

change. Installed in the same room as *No Ordinary Protest*, this work forms the conclusion to the exhibition. It intimates our uncertain environmental future, an emerging working-class engaging in a form of labour in which humans replace the toil of insects, and finally the ongoing troubling prospect of human interference in nature and biological processes.

It is not only the musical reverberations like singing and humming that define the meaning and scope of Karikis' video works, but also ambient sounds, such as birds whistling, the wind hissing, leaves rustling, and the murmur of the sea, which also play an important role in establishing the overall atmosphere of his work, hinting at the tensions between nature and culture, humans and manufactured landscapes. Music and sound are to be understood as overarching qualities that entirely permeate reality, not unlike the medieval idea of the *Musica Universalis* or Harmony of the Spheres. The 'Music of the Spheres' or 'Musica Universalis' is a philosophical concept that regards proportions in the movements of celestial bodies as a form of music<sup>1</sup>.

Karikis works with traumatised communities, or communities under threat. It highlights dystopian post-industrial environments and vocations and economies that have fallen victim to transformations in the productive system under global capitalism. He shows the human face of labour that has disappeared behind corporate conglomerates, financial algorithms and statistics. In addition to its advocacy of collective action and power, his work emphasizes the importance of social relations, community building and imagining alternative ways of living together. Against today's doctrine of 'there is no society', 'atomisation' and capitalism's 'ethos' of each person for themselves, Karikis points to the importance of real-time friendship,

co-existence and creative social exchange as a way of countering post-industrial, urban alienation, economic disempowerment and social disenfranchisement.

Contested spaces or spaces of social upheaval or forced radical change become re-animated through the power of communal sharing and creativity. His works advocate a shared sense of justice and responsibility towards the environment, and an urgent need for solidarity with all creatures. Rather than lapsing into didacticism or finger-pointing for all the economic and social ills that afflict us today, Karikis calls for empathy and is deeply affective. While being critical and focusing on adverse social and economic issues, his work always emanates a sense of optimism and hope. As a visual artist he does not forget the potential of the aesthetic power of images. Together with the direct, emotional power of music and sound, he creates resonant, poignant and moving works that linger in our visual and sonic memory for time to come.

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<sup>1</sup>Pythagoras discovered the relation between the pitch of the musical note and the length of a vibrating string. The Music of the Spheres combines the idea that mathematical relationships express 'tones' of energy, manifest in numbers, visual angles, shapes and sounds. During the Renaissance the idea emerged that planets emit their own unique "hum" based on their orbital revolution around the sun. The quality of life on Earth reflects this tone of celestial sounds.

## Polyphonies of the collective

Katerina Gregos

Over the last ten years Mikhail Karikis' multi-disciplinary practice has consistently explored critical social, political and economic issues, with vulnerable social groups and communities in transition. His work looks into, among other things, the repercussions of globalisation and the consolidation of neo-liberal capital, the demise of industry in the UK and the rest of Europe, vanishing communities and the disappearance of traditional vocations further afield. He explores inter-related issues of identity, community, belonging, and social cohesion – all of which are under threat in our modern world of high capitalism, post-industrialism, uprooted 'nomadic' citizens and economic or political migrants, networks and social media – many of which have contributed to social isolation and arch-individualism.

However, rather than simply documenting or commenting on disenfranchised communities from a distance, Karikis works from the bottom up, engaging with people long-term and involving them in the creative process all the while privileging memory and restoring a sense of pride within the participatory process. His practice re-affirms the emancipatory power of collaboration and what I would call creative activism. Karikis' work is genuinely political because he not only thinks politically, but he acts accordingly by practicing what he preaches. This exhibition focuses on moving image, a backbone of a practice that also includes installation, sound, photography and performance. Five of Karikis' major video installations are presented: *Sounds from Beneath* (2011-12), *SeaWomen* (2012), *Children of Unquiet* (2014), *Ain't Got No Fear* (2016) and *No Ordinary Protest* (2018-19).

*Sounds from Beneath* (made together with artist Uriel Orlow) re-unites a group of former coalminers in a decommissioned derelict Kent coalmine. The video features men from the Snowdown Colliery Male

Voice Choir, who were invited to remember, vocalise and simulate the industrial sounds of a working coal mine, such as hissing, banging, rattling, humming, grouping in formations reminiscent of picket lines, against the bleak backdrop of coal slag heaps. The work is epic in character, and the force as well as solidarity of male labour power is transformed through the creative energy of song. At once political and poetic, the film resonates with pathos, dignity and emotional force. It functions as a salvaging of memory, an ode, a tribute, and a requiem all at once.

These works share the use of voice as a sculptural material, a consistent point of reference in Karikis' entire oeuvre. Sound in general plays an extremely important role across the artist's practice, constituting a red thread running through all of his films. It functions both as an emancipatory expressive force as well as an emotive and affective one, connecting people, their longings, dreams and endeavours, as well as their latent fears. This sound is carefully crafted to reflect the social situation in which it plays out. Be it a choral song imitating the industrial sounds of the underground as in *Sounds from Beneath*; humming pipes mimicking the flow of gas or the transport of liquids as in *Children of Unquiet*; the sounds of ancient breathing techniques used by veteran female divers as in *SeaWomen*; the drone of children's voices engaging in eco-activism as in *No Ordinary Protest*; or the rumbling echoes of the the demolition of a power plant, used as the beat for a rap song in *Ain't Got No Fear*, sound is never secondary to image in Karikis' moving image works.

*Ain't Got No Fear* (2016) was made with a group of teenagers from the Isle of Grain in Kent, a militarised post-industrial marshland peninsula in the district of Medway, Kent. It is a highly contested territory in socio-economic and environmental terms. The

area's former facilities include an oil refinery and concrete factory and having gone through production transition, it is now the site of a power station, a gas terminal and import facility as well as industrial warehouses for the Thames Gateway project. Despite its importance as a major habitat for diverse wetland birds, it has been the proposed site for a new four-runway airport to ease Heathrow congestion. Taking the issue of the limited prospects for young people within a post-industrial wasteland in the process of 'economic restructuring', *Ain't Got No Fear* focuses on a group of 11-13-year-old boys from Grain. In response to the isolation of the village they grew up in and the lack of stimuli for teenagers, the boys organised raves in the woods, which were subsequently raided by the police.

With this landscape and reality as a backdrop, the boys sing a rap song they wrote about their lives, recalling their childhood and imagining their future and old age. Once again sound and rhythm play a key role in the film: in addition to the autobiographical lyrics, the boys use as their beat the persistent crushing noises of the demolition of a local power plant. The work is filmed in the style of a socially gritty music video, juxtaposing desolate post-industrial landscapes, on the one hand, and forests at the edge of urbanity on the other, where the camera follows the boys to their secret hideaways and records their act of re-capturing and re-claiming the site of their former raves.

We see the teenagers in the forest making noise with all kinds of contraptions including police helmets as drum kits. It is a space of freedom, far from social convention, parental oppression and social deadlock. The video is shown alongside a photographic series entitled *Little Demons*, which features a group of local children in the woods where youth raves used to take place. They wear demon-like

masks as a playful response to parental hegemony. A tribute to friendship and anti-authoritarianism, *Ain't Got No Fear* shows how a former industrial site can be re-imagined through play, creativity and music.

Also featuring children as protagonists, *Children of Unquiet* (2014), is a multi-disciplinary project in several parts, of which the video is shown here. The artist focuses on children and our possible futures. The project takes place in the geothermal area of the Devil's Valley in Tuscany, Italy, which inspired Dante's *Inferno*, and is known for being the place where sustainable energy production was invented at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and where the first geothermal power plant in the world was built. Until its shift from manual labour to automation, several thousand workers and their families lived in this area. They were housed in several industrial prototype workers' villages constructed by the modernist architect Giovanni Michelucci in the 1950s, in the visionary utopian spirit of the times. With the advent of automation, unemployment rose dramatically and job opportunities for young people shrank resulting in rapid depopulation and the abandonment of entire villages.

Karikis worked with a group of forty-five children between the ages of 5 and 12, from the area. He organized a series of workshops and performances resulting in a film featuring a 'take over' of one of the abandoned workers' villages, in an emancipatory form of defiance. In addition, the artist created a board game reactivating the decision-making processes that led to the region's decay and the disenfranchisement of workers, and a Super-8 film animating the children's possible future visions of the deserted village. As with many of Karikis' other pieces, the deployment of community solidarity, collaborative work and play become an antidote to the traumatic effects of post-

industrialism and the fractured communities and broken individuals it leaves in its wake. At the same time, we are reminded quite simply that children hold the potentiality of the future and possess unbridled imagination for the possibilities lost by many adults.

The artist's interest in vanishing communities and gender recurs in *SeaWomen* (2012), which features a dwindling group of mostly elderly female divers living on the volcanic South Korean island of Jeju in the North Pacific, situated between Japan and China. The work was made during a residency on the island, where the artist met *haenyeo* (sea-women) who free dive to great depths to gather pearls and seafood. The video follows the women on the boat, where they dress in their wetsuits and diving masks, preparing for their daily labour under water where they catch octopus, starfish, oysters and urchins.

This age-old female profession became the dominant economic force on the island by the 1970s, establishing a strong community and matriarchal system. *SeaWomen* witnesses a disappearing world: of women divers working in a sustainable ecological way, against the ever-growing trend of industrialization and machine extraction. The sounds of the wind and the sea, the chatter and laughter of the women, and especially their singing, celebrates the joy and play of a tightly-knit group with a deep sense of identity and community, sharing in work, pleasure and song. Finally, the film is a critique on the widespread ageism in our world where elderly people are marginalized and cast aside as being of no use. Here we bear witness to a group of women whose twilight years are filled with purpose, usefulness, fun and independence.

*No Ordinary Protest* (2018) is based on a children's science fiction novel, entitled *The Iron Woman* (1993), by the British poet and children's writer Ted Hughes (1930-1998). In the novel, the female superhero

invests children with a mysterious power of sound, which can engender socio-political transformation. This sound, transmitted by touch, resonates with the howling of creatures endangered by the pollution of the planet. For the film, Karikis worked together with a group of seven-year-olds from an East London primary school for an entire academic year. Through the use of experimental teaching methods, reading, discussion and play, they co-created the project. The resulting film casts the children as agitators and activists. It echoes the environmental themes of the book and interprets the mysterious noise, which they use in their protest. Sporting masks, they harness this secret power, infiltrating factories and 'infecting' adults with their demands for action. Improvising with their voices, as well as musical instruments and toys, they employ sound to trigger change. With the uncertainty governing our natural environment as a backdrop, and echoing the recent climate protests and school strikes held by children all over the world (though it was made before these events), *No Ordinary Protest* brings to the fore a powerful tool: the political voice and activist imagination of children as a transformative force for the present as well as the future.

Finally, the exhibition includes a new commission *Becoming Insect* (2019), which is a wall-based structure comprising three elements: an image of a flower seen in UV light (which is how bees would see flora), being hand-pollinated by a child's hand using a paint brush; and two Perspex panels with a transcript of two conversations with seven year-old children from a school in the industrial northern English town of Middlesbrough. In the first one, the children imagine how they might transform into a bee to pollinate a tree, while the second features observations of a photograph of Chinese pollination workers in an apple-growing region where bee populations have been devastated because of climate