

Don Quixote Fellowship Report

Drawing for German

Nicky Enright, August 31, 2022, Berlin, Germany

To begin, I express my gratitude for this fellowship and the generous support that brought my proposal to life. I set out to learn German as Don Quixote might have envisioned, by drawing all of Berlin's 3.6 million residents, exchanging their conversational German skills for my original portrait of them. A selection of images is available [here](#).

This project was a combined Drawing and German class for me, with the city of Berlin as the classroom. In this unfamiliar environment and economy, I used language and art as an alternative means of exchange, thereby linking this project to my international currency project, the [Globo](#). I also included music, requesting tracks from every participant for my *Drawing for German* [Spotify playlist](#) - a musical German class, now available to the public.

My project became a close encounter with the power of art to create connections and community, a power that accounts for why art is foundational to every human civilization.

Furthermore, I studied intimacy, a word usually reserved for long-term relationships; portraiture is linked to the human desire to be seen and, in this case, also heard. My experience indicates that intimacy is created when you look at a person as if drawing their portrait, and listen to them as if learning their language. In this way, even a brief, shared moment could be considered intimate, and the portraits could become mementos and lasting memories. I also spent quality time with old friends and new, all of whom I drew.

Predictably, I failed to reach my goal of sketching all 3.6 million Berliners, but I did manage a great many, perhaps 2.1 million – or thereabouts.

A sustained August heatwave in Europe became an unexpected challenge, since Berlin has virtually no air conditioning. At times the atmosphere was sweltering, while everyone experienced, physically and emotionally, the distressing reality of climate change. Another challenge was the difficulty of even finding a German speaker sometimes; imagine landing in some areas of NYC, say the Spanish-speaking neighborhood of Washington Heights, with a project called *Drawing for English*. My Berlin apartment was in *Neukölln*, a neighborhood brimming with Turkish, Arab, and Romanian immigrants. Occasionally, I spoke more German than they did. Many participants added non-German music to the playlist; together with my drawings, they provide a representation of the diversity of contemporary Berlin.

Being a teaching artist, it was exciting to see everybody as a possible teacher. Even beyond language, we all have so much to learn from each other. Also, this project reminded me that being a full-time student is exhausting; my brain got a serious workout with the grammatical gymnastics of German. But it was exhilarating to learn from and practice with so many people. Sometimes I felt I was swimming, but I often felt out of my depth with no choice but to keep floating~

Both my drawing and my German skills improved through immersion, though there is a long road ahead. As with art, the pursuit of self-expression and understanding through language is endless, unlike this report, which I end with great appreciation for this rare opportunity.

Vielen dank!