

ANGELA RICHTER

SUPERNERDS

Conversations
with HEROES



OFFICE OF

Supernerds

Conversations with Heroes

Edited by Angela Richter
In collaboration with Julian Pörksen
With drawings by Daniel Richter



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Angela Richter, born in 1970, has been house director at the Schauspiel Köln theater since the 2013/14 season. Her work combines the areas of theater, performance and journalistic research. In 2006 she founded the Fleet Street theater in Hamburg, which she ran until 2010. Artistically she has been dealing with the phenomenon of internet activists for quite some time. She lives in Berlin and Cologne.

Daniel Richter, born in 1962, is one of the most famous contemporary German painters. Since 2006 he has been lecturing at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and now lives in Berlin.

For David

“World War III is a guerrilla information war with no division between military and civilian participation.”
Marshall McLuhan

“Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.”
Henry David Thoreau

“There’s no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons.”
Gilles Deleuze

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You cannot arrest an idea

@atopiary

Ah, I'm sick to death of hearing things
From uptight, short-sighted, narrow-minded
hypocrites
All I want is the truth
Just gimme some truth

I've had enough of reading things
By neurotic, psychotic, pig-headed politicians
All I want is the truth
Just gimme some truth

John Lennon

I met Julian Assange at the beginning of July 2011, at a dinner with Slavoj Žižek, which I had bought on Ebay. I used the occasion to tell Assange about my plan to do a piece on WikiLeaks, based on interviews with him. I didn't expect that Assange would go along with it, God knows he had enough problems at the time. He was under house arrest and was being monitored by an electronic tag attached to his ankle. His WikiLeaks publications had angered world power USA, and thoroughly disgraced them too. As we now know from the Stratfor-Leak, a secret grand jury was in meeting at the time preparing a sealed indictment against him. As well as that, he was being threatened with extradition to Sweden. He was to be questioned about allegations of the abuse and rape of two women with whom he had slept. The issue in this ongoing case is mainly about the use of condoms. Despite all that was going on, we still somewhat surprisingly

managed to have our initial meeting at Soho House, London in March 2012. It lasted several hours, during which time it was Assange who mainly asked the questions. I was nervous at the time, and I'm sure I wasn't making a great impression. As we were saying our goodbyes he casually said that I had convinced him, and gave me the nod. His staff member Joseph Farrell subsequently advised me that I should be ready, as the next meeting would take place very soon.

For the following weeks and months I waited for news from London. During that time I broadened my knowledge and spent a lot of time on Twitter, where I not only followed WikiLeaks, but also notorious members of Anonymous as well as the genius hacker group Lulzsec. Day and night I thought of nothing else, and also didn't talk about anything else, much to the annoyance of those around me. The more I found out, the more questions came up. I developed an obsession with the subject and got completely engrossed in the depths of the internet.

As I hadn't heard anything from WikiLeaks in months, I started to have my doubts about the whole endeavor. In mid-June I went on a long planned trip to Key West, to swim with dolphins in the wild. I had barely arrived when I got word from WikiLeaks that I should come to London immediately. Assange had lost his last case in Great Britain and was to be extradited to Sweden within two weeks. On Sunday 17 June 2012 a cocktail party was hosted for Assange at the home of Baroness Helena Kennedy, to which friends and potential supporters had also been invited. On the following Tuesday I was to meet Assange at his hideout in Kent, together with Chris Kondek, who was to film the meeting: the interview finally seemed within reach. I left the dolphins and booked the next flight to London.

I rushed from the airport straight to the party, unshowered and jet-lagged, and discovered to my surprise that the majority of his supporters were intellectuals and artists.

There were also some representatives of the British establishment with a soft spot for freethinkers. I can still remember thinking that something like this would never happen in Germany. The hostess herself, Baroness Helena Kennedy, a lawyer and member of the House of Lords, supported Assange and gave him legal advice.

There were about two dozen people present: supporters, lawyers and the WikiLeaks team. I also recognized documentary film producer Laura Poitras, human rights lawyer Jennifer Robinson, and activists Peter Thatchell and Victoria Brittain. It was a hot summer's day. Cold drinks were being served out in the villa's garden. Finally Assange gave a small speech in which he thanked everyone for their tireless support. He looked strangely awkward and embarrassed and seemed very uncomfortable talking about his imminent trip to Sweden. When we spoke later on about how I planned to do the interview, he said to me that our Tuesday meeting might not happen, but only if he couldn't help it. I was immediately alarmed and asked him what he meant, but I only got an evasive cryptic answer as he mumbled something about "political reasons". In order to distract me, he dragged me over to our hostess's husband, the famous plastic surgeon Professor Ian Hutchinson. Assange knew that I was working on a piece about plastic surgery and therefore wanted to introduce us. Months later this acquaintance would turn out to be of huge benefit to the piece I was working on. After saying goodbye to Assange, I asked his assistant Joseph Farrell if our meeting was in danger of not taking place. Joseph assured me that it would and that Julian had no idea about when his appointments were. I shouldn't worry.

On the Tuesday I finally with met Joseph and Chris at a railway station in central London and we boarded a regional train headed for Kent, complete with camera gear. On arrival we took a taxi, and Joseph then made us get out long

before we reached the hideout – so as not to be followed, he explained. Having taken many detours, he led us to the address. Slowly Chris and I started getting a little paranoid. We felt like we were in a spy movie, just without all the glamour. It was a fairly long journey on foot, lugging the equipment along with us in the humid weather. When we finally entered the house, I immediately recognized the ground floor surroundings, where Assange’s talk show “The World Tomorrow” was filmed. We met some WikiLeaks members, as well as Laura Poitras. The atmosphere was tense, and there was no sign of Assange. We were slowly getting impatient.

Suddenly things started happening. We were told that there was evidence that his hideout had been uncovered. Assange had to be brought to safety as a matter of urgency. Things got hectic. With his hair colored, wearing a false beard and a pebble in his shoe (to change the way he walked), Assange hopped into a car and drove off without our noticing. A few hours later we found out through the media that he had entered the Ecuadorian embassy to ask for political asylum. This was granted to him in August 2012.

By June 2015, Assange will have spent three years in the Ecuadorian embassy. Three years living in 20 square meters without sunlight. Within this time he has more than made up for that failed meeting. Since August 2012 he has granted me numerous interviews, and our conversations continue to this day. At the beginning of September 2012 my play *Assassinate Assange* premiered in Hamburg. During those rehearsals I spent three weekends in London. Usually our conversations went from eight in the evening until five or six the next morning. If ever I got tired during one of these marathon sittings, Julian would always think of something to pep me up again – at times we’d smoke a huge Shisha pipe (a present from the boss at Al Jazeera), other times he’d make me a cup of tea, even sometimes give me a shot of oxygen from a diving cylinder that was standing in the

corner for “emergencies”. He was tireless and his enthusiasm was infectious. In the end I had hundreds of pages of material. The interviews were transcribed, translated and rehearsed under high pressure. We only had three weeks. By the time the premiere came around the project was nowhere near finished, it turned out to be a work in progress, I kept adding pieces, a new section each time, in Berlin, Vienna and finally at the Cologne Theater.



Angela Richter, Julian Assange. Photo: Oliver Abraham

The press usually depict Assange as a questionable character, especially comments made by former employees and journalists. Certainly it's more interesting and far more profitable to show him as some kind of mad freak, brilliant

but crazy and unrestrained, ultimately a narcissist. When all else fails they even accuse him of having poor table manners. None of this describes the Assange that I got to know. I've always experienced him as being a generous, warmhearted, humorous and loyal person. He is highly intelligent and committed, his bravery is astonishing. He shared his knowledge and his meals with me. Other artists I've met have been far more narcissistic, but I can completely understand why many journalists hate him: he makes them all look like opportunistic careerists and compliant collaborators.

I've said what I think about the accusations in Sweden many times already, so I just want to say this: I do not think that Julian Assange is a rapist and believe the whole case to be extremely flimsy. Without his help and the help of his employees, none of the interviews that I have conducted with countless whistleblowers and activists in the last few years would ever have happened - whether with Edward Snowden, Thomas Drake, William Binney, Jesselyn Radack or Daniel Ellsberg.

Daniel Ellsberg's house is in Kensington, on the hills above Berkeley, with a great view of the Golden Gate Bridge. It was there that I visited Ellsberg - a great hero among whistleblowers, his publication of the *Pentagon Papers* decisively contributed towards ending the Vietnam War - on the 5 October 2014, in order to spend a few hours asking him some questions: It turned into three days. He'd make me an omelette in the mornings, and as he was telling me about his life would repeatedly jump out of his chair to act out the situations he was describing. This 83-year-old came across like a hyperactive, charismatic boy. We spoke about the *Pentagon Papers*, about treason and resistance, and at some stage he read me a sonnet by Albrecht Haushofer, who was involved in the July 20th conspiracy against Hitler

and later executed by the SS. The last few sentences he read out in German: “Ich hab gewarnt – nicht hart genug und klar! / Und heute weiß ich, was ich schuldig war.” (I gave warning. Not strong and clear enough. / Today I know what I was guilty of.)

The most difficult challenge was getting to meet Edward Snowden – and I only managed this with the help of WikiLeaks, Sarah Harrison, and human rights lawyers Renata Avila and Ben Wizner. I wrote him a long letter, which ended with the words: “You surely don’t need theater and art, but art needs you”. Once again, the news that he had agreed to meet me came with short notice: On 24 February I was told that I could meet him on 27 February accompanied by Renata Avila. When I asked if there was anything I could bring him, I received his wish-list from Russia: American peanut butter and some other snacks. I packed as much as I could carry into my suitcase. In order not to endanger him, I can’t tell you much about the finer details of this meeting. Having waited for half an hour in the lobby of a hotel in Moscow, he suddenly showed up – a peaked cap pulled down over his face, and his jacket collar turned up. He nodded at me and we got into a car without exchanging a word. When we arrived at the room, he took his hat off and I was completely taken aback by his extremely youthful appearance. I didn’t expect that he would be so delicate, he looked like a 16-year-old. He noticed that I was surprised, we laughed and then gave each other a spontaneous hug. I gave him the things he requested, and he was really happy and explained that it was really hard to get peanut butter locally due to the economic sanctions imposed on Russia. We ordered some food and I turned on my dictaphone – I was given five hours for the interview. He spoke quietly and eloquently, suddenly seeming more grown-up. After the interview we talked about his current situation, and he often mentioned how much he

would like asylum in Germany and to live in Berlin, where several people from the whistleblower and internet-activist world were already living in voluntary exile. Right at that moment I was ashamed about German and European hypocrisy, their cowardly subservience to the United States. If he was a Russian or Chinese dissident, they'd be rolling out the red carpet, of that I am certain.

Saying goodbye wasn't easy. As I was walking around Red Square that same evening, still a little worked up about our meeting, Russian opposition member Boris Nemzov was shot dead only a few hundred meters away. It was an ominous night.

Two interviews that I had wanted to do face-to-face were not possible. It wasn't that those concerned weren't willing, it was rather due to obstacles placed in the way by the American prison system. Journalist Barrett Brown and hacker Jeremy Hammond are not whistleblowers in the classic sense, they are however inextricably intertwined with the issue. Their cases didn't get much attention in Germany and it is my strong desire to make their voices heard. Finally I managed to contact them via a prison email system called CorrLinks, and we agreed that I would send them questions and they would give me written answers. Only a few hours after Barrett Brown had replied to me with a remarkable essay, I received the following email from the prison: "This is a system generated message informing you that the above mentioned federal inmate temporarily does not have access to messaging. You will receive notification when they become eligible for messaging."

Journalist Glenn Greenwald subsequently tweeted that he too had received the same message after he negotiated with Brown for a contribution he was to write for *The Intercept* over the coming months. A day later, a statement appeared on the internet, written by Brown himself. After