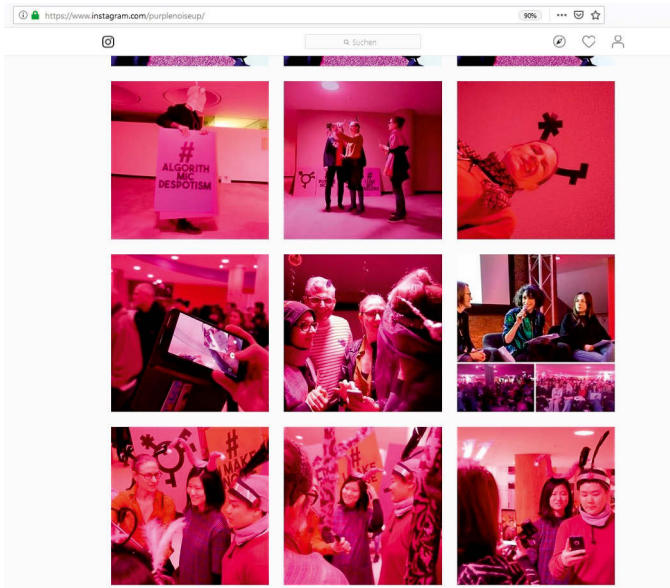
#purplenoise adopts social media's strategic use of viral imagery by creating its own in form of "iconographic signs of infinite gender variations:" newly created gender signs based on the mostly binary used gender symbols created in 'do-it-yourself'-mode as well as their so-called "feeler meme" (*#purplenoise* 2018), inspired by multispecies feminist and science theorist Donna Haraway.⁵ The feelers, which *#purplenoise* creates with participants in 'feelers-tinkering workshops' for example at transmediale festival in 2019, titled *#iusemyfeelers – How to Grow and Use Your Feelers*⁶ (transmediale 2019), are self-created wearables to be worn on the head (see fig 3).

They are supposed to function as an "extended human sensorium" inviting participants to speculate about possible futures for themselves and beyond (Sollfrank 2018: 7). The making of and tinkering with feelers and gender symbols, could be also described as a form of what media researcher and activist Sophie Toupin frames as "feminist hacking" (Toupin 2019). Accordingly, she defines it as hacking in a doubled sense: firstly, as hacking *technology* by adding a critical material dimension to traditional technofeminism and secondly, as hacking *gender* by challenging heteronormative understandings. As a form of collective resistance it creates new spaces and feminist infrastructures beyond online and offline dichotomies. (Cf. Toupin 2019: 31f) Consequently, 'feminist hacking' can be seen as a form of dissent and queering normatizing practices impaired by gender and technological hierarchies. The creation of gender symbols and feelers in workshops or performances and their virtual and spatial distribution as visual along with textual representation across various sites including art spaces and social media, serves as artistic strategies to 'add to the noise' in a disruptive manner: "The feeler meme and the iconographic signs of infinite gender variations inspire us to tell and share little stories. These mix as nonspecific disturbances with the noise of social media." (*#purplenoise* 2018) This re-thinking of the future in narratives that transcend notions of *her-story* cross and thereby queer binary logics: gender, then, is not limited to two but instead infinite options. In transcending the various sites, *#purplenoise*, further queers the

5 In Donna Haraway's so-called Camille stories, one follows – in an act of "speculative fabulation" – the fictitious character Camille, half-human, half-butterfly and genderless, over five generations between the years 2025 and 2425. The Camille of the second generation decides to get "chin implants of butterfly antennae" – feelers – "as a coming-of-age gift" helping in the "becoming-with" the human partner (cf. ?

6 The workshop *#iusemyfeelers – How to Grow and Use Your Feelers* was conceptualized and carried out by Cornelia Sollfrank, Charlotte Bonjour, Christina Grammatikopoulou, Janina Sack, Johanna Thompson and Isabel de Sena. Additional performers: Nina Stuhldreher and Gerog Gläser, for the performance () Opting out Is Not an Option! (Cf. <https://archive.transmediale.de/content/optiming-out-is-not-an-option>, last access 17.05.2021).

Figure 3: Participants of the workshop “#iusemyfeelers – How to Grow and Use Your Feelers” experiencing transmediale festival with their ‘new sensorium’.



Screenshot of Instagram-page of #purplenoise: <https://www.instagram.com/purplenoiseup/>, last access 5.17.2021.

thinking in spatial binaries. As such, the queering of spaces can be conceptualized as a feminist taking of *sid/tes*, in that it questions the binary logics of gender.

“Share Your Emotions”: Already Engaged Participants

In a participatory mode, #*purplenoise* aims at “reaching out – to connect with you!” and invites “real people with real time/users, digital naïves/using platforms, being used” to participate in their “feminist noisification of social media” (#*purplenoise* 2019a). The manifesto, thereby, points to the double bind character of social media platforms that use the users using them. Participants are positioned as ‘naïve’ and, thereby, as easily available via direct requests. Prompts that are stated across the manifesto read much like imperatives akin to social media appeals: “Donate yourself/share your emotions/share your confusion/turn it into noise”, “Produce more noise./Channel your noise./Feed our channels./And get in touch.” “Add your per-

sonal flavor to purple noise,/join us on our social media.” (Ibid.) These demands necessitate the users’ ability to join in by having access to social media platforms in the first place. Further, they hint at the need for participants’ willingness to contribute to the project on a personal and emotional level. Hence, participation is directed at social media users that are already familiar with the strategies and practices of sharing, liking, joining, producing content, and feeding social media channels thus at users *already* participating. In reflecting on social media and its affordances with means of digital infrastructures itself, *#purplenoise* can be described as situated in the “post-digital” (Cramer 2014) that positions participants as “already engaged” (Tyžlik-Carver 2014), as “always-on/always-on-you” (Turkle 2008), and thereby affected by the ubiquity of mobile technologies and structures of connectivity. Following media and art theorist Magda Tyžlik-Carver, post-participation “assumes participation as a condition present everywhere and enacted by humans and non-humans participating together and being already part of something regardless if it is a desired outcome.” (Tyžlik-Carver 2014). Consequently, positioning oneself in a matter of taking a *site* – by interacting with social media platforms – and of taking a *side* – by siding with feminist notions – means becoming situated in a post-digital, post-participatory condition: within the omnipresence, the continuity, and the becoming self-evident of digital or participatory practices, processes, and technologies.

Feminist Dissent as Common and Affective Infrastructuring

Feminist dissent in *#purplenoise* unfolds as based on a doubled shift: firstly, in artistic practices situated as *post*-digital and *post*-participatory and secondly, in contemporary feminism “defined by the cross-pollination of digital and physical space, generating new tools of resistance through visual and media culture.” (Grammatikopoulou 2019: 105) Both shifts are premised on changes brought about through large-scale digitization and datafication and their interrelations with everyday practices and offline spaces. In *#purplenoise* these ‘new tools of resistance’ take shape in form of artistic feminist practices, producing visual and textual content and mobilizing it via social media channels, making them sites of dissent. In utilizing the participatory structures of social media platforms for dissenting those themselves, social media is positioned as one possible and necessary site of resistance. In their co-created manifesto, the *Feminist Principles of the Internet*, “a series of statements that offer a gender and sexual rights lens on critical internet-related rights,” the internet is defined as

“a space where social norms are negotiated, performed and imposed, often in an extension of other spaces shaped by patriarchy and heteronormativity. Our strug-

gle for a feminist internet is one that forms part of a continuum of our resistance in other spaces, public, private and in-between.” (Association for Progressive Communications 2019)

Understanding the internet as such an extended site of feminist resistance, *#purplenoise* is negotiating the practices of dissent in taking sides and sites. In using social media channels and in taking to the streets and to art institutions with the aim of noisifying them, they become sites for artistic practices of feminist dissent. Thereby, the techno-feminist art project intends to interfere with and thus queer the sites and logics of algorithmic governance of corporate players, shifting power relations towards more equal access and rights. However, the project of critically intervening in power structures is a complex process affording time, endurance, and personal involvement. Accordingly, Cornelia Sollfrank describes the impacts of social media and its (infra-)structural repercussions, that affect the members and participants of *#purplenoise* on a personal and affective level:

“We knew all of that before, but experiencing it on a daily basis, physically and mentally, and understanding how time consuming and manipulative the structures themselves are, was extremely frustrating and even depressing. I would say this first lesson was a hard one to learn. Luckily, we also had a lot of fun in the course of our collaboration.” (Sollfrank 2018: 7)

As such, *#purplenoise* is shaped in its core by what cultural theorist Lauren Berlant describes as “affective infrastructures” (Berlant 2016: 414). The affective dimension of “‘infrastructure’ as that which binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself” (ibid.: 394) critically considers, how affect is (made) infrastructural as well as how infrastructures are intrinsically affective. In introducing the concept of the common, Berlant stresses “its power to retrain affective practical being, and in particular [...] its power to dishabituate through unlearning the overskilled sensorium that is so quick to adapt to damaged life with a straight, and not a queer, face.” (Ibid.: 399) *#purplenoise* challenges affects created by social media, for instance, by proposing a new ‘sensorium’ through creating feelers or gender memes for negotiating social media practices. In doing so, the art project critically questions, how social media, its diverse users, and its infrastructure could be and act(ed upon) otherwise. Arguing for collective practices, Berlant calls on “all world-creating subjects in common struggle” to “build affective infrastructures.” (Ibid.: 414) *#purplenoise* as an artist-group is continuously reshaping itself by various constant and interchanging members coming and working together for particular projects, thereby forming what could be described as an ‘affective affiliation.’ Taking sides and sites, consequently, can be conceptualized as a communing, especially of infrastructures of social media, through dissenting strategies that work

against these very parts of the infrastructures that impede empowerment of female and queer persons, diversification, and queer thinking.

Taking Sid/tes as “Always Figuring Out What’s at Stake”

Taking sid/tes calls for self-reflexively considering the positionality of oneself in relation to others and other *sides*, as well as in relation to one’s own and other *sites*. Or as social anthropologist Athena Athanasiou puts it, bridging situating and participatory practices, “taking sides involves becoming situated in space and time through the collective work of always figuring out what’s at stake.” (Athanasiou 2018: 6) Becoming situated as collective and processual practices, taking sid/tes in *#purplenoise* and its practices of feminist dissent can be described as a range of participatory practices and as an active process of constantly and collectively negotiating the straightening practices of social media. More concretely, the practices of *#purplenoise* aim at a critical unraveling of the power relations involved in social media through appropriating their practices and ‘tinkering’ with them. Thus, the feminist taking of sides and sites in *#purplenoise* is experimental in nature and constitutes a tinkering with possibilities of dissent and the questioning of positionality. These processes describe a circular movement of probing and adapting, of trial and error with the aim of disentangling what the relations (with)in (affective) infrastructures of social media are and entail.

The taking of sides and sites, as conceptualized in its threefold way, can be located in *#purplenoise* and its practices. Firstly, taking a *side*, by positioning oneself in opposition to another, speaks foremost to the taking of a feminist standpoint. Secondly, taking *sites* “as a manner of protest, occupation, appropriation or acquisition” (Bippus et al. 2018: 1), is realized in *#purplenoise* in manifold ways: by organizing a street protest, partaking in festivals, exhibitions, and workshops within art institutions, or occupying social networking websites as a means of ‘feminist noisification of social media’. Thirdly, taking a side as an active decision-making including processes of positionality and subjectification can be found in participants’ willingness to personally join in on the practices proposed by *#purplenoise* as well as in situating the project within feminist theories and practices, thereby inviting participants to position themselves within those. In challenging gender hierarchies and heteronormativities, for example by creating new inventive gender symbols and sharing them via social media channels, participants become personally involved, and at the same time form part of a larger movement.

Feminist dissent in *#purplenoise*, then, opens in a twofold way as appropriating strategies established within digital infrastructures that display dissent by disturbing normalized social media practices, that also affect these very infrastructures and their participants by deconstructing the ways in which ‘affective infrastruc-

tures' construe power. Rather than existing as a mere disturbance, *#purplenoise* thus actively intervenes in the status quo and constructs new narratives, thereby becoming a productive strategy in the collective fight for queer-feminist causes. In this way, we can see feminist noisification as a path into dissenting and common affective infrastructuring, with feminist dissent comprising a tactic for productively taking sides and sites by appropriating and loudly opposing any noise that is not purple at its core.

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