

# VISUAL ACTIVISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

**ART, PROTEST AND RESISTANCE  
IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD**

EDITED BY  
Stephanie Hartle & Darcy White

B L O O M S B U R Y



# Visual Activism in the 21st Century





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Art, Protest and Resistance in an Uncertain World

**EDITED BY  
STEPHANIE HARTLE AND  
DARCY WHITE**

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*In loving memory of Oksana Fedotova (1961–2020), beloved friend and esteemed colleague, whose commitment to education touched the lives of many and to such positive effect. Missed by all.*





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# Introduction to the anthology

*Darcy White and Stephanie Hartle*

**A**ctivism is dangerous. Dangerous for the activist, but more so for the political status quo threatened when the ideological foundations upon which it languishes comes under scrutiny and are challenged. Challenged not with the threat of violence but by the force of new ideas – ideas for building a safer and more equitable world. But in what form should these ideas be explored, communicated and demanded? Particularly if they are to be taken to the heart of the problem, the seat of the power behind whose door the solution resides. Even more particularly, if, in the face of indifference or hostility, you are determined to push against that door and be noticed – and moreover, to bring other people along with you.

The world is at a very dangerous moment. Grippled by a scale of planetary crises never before experienced by humankind, of which too many of us are only now becoming aware. A moment of planetary ‘entanglement’ and of ‘dread’, as people are ‘Caught in the stranglehold of injustice and inequality, much of humanity is threatened by a great chokehold’ (Mbembe 2021: S59/S60). But, it is hoped that ‘a *day after* will come’ but it will come ‘only with a giant rupture, the result of radical imagination’ (ibid.: S60).<sup>1</sup> It is faith in the potential force of such ‘radical imagination’ that drives people on in the face of overwhelming odds, together with the realization that we are at such a moment of ‘giant rupture’ that will provide the opportunity for transformation. And living as we do in a cultural landscape in which the visual is privileged, then the language must be, at least in part, that of visual communication. Where ‘aesthetic gestures, images, and performances make political thinking possible precisely because they work at the level of *both* thought and affect, and engender the space of appearance’, a space in which to be seen – ‘the space of *both* speech and action’ (Pollock 2018: 15).<sup>2</sup>

As Achille Mbembe has observed, people are turning not only to ‘languages of resistance, but languages of opposition, languages of confrontation and protagonism’ (2016). But many believe that the languages of protagonism must also include those that advocate for solutions in an activism of resilience, because the situation is urgent and some have long lost hope and have little left with which to fight for their own salvation. There is no time to wait. In the words of one activist: ‘It’s useless to wait. To go on waiting is madness. The catastrophe is not coming it is already here. We are already situated within the collapse of civilization. It is within this reality that we must choose sides’ (ibid.).<sup>3</sup>

## This anthology: aims, terms and concepts

This anthology is not a definitive or comprehensive study of visual activism in the twenty-first century, and does not attempt to be. Fortunately, perhaps, because of the richness of the work that is being undertaken by activists of all kinds across the world, this would be an impossible task and one that would risk perpetuating a cannon of important causes, actions, and events that are already very well documented elsewhere. Instead, we have brought together a selection of case studies that provide a wide range of examples of the strategies and methodologies employed within activism and protest, echoing the observation made by Paula Serafini in 2014, that such strategies are ever more inspired and emphasize 'the value of art and creativity as tools for political action' (p. 321). We pursue an investigation into the question of the nature of the relationship and, arguably, the continuum, between what happens in the safer spaces of the art institution and what is increasingly occurring on the streets and in other non-safe spaces. Creativity here equates with not simply mimetic and powerful visual representations, but also with the clever use of visual references, intertextualities, re-appropriations, puns, metaphors, performances and other ingenuities. Some are artistic and visually pleasing, others are visually and intellectually arresting, but challenging, often sobering and at times deeply disturbing.

Our investigation is concerned with two domains – relating to the visual and to activism – and is premised on the question of whether there is good reason to believe that there is an increasingly strong association between these two domains.<sup>4</sup> We welcome the lead taken by Griselda Pollock who, working in relation to art and feminism, identified a 'need to invent concepts to confront what has happened in this encounter' and to 'understand what is happening in their relationship now' (2018: 1, 4). We recognize a similar need in relation to the encounter between the visual and activism. However, for the present, our task is not to invent, but to identify the concepts and terms of reference that are being brought to the analysis of this relatively new field of study. It is hoped that this collection will contribute to a growing understanding of cultural and global differences concerning the nature of the relationship of art to the visual elements of activism. As editors, we concur with Serafini's suggestion, that 'there is a significant lack of work addressing the ways in which art is explicitly incorporated into activist strategies as political instruments' (although this is beginning to be addressed), and that 'aesthetics and art theory can add a new dimension to the study of political activism and social movements' (2014: 320). However, other theoretical approaches are also necessary, and are already adding to the emerging discourse. So, we begin this discussion with an exploration of a few relevant terms and concepts – not to pin them down, but to suggest a basis from which to proceed. Terms and concepts that remain open and contestable. The spheres of critical analysis concerning the visual in relation to activist strategies include ideas about 'visuality', the 'right to look' and the 'space of appearance'.<sup>5</sup> Such concepts are becoming established as the foundations upon which to examine the dynamics of the visual in activism, but one of the premises of this project is to extend the field of enquiry – particularly given the rapidly changing context in which activism is occurring.

The term 'visual activism', as yet unsettled, lies 'at the intersection of visual culture, artistic practice, social actions and movements' (Sliwinska 2020: 5). Following South African artist and activist Zanele Muholi who, it has been suggested, originated the term in 2013,<sup>6</sup> we take as our broad definition, and area of examination, the manifold ways in which the 'tools' of visual culture are used with the aim of promoting progressive change in the world. Visual technologies, whether

old or new, modest or spectacular, every day or orchestrated, are increasingly utilized by activists on the street, in places of detention, within corporate and institutional spaces and, of course, online. These very different contexts come with differing degrees of danger, levels of citizen participation and agency and in such contexts the visual performs different functions to create and achieve different effects.

### ***What is ‘visuality’?***

As with all ideas, those concerning the visual are in a perpetual state of flux, contingent upon wider cultural forces. An important intervention into the recent use of the term ‘visuality’ came from Nicholas Mirzoeff, who noted in 2011, that the term is not as new as we might suppose, but rather a nineteenth-century term – indeed, ‘an old word for an old project’ – relating to the ability of the state, and those otherwise occupying positions of authority, to visualize.<sup>7</sup> Visuality, in this paradigm, is concerned with the control of power, history and ideas, current ideological systems as well as future directions. It describes the mechanisms by which authority is first coveted and envisioned, then established, maintained and renewed – through processes of ‘classifying, segregating, and aestheticizing’, whereby authoritative ideological systems are furnished with an apparent logic and even beauty which serves to legitimize them – making them seem ‘real’ (ibid.: 476). The ability to visualize is therefore fundamental to what Mirzoeff called ‘the complexes of visuality’ (ibid.), which he later refined and refocused, using the term the ‘colonial complex’ (2020a: 13). Thus, it is important to appreciate that ‘visuality’ refers not merely or straightforwardly to tangible visual products, but to the realm of the imagined – the realm of visualization, of envisaging and the visionary. Authority is achieved and maintained by those who are skilled at visualization, and who control the vision, narrative and messaging of the given authoritative context. Today, such messages are communicated visually to a significant extent, therefore visual strategies used in activism carry significant potential. Indeed, the idea that aesthetics underpins all political behaviour is well established, where ‘not all art is political, but all politics is aesthetic’ (Sartwell in Werbner, Webb and Spellman-Poots 2014: 1).<sup>8</sup>

### ***The ‘right to look’ and the ‘space of appearance’***

The mechanics of ‘visuality’ depend upon the establishment of codes of behaviour that describe, delimit and determine relations of structural power which are challenged when we claim, what Mirzoeff (and others before him) call ‘the right to look’ (2011: 473).<sup>9</sup> An assertion of the ‘right to look’ is a claim to ‘autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism’ but a right to ‘political subjectivity and collectivity’ (ibid.). In short, it means the claiming back of agency by those who have been denied it, from those who have orchestrated this denial. In this way, the claim to ‘the right in the right to look acknowledges the patriarchal slave-owning genealogy of authority – and refuses it’ (ibid.: 479). This claiming back of agency – this claim to ‘the right to look’ – may therefore be understood as a countervisuality, as a fundamental challenge to the forces underpinning visuality and everything that is gained by it. Moreover, when Mirzoeff (and others) speak of ‘the right to look’ this also implies ‘a right to the real’ (ibid.: 473); the right not to be subject to the dishonesty

inherent in the disassembling, obscuring and ultimately controlling mechanisms of visibility. Those who claim this right, demand they are afforded equal access to their own humanity, self-determination and to the public realm and with this the right of (self)-representation through 'action and speech' – the 'space of appearance' (Arendt [1958] 1998). The claim to the 'right to the real' therefore insists on the open acknowledgement of the foundations of exploitation and oppression upon which capitalism was built and neoliberalism now thrives, and demands a commitment to addressing and dismantling such foundations.

All of this cuts to the heart of the various case studies addressed in the chapters of this book, which, in turn, examine how such demands are being made, the visual forms they take and the spaces in which they are enacted. A spectrum emerges. At one end, the (relatively) safe, sanctioned physical spaces of curation within art institutions and museums, and other authorized sites of public art, integrated into the urban fabric of the street and its buildings, installed in parks or even in the unlikely location of the bottom of the sea. At the other, those unsafe sites where unauthorized actions carry risks of illegality and punishment, whether on the streets, outside seats of government or at detention centres. But cutting across this spectrum of safety are the virtual spaces of activism, the online platforms where the level of risk is contingent upon the wider context. But all such spaces are dynamic and potentially unpredictable, where acts of transgression occur in relation to the given context – what is safe in one context could be perilous in another; so, mitigating for risk can be, and often is, built into the design of an action where the visual is deployed for the possibility of its potential to play a part in such mitigation.

Understanding the dynamics of space is, therefore, fundamental to discussions of regimes of protest, and here the ideas of Hannah Arendt are core. In *The Human Condition* ([1958] 1998) Arendt argues that every human requires a space to think and reflect on their existence in the world – but they also require a space in which to 'appear' in order to be actualized; the 'space of appearance which is the public realm' (ibid.: 220) a place of 'action and speech' which confirms the 'the reality of one's self, of one's own identity' and the 'reality of the surrounding world' (ibid.: 208). Fundamentally, acts of protest require others as co-actors, as witnesses and as receptors: indeed, for Arendt, 'the political realm rises directly out of acting together' (ibid.: 198). Or, as expressed by Pollock in relation to the activist work of Sonia Khurana: 'Using our bodies, "we" can come together in this space of action . . . the space of coexistence' (Pollock 2018: 9).<sup>10</sup>

### ***Countervisuality and devisualization***

Countervisuality does not necessarily take a visual form. For example, Jacques Rancière points to the emancipation achieved through education by which a person acquires an 'intelligence' that obeys 'only itself even while the will obeys another will' (1991: 13). Thus, the techniques of visibility are revealed and challenged. The mechanisms of visibility create a habitus that is hostile to perhaps the majority of its citizens, where only some are afforded the 'right to look' – for the rest, it is a 'space of nonappearance' (Mirzoeff 2017). This begs a question – in such circumstances, under what conditions might an individual or group gain access to the 'space of appearance which is the public realm'? (Arendt [1958] 1998: 220). Mirzoeff, at pains to point out that the project of visibility must be perpetually maintained by the given authority in order to be effective, argues that 'it is that space between intention and accomplishment that allows for the possibility of a countervisuality'

(2011: 482). Moreover, those wanting to exercise their right to act and speak out against something – or, indeed, make visible an alternative as in acts of ‘aesthetic resilience’ – do so by looking for, creating or otherwise exploiting this in-between space – a space that we can think of in Rancière’s terms as a moment of rupture – where ‘the rupture is not defeating the enemy. It’s ceasing to live in the world the enemy has built for you’ (Mirzoeff 2020a: 11). Mirzoeff calls this process ‘devisualization’, as he explains: ‘the space of appearance today is the workshop for the production of devisuality, meaning the undoing of visibility by decolonization. Devisualizing means undoing the processes of classification, separation and aestheticization formed under settler colonialism’ (ibid.: 13).

Mirzoeff’s use of the ‘workshop’ metaphor is prescient. Based on the evidence of recent practices of law enforcement in the UK, such workshops (in a literal sense) are being understood, managed and constructed for a general public, as a serious threat to the establishment. To cite one noteworthy example: on 25 June 2021, London’s Metropolitan Police raided premises taken to be Extinction Rebellion’s ‘art factory’ and arrested rebels engaged in painting props allegedly destined for a ‘Free the Press’ protest planned for the following weekend.<sup>11</sup> Police interventions of this kind suggest that acts of countervisuality and/or devisuality are increasingly considered a problem and will not be tolerated – even in so-called liberal societies, where acts of peaceful protest, and even preparation for peaceful protest, are routinely framed as ‘unreasonable’, ‘irrational’ and ‘illegitimate’ by policing agencies, both in their internal training materials and through the mouthpiece of the media (Jackson, Gilmore and Monk 2019: 34–5). We will return to this point.

When, in 2020, Mirzoeff was asked what he considered to be the most important visual of the year, he answered that it was undoubtedly the filming of the murder of George Floyd by police, taken on a mobile phone by Darnella Frazier, an astute 17-year-old girl who took a decision to film and keep filming for the full duration of the 8:45 minutes over which the murder took place. The visibility of these events was significant, Mirzoeff ventured, because it would ‘change the everyday lives for tens of millions of American citizens’ (2020b). The film of this atrocity was picked up by the world’s news media, and undoubtedly watched by countless numbers of viewers, and Mirzoeff’s point is that its significance was in large part due to the way in which it showed that ‘another world is possible’ (ibid.). This argument is seductive, yet debatable. Indeed, in the current moment of a plurality of crises and widespread feelings of ‘dread’ in the context of ‘societies of enmity’, the ‘brutality of borders’ (Mbembe [2016] 2019: 2, 3), and ‘annihilator ideologies’ (Pollock 2018: 15), it is hardly a surprise that many black commentators refused to watch this spectacle. Contrast the optimistic tone of Mirzoeff’s comments with those of Judith Butler’s more sober suggestion – that the murder of George Floyd had ‘shifted and intensified an already pervasive sense of peril – not only because he was yet another black life . . . but because the spectacle of his killing was a shameless advertisement for white supremacy, a resurgence of a lynching explicitly performed for the cell phone video’ (Butler 2020). These statements are perhaps telling for the way they index the differing perspectives that motivate a belief in the importance of action.

Perhaps Mirzoeff’s fervent comment that ‘another world is possible’ chimes with a similarly hopeful conviction that drives the present outpouring of dissent through various forms of protest and in relation to a wide variety of issues and causes (2020b). But a graver evaluation might suggest that such outpourings manifest growing levels of frustration, anger and despair in response to the ever widening and deepening plethora of crises. Perhaps this is a moot point – different people will have different motivations at different times and in different places – the levels of belief

in the effectiveness of activism, visual or otherwise, will always be contingent upon the background circumstances. But there is also a new constructive tendency emerging – one that is not satisfied with ‘resistance alone’ – identified by Ieven, Steinbock and de Valck, as a form of visual activism that is ‘taking aesthetics from resistance to resilience’, in the context of the ‘apparent emptying out of the artistic and political realm by neoliberalism’ – it seems there is a need felt by many for a new ‘form of art that nurtures and fosters our possibilities for change’ (2020:1).

## Political art to activist art: tensions and blind spots

Where does ‘political art’ diverge from ‘activist art’ in its aims or characteristics? Recent discussions regarding art and activism are inevitably weaved into the discourses already bound up in socially engaged or political art. In his reappraisal of the relationship between art and politics, Burgin, in conversation with Van Gelder, points to some of the ongoing tensions and constraints that the creative process encounters when it attempts to enter the realm of sociocultural critique. Burgin locates the problem firmly within the context of the power of contemporary media, or more precisely what he refers to as ‘the progressive colonization of the terrain of languages, beliefs and values by mainstream media contents and forms – imposing an industrial uniformity upon what may be imagined and said, and engendering compliant synchronized subjects of a “democratic” political process in which the vote changes nothing’ (Burgin and Van Gelder 2010: 3). Offering up visual alternatives and contradictions to neoliberalism’s established ideologies has clearly been an important part of Burgin’s own practice – the ‘sphere of representations’ is where he identifies the real ‘political agency of artists’, rather than ‘on the ground in everyday life’ (ibid.: 5). However, in dispensing the seemingly privileged role of ‘critic’ onto the artist, Burgin reminds us that ‘where such a position is assigned we do well to ask if there are not blind spots in the critical view’ (ibid.: 2).

This anthology is inevitably haunted by such ‘blind spots’, both in and around the contested grounds on which art, protest and activism seek to tread. It becomes most acute whilst attempting to pin down the various (and often interchangeable or indistinguishable) terms or buzzwords which have been used to describe examples of art and visual practice that aim to have a more active or urgent political currency. Even the more recent concept of ‘visual activism’ is not without problem, for example in the way it inflects a particular type of sensory affect. T. J. Demos warns that: ‘the term splits visibility into its activist dimension while also implying a conservative, non-activist imagery’, and that paradoxically this could undo the way ‘*activism* names a multisensory, collective, and situated form of being-in-the-world posed against constituted powers’ (2016: 87).

Hilary Robinson discerns another type of ‘blind spot’ in the androcentric theorization of visual activism, observing that ‘what has been published has been written by men, most of whom are white, and most of whom are based in America’ (2021: 24). The antagonism between the resistance of activist practices and the apparent enduring nature of patriarchy in left academia is especially highlighted in feminist and/or queer visual activism because ‘feminist thought and activism is resistance to patriarchy’ (ibid.: 33). Indeed, a significant amount of more recent acts of protest have been enactments led by women. Robinson draws attention to the creation of a range of feminist and/or LGBTQ+ activist groups such as the Gulabi Gang in 2002 (India), Pussy Riot in 2011 (Russia), Black Lives Matter (BLM) in 2013 (USA) and Sisters Uncut in 2014 (UK), who all have ‘developed strong visual elements to their activism’ (ibid.: 34). In addition, there are also



acknowledged interventions by artist-women like Paula Rego, whose *Abortion Series* (1988) is widely credited with assisting in a change to public opinion, directly influencing the 2007 Portuguese referendum to decriminalize abortion (ibid.). Ultimately, Robinson argues that it is vital to actively decentre the privileging of dominant narratives, as ‘theory based on omission of women, of misreading of representations, or lack of attention to feminist practices will never allow for the development of resistant or revolutionary practices that are effective’ (ibid.: 35).

How do artists working with activism or activists using art strategies effect change, rather than simply resting on creative methodologies of resistance to function as ‘a form of self-legitimization’? (Vanhaesebrouck 2011: 22) Contemporary debates on the appropriateness or efficacy of art in the spaces of protest and resistance have a long and contested history within art and visual culture – we do not seek to resolve these debates here, but rather reflect on the specificities of their contexts of production and mediation. In tracking the historical encounter of feminism and art, Pollock points to the uneasy relationship of political activism and aesthetic strategies in the emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement, where, for example: ‘At best artists might be useful for making posters and other agit-prop materials. At worst, art was a bourgeois distraction irrelevant to the struggles in which women were involved’ (Pollock 2018: 1). Pollock argues that even with the radical aesthetic potential of women artists in the 1920s and 1930s, ‘art has long suffered from bad, incomplete, and ideologically distorting narratives’ (ibid.: 15). Despite the conditions and discourses of neoliberalism maintaining these systemic imbalances within the contemporary art world, this anthology seeks to address and engage with nuanced examples of aesthetic alterity, transgression, refusal or dissensus – in keeping with Pollock’s project ‘to show how gestures, images, and performances enable not only political thinking, but also political *affect*’ (ibid.).

## What’s in a name?

Our project has been driven, in part, by a fascination with the dynamic and contentious dialogues between the visual forms of art and activism and previous definitions of politically motivated art, embracing the entanglements of existing categories and the emergence of new, but nevertheless, uneasy concepts and vocabulary. It is through the plurality of these approaches, and the conversations engendered, that we can gain better traction in understanding its potentialities. At the same time, we recognize here the potential risk of collapsing or conflating terms into each other, as well as the inherent demands of combining essential terms such as ‘political’ and ‘art’ or ‘art’ and ‘activism’ – these can be reductive and problematic in terms of limiting or excluding other types of knowledge, understanding and visibility. And despite the ease and frequency in which they are used, Karel Vanhaesebrouck suggests that ‘a concrete, practical interpretation of these concepts seems to be increasingly inaccessible and even impossible’ (2011: 21). Trying to unpick where political art or ‘curation activism’ may begin and where activist art ends can seem like swimming in a maelstrom – other terms such as ‘resistance’, ‘dissent’ or ‘radical’ can dissolve into each other further still. Art practice which might be said to have more direct activist qualities – as a means to actively effect social change – is often referred to via the portmanteau of ‘artivism’. Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre describe this as a ‘hybrid neologism that signifies work created by individuals who see an organic relationship between art and activism’ (2008: 82). One might say then, that artivism goes *beyond* representation – it proceeds with a drive to respond more

dynamically to affect social problems. Maria Fuentes also suggests that ‘in activist projects, the main goal is to trigger responses and not merely represent a state of affairs. “Interruption,” “disturbance,” “dislocation” and “reappropriation” are some of the terms employed to account for the ways in which activist practices engage different spheres of action and discursive formations – social, artistic, scientific’ (2013: 32–3). However, Julia Bryan-Wilson, Jennifer González and Dominic Willsdon, in their introduction to the themed issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture*, more reservedly state that: ‘we understand *activism* as a word riven by ambiguities, and consider it less in its common usage (to mean active or vigorous campaigning) than to signify the abandonment of neutrality’ (2016: 4). Whilst this anthology explores a range of direct actions as well as more oblique visual projects, all could be said to ‘abandon neutrality’ to traverse the uneven boundaries between art and activism.

Rather than try to neatly package or divide these various terms into distinctive and separate categories, we take our cue from Elizabeth Grosz who reminds us ‘concepts are not solutions to problems’, but instead ‘they enable us to surround ourselves with possibilities for *being otherwise*’ (2012: 14). Victor Burgin and Hilde Van Gelder’s engagement with philosopher Gilbert Ryle’s coining of ‘the ghost in the machine’ – the simultaneous inhabitation of a public reality and a private inner world – is also useful in helping to think through some of the complexities in perceived axioms such as art and activism (Burgin and Van Gelder 2010: 3). Burgin notes that Ryle gives prominence to the ‘transactions’ between the parallel states, but with the caveat that ‘there is no way of accounting for the *transactions* that take place between public and private histories, as by definition such transactions belong to neither of the “two” worlds’ (ibid.: 3–4). The relations between so-called ‘worlds’ recalls Félix Guattari’s interest in ‘schizoanalytic cartographies’ and the ‘deterritorializing rhythms of art’, described by Brian Holmes as ‘art, not as it hangs on the wall in a museum, but as it returns in your memory and your senses, as a refrain or ritornello of insistent presence cut off from anything you could precisely define or own’ (2011: 285). Holmes considers the implications this has on how we can thus conceive of art as ‘no longer approached as a strictly specialized zone, but as a mobile element in an existential mix’, and therefore ‘there will always be thresholds of unexpected chaos before any kind of world comes together’ (ibid.).

In a comparable way, this anthology also attempts to explore and engage with the slippages, chaos and contradictions in the oscillating transactions of the key concepts in visual activism – but, like Burgin and Van Gelder’s unfolding and opening out of Ryle’s ideas, tries to avoid imposing hierarchical divisions of categories (2010: 4). One must be wary of impressing value judgements on the perceived differences between art and activism, also expressed by Bryan-Wilson, González and Willsdon, who state, ‘does an emphasis on activism imply a straightforward measure of ‘effectiveness’, as if art had to have a clearly articulated end-goal and could be judged according to some rigid rubric of failure or success? We think not’ (2016: 4).

Other concepts and methodologies to describe these junctures will no doubt continue to develop in time as the relationship between activism, art and visual culture evolves, moreover, these are always fluid and transformative categories rather than fixed to single agendas. Urban Subjects, a Vienna/Vancouver-based collective formed in 2004, employs the term the ‘militant image’ in the context of photographic work, to ‘speculate on the relationship between artistic representation and social change today’ (Urban Subjects 2015: 7). Referring to an ‘imbalance of the visual and the speakable’ they claim that ‘while the militant image – perhaps ephemeral, elusive, whispering, and circulating at the threshold of invisibility – proposes that a new condition of the

image seeks to respond to the radically uneven conditions of the present, the militant image always aims for the future' (ibid.: 9). Here we can pick up on the critical context of time and duration in the experience of the visual, or what Bryan-Wilson, González and Willsdon refer to as its 'temporal lag' – visual activism may not necessarily work in the presentness of its inception or production, but develops historically or retrospectively; it can therefore 'travel' (2016: 9).

## A question of aesthetics

As we have seen, when art functions in the political sphere it can be difficult to establish where its transformative potential precisely lies, beyond a restricted aesthetic imaginary. Leven, Steinbock and de Valck argue that art 'has the ability to stimulate our political imagination and populate it with new, perhaps revolutionary, ideas' (2021: 3). In this sense, art and visual culture can give way to new forms of social encounters that subvert existing patterns of thinking and (in)action. Additionally, the exhibition titled *Disobedient Objects* held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2014, proposed that protest art and design (such as repurposed everyday objects) in their physical objectness, have a revolutionary role. Yet, it is not just in the finalized encounter with the material object or artwork itself where the possibilities of visual activism's power resides. Practitioners of activism who draw upon creative strategies are keenly aware of the mobilizing processes at *all* stages of activism's visuality, as T. J. Demos asserts, it 'is inextricable here from the rehearsal, pedagogy, practice, and recording of collective direct action' (2016: 87). The aesthetics of protest then must include these less visible stages, not simply the final form of visual material. Demos argues against 'isolating' specific instances of the visual as to do so would 'reify them as art objects or autonomous visual forms' and would therefore threaten to 'court the very betrayal of political engagement' (ibid.). Visual activism thus runs the risk of being subsumed by the numbness of spectacle or obscuring the complexity of protest and activist work through a reduction to 'iconic' imagery (Jackson 2016).

Taking a strong critical stance against what he referred to as seemingly 'settled' or 'unquestioned' artistic interventions – in other words, one might say didactic or dogmatic political art – J. J. Charlesworth, in the moment of Brexit, proposed a return to an aesthetics of ambiguity. He laments that 'what underpins that drift of art towards an uninflected, side-taking politics is a bigger failure of cultural thinking regarding how artworks might possess their own logic, their own sense, their own capacity to affect us in ways which can't easily be directed or determined' (2019). This call for 'open-endedness' is not a new response to the discussion of politics in art, but indicative of a long history of privileging art's perceived autonomy or disinterestedness – art that serves a social impulse can often be criticized as somehow rejecting art's protracted commitment to aesthetic play. Drawing upon the work of Rancière, Claire Bishop has previously argued for vigilance in upholding a careful balance between aesthetics and politics, observing that, 'for Rancière the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise' (2006: 182). And yet, these two regimes have ostensibly always been entangled in our bodily and sensual experience of reality, with Margus Vihalem claiming that 'nowadays, more than ever, aesthetics is an essential component of politics and even economics; politics is not only increasingly aestheticized . . . it is also aesthetic in the sense that its character has been profoundly transformed by its staging through media. Politics is not conceptualised; it is visualized' (2018: 2).

Performativity, in different aesthetic iterations and guises, plays a significant role in the art of protest and activism. In their introduction to *The Aesthetics of Global Protest*, Aidan McGarry et al. open out the question of aesthetics in terms of social change to a focus on the role of performances, 'to show how aesthetics are harnessed by sociopolitical and sociocultural actors through protest and have the power to transform existing structures, ideas, and orthodoxies' (2020: 17). Key examples such as Gezi Park (2013) are used to explore how protest can draw upon a range of aesthetic communications, such as 'the slogans, art, symbols, slang, humour, graffiti, gestures, bodies, colour, clothes, and objects that comprise a material and performative culture with a high capacity to be replicated digitally and shared across social media networks, ideological terrain, state borders, and linguistic frontiers' (ibid.: 18). Similarly, in *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, Peter Weibel observes what he describes as an emerging 'performative democracy' evident in a range of trans-local protests against the destructive forces of a globalized economy and their ensuing crises (2015: 23).

Visual activist practices are diverse in their approach and methodology, often crossing disciplinary lines or negotiating what might be considered 'relational' tactics of performance, participation and collaboration. Alana Jelinek proceeds with caution when she states that: 'while it is true that these types of practice have been fruitful in producing interesting art, they have also been sites of tired clichés and sites where repressive or exclusive norms have been replicated' (2013: 5). Perhaps this is why 'visual activism' is favoured by some as a less loaded term, such as Bryan-Wilson, González and Willsdon who state that: 'by using the phrase *visual activism* instead of, say, *relational art*, we hope to sidestep some of these familiar debates in order to better highlight the complex and ever-shifting relationships between visual cultures, artistic practices, and polemical strategies in their most capacious definitions' (2016: 5). In her much cited essay, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', Bishop confronts the myth of social harmony and 'community as togetherness' that could be perpetuated in socially engaged forms of participatory art (2004: 79). Clearly, there are limits to socially committed art and we need to recognize their own possibilities for exclusions, oppressions or inequalities.

Where this type of art practice can work, Bishop argues, is when the model of subjectivity is 'a divided subject of partial identifications open to constant flux' (ibid.: 79). Yet, there are many examples of where artists have gone beyond what has been criticized as mere 'arty-party' (Foster 2003). In 2007, Regina Jose Galindo – the Guatemalan artist known for confronting oppression and violence often explored through themes of the body, migration and power – enacted a piece of work titled *Curso de supervivencia para hombres y mujeres que viajaran de manera ilegal a los Estados Unidos* (*Survival Skills Course for Men and Women Preparing to Travel Illegally to the United States*). This involved collaboration with a survival instructor to train potential migrants in a range of activities deemed to be 'forms of resistance' – such as map-reading, orientation, climbing and first aid. Clare Carolin argues that such interventions go far beyond what might be dismissed as mere 'critical art'. She asserts that Galindo 'actually articulates a discourse within the reality on which her work acts, such that the roles of participant, observer and commentator are rolled into one another, and the mode of transmission itself becomes integral to the form and agency of the work' (2011: 215). What complicates this, however, is that Galindo distances herself from an alignment with activist practices, instead she sees artist and activist inhabiting entirely different roles and having separate purposes (ibid.: 223). This position can partly be explained by her willing and active participation in the evolving 'commodity status' of her recorded 'dematerialised'

performative work in its recirculation in the gallery space, thus ‘rematerialising the art object as commodity in imitation of the human form’ (ibid.: 222).

In *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalisation*, Lieven de Cauter dissects an approach they characterize via the term ‘subversivity’ – ‘a disruptive attitude that tries to create openings, possibilities in the closedness of the system’ (2011: 6). Disruption and deviance, rather than specifically revolution, is key to this understanding, ‘a place for taboos, truths which generally must remain hidden, a space for the reality of the object, for the forbidden, for transgression, the breaking the norms and normality, a space for nonconformity, a space for the undermining of convention and tradition’ (ibid.: 9–10). Writing in 2011 against the backdrop of what they perceived to be the failure of the counter-globalization movement, alongside the ecological emergency and the legacy of 9/11 ‘War on Terror’ in the implementation of a silencing and repressive ‘state terror’, de Cauter states that we have largely experienced ‘the end of subversion, the end of a critical tradition of dissent, eccentricity, dissidence and protest’ (ibid.: 10). To counter this, de Cauter proposes that ‘artists and intellectuals have to change gear and turn the tables in response; from the spirit of negation to a practice of affirmative civic protest, in short, from subversion to activism’ (ibid.: 16). The dilemma of aesthetics is exposed again here – on the one hand, art can remain purely at the level of aesthetics, on the other hand, the subversion of aesthetics (say in the spirit of the historic avant-garde) has perhaps run its course. Protest art – like any other type of art – may also be short-lived ‘or worse: a lubricant for neoliberal development’ (ibid.: 16).

## Subverting the institutional gaze

Protest art often operates from and within capitalist institutions of structural power such as the gallery or museum (or is eventually co-opted by them) – the same institutions which uphold the status quo of inequality via maintenance and policing of boundaries, values, definitions and exclusivity (see, for example, Jelinek, 2013) and contribute to the ever-increasing commodification of art. Even well-intentioned, socially orientated art is difficult to separate from the infrastructures underpinning these institutions. Twenty years after Documenta X’s praised reclamation of art’s political project, its 2017 edition was criticized by Yanis Varoufakis for ‘adding the veneer of a left-wing narrative against neoliberalism to a purely extractive neocolonial project that’s framed as a gift to Greece’ (Fokianaki and Varoufakis 2017). Visual activism can intervene in the institutional and financial management of art and culture – for example, the artist collective known as Liberate Tate, formed in 2010 as a response to Tate’s then acceptance of sponsorship from the oil company BP, drew increased attention to the fraught ethical relationship between art institutions, global corporations and environmental politics (Rectanus 2016). Elsewhere, the artist and activist group Boycott Divest Zabludowicz (BDZ) was founded in 2014 to publicly counter what they perceive to be a form of institutional art-washing, characterized by the London-based Zabludowicz Art Trust, which has accusations of links to pro-Israeli arms-dealing and apartheid. In May 2021, amid the violent escalation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the BDZ reinvigorated calls for artists to de-author their work held in the Zabludowicz collection, resulting in at least twenty-five artists publicly announcing their withdrawal of labour (Artforum 2021).

Keeping in mind this type of institutional critique, it is perhaps easy to see why Kirsten Dufour points to the importance of defining activist art (as opposed to institutionally sanctioned ‘political

art') as existing beyond the gallery and instead 'working outside of institutions, in public space, where one is capable of addressing and making use of many modes and forms of culture' (2002: 157). Today, this also includes the hybrid virtual spaces of the internet and other technological spaces. But defining activist art in this way can be reductive and negates the fact that such spaces themselves are never neutral. Moreover, increasingly we need to be conscious of the interface and play between the materiality of the physical world and the alternative visual spaces offered up by the digital (McGarry et al. 2020: 26). Sarah Tuck has demonstrated how new forms of seeing can be afforded by the technologies of drone vision in their deployment in civilian activist protests such as the 2016 Native American Sioux tribe-led NoDAPL pipeline protest in North Dakota.<sup>12</sup> Tuck's interest lies in the possibility of the drone 'destabilising' the distinctions of public and private, she probes 'how the drone view as a form of spatial imaging registers in the broader sphere of networked visibility and visibility, that marks a shift from the asymmetry of seeing without being seen, to seeing and being a part of what is seen across differentiated time and space' (2018: 172–3). Well-documented protests of the early twenty-first century, including the Arab Spring, Occupy, Standing Rock, #MeToo, The Rapist is You, Black Lives Matter, Rhodes Must Fall, and School Strike 4 Climate, have all harnessed aspects of social media to increase accessibility, communication, visibility and mobilization, across fluid geographical times and locations. Social-networking technologies clearly contribute to the collectivist trans-local nature of recent activist movements, but also allow space for more individualized and subjective forms of activism (Bosch 2017). Maria Bakardjieva characterizes this type of civic participation as 'subactivism', describing it as 'a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life. It is constituted by small-scale, often individual, decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and are difficult to capture using the traditional tools with which political participation is measured' (2009: 92). It is therefore a less visible, and more personalized, engagement with activist practices – a private embodiment of citizenship.

## **From protest to activism: media representation, policing and the framing of 'criminality'**

It is not possible in this short introduction, to give a full account of the developing status of the visual as a fundamental and increasingly integrated dimension of protest and activism, so the intention here is to highlight some of the most significant developments, which have been in relation to mass media communication. These came first through modern forms of print and broadcast media, and increased substantially with the advent of information technology, as activists, and citizens more generally, took hold of what Walter Benjamin famously called the technologies of 'mechanical reproduction' to become (as he predicted) the authors of their own stories (Benjamin [1936] 1992).<sup>13</sup> Central here is the relationship between activists and their visual representation; how their identity and messaging is mediated and the strategies they adopt to influence and even control that media message. Communication practices in the current era of dissent may be said to have their roots in the many civil rights uprisings of the mid-twentieth-century and which, according to Barbas and Postill, can even be 'traced back to the late 1940s in two markedly different cultural contexts: the United States and Latin America' (2017: 648). It has



been claimed that in the context of civil unrest in America during the late 1950s, mass media reporting, particularly through increased access to TV and radio, offered ‘a window through which millions could watch the black struggle’ (Samad in Postill 2014: 343).<sup>14</sup> Ieven, Steinbock and de Valck have looked at this issue, through the lens of what they term ‘aesthetic resilience’, arguing that as a result of this experience, some of the ‘ideas, tactics and achievements of the civil rights era were transmuted into new aesthetic weapons’ which they elaborate as ‘new ways of engaging with politics through art’ (2021: 3).

An important new era of anti-systemic protest emerged at the start of 1994, when Mexico’s Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the EZLN, rose up in protest at the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement, exploiting the affordances of the World Wide Web, and heralding in a hugely significant development in ‘imaginative direct action tactics and communications skills’ (Mertes 2004: xi). A ‘new activism’ was conceived characterized by novel creative strategies, developed in relation to a strong ethos of nonviolence (*ibid.*), and for the Zapatistas – in the words of their leader Sub-Comandante Marcos – ‘the gamble on a peaceful mobilization was sensible and fruitful’ (Mertes 2004: 4). This provided a powerful example that others would later follow, demonstrating that nonviolence, as both an ethos and a strategy, could be supported through creative and imaginative tactics, and the handling of media representation played an important part in this.

A related, more recent, example was Spain’s staunchly nonviolent anti-austerity protest movement known as the indignados/M15. In his 2010 study, John Postill probed the question of why this movement was ‘so devoted to non-violence’, judging this to be ‘remarkable’ given the ‘provocation and brutality’ of the riot police, but concluded there were ‘sound historical reasons’ for doing so (Postill 2014: 343, 360). He found that the commitment was strongly linked to the indignados’ experience of the media – and, indeed, that a key focus of the literature of nonviolence more generally, has been ‘the part played by the media, particularly the mass media in the development of non-violent social movements’ (*ibid.*: 343). Postill explored ‘the mediated aesthetics’ of new movements in the Spanish context, during a period of rapid technological change, identifying a ‘new aesthetics’ that was ‘complexly mediated’, both by established forms of mainstream media and by ‘new platforms and technologies’ (*ibid.*: 345). Furthermore, he identified what he called a ‘protest aesthetic’ – a ‘set of principles underlying the subcultural work and style of a particular protest movement’ (*ibid.*: 347–8). In the case of the indignados, these principles were, in part, pursued through the utilization of the everyday tools of visual culture. Postill notes that mainstream conservative media outlets often attempted to undermine the indignados’ strategies of nonviolence, by representing them as embodying a ‘radical aesthetic’ which they would then endeavour to counter through the widespread sharing of their own, self-made, YouTube videos to show ‘police provocateurs, . . . scenes of peaceful sit-ins brutally broken up by the police’ and ‘posters of demonstrators facing riot police with open hands raised in the air’ as they chanted: ‘These are our weapons’ (*ibid.*: 346). Repeatedly, they were compelled to counter misrepresentations of themselves as violent, with ‘highly visible displays of non-violence’, and the strategic use of humour (*ibid.*: 351).

In summary, Postill found that the indignados combined ‘two distinct technical affordances – photographic indexicality and social media virality – to great rhetorical and aesthetic effect’ (*ibid.*: 355). Postill found that this group had a wide influence, indeed that Spain during this period, was at ‘the global forefront of techno-political innovation and social change’, and that similar to earlier

uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, the indignados provided a model that would be picked up by movements across the world – such as those during Occupy Wall Street soon after (ibid.: 345). Moreover, a later study found that the ‘15M Movement transformed countless Spanish citizens from passive users of communication media to active political actors’, who, instead of relying on mainstream media, ‘took it upon themselves to create communication dynamics to that end’ (Barbas and Postill 2017: 648).

More recently still, Rebecca M. Schreiber, amply demonstrated in her book, *The Undocumented Everyday* (2018), that when activists encounter difficulties in soliciting the right kind of media attention, and particularly when they feel misrepresented, they take matters into their own hands, recognizing the potential, and indeed importance, of self-representation. Schreiber’s examination of the representation, and self-representation, of Mexican and Central American activists from communities of undocumented migrants, found that through experience they took increasingly radical measures to control the message in order to make injustices visible, communicate demands, gain public support and widen participation. Schreiber’s study noted ‘the significance of “subjective” aesthetic forms’ (ibid.: 3) and a ‘mixed-genre aesthetic’, whereby documentary forms were combined with domestic and vernacular image making, used to great effect (ibid.: 35). Her argument builds on the work of Sontag, Rosler and Tagg,<sup>15</sup> in challenging the liberal humanist faith in the positive effects of some forms of documentary representation; she argues that self-representation within the sphere of activism, contests the ‘seeing-is-believing’ paradigm and tackles, head-on, questions of ‘who has the power to represent whom and what events are made visible or invisible’ (ibid.: xii). But perhaps Schreiber’s most significant observation is that migrant activists devised approaches to make visible the brutal effects of US border policy and policing, to produce ‘migrant counter-conducts’ to challenge their own exclusion (ibid.: 36). Importantly, Schreiber’s study revealed that even when apparently well-intentioned US organizations and agencies intervened in support of such people, all too often their representations ‘foreground a “national gaze”, augmented by a ‘nativist point of view’ (ibid.: 157). This motivated many undocumented migrants to devise their own creative strategies to challenge the ways in which they were represented, evidence their experiences, motivate others, and make visible the crimes committed against them by the US state. In creatively revising existing documentary forms, and making use of new modes of dissemination, they were able to ‘disrupt the ways in which migrant “illegality” is produced by making visible the effects of border militarization and policing . . . on undocumented migrants’ (ibid.).

In the context of the UK (specifically England and Wales), activists are also being increasingly compelled to mitigate the negative effects of police press statements and media representation. Jackson, Gilmore and Monk have shown that since 2010, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO)<sup>16</sup> has been engaged in a process of re-definition and recategorization of protest types producing a ‘structure of protest’ that re-designates peaceful protest where the peaceful protester is being reconstructed and re-presented as a serious threat to order. New guidelines define ‘protest’ in terms of ‘accepted tactics’ as distinct from ‘activism defined by criminality’, but additionally borrow a further designation from the USA, to produce a new concept in the UK context; that of a ‘transgressive protestor’ (Jackson, Gilmore and Monk 2019: 28). In so doing, these measures also recategorize the recommended and authorized ‘discretionary’ police response types. The study found that attempts by protesters to move beyond ‘purely symbolic gestures’ – but particularly when they were seen to be in ‘direct opposition to the political and



social order’ – are being met with increasingly tough policing tactics and behaviours (ibid.: 29). At the time of writing, in the UK, we wait to see the outcome of the new Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (2021), currently going through the parliamentary process and widely understood as intended to curb the activities of groups such as Black Lives Matter, Sisters Uncut, Extinction Rebellion plus anti-fracking and anti-HS2 protestors.<sup>17</sup> These groups operate in accordance with deeply held nonviolent ethics and adopt creative and imaginative tactics in part designed to foil negative police press statements and representation in mainstream media.

Such studies as those outlined above demonstrate that activists have not just become conscious of the role of mass media in controlling the message, but have also become adept and imaginative in the approaches taken in negotiating and shaping it to their own ends. Indeed, it is a given that in the twenty-first century, protest groups and activists are deeply aware of the importance of ‘media and messaging’ and are proactive in their consideration of how their message, event or issue may be (mis)represented and interpreted – to the extent that their awareness of such matters is often incorporated through the design of their strategies, events and visual materials. This can be related back to the concept of devisualization. A point raised by Thomas Tufte – that ‘social movements use media and communication technologies as practices embedded in spaces that they [themselves] create outside systems of governance and social organization – spaces that they claim, reclaim and occupy’ – confirms the suggestion that activist strategies must be proactive and not simply reactive, in shaping the grounds on which they act (2012: 87, in Barbas and Postill 2017: 657).<sup>18</sup>

## The networked image

In 2015, Nicholas Mirzoeff defined visual activism (then emerging as a new realm of academic investigation) as ‘the interaction of pixels and actions to make change’ (p. 297) – and in doing so, pointed to the centrality of the digitized and networked image in the ways that information is disseminated, and new ideas are brought into the world. In terms of the work of social movements and the many and varied forms of protest and activism, an evolving ‘digital landscape’ has enabled a widening of the ‘repertoires of contention’ – so, in this sense, it is very much the case that the ‘internet has taken to the streets’ as Lucas Melgaço and Jeffrey Monaghan argue ([2018] 2021: 12). The digital network is a reality of contemporary protest and all examples examined in the selected case studies utilize it to a greater or lesser degree. Even in cases where displaced and isolated individuals employ the tactics of visible self-harm, to regain the right to be seen – this ultimately means via the networked image.

In their important study of *Protest in the Information Age*, Melgaço and Monaghan identify an ‘(in)visibility dialectics’ where, in the context of protests, ‘visibility is a synonym of power’, but note that visibility also brings ‘exposure and makes way for control and surveillance’. As social movements deploy an impressive variety of visually creative means in an effort to ‘make their rights and demands more visible’, at the same time state agencies have ‘likewise mobilized new organizational and technological practices to surveil and control these movements’, in what they describe as a ‘struggle over the control of visibilities’ (ibid.: 9). The authors observe that while the first phase of the internet (known as the Web 1.0 era) was significant for protest groups for bringing in ‘mailing lists, chat portals and web pages’, the development of the so-called Web 2.0 has had a

profound and far-reaching effect, where technologies supporting the 'mobile internet, social media, and smart phones' have enabled new 'platforms for expression, critiques, and actions' with the potential to reach 'multiple and global publics' (ibid.: 5). They argue that not only have such technologies become ever more available, but they they are also 'progressively impacting the logics of protesting' (ibid.: 4). For example, protest events and actions can now be filmed and live streamed whereas previously, recorded videos were susceptible to confiscation by the police (ibid.: 12); although it should be noted that such films can also provide prosecution evidence for policing agencies and therefore carry their own risks.

However, despite the evident importance of the networked image and its centrality as (one of) the primary tools of visual activism, it should be recalled that Postill found that the indignados combined 'two distinct technical affordances – photographic indexicality and social media virality – to great rhetorical and aesthetic effect' (2014: 355). In other words, the photographic image as indexed to something real that occurred, subsequently disseminated by the digital network, the centrality of protest as an embodied practice, and the suggestion that contemporary activism is necessarily both real/embodied and virtual/digital. This is a double perspective within which both the body and the digital network are in the focus of contemporary activism.

Activism remains a fundamentally embodied practice. Sometimes this involves the activist's body as surface, medium or conduit of the visible aspects of such actions, in the form of a performance or an intervention – whether obviously creative or as a more prosaic mechanism of obstruction or occupation (noting that these can also take a creative or imaginative form and often do). But, of equal importance, as Arendt established, all activism necessarily requires the presence of others – a space in which to appear – this is fundamental. The digital network is having a profound impact on bodily acts of protest and who gets to witness them. To give one example: as Serafini has suggested, the ability to video and share performances has reinvigorated the potential of performance activism: 'this online sharing is perhaps what could ultimately make actions more valuable than their actual live performance, if we consider the number of people that can be reached online' (2014: 335) – leading her to ponder on whether this has become a new form, now that it is a recording rather than a one-off, unique moment in time and place. Melgaço and Monaghan describe this phenomena as 'constitutive of a digital co-presence' where such actions 'transcend the traditional requirements of time, space and physical co-presence, blurring distinctions between movements and the techno-sphere' ([2018] 2021: 6).

### ***The body and the double perspective of the new digital reality***

At the time of writing, in 2021, things have moved on, accelerated by the effects of the Covid-19 virus. Under the restricted conditions of a global pandemic the potential of the networked image for 'communication activism' has been tapped more than ever. While the bodily effects of the virus have been felt viscerally, and have served to expose the deep inequalities of lived experience, at the same time much of life has been pushed into virtual spaces. In a robust repost to this most digital of moments, written in April 2020, Achille Mbembe commented on the dominance of the digital; describing the 'great confinement' triggered by 'the stunning spread of the virus – and along with it, the widespread digitization of the world' (Mbembe 2021: S59). Mirzoeff's earlier insistence on the centrality of the digital in the moment of a renewed potential for activism in its

many guises, must be problematized, because ‘in the end everything brings us back to the body’ (ibid.).

The digitization upon which networked activism now depends is itself contributing to the problems faced by the world, where the resources required for the infrastructure and the ‘powering and cooling of computer chips and supercomputers’ for the global network ‘will require further restrictions on human mobility’ (ibid.: S61) – and, moreover, Mbembe insists it is instrumental in keeping us apart at the same time as ostensibly enabling us to network. In *The Universal Right to Breathe*, Mbembe argues that the digital is the ‘new gaping hole exploding Earth . . . the bunker where men and women are all invited to hide away, in isolation . . . But this is an illusion’ for ‘there is no humanity *without bodies*’ and no ‘freedom . . . outside of society and community’ (ibid.: S60). Mbembe argues that the experience of living through what he describes as the ‘dank underbelly’ of ‘modernity’, has been as ‘an interminable war on life’, where ‘the impoverishment of the world’ – meaning the breakdown of community, and society, and the ‘desiccation of entire swathes of the planet’ – may be characterized as ‘the subjection to the digital’ (ibid.: S60).

## Risks and dangers

At the start of this introduction, we pointed to the dangers inherent in activism; the risks involved in taking a stand. Clearly such risks are contingent upon the specific circumstances in which the activism occurs – which range enormously – as the case studies in this anthology demonstrate. At the safer end of this spectrum is the activist work that is presented within spaces dedicated to the display of art; yet, even here, there may be personal or professional risk. For example, it has always felt safer for artists to produce work that is aesthetic and unpolitical, certainly from a commercial point of view.

Sometimes, in attempting to address a difficult issue through art, an artist is aware of the potential to get it wrong. Maud Haya-Baviera has discussed this in relation to a shift in her practice, around 2018, where she began to address the trauma of migration as a subject in her work.<sup>19</sup> She stated in a public talk (2021): ‘it was the first time I felt brave enough to tackle such a subject’ . . . ‘I did not want, *not* to give justice to that subject . . . and to embrace what I view as politically important’. Similarly, when speaking about her 5-minute film, *Things Fall Apart* (2020),<sup>20</sup> which addresses colonialism through the appropriation of archive footage, she reflected on what was at stake for her as a politically concerned artist:

Sometimes when one wants to criticise something one ends up advertising it and I think there is this tension in *Things Fall Apart* that [pause] showing things that I want to criticise is difficult . . . because it requires me to walk on a very fine line and not to advertise what I want to criticise . . . There is a real tension and a danger that very much interests me, but that I’m conscious of, and it feels risky. And doing something risky is exciting, but also there might be the risk that I fail. And failing on those kinds of subjects is for me [pause] would be unacceptable.

IBID.

The risks involved in activism can also be at the level of not being seen, heard, listened to or apprehended – that actions go unnoticed or are not taken seriously – as Pollock cautions, where: ‘Encounters based on an open invitation involve the possibility of refusal as much as the possibility

of revolutionary engagement.’ (2018: 9) There is also the possibility of emotional harm; of personal humiliation, degradation and trauma. Some risk damage to career aspirations or find that their commitment has an impact on, not only professional matters, but on interpersonal relationships. In the words of one activist:

Going through this particular grief around climate – it’s connected to everything . . . to all our societal structures, economic, social, . . . if you want to change things and you want to be true to yourself you’re not necessarily going to be liked, you might be ridiculed a lot, might get anger from family members, from friends, but that’s part of the process and you will find other people on the way.

UNKNOWN ACTIVIST IN HADDAD 2021

At the more perilous end of this spectrum of vulnerability, there is also the risk of loss of liberty and the danger of violence and physical harm at the hands of state security forces, commercial agents or the general public. And, in many countries, there is the very real danger of losing not just liberty, but life, as a direct result of protest and activism. To take just one category – environmental activism – the annual numbers of activists who have been murdered is truly staggering, the vast majority of whom are indigenous peoples trying to protect their lands.<sup>21</sup>

The question for this anthology concerns how the visual is implicated in activism and since all activism carries risk of some order, we are concerned with the relationship between the visual elements of activism and the dangers that activists face. As we have shown, many activists and activist movements find that the visual offers a multiplicity of benefits including some protection from harm – in terms of bearing witness and in the handling of identity and message – but there are also the many ways that the visual is deployed to create a safer space in which to act, and to create a sense of community and the support that goes with it.

But in instances such as those arising from the conditions within refugee camps and detention centres, the fundamental loss of human rights impinges so fundamentally on individuals, groups or whole communities, such that the need to appear and to be heard goes very deep. In Arendtian terms, where ‘actualization resides and comes to pass in those activities that exist only in sheer actuality’ ([1958] 1998: 208). In the case of the inhabitants of the Camp de la Lande, Calais – a refugee camp widely known as Calais Jungle – this ‘sheer actuality’ is insisted upon through acts of visible self-harm by the practice of sewing their lips and/or eyelids together; ‘where subjectivity is under such pressure that it experiences itself as becoming abject’, then people are driven to desperate means (Pollock 2018: 5).

This brings us back to the focus of this anthology – art, protest, and activism in this most uncertain of moments – and to the premise of each of its chapters, which in turn examine the visual practices that are being used as instruments in the many and varied struggles for a better world.

## Outline of the themed sections and chapters

The authors selected for this anthology explore various kinds of visual activity employed in the name of bringing about positive social change, together with the associated tensions and risks involved. One of the strengths of drawing together different case studies, is the breadth this

affords in the examination of the ways such practices engage with changing concepts of democracy, subjectivity, identity, and citizenship, in matters of agency, action, participation and bearing witness, and how these alter in different contexts. For example, we include chapters that examine two very different responses to the profoundly serious issue of displacement and refugee status in discussions that, at one end of the spectrum, interrogate the performance context of a fashion show for an 'activist' stunt, while at the other, the self-harm of those who suffer directly the material consequences of displacement within the horrors of the Calais Jungle. We hope that in placing these within a collection, both are illuminated. In each case, a space of appearance has been created, but they have been differently motivated and conceived.

Our intentions for this book are therefore manifold. *First*, to bring together a selection of studies that collectively throw light on the proposition that activists are becoming ever more creative, and strategic in their utilization of what we can think of as the tools of visual culture. *Second*, to elucidate the complexity of the various visual strategies under examination, whilst also exploring the function of such developments. *Third*, to examine the extent to which there is a link between what happens in the safer spaces of the institutional sites of art, and the unsafe spaces of street protest and activism.

While acts of countervisuality and/or devisuality do not necessarily take a visual form, the thread running through this book does focus on the visual. This anthology includes new voices and less well-known, geographically diverse examples of political art, protest and activism. The chapters are grouped into three parts, organized around themes that reflect the visual strategies, methodological approaches and contexts in which activism occurs. In 'Part One: The Politics of Performance: Acting/ Re-enacting and Alternative Histories', case studies on visual activism are presented through the broad framework of performativity. Contributors in this section point to the nuanced spectrum of encounters with performative strategies; masquerade, unruliness, theatricality, spectacle or the carnivalesque approach of named examples, while others instead explore (re)performances of counter-temporality and memory – perhaps representing historical actions and events as an act of resistance to ideological narratives. In such performances, individuals may come together in a crowd or operate as a single organism. Through these acts of subversion and absurdity, new possibilities are experienced, albeit for a brief moment, and suggest alternative realities for the future. In Chapter 1, 'Making Sense and Claiming a Presence: The Social Semiotics of Visual Activism', Eve Kalyva builds on the work of Michael Halliday, Mikhail Bakhtin and Judith Butler to examine how visual activist acts – from within and beyond the art world – challenge existing power structures, enact social behaviours and create opportunities for coming together. Using case studies taken from the first decade of the twenty-first century in Argentina (Group of Street Art), the UK (Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army) and Spain (Enmedio), Kalyva proposes that these performative interventions articulate and disseminate sociopolitical criticism by subverting, appropriating and re-semiotizing meanings, images, sites, and gestures. In Chapter 2, 'A Total Performance: Invisibility, Respectability and Resistance in Corporate Capitalism', Jill Gibbon offers a first-hand account of her use of Brecht's idea of 'gestus', a gesture with social and political significance, to propose a representational version of performance drawing. Gibbon describes a method of performance she has developed to slip inside the secretive international arms trade industry, mimicking its duplicitous gestures of respectability, and using her invisibility as an older woman. Her method is similar to Boal's 'invisible theatre' where performances take place outside a theatre, though it is more discrete, with the aim of avoiding

attention. In Chapter 3, 'By a Thread: The Space Left to Activism when Fashion Deals with the Refugee "Crisis"', Elsa Gomis examines current biopolitical regimes on bodies, in relation to the performativity and gestures of fashion, and its contributions to notions of beauty. Her starting point is the presentation of Givenchy's 2016 Spring/Summer collection, whose audience members were wrapped in survival blankets similar to those used by NGOs to rescue migrants in the Mediterranean. This episode opens out questions relating to the role and place of fashion in visual activism in the context of migratory policies, examining fashion's excesses in 'humanitarian washing'.

In Chapter 4, 'Digging up the left-wing corpse? Visual activism and melancholia in Jeremy Deller's, *The Battle of Orgreave*', Stephanie Hartle invokes Walter Benjamin's notion of 'left-wing melancholy' to explore the function and political agency of Jeremy Deller's strategy of re-enactment in *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001). Whilst the recent rebranding of the Orgreave brownfield site can be described as an attempted burial of the past, on the contrary, themes of post-mortem, digging-back, exhumation and historical layering appear as key ideas underpinning Deller's work. Recalling the gothic tropes of Marxism, Hartle uses the figure of the vampire – as the 'living-dead' – to question both its ambiguous identity and its critical potential. In Chapter 5, 'Imperialism, empathy and healing in Rajkamal Kahlon's artistic activism', Margaret Tali discusses the artistic act of rethinking history via images, by focusing on Rajkamal Kahlon's work realized for the exhibition *Staying with the Trouble* (2017–18) at the Vienna Weltmuseum. Examining Kahlon's use of archival work, Tali suggests Kahlon's decolonial approach seeks for ways to embed acts of resistance into historical photographs, allowing for the possibility of a counter-history. In Chapter 6, 'Shooting Back / Speaking Forward: Decolonial Strategies in the Work of Sasha Huber', Temi Odumosu (scholar/curator) and Sasha Huber (artist), address another example of decolonial activism in a three-part collaborative text. First, an exploratory short essay, thinking-out-loud about Huber's ongoing 'shooting' practice – creating artworks using an air-compressed staple gun; second, a transcribed excerpt from their 2019 interview in Helsinki; and third, a photo essay. Written and presented as collage, Odumosu and Huber together consider the processes and risks involved in this evolving decolonial visual activist practice; an endeavour to reveal what has been hidden and restore dignity in a context of trauma and violence.

'Part Two: Places of Protest: Public Space and Citizenship', directs its attention to the different types of physical or discursive spaces in which visual activism is enacted, witnessed, and experienced. In each case the activism forces a new dialogue, with new imaginaries, in a visual politics of place. These could be shared public spaces, specific cultural or institutional places, the everyday street, or more isolated or marginal heterotopias – it may even include the most unlikely of spaces (the bottom of the sea, for example) or the contested space of the human body. Contributors in this section also examine examples of women's relationship to activism and the complex interplay of activism and art in countries with authoritarian, non-democratic governments and otherwise repressive regimes, where being female gives these artists a specific vantage point to their works. At the same time, they offer different 'narratives of globalization' where women respond to 'new modes of gender power and disadvantage' and, by so doing, make visible the 'gendered dynamics of contemporary globalization' (Hawkesworth 2006: 2). In Chapter 7, 'Visible Speechlessness: A Critical Approach to Image Acts of Lip-Sewing', Amelie Ochs and Ana Lena Werner provide a cross-disciplinary case study focusing on the paradox of refugees silencing themselves through lip-sewing; demonstrating their inability to act, and, at the same time,

producing visible images of their situation. In criticizing the view that lip-sewing includes an emancipatory and political potential, Ochs and Werner attempt to differentiate between the actual deed and the visual effect when judging activism. They argue that *visible speechlessness* is taken to extremes by the evidence of the visual and its accompanying silence, caused by the inability to speak. In Chapter 8, ‘“Ripples in Water”: Minor Episodes of Feminist Visual Activism by Three Women Artists in the PRC (2007–15)’, Monica Merlin moves beyond the connection between activism and dissidence, to focus on feminist visual activism produced by three lesser-known women artists based in Beijing: Gao Ling (b. 1980), Li Xinmo (b. 1976) and Sun Shaokun (1980–2016). All three artists use the body as the medium in which to rethink women’s rights within the tightly surveilled cultural ecology of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Merlin interrogates how, in this context, these informal, individual and ‘minor’ acts of visual activism are not associated with conventional democratic public protests or social movements. By interweaving theories of activism and feminism, Merlin interprets such artworks as demonstrations of alternative strategies for art as activism, as a response to – and resistance to – the surrounding sociopolitical environment.

In Chapter 9, ‘“America is Black,” Indigenous and Muslim: Tatyana Fazlalizadeh’s Public Challenges to White Nationalism’, Stefanie Snider examines street art murals and gallery exhibitions created by contemporary US-based black activist artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh between 2016 and 2019, to describe the ways in which they enact a community-based project of black resistance against white supremacy, and challenge dominant visual and rhetorical discourses of white nationalism enacted by local and federal US governmental systems in the twenty-first century. Snider proposes that Fazlalizadeh’s murals activate the spaces in which they are located, in intimate and public as well as individualized and communal ways. In Chapter 10, ‘Farida Batool: A Pakistani Visual Activist’, Amina Ejaz considers the work of Farida Batool – a Pakistani visual artist and activist – namely, in the way in which Batool’s site-specific works and her collaborative endeavours are shaped by the specific context of Pakistan’s complex and violent history; political murder, sectarian killings, border conflict and dislocation, honour killings and gender-based violence. Here, Ejaz observes a key distinction separating Batool’s art-activism from sited art in other geopolitical locations – a real threat of danger to life. In Chapter 11, ‘Jason deCaires Taylor’s Submerged Sculptures and the Iconography of Slow Violence’, Karen Stock focuses primarily on Jason deCaires Taylor’s sculptural installations; sculptures made from pH-neutral cement installed on the ocean floor at the Museo Subacuático de Arte (MUSA) in Cancun, Mexico. MUSA is discussed as a means of redefining the typical art museum in the age of the Anthropocene and redirecting the touristic gaze toward art and conservation. Stock extends Rob Nixon’s definition of slow violence to consider how deCaires Taylor’s sculptures are one way to give physical form to slow violence – or, indeed, a type of slow activism.

Darcy White, in Chapter 12, ‘Keeping the Peace: The Visual in the ‘Struggle’ of Non-Violent Activism in a Global Existential Crisis’, examines the highly acclaimed visual design programme of the environmental movement Extinction Rebellion (XR) with its ‘we-do-it-together’ practice of self-made graphics and image-based campaign materials. Through a consideration of Judith Butler’s ideas on ‘grievability’ and the ‘struggle’ of nonviolence, together with critiques of Western environmentalism – including those expressed by T. J. Demos – White explores XR UK’s design strategy in relation to the movement’s commitment to the principle of nonviolent activism and to its framing of the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE); in terms of its causes, global affects and issues of justice.



'Part Three – Connectivity Online: Digital Activism and the Networked Image', explores the various ways in which activists use or resist the networked space. Contributors in this section offer accounts of digital participation, connectivity, solidarity, and spectatorship. Together, citizens harness the trans-local characteristics of networked spaces to show solidarity, and to take ownership through the recording of events, bearing witness through self-representation and public accountability and, ultimately, the creation of a networked movement of movements. At the same time, this section also questions the perceived democracy of virtual spaces, asking challenging questions about the legitimacy of network-based activism and its failure to reach those perhaps most in need, those who live on the other side of the digital divide or outside of its perpetuation of normativity.

In Chapter 13, 'Montage and Vernacular Spectatorship: The Role Played by YouTube Channel AnarChnowa as a Tool of Visual Activism in Post-14 January 2011 Tunisia', Marianna Liosi examines the case study of the YouTube channel AnarChnowa, initiated in 2016 by the Tunisian cyber and media activist of the same name, to question the activist potential of its use of video mash-up. In particular, Liosi analyses two examples of video remix in which AnarChnowa reuses the vernacular videos of the 29-day phase of the Tunisian revolution, post-14 January 2011. Liosi suggests that both AnarChnowa, as a prosumer through recontextualizing ripped, poor images from the digital archive, as well the users of the channel, through the online communications, are vernacular spectators and thus contribute to the ongoing writing of current Tunisian history. In Chapter 14, 'Sociality, Appearance and Surveillance in Digital Political Activism', Stefka Hristova offers a comparative framework for understanding the impact of visualization via colour and geolocation on digital political activism. Over 6 million Facebook users applied a rainbow filter in 2015 to show support of the Supreme Court's decision to legalize gay marriage, and, in 2016, around 1 million Facebook users 'checked into' Standing Rock in order to show their solidarity with the Native American opposition of the North Dakota Access Pipeline. Hristova uses both these case studies to illuminate the role sociality plays in political movements that attempt to reshape the social. Sociality here is understood to stand in tension with the social and configures the potential for relationships differently, based on opportunistic, temporary, tactical, open, fluid, less exclusionary, more fragile alliances. Hristova argues that an alliance based on sociality rather than social belonging changes the ways in which political struggles find expression in Arendtian 'spaces of appearance.'

Sugandha Sehgal, in Chapter 15, 'Rendering the Invisible Visible: Menstrual Activism in Contemporary India', maps the beginnings of a nascent aesthetic trend in the digital realm, that is, the rise of radical feminist visual narratives on menstruation on Instagram in postmillennial India, a digital discourse espousing new forms of protest centred on the visual politics of the menstruating body. Urgent, provocative and graphic, these narratives deploy the visual as the chief tactic of activism. Sehgal questions both the promises and limitations of this form of menstrual activism by exploring whether the Instagram hashtag *#Menstruation Matters* reaches the other side of the digital and menstrual divide in the rural heartland of India. In Chapter 16, 'Unruly Images: The Activist Visuality of Technical and Bodily Disruptions on Instagram', Vendela Grundell Gachoud analyses how activism manifests in images that contest visibility in order to suggest that visibility gains an activist agency if it challenges notions of normality that limit our modes of seeing. To test this hypothesis, Grundell Gachoud uses an innovative framework of media theory, disability studies and art historical image interpretation in a qualitative case study of Instagram posts by glitch artist Rosa Menkman and blind photographer Kurt Weston. By bringing together glitch art



and disability aesthetics on social media, Grundell Gachoud proposes that visibility emerges as a multisensory and multimodal entwining of sight and seeing with visualization and visibility; situating photographs as embodiments of the contested visual vocabularies that shape the social imaginary.

## ***Final thoughts***

The premise that the specific culture or circumstances of visibility – at a given place and time – controls who has the ‘right to look’, serves to highlight the importance of speaking from a position of specificity, one that affords a granulated understanding of local variation, as the majority of our authors have done.<sup>22</sup> However, at the same time, the unprecedented scale of the crises afflicting our particular moment, perhaps necessitates that we also act like rebels in our approach to thinking through these developments – to think more broadly and across different currents of thought – as Mbembe has suggested in noting the contribution of anti-method, and when he points to the potential of different kinds of reading of canonical texts, (by Frantz Fanon, for example), and in his suggestion that it doesn’t really matter that the case studies under discussion are different, ‘the more different, the better’ (2016).<sup>23</sup> Therefore, as already suggested, this new moment, and this emergent field of enquiry requires new concepts with which to think through the development of the dynamic relationship between acts of protest and visual creativity and ‘what is happening in their relationship now’ (Pollock 2018: 4). So, we offer you our anthology and invite you to consider both the specificities of the examples of protest occurring around the globe in the name of resistance and hope for change, but at the same time to think about whether our current theoretical approaches, within mainstream academia, require expansion. We invite you to join us in a spirit of rebellion, to think creatively and with a tenacity adequate to this moment.

## **Notes**

- 1 For a further discussion of ‘rupture’, see, for example, Rancière (2010).
- 2 Following Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958).
- 3 Mbembe cites the words of an unnamed activist speaking within the context of contemporary South Africa.
- 4 Serafini (2014).
- 5 Particularly in relation to the ideas of Arendt (1958) and Nicolas Mirzoeff (2011, 2015, 2017); significant debates around visibility were initiated in the late 1980s, particularly within the anthology, Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality* (1988). This contained essays by Martin Jay, Jonathan Crary, Rosalind Krauss, Norman Bryson and Jacqueline Rose, and Jay’s contribution, ‘Scopic Regimes of Modernity’, was a foundation for his subsequent book, *Downcast Eyes* (1993).
- 6 See Mirzoeff (2015) and Bryan-Wilson, Gonzalez and Willsdon (2016); Zanele Muholi – the South African activist and artist, has been photographing people and events associated with the persecution and murder of LGBTI people – particularly black lesbians – as a mode of activism for more than fifteen years, stating: ‘I am a visual activist before I am an artist’ (2016).
- 7 Mirzoeff notes an argument by Thomas Carlyle in 1848, where he employed the term ‘visuality’ to describe ‘the tradition of heroic leadership, which visualizes history to sustain autocratic authority’ (Mirzoeff 2011: 475).

- 8 From Crispin Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics* (2010: 1); for wider discussion, see Verbner, Webb and Spellman-Poots (2014).
- 9 Mirzoeff has acknowledged his debt to previous thinking of Laura Mulvey, W. J. T. Mitchell, Anna Friedberg, Martin Jay and particularly to Jacques Derrida.
- 10 This statement comes from close reading of Khurana's text-poem *Lying Down* (2009).
- 11 See, for example, Rawlinson (2021).
- 12 Also known as the Dakota Access Pipeline protests.
- 13 For an alternative translation of Benjamin's title and essay, see Benjamin ([1936] 2006).
- 14 Samad (2009) in Postill (2014).
- 15 Susan Sontag, Martha Rosler, John Tagg.
- 16 Replaced in 2015 by the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC). See ACPO (2010).
- 17 See, for example, the discussion in Clements (2021).
- 18 Tufte (2012).
- 19 A 20-minute film, Maud Haya-Baviera, *The Waves* (2019).
- 20 This title borrows directly from the novel of the same name by the Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe (1958).
- 21 See the Global Witness report (2021) on the annual murder rate of land and environmental activists.
- 22 For example following the approach taken by Rosi Braidotti, and others pursuing New Materialism.
- 23 Mbembe cites Feyerabend (1975); and arguably this moment will also benefit from a return to 'the archive' of black thought and to indigenous thought.

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# 1

## Making sense and claiming a presence

### The social semiotics of visual activism

*Eve Kalyva*

#### Introduction

**W**e make sense of the world around us by relating words, images, objects, gestures and sites to particular meanings. The opposite is also true: perceived meaning is shaped through interaction with the world. In linguistic terms, different things become part of signifying systems and participate in clusters of meaning as signs through a process that is called *semiosis* (from the Greek word *semion* [σημείον] meaning 'sign'). Semiosis takes place naturally in the evolution of language and communication, but is a dynamic process. Language users can negotiate meaning and superimpose new meanings on pre-existing ones by utilizing words, images, objects, gestures and sites – among other things – in ways that refer to something more or different to what they already do. The question is, then: Why would someone do this, and how?

In the early 2000s, Grupo de Arte Callejero (Group of Street Art, GAC) in Argentina created city maps and re-designed traffic signs to indicate the locations of illegal centres of detention that operated during the 1976–83 civic-military dictatorship and the houses of its collaborators. Across the Atlantic, in the UK, Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army ridiculed the police and the army as a way of condemning the country's international war operations. In Spain, the group Enmedio participated in demonstrations with clearly identifiable visual signs and threw parties at banks and unemployment centres in support of those affected by the severe European austerity measures. These acts sought to re-semiotize words, gestures and cultural registers and re-frame them in new chains of signification to mean something more than what they would mean in other contexts. Given that specific objectives are often behind such acts, the prefix 're' becomes instrumental in this discussion. Such objectives can include raising awareness by hijacking existing modes of communication, contesting how the media portray reality, and seeking to transform the passive public into active agents in order to change social behaviours and attitudes.

Meaning, communication and impact are thus important for the success of activist acts. To evaluate them, this chapter develops a social semiotic approach to visual activism. Social semiotics



considers meaning making and communication as social practices that shape both our understanding of the world and our relationships with others. Based on this premise and the work of Michael Halliday, Mikhail Bakhtin and Judith Butler, this chapter proposes a framework of analysis and evaluation of visual activism according to three criteria: negotiating meaning and how ideas are formulated; performing power and how social roles are reconfigured; and coming together and how communities are created. It asks: How well does a visual activist act communicate its ideas to wider audiences, creating and sustaining the conditions that enable it to engage others critically? How do audiences participate in this act? And, what is achieved by this?

There are several benefits to the proposed approach. It underlines the importance of social context and communication on which activist acts rely. Social context is specifically understood here in terms of the sites where an act takes place and who the audiences are, and communication in terms of how messages are disseminated and prompt reflection and action. Moreover, it acknowledges that the form of activist acts qualified as 'visual' is defining and instrumental in conveying their message. Thus, a social semiotic approach considers both an act's material aspect (its presence), and its ideational aspect (what it may mean). Third, with examples from within and beyond the art world in a global context, the discussion that follows addresses impact, agency and the relation of art to the political. It examines the efficiency of communication across different visual cultures and discourses, and evaluates how visual activism can bring about positive social change through shifts in ideas, attitudes and behaviours. Of particular importance is how individuals come together, conceptualize their social experiences and participate in the commons.

## Visual activism

The relation of art to activism is central in discussions of twentieth and twenty-first century cultural production. These include the Russian avant-garde, Dada, the Situationists, Fluxus and, to a lesser extent, Conceptual art; as well as discussions regarding the social turn of art and the institutionalization of its institutional critique (Bishop 2006; Holmes 2007; Forkert 2008). In the past few years, different terms have been proposed to indicate this relationship, such as 'activist art', 'artivism', 'curatorial activism', 'artistic activism' and, from a wider perspective, 'creative activism'.<sup>1</sup> Adding to this nomenclatural track record, 'visual activism' encompasses practices from within and beyond the art world while drawing attention to the form and means of the act. From within the art world, the adjective 'activist' is often used to denote artistic practices that engage sociopolitical reality with an applied interest in changing it. This contemporary iteration relates to previously used terms such as 'avant-garde' and 'political-artistic' and helps identify different strategies that artists may use to respond to emerging issues from their context in provisional, ephemeral and experimental ways. It underlines the social responsibility of art, and specifically how to reconnect art to everyday life and negotiate the state of affairs in the public sphere. For its part, describing activist acts as 'visual' may mean little in terms of sociopolitical critique and often serves other purposes such as attracting the prestige of the art world along with funding opportunities and institutional support. Yet, in analytical terms, the qualifier 'visual' can be employed to emphasize that an act wants to be seen. Put forward by artists, activists or artists-activists, it will be used in the following discussion to qualify an act that has a defining visual presence and a form that is instrumental in conveying its message.



Thus, visual activism can be understood as making a visibility claim: a gesture of critique that draws attention to itself as a way of making sense and claiming a presence. It is a 'gesture' in the sense of a proposition or indication of how to understand the world and act differently in it, rather than an intellectual exercise in how to classify the world or a permanent transformation of the social order. And it is 'critical' inasmuch as it aims to challenge, question, disturb or temporarily suspend that order, together with the power structures that sustain it and the behaviours that propagate it.

## Social semiotics

In his seminal contribution to the study of language, Michael Halliday (1978) describes language as a social semiotic system: a system of information and interaction realized in social context. Accordingly, human communication is better understood if we consider meaning making as a social and contextually dependent practice, language as a performative form of social interaction and communication as shaping communities of users.

In more detail, meaning is not intrinsic to a sign but becomes negotiated in the process of meaning *making*. Here, the context of a particular situation and the cultural context are important. We can evaluate how context configures meaning by considering the topic and purpose of a discussion (field), the way it is carried out (mode) and who participates (tenor). Furthermore, language is a form of social interaction and has a performative aspect. Speakers do not only use language to convey information and articulate world views. Rather, they use language as a primary means to enact social roles and behaviours, maintain relations and shape social practices. Indeed, and with reference to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Halliday (1976) discusses the reality-generating power of language. Language *realizes* reality and, in particular, our social world. Lastly, communication cannot be done in isolation. It is an act that is shared and social, taking place within communities of users which it helps create. The conditions of communication – be it cultural, contextual, in terms of register or rapport – do not only define it, but conversational participants rely on them in order to be understood. Thus, rather than simply transmitting information from the sender to the receiver, the act of communication creates social groups through which common meanings and beliefs circulate. At the same time, people use language to participate in such groups through which they self-identify.

To summarize so far, social semiotics draws attention to meaning making as a process realised in context through social interaction and by groups of users. In addition, it goes beyond the linguistic and examines multimodal communication, visual registers and bodily gestures. For these reasons, it becomes a unique tool of analysis and evaluation of visual activism. While other frameworks have been proposed in relation to activism such as 'tactical media' and 'guerrilla of communication', these operate on a descriptive level. Tactical media refers to practices that, ranging from radio, TV and the printed matter to websites, internet browser applications and video games, test how media can be turned against themselves. Pragmatic and provisional, they have been described as media of crisis, criticism and opposition (Garcia and Lovink 1997), while the term draws attention to the mediation of reality or, better, to the *mediatic* experience of reality with reference to Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* ([1967] 1970). As Rita Raley (2009) explains, tactical media not only re-appropriate existing instruments of communication but also re-engineer semiotic

systems, reflecting critically on the institutions of power and control. They create disturbances in the dominant semiotic regime and the field of the symbolic, and give rise to temporary situations where signs, messages and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible. For its part, the term 'guerrilla of communication' describes tactics that seek to subvert information and appropriate its channels of distribution, disrupt the rampant misinformation by corporate media, and contest the rise of popularism and the intensification of global capitalism. In a manual assembled by the activist collective a.f.r.i.k.a. grupe, tactics include the hijacking of means, modes and codes of communication, subversive affirmation, re-contextualization and re-semiotization, and media campaigns and other public acts that ridicule and expose power (a.f.r.i.k.a., Blisset and Brünzels 2000). Here, the term 'guerrilla' seems more appropriate than 'warfare'. It underlines the inequality of power between institutional apparatuses and dissident acts, and recalls a tradition of struggle against what is considered to be an illegitimate state.

A social semiotic approach to visual activism is synergic to the above considerations and has additional benefits. It can help analyse and evaluate the extent to which the 're-engineering' of semiotic systems by tactical media is sustained, and the effects of guerrilla communication strategies for different communities. It also allows us to talk about agency, drawing attention to the performative aspect of communication by which not only information is exchanged but also social roles are enacted. This is important in understanding how activist acts can offer new experiences of behaving and thinking differently, and how they can incite people to reflect on social processes and behaviours in order to change them. Third, a social semiotic approach examines meaning in a nexus of affairs and the powers that are at play. Signifying systems may be malleable but they do not operate in isolation. It is therefore important to make comparisons at a trans-regional level and consider how activist acts form part of international networks of solidarity, recognition and reception, albeit time- and site-specific. A fourth benefit concerns the relation of art to politics and, more specifically, to the political. If it is fashionable today to talk about activism, we should not forget that criticism becomes co-opted and institutionalized. In the art world, this is often achieved through a seductive yet neutralizing rhetoric that both embalms and exaggerates claims while neglecting to address *how* these are communicated and take effect. It is therefore important to consider impact. This concerns institutional critique as well as what different modes of communication can accomplish in the context of everyday instantiation – in the context, that is, of the realization of social relations and power structures.

## Negotiating meaning

The end of the twentieth century was turbulent worldwide. The mass protests at the summit of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999 gave rise to new forms and networks of resistance. Naomi Klein (2000) describes them as miniature movements, autonomous but interconnected hubs of activity brought together by an emerging consensus on the need for community-based decision-making. Shaping a new language of protest, this 'movement of movements' gained in momentum what it might have lacked in organization; and it was multiple. Yearly demonstrations were held during the summits of the G8, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (cf. Cologne 1999, Prague 2000, Genoa 2001). Through this widespread social unrest, diverse initiatives and agendas came together. The World Social Forum was inaugurated in 2001 in Brazil, the Global

Justice Movement was consolidated, and hundreds of thousands of people around the world were mobilized against the centralization of wealth and power by corporate capitalism and its neo-liberal attack on the welfare state.

One of the most paradigmatic cases of social injustice happened in Argentina. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed a series of unconstitutional and unserviceable loans that streamlined the privatization of the country's resources and the centralization of its wealth in the hands of few multinational companies. Aggressive deregulation coupled with excessive austerity measures decimated social and public services while inflating taxation. The country was placed in an economic headlock and, by the end of 2001, defaulted on nearly \$100 billion in debt. It was, at the time, the largest sovereign default in history. Large-scale social mobilization and attempts to recover from the socioeconomic crisis followed. These were bottom-up (for example, factories were reclaimed and operated by their workers); as well as introduced by the new government of Nestor Kirchner that also re-opened the judicial process against the crimes committed during the civic-military dictatorship of 1976–83.

The interventions of Grupo de Arte Callejero took place in this context. Through public actions and workshops in collaboration with human rights groups and local communities, the group addressed important issues such as impunity, justice and memory. In December 2001, a time of unprecedentedly large demonstrations in Argentina but also of severe repression by the police and the armed forces, GAC attached improvised plastic parachutes to 10,000 toy soldiers and released them from a helicopter in downtown Buenos Aires (*Invasión [Invasion]*, 2001). Part of the same action, they placed stencils of military symbols on common goods in circulation such as Marlboro cigarette packs and the leading newspaper *Clarín*, and put up posters that illustrated the connections across multinationals, the mass media and the security services. Given the country's turbulent history, these visual registers were an apt way of exposing a continuity of violence, but also of resistance.

Between 2001 and 2006, GAC created memory maps and placed them across Buenos Aires. These maps indicated the locations of illegal centres of detention that operated during the 1976 to 1983 dictatorship, the houses of its collaborators (military officers, torturers, appropriators) and the sites from where the so-called 'death planes' took off to throw political prisoners alive into the La Plata River. In plain numbers, there were more than 500 illegal centres of detention, 500 children appropriated by the security forces, an estimate of 250,000 people in exile and 30,000 people classified as 'missing' to this day, without counting the thousands of political prisoners, the covert executions and the death toll in armed conflict. In a context where the juridical process against the dictatorship's officials and collaborators had ceased prematurely (cf. the Full Stop Law of 1986 and the Law of Due Obedience of 1987, both of which will be repealed by the Argentinian National Congress in 2003), GAC's memory maps do not simply illustrate data. Rather, they function as a medium of both social critique and collective memory. Paradigmatically operating in the public sphere, they draw connections across the past and the present, chart out how relations of power are geographically distributed in the city, and become *loci* of remembrance and resistance.

Another intervention in the city's social and urban landscape were GAC's *escraches*. Deriving from the English word 'to scratch (out)', *escraches* are a popular form of public denouncement that discloses or reveals the truth through direct, on-site action. GAC's *escraches* took the form of subverted traffic signs. The most prominent was the red and white circle, the traffic sign for 'no vehicle', which GAC re-semiotized to bear a military uniform hat and read 'Trial and Punishment'. This *escrache* became particularly popular in demonstrations for truth and justice for the victims

of the dictatorship, and was often co-created on site and handed out. Other actions involved subverting rectangular blue parking signs to read the locations of former illegal centres of detention and the addresses of the regime's collaborators, and placing them on traffic poles near their denoted locations; and lozenge yellow signs, normally indicating roadway conditions, which were equally used to forewarn the distances from such locations.

Returning to the proposed social semiotic approach to visual activism, the first criterion of analysis and evaluation is examining how acts negotiate meaning. Since visual activist acts are acts that want to be seen, we will consider both their material and their ideational aspects. In terms of their material aspect, traffic signs are by design easily recognizable. Yet upon closer inspection, GAC's interventions subvert expectations and interrupt the visual homogeneity of urban signification. In terms of ideation, they shift expected function. Rather than aiding the navigation through actual traffic conditions, GAC's signs interrupt the routine of how the city is spatially experienced. Let us consider this effect more closely. Signs do not stand alone but participate in bigger chains of signification, and GAC's choice of medium achieves a particular level of critique. The traffic code is a code of public conduct that regulates everyday life. It is designed to control the bodies that traverse the city and therefore to control an aspect of social behaviour. Tampering with this code, GAC's re-semiotized signs draw parallels between the regulation (and penalization) of public conduct with the regulation (and lack of penalization, in this case) of another kind of social behaviour and power structure that relates to violence, injustice and impunity.

In these ways, GAC's interventions take active part in a shared and social process of meaning making across physical and social context. They can be evaluated by how well they link past and actual experience, or remembering and taking up action. For those directly or indirectly affected by the dictatorship, politically active collectives and socially aware individuals with whom GAC collaborated at demonstrations and public interventions, these signs become instantiations of empowerment. For those unaware of or unwilling to consider such matters, they hijack an official channel of regulation and negotiate new meaning as indicators of social conscience and solidarity.

Because a social semiotic approach is specifically concerned with how context configures meaning, it also helps identify and evaluate the resonance of activist acts in case of relocation. Following their precarious and ephemeral appearance in the city, GAC's re-semiotized traffic signs are now permanently installed at Buenos Aires' Remembrance Park. We can evaluate their efficacy to communicate and disseminate their criticism by examining their contextual dependence in these two locations in terms of field, mode and tenor. Field refers to what is talked about and the communicative purpose: illicit activities during the dictatorship, with the aim to expose and juxtaposed them to everyday life and political actuality. In this case, and despite the signs' dislocation from the streets, the field is maintained. Mode refers to the way language is used including the medium, the genre and the rhetorical mode such as narration, description, exemplification etc. Here, the medium remains the same. Even when the distance that the signs indicate becomes null by their relocation from the streets to the Remembrance Park, their message remains legible. There is, however, a change in the signs' evocative power. Whereas seeing these signs at their individual city street locations creates a sense of immediacy or even alert, seeing them grouped together at the park along a single road may moderate the sense of urgency or discovery. There, a different feeling rises. By bringing together a range of signs including ones that comment on policies affecting Latin America as a whole, the Park layout is more immersive and may evoke dread as it relays more fully the atrocities of state terrorism.

Tenor (who speaks and the relations across participants including formality and power) also shifts. In the case of normal traffic signs, the regulator addresses the regulated and the latter must obey. For GAC's signs in the streets, there is no label to indicate who is speaking and the conceptual framework of this intervention is not clear. This might affect the signs' credibility and one's willingness to listen, unless one identifies with the signs' message in which case authorship becomes secondary. At the Remembrance Park, a site intentionally placed in critical dialogue with the country's political past, the signs are conceptually framed in more concrete ways. Who is speaking becomes clear (artists engaging remembrance) and credibility is institutionally supported. Identification with the signs' message in the streets depends on who is looking, whereas this is more likely to happen for those who purposefully visit the park.

Another context for GAC's signs is the art world. While the Remembrance Park is a public space in the city of reference sharing parallel communicative aims with GAC's actions, the same cannot be said for the fiftieth Venice Biennale at which GAC participated in 2003. This brings us full circle to the turbulent beginnings of the twenty-first century. Despite, or perhaps because of, widespread social mobilization, art's social critique and the advocacy for human rights became institutionalized very quickly (Longoni 2008). Along with new contextual dependencies, an institutional setting affects how objects are experienced and their function. In terms of tenor and experience, there is often a steep relationship of power between presenter and receiver, and meaning is framed and relayed by experts, especially in high profile undertakings. Even when institutions prompt their visitors to draw their own conclusions, this is often a gesture of politeness masking a pressure to comply with predetermined narratives. Equally, the mode changes once objects are categorized, qualified as 'art' and accompanied by institutional discourse. Through reiteration and abstraction, discourse can alienate both the public and the artworks from their social context. What is more, it can overexpose gallery visitors to tailor-made claims of critical engagement leaving them disinterested in pursuing this further by themselves. In terms of field and function, *escraches* in the streets are part of a bigger frame of reference and integral to the interventions that create them. Translated in an institutional setting, they become icons in the Peircean sense, referencing their original communicative purpose but subverting their potential impact. Institutional power takes precedence in defining and controlling meaning and interaction, and neutralized enjoyment is offered to visitors at the expense of the act's critical potential and what it could mean for wider audiences in their everyday reality.

As demonstrated by this social semiotic approach to visual activism, the limit of an act's critical gesture is determined by context, mode of communication and users. In the case of relocating street signs in the gallery space, one must consider the extent to which these retain their ability to challenge the status quo, or whether the act is reduced to the repetition of slogans for viewers who remain consumers in the private sphere instead of being activated as agents in the socio-political sphere.

## Performing power

In 1995, two cars collided in London's Camden High Street and their drivers stepped out and started to destroy them. Staged by the Reclaim the Streets (RTS) collective-cum-movement, the act was transformed into a party of several hundred people stopping traffic. Radicalized parties and

unauthorized public celebrations taking over the streets spread throughout the UK and internationally, and a new language of protest emerged: spatial disobedience. In another RTS-led event in Islington, London the same year, the street was covered with sand recalling the May 1968 motto, 'Beneath the paving stones, the beach' (*Sous les pavés, la plage*). By the next year, the M41 motorway was blocked by 6,000 people. Performers on stilts played music while underneath their full length hoop skirts, activists drilled holes in the road to plant trees (Ramírez Blanco 2018).

These events are playful but not by default less critical than traditional forms of protest, and offer the experience of another state of political being. For their duration, solidarity and the transformation of social and spatial relations are actualized despite a wider context of repression, isolation and exploitation, and are celebrated even for a short while. To coincide with the demonstrations in Seattle in 1999, Carnival against Capital took place internationally on 18 June. An estimate of 10,000 people attended the London event alone and gatherings were coordinated in sixty other countries. Colourful flags and banners read slogans such as: 'Global ecology not global economy,' 'Don't speculate, live,' 'The earth is not the casino of the rich' and 'Life beyond profit'.

The shift in global finance at the turn of the millennium was matched by a shift in warfare. In 2003, US President George W. Bush visited London during the Iraq invasion – an invasion that marked a new era of neo-imperial warfare and control of resources under the pretext of 'humanitarian aid'. Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) participated in anti-war demonstrations and mocked, confused and ridiculed the police and the armed forces. CIRCA's interventions echoed RTS practices and combined methods used by professional clowns to deploy child-like innocence and exteriorize spontaneity. Playful but always disobedient bands of clowns hugged police officers, begged them on their knees, smudged pink kisses on their riot shields and passed through their lines unchallenged (see Figure 1.1). Clowns also entered army recruiting offices and tried to enrol, causing havoc. On one occasion, this intervention resulted in the office's closure, while the dressed-up activists put a table outside beckoning passers-by to join their ad hoc army.

The second criterion of analysis and evaluation of the proposed social semiotic approach concerns the interdependence of language and social relations, and how power is performed. Apart from communicating ideas, language has the performative capacity to articulate power and define social relationships. A social semiotic approach acknowledges the performative dimension of language, and helps determine how power roles are enacted. Language users make choices depending on the communicative aims they want to achieve. In the case of CIRCA, two such aims are to invert or disqualify existing power relations and to transform social behaviours. At a practical level, their carnivalesque antics seek to ridicule authority and suspend its power. While authority cannot take effect without compliance and recognition, rebel clowns neither take it seriously nor recognize its tenure when they lead demonstrations by pushing the police back and shut down army offices by attempting to be recruited as soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Such acts challenge law and order and make it impossible for those in power to actualize that power. Indeed, according to reports, the police were at first too baffled to react when faced with demonstrators dressed up as clowns (Beautiful Trouble 2019). At the level of association, the deeds of these clowns hint at politicians and draw links across the weakness of the state to control populace at home and the criminal absurdity of going abroad and invading other countries. As such, and across textual, visual, audio





**FIGURE 1.1** Intervention by the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) at a protest, c.2003. Reproduced under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License (CC BY 2.0): <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>.

and corporeal registers, CIRCA's multimodal interventions open up physical as much as conceptual spaces for new experiences and ideas.

The visual and behavioural choices of CIRCA were also instrumental in inverting the criminalization of protest and challenging the validity of mainstream information. At times of widespread social mobilization, corporate media and the state are quick to portray it as isolated events of 'violent clashes' by 'unruly mobs' or dubious 'black blocks' in order to de-legitimize it in the eyes of wider audiences. To contest this, CIRCA's practices created dissonance between how demonstrators were described and what they actually looked like and did. This has an important critical value. Instead of challenging the negative light cast on demonstrations discursively, CIRCA replaced common references to appearance and behaviour such as 'black' with 'colourful' and 'violent' with 'playful' but left the disqualification of official argumentation open-ended. This created an aporia of meaning capable of inciting critical reflection and suspending the power of the media to unilaterally shape reality. If, instead of terror-spreading demonstrators threatening public safety, those watching the news are presented with images of clowns dancing in the streets or populating army recruiting offices, they might be prompted to question other reported information as well, such as regarding international war operations and the global state of affairs.

CIRCA's highly visual, exaggerated and dramatized acts cause shifts in the associations one makes regarding the power of others but also regarding the power of disobedience itself. Such

shifts in association are important in mass psychology and in how authority responds to disobedience. For the police, professionals trained to respond to situations based on particular visual cues, a change in the latter moderates the automated process of perceiving threat and acting in response. For those participating in demonstrations and the onlookers, change may occur regarding their attitudes towards social mobilization, powerlessness and entitlement. For its part, the use of humour and carnival registers has been described as 'tactical frivolity'. A form of protest, tactical frivolity makes it harder for violence to escalate, for power to enact itself, and for repression to be justified as protecting order and defending peace.<sup>3</sup> In the case of CIRCA, their outlook may be playful but their critique is targeted. They aim to invert existing power binaries and reclaim the agency to shape one's own actuality. Their actions operate across the discursive, symbolic and experiential orders and reconfigure both the context in which disobedience is actualised and the power relations that frame it.

The conceptualization of the suspension of hegemony and power with reference to the carnival is not symptomatic here. Mikhail Bakhtin ([1965] 1984) explains how the carnival involves the temporary suspension of the hierarchical distinctions and barriers among people. Drawing from a tradition of mocking those with authority and of juxtaposing high and low culture, serious conventions with their parodies and daily identities with festive masks, the carnival conserves the deep-rooted aspiration to uncover, undermine and even destroy dominant ideologies and power structures. It can be understood as a moment when (almost) everything is permitted, creating an alternative social space characterized by freedom, equality and abundance wherein the carnival body can transgress and outgrow its own limits. For Bakhtin, carnivalization can elucidate alternative conceptualizations about reality, introduce plurality of perspectives and 'extend the narrow sense of life' (*ibid.*: 177). Trouble begins, however, when carnivals and celebrations remove themselves from the process of positive social transformation and become mere spectacles and outlets for private entertainment. In similar discussions about comedy, there is the danger of self-indulgence and attachment to pleasure despite its power to disturb existing orders (Berlant and Ngai 2017). Keeping this caution in mind, the carnival may permit the transgression of bodies, roles and attitudes but in order to effectively become part of social transformation, it must have a critical outlook that goes beyond mere celebration. Indeed, for Bakhtin ([1965] 1984), the carnival contains a utopian promise for human emancipation that, in its free expression of thought and creativity, keeps re-appearing elsewhere in social life.

Returning to CIRCA, their strategies can be understood as attempting to communally perform inversions of power. They seek to insert fluidity into a fixed order of being, challenge dominance, make one laugh in the face of subverted authority and help remove fear. Ephemeral as they may be, their interventions offer an experience that is direct and playful rather than prescriptive, inviting exploration and remaining open-ended. This type of embodied experience is relatable and has more resonance, motivating people to reclaim the commons. It is therefore a more constructive experience of critique and of the possibility for change. Still, we must keep in mind that the 'commons' is not a category that cannot be corroded spatially and conceptually, nor a placeholder for something that has been somehow misplaced but is waiting to be recovered. The deconstruction of relations – be it social, interpersonal or of power – creates an uncontrollable space from which the new must be constructed. It is this negative space between vision and action that CIRCA negotiates as one of the most important qualifiers of positive social change and community building.



## Coming together

Neoliberal deregulation, privatization and the dissolution of the welfare state are administered in Europe by the European Central Bank (ECB) in collaboration with the Washington-based IMF and the European Commission – an alliance that is dubbed the ‘Troika’. Following the financial crisis of 2007 to 2008, severe and often unconstitutional austerity measures led to sweeping impoverishment, unemployment and dispossession causing further social, political and humanitarian crises. These measures were met by widespread and multifaceted resistance, including the Occupy internationalized movement after Occupy Wall Street in the USA in 2011, and the movements of the squares in Greece and Spain.

In 2012, the closure of a bank account in Spain was transformed into a party celebration. An unsuspecting customer talking to a bank clerk was approached to confirm the request and, when the news spread and reached the street, a troupe of activists entered the bank with a boombox, pompoms and party blowers. Confetti was thrown, and a disco ball appeared from under the blouse of an assumed-to-be pregnant woman. The troupe danced to a famous rave beat while and sang ‘close Bankia’ in tune, while the customer was given flowers and a tiara, lifted up and carried outside (Enmedio 2012). The act was staged by the interdisciplinary group Enmedio (meaning ‘in the middle of’), which comprises designers, photographers, filmmakers and artists. Working in between art and social action, the group aims to create interference in the official account of the world through spectacular interventions that employ the transformative power of images and stories (ibid. 2019). This interference includes challenging the narrative of progress and economic growth heralded by the media and the government, and calling attention to an everyday reality where thousands of people are left without access to social goods, healthcare, employment or housing, while corporations extort public money. Bankia Bank is one of the most scandalous examples. Claiming bankruptcy, it asked for a bailout of €23 billion, to which the Spanish government complied while implementing cutbacks in healthcare and education.

Apart from parties at banks and unemployment centres, *Enmedio* coordinated street actions, workshops and creative activism gatherings, and participated in demonstrations and social fora (cf. *How to End Evil*, Barcelona, 27–31 March 2012). For the campaign, *We are not numbers*, in collaboration with the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages – a citizens’ movement formed in 2009 against the mass evictions, unserviceable mortgages and the appropriation of social housing stock by real estate vulture funds – the group designed posters with mugshots of those evicted from their homes and fly posted them in Barcelona. They also created highly visible green and red *escraches* reading, ‘Yes it’s possible/ But they don’t want to’ (*Si se puede / Pero no quieren*) to be used in demonstrations, and a subverted traffic stop sign reading ‘Stop the Evictions’, which was likewise printed on cardboards and T-shirts.

The third criterion of the proposed social semiotic approach to visual activism concerns how (multimodal) language helps create communities of users. Considering Enmedio’s interventions from a wider perspective, they form part of a transnational network of resistance. Sharing a repertoire of tactics with GAC and CIRCA, they bring lived experience to the fore and challenge what is mediated by the press and distorted by official discourse. Their actions seek to raise awareness and visibility, combat fear and resignation, and shape new social roles and behaviours through empowerment and solidarity. Yet, a social semiotic approach evaluates how language

use brings people together in more specific ways – specifically, how meaning becomes anchored within groups of users, which in turn it helps create.

Props such as confetti, mugshots and placards are used by different people – a use that helps consolidate them as a group not only across the visual and the conceptual, but also across the experiential. At an elementary level, the simple fact of different people using the same visual sign unifies them as a group against a bigger set. In terms of meaning, these signs operate within chains of signification. In the case that their message is codified and lacks intellectual elaboration, it is possible that users draw from their everyday personal experience in order to unpack it. In this way, meaning making and the use of common signs bring together those who share common experiences and concerns; they are a means to articulate one's own condition and recognize in others a shared experience. Sign use is therefore expanding, as a way to both articulate a message and consolidate groups and identities through use, association and identification.

Let us consider the binary signs 'Yes it's possible/ But they don't want to' more closely, including in terms of their visual presence and ideational content. These signs appeared in demonstrations in the form of green and red circles. By recalling green and red traffic lights, this visualization enhanced the conception that one should opt for that which is possible (green) and not for its negation (red). In terms of content, the identification of that which was possible remained open to interpretation rather than being specifically linked to the case of mass evictions, which was the initial context in which these signs were used. In addition, the signs did not specify from whom this possibility was denied, as for example in the structure 'us/they'. In this way, they avoided creating a barrier of exclusion between sign-users and non-users such as the onlookers, and ascribed universal attributes to 'it'. As their use became wider, so was the acknowledgement that the demand of those carrying these signs was not an individual affair but affected everyone and society as a whole. In contrast, 'they' became a subgroup perceived as acting against common good. Commonalities and groups were thus created through language use, meaning making and shared experience.

Judith Butler (2015) argues that coming together creates a political space that is subject to collective responsibility. By coming together, those who might be considered ineligible as political agents by a dominant structure (based, for example, on the logic of assigning responsibility and of political representation) claim a plural positioning of eligibility where there was none before. This opens a political space that is relational and created through plural action rather than preceding it as its condition, as Hannah Arendt proposes. Moreover, Butler continues, humans are relational and social beings, and therefore the single cannot be sovereign. Freedom (like power) is something that is *exercised*: 'Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or indeed, among us. [ . . . ] The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or rather, when through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being' (Butler 2015: 89). The right to appear does not only mean appearing in a physical sense. More precisely, it refers to the right one has to claim and demand what is right, and to articulate this through collective action. As such, social mobilization engenders space to be read as political – a locus where agency is re-assigned and the commons re-defined. Language participates in this process at the level of meaning, but also at the level of relations and group formations. Its use, therefore, is also a matter of collective responsibility.

According to social movement theory, social movements follow a trajectory of emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization and decline. There are different reasons for decline including

repression, co-optation and organizational failure, but also success (in the sense that the movement dissolves) or becoming mainstream. While active, movements function as sites of reflection and social construction of identity. Within them, events such as gatherings, demonstrations and activist acts may push for change, while opposing forces will seek to revert the state of affairs to pre-existing hegemonic structures. Even so, the experience of dissidence and coming together to articulate social critique in and beyond speech will keep reminding us that if social movements rise and fall, so does power.

## Where to go from here

Activist acts seek to create spaces for action and reflection within the same public sphere wherein everyday life is actualized, and new ways to conceptualize social reality. A social semiotic approach helps us understand the importance of social context and communities wherein activist acts operate and with which they engage. It likewise examines communication as a social process through which meaning is negotiated, power roles are enacted and groups become consolidated. It therefore offers precise ways to analyse and evaluate the mechanisms through which activist acts contest official discourse, challenge power structures and help form communities.

Language users choose those communicative resources by which they think they will be best understood and, if the reference point is broad and common, it is easier to codify and disseminate messages to wider audiences. Still, the challenge for visual activism is not how to find easily recognizable visual registers. Rather, it is how to intercept the mediation of lived experience by the media and official discourse in ways that are efficient and constructive. A number of things are important here: experience, duration, vision and immediacy. An activist act can be evaluated according to whether it meets its own objectives, be it to facilitate demonstrations, raise awareness or offer the means to act and imagine the world differently. The scope, function and effectiveness of visual activism should moreover be examined in relation to the state of affairs and contextual dependence. Third, one must consider its contribution to wider debates regarding how the political is conceived and actualized. This includes understanding and evaluating how different audiences are reached, engaged and established; and how different contexts (material, art-related, socio-political, discursive) register and resonate with different groups of people. Successful activist acts must operate across all three spheres of thinking, doing and imagining. They should employ adequate vocabularies of expression and forms of action to help their audiences *experience* their objectives, be it empowerment, social justice or solidarity. Equally, they should juxtapose direct experience with new forms of being together to help their audiences claim a voice and a public, collective body. Since changes in attitudes and behaviours must be experienced, the propositions that activist acts put forward must become grounded through longer contact. Improvisation, play, co-creation and dialogue, as well as workshops and collaborations with communities are important in establishing a critical view of the world and collective action towards positive social change. In such ways, activist acts can create the conditions for social groups to *realize* an idea, in the double sense of the word.

Today, misinformation is distributed in unprecedented volume and variety. From the shock doctrine of 'disaster capitalism' (Klein 2007) to short-lived fake news designed for high emotional impact, words, images and gestures have never before been so full of meaning and so utterly

void. 'The Protestor' was voted person of the year 2011 by *Time* magazine, and 'post-truth' the 'word of the year 2016' by *Oxford Dictionary*. (Post-truth is accordingly defined as relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.) In addition, cognitive capitalism treats knowledge, attention and innovation as commodities and therefore as resources to be harvested, privatized and monetized. Where do we go from here? The Argentine government has renewed its agreements with the IMF and so did European countries with the ECB. The United States have entered a new era of war on 'everything' with dire consequences for national social sectors as well as Latin America, the Middle East and Asia; while Britain grapples with Brexit and the far right is on the rise across the globe. Faced with insurmountable financial and sociopolitical problems including the refugee crisis, many resigned from politics. For its part, the more creative activism becomes, the more creative is the institutional response. At the G8 summit in Heiligendamm in 2007, the privately funded event Art Goes to Heiligendamm presented art installations, projects and talks that explored and engaged social protest. This created a parallel dynamic that at best profited from the political demonstrations taking place in the city and at worse diffused their momentum and importance.

Addressing the relation between art and politics, Group of Street Art (GAC 2009) argues that their works operate in a space where the political and the artistic form part of the same mechanism of production. Apart from a shared means, we can add here a shared vision. Art as a means of expression and communication, and politics in the sense of participating in the commons, are both means of positive social change. While by comparing different visual activist strategies we can evaluate the efficiency of different ways of doing things, by comparing artistic to no-artistic practices we can evaluate the degree to which institutional discourse affects understanding. If we take the political to be external to art but somehow introducible to it, we are caught in a binary ontological problematic for which we must define the limits of both art and the political. Another approach is to find, or to recover, the political *in* art: those aspects and modes of artistic practice that can function as means of political actualization rather than mediation or representation. Political actualization is used here in the sense of actualizing a political act: inciting reflection, opening dialogue, re-signifying meaning and notions such as 'public' and 'commons', re-assigning agency and reinforcing the social fabric. Based on this, an artistic-activist act can be understood as treading on the limits where making art *also* becomes a political activity – an activity that engages the world critically, and at the same time reflectively addresses its own relation to the world and the category of art.

Understanding the dialectics of criticism is one way of responding to the co-optation of institutional critique by institutions that appear to be talking about the problem without attempting to change it. It also helps address the pitfalls of analysis, whose responsibility is to acknowledge existing trends without reifying the case at hand; as well as the discursive power of nomenclature and the currency that denominations such as 'visual activism' acquire. Let us also keep in mind that activist acts are conditional to the needs, capabilities and resources of those undertaking them, as well as to the particularity of the case at hand. The demands to be immediate, have impact, sustain a critical message, reach wider audiences and make sense against resignation, criminalization, repression and co-option are staggering. Single acts of a limited magnitude cannot permanently destroy the hierarchies of power, meaning and dominance. But they can keep revealing those hierarchies and their inherent injustice, and remediate how these are experienced.

Perhaps the most compelling quality of activism is its relation to legitimation. It asks: Who has the authority to dictate actions and behaviours, and to claim public space or a public good? The case studies discussed here claim the power to name and re-semiotize words, images, objects, gestures and sites in order to remember, expose and incite; as well as in order to re-cover identity, solidarity, hope and vision. To return to the prefix 're' introduced at the beginning of this chapter, *re*-covering seems more useful than *un*-covering. This is not because there is no truth to be uncovered behind, for example, media reports on social reality. (A truth that would challenge their subject matter as much as the practices of the media outlets themselves.) Rather, the emphasis on 're' bypasses binary logic and introduces a dialectical understanding of agency and of how both meaning and social reality are formulated through language, behaviour and force.

## Notes

- 1 The term 'creative activism' has been used to refer to pranks, happenings, street art, tactical media, social utopian experiments, viral campaigns, flash mobs and subvertisement in addition to the traditional activist repertoire of demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, barricades, information campaigns, boycotts and mass petitions (Harrebye 2016: 4). The Center for Artistic Activism describes itself as a research and training institute dedicated to making activism more creative and art more effective, and offers organizational advice, online training, and artist and activist consulting (<https://c4aa.org>). For her part, Maura Reilly explains curatorial activism as a term used 'to designate the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principle aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art' (2017). For an applied discussion of the relation between art and activism by activists themselves, see Martín and Artigas (n.d.).
- 2 The UK is one of fewer than 20 states and the only country in Europe, major military power and Permanent Member of the UN Security Council that maintains a minimum army recruitment age of 16 or below (15 years and 7 months), despite petitions and recommendations to raise it to 18 (Child Soldiers International 2015).
- 3 See, for example, the documentary, *Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance* (2007), in relation to the Carnival Against Capital and demonstrations at the turn of the millennium.

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# 2

## A total performance

### Invisibility, respectability and resistance in corporate capitalism

*Jill Gibbon*

**W**e recognize each other in the coffee queue, behind the long-range missiles. I have seen her in previous arms fairs. There are not many women our age in the arms industry so we stand out, at least to each other. Over the years the differences between us have become more apparent. As I grow older, she seems to get younger, her skin tighter, more contoured. Her shoes are higher, the toes more pointed, and her suit drapes with a quality that my polyester version lacks. She gives me a troubled look, as if she thinks she should know me but can't remember where from. Then she is distracted by a colleague who passes her a coffee. Thankfully, he doesn't notice me; he is gazing at a young woman giving out sweets.

This is not a story of visual activism, but invisibility, of my attempt to sneak through the cracks of one of the world's most elusive, yet dangerous industries. Since 2007, I have visited arms fairs and company Annual General Meetings by masquerading as a defence consultant. I am not the only one pretending – the arms industry is based on deception. Arms companies talk of 'products' instead of missiles, and 'defence' instead of destruction. They masquerade as respectable while selling weapons to repressive regimes, and lobbying governments to increase military spending.

Women, traditionally defined in patriarchal society by their 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 1975) notoriously become less visible as they age (Hofmeier et al. 2017). This invisibility has become more nuanced as companies face pressure to improve diversity, particularly in senior positions. The Financial Reporting Council (FRC) has asked companies to take 'due regard for the benefits of diversity on the board, including gender' when appointing new directors (2012: 12). Since then, the arms corporation BAE Systems has increased the number of women on its board to three out of eleven directors (2021b). They have expensive suits, coiffured hair and tasteful makeup, yet remain in the background. They sit in silence in the company's AGMs, hands folded, eyes down. This elegant discretion mirrors the public face of the industry. The arms trade is everywhere, yet unseen.

Judith Butler describes political activism largely in terms of visibility. Writing in the wake of the 2011 uprisings in Tahrir Square, she emphasizes the political significance of public assemblies





**FIGURE 2.1** IDEX 2017, *Tank Ammunition*. Photo credit: Tom Fisher.

‘when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other public venues is the exercise – one might call it performative – of the right to appear, a bodily demand for a more livable set of lives’ (2015: 24, 25). Certainly, ‘the right to appear’ is a pressing political issue. However, in globalized capitalism power is increasingly invisible, taking place outside official channels. Tahrir Square is an important example. The UK publicly supported the pro-democracy movements that spread across the Middle East in 2011, while privately issuing export licenses for the sale of the military and surveillance equipment that suppressed them. Bahrain used UK made tear gas and armored vehicles to put down protests in 2011, and the sales continue despite a rapid deterioration of human rights (Gallagher 2016). Indeed, British arms companies have sold weapons to two thirds of the countries that the Foreign Office has listed as ‘Human Rights Priority Countries’ (Sharman 2017). In one of his last books, John Berger warned that power has shifted from elected governments to multinational corporations and financiers, ‘politics have been superseded by the global dictatorship of speculative capitalism with its traders and banking lobbies’ (Berger 2016: 137). This ‘global dictatorship’ meets away from of the public eye in board rooms, hotel suites, and trade fairs where alliances and deals evade scrutiny. The problem is particularly acute in the arms trade. In *Shadow World*, Andrew Feinstein describes ‘the all-encompassing secrecy that often characterizes arms deals, hides corruption, conflicts of interest, poor decision-making and inappropriate national security choices’ (2011: xxv).



In this chapter, I will discuss a method of performance I have developed to slip inside this secretive industry, mimicking the duplicity of arms companies, and using my invisibility as an older woman. I begin by explaining the manipulative relationship between arms companies and the UK government, and how this is hidden by a performance of respectability. Then, I will describe my attempt to mimic and draw this performance, making it visible (see Figures 2.1 and 2.3 and Plates 1–5).

## A duplicitous industry

Arms manufacturing is based on a central deception. Arms companies claim they are producing weapons for ‘defence’, while driven by a logic of profit. The arms industry is interwoven with the history of capitalism and colonialism. Kehinde Andrews argues that capitalism has been fueled by the theft of people, resources and lands (2021: 32). This required weapons. The British arms industry emerged in the seventeenth century to facilitate colonialism. It soon became clear that weapons were also a profitable commodity in themselves. Guns and ammunition were produced both to impose British rule around the world, and as currency, one of the main commodities used to ‘buy’ slaves in West Africa (Satia 2018: 29). The colonial heritage of the industry remains. Weapons are now produced by Western multinationals to facilitate Western wars, and, increasingly, as products for an international arms trade. The impact of the industry is mainly felt by Black populations. The arms industry fuels wars and repression in Black parts of the world, displaces Black populations, and diverts money for development in countries devastated by colonialism. Arms production also drains money from health, education and sustainable energy in the West.

Yet, because arms companies are regarded as important for defence, they exert considerable influence over governments. Since the nineteenth century, arms traders have encouraged governments to increase military spending, and go to war (Feinstein 2011: 4). For most of the twentieth century, weapons were produced by companies based in specific countries – Vickers and Armstrong in the UK, Nordenfelt in Sweden, Krupps in Germany, the Lockheed Corporation in the US. Deals were facilitated by contractors and traders. The notorious Basil Zaharoff worked for Nordenfelt and later Vickers and sold weapons to all sides in the Boer War, the Russo-Japanese conflict and the First World War. A close advisor to Lloyd George, Zaharoff justified international arms sales as a way to understand opponents military and naval arsenal. When a peace settlement was imminent in the First World War, he urged the UK to continue the war ‘to the bitter end’ (Feinstein 2011: 6). Feinstein suggests this led to ‘very real fears, especially among some British politicians that the arms companies in general and Zaharoff in particular were setting their own foreign policy’ (ibid.: 6). President Eisenhower gave a similar warning in 1961 when he used the phrase ‘military-industrial complex’ (MIC) to describe a network of arms dealers, manufacturers, politicians, and the military with a vested interest in war, and unwarranted influence on government policy (Eisenhower 1961). Since then, these networks have grown, becoming more diffuse, internationally connected and secretive. Arms industry analysts, Paul Dunne and Elisabeth Sköns argue, ‘The concerns of Eisenhower are certainly still relevant as the post-war restructuring may well have left an MIC that is just as pervasive and powerful, more varied, more internationally linked and less visible’ (2010: 289).

When the Cold War ended, military budgets were cut in the West, and there was a brief opportunity to shift military production to civil uses. Instead, arms companies merged into vast

'mega defence corporations' (Bitzinger 2010: 208). In the UK, BAE Systems formed from a merger between British Aerospace and Marconi, later acquiring Vickers and more than twelve US arms companies. In 2019, armaments totalled 95 per cent of BAE Systems' sales, making it one of the most military intensive manufacturers in the world (da Silva et al. 2020: 25). Products include machine guns, tanks, surveillance, and war planes, while the joint venture MBDA makes missiles for its jets. BAE Systems has kept its headquarters in the UK but has a similar workforce in the US, and employees around the world. Sales are dominated by the US, UK and Saudi Arabia (BAE Systems 2021c). The company's involvement in Saudi Arabia is set to increase. In 2017 Saudi Arabia announced a plan to manufacture more weapons locally, and BAE and other corporations responded by proposing joint arms manufacturing ventures with the regime (da Silva et al. 2020: 21). At the 2018 BAE Annual General Meeting, the Chair Roger Carr emphasized the international reach of the company, 'We have a terrific international footprint. We are truly global company'. The change of name from British Aerospace signaled the global reorientation of the company. When asked what BAE stands for, he said, 'You can decide in whatever way you wish. Answers on a postcard' (Carr 2018).

Although BAE is a global company, the company continues to influence the UK government. A freedom of information request by *The Guardian* in 2020 revealed that BAE Systems, MBDA and other arms companies have staff seconded onto UK government departments including the Department for International Trade with roles including 'developing country strategies for industry markets' (Quinn 2020). So, it is perhaps not surprising that the UK government has such a lenient policy towards arms exports. The influence is more discrete than in the early twentieth century, no longer exerted by notorious arms dealers like Zaharoff, but by shifting groups executives. Corporations are expected to regularly change their chair and board. The FRC emphasizes, 'The value of ensuring that committee membership is refreshed and that undue reliance is not placed on particular individuals' (2012:11). However, this means that no one is ultimately responsible for the actions of a company. The board is accountable to another changing group – shareholders and 'other providers of capital' (ibid.: 13). This places accountability and responsibility in the hands of a suited corporate financial elite. Berger describes their characteristics, 'Study the faces of the new tyrants. I hesitate to call them plutocrats for the term is too historical and these men belong to a phenomenon which is unprecedented. Let's settle for profiteers [ . . . ] They are impeccably dressed and their tailoring is reassuring like the silhouette of high-security delivery vans. Armor Mobile Security' (2011: 146).

Globalization has made the arms industry invisible in another way. Weapons are now produced primarily as commodities. To an extent this is not new – weapons have been produced for export since the seventeenth century. However, when arms companies were based in specific countries, military production had to be justified in terms of that country's perceived needs, however spurious this might have been. Now, as arms production has become disconnected from any one country, it is justified in terms of a share price. With this shift, 'use value' has been eclipsed by 'exchange value'. This has had a strange effect on the meaning and status of weapons. As Marx (1867) noted, a commodity is a curious thing, 'as soon as it steps out as a commodity, it metamorphoses itself into a sensually supersensual thing. It does not only stand with its feet on the ground, but it confronts all other commodities on its head, and develops out of its wooden head caprices which are much more wondrous than if it all of a sudden began to dance.' Benjamin Meiches argues that weapons incite desire – they 'enchant, glimmer, and terrify' (2017: 15). As weapons are treated as

commodities, these seductive properties have been accentuated. Nowhere is this more evident than in an arms fair.

Arms fairs were set up in the 1990s as part of the globalization of the industry to provide international venues to promote the latest weapon ranges. Two of the largest fairs, DSEI (the Defence Security Exhibition International) and Eurosatory take place on alternate years in London and Paris. Guests include repressive regimes, countries involved in aggressive wars, and unstable states (CAAT 2017). Tanks, bombs, missiles, war ships, and armed drones are all on show. Helicopters are open for viewing, bullets and shells are arranged under spotlights. As populations flee war zones, there is also equipment to keep them out – razor wire, surveillance systems, security services. And as the lines blur between the military and police, there are riot shields, rubber bullets, teargas, boots, batons and knives. Alongside a teargas stall, tables are laid with white linen, a side of ham and rounds of brie, while waiting staff circulate with wine, beer and champagne. There are also gifts – pens, keyrings, stress balls in the shape of bombs, and sweets wrapped in slogans (Gibbon 2020). Weapons have names that imply they are an act of God or nature – Brimstone, Meteor, Storm Shadow and Peregrine missiles; Tornado, Typhoon, Tempest, Raptor and Falcon warplanes; Cuttlefish camouflage, Condor tear gas. Brochures present weapons as feats of engineering, innovation and mastery. Under the headline, *Mastering the Skies*, Raytheon describes its fighter jets as ‘robust technologies’ that ‘give pilots a toolkit for air dominance’ (2021). The missile manufacturer MBDA (2021) suggests that ‘Innovation and creativity are part of everything that is done every day within every part of our business’. There is no mention of killing.

While weapons are promoted as desirable commodities inside arms fairs, outside they wreak havoc. Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations warned, ‘The world is over-armed and peace is under-funded [. . .] More weapons are being produced. They are flooding markets around the world. They are destabilizing societies. They feed the flames of civil wars and terror’ (UN 2009). Achille Mbembe writes, ‘Nearly everywhere the political order is reconstituting itself as a form of organization for death’ (2019: 17). The impact of the arms trade is brutally clear in the war in Yemen where over 100,000 people have been killed, including 12,000 civilians, since Saudi Arabia and its coalition allies joined the conflict in 2015. Two thirds of civilian deaths were caused by Saudi-led airstrikes (ACLEDA 2019). Infrastructure has been destroyed including schools, markets and hospitals triggering a humanitarian disaster with widespread malnutrition and disease. According to Unicef (2021), ‘More than five years of fighting has already pushed Yemen and its health system to the brink of collapse. Millions of children lack access to clean water and sanitation facilities and are in desperate need of basic healthcare. Malnutrition is also at an all-time high.’ A United Nations report documents ‘serious international humanitarian law violations’ and warned that countries selling arms for use in the conflict could be ‘aiding and assisting’ war crimes (HRC 2020). The US and UK are the largest suppliers of weapons to Saudi Arabia. In 2018 Saudi Arabia received 22 per cent of US and 44 per cent of UK arms exports (Wezeman et al. 2019: 2). Amnesty International (2018, 2019) has established that US- and UK-made missiles have been used in Saudi-led airstrikes on civilian sites.

There is a pretence of regulation in the industry. The Arms Trade Treaty came into force in 2014, negotiated by the United Nations to control international weapons sales. However, Anna Stavrianakis argues it is an exercise in dissimulation. The treaty has no external enforcement mechanisms, allowing individual states to define legitimate sales themselves, while creating ‘the impression of responsibility and morality’ (Stavrianakis 2016: 2). The UK has additional export



**FIGURE 2.2** Eurosatory 2015, *Pearls*. Photo credit: Tom Fisher.

controls which the government repeatedly invokes as proof of regulation, while continuing to sell weapons to countries involved in human rights abuses (ibid. 2017: 3). Research by Action on Armed Violence shows that Britain has approved arms exports to 80 per cent of the countries on its own embargoed or sanctioned trade list (Jones 2021). Western arms sales are frequently justified with appeals to liberal values and ethics. In a particularly surreal example, the UK foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt suggested it would 'be morally bankrupt' to end arms sales to Saudi Arabia. He explained:

We could halt our military exports and sever the ties that British governments of all parties have carefully preserved for decades, as critics are urging. But in doing so we would also surrender our influence and make ourselves irrelevant to the course of events in Yemen. Our policy would be simply to leave the parties to fight it out, while denouncing them impotently from the sidelines. That would be morally bankrupt and the people of Yemen would be the biggest losers.

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Claims of morality are not only made with words, but performed through displays of manners and corporate ethics (Figure 2.2).

## A total performance

In 2009, the arms corporation BAE Systems announced it was cultivating a 'Total Performance culture' (2009: 6). The company had been entangled in a series of bribery and corruption scandals in the late 20th century in deals with South Africa, Tanzania, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Saudi Arabia (Feinstein 2011: 127, 224). The Serious Fraud Office attempted to investigate the company but was forced to abandon the case after pressure from the UK government. Instead, BAE set up its own review, the Woolf Report which tactfully concluded that the company had 'failed to pay sufficient attention to ethical standards' (Gray et al. 2008). The following year, BAE Systems described a new 'Total Performance culture' in its annual report (2009: 6). The chief executive, Ian King, explained, 'Total Performance focuses not just on what we do but also how we do it. It is about every aspect of the way we do business: Customer Focus, Financial Performance, Programme Execution and Responsible Behaviour. Delivery of the Group's Corporate Responsibility agenda is an essential part of embedding a Total Performance culture across the Group (ibid. 2009: 6).

'Performance' is a complex word with three overlapping strands of meaning. The first strand refers to something enacted, the second to a quality of action, the third to acting or a theatrical display. It stems from Old French *parfornir* meaning to do, carry out, finish or accomplish. The verb *performen* was used in English from 1300 to describe the action of fulfilling a task. The noun 'performance' emerged in the late sixteenth century to describe that which is enacted with the more specific sense acting on a stage used from the seventeenth century, and a theatrical production from the eighteenth century (etymonline 2021). The noun 'performance' has developed an additional sense in relation to the quality of an action particularly in music, technology or sport. From the late twentieth century, this sense was extended to employment for instance in 'performance reviews' and 'performance related pay'. BAE Systems uses the word 'performance' a lot. It is scattered throughout its annual reports. However, until 2009 the company primarily used the word to refer to technology or accounts, for instance the performance of a fighter jet or share price. The phrase 'Total Performance culture' indicated the extension of the term to business ethics or 'Corporate Responsibility' (BAE Systems 2009: 6).

Yet, ironically, there is an alternative interpretation. A 'Total Performance' could be interpreted through the third strand of meaning to refer to a theatrical display. The company's new interest in ethics could be understood as a total act. The chief executive's phrase, 'how we do it' is curious (ibid.). Ethics usually concerns principles of behaviour. Yet, the Wolff Report did not consider what the company produces, or where it is sold, but only how this is done. This suggests that in the arms trade ethics is mainly for show. Here, 'Corporate Responsibility' is just another term for respectability, a display of manners (Figure 2.3).

## Inside DSEI

I visit arms fairs by taking part in the performance. I wear a suit, heels, and simulated pearls, with a pass that describes me as the director of a sham defence consultancy company. When I first used this cover ten years ago, I was sick with fear. DSEI is surrounded by intense security. It takes place in the Excel exhibition centre, a windowless concrete edifice in Docklands. Anna Minton suggests the building is designed to act as a fortress; it can be protected by 'a ring of steel' when





**FIGURE 2.3** Eurosatory 2018, *Tank*. Photo credit: Tom Fisher.

necessary making it 'a completely secure site' (2009: 13). The Docklands Light Railway, Thames and A1020 encircle it like a moat. The only pedestrian access is by two footbridges, and when DSEI is on they are guarded by security guards and armed police. Protestors are kept away from the venue behind police lines. Inside the halls, CCTV scan the crowds of visitors looking for unusual activity. In the early years, I was questioned several times by security guards, and twice told to leave. I am not sure what marked me out, whether it was something in my dress, manner, or movements. Since then, I have learned to act the part of an arms trader more carefully.

A year after being thrown out of DSEI, I visited Eurosatory with a new name, new passport and new business identity. The train to the venue was crowded with arms traders. My legs were shaking so much I feared they would give me away. Then, I noticed a young arms trader sitting opposite, face red, forehead beaded with sweat, feet shuffling, and I realized he was similarly afflicted. I saw him later in the fair negotiating a deal with perfect composure, smiling, adjusting his tie, and consulting a brochure. Irving Goffman suggested that most professions have a set of postures and mannerisms that convey credibility: 'Thus one finds that service personnel, whether in profession, bureaucracy, business, or craft, enliven their manner with movements which express proficiency and integrity, but, whatever this manner conveys about them, often its major purpose is to establish a favourable definition of their service or product' ([1959] 1990: 83). This seems particularly important in an industry where legitimacy depends on the way things are done.

In arms fairs sales staff use the gestures, expressions and manners of a luxury fashion house. They stand hands on hips or clasped at the waist, occasionally dusting merchandise and rearranging brochures into neat rows. They greet potential clients with a polite bow, one palm tilted towards the goods on display. Brecht used the Latin term *gestus* to describe a movement with social and political significance, 'the gest relevant to society the gest that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances' ([1957] 2001: 104). Whereas a sales gesture might be trivial in a shopping mall, in DSEI it is significant because it presents weapons as products.

Some staff are professional actors. Many arms companies employ exhibition hosts to stand on the front of stands for the duration of a fair, handing out gifts and leaflets; directing clients to reps at the back if they are interested in a deal. Exhibition hosts have no connection to the industry but offer a set of rehearsed postures and expressions that connote sales and hospitality – a manicured hand to show the features of a product, a porcelain smile to mask internal reactions. On one stall, a young woman stands in cropped shorts and fishnet tights, holding a teargas gun while business men line up to take selfies alongside her. She stands like this for the duration of the fair, her face emotionless. This requires skills in dissembling. The agency, 'Exhibition Girls', explains 'Many of our staff are also working actors and performers from an entertainment background which works well in exhibition and event environments' (Exhibition Girls 2021). Clothes and speech are also an important part of the act. A sign at the entrance to DSEI says visitors must wear business dress. Reps wear polished shoes, discrete suits and silk ties conveying taste and quality. With a lanyard around the neck, they speak for the company rather than themselves, with memorized lines from product brochures.

Once I realized that most people in an arms fair are acting a part, I felt less of a fraud. I began to use my cover more deliberately to mimic the performances in the industry. Here, my age and gender have become useful props. Arms companies are dominated by men. Only 22 per cent of BAE Systems' employees are women (BAE Systems 2021b). Temporary exhibition staff are usually women, as the name 'Exhibition Girls' implies, however they are young. Exhibition Girls has a catalogue where clients can choose from rows of photographs of women, and a very few men. They are uniformly young, slim, with blow-dried hair, and a garment occasionally falling off one shoulder. There are some ethnic minorities. In contrast, in line with its colonialist heritage, the Western arms industry is almost entirely White. This means that arms fairs are mainly populated by White men, and young women. Being White helps me to slip unnoticed into the fairs, but apart from this I fit neither category. However, the arms industry is keen to change its image. BAE Systems 'total performance' includes a commitment to improving diversity. The company explains, 'Creating a more diverse and inclusive workforce helps us to achieve our goal of total performance' (ibid. 2021a). BAE is explicit about the reason, 'creating an inclusive work environment is consistent with high standards of business conduct and helps protect our reputation' (ibid.). A diverse workforce helps the company to appear reputable. By visiting arms fairs as an older woman, with a fake business identity, I take part in the pretence of respectability. I mimic the gestures of the industry, strolling up and down the aisles, gazing at tanks, pausing to inspect ammunition. Even so, my performance is too discrete to be described as parody.

There is a long tradition of parody in political art, often using business dress, however this usually involves exaggeration. George Grosz walked through Berlin as 'Dada Death' in 1918 wearing a formal coat, cane and skull, parodying the polite rituals that allowed the First World War, while showing what lay beneath the civilized veneer. Andrea Fraser wore a suit in *Museum*

*Highlights* in 1989, leading a tour around the Philadelphia Museum of Art satirizing the text of art catalogues. Describing the gallery collection, as well as features of the toilets, cloakroom and shop, her act was both convincing and surreal (Martin 2014). Grosz and Fraser both use formal, business dress as a kind of drag, cross-dressing as polite culture.

Judith Butler argues that drag is subversive because it is clearly an act, thus drawing attention to the performativity of gender, and undermining the myth that gendered roles are natural. She emphasizes the point with italics, '*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*' (1990: 187). By adopting gendered motifs, dress, gestures, and rituals, a drag artist shows that gender is performed. Similarly, Grosz and Fraser show that 'high culture' is a performance by parodying its dress, rhetoric, and behavior. However, in each of these examples the act is revealed with a twist, an element of excess. For Butler, parodies of gender 'in their very exaggeration reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status' (ibid.: 200). Grosz's formal coat and cane, and Fraser's suit might imply cultural status, but this is undermined by the skull, and references to the gallery toilets. In contrast, there is no exaggeration in my act. Like the arms traders around me, I am just trying to appear credible. There is no reveal. It is a 'total performance'.

My method is similar to Augusto Boal's 'invisible theatre'. In both cases, the performance takes place outside a formal theatre to unwitting passersby who 'must not have the slightest idea that it is a "spectacle"' (Boal [1974] 2019: 122). However, there is a key difference. Though Boal's theatre is invisible, the performers make provocative statements to draw attention to social injustices. In contrast, I try to avoid attention in order to stay in the event. Instead of intervening, I attempt to make the arms industry visible by drawing its characteristic poses and gestures. This is partly informed by my own performance as a defence consultant. Berger suggests that drawing is visceral, guided by the body as much as the eye (2011: 149). I have come to know many of the gestures of the arms industry by taking part in them – an obsequious nod, a shopping-mall gaze. Drawing has long been associated with gesture but mainly in relation to the sense of performance as a quality of action. The Museum of Modern Art held an exhibition, 'Performance into Drawing' in 2007, with work by artists, including Jackson Pollock, Joseph Beuys and John Cage. The press release explained that the exhibition explored the ways that drawing has been used 'to map and prepare actions, record actions, and as an action in itself' (MOMA 2007). The repetition of 'action' and non-representational emphasis of the work implied an idea of performance as a raw physical movement. This is also evident in the contemporary genre of drawing performance where artists use charcoal, ink and other materials to record the movements of their bodies. The artist Ram Samocha explains, 'Mark making in drawing performance is often a result of powerful physical gesture and body movement that connects the elements of line, movement, space and time' (2021). The political and social are notably absent from this list. Samocha uses performance and gesture in a formalist sense as pure movement. I am also using drawing to convey performance, but conceived as acting instead of an action.

This leads to a different method of drawing. Instead of directly recording movements, I use drawing conventions to interpret the gestures I see and take part in – diagrammatic figures reminiscent of 1950's etiquette manuals to convey ritualized manners, a classical profile to suggest pretensions of refinement, caricature to imply what lies underneath. And it is here that an element of parody enters the project. By parodying these drawing conventions, I attempt to reveal 'the imitative structure' of respectability in the arms industry, to show that it is constructed (Butler 1990: 187).



With globalization, the arms trade has become more pervasive, and less visible. Tanks, bombs, machine guns and tear gas are produced as commodities, and sold to an international clientele. Deals are negotiated in windowless buildings by anonymous corporate executives, contractors and politicians. Wearing formal dress and speaking advertising copy, they shroud the industry in a polite veneer. Agency staff use sales gestures to present weapons as products, reps shake hands with new clients, waiting staff refill plates and glasses. In contrast to the polite interior, arms events are surrounded security guards, police and surveillance cameras. The only way inside is to take part in the performance. By mimicking and drawing the polite gestures of the industry it is perhaps possible to show the pretence. The man from the coffee queue has lipstick on his cheek. Oblivious, he wipes his face and leaves a blood-red smear.

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# 3

## By a thread

### The space left to activism when fashion deals with the refugee ‘crisis’

*Elsa Gomis*

In May 2018, the fashion house Givenchy went viral when they were chosen by the future Duchess of Sussex to create her wedding dress. Riccardo Tisci, its previous Italian creative director, had already made the headlines in October 2016 when presenting Givenchy’s Spring/Summer Collection by wrapping the audience in survival blankets. These survival blankets were similar to the ones used by NGOs to warm up migrants saved from drowning in the Mediterranean. Tisci’s gesture bears a paradox.

Intended to be seen, in order to be widely disseminated and adopted, fashion trends integrate with daily habits easily and are observed on outfits in the streets. At the same time, the current repressive European migratory policies compel exiles to invisibility. Their detention in camps, spread all over the European continent, is part of this form of biopolitics governance.<sup>1</sup> Commonly shared by other Western countries, this mode of expression of power, defined by Michel Foucault (2004: 323), implies that state authority is no longer exercised over territories but over individuals and populations. At a time when philosopher Étienne Balibar (2018) refers to the notion of genocide to describe mass disappearances in the Mediterranean, this political framework is now considered as necropolitics (Mbembé 2019). Contrary to the visibility of fashion trends and practices, policies lead to the masking of the presence of refugees.

In the mainstream media, migrants’ presence is identified by a narrow range of objects. A search on Google Images with the two key words ‘Migrants’ and ‘Mediterranean’ leads to a few visual motifs consisting of rubber boats, life jackets and survival blankets. Associating exiles with humanitarian aid, these few objects contribute towards drawing today’s imaginary of migration by the sea. The use of the collective imaginary of migration in the fashion sphere is at the core of the following passages. They will understand fashion practices in the sense of visual anthropology, which not only considers man as a political animal, but also as a *homo pictor*: a being who shapes images, produces images, and understands the world in images (Belting 2011). In this sense, fashion and artistic proceedings dealing with migration in the Mediterranean are understood as

grids of interpretation of current migration policies that take place in this maritime space. From the avant-garde of haute couture to its commercial use in ready-to-wear garments, fashion plays a key role in the circulation of images. More precisely, it seizes motifs, or in the Givenchy case, materials, which navigate through the collective imaginary. Considering W. T. J. Mitchell's (2004) suggestion of a resemblance relationship between circulations of images and migrants, fashion practices taking over floating trends could be considered through the lens of migration.

If the cultural appropriation of visual motifs by fashion is a debated question seized by activists, its collusion with finance and a certain contemporary art appears as a more insidious process, shown for example by collaborations between Louis Vuitton and Yayoi Kusama, Richard Prince, Jeff Koons or Takashi Murakami. From this vantage point, the critical perspective on capitalism's alienating effects would be that embraced by the art historian Annie Le Brun in her recent essay, 'What is Priceless' (2018). Serving intermittently as a tool of empowerment and of standardization of the body, fashion materializes the contradictions of visual activism. It settles down in the conditions of a war of images defining today's globalization in which, following T. J. Demos (2013: xv), aesthetics is seen as an 'oppositional force'. Based on this theoretical framework, this chapter investigates jointly three series of artworks that resonate with three series of fashion productions:

- 1 Roberto Tisci and Ai Weiwei's performative interventions with survival blankets, in view with Norbert Baksa's photographs *Der Migrant* for the brand Zara.
- 2 The photographic series *Sneakers Like Jay-Z* by Frédéric Delangle and Ambroise Tézenas, in relation to the barbed wire motif used by the Afghan designer Sami Nouri.
- 3 Lucy Orta's *Refugee Wear Intervention*, in the light of Angela Luna's purposeful design for saving lives.

These developments will provide the means to delve into three specific dimensions of visual activism:

- 1 The media message at the risk of obscenity: can media motifs of a dire situation be reused in an artistic context and be respectful of the victims? Can artists claim to resist discourses when being promoted by industries whose functioning contradicts them?
- 2 The narrow path of emancipation through fashion: how can artists and designers in exile assume the past that constitutes their identity, but not be regarded on the art scene only for the activism they embody?
- 3 The shift of humanitarian fashion practices: in which way are they revealing of the place granted to migrants? Can 'social heroism' in art and fashion be good art and fashion?

## **AI Weiwei and Roberto Tisci's performative interventions with survival blankets, in view with Norbert Baksa's photographs *Der Migrant* for the brand Zara**

Connecting the fashion sphere to the effects of Western migration policies seems to be a perilous exercise. In these three particular cases, one fashion designer and two visual artists have arranged

the meeting of these two universes. What distinguishes these three implementations of a topical issue in the glamorous sphere of fashion is the clarity of their intentions regarding their use of the migrants' fate, which, depending on each specific case, was more, or less, overtly assumed. First, on the previously mentioned occasion of the 2016 Givenchy showcase, the Italian fashion designer did not claim the connection between the choice of wrapping the audience in survival blankets and the concomitant humanitarian rescues in the Mediterranean. When reading fashion magazine articles relating news of the event, it is suggested that the emergency blankets were intended to protect front row guests from chilly October weather (Lau 2016).

It can be supposed that this specific material, described as 'space blankets', has been chosen for aesthetic reasons, because of its shimmering reflections. Yet, if the relationship with contemporary migratory displacements is not overtly claimed, it can be guessed from the event's concomitance with the refugee 'crisis' and from Tisci's previous successes in the fashion industry. Fatherless since the age of 4, Tisci grew up in a large family from a poor town in Southern Italy. Propelled at 31 to become one of the youngest artistic directors of a Maison Haute Couture, the designer is considered as the precursor of 'street couture' or 'street luxury'. For launching a trend associating garments worn in the street-to-trend setting styles, Tisci 'has been ahead of the curve in almost all the most important ways fashion has shifted over the decade' (Cartner-Morley 2018). The relationship between migrants, who, when not held in camps, wander in the streets of Western capitals, and the specific material chosen to cover the showgoers, is not overtly claimed, but it can be inferred from Tisci's artistic choices so far.

In the second case study, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei more clearly stated this link. In February 2016, he proposed to Hollywood stars they should wrap themselves in survival blankets during the *Cinema for Peace* Gala organized in Berlin. Known for being an activist, Ai declares himself as 'the most dangerous person in China' (Ai Weiwei 2018). Because of the authoritarian regime in his home country, Ai claims he had no choice but to become both an artist and an activist (ibid.). The event during which he distributed the emergency jackets was held at the Berlin Konzerthaus. The artist, accustomed to accumulating media motifs of the migration 'crisis' in gigantic dimensions, had already covered the outside pillars of the building with discarded life jackets collected on Lesbos island. The use of survival blankets, namely of another humanitarian item identified in mainstream media with fatal migrations, was expected to bring awareness of the migratory policies that lead to those deaths.

The artist's intention relies on the association of two totally opposed universes: that of refugees pushed back to European boundaries and that of film stars evolving under spotlights. Covering actresses with survival blankets could thus aim to contribute to changing European regulations on migration. However, in view of the selfies taken during the Gala by Charlize Theron – also known to be Dior's *Egeria* – Nadya Tolokonnikova, artist and Pussy Riot member, and several other famous guests, Tim Renner (Berlin's culture secretary) declared: 'When Ai Weiwei illustrates the dimensions of terror outside [the Gala] with 14,000 life jackets from Lesbos, it is perhaps not subtle but effective and justified; but when guests of *Cinema for Peace* are prompted by the organizer to don emergency blankets for a group photo, even if understood as an act of solidarity, it has a clearly obscene element' (Barnes 2016). Why did this representative consider Ai's gesture as an offence to victims of migratory policies? Renner's sense of uneasiness is perhaps due to the fact that an attribute attached to the most repelled population was at the same time being saluted by the most endogenous sphere of Western society. The hype inflicted on exiles would produce



antithetical imaginations which reflect, however, a level of hypocrisy towards them. Moreover, today's exiles are not wearing much more than survival blankets, but this fact has not prevented European countries removing from them any meagre belongings they still could have, after they have been exploited by smugglers on their way. A Danish law adopted on 26 January 2016 establishes the confiscation of goods whose value would exceed €1,340. A year after its introduction, the Danish state had only raised around €15,000 ('Danemark' 2016). The figure illustrates the deprivation of exiles whose plundering, in France, does not even need to come through a specific law – NGOs have blamed the National Police for depriving homeless exiles from their sleeping bags and blankets (Baumard 2017).

In this context, the insertion into a gala evening of motifs carried by migrants appears to come under the complex category of 'cultural appropriation'. It designates Western culture's appropriation of elements of a minority culture, for example non-Western or non-white cultures, which bears connotations of exploitation and dominance. For some, like the Irish blogger Kat Clinch (2013), the clothing elements coming from minority cultures are adopted naively because 'we are simply appreciating!' As Gabrielle Chanel used to invite photographers and designers to 'Come to my place and steal all the ideas you can' (Green and Kaiser 2017: 147), cultural appropriation is often not seen as offensive because it appears to be inherent to fashion itself (Clinch 2013). It is seen as a process of inclusion of one culture into another that goes along with the integration of new communities.

However, this statement must be tempered by two observations. First, from a decolonial perspective, it implicitly implies a structural bias (Muñiz-Reed 2017), whereby Western society should make an alien culture their own by re-engineering it to their own standards (Shand 2002). Second, it occurs within the necropolitical regime that is at stake regarding exiles, which considers bodies as objects of power. Governments find their legitimacy in the protection of populations against globalization, whose migrants would be the 'negative side' (Agier 2012: 91). From there, fashion, whose very purpose is to dress bodies, emerges as an instrument of this power. Fashion trends hunt circulating motifs to expel them in a standardized way. Its endeavour is the control of the sensitive signs of self-identification. 'Fashion has the flair to flush out the current, wherever it moves in the maquis of old times. It is the leap of the tiger in the past. Except that it takes place in an arena where it is the dominant class that commands' (Benjamin [1942] 2017: 75).<sup>2</sup> Seen from Walter Benjamin's perspective, Givenchy showgoers would garnish themselves with the ornaments that used to wrap survivors of migratory regimes. During the time of an evening, they would devote themselves to the pleasure of exotic travesty.

In the following case study, the photographer Norbert Baksa seems to have literally reversed Benjamin's finding. The Hungarian artist organized a shooting of the model Monika Jablonczyk, with the clear willingness of 'glamourizing' border crossings ('PHOTOS' 2015).

In this series of photographs, the model wears high boots, stands with legs wide apart, with falsely soiled fingers, and mimes or rather *simulates*, media images covering the 'crisis' – dressed in clothes from the brand Zara. The series entitled *Der Migrant* sparked a controversy on social media which led Baksa to remove the images from his website; 'The situation is very ambiguous and we wanted to represent this duality: someone who is miserable, but at the same time very pretty, and who despite her situation has good quality clothes and a smartphone' argued the photographer ('Réfugiés' 2015). In other words, the goal of the photographs was to represent migrants by instilling charming attributes attached to the world of fashion. In this sense, his approach implicitly admits that migrants would not be 'very pretty' or more precisely they would

not be as 'pretty' as the dominant visual regime dictates. Far from being full of the poetry ingrained in Surrealist collages,<sup>3</sup> the confrontation of signs Baksa staged only produces another feeling of unease. His representations overlay, without refinement, the signs belonging to the opposite universe. If striking photographs of migrants arriving on Mediterranean beaches – which welcomed tourists – have succeeded in denouncing a terrible gap between privileged Westerners and migrants,<sup>4</sup> the juxtaposition arranged by Baksa simply provides disgust. This unpleasant sensation comes perhaps from the fact that the use of navigating motifs of migration is fully claimed by the photograph. Unlike the case of the Givenchy fashion show, where survival blankets were distributed with no explanation allowing the audience themselves to connect consciously and openly with migration issues, Baksa's staging is obviously deliberate. His awkward glamorous re-enacting of border crossings operates less as a tribute, than as a masquerade. Far from capturing the refugees' experience, this portrayal reinforces an exotic otherness view of migrants to which it adds another layer of commercial-like passive sexualization. Yet, at the time when Viktor Orbán, Hungary's Prime Minister, known for his extreme firmness towards migrants, was setting up a barbed wire fence along the border with Croatia, the photographer's original intentions might have, in this context, suffered from an additional misunderstanding. Because of the explicitness of the association between the fashion sphere and the dire conditions of today's migration, this third specific case is perhaps the less offensive to exiles.

As in all his works on migration, Ai makes use of media motifs (such as the rubber boats, the life jackets, or the survival blankets) and accumulates them in huge sizes and quantities into public places. Yet, while the art historian Michel Thévoz (2017: 56) designates media images as images 'unequivocal, ensured with a meaning, classified as information, humour or fiction, turnkey images, images with instructions for use – those, to put it bluntly, that are broadcast by the media', the Chinese activist precisely selects media motifs repeated in media images to reproduce them in gigantic dimensions. For Le Brun (2018: 23), contemporary artists' tendency to produce very large pieces contributes primarily to producing stupefaction, not reflection, nor reaction. In Ai's works, exiles are summarized within these repeated motifs that reinforce a mental association between these few humanitarian items. This repetition, fostered by social media networks, contributes to legitimize the idea of a population that should be supported. Moreover, as these accumulated first-aid items are covering public spaces and buildings, it increases their association with the idea according to which migrants are supposed to be a burden. This visual repetition engenders a reverse '*Pygmalion Effect*':<sup>5</sup> disseminating images that restrict exiles to a narrow perceptive field referring to passivity and conveying anxiety, operating as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Public opinion and leaders would tend to believe that exiles are a load, and so, let their plight get worse. The very repetition of these motifs acts as a shield, hiding the common humanity that viewers share with exiles. The diversity and wealth of the multiple identities conveyed by exiles are being reduced to these few motifs operating as protective screens that prevent the viewer from identifying with the individuals behind them. This recurrence also diverts attention from the role played by Western countries in generating these situations. As an example, 70 per cent of arms exports made by the European Union are intended for regions outside the Union, among which the Middle East is the first beneficiary.<sup>6</sup> It feeds the 'hot potato' policy played by European Union member states towards Southern countries inside and outside the Union's borders.<sup>7</sup>

Far from conveying identification, and from attracting sympathy from opponents, summarizing exiles to these few humanitarian items locks them into the narrow representation already assigned



by the media. In view of the reciprocal influence of media and art images, art productions<sup>8</sup> reusing these motifs lag behind media, to which they are content to be echo chambers. Following the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, these artworks would enter into the realm of *simulation*. They miniaturize reality, by adopting clear referents that only show spectacular signs of it. By the artificial resurrection they stand for, artworks consisting of the duplication of these motifs 'substitute reality with signs of reality' (Baudrillard 1981: 11). Whereas in representation, the motifs produced reflect a reality, simulacra do not function as a reflection of reality. A motif operates as a value in itself. In this case, they imply the disappearance of the exiles behind them. Exiles end up having no more reality than the motifs repeatedly encapsulating them. As a consequence, comparing Ai's activism to that of JR, another artist working in the direction of refugees, sociologist Abby Peterson estimates that: 'Ai is speaking *for* refugees from an elevated position of power. His voice is heard, but it is not the voice of the refugees' (2019: 196). He would not meet Lucy Lippard's definition of an artist activist. For Lippard, this would be someone who works within local communities, 'stimulates active participation . . . and mobilises for change' ([1984] 1995: 349).

This point is not trivial, especially when knowing that the artist generated around \$40 million between 2006 and 2016, and that his rating boosted during the period from 2014 to 2016, namely at the same time as the migrant 'crisis' blew up in the Mediterranean ('Ai Weiwei' 2016). Ai is known for being closely linked to capitalist leaders who are building art collections as stock portfolios by opening foundations, such as Bernard Arnault. Arnault is one of the richest people in the world, a business magnate and owner of Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (known as LVMH), the world's largest luxury-goods company, while also holding the Parisian Department store *Le Bon Marché*, as well as the Foundation Louis Vuitton. The Foundation Louis Vuitton, in particular, whose entrance fee was fixed at €14, and whose cost was, for more than half of the total amount, paid thanks to national taxes, materializes for LVMH a means of tax optimization (Tobelem 2014). Ai exhibited his work both in the clothing store, and in Foundation Louis Vuitton. Collusion between the art and the financial sphere, as Ai embodies, thus renders his potential activism harmless.

Although this fact was not clearly stated during the Givenchy showcase, a fashion company also owned by LVMH, covering the front row audience with survival blankets cannot be a totally selfless act. From the arrival, in 2005, of the subversive artistic director Riccardo Tisci who introduced motifs and textiles originating from the street, to his departure from the fashion house in 2017, he is believed to have increased Givenchy sales revenue to around €500 million annually (Friedman 2017). As Le Brun (2018) observes that multinational companies' tendency to commercialize all sensitive signs corresponds to acts of predation. She reiterates Benjamin's conclusion about the victors' spoil, whose design would be to 'systematically detach the sign from the thing [that] once was signified' (ibid.: 42), namely the shimmering material from its use in dramatic circumstances caused by restrictive Western migratory policies.

What is outrageous is not the connection between two supposedly opposed universes – that of fashion and elegance and that of migrants – it is the instrumentalization of their suffering for selling purposes. Le Brun illustrates this process giving the example of the way the fashion world cut jeans' sizes for years, so that they fall on the hips of millions of young people. The latter were unaware that this dressing habit was originally a sign of solidarity of teenagers from American ghettos with their brothers' inmates, where the prison regime prevented them from wearing belts (Le Brun 2018: 104). For his part, Tisci became famous because his 'skill in blending streetwear

with high fashion is highly relevant to today's luxury consumer' ('Why Burberry Chose Riccardo Tisci' 2018). He therefore made Givenchy's success by disconnecting visual signs from the deprived environments from which they were originating in order to transform them into high value products.

From this perspective, Baksa's openly claimed association of the fashion sphere and today's migratory displacements that relies on well-trodden tropes of orientalism and otherness is perhaps less deceitful, than the subtle picking of visual signs from the migration imaginary intended to make them sell exorbitantly priced items or artworks.

### **The photographic series *Sneakers Like Jay-Z* by Frédéric delangle and Ambroise Tézenas, in relation to the barbed wire motif used by the Afghan designer Sami Nouri**

Two other case studies seem to counteract these processes of commercial appropriation and to bear paths of emancipation as a result of fashion. First, the series of photographs by Frédéric Delangle and Ambroise Tézenas reveal an effort to establish the integration and emancipation of exiles through fashion (see Figures 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3).<sup>9</sup> The two photographers exhibited *Des Sneakers comme Jay-Z* (*Some Sneakers Like Jay-Z*) during the 2018 edition of the Rencontres Européennes de la Photographie in Arles. These pictures aim to illustrate the work of Emmaüs Solidarité, a Parisian NGO who organized a reception centre for migrants including a 'boutique', where men could benefit from clothing donations. A group of migrants were invited to choose clothes, and to pose with them. Every photograph is accompanied with a text that expresses their selection. These testimonies remind the viewer that clothes are often the only belonging of exiles. For this very reason, clothes are a subject of major symbolic importance that reflects their identity: the way in which they wish to be seen, and the way they perceive themselves.

J'ai 21 ans. Je viens de Somalie (de Mogadiscio).

Je suis habillé avec une chapka et un manteau qu'on m'a donnés en Russie.

J'adore ce pull qui a le style hip hop!

Si les gens me demandent combien je l'ai acheté, je vais dire que c'est un cadeau.

J'adore Paris, les gens sont gentils, comparativement à Stockholm, Berlin ou Varsovie.

Si j'avais des sous, j'achèterais une veste noire et des baskets Nike.

Le noir me va bien car j'ai la peau caramel.

I am 21 years old, I come from Somalia (Mogadishu).

I am dressed in an ushanka and a coat that I was given in Russia.

I love this jumper and the hip-hop style!

If I am asked how much I paid for it, I will say it was a present.

I love Paris, the people are nice compared to in Stockholm, Berlin or Warsaw.

If I had some money, I would buy a black jacket and Nike trainers.

I look good in black because I have caramel-coloured skin.



**FIGURE 3.1** Frédéric Delangle and Ambroise Tézenas, *Ahmed*, *Des Sneakers comme Jay-Z* series, colour photograph, 2018. Courtesy: Frédéric Delangle et Ambroise Tézenas.





**FIGURE 3.2** Frédéric Delange and Ambroise Tézénas, *Abdallah, Des Sneakers comme Jay-Z* series, colour photograph, 2018. Courtesy: Frédéric Delange et Ambroise Tézénas.





**FIGURE 3.3** Frédéric Delangle and Ambroise Tézenas, *Al Noor*, *Des Sneakers comme Jay-Z* series, colour photograph, 2018. Courtesy: Frédéric Delangle et Ambroise Tézenas.

J'ai 24 ans. Je suis soudanais.

Je l'aime bien cette veste, avec toutes ces poches. Ce n'est pas du tout le genre d'habits que je portais avant, au Soudan.

Ça me fait bizarre de me voir comme ça.

J'ai l'air plus français avec ça, non?

I'm 24. I'm Sudanese.

I like this jacket, with all the pockets. It's not at all the kind of clothes I used to wear in Sudan.

It makes me feel bizarre.

I look more French with it, don't I?

J'ai 42 ans. Je viens du Soudan.

J'ai choisi cette chemise parce qu'elle est assortie à mon pantalon. Je portais pratiquement la même chose au Soudan, mais dans des couleurs différentes.

Je n'aime pas les couleurs flashy. C'est une question de goût. Comme je suis mat de peau, eh bien, je m'habille donc plutôt en couleurs claires!

I am 42 years old. I come from Sudan.

I chose this shirt because it matches my trousers. I wear almost the same things that I would wear in Sudan, but just in different colours.

I don't like flashy colours. It's a question of taste. Because I have darker skin, naturally I wear lighter-coloured clothes!

Circulating motifs attached to clothing constitute here the last bastion of a dignity many times violated on the road of exile. In this regard, Monica L. Miller's monograph *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (2009), demonstrates how clothing style, and in particular dandyism, has defined Black people's identity through shifting political and cultural environments. Clothing appears as a way to perform and to reinvest scorned identities. Besides, Miller highlights 'how and why black people became arbiters of style' and stresses antinomic relations inherent in dandy's dress codes, namely how peoples of the African diaspora 'once slaves to fashion, make fashion their slave' (2009: 1). Seizing circulating fashion motifs to make them their own could thus constitute a way for migrants to empower themselves within slave-holding regimes.

The path of Sami Nouri, a 23-year-old fashion designer, also seems to symbolize how fashion may constitute a way towards integration and emancipation. Born in Afghanistan from a father who is a tailor and an activist, Nouri and his family were forced to flee their homeland to escape the Taliban regime. In Iran, at the age of 8, the boy, who is denied access to school, starts helping his father in a makeshift workshop. After another exodus, this time in the direction of Europe, the family is separated by smugglers before trying to cross European borders. At the age of 14, Nouri is left alone on a train platform in the city of Tours, south of Paris. Welcomed by social services, he starts going to French school and decides to send seventy applications in order to find a job in the fashion industry. John Galliano accepted him for a three-week internship after which he begins an apprenticeship in Jean-Paul Gaultier's studio. A year and a half after his arrival in France, Nouri manages to find his mother and his sister on Facebook, and they later join him in France. Nouri then makes the headlines of people and fashion magazines. Watering down the fact that the

young man languishes because he yearns for news from his father, several media outlets, as for instance *Paris Match*, introduce him as 'The little Prince of couture' (Vollaire 2017) and present his story as a fairy tale. In Nouri's first collection, which is called *Exodus*, emphasis is placed on barbed wire, a specific motif inserted on several models. In 2018, he invites the pop music duo Madame Monsieur, whose song *Mercy*, dedicated to the refugee's fate, was the French entry in the Eurovision Song Contest, to perform at his show. When a later collaboration was proposed with the traditional brand Saint James, reputed worldwide for its striped sailor shirts, the barbed wire motif was revived for the French Normandy company (see Plate 6). On two places on the shirt, around the neck and on the elbows, the usual blue straight lines are replaced by a white barbed wire design on a black background. As in the survival blankets that summarized the refugee's fate during the *Gala for Peace* orchestrated by Ai, barbed wire appears as a tiny digest of the migrants' destiny when trying to reach Europe.

Can this reminder of the designer's traumatic past be seen as a tribute or show support to current exiles? On a television report related to Nouri's story, Luc Lesénécal, CEO of Saint James, explains that 'Barbed wire is as well a way to divert the stripe. This makes it possible to give small touches of elegance, strength, with something authentic' ('Le Fabuleux destin de Sami Nouri' 2018). At a time when the usual selling proposition of the company, which presents itself as the fashion house of sailors' ancestral clothing, would be the usual blue stripes, he explains that it would benefit from the introduction of barbed wire motifs. By introducing a pinch of 'true story' into the standard navy shirt, the latter revives consumers' interest. The oppression of refugees would thus renew Saint James's storytelling and attract new fashionistas, perhaps sensitive to humanitarian causes and to Nouri's media success story. Visual activism can be found here at the service of a sales and marketing strategy to which the young designer is incorporated. If in his original creations the barbed wire's presence was somehow a moving memorial of a childhood abused by war, their duplication into ready-to-wear items precisely makes them lose any authenticity. As Lesénécal indicates, the barbed wire motifs constitute a way to 'divert' consumers' attention, but not from the mere blue stripes. They divert them from the actual objective of the fashion company, which is not to denounce migratory policies that have contributed to establishing barbed wire borders, but to increase its sales figures, by striking a sensitive or subversive chord with potential buyers. Therefore, in light of this, it is worth questioning if a genuine artistic process, such as those of Delangle and Tézenas, can be totally dedicated to the exiles' fate? Rather than focus on the clothing habits of those represented, which are presented as the mere series' topic, the purpose of such an artistic proposition deserves to be examined under the visual anthropology lens.

In his classic book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said noted more than forty years ago that 'my real argument is that Orientalism is – and does not simply represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with "our" world' ([1978] 1979: 12). According to Said's logic, the series *Some Sneakers Like Jay-Z*, which has been exhibited in French photographic hotspots and made the headlines in the trendiest of media, would be less about representing migrants, than about the Western photographers' gaze on them. Its success within this media segment seems to indicate that the display of the migrants' photographs wearing modish garments appears as an opportunity to address migratory questions in a perhaps lighter tone. As the audience of trendy media and of photographic exhibitions would share the same wardrobe as the migrants, the series would constitute an occasion for bringing exiles closer to the way of life of the latter, namely, to identify with the refugees. In her

novel, *The Years*, French author Annie Ernaux addresses this irreducible gap. Her book is an intimate and collective narrative of six decades of a life running from 1941 to 2006. It describes photographs but also books, songs, radio and television programmes, and advertising campaigns and headlines in tune with the times, and which compose a collective imaginary.

In relation to the last period of this narrative, and therefore the one closer to us today, Ernaux writes:

It was a gentle and happy dictatorship against which no one rebelled, one had only to protect oneself from one's excesses, to educate the consumer: that was the first definition of the individual. For everyone, including illegal immigrants huddled on a boat to the Spanish coast, freedom had the face of a shopping centre, hypermarkets crumbling under the abundance. It was normal for products to arrive from all over the world, to circulate freely, and for men to be pushed back to the borders. To cross them, some locked themselves into trucks, made themselves merchandise – inert – died of asphyxiation, forgotten by the driver on a parking lot in June sun in Dover.

2006: 229<sup>10</sup>

Ernaux describes an unspoken tyranny. Stronger than political borders, the market's powerful and invisible reign shares humans in two categories: the insiders who implicitly accept its domination and the outsiders who need to make themselves into goods to have a chance to join it. With the hindsight of IOM's surveys, it is now admitted that a large majority of today's migrants trying to cross European borders are led to make their bodies merchandise. In a field survey of October 2016, 71 per cent of the interviewed migrants report to have been subjected to human trafficking and other exploitative practices (International Organization for Migration 2017). In Libya, a place of transit for many migrants, to which the European Union has outsourced border control, these activities would represent a 'turnover' of \$350 million in revenue in 2016 (Vincent 2017). In this context, the fact of wearing clothes belonging to the dominant visual culture, to which the title of the exhibition refers explicitly, would signal the migrants' integration into this culture. The online newspaper *Lundimatin* (2019) observes that 'the message that these clichés actually convey [is], namely, "we welcome them on the sine qua non condition that they are and above all that they prove that they want to become, like us, consumers"'. The series of photographs would thus be less telling about the contemporary exiles, than about the way market societies determine Westerners' relationship to clothing. As exemplified with jeans cut loose on the hips, the operating cycle of visual appropriation seems to be achieved: originating from American ghettos this trend has been adopted worldwide, has become trendy street wear, and is now considered as a mark of recognition from the ruling classes towards newcomers.

For his part, by obtaining French nationality with the help of media coverage around his rapid accession into the fashion industry, Nouri has been officially and symbolically thanked for his exceptional integration into commercial society. The price of this success may be that, in exchange, Western society has made his refugee story a fashionable product. By granting him, as a result of French citizenship, the freedom to come and go, this European country may have, at the same time, signed the end of Nouri's freedom to create. Stacy Copland states the presence of another kind of visible minority; 'Like many "Others," queer woman run the risk of falling into a commodified and stereotyped role within the larger media sphere as their voice is used to feed the desires of



mass culture for the financial benefit of corporations' (2018: 217). Passed through humanitarian washing of global capitalism, Nouri's intimate experience of oppression and border shutdowns is both underlined and condensed into a repeated visual sign. Absorbed by the fashion industry, the barbed wire turns into a marketing gimmick defused from any 'oppositional force'. It became the designer's passport to access the world that rejected his family. Now surrounded by the borders of market rules that maintain him in his past, Nouri's forever present seems to be kept in exile.

## **Lucy Orta's *Refugee Wear Intervention*, in the light of Angela Luna's purposeful design for saving lives**

To counteract the market's drift to render marketable all aspects of life, some artists and designers have dedicated their work to creating clothing intended to help the most deprived. Lucy Orta, a British artist, and Angela Luna, an American designer, have both devoted themselves with an obvious sincerity to changing refugees' lives with clothes.

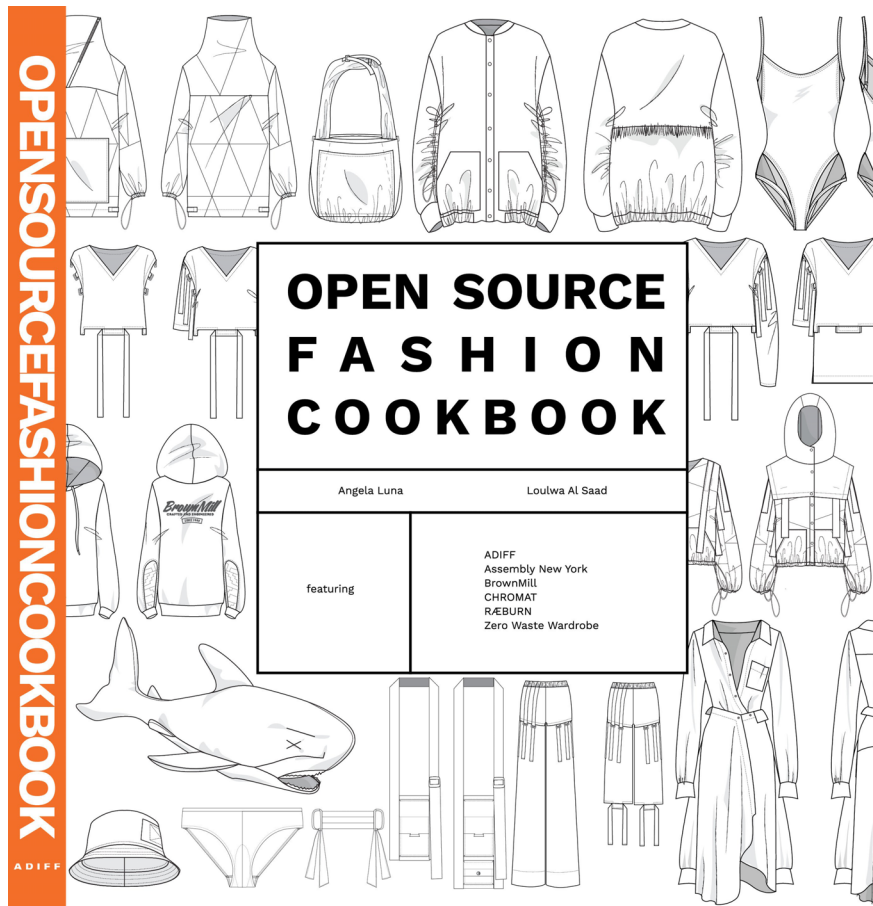
To address fashion's supposed vacuity, and to propose concrete humanitarian solutions, Lucy Orta conceived, in the 1990s, her *Refuge Wear* series to help displaced Kurdish communities during American's invasion of Iraq. The attempt falls within what Lippard ([1984] 1995: 349) defines as the world of the 'artist activist', who works within the communities in order to stimulate the active participation of their audiences and 'mobilises for change'. Orta's motive was to focus on the fashion potential of functionality, in order to provide assistance to marginalized populations. Designed with futurist lines evoking robotics, these clothes focus attention on deprived people. Aiming to associate them with her creation, she stood as their spokesperson: 'Population becomes the main actor of the artwork which takes shape and life through the act of participation' (Ardenne 2002: 194).<sup>11</sup>

For this project, she collaborated for a long time with French NGOs to create collective actions aimed towards the excluded. Close to art therapy, her fieldwork produced a series of garments intended to constitute shelters for homeless people. Although acknowledging the good intention of the artist, I follow the art historian Dominique Baqué who highlights that Orta's work fails in two aspects: in terms of the charity actions, and in terms of the art pieces that were created alongside the charity act. As Baqué suggests, one could be sceptical of the effectiveness of Orta's action: 'who can, in good faith, believe in the purely symbolic effectiveness of these sporadic actions which, moreover, can take the form of social heroism?' (2006: 135).<sup>12</sup> The art historian also wonders if artistic initiatives put to the service of activism are doomed to lose their artistic interest. The question is even more relevant when art deals with fashion, a practice comprising both an artistic dimension, the haute couture, and an industry, namely the ready-to-wear. I would rather question the vision of society it conveys: is visual activism still effective when dealing with the consequences of a dire situation? Actually, is art compatible with a mere purpose?

The young fashion designer Angela Luna seems to avoid this dilemma by focusing only on a garment's functionality. She recently made the headlines for creating clothes for refugees (see Plate 7). For example, Luna is listed among the '30 Under 30: Art & Style' compiled by *Forbes Magazine* ('30 Under 30: Art & Style' 2017) regarding her efforts to 'design intervention for global issues'. In line with Lucy Orta's *Refuge Wear* series, Angela Luna assigned herself a list of specifications with a view to conceive the most adapted clothing to deal with the harsh conditions

of migrants' journeys. On the occasion of a TED conference, she displayed her solutions for making fashion that 'saves lives'. As she deplores to see 'homeless on the streets daily in pants not made for sleeping on city sidewalks, . . . to see refugees fleeing in branded t-shirts and jeans', she designed the ideal clothing for refugees, so that they could benefit from garments adapted to their condition (Luna 2018). The latter should be weatherproof, waterproof, unisex, one size and in a camouflage colour. The American fashion designer distributed 500 outfits following these specifications in refugee camps in Northern Syria, which, she said, were received with great success.

The pragmatism and realism that come with designing these clothes constitute a deeply sad revelation about the migrants' situation. Far from denying Luna's goodwill and engagement, it questions the kind of reasoning and, more broadly, the worldview it implies. These garments coldly embody the inaction of Western countries to help put an end to the conflicts, and the situations that contribute to causing the refugees' departure. In this perspective, if ADIFF, the company Luna created, would become a success, it would mean that there is probably nothing better to expect from Western countries after its creation (Figure 3.4). Moreover, if fashion is made as something that is futile, and loaded with imaginary and nomadic images, tailor-made clothes for



**FIGURE 3.4** ADIFF, *Open Source Fashion Cookbook*, 2020. © ADIFF.

the good of migrants represent exactly the contrary. Imbued with paternalism and thus with a condescending attitude, these specific clothes underline the outsider place of those who, precisely, were born outside Western borders. The more these clothing items are functional, the more they underline the special place of exiles in Western societies and deny them the very access to the sensitive and thus much-needed fashion field. Apparel defines our way of being in the world, our way of dealing with others' eyes. Yet, these clothes show that exiles are denied access to more than just a physical territory: they are also denied from an imaginary territory. They are deprived of the ability of inventing themselves. Such clothing is an acknowledgement of the fact that exiles' appearance is no longer a space in which they can express their individuality. Even if trivial choices contributing to dress appearance are destined to adopt signs belonging to a homogenized and globalized world, as in the photograph series *Some Sneakers Like Jay-Z*, at least they reflect one individual's expression.

## Conclusion

Dealing together with both the art and the fashion spheres, these case studies have been an occasion to show the transmutation of art into merchandise and merchandise into art. The last bastion of one's identity is deprived of its homeland; fashion becomes a theatre of violence against bodies making activism's attempts hardly credible. What brings together artistic answers on the one hand, and fashion answers on the other hand?

First, in a transversal way, what connects the art works of Ai Weiwei's performance with the photographic series of Norbert Baksa, Lucy Orta, Frédéric Delangle and Ambroise Tézenas? Do they manage to shift beholders' perceptions of migration? If all received more or less harsh criticism, in strict terms of dissemination, only Baksa was led to remove his photographs from his website. Yet, what is striking is Baksa's symmetry with the clearly more acclaimed series of Delangle and Tézenas. With *Der Migrant*, Baksa's model stages and mimics exiles' border crossings, while in *Some Sneakers Like Jay-Z*, refugees originating from the African continent seem to be staged as Western models. As only Baksa's series caused a real outrage and failed to receive artistic recognition, it is perhaps because fashion photographs' codes are increasingly adopted in the Instagram era. Those adopting the dominant dress and visual codes, as the refugees are staging in Delangle and Tézenas photographs, would thus be more consensual than Westerners dressing up or enacting like those who originate from dominated cultures. To defend himself against the outcry he created, Baksa explained that he aimed to show 'a suffering woman, who is also beautiful and despite her situation has some high-quality outfit and a smartphone' (Freeman 2015). His intention is not far from Ai's motive when proposing to Hollywood stars to wrap themselves in survival blankets. The great smiles of the celebrities, the selfies they took, and the victory signs they made, highlight the obvious amusement generated by Ai's proposal. Their evident enjoyment is probably at least as strong as Berlin's Deputy Minister of Culture's unease. Contrary to Ai, Baksa, Delangle and Tézenas, Orta's garments are not intended to enhance refugees' beauty. Covering the almost entirety of their bodies, including their eyes, Orta's *Refuge Wear Intervention* barely allows them to breath and move. The bodies hidden by Orta recall the European migratory policies whose consequences are constraining exiles into camps, out of local populations' sights.

In the case of the art works by Ai, Baksa, Orta, Delangle and Tézenas, the failure of the proposed artistic dispositions hangs by a thin but sturdy thread: that set by the power of reciprocal representations. In his novel *Compass*, Mathias Énard tells the story of a group of Western scholars visiting Syria. Franz, the main character, states: 'We were hurting ourselves against our own representations which were interfering by their expectations, with the very possibility of experiencing this life which was not ours' (2015: 183).<sup>13</sup> The power of representations has perhaps to do with the visual closed-loop generated by migratory policies: that of non-expected forced displacements, leading to a non-managed humanitarian situation whose persistence matches that of a narrow range of motifs in mainstream media. The intense repetition of the latter would act as a visual shield enhancing the strangeness and preventing the experience of otherness.

Second, regarding the relationships between fashion designers whose creations are related to migrations, their main common point seems to be motifs originating from the mainstream images of border crossings by the Mediterranean. Tisci's artistic choice of covering front row showgoers with survival blankets, and Nouri's use of barbed wire patterns, have in common their weakening of the visual motifs coined by media coverage of the 'crisis'. If this is not the choice made by Luna in the collection she realized for the termination of her study at New York's Parsons School of Design, the works the young designer currently displays on her Instagram page seem to follow her fellow peers' footsteps. She settled for a while in Greece and went to the Lesbos life jackets' graveyard to 'upcycle' these dregs of maritime border crossings into fashion items. Her emerging company, in which tent jackets are sold for £350 on the 'buy-one-give-one model', and whose slogan is 'Survivor Made', have been fascinating to follow through the course of this writing, to see how the young woman dealt with the industry's contradictions. After cleaning and assembling pieces of discarded life jackets for her next collection, Luna hired a group of Afghan resettled refugees based in Athens to manufacture her clothing. The website of her company now bears a continuous display announcing the number of tents donated to refugees and homeless people, the number of masks donated to hospitals and NGOs, and the amount of the salaries paid to her staff of resettled refugees. The degree of emphasis given to these figures and to the rationale of the brand – '*making a difference through fashion*' – transpires the will to defy humanitarian washing critics. Three short paragraphs also describe the story of the team members who, like Nouri, used to be tailors in Afghanistan. ADIFF seems to be the meeting of two worlds: one in which handmade clothing is still common and one in which sewing manual knowledge is lost. The company thus sells a fashion 'cookbook' for those who are not 'trained sewer[s]' (see Figure 3.4). The thin thread which reconciles activism and the fashion industry could indeed be summarized through the metaphor of the cookbook: a mixing process in which spices used for defending a cause should be adequately balanced, to not erase original taste and to not become a flavourless gimmick.

## Notes

- 1 In France, for example, the total known capacity of places in camps increased from 32,000 to 47,000 in the period between 2011 and 2016.
- 2 Personal translation by the author.
- 3 Which could emerge from a 'chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella' (Lautréamont 1938: 256).

- 4 In particular, a series of photographs of exiles arriving in the Canary Islands, 'In Search for a Better Life' (2010).
- 5 Also called the '*Golem Effect*', it is mostly studied in an educational environment (see Babad, Inbar and Rosenthal 1982; and Stoichita 2008).
- 6 See, for example, the European Parliament's research paper, 'EU Member States' Arms Exports (2013)' (2015).
- 7 The situation helps to explain Italy's position, as advocated by its new Minister of the Interior, in which, since June 2018, it has refused permission for rescue boats of NGOs such as SOS Méditerranée to disembark.
- 8 Artists such as Bansky, Gabriele Gandolfo David, Arabella Dorman, Alex Seton or Bianca Argimon, have made these motifs central in some of their creations.
- 9 Exhibition organized by the Association du Méjan (2018) as part of the Associated Program of the Rencontres d'Arles.
- 10 Personal translation by the author.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.

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# 4

## Digging up the left-wing corpse? Visual activism and melancholia in Jeremy Deller's, *The Battle of Orgreave*

*Stephanie Hartle*

Jeremy Deller's, *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), saw around 800 participants, including members of the original conflict, performing in a highly orchestrated partial restaging of the violent clash in South Yorkshire on 18 June 1984, between striking miners and police. This act of mimesis, and the return to history, positioned the past, present and future together in a different kind of temporal exchange. Writing shortly after the emergence of Deller's 2001 restaging, JJ Charlesworth heralded the return of politics in art, identifying several projects with political content that attested to 'how acceptable, and sought after, art with a professed sociopolitical orientation has become' (2002: 357). At the same time, Charlesworth was wary that the apparent mainstream art embrace of political radicalism did not necessarily signal a wholesale return to politics, asking: 'In an epoch of profound political malaise and disaffection, what do these recent developments tell us about the current state of our political imagination, our attitude to the future and our understanding of what changes might bring it about?' (ibid.: 358). Indeed, Deller's reconstitution of social space and time in this work points to wider concerns over the relationship of art and politics, and its agency in the critique of capitalism in contemporary culture.

A strategic residential and leisure redevelopment plan involving a recent rebranding of the Orgreave brownfield site (now renamed Waverley) has in some way attempted to bury this past to make it more palatable to the modern resident. Martha Minghay describes this in terms of a cleansing process under the guise of optimism and 'renewed progress' (2015). And yet, a spectre remains. Calls for a full inquiry into this notoriously violent and divisive landmark have been repeatedly resisted, despite the persistent work of the Orgreave action group 'Justice for Orgreave' who demonstrate under the banner 'No Peace, Never Forget, Never Forgive' – in part, referring to the avoidance of the South Yorkshire Police to formally admit to accusations of wrongful assault, arrest and false prosecution; the still present urgency of this historic struggle and its legacy continues to be felt. The specific 'act' of re-enactment in art practice raises complex questions

regarding recollection and interpretation, inevitably revealing significant temporal and spatial fissures that Ruth Erikson identifies as 'a dialectic of connection and difference' (2009: 107). It is this very notion of difference that could allow for the potential of critical engagement. This chapter therefore seeks to explore how – via the gothic language of Marx – Deller's *Orgreave* concerns itself with the historical 'then' and the 'now' to give way to something close to the condition of hallucination or amnesia: a 'digging back' through the archives that becomes aesthetic as well as subject. In the context of increasing political resignation on the one hand, and on the other new manifestations of visual activism and protest art in recent years, the central enquiry of this chapter is to consider how far Deller's re-enactment, and its continued re-presentation in the space of the gallery can be a catalyst for political action, or conversely, a melancholic withdrawal from it.

## Melancholic acts or acting melancholic?

The year-long Miners' Strike (1984–5) had fleetingly posed the question or possibility of a different type of Britain, rooted in solidarity and collective action. The incident at Orgreave in 1984 (see Figure 4.1) entirely refuted the idea of police neutrality and liberal democracy – bound up with a government programme designed to criminalize striking miners and lesson the strength of the Trade Unions. Seventeen years later, produced at the height of New Labour, Deller's *Orgreave*



**FIGURE 4.1** Martin Shakeshaft, *Mounted Police Charge at Orgreave*, 18 June 1984 © Martin Shakeshaft.

(commissioned by Artangel) was an artwork in apparent contrast to other representations of the Miner's Strike circulating around the same time. These tended to sentimentalize history, or worse, to overlay it with a narrative of resolution or a kind of victory.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the now semi-mythological site of Orgreave can be considered both a battleground and graveyard of Left British history: a place of collective trauma.

The motif of trauma and mourning is prevalent in both Deller's project itself and subsequent writings on it; it is rooted in a moment in history in which Tim Etchells considers 'what it means to be part of a generation whose symbolic, psychically defining moment is not a victory (the overthrow of a regime, the end to an unjust war), but defeat' (cited in Charlesworth 2009). Similarly, Charlesworth considers the extent to which *Orgreave* deals with Victor Burgin's distinction between 'the representation of politics and the politics of representation', concluding that, 'the only politics that Orgreave properly "represents" is the contemporary, "post-political" politics of mourning and anxiety' (ibid.). Arguably, Deller's *Orgreave* leans on the language of psychoanalysis for understanding and meaning making and it is through this prism that I invoke Walter Benjamin's notion of 'left-wing melancholy' ([1931] 1974) to probe this further. Drawing upon the legacy of Benjamin, the analytical category of melancholia has been borrowed by several contemporary writers, as Jonathan Dean proposes, to 'help capture something about the affects and dispositions of the academic left' (2015: 236). Wendy Brown identifies Benjamin's term left-melancholy as his 'name for a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thing-like and frozen in the heart of the putative leftist' (1999: 21–2). Despite the left-wing melancholics apparent commitment to radical politics and its desire for transformation, the result as Dean argues, is that they take shelter in the past which 'engenders a conservative refusal to engage critically and constructively with the world' (2015: 3). The notion of such refuge or shelter certainly has relevance to *Orgreave*, especially in the context of historical re-enactment and a return to a symbolic moment of political defeat. Indeed, Deller's project reaches a tangibly painful sense of melancholia on hearing the well-known battle cry repeated in the present, 'We're miners united, we'll never be defeated.'

This malady is close to the condition of melancholia as defined by Freud ([1917] 1957), however, there are important differences here too. Freud identified melancholia as the result of an inability to consciously comprehend the lost object, a persistent and unavowable grief. In turn, Julia Kristeva later described melancholia as 'an abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief at times, and often on a long-term basis . . . to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself' (1987: 3). Brown further defines this specific inflection of melancholy by claiming; 'We come to love our left passions and reasons, our left analyses and convictions, more than we love the existing world that we presumably seek to alter with these terms or the future that would be aligned with them' (1999: 21). Taking this approach, one can argue that the process of re-enactment in this context precludes the need to generate action in the present, since Benjamin also proposed that left-wing melancholy produced a complacency that leads to an 'attitude to which there is no longer in general any corresponding political action' ([1931] 1974: 30). Benjamin's use of the term to point to a perceived unwelcome development in the Left was a condemnation of a sentimentalism he aligned with a form of reification and fetishism. *Orgreave* perhaps characterizes this type of melancholy by monumentalizing the details of the violent clash itself, rather than the wider political activities that the event encompassed. In this project, Deller fixates on the most dramatic element,

further emphasized in his titling of the accompanying publication of archival source material, *The English Civil War: Part II* (2002).

Deller's ritualistic re-enactment of the battle is seductive and therefore may constitute a type of spectacle, moreover Erikson argues that its circulation in the art world could 'ultimately implicate the work in the very processes it was supposed to critique' (2009: 109). Such a concern is applicable to any political and activist artwork which finds itself co-opted into institutions of power. Even so, it is hard not to worry that *Orgreave* may in some way be part of the spectacle of media representation rather than an unproblematic counter-piece of critical performance. Debord and the Situationists dismissed spectacle as 'a theater performed by commodity-images, consumed passively by people who live impoverished lives' (Lütticken 2005: 17). Deller's performance has in part been subsumed by its reproductive representation in Figgis's documentary film and therefore risks being assimilated as just one media spectacle amongst many others. *Orgreave*, like other forms of politically and socially engaged contemporary art, positions itself as critique, however, as institutions continue to absorb and commodify such critiques, the potential power of this work could be largely invalidated.

This melancholic fetishization, and in turn, accusations of avoidance of the present or indeed future, may be levied against examples of political art that use re-enactment as their mode of address – in the same way that much appropriation in art practice is easily dismissed in terms of stealing or copying; both could be mistaken as passive or possibly vacuous gestures. The re-enactment in *Orgreave* could, on the surface, indicate a denial of history and specifically left defeat, rather than an attempt to engage with it at a more progressive or forceful level – work which is often left to (or more commonly associated with) grass root community activist organizations, rather than the anodyne space of the art gallery. Such an accusation has been levelled by Claire Bishop, who writes that, 'Deller's event was both politically legible and utterly pointless,' reasoning that Deller's re-enactment was highly ambiguous and more akin to a traditional village fair or church fete with brass bands, food stalls and tea stands (2006: 182). Bishop is also critical of the project's conformity to stereotypical notions of eccentric historical re-enactment societies (ibid.), although in contrast, Andrew Wilson suggests that Deller's specific use of these societies – notably 'his subversion of their usual relationship to history' was key to understanding the project's force (Wilson 2013).

Since *Orgreave* is also a symbol for the decline of working-class communities it is understandably difficult not to read Deller's re-enactment as a melancholic-tinged mourning for traditional social bonds. Invariably this can lead to accusations of nostalgia and sentimentality. The aestheticization and commercialization of working-class lives into tourist attraction is clearly problematic and has been a source of antagonism for other artists.<sup>2</sup> Placing *The Battle of Orgreave* within a wider context of Britain's heritage industries, Alice Correia proposes that the re-enactment 'encompassed the twin facets of heritage culture: the recreation of past events as part of an educational-historical methodology and the transformation of industrial heritage into spectator experience' (2006: 101). Whilst nostalgia is frequently rejected as a conservative retreat into the past – the antithesis of radicalism – others have argued that nostalgia can do much more than just ignore the present in its privileging of the past; it can be employed as a corrective to dominant narratives (Glazer 2010). Instead, an approach towards a radical nostalgia, via the process of re-enactment, can remind us that the experience of time is both subjective and highly mediated.

## Re-performing history: temporality and memory

Rebecca Schneider writes that re-enactment is 'an activity that nets us all . . . in a knotty and porous relationship to time. It is about the temporal tangle, about the temporal leak, and the many questions that attend time's return' (as cited in de Groot 2011: 592). One is reminded of Benjamin's decisive use of the term 'awakening' or 'the flash of awakened consciousness' and recollection (*Eingedenken*) as a transformative process ([1929] 1996). In this sense, Deller's re-enactment could serve as an anachronistic challenge to the present, a realization of Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* (now-time) – pungent with revolutionary possibilities because it is detached from the notion of continuous (i.e. 'progressive') history, and as importantly, written from the point of view of the defeated rather than victor (ibid. [1940] 1973). The disjuncture and disavowal of time in *Orgreave* ruptures the linearity and progress of a utopian history and we see Benjamin's 'image flash' gain relevance, as Alex Farquharson also notes: 'For many-participants and spectators alike – this Battle of Orgreave was more flashback than re-enactment' (2001). Laurie Rojas suggests that *Orgreave* occupies a more ambiguous and ambivalent position with regard to nostalgia, it is rather 'an exploration of historical memory and an attempt to bring a renewed interest to an event that otherwise could have receded into obscurity and incomprehensibility' (2015). One may be able to see *Orgreave* as acting as a counter-memorial, an artwork that seeks to resist the imaginary cohesion of history and progress. Correia supports this viewpoint by concluding that, '*Orgreave* raised questions over the reliability of images, who has control over the presentation of historic events and how the past is remembered' (2006: 110).

In thinking through Deller's project, Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardsness) is also of some use; a repressed memory that becomes a deferred or belated trauma; events can take on new signification or meaning at a later point in time. Jennifer Allen suggests that any re-enactment 'always presupposes a missing body' and that re-enactment operates as therapy – the curing of a patient by reliving trauma: 'In this case, the missing body belongs to the patient himself, who has lived his past selectively by repressing certain experiences' (2005: 183). The temporal play with history and memory in Deller's project is also identified by Hal Foster who suggests that 'it conjures both a before (past) and an after (post) in the way that aims to open up possibilities for the now' (2015: 132).

In its revival of a conflict involving crowds and community, *The Battle of Orgreave* has resonances with other historical restaging. One calls to mind the commemorative 1920 re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace on the third anniversary of the October Revolution; many participants had also been active in 1917. As with *Orgreave* the boundaries between theatre and real life become slippery and oblique. The 1917 Revolution was additionally re-enacted for cinema by Eisenstein in his film *October* (1921).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, there are reverberations with the Radek Community's intervention in their video work *Manifestation* (2001) – a spontaneous street performance wherein an unsuspecting crowd become implicated in the group's protest as they move as pedestrians crossing a street whilst unfurling banners with slogans such as 'Another World Is Possible'. Analysing the significance of role of the crowd in this Russian collective's work, Gail Day writes: 'We are prompted to think about the differences between crowd, mass, assembly, and multitude; between populace, people, publics; the distinction between aggregates of individuals and collectivities; the history of Marx's ideas on the self-knowledge of the revolutionary class' (2011: 230–1). The crowd has significance in these re-enactments beyond mere historical



detail. Sven Lütticken claims that 'such re-enactments attempted to engage the people in a kind of participatory mass theater that was intended to be in total contrast with the consumerist spectacle of capitalism' (2005: 53). In this sense, re-enactment points to the notion of continuation – intended as a device 'activating the masses and giving history a forward impulse' (ibid.: 55). Deller's interest in the theme of civil war is compared to Gramsci and Marxist thought by Foster, 'his sense of the *polis* hinges on the actual antagonism of different groups as much as their potential solidarity: for Deller, as for latter-day Gramscians such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, democracy is also *dissensus*' (2013: 14). So, despite the association with melancholy and inertia, the act of repetition and mimesis can be more politically charged than first assumed – *Orgreave* can be considered an active rather than passive experience across several contexts.

## The aesthetics of performance and participation

Re-enactment, as Lütticken writes, can work to 'fight repetition with repetition, to break open and recharge the past by duplication and interrogating our event culture' (2005: 7). Katie Kitamura's investigation of Deller's re-enactment also proposes a very different type of reading to the diagnosis of left-wing melancholy, claiming it as 're-enactment as social practice' (2010: 44). Kitamura argues that the event was 'relentlessly proliferating' and cites it as an example of Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics (ibid.: 39). Bourriaud had identified a type of art practice that took 'as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than an assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space' (1998: 14). Dismantling the division between subject and object, relational art projects concern itself with the spectator's connection to the work, as Rojas explains; 'in which participants' physical and cognitive interaction is integral to the work itself and dependent upon it' (2015). In this regard, there are connections with this type of art practice and the approaches of other types of visual activism, defined by characteristics of community connectivity and participation: 'doing' and *act-ivity*. In describing Deller's re-enactment as 'recreating chaos', Kitamura suggests that the work acted to challenge authorial control, 'channeled into what might be considered a formal, aesthetic interest in the problem of spillage' (2010: 4). The perception of spillage and 'uncontainment' demonstrates the extent to which *Orgreave* oscillates between reality and fiction. De Groot reasserts this idea when he argues that '*The Battle of Orgreave* also demonstrates how re-enactment can obviate the clear problems of narrativization, authenticity, objectivity and political neutrality common to much other historical representation' (2011: 595). This can provide an emancipatory and liberating element that Robert Blackson further suggests distinguishes it from 'its kin of simulation, reproduction, and repetition' (2007: 30).

One way that *Orgreave* explored this emancipatory potential was through role-reversal; some policemen and miners chose to swap positions. Natasha Hoare argues that the artwork therefore allowed the participants to 'inhabit a different subjectivity through which they could gain a perspective of the action from the other side of the battle line' (2013). In this sense one could argue that Deller's *Orgreave* acts to readdress some of the perceived false media coverage of the original event, giving a voice to those who have been silenced or ignored. Deller himself claimed that the work was 'history painting from below' (Beech 2002: 396) and Correia also argues that Deller's project was a 'dialogical artwork, containing multiple strands created through conversations'

(Correia 2006: 99). In this interpretation, the meaning of the work is not fixed and contains several different viewpoints. Correia develops this point by suggesting *Orgreave* actually did work to highlight the legacy of the wider social and political impact of the event, 'by providing a platform to address the causes of these social problems, Deller can be considered as participating in the regeneration and rehabilitation of marginalized mining communities' (ibid.: 100). It is clearly impossible to quantify the extent to which the project may have contributed to any perceivable change in such communities, but this is not the point; the provision of the platform or 'stage' is perhaps all that art can realistically achieve. Performative artworks are politically active and affective via their imaginary potential, they command attention and pose an alternative dialogue or space for discussion.

Like a great deal of performance art, Deller's re-enactment and re-presentation of the original event survives itself only in the form of reproduction – for example, Mike Figgis's documentary film of the re-enactment or photographs taken on the day (see Plate 8). The work is now presented as part of a larger body of archival work in the installation piece *The Battle of Orgreave Archive (An Injury to One is an Injury to All)*, held in the Tate Collection (see Plate 9). This comprises several different formal elements such as a wall painting, books, memoirs, objects, video and audio. Lütticken asks 'is it the fate of the re-enactment to become an image? And are such representations just part of a spectacle that breeds passivity, or can they in some sense be performative, active?' (2005: 5). Yet, such re-presentations enable an ongoing and sustained engagement with the subject. Describing Deller's approach to this installation as one which 'curates or facilitates the unfolding of situations between groups of people', Wilson suggests that the juxtaposition of different archival material allows for an open dialogue between previous conceptions of documentary realism and artifice (2013).

In a further criticism of the documentation of performance art, Peggy Phelan has argued that 'performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the representations of representations' otherwise it 'betrays and lessons the promise of its own ontology' (1993: 146). The critical assessment of live performance is clearly problematic when the viewer is removed from its direct unfolding in time and in the place of its site specificity (Rojas 2015). And yet, through the documentary process, the viewer is perhaps acutely aware that this re-enactment is also a construction. This reflexivity may serve to counterpoint such claims to spectacle and enhance the 'truth-value' of the work. The 'sameness' of the re-enactment to the original event is antagonized by a de-familiarizing effect, in part achieved by deploying a theatricality that distances the viewer. Erikson writes that: 'revisionist narratives and Brechtian alienation tactics both attempt to achieve something more "real" – whether than means closer to a lived, personal experience or, in a Marxist vein, to the real material and social conditions of existence – by breaking through the dominant ideology and illusion' (2009: 114). Deller's project reignites an engagement with dominant ideologies and new political possibilities through its challenging and disruptive temporalities.

Historical re-enactment in contemporary art has been a key cultural practice for several years, particularly so in the context of artists in countries where counter-histories have been more rigorously and systematically repressed. Often the motive behind such historical appropriation is revisionist in nature, recovering some degree of agency and providing a stage in which to create new narratives and interpretations. A reworking of the past through the strategy of re-enactment self-reflexively *constructs* memory rather than reflects memory; memory is not simply ever 'there'.



The reunion of miners and police who had previously taken part in the event in 1984 has significance for the viewers own consciousness, as Hoare argues: 'Each participants physical inhabitation of this episode of history, both as lived performance and as framed by film, brought this piece of working-class near-history to the attention of viewers for whom this confrontation had yet to be memorialized' (2013). Referring to the novel *1984*, where its author, George Orwell, wrote, 'those who control the present control the past and those who control the past control the future', Blackson argues that: 'By allowing the miners' memories to control the course of the re-enactment, Deller's performance provided languishing mining communities a way to act outside the historical script determined for them by the government and media' (2007: 33). Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska posited that 'art has to stop pretending to sublimate consumer desire, and, like Jeremy Deller's *English Civil War*, reengage with the social imagination' (2006: 421). They assert that Deller's work builds upon the legacy of art practice engaging with institutional critique and praise it for its confrontation with ideology and hauling it into the present: 'the "battle" memorialized a profound historical moment, denying us the luxury of forgetting its effects, and simultaneously challenged contemporary art to engage with important issues of social representation' (ibid.: 405).

We find ourselves navigating back to a psychoanalytical framework of analysis. In both *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through* ([1914] 2003) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* ([1920] 2003) Freud looks at the notion of *Wiederholungszwang* (a compulsion to repeat but without the recognition or knowledge of such repetition). *Orgreave* may be condemned to this cycle of repetition but there is also an extent to which a talking cure – the performance of re-enactment – acts as a process of liberation. At the forefront of Deller's work was the psychological state of the participants as performers – their individual memories and emotions. The re-enactment of *Orgreave* is clearly notable for its revisiting of both collective and personal trauma, drawing upon psychoanalytic methods of treatment and recovery. Through this interpretation it is again possible for Deller's work to be conceived as a direct or active confrontation, rather than simply dismissed as a melancholic act of empty repetition.

## Living-on: digging up Orgreave's vampires

Dissensus and subversion run through Deller's project at different angles – an approach that gives visibility to the highly mediated nature of history and cultural memory. Themes of digging-back, exhumation and the summoning of shadowy figures from the grave appear as key ideas underpinning this work. Deller's insistence that 'I've always described it as digging up a corpse, giving it a proper post-mortem' is undeniably important for how we make sense of this work (Foster 2013: 15). Foster is initially hesitant in accepting this diagnosis, asking: 'but what exactly is a *proper post-mortem*? An autopsy of a troubled past that is also a laying-to-rest? That is to imply a working-through or coming-to-terms that is at odds with his other principles of *social surrealism* and *civil war* where the point is to sustain such tensions, not resolve them' (ibid.). However, Deller later stated: 'I was not interested in healing the wounds of the strike, as some commentators have subsequently written or speculated; rather I wanted to re-open the wounds if anything' (Hayward Gallery 2012: 190). Other writers, such as Ralph Rugoff, reiterated this assertion by claiming that 'despite a fair amount of critical commentary about the work's therapeutic value – its enabling of former miners to rewrite their own history and to work through a traumatic social

conflict – *Orgreave* had been designed to make people angry’ (ibid.: 17). Of relevance to Foster here is Adorno’s notion of ‘living-on’, in response to Marx’s claim in ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ (1845), ‘that philosophers have only interpreted the world when the point is to change it’ (see Foster 2002: 129). Foster argues that ‘maybe this living-on is not a repeating so much as a making-new or simply a making-do with what-comes-after, a beginning again and/or elsewhere’ (ibid.). Again, there is a sense in which this ‘living-on’ is done so in the shadow of trauma and the failure (or refusal) to mourn sufficiently the first time round.

We have already seen how inhabiting different temporal realms and space is a key aim of re-enactment, but what I am concerned with here is the extent to which *Orgreave* recalls the gothic tropes of Marxism, especially in terms of the corpse motif. Allen describes how ‘behind every re-enactment there is a “little death” . . . Although no one really dies in the re-enactment, all language becomes an epitaph’ (2005: 179). There are further resonances with Derrida’s ‘Spectres of Marx’ where he states: ‘what manifests itself in the first place is a spectre, this first paternal character, as powerful as it is unreal, a hallucination or simulacrum that is virtually more actual than what is so blithely called a living presence’ (1994: 32). Foster proposes the notion of ‘shadowing’ in art practice – of both traumatic history and precedents of previously significant art; ‘often the shadowing in contemporary art is more literally *spectral*’ (2002: 134). Here again we are returned to the condition of ghosts. In Deller’s version of an autopsy there is no immediate reconciliation or laying-to-rest; the ghoul lingers.

The employment of gothic tropes and, specifically, the summoning of the ghost or spectre have been well documented in previous writings on the work of Marx. Marx wrote in *Capital*; ‘If money comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek . . . capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt’ (see Neocleous 2003: 668). Marx demonstrated mastery of metaphor and imagery with his likening of capitalism (as the social body) to the human body, and the role of labour in the production of commodities taking on abject metaphors such as ‘coagulated’ or ‘congealed’. Taking this fascination with the occult even further, Marx conjures images of other disturbing figures from myth and literature – werewolves, Frankenstein and vampires. Neocleous examines the use and context of the vampire metaphor found in Marx’s writing, proposing that the theme of horror and blood is suggestive of ‘the constant sucking of the blood of the Western working class by the bourgeois class. This form is nothing less than the horror of a property-owning class that appears to be vampire-like in its desire and ability to suck the life out of the working class’ (ibid.). Whilst these gothic allusions work as clever literary devices in Marx’s critique of political economy, I suggest that the vampire metaphor (or zombie) has some resonances with the language Deller uses to elucidate his intentions in *The Battle of Orgreave*, specifically the corpse motif and its haunting reappearance. Neocleous also identifies the vampire with marginalized and oppressed groups: ‘The vampire is a harbinger of “category crisis” because, again as with the monster in general, he or she represents a form of difference’ (ibid.: 673). It is perhaps too simplistic to compare the vampire with the oppressed working-class miners of Orgreave, moreover the re-enactment of Orgreave is not in the context of a Marxist revolutionary call to arms. Instead, I argue that both *Orgreave* and the figure of the vampire or zombie, as the ‘living-dead’, share similar characteristics of ambiguity and a crisis of identity, inhabiting a neither-nor space, between good and bad and ‘otherness’.

Since the figure of vampire can be thought of as an outsider or excluded Other, I also take my cue from Gayatri Spivak’s seminal essay (1988), and Atti Viragh’s extension of it, in his article ‘Can

the Vampire Speak?’ (2013). Using Spivak’s account of the subaltern, the vampire tries but cannot speak – as an Other they are both silent and silenced. Like the figure of Dracula, Orgreave for many is a horror story and continues to be one – a narrative of violence that remains both remarkably and mundanely ‘undead’ – drained, marginalized and excluded. Whilst Viragh proposes that Dracula’s ‘voice and perspective are always mediated by other characters and therefore excluded from direct narrative representation’ (ibid.: 238), Deller’s re-enactment, alongside continued protest work enacted by groups such as the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, provide a means of speaking, visibility and agency. Without such engagement, Orgreave could be condemned to play out the fate of Dracula, who is described by Viragh as ‘a culturally tragic figure who never really has any hope of emerging from the receding periphery of history’ (ibid.: 242). In Deller’s *Orgreave* the vampire is at least offered some agency to resist; it calls to attention the rampant colonization of capitalism and globalization and its mystical life draining of organized labour, community and social justice.

The corpse figure also appears in Maurice Blanchot’s, *The Space of Literature* (1982). In Blanchot’s discussion he aligns the peculiarity of a corpse with the ‘disembodied resemblance’ of an image’s object: ‘Something is there before us which is not really the living person, nor is it any reality at all. It is neither the same as the person who was alive, nor is it another person, nor is it anything else . . . The cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere’ (ibid.: 256). Blanchot’s analysis comes to rest on the notion of ‘nothingness’: ‘if the cadaver is so similar, it is because it is, at a certain moment, similarity par excellence: altogether similarity, and also nothing more. It is the likeness, like to an absolute degree, overwhelming and marvellous. But what is it like? Nothing’ (ibid.: 257). Nothingness may be an applicable term for an analysis of *Orgreave*, i.e. to the extent that we have already been unpacking the way it can be conceived as a denial or type of absence – a reversal of action. Taking up Gail Day’s writing on the dialectics of negation, it might be useful to frame *The Battle of Orgreave* as a ‘practice of negation’ involving elements of emptying, rupture and disjunction (Day 2011). Day reflects on the ‘repetitions and echoes’ apparent in a different piece of documentary film work – Chris Marker’s *San Soleil* (1983) and argues that there is ‘neither “resignation” nor “defeat”, but rather a reminder of how human subjects are fundamentally transformed in and through the process of resistance’ (2011: 1). Whilst *Orgreave* is situated in a symbolic defeat of the left it can be placed in a wider context of politically and socially engaged artworks that saw a revival in the 1990s. In its historical consciousness *Orgreave* operates not only as re-enactment but also as reinterpretation through the political milieu of the proceeding decade. Rugoff claims that:

the collective memory of this crucial ‘battle’ had fallen prey to the social amnesia that accompanied New Labour’s ‘cool Britannia’ makeover (which was predicated on keeping a distance from anything to do with aggrieved unions and class confrontation). Inasmuch as Deller’s project sought to reposition the clash at Orgreave as one of the decisive struggles of English History . . . it was in response to that present scenario as much as from any impulse to remedy past injustice.

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Correia writes that *Orgreave* relates to history as ‘not the past seen from a safe distance, but rather history presented as unfinished business’ (2006: 110). The same could be said for the

vampire or zombie figure – caught in a cycle of repetition and burdened by its past; it lacks control, it hovers in alternative dimensions, and is always hungry for more. In this absence of safety, the vampire motif can also be read as history presented as unfinished business.

## Conclusion

In summary, *The Battle of Orgreave* activates a dialectic of reality and fiction, fragmentation and absence; its distinctive performativity of re-presentation provides a different space of occupation in which the viewer (and participants) can observe the gaps between memory and history. The particular inflection of this chapter has been to interrogate Deller's work in the context of left-wing melancholy, taking in a psychoanalytical framework of analysis and an examination of the relevance of the corpse motif which features in a number of discussions about the work. Deller distances himself from the notion of visual activist or activist-artist at a number of points, but largely as Costello argues, through his refusal 'to tell his or her audience the truth about politics' since the realization of his work is given over to other collaborators (Costello 2021: 38), or what Kitamura described as 'chaos' (Kitamura 2010). Costello's conclusion to the discussion of the relationship between politics and art posits a crucial difference between 'political artist' and 'political art':

Deller refuses the epithet "political artist" because the political artist, as this is typically understood, is only weakly political. Weakly political artists claim to tell us how things are politically. Deller not only does not do this, he refuses to do it. At its best, Deller's art is strongly political; it is permeated by a politics of engaging with others that not only animates its construction from the ground up, but does so in such a way as to reflexively embody its own, strikingly egalitarian, political content.

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It has become clear in this chapter that critical responses to Deller's work have been mixed. Rugoff captures the highly ambiguous nature of the work and its competing tensions when he states: 'Its mixed cast of re-enactors and real-life "actors" presented an uneasy cocktail of authenticity and simulation . . . In any case, in re-presenting a recent social trauma with the ersatz of aesthetic of an historical theme park, Deller's *Orgreave* was at once serious and profoundly odd' (Hayward Gallery 2012: 17). However, according to Paige Sarlin, re-enactment involves a process of 'temporal dislocation and thereby has the potential to operate as a form of historical intervention' (2009: 144). *Orgreave* can also be viewed from within the critical context of an art practice that Nato Thompson refers to as 'living as form' (2012). Such artwork is known by other terms such as 'relational aesthetics', 'participatory' art or 'social practice', which *Orgreave* undoubtedly borrows from. However, it is hard to accurately evaluate 'the question of possibility – or refusal – of transformation that the experience of such re-enactment-as-art might posit', especially because the work cannot be experienced directly (Rojas 2010). Having said that, re-enactment as an approach in politically engaged art can provide a space for social and political reflection. Even if considered marginal, re-enactment in this context can contribute to a process of rethinking, or at the very least offers the space, or stage, for this possibility to occur (Lütticken 2005: 60). What is interesting about the re-examination of history in *Orgreave* is that it centres round a 'living history'

– this was a re-enactment that used the near past, deploying participants who had directly experienced the event and were able to share their individual and collective experiences. This isn't a particularly new type of art practice, as the similarities with the reconstructions of the October Revolution have made clear. Yet, what is strikingly different from such a previous re-enactment is that *Orgreave* is not a recreation of a nostalgic victory, but one which marks a considerable and violent defeat (Rojas 2010).

The concept of left-wing melancholy, or left-wing nostalgia, provides an important framework in which to evaluate Deller's project. Brown's analysis of Benjamin's reference to this concept suggests that such an approach marks 'a refusal to come to terms with the particular character of the present' (1999: 20). Here, even the failure of a political ideal is more appealing than radical change in the 'now'. Despite the negative connotations of left-wing melancholy, Deller's strategy contributed to a return to art of political relevance at the turn of the twenty-first century. Loosening the guilt-ridden tradition of left-melancholy, Enzo Traverso argues for an approach which instead aligns itself with Judith Butler's proposal of the 'transformative effect of loss'; recognizing its revolutionary potential rather than its wholesale resignation (2016: 20). Arguably this is something that Deller's project achieves – particularly in its continued re-presentation in different spaces to different audiences. *Orgreave* acts as a reminder about the potential power of people, or more specifically the collective crowd, who are made visible rather than hidden. In this specific example of re-enactment there is a revised dialogue with the past through an active form of remembrance and recollection.

There is another way that *Orgreave* moves beyond left-wing melancholy in the way that it forcefully digs up the festering corpse of the left, taunting the previously held recollections of the original event in an act of resistance, an act of resistance rather than 'making-do'. Foster argues that this excavation and re-enactment of the dead by Deller suggests 'that it might be premature to announce the utter disappearance of the left, that the funeral held in its honour might be for the wrong corpse' (2013: 15). The metaphor of the vampire is significant if one agrees that *Orgreave* takes up the dialectical position of the 'living dead', not just 'living history' – here borders are insecure. Neocleous suggests that 'as a form of monster, the vampire disrupts the usual rules of interaction, occupying an essentially fluid site where despite its otherness it cannot be entirely separated from nature and man. As simultaneously inside and out-side, the monster disrupts the politics of identity and the security of borders' (2003: 673). In this interpretation, *Orgreave* can succeed as a politically and socially engaged piece of artwork. Finally, Neocleous posits that 'the vampire, as a "monster", is of course connected to the root of that term: from *montsrare*, meaning to show forth . . . The vampire as monster both demonstrates the capabilities of capital and acts as a warning about it' (ibid.: 684). If nothing else, Deller's, *The Battle of Orgreave*, continues to act as a warning – opening out provocative questions of authenticity, accountability and cultural memory to a new generation of viewers.

## Notes

- 1 I am thinking of films such as *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry 2000) and perhaps to a lesser extent *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman 1996). Even whilst interspersed with more sober passages, such films give way to a problematic entanglement with nostalgia especially in terms of their use of soundtrack (see Wayne 2006).

- 2 In his series, *Flogging a Dead Horse* (1989–93), Paul Reas critiques this development of the heritage industries at sites such as the open-air Beamish Museum in County Durham and Wigan Pier Heritage Centre in Greater Manchester.
- 3 Though more symbolic than performative, it is also interesting to note that in 1976 a new journal *October* was named as a further form of re-enactment.

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## 5

# Imperialism, empathy and healing in Rajkamal Kahlon's artistic activism

*Margaret Tali*

**A**rtistic activism has often been approached either as street activism by focusing on the visual and creative strategies employed by activists on the streets (Firat and Kuryel 2011; Zangl and Bala 2015; Tunali 2018) or occasionally in relation to the ways that artists mediate between different spaces in realizing their work (see, for instance, Hertzberg 2020; Pukyte 2020). Rajkamal Kahlon's work opens up the need to reconsider the notion of artistic activism in its relation to a broader variety of creative positions including different artistic gestures in order to understand how it can push public discussions further in shifting understandings and opening imaginations about the meaning of justice. Kahlon's work offers a rich example of artistic research in rethinking dominant modes of archiving, collecting and presenting knowledge, while simultaneously changing such practices. Connecting feminist and institutional critiques, her work is both subtle and tangible in its bringing to the fore how artistic activism can successfully operate within a gallery context. Kahlon interrogates conventional methods of knowledge production in order to analyse imperial systems of power and lay bare how they continue to influence who is considered primitive and who is seen as a terrorist – or, in short, who constitutes as human and who does not. In museums where her work is displayed, these systems of power involve archiving, collecting and presenting knowledge. Kahlon's practice seeks to creatively rethink their present modes and her decolonial critique also raises acute questions about the ethics of museum work; visualizing the uneven power dynamic between the photographer and their subjects as well as the politics of the space in which photographs are viewed. It is by exposing the imperial hierarchies still extant in the dominant Western ways of seeing, that she places the past within the present and thereby shows the potential of altering the both. The artist's ways of addressing explicit forms of violence evident in visual representations, offer a theoretically and visually layered example of an approach to dealing with difficult histories that expands the dominant ways of thinking about artistic activism.

Traditional methods of history writing offer few means to discuss the resistance of oppressed and enslaved people to imperialism and the creation of oppressive regimes. Scholars analysing the complex ways that trauma travels across generations might come closest to unravelling these relationships. Using creative means, Kahlon adapts archival photographs in order to trace historical forms of resistance and bodily trauma and reveal greed, arrogance and theft enacted by colonizers.

Her investigation connects various layers of experiences and reflection, bites the hands that feed her work, and plays with temporality in interrogating conventional methods of knowledge production. All this, as the artist explains, is in order to analyse the systems of power behind dominant ways of describing the world today. Informed by her research into the processes of creating these images, she articulates and critically points to the uneven power relations, subverting them through her visual activism. In doing so, Kahlon's work on violent and traumatic histories is often focused on the body, seeing it as a site for their tangible continuation (2018).

Kahlon is a Berlin-based artist, born in America and of Indian descent. Her work is confrontational and often shocking – it combines activism with art in order to raise a series of ethical questions about the practices of ethnographic museums, and their methods of engaging with the relations of power embedded in their collections. While doing this work, she proposes new methods informed by her artistic research and position. She sees this position as being colonizer and colonized at the same time. In this chapter, I will focus on Kahlon's exhibition, *Staying with Trouble*, held at the Weltmuseum in Vienna (25 October 2017–31 December 2018), in order to analyse the artist's working method and her subversive approach to violent imagery, that inspire new ethical ways of mediating past violence and trauma, particularly in their refusing to reproduce old stereotypes embedded in historical images.

The exhibition *Staying with Trouble*, shown on the first floor of the Weltmuseum in Vienna over the course of one year, was surprisingly small and coincided with the reopening of the museum after its renovation. The work based on Kahlon's research at the residency in the museum consisted of three connected series, *Do You Know Our Names?*, *People of the Earth (Die Völker der Erde)* and *Dear Sir, I regret to inform you . . .*, which were displayed next to her digital diary *Field Work: An Artist's Reflection Among Her Time with the Natives of Vienna 2016*, documenting her working process during a two-month residency while the museum was closed for renovation over three years.

According to Kahlon, it was her encounter with the book *Die Völker der Erde* (1902), in an antique book store in Vienna, that prompted her to investigate methods of anthropology and scholarship employed in ethnographic museums (Tali 2018). This book by German zoologist and biologist Kurt Lampert is an horrific, but not unique, example of racist imagery that aims to catalogue people of the world as a whole, into categories created in the Western world. Its scientific racism was a well-maintained norm in the anthropological scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, Kahlon takes it as a case in point to undermine its practices of barbarization, exoticization and dehumanization of difference by focusing on its images.

The offensive nature of such representations raises a series of questions for Kahlon about what can be done with such historical material; how it should be treated, analysed and shared in public in ways that are ethical and respectful towards the subjects represented in the photographs. Which photographs can be shown, and which should be hidden away as unethical? These questions are particularly relevant for museums, whose archives and collections are filled with racist imagery. When discussing her project *Staying with Trouble*, Kahlon indeed proposes that ethnographic museums should be seen as holocaust museums; that is, not as sites of 'scientific' exploration of non-Western cultures, but as museums of crimes against humanity. Her exhibited work offers an example of how artistic practices can offer novel means for rethinking the violent histories embedded in ethnographic museum collections, bringing greater awareness and sensitivity. During her residency at the Weltmuseum, the artist connected the imagery from *Die Völker der*

*Erde* with that in the museum's photographic archive and with her research on the museum's collection. Kahlon consciously repurposed some of the offensive and ignorant methods of Western ethnographic fieldwork in order to rethink and transform the ways that museum structures and practices, have the power to shape the worldview of its visitors. For instance, similarly to early anthropologists, she hand-colours photographic material – however, whereas their aim was to increase credibility and strengthen their control, her project visualizes the uneven dynamics of power between the photographers and their subjects, occasionally subverting and reversing it. By doing so, *Staying with Trouble* underlines how violence is embedded in images and archives throughout the Western world. The exhibition title *Staying with Trouble* is a reference to Donna Haraway's work, and particularly to her idea of 'staying with the trouble', offered as a solution, in a time of exterminations and extinctions of species, in order to nurture well-being on a damaged planet (Haraway 2016: 76); Kahlon proposes to choose a similar approach with resisting Western practices of subordination.

## Phantom images, real people

When I first flipped through the pages of *Die Völker der Erde* in Groningen University library, I was caught by the feeling that I have already seen this book, even though it was the first time I had opened it. In *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008), Ariella Azoulay writes about the pictorial nature of collective memory, suggesting that it is in constant conversation with personal experiences. Discussing the role of what she terms 'phantom images', she writes:

the pictures have been planted while the 'owner' of the album remains totally unaware of the violence involved, until the day she is able to see that this or that image that she had taken for her own was in fact nothing of the kind. What distinguishes such pictures from regular photographs is the mode of their transmission. They are planted in the body, the consciousness, the memory, and their adoption is instantaneous, ruling out any opportunity for negotiations as regards to what they show or their genealogy, their ownership or belonging.

IBID.: 13

According to Azoulay, it is these precise relations that turn the space in which photographs are viewed into one of political relations. This space is political because photographic images are part of the discursive structures defined by dominant regimes; and simultaneously, one that people imagine on a daily basis (ibid.: 20).

Photographic images in the Weltmuseum archive and in Lampert's book have been widely circulated in catalogues, exhibitions and books, supposedly in order to make these cultures 'available' to Western audiences. In effect, they have informed practices of seeing, relating and understanding the world for the Western middle class and beyond. Kahlon engages with such reproductions in order to shift the relations the photographs enact, revise the power dynamics they sustain, and turn around their supposed 'truths'. She uses the image archives of ethnographic museums to understand the practices of dividing the world, and critiques the ways in which museums narrate that division. She does this by creating intimacy with her subjects, acting in

relation to the violated people as an embodied subject, that allows her to empathize with them (Kahlon 2016).

Her work *People of the Earth* (*Die Völker der Erde*), is a large installation constituted of pages of the book *Die Völker der Erde*, which have been ripped out by Kahlon and reassembled into alternative narratives about the depicted people. She writes across the pages of Lampert's book, thereby setting her characters in new situations that reverse the previous stories and suggest a different course to colonial histories (see Figure 5.1 and Plate 12). Her reinterpretation of the book, and her gesture of ripping out its pages, are acts of devaluation that constitute her activist tactics and are also used in her later work (ibid.). Kahlon's interventions may appear as shocking due to



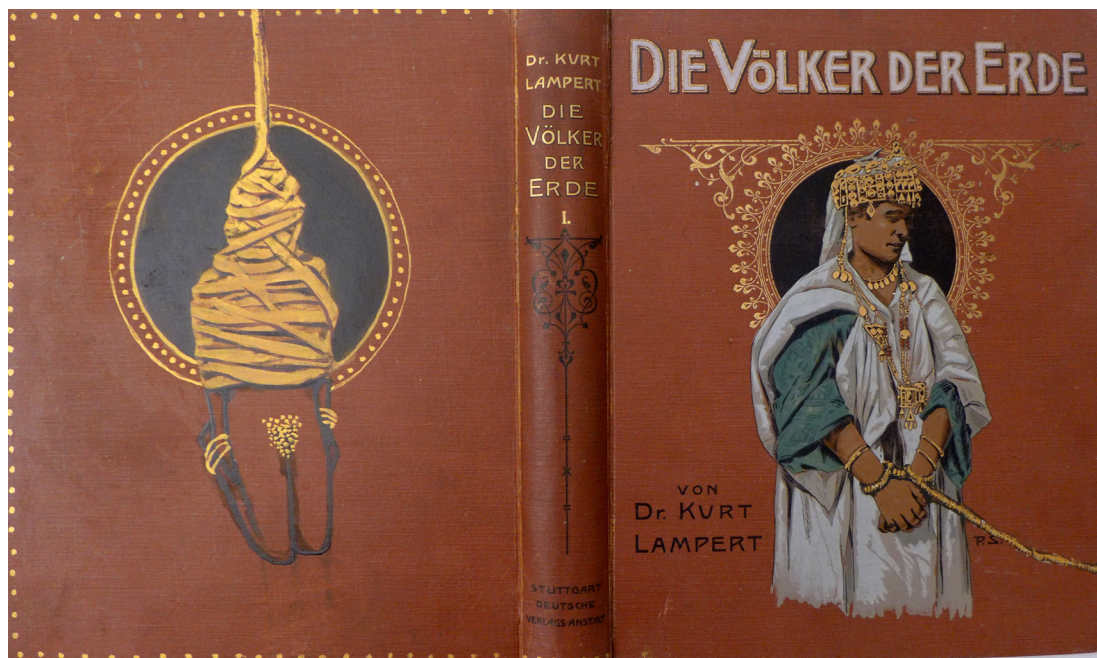
**FIGURE 5.1** Violence against women is often visualized in Kahlon's interventions and they are often equipped with tools to resist. Rajkamal Kahlon, Images from the series *People of the Earth*, 2016. Courtesy Rajkamal Kahlon. (Also see Plates 10 and 11.)



the preservationist logic on which Western culture is based: cultural heritage is perceived as something to be preserved instead of destroyed. Her interventions on the other hand foreground the presence of death, violence, and injuries left by sexual, psychological and mental forms of exploitation. For instance, her 'corrections' to the images visualize how photographed women and children have been used as objects of eroticization and exoticization. She *shows* the invisible wounds left to women by these serial humiliations and injuries, using lines and dots around women's bodies as references to blood and violence.

When discussing women's vulnerability to violence, Azoulay has noted that women's injuries are in fact 'unrepresentable'. This continues to apply in the contemporary era, and due to the ongoing stigmatization and existence of cultural taboos that work against women, such injuries can be left unpunished because they cannot be publicly articulated (Azoulay 2008: 54). Kahlon, however, finds ways to break such taboos: blood streams beneath several photographs (see Plates 10, 11 and 12), others refer to extreme trauma and death by showing women with ropes around their necks and their heads bandaged. In her reinterpretation of Lampert's cover image (see Figure 5.2), the artist has added a rope around the hands of the photographed man, while the woman who is added to the empty back cover can be seen to have lost her humanity altogether. Her body is depicted naked, with her head and chest wrapped in a bandage; these images make graphic the circumstances of making the photographs commissioned by Lambert and the relationships in which they are invested.

As I was flipping through the golden-edged pages of Lampert's book at the Groningen University library, an elderly man, who for some time had been closely following my engagement with the book from behind my back, leaned over towards me. 'Wat een mooie boek heb jij gevonden!'



**FIGURE 5.2** Rajkamal Kahlon, Reworked cover image of the book *Die Völker Der Erde* (1902) by Kurt Lampert, 2016. Courtesy Rajkamal Kahlon.

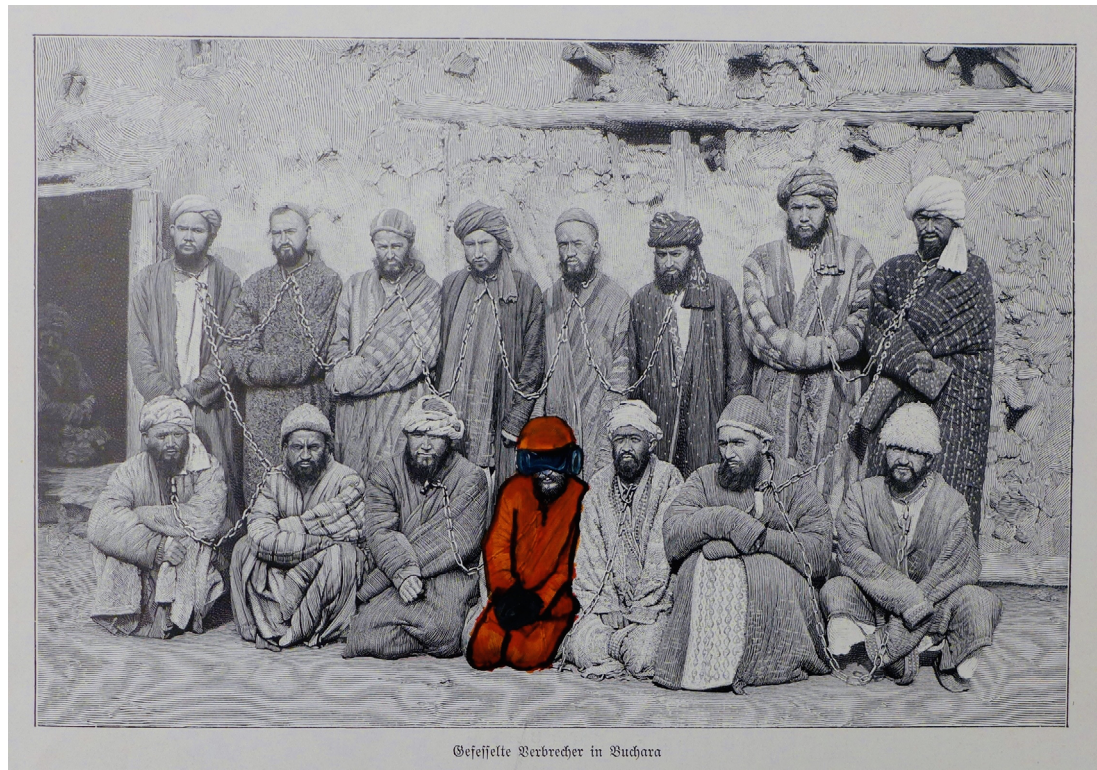


(What a beautiful book you have found), he said, full of enthusiasm to share his admiration as if he was looking forward to reading the book himself. I mumbled in response, more eager to use my scarce time in the library with the two volumes of this book, instead of entering into a conversation with a stranger. I wondered what his position in the university might have been and why had he been so interested. Yet, this short encounter made me realize that his honest reaction to images of colonial violence and desire for such images is precisely what Kahlon's work tackles.

In her book, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (2002), Ann-Laura Stoler analyses the way sex was managed in colonial contexts, colonized and dominated by Western European countries, and how fear of the so-called 'racial degeneracy' shaped encounters with colonial others in such contexts: 'Who bedded and wedded whom in the colonies of France, England, Holland and Iberia was never left to chance' (ibid.: 47). The colonizers went to great lengths in regulating the lives of mixed offspring and abandoned children who grew out of such relationships, developing various forms of distinctions coined in handbooks to maintain European supremacy in mixed relations. According to Stoler, internal divisions in colonized countries in turn augmented the intensity of racist practice; sexuality and reproduction were at the core of defining colonial privilege and its boundaries, determining who could have access to property and privilege and who could not (ibid.: 39). In several of her images, Kahlon plays with this power dynamic and equips the photographed women with guns and spears, putting them in charge of their bodies to fight against sexual violence, dehumanization and other forms of oppressions. Her creative intervention ensures that their weapons appear to cut through the text and images, reversing discursive tropes guided by the kinds of fear and suppression Stoler discusses.

In the series, *People of the Earth*, Kahlon builds further on her earlier work on systemic use of physical and bodily violence. In her series of drawings, *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* (2009–present), for which she worked with a collection of autopsy reports in the archives of the American Civil Liberties Union's National Security Project, in New York, where she learned of Iraqi and Iranian men killed in the USA, thereby raising questions of justice in the face of brutal torture and 'the war on terror' in post-2001 USA. Her work adds imagery to the reports which, either through graphic metaphors or patterns, serve to visualize the extreme and often unimaginable forms of violence and humiliation that the reports recount. Working with two different kinds of archives – from ethnographic museums and the military – has enabled Kahlon to draw parallels between historical and contemporary practices of representing violence. *People of the Earth* brings to the fore the entwined nature of past and present by pointing to the continuity of violence and imperial hierarchies, in the dominant Western ways of seeing the humanitarian catastrophes in Africa and the Middle East. There are several images that draw the viewers' attention to the ways the people depicted are indeed prisoners of the confining representations created by ethnographers and photographers; these emphasize how their rights have been violated in these acts of representation. For instance, under one photograph she has added a hand that directs the people depicted as though they are puppets on the ethnographer's photographs. And in another image, the artist 'dressed' one of the kneeling men in a bright orange prisoner uniform (see Figure 5.3) – one that is well known from the infamous photographs made in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (published in 2004), suggesting the continuity of humiliation and violation embedded in geopolitical divisions that have been shaped under Western imperial rule.

Many of the symbols Kahlon uses remain ambivalent and this seems to constitute a conscious choice. The meanings of the symbols that she uses shift in *Staying with Trouble*; they are used to



**FIGURE 5.3** Rajkamal Kahlon, Image from the series *People of the Earth*, 2016. Courtesy Rajkamal Kahlon.

do different things on different occasions. A head in bandage, for instance, is a recurring symbol throughout several scenes. Most often it is used to show women's experience of disfigurement and trauma in the scenes with which she engages and alters. Yet in her diary, a bandaged head becomes a symbol of European anxiety when the Western colonial explorers appear with their heads wrapped in bandage. Thus, the meaning of her symbols makes them dependent upon their application.

Kahlon often uses coloured dots and lines to make alterations to the photographic reproductions, these constitute her most recurrent interventions. Dots are applied to people's bodies, but elsewhere their use reminds us of the logo of the Weltmuseum. The artist leaves their interpretation open, but they seem to reference a particular disease that combines greed and violence and moreover, the museum's modes of communicating the objects of ethnographic collection; modes that typically resist through obfuscation, the underlying aims of the Western quests of colonization. For instance, in one of the images a girl tries to deflect a flying object shaped after the logo, while holding another object with the same shape in her hand. In another image, a woman's face is covered with a series of dots seeming to refer to traces of trauma, which, despite being denied, live on. Elsewhere, red lines are used to represent blood streaming under the feet of women (see Plates 10 and 11).

In her diary, the artist reflects on her experiences of navigating the museum collection by documenting this process in sketches, written notes, conversations and observations. 'There's so much left out,' Kahlon writes, referring to her wish to 'complete the sentences' (2016). This is the work that she indeed does through her decolonial interventions in her exhibition reflecting on the Weltmuseum collection. In putting together pieces of information about individual scientists, such as Joseph Chavanne and his economic interests in Congo, or the stolen artefacts of Andreas Reischek from the Maori community in New Zealand – that include human remains, she draws attention to the formation of collections and raises ethical questions about their legacies and modes of presentation. The disciplines of museum studies and anthropology have typically legitimated the removal of objects from their original contexts, whilst drawing attention to their technical qualities, in order for these qualities to be 'appreciated' by the museum going public. This has functioned as a means to draw the viewers' attention away from the theft and blood, or, as Kahlon writes in her diary, to create 'a safe distance from their difficult arrival' in Western museums (ibid.).

In her reflections, Kahlon compares Europe with a cannibal, who sucks the marrow of a bone; 'Europe has littered the road with carcasses, . . . using up its people, resources and animals' (ibid.), she writes while looking for the root cause of the refugee crises in the collections of the Weltmuseum, and other similar institutions, as well as in the disciplines of anthropology and ethnography in general. She wonders whether those who manage to escape from the bombing campaigns and come knocking at the door for help suffer from Stockholm syndrome, in continuing to identify with the aggressor.

Furthermore, her diary discusses moments of taking photos of the museum staff in their offices and the feelings of discomfort that it created. Some of the results of this series are presented in glass cases, similar to the way Western ethnographic museums customarily present colonial subjects and objects – at a safe distance, hence reversing the traditional modes of presenting histories – moving colonial histories from glass cases to the walls and placing white European history into the glass cases. In conversation with these reflections, Kahlon developed the series *Dear Sir, I regret to inform you . . .*, offering a powerful example of institutional critique. In this series the artist builds on the idea of submitting a rejection letter to the museum staff that it portrays, including both historic and contemporary staff members. Painting facial tattoos across the faces of museum directors and curatorial staff – all of them male – serves for Kahlon as a way of 'primitivizing' them in order to undermine the legitimacy of their knowledge and their authority towards the people displayed in the museum, or, as the artist puts it, to symbolically 'announce the loss of the narrative behind their project' (Kahlon and de Craen 2020: 102). Her drawings of these men bring to the fore another important discrepancy in the Western system of knowledge / power in the ethnographic museum – that of gender (see Figures 5.4 and 5.5).

I think back to my first meeting with Rajkamal after hearing her speak at a conference organized by the Volkenkunde Museum in Leiden. She shared in her presentation her doubts about showing this series in public, while one of the Weltmuseum senior staff members, whose image with his face covered with tattoos she had included in her presentation slides, was seated among the audience. She decided to share it anyway. I went to acknowledge her courage to speak back to power after her presentation. A few months later, I visited the artist in her studio in Prenzlauer Berg and learned much more about the background of her work and ways of approaching her subjects; and this inspired the line of enquiry underpinning this chapter. Paradoxically, despite the





**Figures 5.4 and 5.5** Rajkamal Kahlon, Drawings from the series *Dear Sir, I regret to inform you . . .*, 2016. Courtesy Rajkamal Kahlon. Displayed in a glass-case, they were accompanied by the following texts: Steven Englesman (b. 1949) Englesman has been the director of the Weltmuseum Wien since 2012; Fritz Röck (1879–1953) Röck was the first director of the museum between 1929 and 1945. He was supportive of Nazi ideology.

heaviness of the subjects that Kahlon engages with, there is plenty of humour in her work, which together with the seriousness of her subject matter, provokes different emotions in her viewers as well. It even calls for an affective response. A recent exhibition in Berlin, dedicated to this artist, curated by Nataša Ilić and featuring much of the same work, posed a question to the visitor in its title, *Are My Hands Clean?* (2019–20) – calling for the viewer to revisit their complicity in the Western colonial project.

## Shifting histories in women's gazes

Through her work Kahlon lays bare the reasons why these historical images speak to the present, and how a certain visual rhetoric has been developed in maintaining them in museums. Her acts of aesthetic refusal undo the colonial tropes and visual rhetorics. To give a powerful example: there are four images that visitors to her Weltmuseum exhibition notice from afar; four portraits of women from her series *Do You Know Our Names?* Three of the women portrayed are looking directly at the viewer, while the fourth is presented in profile. The artist reprinted and enlarged these portraits

from *Die Völker der Erde* and painted over them in an activist intervention, adding contemporary clothing, make-up, and jewellery to the bodies of the women portrayed. Kahlon's intention was to foreground their humanity, individuality and beauty, which the gaze and interpretative framing of the photographers had either denied them, or diminished (see Plates 13–16).

The compositions in which the women are presented still recall the standard documentation of criminalized people, echoing the operation of violence in such modes of representation. Kahlon's blown-up images show how photographic conventions, such as scale, perspective, and methods of documentation, have assisted Western ethnographers in oppressing people and marginalizing their position; while in her series this practice is turned around by stressing the women's individuality. Her act of enlargement also makes it possible to see the eyes of these women. This allows the viewer to see for themselves that the eyes of the woman – clothed by Kahlon in white-dotted beige – are full of sadness. The woman with curls in green-stripes gazes defiantly at the viewer; the resistance of the woman dressed in blue, and with blue dots covering her face, also includes notes of condemnation towards the photographer and perhaps the context of taking the photograph.

An interesting negotiation opens in Kahlon's symbols also in relation to visibility. Art historian and visual studies scholar Nicolas Mirzoeff has interpreted imperial visibility itself as a form of violence in that as an early nineteenth-century term it refers to the visualization of history (Mirzoeff 2011: 474). He suggests that we should understand visibility as a modern method of subordination, even warfare technique, in that visibility sought to present authority as being self-evident. This leads Mirzoeff to connect the right to look with the right to the real as an important mechanism in the Western claim to domination over the colonized and enslaved world, arguing that slavery functioned as the removal of 'the right to look' in order to justify the domination of the 'cultural' over the 'primitive' (ibid.: 483). As an extreme act for enforcing these relationships, he cites the example of blinding that was used to prevent the enslaved people from escaping, hence withdrawing people's right to look (ibid.: 481). The need to decolonize the realm of visibility by reclaiming autonomy from this authority follows from this discussion. In Mirzoeff's terms Kahlon's work becomes a project of counter-visibility in that it opens up an alternative historical reality, which has been absent – left unvisualized in accessible (visual) records. Kahlon blindfolds the gaze of colonizers and ethnographers in order to rip their right to look from them. She inserts eyes and bodies behind skulls to remind museum visitors about their humanness, thus problematizing the existence of human remains in the museum collection. In some of her images she depicts skulls of the kind violently taken to museum collections as modern trophies, or adds giant eyes to the bodies of indigenous women in others. Her use of make-up in *Do You Know Our Names?* further assists her in returning to the women she portrays, 'the right to look back at the viewers of their photographs – one of the most important characteristics of humanity and individuality' (Mirzoeff 2011).

Kahlon's approach in this series also reminds me of Haraway's idea of 'kin making', which she proposes as being 'something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy' (Haraway 2008: 103). Since, as Haraway reminds us, we are all connected with everything, this notion simultaneously serves as a call for broadening our understandings of ancestry and genealogy; to be one, always means to become one together with many others (ibid.: 4). Hence, the practice of making kin involves collaboration, care and taking responsibility in a way that is transformative in that it can 'stretch the imagination' and 'change the story' (ibid.: 103). Kahlon's practice of kin-

making with the women she encountered in the photographs, challenges long established patterns of showing images of such women in Western ethnographic museums. Their portraits are hardly ever hung up on museum walls, and certainly not in these formats, because such historical portraits do not exist. Instead, women of colour appear in photographs as a group, without much attention given to their individuality, or space in the frame to enable it. Often when singled out they become objectified, as a result of sexual fantasies and desires projected onto them. Furthermore, the location of her presentation of the painted reproductions is significant; paintings representing Western aristocracy or upper-class subjects have conventionally hung on museum walls, whereas colonial objects, photographs, and memorabilia have been placed in glass cases in ethnographic museums. Kahlon's creative gestures of repositioning, rescaling, and intervening in the representations, seek healing and redemption through undoing and remaking the relationships between those behind representing and the women represented.

These visual codes have remained engrained in our practices of classifying, separating and aestheticizing. When the three women in Kahlon's portraits look back at the viewer, they simultaneously look at the museum's history and its practices of exclusion in the present day. They require the viewers to pause because they challenge the hierarchies of the contemporary world's conventions of seeing, which are upended by the women's augmented presence that makes their gaze visible. It is their gaze and looks that function in recovering their identity. Yet, Kahlon's images challenge any easy and straightforward ways of addressing the figures in her reworked visual narratives of history; are they 'her characters' or are they still photographic representations of 'real people'? In answer to such questions, I would argue that the way in which the artist works with these photographs makes her characters also come to life in the sense of being connected to the present moment. When visiting Kahlon in her Berlin studio, the artist shared with me one of the portrait's source images, showing how her intervention had covered the woman's nakedness with clothing. Fashionable hairdos, contemporary make-up and jewellery, worked out in colour on the black-and-white reproductions, thereby refocus viewers' attention to the women's eyes and their facial expressions giving them new meanings. In a later interview, the artist admits having received feminist critique of this work, which prompted her to acknowledge a contradiction: employing make-up and fashion as tools in one context may be considered as traces of patriarchy, whereas in another context it is about healing, care and transformation (Kahlon and de Craen 2020: 106). Discussing her working method in her essay 'Hyper Empathy Syndrome' (2018), Kahlon reflects on her physical reaction of resistance to the violence enacted in museum environments. Careful noticing of her own affective reactions to this violence serves as the trigger for her work. She writes:

The images can speak if I listen closely. [ . . . ] They provoke deep emotional responses in me which also need decoding. Then the intangibles of time and reflection are added to the brew. Patience is required. And attention. It can be instantaneous, take a few days, weeks or many years to have a coherent understanding of what my course of action might be in relation to the traumatic material before me.

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'Contact and acceptance,' she adds, start a conversation based on an empathetic relationship with traumatic histories in order to create contact with trauma and possibilities of healing (ibid.).



In discussing her position towards her subjects, Kahlon explains how their trauma can lead to her feeling nauseous, dizzy, experiencing rapid heartbeat, along with a range of other emotions (ibid.). Instead of reproducing the women's muteness, she converses with them through their gazes and defiant poses and acts upon them as their empathetic listener.

## Conclusion

Since realizing the exhibition at Weltmuseum, Kahlon has continued to make new portraits, sometimes drawing them onto pages of published books by other Western anthropologists and ethnographers. She also continues to make kin with women in ways that require time travels. Representation of women and women's experiences of resistance were at the heart of *Staying with Trouble*. Juxtaposing the four portraits of women in her series *Do You Know Our Names?* with her drawings of men all of whom have served as curators and directors of the Weltmuseum in *Dear Sir, I regret to inform you . . .*, is particularly telling in bringing to the fore her practices of redistributing authority and undermining legitimacy of historical knowledge and experience. Approaching these two groups as individuals also underlines the power dynamics between them, as she has done in several other interventions that were a part of *Staying with Trouble*; making power visible, bringing the scenes from history to life, changing the course of events and hence also opening a new decolonial repertoire of stories.

Kahlon's re-use of historical representations in *Staying with Trouble* simultaneously allows us to imagine a different future in which museums become sites for mediating colonial trauma and healing, as well as places in which one can learn about the complex visual power structures engrained in the museums' photographic collections and understand the possibility of their change. It cannot be forgotten that her images also offer alternative identifications, ones that inspire the viewers to perceive the contemporary struggles against racism as continuations of many earlier resistances that Kahlon's activism visualizes by connecting creative, empathetic and critical tools.

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# 6

## Shooting back / Speaking forward

### Decolonial strategies in the work of Sasha Huber

*Temí Odumosu and Sasha Huber*

**H**ow did we get here? What are we forgetting? And, where are we going? This text is both an inquiry and an intervention. It explores methods and activist gestures employed by Haitian-Swiss artist Sasha Huber, on her long-term artistic research journey engaged in reparative justice. In March 2019, we conducted a long-form interview between us in Helsinki, as collaborators and friends. We walked, talked, and sat in Sasha's studio over several days, to discuss what it means to time travel and reckon with ghosts; and to consider her work as risk, as revision, as remedy. Our meeting set the stage for this collaborative text, which we decided to present in three parts: first, an exploratory short essay, thinking-out-loud about Sasha's ongoing stapling practice, which includes a number of direct quotations from our conversations in Helsinki; second, a transcribed excerpt from our long interview, to contextualize Sasha's work and artistic motivations; and last, a photo essay, to move us beyond words (for photo essay see Figures 6.7 to 6.19 below and also Plates 17 to 29). Writing together in this way, in collage (or as quilt), we challenge the I/eye. We stitch words and ideas together, sometimes unevenly but with shared intent, because we '*speak as two sisters now, sisters who keep language for each other in bundles*' (Hupfield and Hogue 2017: 8), sisters who reach out quivering hands, across time, space, culture and memory.

#### I. Praxis

An artist stands in her studio with an air-compressed staple gun. A pneumatic stapler, the kind they use to stitch and bind fabric onto heavy duty furniture. She is wearing protective eyewear (clear plastic goggles digging into her facial skin), and also earmuffs, large yellow cups that temper the effects of loud sounds. This capsulation creates a small distance from the outside world, a hollow quietness that enables an inward going, eventually becoming meditative. Delicately, confidently and with precision, she presses steel staples (one by one) into reclaimed wood. With each action, a sharp sound pierces

the air, which would definitely disturb an onlooker. It is not like the sound of a gunshot from a pistol. Instead, it could be described as a *clack*, two hard materials repeatedly hitting each other in forced meetings. Listening up close, the *clack* holds within its frequencies, echoes of a clap, a shout, a pounding, a crack, a shot, a slap, a breakage; repetitive actions and sonic textures with disruptive capability that are transferred into the object being made. All these vibrations travel with each staple action up the arm of the artist, for whom this practice is painful: *'even for the soul'*, she says.

When stapling, the artist is alone, even when being watched or working in collaboration; because, she cannot share the safety burdens of this peculiar craft. Most of the time she is dangerously close to the material and in that closeness courts the risk of backfire. Yet, skilfully, she continues. She shoots and shoots, focusing her gaze and intent, working the staple gun like an additional loaded finger. Pointing to empty spaces and making a mark; scarring and recovering repeatedly. Occasionally, a staple gets stuck in the wood in the wrong position. She stops to yank it out *'like a sick tooth'*, she says. Occasionally a staple gets stuck in the gun, and she opens it to assess the problem, with the efficiency of an engineer. She also gets tired, has to take regular breaks to ward off repetitive strains. And, the artist is left-handed. Beautifully, powerfully left-handed; which means a lot in the language of Afro-diasporic mysticism, but also indexes a delicate history: *'I remember the story of how my mother's left hand was wrapped up by a nun in the Catholic girl's school in Haiti, when she was a child. Her hands were wrapped up daily to enforce right-handedness, until her father stepped in and forbade the school from doing this. He resisted these colonial impositions.'* We are also reminded of a line from Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979) on time travelling and the legacy of American Slavery: *'I lost my arm on my last trip home. My left arm.'* (2003: 9).

### ***Re-rootings***

Sasha Huber shoots with staples because the images she makes are urgent. This was the first methodology she employed as a visual artist and researcher, where the shooting initially represented a direct reaction to things that were difficult to speak about, and thus a way to manage the intensities of displacement, transgenerational trauma, and loss. In 2004, newly based in Helsinki, Huber used the shooting method to retrace historical steps, in her series *Shooting Back: Reflections on Haitian Roots*, where she reproduced portraits of men central to the colonization of Haiti: Christopher Columbus (1471–1506), François 'Papa Doc' Duvalier (1907–71) and Jean Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier (1951–2014). These were men responsible (as she puts it) for *'displacing my close family and loved ones'*. The staple gun was thus a performative weapon that could be discharged intimately; shooting into the silence that cloaked the migration of her family to New York in the 1960s, who were fleeing the hostile political climate, increasing social poverty, and the ongoing threat of kidnappings. Shooting, speechlessly, into a history of colonial wreckage and environmental catastrophe. With an even longer view, she was also shooting into the profound silence of the Taíno first encounter with the Spanish in 1492, from whose perspective we know nothing.

The initial portraits Huber produced with this practice were both protest and testimony: *'I was literally nailing them onto abandoned plywood, which gave me a sense of reacting to a history I couldn't influence anymore.'* Shooting back to disrupt a mythology of linear progress, and to return



**FIGURE 6.1** Sasha Huber, *Shooting Back – Reflection on Haitian Roots, Christopher Columbus (Conqueror, 15th century)*, metal staples on abandoned wood, 80 × 115 cm, 2004. Private collection, Helsinki. Courtesy of the artist and Muotohiomo.



**FIGURE 6.2** Sasha Huber, *Shooting Back – Reflection on Haitian Roots, François 'Papa Doc' Duvalier (Dictator of Haiti, 1957–71)*, metal staples on abandoned wood, 80 × 115 cm, 2004. Private collection, Paris.



**FIGURE 6.3** Sasha Huber, *Shooting Back – Reflection on Haitian Roots, Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier (Dictator of Haiti, 1971–86)*, metal staples on abandoned wood, 80 × 115 cm, 2004. Collection of Botkyrka Konsthall, Botkyrka municipality, Sweden.

the unidirectional colonial gaze. She was daring to look back. Push back. And because Huber was discouraged from visiting Haiti, the shooting practice became a way to revisit the oral and visual patchwork of her education, providing a space to reflect on what was being lost: *'What exactly did I really know?'*

*Reflections on Haitian Roots* is a set of compelling portrait images too difficult to ignore. Images that have aesthetic allure, in the way they shimmer as mirrors, reproducing familiar likenesses but also obscuring them with contextual changes in light. In fact, they need light to be properly seen. The staple portraits also show inverse images, similar to those initially produced in analogue photography. Huber says, *'I am shooting an image much like a photograph, except through the details, as single grains, where the picture emerges over a long period of time.'* Huber is fascinated by early photographic techniques (ambrotype, daguerreotype, cyanotype), which were labour intensive in terms of chemical processes that required accuracy and time sensitivity; but she is also interested in its affordances for everyday people. Photography as *'the means through which historical excavation could take place, through which truth claims could be tested, and through which understanding would emerge'* (Edwards 2012: 33). Inflected with a photographic impulse, Huber's stapling asserts a counterpoint representational practice of slowly coming to clarity, which offers the possibility to trace the lines around negative space; to struggle with historical absence and entanglement (Lowe 2015). Furthermore, the staple images participate within what



Krista Thompson has described as a 'visual economy of light' that appears as 'shine' and 'bling' through Afro-diasporic aesthetic practices, modes of citizenship, and self-fashioning (Thompson 2015). Shine is, as Thompson writes, 'an African diasporic location within, and visual perspective on modernity' (ibid.: 26); the 'brilliance and the bitterness', the 'distress of lights on its expanse' (Glissant and Caws 2013). Under the right light, Huber's portraits 'pop' with the audacity of a bejewelled hip-hop artist, catching the viewer's gaze for long enough to realize what or who is appearing, but also the intense labour performed by the artist. They say: '*See me, I am here.*' But the shine also exacts a glare of accusation; a necessity to bring the person represented into the light in order to be held to account. So, Huber shoots, the gun clacks, and the images pop with 'sonic visibility' (Thompson 2015: 236); reflecting and deflecting the dissonant historical soundings that brought them into being.

The initial *Reflections on Haitian Roots* series represented a mode of activism focussed on immediacy and intent to get to the bottom of things; to interrogate dominating figures in Haitian history, and bring them once more to the forefront of a conversation about political origins and the dislocation of a family. The fixing, or pinning down/up of these men's portraits was a confrontation that offered one way to visually register historical accountability. But very quickly Huber realized that the representational values were out of balance, in her aestheticization of the powerful, especially given the binding nature of her methodology: '*I used so much time to create these elaborate portraits of men who harmed, and I realized that in fact I was harming myself; giving them so much energy and continued power in the present. They had already received so much attention in the history books. It was time to turn my attention to those muted and overlooked histories.*' Twice more, Huber would employ the stapling technique to represent colonizers' profiles: in 2006, with Peter Stuyvesant, the last colonial governor of New Amsterdam (New York), who had been appointed by the Dutch West India Company; and in 2008, with a portrait of Louis Agassiz, who still remains a spectral figure in the artist's evolving practice (Figure 6.4).

Wrestling with colonial 'fathers', and agents of racism would become an ongoing provocation and challenge in/to Huber's practice and a driver of activist energy, however what emerged early on was a notable shift in priorities. Huber understood intuitively that her practice required more supportive ethical ground; a mixed methodology with the capacity to include intimacy with ancestors and archives, intergenerational dialogue, listening practices, and travel to places and communities with (post-)colonial reckonings. Huber's art has evolved in relation to an alternative set of questions concerned with the ongoing role of the postmemorial artist – those makers imaginatively invested in 'inherited memories' and 'traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension' (Hirsch 2012: 5). How can an artist shoot back and speak forwards in ways that do not re-inscribe inherited power logics and modes of viewership? In what ways can/does the artist's own body assist in the transmutation of colonial toxins? Where and how could Haiti be remapped within Huber's internal rooting-system? And, in shooting at the past she did not live through, what would/could the gun echo back out of the silence?

### ***Pain things***

200,000 staples marking time; the time it takes for a human life to flourish and fade. The time and circumstances between each life, joined together for a passage on a boat, from here to there.





**FIGURE 6.4** Sasha Huber, *Peter Stuyvesant*, metal staples on fire burned table top, 85 × 110 cm, 2006. Private collection, Finland.

200,000 staples wailing the horrors of the ocean abyss, shot by shot; the abyss of the river with 'no middle', the abyss of 'all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except—more and more threadbare—in the blue savannas of memory or imagination' (Glissant 2010: 7). 200,000 staples for millions of Black Middle Passage pasts (Wright 2015); and Mediterranean presents, so close and overwhelming they overload the tongue. 200,000 staples, then, fixed to recognize uncountable journeys between expectations: the fragility of wanting and desire, contingent promises, and the hope-filled possibility of disembarkation with the body, mind and soul intact. 200,000 staples warding off all the sharks. And 200,000 staples as a metaphor for the 'long durée' of 'residence time', that 260 million year forever-time, beyond human conception, which is required for the molecular traces of the lost to finally disappear from the ocean (Sharpe 2016: 40–1). This is the *Sea of the Lost* (2016), a stapled monument in the shape of a ship, that is also a coffin, representing the scale of human suffering under conditions of coloniality; an 'exorcism', a 'fixing ceremony', an 'altar' as Toni Morrison once described (King, 2000: 153).<sup>1</sup> (Figure 6.5). 200,000 staples to defend all the hostages and the dead (Philip 2008: 26).

Sasha Huber has released the staple gun into and onto different surfaces and contexts, but each requiring the strength of visualization for honouring, and to address silences and misrepresentation (see Huber 2018). For example, in the *Shooting Stars* series (2014–present), Huber has been representing people who were killed through hate crime, or assassinated for their



**FIGURE 6.5** Sasha Huber, *Sea of the Lost*, metal staples on wood, 355 × 120 cm, 2016, The Saastamoinen Foundation Art Collection. / EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Sasha Huber.

political views. In another series of portraits, *The Firsts* (2017–present), she portrays people of African descent who set new precedents in different global contexts. Sometimes these images are stapled onto black acoustic boards, fabric-textured industrial material commonly used in buildings to absorb excess sound and enable clearer and more intimate sonic experiences. Here, the stapling also transforms into stitching; a more delicate bonding of black-body images onto softer matter. Beyond human portraits, Huber has also used the stapling technique for environmental imagery concerned with modern colonial issues, such as resource extraction in Finland, with *Wound – Kittilä I* (2016), and with the climate crisis and species extinction in Aotearoa New Zealand, with *God Save the Huia* (2015) and *The Tipping of the Iceberg* (2020). The labour required to produce all these staple works is itself a monumental endeavour aimed at recalibrating the many forms of carelessness and disregard for life, Black life, within the colonial project. The stapling brings intensity and precision to a citation practice binding each image to a contract of visibility; radiating with the assistance of light, but also going beyond the physical artwork. For example, when Huber placed her *Reflections on Haitian Roots* portraits through X-ray in 2004, the faces appeared with even more clarity. Regularly, she makes frottage drawings of the staple

works, returning to the images and allowing them to transform and multiply, even change colour, on paper. The stapling and frottage subsequently become ways of carefully making colonial wounds visible, as they are simultaneously being stitched together.

When you encounter Sasha Huber's staple works in person, the curated encounters are usually limited to viewership, however these are haptic images with raised surface textures that call for touch and feeling. The tensions built up by the shooting process are also there to be distributed between bodies, from artist to viewer. Each staple therefore, has the capacity to signify as scar tissue left by lacerations on the surface of the skin; or on the psyche. For Huber, the staples are fired under pressure, the terrorizing pressures of history – or, rather, the 'extended temporalities' of 'imperial duress' (Stoler 2016: 6–9). The air built into the mechanics of the staple gun is discharged as a surrogate for all those accumulated colonial affects, which through a repetitive and laborious practice are registered within Huber's own body, producing fatigue. The staples materialize a fixed/binding register of pain enacted – like a tally chart, or ledger for 'racial grief' and (post-)colonial sorrow (Cheng 2001: 6). And they are a 'chronicle' of deaths 'foretold and anticipated' (Hartman 2008: 3). Shooting, then, as a form of storage, which holds in(to) place the memory of injustices that need to be faced and claimed.

Huber makes incisions, sutures *and* leaves scars throughout the shooting process, never outsourcing the work to another person, or larger machine. As such, this methodology constitutes a private performative practice of endurance (central to the Black radical tradition), where Huber puts her own body under strain for the purposes of time travel; to absorb the 'bodily sense memory' she receives as a transmission from the past into the present (Hirsch 2012: 97). Huber thus becomes 'this "witness for the witness," [who] reproduces the marking of trauma', to feel the pain (ibid.: 98). But, as the character Dana in Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* reminds us, time travelling is dangerous; especially when you are mediating (back and forth) between what Katherine McKittrick so hauntingly describes as the 'past elsewhere and present incomplete' (McKittrick 2006: 35). We know, McKittrick writes, that 'black writers and artists are re-placing that which was/is too subhuman, or too irrelevant, or too terrible, to be formally geographic or charted in any way' (ibid.: 33–4).

Within this Afro-diasporic metaphysics of time and space, Sasha Huber's activism (her insistence to act/shoot) needs to be viewed hauntologically, as part of an unfolding relationship with 'trauma's ghost', who spooks and inspires the remembering subject, and shimmers with 'unrecorded, discredited or repressed histories' (Bellamy 2016: 8–9). This is art produced in a state of wakefulness, which is to say in mourning whilst following the trails of ships (Sharpe 2016); but also, art highly aware that 'some fixing ceremony' is required. And this emergent feeling, 'this something to be done, is not a return to the past but a reckoning with that which we have lost, but never had' (Gordon 2004:183). So, something must be done, not just because colonialism still wreaks havoc on the human condition and has indelibly scarred the planet, but because in the smallest and most intimate of ways, a child has lost her mother-tongue to this history. Huber says: *'My mother never talked to me in her languages, which would have been French and Creole and spoke English instead. It makes me feel less connected to my mother perhaps, but my enduring engagement with her heritage I think compensates for this loss. Ironically it has gained my work recognition as a Haitian artist, becoming acknowledged in the Haitian artworld.'*<sup>2</sup> Shot by shot, inside history, producing steel grains of light, the artist endeavours to call the pieces back.

## II. A dialogue

We are Sasha Huber (visual artist researcher based in Finland) and Temi Odumosu (curator and lecturer based in Sweden); two black women who have come from elsewhere and now live and work in the Nordic countries. In this context, we both work on slavery, colonialism and its afterlives. We teach, we write, we make art, and all with generosity and much love. However, living in Scandinavia is not easy, and it can feel like being in a bubble where people genuinely think they are protected from the trials and tribulations of the world (and its histories). We regularly experience a strange sense of déjà vu when dealing with issues of intolerance and coloniality in these cultures, since the responses of defensiveness, discomfort, and denial mimic those in other European countries, as well as in settler colonial contexts. There can be a saddening reluctance to simply listen to different perspectives here, let alone process what has happened.

In March 2019, we sat down together in Helsinki to talk about Sasha's art, what motivates her work, and the post-memorial impulse invested in both of our work. Sasha was grappling a cold, and we were feeling very sensitive after the recent loss of two important colleagues in the arts: Alanna Lockward and Bisi Silva; two powerful women who had touched our lives. A few days after our interview the venerable curator and art historian Okwui Enwezor died. Then, two weeks later Temi's grandmother died, the prolific matriarch of a big family. The grieving brought us closer together over the writing process for this whole essay, but also highlighted the precariousness of life, and all the responsibilities of cultural work that we are now feeling more intently.

To better understand Sasha's work, we thought the interview format was a priority for this piece of writing. As you can imagine, we talked for a long time, so we have chosen moments of dialogue that engage the broader scope of her practice; an artistic practice consisting of staple works, drawings, performative actions, video works, sculpture and rituals. We also share parts of an extended discussion we had on the *Demounting Louis Agassiz* project, which has been Sasha's life-changing artistic saga (in the old Norse sense of the word). Our feeling is that the conversations demonstrate how visual activism can be attentive, thoughtful and poetic.

### ***Beginnings***

**TO:** *What are your earliest childhood memories of art or artistic practices?*

**SH:** There is this one memory where I remember my mother drawing with us, my sister and me; and realizing that she is really good at drawing. And she would draw, for instance, everyday life objects in a row and then we would then colour them, or she was drawing princesses; you know these colouring pages, but she created them herself. But she was also doing a lot at home, like painting furniture or tiles in a specific way . . . I also remember her telling us about her father being a painter and an artist from Haiti. But then I also know that my Swiss grandfather on my father's side was also a really good drawer. He was a mushroom expert at the botanical garden in Zurich and a scientific illustrator. He created those beautiful study cards of something like 800 different mushrooms.



**TO:** *Your Mother's father was a well-known Haitian artist, what was his name and what kind of art did he make?*

**SH:** His name was George Remponeau (1916–2012), and he was one of the co-founders of Le Centre d'Art in Port-Au-Prince, which opened in 1944 [Figure 6.6]. He was a figurative painter, self-taught, painting with oils but also drawing, he was a teacher and mentor to many young artists and directed the school for some time. He was also running a gallery together with my grandmother. After immigrating to New York in the mid-1960s, he became an illustrator at McGraw-Hill publishing for many years, so he did a lot of technical illustrations of animals or cars and things like that. But in his own work he painted landscapes, and also a lot of Haitian people in their everyday lives and environment. He also noticed at the time, in the 1950s, that all the schools'



**FIGURE 6.6** Georges Remponeau (1916, Haiti–2012, USA), Haiti, 1930s. Family archive.

textbooks in Haiti depicted white people even though the majority population was black. He felt that should be changed, and he proposed if he could redraw the school books. So, he did that, too. There is a series of journals he made for children with creole text that depict Haitian people as they were, so that children could recognize themselves.

**TO:** *Wow, wonderful. So, you really were prepared (in some respects) for some kind of artist life?*

**SH:** I do feel it had an impact and it came quite naturally in that sense, but at the beginning I decided to become a graphic designer. Art came only at a later time in life during my Master's degree studies in visual culture in Helsinki in the early 2000s.

**TO:** *Were you exposed to or confronted by historical images of slavery and colonialism, early on?*

**SH:** I remember the sculpture in Haiti of the freed slave (*Le Marron Inconnu*)<sup>3</sup> in front of the presidential palace. I really remember seeing that as a small child and also represented in books about Haiti we had at home and which my mother gave me meanwhile. Otherwise, in Switzerland, I remember that there was this candy, which had a strange name that I also did not understand at the beginning. It's called 'Mohrenkopf', or 'The Head of a Moor'.<sup>4</sup> But then at some point I understood, OK, this is a head of a black person, and everybody just eats that candy without thinking. And even as a young person already it made me feel uncomfortable but I was still missing the vocabulary. Today there is much more discussion about these issues.

**TO:** *Did you find Switzerland an inspiring place creatively, to make art?*

**SH:** It's interesting because I became an artist in Finland. I was doing artistic work and graphic design in Switzerland and studied there, but then I went to Italy in 2000 to a place called Fabrica, a research and design centre set up by Benetton in Treviso. Before I went there, I was fascinated to hear about this place where creatives came together from all around the world. I was keen to be exposed to that kind of environment, because I was working in Swiss advertising agencies and felt a bit limited. And I also knew that this Swiss advertising world was not my world, even though I was curious about it. So, I applied to Fabrica and got invited to go there for a year. That is when I met my partner Petri Saarikko, who was at the New Media department while I was in the graphic design department. We collaborated during this time and then moved together to Helsinki where he was from. I quickly applied for a Master's degree in graphic design at the University of Art and Design (nowadays Aalto University). It is during the studies that I started to work with the staple gun. My final degree project was the first stapled portraiture series *Shooting Back – Reflection on Haitian Roots*. This project was like a seed that I planted, from which everything that followed grew.

**TO:** *And that's a very powerful, introductory public statement to make; to be shooting. As opposed to sketching or painting or sculpting.*

**SH:** Yes, and the work was made because I was invited to participate in a group show in Helsinki, with Petri and another friend. And that was an invitation to have my first exhibition. And then I



thought, what am I going to do? This was my opportunity to find my own expression. So, I started with my Caribbean heritage, particularly because I was living and working in a place that was entirely new to me, and which was hard to connect with.

## ***Practices in places***

**TO:** *I wanted to talk about the importance of the site in your work. Location. Because you have a very situated practice, and work in different places around the world which have historical resonances, or are connected to colonialism. Arguably the whole planet is, but I mean very specific places that have resonance. So, what is the importance of location in your work?*

**SH:** At the start the site was mentally a place of memory. It was about being detached from both of my home countries (Switzerland and Haiti), and being in Finland, as a Nordic country, which was completely something else. But still being able to transcend or teleport myself to other places; being able to do that mentally. And that might have been, like, a warm-up for me. But then the actual physical way of working on sites happened in 2008, when I got involved and was invited to be part of the Demounting Louis Agassiz committee which was founded by the Swiss historian and activist Hans Fässler in 2007. I met him after reading his book about Switzerland's involvement in slavery and the slave trade (*Reise in Schwarz-Weiss: Schweizer Ortstermine in Sachen Sklaverei*). It was the first time I read about Switzerland's colonial history.

The Demounting Louis Agassiz project, actually brought me back to Switzerland. And Hans Fässler started this project because he noticed that historical retelling of the famous Swiss glaciologist Louis Agassiz was always focussed on his achievements in glaciology and ichthyology, but nobody mentioned much about the racial theories he taught in the United States after immigrating there in 1846 (to teach at Harvard University), which was where he came into contact with black people for the first time. He would write to his mother about his experiences with black people who served him, and him feeling disgusted about having them touching his plate, and so on. That was the beginning for him to become one of the most influential racists of the nineteenth century, suggesting segregation in the States at a governmental level.

Hans Fässler felt that this should be part of Agassiz's official history in a year when his 200-year birthday anniversary was being celebrated. He took this as an opportunity to reflect on how to make that history complete. His suggestion was to literally 'demount' him, by renaming one of several mountains named after Agassiz, called Agassizhorn, which was in the Canton Berne valleys, situated within three communes. He wrote an official letter to the government, and set up a committee, which he invited me to be a part of. And this is where I learnt more about the project, and the decision to rename the mountain 'Rentyhorn', after one of the enslaved persons Agassiz ordered to be photographed on a South Carolina plantation, in March of 1850. Renty was actually born in Kongo, and was the eldest of a group of seven enslaved people that were photographed, all stripped of their clothes, from front, side and back, and also portraits as well. Agassiz tried to use those photographs to prove the inferiority of Black people. So, when Hans was thinking about the renaming, he thought that it would be more respectful (also in terms of using images) if we chose the elder of the group.

The idea was to officially get the mountain renamed but the whole process of the renaming was really to start a dialogue about this history. It was a big campaign, all the mayor's got a letter from us, also the UNESCO world nature heritage committee (because the mountain is located in that area); including Kofi Annan who was also part of it, and he got that letter too. Back then, it took a long time before they decided that 'No,' they didn't want to rename the mountain, they wanted it to stay because of the merits Agassiz has in glaciology, since this is the Alps. And even one of the Mayors from Guttannen said the we have no 'N-word's' here (he actually used that word). He said, 'We don't have n\*\*\*\*\*s in this area, they have no merits, why should a mountain be named after a n\*\*\*o.'

What happened is that this whole story really took me in, and then I felt like OK, this has to happen now. I wanted to rename that mountain physically, to go there and just put a new sign with a new name. And, I'd never done that before, making a direct action that takes me to a location. My original plan was to go there by foot, definitely, but then through researching I realized that you needed to know how to climb and all the rules about what to do, you needed a guide also. But I didn't know how to climb and I didn't want to lose time either. So, I realized that the only way of getting there would be through the air, by helicopter. I ended up going alone. It took a while to organize everything, and I created an engraved plaque, with a new name and a short description about the reason for the renaming, and then made a graphical representation of Renty's portrait (just his head). And I decided to dress myself in a costume that I hoped would make me look like a time traveller. I wanted to create this feeling of going to another time zone, as well.

This was the starting point, and then from there everything else just happened; things that I could have never anticipated, you know. After that followed Brazil - because Agassiz travelled to Brazil to lead an expedition, to study fossils and ice age theory, but then he did another really big commission of photographs of enslaved people in Rio de Janeiro and also in Menais. And there in Rio, I also made an intervention at a square called Praça de Agassiz where I came on horseback to tell the local residents about the story of the street sign. And then, while we were there by chance, we found an old vintage postcard in a flea market of Furnas de Agassiz (it's not called that any more), and then I took photographs of myself there.

**TO:** *I mean all of this does have resonances of a kind of pilgrimage, that you are sort of travelling to these different places because the memory of Agassiz is restored there, and you are disturbing the complicity that people have with his presence in the environment; knowing that it's very difficult to rename things or to take things down, especially when they become part of a national or cultural heritage. So, it's like you travel to these places and then you make a ritual of transformation, or try and leave another kind of memory (another kind of trace) behind. But you intervene, you disturb the historical continuity somehow; this goes back to time travelling, it's like you create ruptures in the timeline.*

**SH:** Yes, that relates also I find, to the notion of rewriting history, as a way of realizing that history, even if it's in the past, that it's renegotiable. I renegotiate on those different locations concretely, and engage with the people there who most of the time didn't know about that part of the story at all – like Aotearoa New Zealand, or Scotland and Canada and so on.

**TO:** *Mmm, OK, and so it starts with the site and then you immediately get connected to or integrated into a community that also has its own relations to this history (or not). And then you are somehow a mediator for this dialogue.*

**SH:** Exactly, and because I'm from Switzerland like Agassiz, I also feel that I have the possibility to do that, maybe more than if he would have been from another country, because there are also of course other figures like him. But it's maybe also how I got involved in this so deeply. I was relearning my own sense of place and history. Through Hans I was introduced to a history that I didn't get to know about at school. And at the time, Hans's book (published in 2005) was the second about this topic. This is why it is important history writing, a missing link that I was given, and then through this becoming part of a collective attempt to renegotiate a part of Switzerland's history. And now, even this last year, Hans and another colleague from the committee got to rewrite Agassiz's entry in the governmental lexicon.<sup>5</sup> Even though the mountain has not changed in name, it did change for people who wanted it to be different. And I also think nowadays things don't have to be official to be true, and the intervention I made changed the name as well, even if in a symbolic way. I feel this way about all of the gestures and collaborative actions since (in Brazil, in New Zealand). Things do change; and also, all these images that come out of these processes have their own affects and power.

**TO:** *Yes, they do. On another side to this though, I'm interested in your relationship to this person (Agassiz), a ghost that compels you to act. I don't want to say you are obsessed with, but maybe compelled, yes compelled to engage with his legacy and to disturb it. But in a way he occupies a part of you and your imagination. How do you feel about that? He is still very alive for you, so it's clear you haven't laid him to rest yet.*

**SH:** Yes, it is not over yet, but at some point, there will be a moment where that probably will happen. This persistence is part of this historical and artistic mission.

## **Time travelling**

**TO:** *But is the mission just about Agassiz, or about something else? Because I'm wondering if it's important to separate Agassiz from a wider mission, whatever it is. For example, for us to live and work with a more sensitive historical consciousness. Or, for us (the human us) to be aware that the past is present. The poet Dionne Brand writes in her book *A Map to the Door of No Return* that: 'History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives', and that where one stands is always in relation to that historicity (Brand 2001: 25); which is not necessarily physically tangible, but always there. And there is nowhere you can go that history is not present somehow. I think that is interesting when thinking about your intentionality with Agassiz. Is it about Agassiz, or is it about what gets silenced, what has been violated, what needs to be transformed overall? Because otherwise Agassiz becomes this overloaded sign; and it's not just him. There are like hundreds, maybe thousands, of people like him who have had a profound, scarring effect on humanity.*

**SH:** At first, the project seems to be centred around Agassiz, but it was in fact always about remembering those persons who have been either directly or indirectly impacted by the extent of the racism that he instituted, and which continues until today. The Rentyhorn was the starting point. There are always new reasons why different places were named after him. And every time there is a different story, and meanings behind it. So, that is why there are these different levels as well that create in the end this big project, which is about him as an exceptional example of one of the most influential racists of the time. In Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, it was very much about the Maori culture – what happened there, why so many names were changed, and how it is today. And in that context, there was much more of this sensitivity in this name change than in Switzerland, because in Aotearoa New Zealand so many indigenous names were changed in the 19th century that are now slowly coming back. So, people are already aware of the colonial naming, but not about this Agassiz story at all.

Dealing with this kind of negative history has also taught me so much, and put me in contact with so many people (like you) that for me, the negatives are transformed by these connections and help healing and caring for the wounds. The fact that I met Tamara Lanier, a direct descendant of Renty, as a result of creating an online petition for the mountain renaming in Switzerland ([www.rentyhorn.ch](http://www.rentyhorn.ch)). Tamara said to me that it was such a good experience for her to see that there is a group of people who wanted to make things right, and reposition things that were seen as fixed. We don't have to just accept things as they are, and that's it. Now after many years with this practice, I can say that the persistence moves things along. And sticking with things is important too because it shows that you are serious about this, so it's not just something you can handle in a short while. This is not possible. But at the same time, it has to come naturally too. You cannot force it, it has to be sincere.

There have been so many serendipitous moments that happened along the way, which were also important moments for me to realize, OK, I'm on the right track. Those signs that happen make me feel that I want to continue this. And of course, I don't only want to do work connected to Agassiz, but most of the work relates to historical trauma and how it affects us today, and tries to suggest or find ways of caring for those wounds. We cannot get rid of them, but it's about caring about them, looking at them, looking after them.

It's interesting I've never thought about it so clearly in that sense, because I would always talk about healing the wounds, but it's actually about caring for them.

**TO:** *Attending to them first.*

**SH:** Yes, exactly, because the healing is . . . well, the wounds do not go away, actually.

**TO:** *Or they may heal but with a very visible scar.*

**SH:** Yes, and that those scars are taken care of and acknowledged. The art can contribute to the healing, which is a slow process.

**TO:** *As an art historian and someone who works with colonial archives, I think a lot about the work that I do as ghost work, which is a term I'm borrowing from Avery Gordon's book *Ghostly Matters**

*(2004). I'm wondering if you consider yourself to be living with ghosts in your practice? And if so, how do they appear?*

**SH:** Yes, you brought that up with the metaphor of the ghosts, and it's interesting because I wasn't really consciously aware of it. But I'm thinking about the *Mixed Traces* (2010 –17) photographic series I made, where I re-enact the poses which people had to take in the past when they were photographed ethnographically (front, side, back). So maybe that is a moment when I take contact with enslaved people who had to endure this humiliation. But also in *My Racism is a Humanism* (2013) performance lecture, this was made based on the idea that we don't let Agassiz rest in peace. In the lecture he wakes up from the dead to come back in order to vindicate himself.

**TO:** *Yes, because you are standing naked, also in the landscape, in the same way that Renty and Delia and all the other people were represented.*

**SH:** Yes exactly, in a somatologic way. And in this taking contact, it is as if I take position into their bodies, or at least the idea they left behind.

**TO:** *Mmm, so you sort of superimpose yourself somehow.*

**SH:** You know that classical image of when you die, your soul lifts up and goes away? Well, they come to me. I could say that actually. Because I'm still alive here, and they come to me, maybe. So, that's something I hadn't thought about a lot, but now that we are talking about it, this could maybe explain how to connect to ancestors in a direct way, but also a painful way.

**TO:** *But also, then, how to lay them to rest again. The unfinishedness of these archives that contain violence, I think is the challenge, right? Because we are not really sure how Renty and the other people were attended to when they actually died. Were they buried in a way that was fitting to their cultural values and systems of belief? We can speculate, perhaps. So, there is also something about the unfinishedness of us not knowing how ancestors were laid to rest originally. When they appear to us in these very violating images, then there are so many things that need to be addressed. All we have is the image and whatever we choose to read from the emotional landscape on their faces. And then on top of all that, there is what we don't know about the rest of their lives.*

**SH:** Yes, I mean things have changed for me in terms of how I work with those racist archives. Nowadays, I would not want to show those photographs any more as part of my exhibitions. I did use them at the beginning when I published a book together with Prof. Maria Helena Machado as part of the 29th São Paulo biennial. And the *Mixed Traces* series was me also putting myself in replacement of the enslaved. I felt this is a good way of working with the archive, as a stand in, in order to reclaim our bodies back. Those photographs were made against their will and showing them now again repeats in my opinion the abuse. You know Tamara Lanier is filing a lawsuit against Harvard University in order to receive the ownership of the photograph of Renty and Delia

which she sees as family photographs as means to repatriate them. To gain their freedom at last and reparations as well for the damages caused.<sup>6</sup>

**TO:** *Wow, I think having a living descendant to fight on behalf of their ancestor is so important, and a gift. In our work we are what Marianne Hirsch describes as 'an extra-familial presence', doing this work on behalf of, because of all the ways the colonial structure erased identities and severed families and community relations (Hirsch 2012: 97). But here you have an actual family-member descendant claiming the right to decide. It's very powerful and symbolic, and we will see how the case progresses. Connected to this, you said someone described your work as poetic activism, and that this resonated with you. I'm wondering what this idea of poetry in action means to you? Given that you are using a range of tools that are provocative and even aggressive, but at the same time producing very beautiful images, too.*

**SH:** In the case of the interventions, I think this is where the poetic activism description was applied. I think my works emerge as a result of relationships, and dialogue and the research I do, and that translates into the work. So, this is why when they are made, they offer a kind of non-violent way of addressing issues, using quite a monumental scale as well. There is a lot of intensity in my practice behind the scenes. I think I absorb a lot of pain. But then as I work and process all of this the outcome is something else. An after image, or something like that. For me everything develops in quite a natural way, from one to the other. I am called or urged into situations where injustices have taken place. I gather the evidence and speak to people, I process the woundings, and then I find careful ways to (counter)act.

### III. Photo essay

Note: The photo essay, reproduced in black and white here, is also included in the colour Plates section – see Plates 17–29.



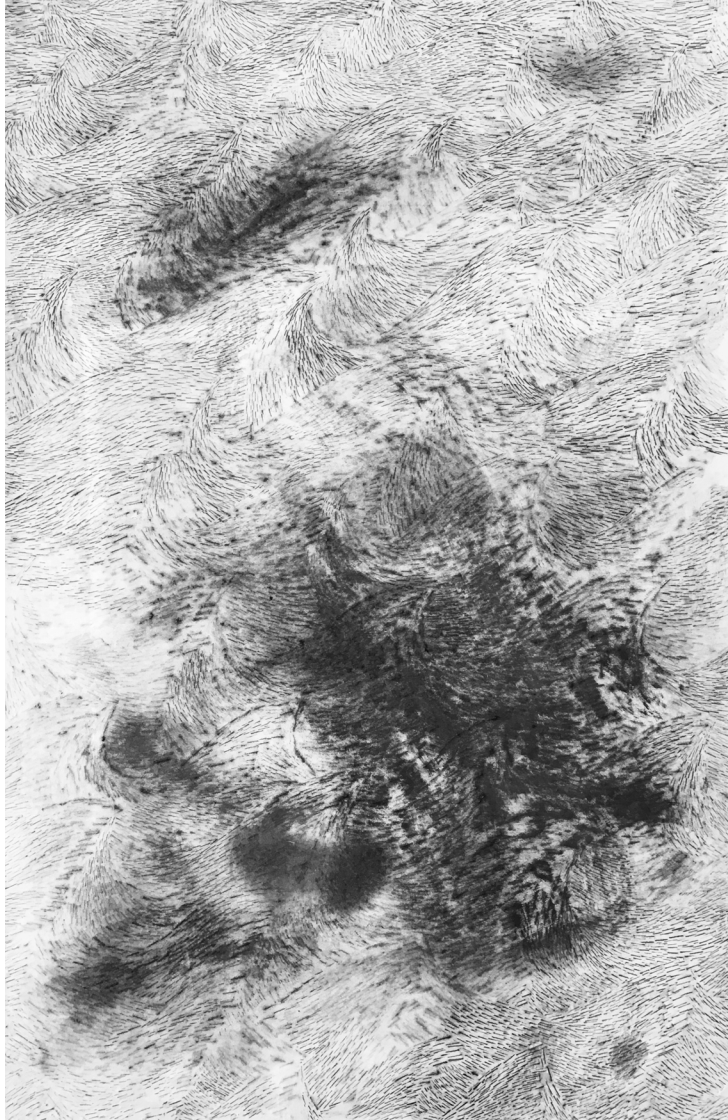


**FIGURE 6.7** Sasha Huber, *Rentyhorn*, video, 4:30 min, 2008. Still photography: Siro Micheroli. Courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki.





**FIGURE 6.8** Artist holds a compressed-air staple gun: Sasha Huber, *Sea of the Lost*, detail, metal staples on wood, 355 × 120 cm, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Saastamoinen Foundation Art Collection / EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Kai Kuusisto.



**FIGURE 6.9** Sasha Huber, *Sea of the Lost*, graphite frottage edition, 65 × 100 cm, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.





**FIGURE 6.10** Sasha Huber, *Shooting Star Series* (2014–), *Henri Perpignand* (1916, *Haiti–1958, Haiti*), Army officer under Paul Magloire, 35th President of Haiti, and co-organizer of the 1958 coup d'état against Haitian dictator François Duvalier. White gold leaf on metal staples and larch wood, 27 × 32 × 4 cm, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.



**FIGURE 6.11** Sasha Huber, *Shooting Star Series* (2014–), *Marielle Franco* (1979, Brazil–2018 Brazil), Politician, feminist, and human rights activist. Leaf white gold on metal staples and larch wood, 27 × 32 × 4 cm, 2019. Gifted to Mônica Benício. Courtesy of the artist.





**FIGURE 6.12** Sasha Huber, *Wound I – Kittilä*, steel staples on fire-burned wood and gold leaf on steel staples and wood, 56 × 71 × 11 cm, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Collection of the European Investment Bank – Luxembourg. Photo by Katja Hagelstam/LOKAL.





**FIGURE 6.13** Sasha Huber, *God Save the Huia*, metal staples on fire burned wood, 80 × 100 cm, 2015. Private collection, Aotearoa New Zealand. Courtesy of the artist.

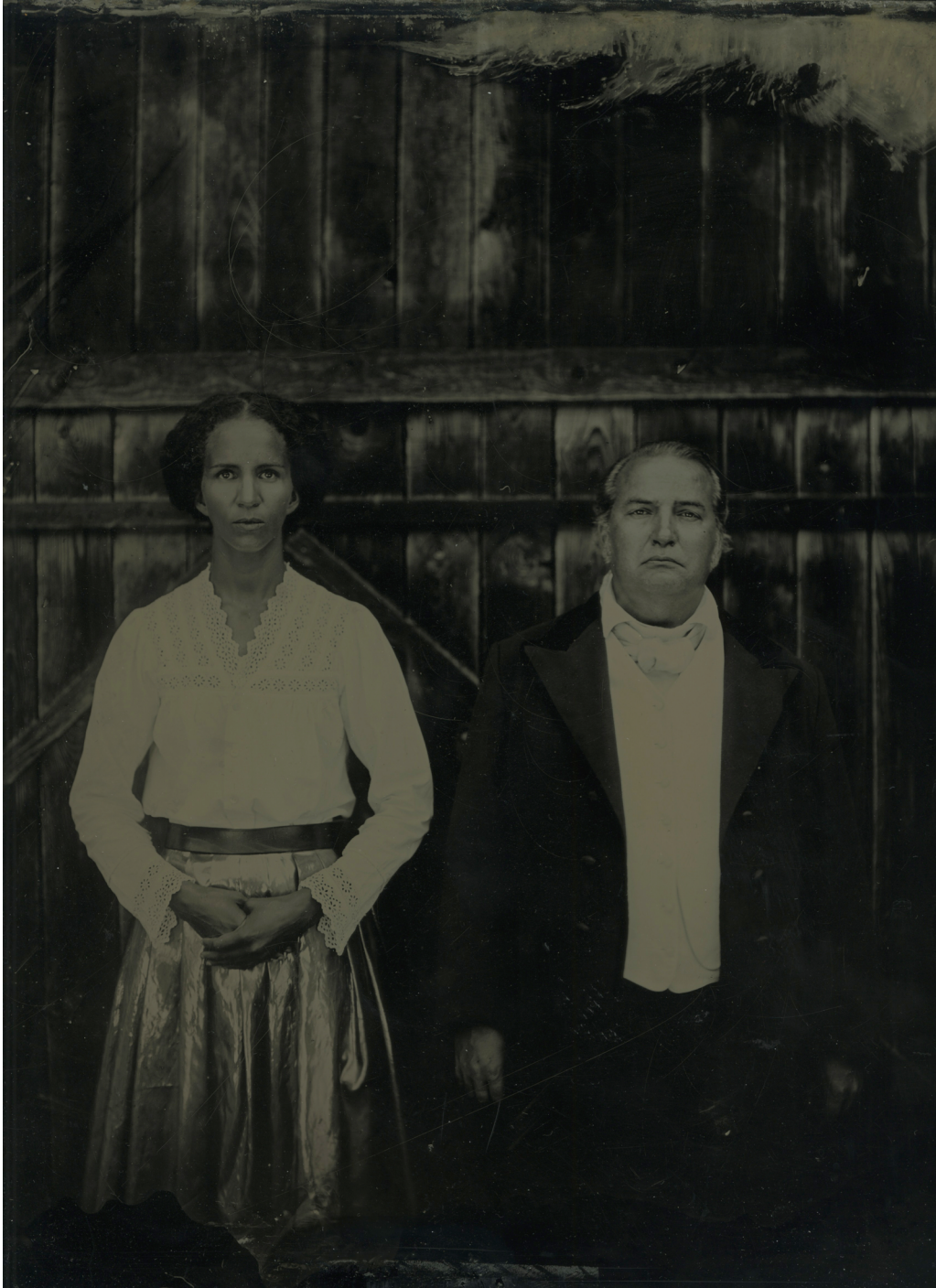


**FIGURE 6.14** Sasha Huber, *This is America*, metal staples on cotton and bulletproof vest panel 15.3 × 18.3 × 1.7 inch [38.8 × 46.8 × 4.3 cm], Series 1: Edition 1/6, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.



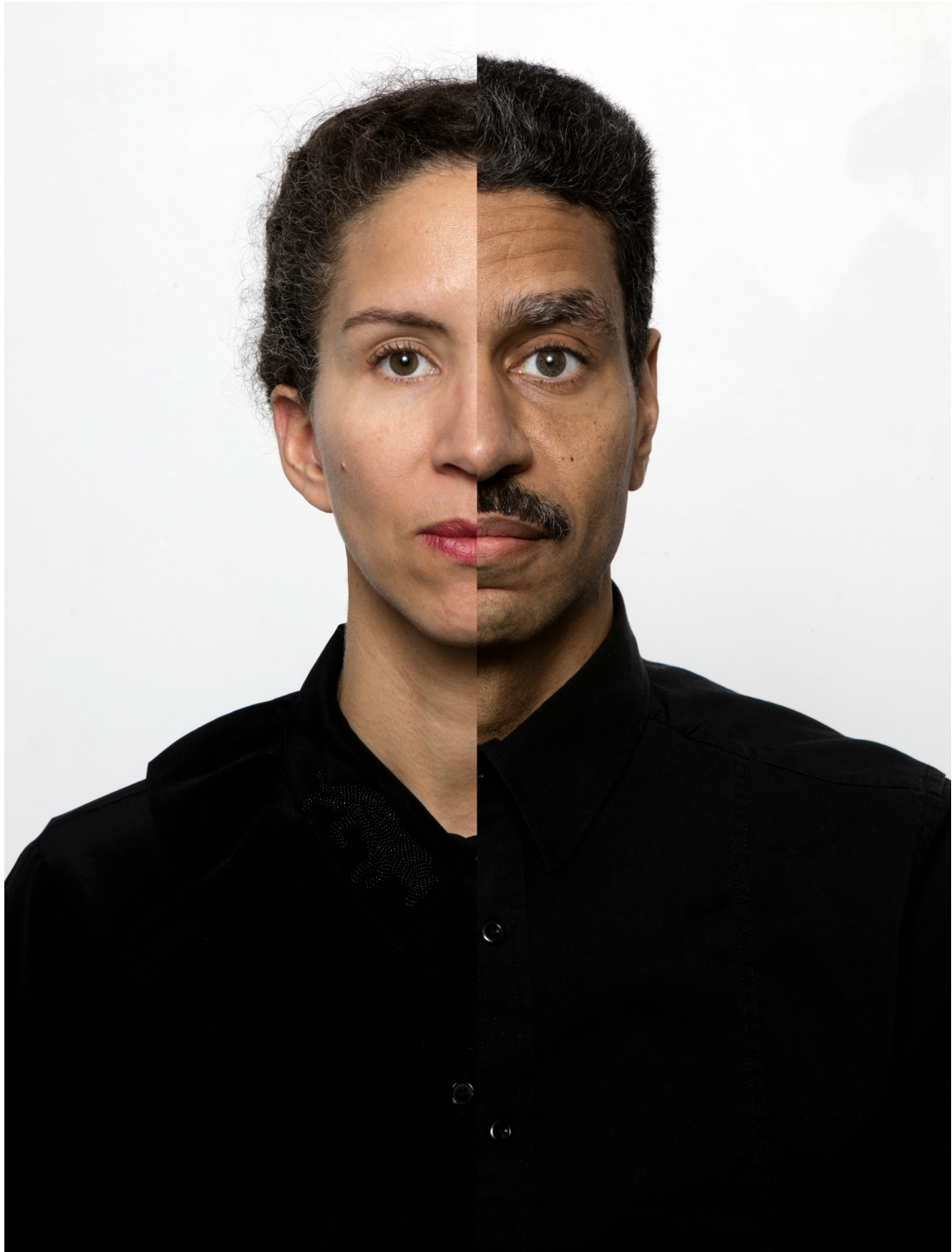


**FIGURE 6.15** *Shattered Louis Agassiz*, Ambrotype of Thomas Götz as Louis Agassiz, 10 × 12 inches [25.4 × 30.4 cm], wet plate collodion photography by Borut Peterlin commissioned by Sasha Huber, 2013. Photo by Sasha Huber. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Sasha Huber.



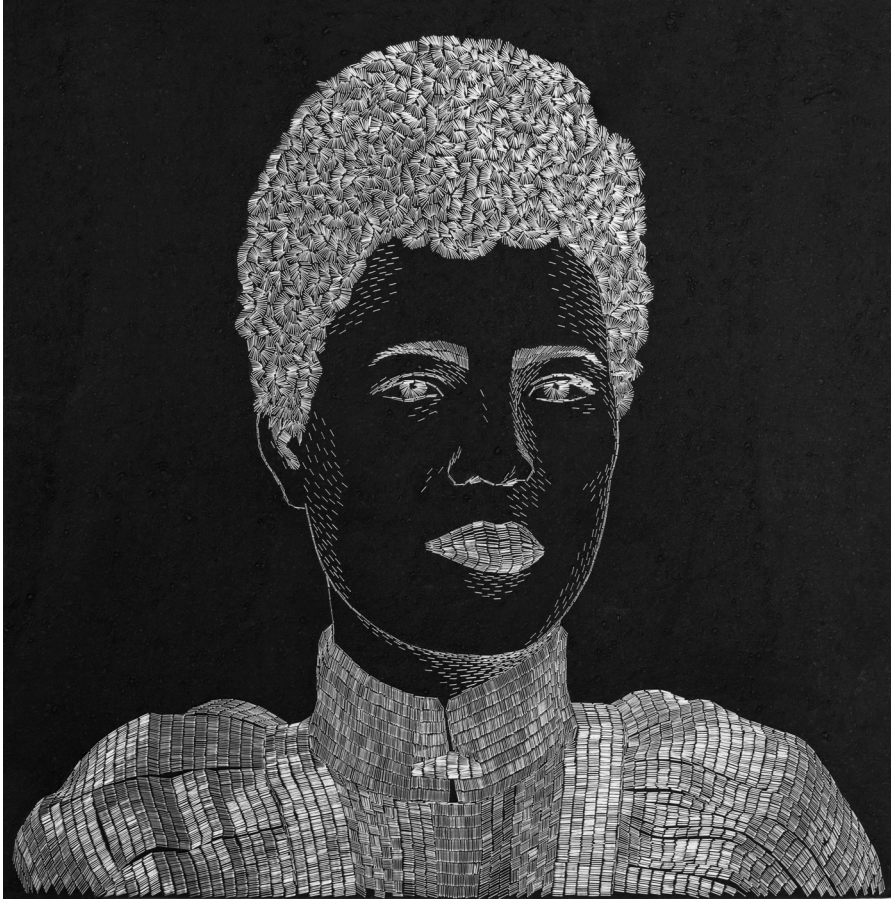
**FIGURE 6.16** *Evidence*, Ambrotype of Sasha Huber and Thomas Götz as Louis Agassiz (right) 10 × 12 inches [25.4 × 30.4 cm], wet plate collodion photography by Borut Peterlin commissioned by Sasha Huber, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.





**FIGURE 6.17** Sasha Huber, *Same Mother*, photography montage, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.





**FIGURE 6.18** Sasha Huber, *The Firsts – Rosa Emilia Clay*, metal staples on black painted acoustic board, 100 × 100 cm, 2017. Private collection. © Wisam Elfadl.



**FIGURE 6.19** Sasha Huber, *The Firsts – James Baldwin (1924–1987)*, metal staples on window shutter of chalet he resided in periodically during 1951–53, 49 × 69 cm, Leukerbad, Switzerland, 2018. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Siro Micheroli.

## Notes

- 1 As cited from her appearance on *The Southbank Show*, 11 October, 1987.
- 2 Huber was invited to participate in the largest contemporary and historical art exhibition in France, titled *HAÏTI: Two Centuries of Art and Creativity, at the Grand Palais* (19 November 2014–15 February 2015).
- 3 *Le Marron Inconnu* (The Unknown Maroon) was designed by Albert Mangonès and completed in 1968. It is installed on one of boulevards, named after the Le Marron Inconnu, of the park of Champ de Mars in the centre of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.
- 4 Sasha Huber has now produced a new project called 'No Mohr' (2021), addressing commodity racism in Switzerland.
- 5 See Barth and Fässler (2018).
- 6 Since our conversation in Helsinki, Tamara Lanier's lawsuit has evolved. In March 2021, her case was dismissed by the presiding judge, who upheld Harvard's claim to ownership of the photographs, citing that the images were the property of the photographer and not the subjects represented.

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# 7

## Visible speechlessness

### A critical approach to image acts of lip-sewing<sup>1</sup>

*Amelie Ochs and Ana Lena Werner*

#### I

**W**hen in March 2016, the so-called 'Calais Jungle' in France was to be partly demolished, refugees living in the camp decided to protest against the measure by sewing their lips together.<sup>2</sup> This was not the first-time refugees have used this (extreme) practice to protest against the appalling conditions they have been forced into after leaving their places of origin. The first reported instance happened in Australia at the Curtin detention centre in 2000. Here, up to a dozen refugees are alleged to have sewn their lips together in protest against the long processing time of their asylum applications and the circumstances they were living in (Hoenig 2009: 140–1).<sup>3</sup> However, no lasting images of people with sewn lips emerged from these early reports.<sup>4</sup> Since then, at least 18 cases of lip-sewing among refugees have been reported from about fourteen countries – and most of these reports have been accompanied by graphic images of the self-harmed individuals. In most cases, men have undertaken these protests though there have been reports of women in Greece, Germany and Turkey, as well as children in Australia and Nauru, also doing so (Greece: Galliot 2010; Germany: Staffen-Quandt 2012; Turkey: Speri 2014; Australia: Marks 2002; Nauru: Farrell, Evershed and Davidson 2016).

Lip-sewing has occurred in various spaces, like detention centres, border zones and public spaces (Cox 2015: 117). In these sites of power asymmetry refugees are, as Julia Schulze Wessel put it, 'border subjects' (Schulze Wessel 2016: 46–57). They are in an asymmetric relationship to the sovereign state and its institutions, wherever they hope and wait for legal and political integration into society (Schulze Wessel 2012: 162). They are not only placed into detention camps and other spaces where their mobility is severely restricted, but they also suffer from fear, uncertainty and desperation with regard to their future. This is often accompanied by a feeling of being deprived of rights, sometimes even after the application process has been completed.

Sometimes, violence by officials or others in charge is reported (Greece: Epoca Libera 2010; Nauru: Farrell, Evershed and Davidson 2016). In response to these experiences, lip-sewing by refugees can be seen as linked to demands on four points. First, clarification of their refugee status in the country they have arrived. Further, the freedom to cross a border into another country where they want to seek refuge. Third, a guarantee not to be sent back to a country where they are threatened in any way, in short: non-refoulment. Last, to call into question the existence of a global human rights regime (an international concept per se) and the alleged 'Western' values of the countries they seek refuge in, such as freedom and democracy.

All of these issues relate to one critical factor, as Isaac, a former detainee in the Australian camps of Port Hedland, Villawood and Woomera, puts it: 'we thought "let's sew our lips and that will get some attentions [*sic*]"' (Fiske 2016: 127). While this laconic statement might understate the painful act, it highlights not only the instrumental character of lip-sewing linked to desperation for public recognition of refugees' suffering, but through its striking brevity also the despair associated with the practice. Some refugees explicitly mention that they had tried to voice their problems before taking the drastic self-harming measure, as one protester in Sweden was quoted saying 'We have begged and shouted, but the Migration Board has not listened. Now we will silence our voices, perhaps then they will listen' ('Iranian Refugees' 2011). While in Calais a placard was seen saying 'Will you listen now?' (McPartland 2016).

As the verbal claims remained unheard, the refugees fell back upon a bodily practice that is visible. The sewn-up lips can be understood as a symbolization of the situation of being unheard. Furthermore, this form of protest captured the general public's attention. The great majority of people who have written about the incidences (including ourselves) do so without direct exposure to the protest. Our gaze is mediated through press accounts and images. A typical phenomenon of the twenty-first century is that the visibility of the protests is increased through new media and the production and circulation of images by digital technologies.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is also a phenomenon of globalization – concerning the appearance and distribution of images, as well as their attention-seeking content. The cases in our chapter stem from the last two decades. Thus, it is a (very) short history of the production and circulation of digital images in an activist context. The compilation is based on an investigation in 2019. The investigation accepts that contents and photographs of the individual events might have been deleted or censored over the last years. In fact, this fits in with the approach we have taken, as we question what remains of these protests.

We will be dealing with the images that resulted from the refugees' protests, which we will analyse and interpret for their background and distribution, composition, theoretical potential and limits. In this text, we understand visual activism as a form of activism using the so-called new media, which is to be distinguished from art activism. Our cross-disciplinary case study reveals the paradox of visible speechlessness – protagonists hurting and silencing themselves through lip-sewing and demonstrating their inability to act. At the same time, they are producing visible images of their situation, which are – uncoupled from the act of self-harming violence – publicly active.

In the discussion below, we point out different levels of the visual (re-)presentation of these protests in order to reconstruct the protagonists' strategies. The increasingly instrumental character of the pictures, leads to the question of the images' potential. In order to answer

this question, we rely on political theory, political philosophy and image theory. All of these inputs provide a route to the topic of agency. The refugees' agency, we will conclude, is to be distinguished from the images' agency – a vital distinction that so far has been missing from enquiries on lip-sewing.

## II

Since the case of the Iranian Kurdish political poet, Abas Amini, in 2003, lip-sewing has become recognized publicly through images taken of the self-harmed.<sup>6</sup> These images are either photographs or films, taken by press photographers or amateurs, which are spread through the (new) media to the wider (global) public. In the following chronology we detect four main dynamics of this visual practice: first, the awareness of the potency of the images increases among the photographed individuals (as well as the photographers); second, the image's layout becomes increasingly dramatic; third, more written messages occur in the photographs in order to underline the demands of the protest; and fourth, the sheer number of images documenting one protest grows over time – and with it the editing of these images.

The photographs of Amini, prominently published by BBC News at the end of May in 2003 (see Figure 7.1 and Plate 30), show his face in a close-up view – one can see the details of his sore lips and lids, stitched with a cotton thread – or portray him lying motionless on a bed with his hands next to his head ('Protest' 2003). The pictures, taken from a view above, underline this gesture of humility – Amini is at the observer's mercy. He made an example out of lip-sewing 'to fight for the rights of asylum seekers worldwide', as he told *The Guardian* newspaper in an interview after abandoning his hunger strike. Tania Branigan, the author of *The Guardian* article, reports that Amini first swore to his friends that he would remain silent about his actions. Obviously, he broke his oath. The decision to inform the general public must have been deliberate – although we cannot reconstruct for sure that it was his personal aim to spread photographs around the world. However, Branigan points out the significance of this case without knowing about the 'afterlife' of the images: 'What seems to have begun as a personal gesture of outrage (. . .) had become an international cause celebre' (Barnigan 2003).

Very similar pictures of Naseh Ghafor appeared in the news only one year later. He had sewn his lips shut to protest the decision of his deportation from Britain back to Iraq.<sup>7</sup> The close-up view of his face, as well as the portrait of him lying on a sofa, shares the same composition as the images taken of Amini. Unlike Amini, Ghafor closed his eyes while being photographed and did not sew them up.<sup>8</sup>

Six years later, two separate groups of refugees launched public protests in front of the Athens' university building within three months of each other: in October 2010, 45 Iranian asylum seekers had been on hunger strike and 8 of them, including 1 woman, Mandana Daneshnia,<sup>9</sup> sewed up their lips with medical thread (Galliot 2010). In December 2010, Afghan refugees followed this example.<sup>10</sup> Compared to the earlier individual cases from the UK, the images which appeared in media reports of the Athens protests were different as the protests took place as part of public demonstrations. So, they attracted much more attention than the earlier examples which had taken place in (more or less) private rooms. Also, the number of persons sewing up their lips



**FIGURE 7.1** One photograph of Abas Amini's protest, shown in the BBC News report on 28 May 2003. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/nottinghamshire/2942602.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/nottinghamshire/2942602.stm). © Alamy.

increased. Furthermore, the reporting changed over the years as a result of the technical possibilities of digital photography and distribution of news. One aspect of the digital form of this news coverage is that they featured different images of the same event (slideshows, photo galleries, sequences of images).<sup>11</sup>

These changes were even clearer in 2013, when images of two Iranian men appeared in German media: in Würzburg, Mohammad Hassanzadeh Kalali and Arash Dusthossein sewed their mouths shut during a refugees' protest ('Es geht um ganz Deutschland' 2012). Just as with the photographs from Athens in 2010, these images have a different quality compared to earlier

photographs: here, the close-up views of the mouths show perfect stitches without any traces of blood or inflammation.<sup>12</sup> The thread used was not made of cotton, but a medical thread. This suggests that the action of lip-sewing was not spontaneous but was planned in advance as such material is not always available. Furthermore, the image reveals the ways in which the protagonists have been staged for the photograph: The two fashionably dressed and – besides the hardly visible stitches in their lips – immaculately good-looking men are posing like idols (see Plate 31). They direct their eyes straight towards the lens of the camera with a trace of a blank stare, but with a gentle expression in their face. The most striking difference to the earlier photographs is that the portrayed open their eyes and address their glance to the beholder.<sup>13</sup> They are well aware of what is happening and for what purpose the pictures are being taken.

This becomes even more evident in a slideshow of a local website. The regional news platform Main-Echo arranged a slideshow of the protests in Würzburg on 4 June 2012 (Ebener 2012). In the first photograph of this sequence of pictures, the two men crouch like footballers next to a placard which gives in German the duration of the protest (80 days) and the hunger strike (26 days). Furthermore, it proclaims that the refugees take themselves hostage with sewn-up lips until the government fulfils their demands. This placard recalls those used in photographs of hostages taken by terrorists in the 1970s: on the one hand they aim to elicit a response from the wider public and on the other hand they blackmail the government.<sup>14</sup> Written messages like these are new elements in the photographs of refugees with sewn lips. Such posters, prominently visible in the photographs from Würzburg, also occurred in the earlier Athens protests. They enhance the *mise-en-scène* and create a narrative continuity by opening up the political context of the protest.<sup>15</sup> But they divert attention from the individuals at the same time as the writing carries the message. The capital letters catch the viewer's eye (still, foremost a reader of a news article) more than the stitches in the lips, which are much too delicate to be seen. It is the paratext of the headline, the caption and the following pictures in the sequence that remind the viewer of the self-harming practice. The texts in these images are in German – the language of the government which is addressed by the refugees' protest – written in all probability by local allies of the refugees. However, although they are presented here by individuals, they formulate super-individual demands. Paradoxically, the refugees with sewn-up lips – becoming more and more anonymous in a group of activists – seem to slowly fade into the background.

Curiously, this point that the refugees themselves as individuals are effaced by the coverage, is illustrated by tabloid reportage on the migrant protests in Rome in 2013/14 at which refugees sewed their lips. Reports were accompanied by an image of the Russian performance artist and political activist Petr Pavlensky (e.g. 'Italian Migrants' 2014). He sewed up his lips at the end of July in 2012, in order to protest against the imprisonment of three members of Pussy Riot, a Russian feminist punk band.<sup>16</sup> No images of the refugees' lip-sewing protest in Rome seem to have been published. It is not their image which is representing the protest in the media, but an iconic, expressive image instead. Thus, they become even less visible in public. This is another indication of the shift from individual distress to an affective formula of media strategy the refugees cannot control anymore.

A few months later, Afghan refugees in Ankara, Turkey, took the same steps for the same reason as their fellow sufferers had previously (ibid.; 'Moroccans', 2014; 'Afghan Refugees' 2014). The pictures, published in the beginning of May 2014, are very similar to those from the protest in Athens, but seemed to reach a wider public this time. The protest took place in front of the United



Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which was directly targeted by the protesters who carried a vertical placard with a painted image of a human hand; the index finger presses, at full stretch, top to bottom, to the ground, with the letters 'UNHCR' written on the back of the hand.<sup>17</sup> It symbolizes the oppressive structure of the UNHCR, what appears even more clear in this photograph as the over-sized finger seems to press down on the shoulders of the asylum seekers sitting in front of it. The photograph's composition positions the protestors as suppressed subjects. Again, it is the paratext that provides information about the practice, since the stitches on their lips are barely visible in this group portrait. The viewer can only find signs in the surgical masks and the woman on the right, who has taped her lips in a clear symbolization of lip-sewing which accompanies the written demands.

As with the Rome protest, the individuals are de-emphasized in the media images taken in Ankara. This could be understood as a distancing strategy in reporting of lip-sewing and hunger strike. If so, it can be understood in two ways: first, as an act of rationalization as the number of such protests increases in a short time period (especially July 2013 to May 2014), and second, as an act of respect for the privacy of individuals. However, this reporting strategy diverts attention from the personal story of the refugees. The latter interpretation seems to fit the reporting on the protests which took place once again in Australian detention camps (Manus Islands, Papua New Guinea) at the turn of the year 2014–15, when images of individuals with sewn-up lips hardly featured in the media. The faces of the individuals were pixelated in group pictures – but as proof for the incident of people sewing up their lips, *The Guardian* showed a montage of photographs showing close-up views of four mouths sewn shut.<sup>18</sup> This changed during the so-called European refugee crises when emotive pictures began to appear frequently in the media.

In Autumn of 2015, the Greek–Macedonian border became a key location of refugees' suffering: borders had been closed by some Balkan countries and only refugees from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq were let through, leaving others stranded and desperate at Idomeni border crossing without being individually screened on their claim for asylum (Safdar 2015). A huge protest among thousands of refugees arose and 'seven men . . . reacted to this sealing of the border by sealing their mouths', as *The Guardian* reported on 24 November (Kingsley 2015). The pictures presented of these protests are in sharp contrast to those which emerged from earlier protests, as the sheer number of people participating in the protest in general increased significantly – and this mass is represented in the background of the photographs. Furthermore, the individuals who sewed their lips were photographed in the act of doing so (see Plate 32). The image shows that the man whose lips are being sewn shut has a tense expression on his face; meanwhile the sewer's hand, which is outside the picture frame, pulls the cotton thread which is perfectly visible in the brilliant sunlight. This extension of the picture space into the viewer's space, brings the viewer into close proximity. This has the effect of seemingly making them complicit in the action. The distance just mentioned is turned into its opposite.

Three months later, similar pictures emerged from the Calais Jungle, as mentioned in the introduction. The press photographs show the protagonists with their heads, eyes and ears covered. The head covering reminds the viewer of scenes of execution when the condemned person's head is covered. Again, close-up views focus on the protestors' lips: either the process of lip-sewing itself is shown (and even closer when compared to the photograph taken around Idomeni),<sup>19</sup> or the sewn lips with swollen and blood-encrusted stitches while the protagonist is framed from below; a conventional practice which has the effect of shaping him as a hero

(see Plate 33). In the latter picture, a sheet of paper with Arabic writing, next to the head of the man, contrasts with the blue sky in the background. It is held by a raised hand and its meaning is translated in the caption of the photograph: 'Why don't you listen to us?' (Quine 2016). During this protest, for the first time, placards are not written in the language of the addressees, but in the language of the refugees, in all probability written by themselves. The photographs taken of the protests since 2013 follow two diverse operations: on the one hand, they point out the refugees' speechlessness in the political discourse, and, on the other, they carry political demands, communicated simultaneously through written speech. This shows that the motif of lip-sewing is in need of an explanation to point out the message of the protest.

For the first time, the photos are accompanied by (amateur) videos, probably recorded using a smartphone. Afterwards these videos were uploaded to online video platforms. They are striking as they point out the speechlessness of the individuals. A video from the Greek–Macedonian border shows a scene, in which the Iranian men are standing in a row holding hands. They have written the name of their home country in red on their foreheads. This is how they pose for the press photographers.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to this video, with many voices of different people in the background, a video from Calais shows protesters marching in silence as the individuals can no longer speak because they have sewn their lips together.<sup>21</sup> The photographs (with the text on the placards, the close-ups of the wounds and the whole context of the protest) seem to be much 'louder' than the actual situation was. Not least, because both videos reveal – more by sound than visibly – the purpose for which these protests were made; the viewer can hear the clicking of several shutter releases. These images (from 2014), without any distance from the events, arouse completely contrary reactions in the viewers; on the one hand, they appear repellent and cause an oppositional position which perceives these masses as a threat, on the other, they provoke an affirmative solidarity.<sup>22</sup>

The images emerging from Calais mark the (provisional) end of a developing iconic tradition. It seems as if these photographs were taken with the awareness of the visual potency of former examples (at least with regard to media resonance). Furthermore, what is different in this later protest is the written 'speech' of the placards, notes or expressions on the body to express demands. In contrast to these verbal statements, the visible speechlessness of the individuals with sewn up lips becomes more evident. Both aspects show an increasing instrumentalization of images, first, to be visible in public, and second, to make political demands register. Together, they qualify this practice as visual activism, in which the human body plays a crucial role as the primary 'medium' for the purpose of creating a specific image of the refugee whose demands for asylum and/or a change of his/her situation is unheard and, thus, wants to be seen. This aspect is easily overlooked as the visual representations of the protesters oscillate between heroism and humiliation, and between sober documentation and lively, dramatic depiction. This ambiguity conceals the clarity of the motif of lip-sewing.

We have identified three chronological stages of depiction stemming from the protests. In the beginning, only a few images were taken and these show named individuals in (single) portraits. At a second stage, many different images emerging from the same event show groups of mostly anonymous participants; only some of them are named and portrayed as heroic figures. And, in the context of the so-called refugee crisis, single people are represented as (self-)violating activists in front of a protesting mass of people. This development is accompanied by a depersonalization of the refugees who sew their lips. This indicates the protagonists losing control over the visual

strategy and, thus, the images become more and more independent in the digital sphere. The ambiguity of these imageries – accompanied by the instrumentalization of the images – provokes the following theoretical approach towards (representing) lip-sewing as visual activism.

### III

Only a few researchers have dealt with lip-sewing and studies of the topic are mainly from the fields of political theory and political philosophy. These have discussed the question of agency, emancipatory and political potential, and the general perspective on such acts. The overall concern of publications on the matter has been to avoid othering self-harming practices (cf. Wolfram Cox and Minahan 2004: 294–5; Owens 2009: 577; Darling 2009: 650; Jeffers 2012: 108; Bargu 2017: 5; Fiske 2016: 118–19). Apart from support and sympathy for the refugees, many scholarly contributors see an emancipatory and political potential in acts of lip-sewing. As Jenny Edkins and Véronique Pin-Fat view it, lip-sewing presents the demand to be recognized, but without also demanding the right to become a citizen, which may be too challenging for the sovereign state (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005: 14–16, 24).<sup>23</sup> Their interpretation does not explain how the political potential actually materializes. However, this is taken into account by scholars who are concerned with the question of the public and the publicity of lip-sewing. In Lucy Fiske's opinion the refugees' agency consists of an 'informed political action', flanked by frustration and desperation linked to their situation of detention (Fiske 2016: 122): they use lip-sewing as a symbol for their 'voicelessness and silencing by the Australian government' (ibid.: 116). While attempts at communication prior to hunger strike and lip-sewing had failed (ibid.: 123–4), raising awareness among the media was one of the central concerns for refugees in Australian detention camps (ibid.: 61). In Fiske's interpretation, '[h]unger strike and lip-sewing was a way to . . . create a public space in which detainees could speak', which however, she qualifies, operates 'still in a mediated fashion' (ibid.: 142–3).<sup>24</sup> While the creation of an audience around the act is discussed, the former interpretations fail to discuss the audience's problematic reactions to lip-sewing and the speechlessness, which actually confirm the status of the refugees as border subjects.

Some scholars question the potential of lip-sewing as a public action. The actual visible speechlessness, in their perspective, impedes communication between equals or even symbolizes the expulsion from the political sphere altogether. In Alison Jeffers' view, lip-sewing, as 'wishful performance', allows glimpses of a better world, which cannot necessarily be created on a political level (Jeffers 2012: 14). The wishful part of the act becomes clearer when media attention is concerned: 'Their dependency on media images to produce this emergence removes another layer of power because they are not in control of these images and the ways they are produced' (ibid.: 106). The problem is that through the act of lip-sewing, which is used by some refugees to make a statement about their situation, they are at the same time rendered speechless and in need of others to speak for them, who might not translate the act according to the refugees' intention (ibid.: 109). Ayten Gündoğdu is even less optimistic about creating significant publicity through lip-sewing, which she explains, referencing Hannah Arendt, as 'violently illustrating speechlessness, demonstrat[ing] how one's exclusion from a political community also marks one's expulsion from humanity, or from the common world of speaking beings' (Gündoğdu 2015: 21). Speechlessness refers to the notion of politics espoused by Arendt, who indicated the

importance of the speaking subject for public action in a political community: 'Speechless action would no longer be action, because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words' (Arendt 1958: 178–9). However, scholars who recognize visible speechlessness in discussing lip-sewing – while they place special importance on the refugees' situation and demands – do not mention the role of the images created.

From our perspective, it is the images themselves which play a crucial role for understanding this ambiguity. It is thanks to the images that the figure of the refugee as a border subject is recognized and discussed in contemporary societies. Taking up Jeffers' observation of the dependency of border subjects on media images, we explore the specific role of images on the one hand and the new media on the other, when thinking about visual activism of refugees' lip-sewing. From the beginning of the twenty-first century, researchers began to investigate how important political events are witnessed through (live) television and (iconic) photographs reproduced in high numbers across the globe (e.g. Werckmeister 2005; Eisenman 2007; Mitchell 2011). We rely on two recent terms taken from the context of 'Bildwissenschaft'<sup>25</sup> (science of images / visual studies): 'image acts' (Bredekamp 2018) and 'image operations' (Eder and Klonk 2017). The accompanying theoretical concepts focus on the potency and agency of images in the setting of the so-called flood of images, caused by new technologies of communication, and the political use of images (from time to time as weapons).

Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk identify operative images through three qualities. First, they emerge in the context of political conflict, second, they are produced with a specific purpose and become instrumental in that sense, third, they operate 'within the seemingly disembodied digital sphere of the internet'. As a conclusion the authors state that 'these images are the *agens et movens* in the unfolding of events' (ibid. 2017: 3–4). Their powerful role consists of providing evidence insofar as they are crucial to the 'legibility, illegibility and perceived reality of events' (ibid.: 4). They are not made for their own sake but for a broader social audience: 'The sociocultural impact of such images can hardly be overestimated, and it confronts us with urgent political, ethical and aesthetic questions. . . . In political activism, images of suffering and injustice document, appeal to and trigger attention, emotion and collective behaviour' (ibid.: 5). Eder and Klonk observe that in 'an important sense, however, images themselves also act' (ibid.). This brings us to Horst Bredekamp's approach to the 'image act' (*Bildakt*).

Criticizing John L. Austin's concept of the speech act, Horst Bredekamp sees the image to be located in the place of the speaker: 'The *image act* . . . adopts the dynamism inherent in the relationship between the *speech act* and its own social, political and cultural environment, but finds its starting point in the latent capacity of the image to move the viewer' (Bredekamp 2018: 33). The image act has an impact upon the observer's 'feelings, thoughts and motivation' (ibid.: 35). This is how the images created through the protests are effective; as image acts, they reach the public the refugees are not yet part of. As substitutes for the refugees' bodies, these images are active in public through media.<sup>26</sup>

Thereby, an 'autonomous' image emerges which refers to, but is uncoupled from – it 'transcends' (Owens 2009: 578) – its generic act. In this substitutive form the image is 'instrument and agency' at the same time (Mitchell 2008: 351). There is no strict linearity from the productive action to a proper meaning of the image, but a distance between act, image and perception (Bredekamp 2018: 190).

## IV

This theoretical insight supports the view that images need contextualization. In order to contextualize the images stemming from the refugees' protests of lip-sewing we will distinguish, first, between artists and refugees as visual activists – even if both use lip-sewing as a practice that creates extreme images – and, second, between political and visual reality in order to outline different spaces of appearance.

The motif of sewn lips was meant and understood as a metaphor for speechlessness before the context discussed here (Laing 2016). In 1989, the American artist and AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz first made use of this motif in a (self-)portrait. It is unlikely that contemporary asylum seekers and refugees refer to this photograph taken by Andreas Sterzing. But it made lip-sewing imaginable in an iconographic way.<sup>27</sup> The parenthesis in the photograph's title, *(Silence = Death)*, links the topic of speechlessness finally to impotence. This image has to be situated in Wojnarowicz's activities during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. The parenthesis refers to the project of six gay activists of the same name, formed in 1987. As a queer project, it aimed to visualize those who are silenced and/or not seen. This is what the protests in the 1980s share with the refugees' protests nowadays. But it also raises the question of the distinction between artistically and politically motivated visual activism. Of course, this question cannot be answered briefly. Therefore, we focus on a very important legal problem accompanying this distinction.

In his controversial article, 'On Art Activism', the philosopher and art critique Boris Groys (2014) points out general aims and strategies of this type of art which undoubtedly has been hyped in the last decade. However, whereas Groys believes that 'art activism is central to our time because it is a new phenomenon' (ibid.: 1), we argue that this form of art should be regarded in the tradition of intervention art, aiming to question norms of society and to influence political situations (Kastner 2014; Steidinger and Berg 2016: 522; Steinbock, Ieven and de Valck 2020). Nevertheless, Groys makes an important point in a casual remark, in pointing out that activists want to change conditions outside the art world by the means of art, he adds 'at the same time, they do not want to cease being artists' (Groys 2014: 1). Not being an artist anymore would mean to lose a social status, which, first and foremost, saves the individual from legal consequences of their actions. These actions are protected by the freedom of art, which is valid at least in most Western societies. The place of the artist is inside the legal sphere of these societies, even if he or she challenges its limitations. This becomes even more evident, when Mike Parr's performance, *Close to the Concentration Camps*, is taken into consideration. In 2002, at Monash University Museum of Art in Melbourne, the Australian performance artist referred to the refugees' situation in Australian detention camps by sewing up his lips, ears, eyebrows and cheeks.<sup>28</sup> Compared to the refugees' lip-sewing, this body art-performance is an exaggeration of the sewing technique applied on the human body. His head streaming with blood, the artist breaks away from speechlessness which is symbolized within the motif of sewn lips, but rather points out the self-harming practice of sewing one's own body. Through this, he sharpens awareness of the problematic conditions of society, by creating an image that challenges that society's self-image. This is the defining characteristic of art activism.

To understand this context, four main aspects of art activism need to be distinguished from the refugees' visual practice. First, art mainly is not a 'desperate' reaction to societal impositions, but



it reflects on societies. This is connected to, second, the exaggeration of societal impositions through artistic means. Third, art activism is often mediated through the art sphere and does not necessarily rely on digital publicity. Fourth, compared to artists, refugees as border subjects are not protected by civil rights.<sup>29</sup>

This brings us to a paradox of the effect of the images discussed: on the one hand, images, especially photographs, have the potency to affect the ethical responsiveness of their viewer (Butler 2009; Eder and Klonk 2017: 4; Schankweiler 2019: 59–61), but, on the other hand, they are lost in the ‘flood of images’ and possibly, as Eder and Klonk point out, entail a compassion fatigue: ‘One of the biggest problems in political activism is that images of ongoing suffering and injustice in certain areas are lacking, and as a consequence there is little public help and support’ (Eder and Klonk 2017: 4).

As the specific character of the photographic medium is its (alleged) transparency, the distance between the image and its generic act is easily overlooked. Media images deny their nature of being an image but are recognized as the event itself. As it documents reality, it is understood to be reality – which is not wrong, but it misses the complexity of the production of a photograph and oversimplifies complex political circumstances. The German historian Gerhard Paul calls this a ‘visual reality’, that differs from the reality it refers to. As a reality of a second nature, it is not a simple depiction of the physical reality, but a compressed, associative and self-regulated reality (Paul 2013: 644–6).

The perception of the protests through images can easily lead to the limited view that the images *are* the events. But one has to distinguish between lip-sewing as the event of protest and the images taken of that protest as an aftermath of this same event. The images are a different operation which is not mediated by the refugees themselves anymore. *Through* the images the refugee’s protest and they themselves gain publicity, but it is the images that are publicly active.

## V

In this case study, we argued that the images are the actual materialization of lip-sewing as a form of visual activism. These images attracted public attention – they are involved in the ‘economy of attention’ (Franck 2019). Their importance led us to suggest a theoretical approach focusing on the images’ agency. The analysis is accompanied by a call to distinguish between art activism and the refugees’ form of protest and to contextualize the origin and purpose of the images. Doing this led us to two main operations: the refugees’ violent practice of lip-sewing as actual deeds and, uncoupled from this, the agency of the images in global media. This confronts us with a paradox: while the protagonists are silencing themselves through lip-sewing and demonstrating their inability to act, they are producing a visible image of their situation, which is – beyond the self-harming act of violence – publicly active.

As the images operate as artificial extensions of the refugees’ bodies, they are placed in the speakers’ position (Bredenkamp 2018: 33), which the refugees cannot yet obtain. They – or the on-site photographers – simply make use of the globalized public’s possibilities through digital media. But, by sewing their lips, the protagonists have come to a dead end – and this is what Wojnarowicz’s portrait reveals with the title (*Silence = Death*). The refugees let the images speak in place of themselves, but can no longer control the images’ operation. The images enter the public sphere

through the 'visual reality', that is, of course, part of our existing reality. But this visual reality is not necessarily part of our political and legal system(s). In this sense, the images are 'free' as they are able to cross national borders.<sup>30</sup> They possess the freedom of movement that the refugees lack.

However, what is overlooked from this perspective, is the suffering of the individual. The refugees who sew their lips together were in all cases without a status allowing them to move freely. Their precise demand was for integration and the possibility to speak and be heard in public. While they were not able to speak anymore, their placards at the Calais Jungle in France read 'Where is our freedom?' and 'Where is our democracy?' ('Calais Migrants' 2016), and 'I came here to find my human rights but unfortunately I found none' (McPartland 2016).

The motif of sewn lips corresponds with this very experience of being deprived of rights – a topic which was prominently discussed by Arendt. When Marieke Borren suggests an 'Arendtian politics of in/visibility', she refers to Arendt's distinction between the private (natural) and the public sphere and their corresponding (in)visibility (Borren 2008). For Arendt, sound public political action is only possible, when citizenship rights are secured and the acting individual does not need to worry about essential physical and emotional necessities and securities, which are natural to all human beings (Borren 2008: 223). In the public sphere, individuals, void of these worries, are able to speak and act freely – and they see and are seen and heard as they 'appear vis-à-vis others' (ibid.: 214). Refugees as border subjects, however, have to worry about rights, shelter and security. This is what motivated them to sew their lips together. Hence, what is natural to all humans, is visible in their case. Their asymmetric relationship to the sovereign state and its institutions prevents them from being equal to citizens taking part in a public dialogue. As Gündoğdu noted, the speechlessness of refugees is 'one of the most fundamental forms of rightlessness' (Gündoğdu 2015: 21). Analogously, Borren points out that the refugees suffer from public invisibility (Borren 2008: 218). What we see in the images showing refugees' lip-sewing – their visible speechlessness – is actually their natural visibility and thus their public speechlessness. By violating their bodies, they literally draw attention to themselves, but remain visibly speechless. The refugees' visual activism creates only images, nothing less and nothing more. Although the images are the refugees' substitutes in public space, they prevent their public visibility. Instead of being transparent the photographs and videos mark a non-transparent wall: they are seen but they themselves cannot see.

The public changed significantly since Arendt's times. New media provides possibilities of speaking, seeing, being heard and being visible which do not include the central aspect of Arendt's concept of the public: the appearance vis-à-vis. But, this egalitarian feature is exactly what the refugees' demanded. Taking their requests seriously means to understand their situation as rightless and thus their urgent need for human rights. However, without citizenship human rights still fail to keep their promise, as Arendt noted – there is still no stable mechanism to guarantee human rights without national legal institutions enforcing it.<sup>31</sup> And scandalous media reports about refugees do not significantly change their situation (Borren 2008: 233), as the different outcomes, emerging from the protests, show. Amini was allowed to stay in the UK, however, the British Home Office commented that the decision and Amini's protest were unrelated (Morris 2003). In Italy the permission for some protesters to leave the detention centre was apparently connected to incidents of lip-sewing. On Manus Island, refugees even reached a financial compensation for their inhumane treatment in the Australian offshore detention centre, however, they were not

granted asylum in Australia ('Manus Island' 2017). Others did not succeed, as for example the Calais Jungle was demolished despite the protest and media coverage (Jones 2016). This illustrates that lip-sewing is by no means a guarantee for integration into a political and legal community.<sup>32</sup> Like human rights, the images and with them the global public do not keep their promises either. What is even more striking, is the violence surrounding and lying within the very act. From a standpoint of basic human decency and equality, something is terribly amiss, when individuals who want to enter a political and legal community need to hurt themselves in order to be recognized.

Captured in a photograph and thus, becoming an autonomous image in the digital age, the act of lip-sewing could seem an effective and even attractive form of activism: it is clear enough to convey a message but also limits what is said – apparently purely transparent, it paradoxically covers up problems at three different levels: first, the image was created by a self-violative act; second, with their inability to speak the protestors are actually not part of the public space of appearance and let the images speak for them; third, the images themselves are not powerful enough to change the existing situation – just because these images exist, the situation does not significantly change. This seems to be one aspect art activism and political activism have in common: the ability of visual activism is limited to the fact that it makes something visible that was unseen before – it does not change the political circumstances per se.

## Notes

- 1 We would like to thank Edward Belleville for his thoughtful comments, questions and careful corrections.
- 2 In this, we examine lip-sewing as a form of protest, in most cases related to hunger strikes. Lip-sewing as an aesthetic or religious form of body modification is not considered.
- 3 In Australia and its offshore detention centres, a number of instances occurred with similar demands, including protests against negative decisions on applications, between 2000 and 2015: Woomera, Curtin and Villawood (Fiske 2016: 118; Mares 2002: 10, 33 and 173; Goldsmith 2002); Maribyrnong, Baxter, and Christmas Island (Cox 2015: 115). For Nauru, see the Nauru Files provided by *The Guardian* (Farrell, Evershed and Davidson 2016).
- 4 Similarly, for the cases in other detention centres in 2002 (Baxter, Nauru, Villawood, Christmas Island, Woomera). In June 2018, a photograph with a close-up view of lips sewn shut and encrusted stiches appeared on Twitter in a thread of the activist group The Holler Network, remembering the incidents of 2002 (see The Holler Network, 2002). Today, one cannot be sure that this picture also originates from the 2002 protests, as it is not clear whether it was taken immediately after the incident and if it was widely seen and noted. At least one can state that on the one hand, the legacy of the Woomera protests are the images of people shaking and climbing the camp's fences, and on the other hand, that this image of the sewn-up lips is not as iconic as the other images discussed in our essay. As Hoenig states: 'only a handful of news stories reported this first episode of lip-sewing' (Hoenig 2009: 140).
- 5 On the affective role of images in political protests, see Schankweiler (2019). Speaking of *Bildproteste* (image protests), the author analyses especially the dynamics of images circulating through social media since the so-called Arab Spring in 2011.
- 6 In 2003, 2004 and 2011, Great Britain was the site of several incidents of lip-sewing. All protesters stated their fear that their applications for asylum would be turned down and they would be sent

back to Iran and Iraq. On Naseh Ghafor in 2004, see Athwal (2004). On Shahin Portohfeh, cf. Jeffers (2012: 100). In 2011, four men stated that they had fled Iran after the Green Movement protests in 2009 and were facing persecution in Iran (Taylor and Dehghan 2011). A similar case was reported from Sweden in 2011, where refugees on hunger strike had sewn their lips because they were to be sent back to Iran, even though they would almost certainly be persecuted there ('Iranian Refugees' 2011).

- 7 'Man Sews Lips' (2004), where the BBC News reports on Nase Jabar Ghafor's protest on 16 July 2004.
- 8 Cf. for the close-up view Athwal (2004) and 'Man Sews Lips' (2004).
- 9 Being a journalist herself, she sat with her lips sewn shut before a news conference in Athens on Monday, 18 October 2010, cf. Moshenberg (2010). The author says that the photograph of Daneshnia and her daughter was published by the *Wall Street Journal* on the same day. This image is held by Getty Images and is no longer freely available on the website.
- 10 Cf. the documentation of the independent film-maker and photographer under the name of Epoca Libera (2010).
- 11 An alarming example is the report, 'PICS. Economic Migrants Sew Lips Shut, Demand To Be "Shot" In Protest At European Border', on the website of the far right American news group Breitbart (Kassam 2015). Accompanied by a text which contains merely superficial facts of the protests at the Greek-Macedonian border, it shows 30 photographs from different places, mixed up in a disorderly sequence so as to visualize the threat of masses of refugees coming to Europe. Cf. for this 'regime of visibility' Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017: 1168).
- 12 The German daily *Welt* reports on the protests in Würzburg on 11 June 2012 (see Staffen-Quandt 2012).
- 13 Close-up portraits of a man with sewn up lips and open eyes emerged earlier, at the end of January 2012, when more than 1,300 prisoners in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, went on hunger strike to protest against the living conditions in their jail. They sewed the edges of their mouths with wire (cf., for example, Palmer 2012).
- 14 Cf. for the iconography of these placards Klonk (2017: 102–4).
- 15 Cf. Susan Sontag's critique of images that they do not explain the situation sufficiently, but remain simply shocking (2003: 122).
- 16 The American news and opinion website The Daily Beast reports on the protests in Ponte Galleria, Rome, illustrating it with the portrayal of the Russian performing artist Petr Pavlensky, 2 April 2014 ('Italian Migrants' 2014).
- 17 *Vice* reports on its website about the protest in front of UNHCR, Turkey, 9 May 2014 (Speri 2014).
- 18 *The Guardian* reports on the protests in Australian detention centres on 4 December 2014 (Doherty 2014).
- 19 The multi-regional digital news publisher The Local reports on the protests in the so-called 'Calais Jungle' on 3 March 2016 (McPartland 2016).
- 20 A video documenting a scene from the protest on the Greek-Macedonian border was uploaded on YouTube, cf. for the relevant scene PigMine7 (2015), 0:29 min.
- 21 Cf. *ibid.* for the Greek-Macedonian border and for Calais SUNP0020 (2016).
- 22 Cf. for different regimes of visibility Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017).
- 23 Other theories on the topic which poses an emancipatory potential ranges from feminist practice to poetry can be found in Wolfram Cox and Minahan (2004), Cox (2015: 116–17), Farrier and Tuitt (2013: 253–70) and Soguk (2006: 389).
- 24 Also concerned with the creation of a public space through such acts are Owens (2009: 578), Darling (2009) and Bargu (2017: 1), while the latter also overlaps with Edkins and Pin-Fat (2005).

- 25 Even though the theoretical tradition of *Bildwissenschaft*, is concerned with all kinds of images, dating back to Aby Warburg and, thus, to the beginning of the twentieth century, it is as yet a comparatively young field of research (Bredenkamp 2003; Warburg [1920] 1992; Mirzoeff 1999).
- 26 Especially in the sense of 'substitutive image acts', see Bredenkamp (2018: 137–92).
- 27 Cf. the German formulation 'ikonographisch vorstellbar' by Klonk (2017: 67).
- 28 Cf. for a discussion on this performance Rand (2011).
- 29 Nevzat Soguk refers to Amini as an artist since he is a poet. His visual practice is very close to Wojnarowicz's self-aggrandizement as a speechless/dead person. Nevertheless, when sewing his lips together, Amini is a border subject with, it seems, no other option. In turn, Wojnarowicz's portrait could also be seen as a result of desperation and was later ennobled as a 'piece of art' (Soguk 2006).
- 30 Although modes of censorship are currently discussed when it comes to the representation of human beings suffering or deceased (Eder and Klonk 2017: 8–9).
- 31 Arendt called this the 'right to have rights' (Arendt 1949: 769).
- 32 Arendt called such an operation a 'liberation', which can direct attention onto problems, especially when freedom of movement is concerned, but which does not necessarily succeed at integration (1970: 79; *ibid.* 1990: 29, 32–3).

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# 8

## ‘Ripples in water’

### Minor episodes of feminist visual activism by three women artists in the PRC (2007–15)<sup>1</sup>

*Monica Merlin*

#### Introduction

**V**isual activism builds on the notion that visual culture ‘is a way to create forms of change’ (Mirzoeff 2016: 283). Scholars, such as Mirzoeff (ibid.) and Meg McLagan and Yates McKee (2012), have investigated its crucial role in grassroots revolutions and civil uprisings, yet the understanding of how artists as individuals, rather than as members of social movements and organized groups, work as activists in authoritarian and nondemocratic states still deserves further investigation. This chapter focuses on the People’s Republic of China (PRC), a one-party regime where artists have bravely and capably used their visual practice as a strategy for activism in response to the surrounding sociopolitical environment. *The State of Artistic Freedom* report by the NGO Freemuse (2020: 7, 64–7) identifies the PRC as one of the most concerning countries where censorship and control over artistic freedom are regularly perpetrated alongside punitive actions against artists. The internationally acclaimed Chinese artist Ai Weiwei (b. 1957) – who was famously imprisoned in 2011 officially due to tax fraud, yet likely in order to restrain his outspokenness and activism – stands out as a prime example of this repression (Wang 2019: 647–737/7730). Similarly, other less famous artists from Mainland China, such as the cartoonist Badiucuo, are regularly censored and intimidated by the Beijing government (Freemuse 2020: 52).

This study moves beyond the association between activist art and dissidence as the two are usually paired in the context of the PRC (Leduc 2018), and focuses on the visual activism of three lesser known Chinese women artists based in Beijing: Gao Ling (b. 1980), Li Xinmo (b. 1976) and Sun Shaokun (1980–2016). They were all born after the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and before the Tian’anmen Square protests of 1989, and use the body as a medium for their work. Through a

critical discussion of their art, the chapter demonstrates how these artists function as activists in their everyday practice. Their work is not obviously connected to larger social movements, which in the PRC are 'typically spontaneous and short-lived' despite the solid and long-lasting social network underlying them, or to public protests, which are regularly suppressed and ignored (Qi 2017: 111). Instead, their actions can be seen as individual, casual and episodic, so how can their work still be considered activism? In order to answer this crucial query, the chapter employs the inspiring research carried out by feminist geographers as they rethink the meanings of activism to encompass those acts which seem too irrelevant to make a difference, and 'yet do create progressive change in the lives of women, their families, and their communities'. (Martin, Hanson and Fontaine 2007: 79). This understanding of activism is paired with Sara Ahmed's theorization of feminism as 'the dynamism of making connections' (2017: 3). These connections are made of small actions as Ahmed suggests 'ripples in water', which provoke other ones, and eventually coalesce in a larger and more powerful movement. As the artists selected in this chapter will demonstrate, collective feminist movements require individual struggles to be built (ibid.: 6).

The chapter interweaves the notions of activism and feminism suggested above with that of 'minor literature' as intended by Deleuze, Guattari and Brinkley (1983) to re-evaluate the work of the selected artists. Gao Ling, Li Xinmo and Sun Shaokun have seldom achieved global exposure and their practice has rarely been discussed in the scholarship on contemporary Chinese art. They find or place themselves at the margins of the art scene in the PRC, even though they all mostly work(ed) in the capital. Their apparently peripheral position can be related to the very fact that they are a minority in using their artistic practice (or part of it) to address gender discrimination, raise awareness on violence and rape against women, and discuss women's issues, all of which carry ethical, social and political weight and are often marginalized in mainstream art and culture. Their work can be described as 'minor' in line with the definition provided by Deleuze, Guattari and Brinkley in their discussion of 'the literature a minority makes in a major language' with a 'strong co-efficient of deterritorialization' (1983: 16). The concept of deterritorialization is beautifully explained by the feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti as a process of dis-identification that 'involves the loss of familiar habits of thought and representation in order to pave the way for creative alternatives' (2013: 88–9). Thus, the language used in minor literature attempts to dis-identify itself from the language it originally belonged to, in order to create an alternative. Similarly, the artists discussed in this chapter use the tools of contemporary art to challenge 'familiar habits of thoughts and representation' (ibid.). Deleuze, Guattari and Brinkley identified two further fundamental characteristics of minor literature: it is political and 'has a collective value' (ibid.: 16–17). All these features are extremely relevant to the work of the artists examined in this chapter, as their practice informally connects to (perhaps louder) human and civil rights advocates and lawyers, and other activists working in the cultural sphere who constantly and carefully negotiate their work in the space and time they live. Among these are the activist Ye Haiyan (also known as Hooligan Sparrow), who in 2013 was harassed and had her possessions impounded by the authorities for her work in aid of sex workers and her campaigns against the widespread paedophilic abuse of students by school heads (Chen 2016). Other advocates of gender and women's rights are the Feminist Five, five young feminist activists, including Li Tingting, also known as Li Maizi, and Wei Tingting, who were arrested and detained for 38 days in 2015 due to a small anti-harassment campaign they organized on Beijing public transports, although they did not succeed in executing this (Fincher 2016).



It is important to note here that Chinese women artists do not tend to call themselves activists and rarely define themselves as feminists. The Chinese words *xingdong zhuyi* ('activism') and *xingdonpai* ('activist') carry a particular set of unwanted attributes that relate to the crime of 'picking quarrels and provoking troubles' and thus endangering public security, phrases conventionally used to repress and punish dissidents and activists in the PRC. The word feminism (*nüquan zhuyi* or *nüxing zhuyi*) is also loaded with meanings associated with Western feminism, perceived as negative by many activists who have often, as Louise Edwards suggests, 'rejected the label "feminist" since they regarded it as too radical and extreme for their tastes' (2009: 121). Nonetheless, since 2012, feminist activism in the PRC has gained momentum in what Leta Hong Fincher has defined 'the feminist awakening' (2018). Differing from their predecessors, young Chinese feminist activists, such as Li Maizi mentioned above, belong to a transnational feminist network and have created a strong bond with the feminist international community from which they give and receive support and inspiration.

This chapter connects with the work by Meiqin Wang on socially engaged art in China, which explores how artists and art professionals 'charge art with the mission of social intervention and participate in the making or challenging of various living conditions' (Wang 2019: 476/7730). Wang identifies a social and public turn in contemporary Chinese art after the year 2000, when cultural activism began to spread mostly with a non-confrontational attitude, located in ideas that include the 'cultivation of shared aesthetics of protest' and the concept of 'creative practice as a form of resistance' (ibid.: 588/7730). Departing from the art professionals in Wang's study, the artists chosen for this research do not explicitly label their practice as socially engaged art, yet they add important collective value to their work by employing it as a means to challenge assumptions of gender normativity, denounce abuse and violence against women, and propose a space to reflect upon women's issues and feminist values.

The chapter contributes to a growing scholarship on a transnational and intersectional understanding of feminist activism epitomized by two remarkable volumes edited by Katy Deepwell (2020) and Basia Sliwinska (2020), which have thickened the theoretical framing around feminism, art and activism with global breath. Along the lines of Deepwell's and Sliwinska's contributions, this study reflects on 'feminist visual activist embodied practices' (Sliwinska 2020: 3) and demonstrates how the work of Gao Ling, Li Xinmo and Sun Shaokun subtly or more overtly advocates for women's rights, gender equality and expressions of alternative sexual and gender identities. Their art raises awareness on violence and abuse against women while reclaiming the presence and agency of women in history and society. This study offers a different angle for understanding the complex interplays between art and activism enacted by women in authoritarian and nondemocratic governments of the Global South.

## A quick note on art, performance and activism in China

State surveillance and censorship over cultural productions in the PRC have hardened since the Olympic Games in 2008, and under the presidency of Xi Jinping, which began in 2013, control and crackdown over activist groups and civil, labour, and human rights lawyers, have steadily risen (on this see the long list of cases reported by China Change in their online archive). This tight, top-down, vigilance creates a cultural ecology characterized by fear and caution, but also calculated

bravery, as reflected in the ways in which individuals and groups consciously attract or avoid potential criticism and legal action from the central or local government, and how they negotiate and update their strategies to resist and confront the surrounding sociopolitical environment.

In the PRC, individual artworks as well as art exhibitions are constantly policed. Art professionals and artists live in a state of uncertainty as to whether their studio / gallery might be suddenly closed down or destroyed (such as the famous destruction of Ai Weiwei's Shanghai studio in 2011), or their art arbitrarily censored and removed (Catching 2012: 231). In 2015, the large show *Jian: Cultural Codes of Gender Violence* was planned to open at the Ginko Art Space in Beijing as a HeForShe exhibition on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, from 25 November to 10 December 2015 (Cui 2016). *Jian*, which means 'rape' in Chinese, was curated by Cui Guangxia and featured 64 artists, half of them were women and the other half were men. The number 64 carries evident political weight, as it strongly recalls the Tian'anmen massacre on 4 June 1989, in Chinese known as *liu si* 'six four'. The works in the show mostly focused on representations of women, and the objectification and abuse of the female body, but they also demonstrated how art could express women's emancipation and empowerment. The censorship over this exhibition was reported in international newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and *The Guardian*, yet it was not covered by official local agencies. The forced closure of the exhibition emphasizes the extent to which art and artists continue to be a concern for the Chinese authorities. It is also important to highlight that rejecting art proposals (Ciric 2008), censoring artworks and closing down entire art exhibitions (even before they open to the public) belongs to the very history of contemporary art in China and have shaped, motivated and inspired artistic practice since the mid to late 1970s (Wu 2000).

A plethora of assumptions and implications are connected to the history of performance art and the use of the body in art. For the PRC, the discussions around the body in performance art, primarily found in studies by Thomas Burghuis (2006) and Silvia Fok (2013), are manifold and in their complexities go beyond the specific interest of this chapter. The potential disruptive nature of performance art, including that enacted by women, had (in)famously become evident in 1989 with the *Gun Shot/Dialogue* performance by Xiao Lu (b. 1962). During the opening of the China Avant-Garde Art Exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishu zhanlan*), the first exhibition of Chinese contemporary art in Beijing, Xiao Lu fired two real bullets into her own installation, *Dialogue (Duihua)*, now in the Tate collection.

Performance art (*xingwei yishu*) with its unpredictability and immediateness is often discouraged in the PRC, or promoted only in highly controlled environments, such as festivals and art fairs. The emphasis on the *here* and *now* of performance art also likely dictates some of the reasons why artists employ it as a strategy for visual activism. Recent conversations with Chinese performance artists have confirmed that a rising level of censorship has led to the increasing reluctance of galleries and other art spaces to display performance art touching upon sensitive (*minggan*) topics, or considered risky (*bu anquan*) in material execution, concept or political implications.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite its potential 'danger', against the scale of possibilities in activism and political action, in some environments art is largely seen as irrelevant and rarely taken seriously. American artist and theorist Sarah Kanouse (2007) has reflected on the tactical irrelevance of art projects, an irrelevance also exploited by Chinese feminist activists. For instance, on Valentine's Day 2012, three activists disguised a public protest as a piece of performance art. Li Maizi, Xiao Meili and Wei Tingting, inspired by Turkish feminist activists, marched in bloodstained bridal gowns while holding

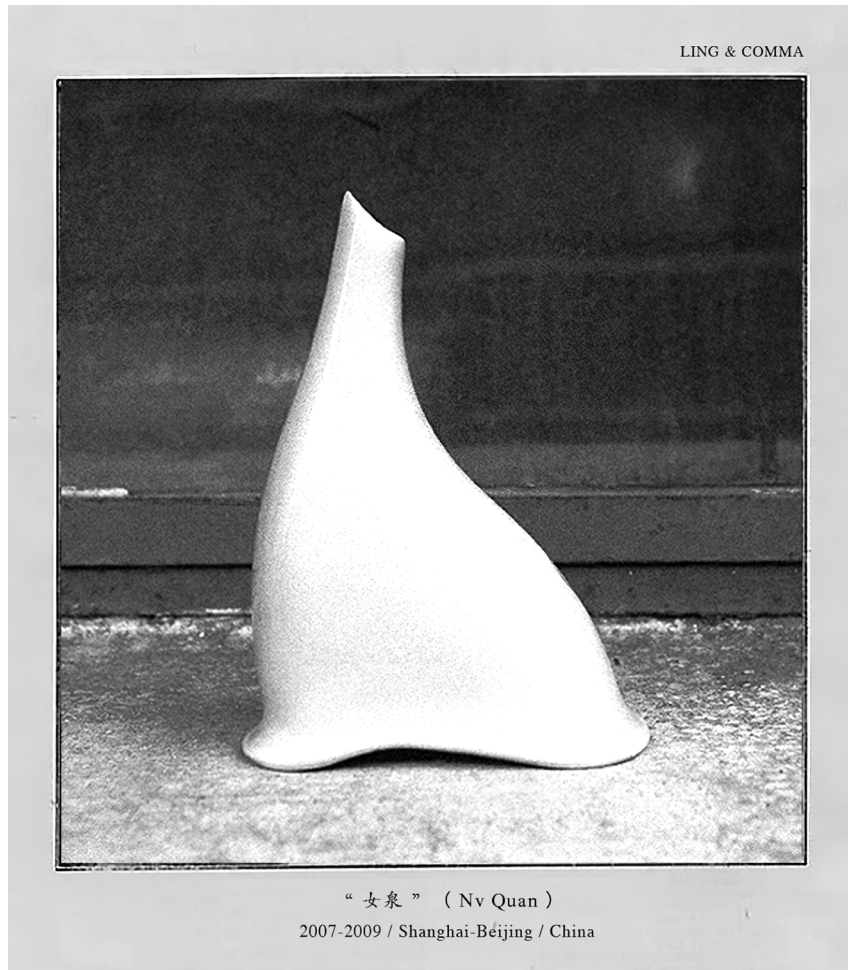
placards with slogans against domestic violence. The *Wounded Brides* protest took place in central Beijing for V-Day, the anti-violence against women movement launched by feminist playwright and activist Eve Ensler. This march was not stopped by the police, and it connected local feminist actions to wider feminist movements across the globe. The second important point about performance – and this is one issue not addressed by Burghuis’ or Fok’s studies – is the evident link between body and gender, as Judith Butler (1988: 523) reminds us. Thus the body in contemporary art carries multiple layers of significance connected to its *presence*, engendering space, time and actions.

## Three artists and their visual activism

The works examined in the following paragraphs date between 2007 and 2015 and can all be seen as episodes of feminist visual activism that challenge social and habitual attitudes towards women, as well as the political / legal practices that allow gender discrimination, violence and abuse to go unpunished. These works are – whether consciously or not – connected to visual precedents in the Chinese contemporary art scene, such as (to mention a few of the most notable) Chen Lingyang’s performatist self-portraits of her menstruating body in the series *Twelve Flower Months* (1999–2000);<sup>3</sup> He Chengyao’s daring public performance, *Opening the Great Wall* (2001), wherein the artist walked topless on the historic Chinese monument; and Ma Qiusha’s single-channel video – *From No. 4 Pingyuanli to No. 4 Tianqiaobeili (Cong Pingyuanli sihao dao to Tianqiaobeili sihao)*, video 7’54” (2007) – performed whilst holding a razor blade in her mouth, the artist narrates painful memories of her upbringing.

### Gao Ling

Gao Ling, currently based in Beijing, was originally trained in design. Since dedicating herself to visual art, she has created works that forcefully reclaim women’s agency in subverting social etiquette and their right to challenge the normative behaviours expected of women. In 2007, Gao Ling, together with the Chinese-American artist Helen Ho (also known as Comma), created *Nv Quan* (see Figure 8.1) – in English, ‘women’s fountain’ which opposes the male Duchampian urinal, and in Chinese resonates with the homophone *nüquan*, meaning ‘feminism’, or literally ‘women’s rights’. *Nv Quan* is a response to Shewee, a plastic device women can use to urinate while standing, often distributed at international music festivals and sport events, and was born from a simple conversation amongst girlfriends lamenting the difficulties women encounter while going to the toilet – queuing and holding (Gao n.d.). Gao Ling and Comma’s ceramic version imbues the device with the long-standing Chinese tradition of ceramic crafting, and upgrades its disposable status to that of a valuable and durable commodity, or a collectible work of art. Made by women for women, *Nv Quan* was later used by Gao Ling and Comma in performances where they pee standing to contest the perception of gendered behavioural etiquette and habitus for women, and simultaneously propose an alternative expression of female subjectivity. Gao Ling and Comma have experimented with the use of *Nv Quan* in exhibition spaces as well as in public. Gao Ling also organized a collective outdoor performance at the Summer Palace in Beijing, where



**FIGURE 8.1** LING & COMMA, *Nv Quan*, 2007–9. Glazed porcelain. Courtesy of Gao Ling.

men and women were invited to try the ‘women’s fountain’, urinating together in a circle in the ultimate representation of gender equality.

Gao Ling’s *Cold Wear* (*Lengzhuang*, 2010) is a series of stainless-steel bras created from triangular plates or tea strainers in extra-small, small, medium and large sizes. Their creation stemmed from the artist’s discomfort with being touched during peak-hour journeys on the subway. *Cold Wear* was subsequently used in a performance titled *Hey! TTTTouch Me!* (2010; see Figure 8.2), in which Gao Ling’s friends rode on the Shanghai Metro Line 7 while wearing the metal bras over their normal clothing. The bras functioned as armour against undesired physical interaction with strangers. This performance went rather unnoticed, however the second performance, *It’s a Dress, Not a Yes*, attracted much more attention. In collaboration with the queer group Shanghai Nü Ai, the performance took place on 20 June 2012 on the Shanghai Metro Line 2, which cuts across the heart of the city. While Gao Ling took photographs, two young





**FIGURE 8.2** Gao Ling, *Hey! TTTTouch Me!* (Xiong qi), performance on Shanghai Metro, Shanghai 2010. Courtesy of Gao Ling.



women rode the underground, holding Chinese signs on their iPads. One performer, wearing a short skirt, a red t-shirt with a *Cold Wear* metal bra on top, and a headscarf covering most of her face, held the sign: 'I can be coquettish, but you can't harass me' (*wo keyi sao, ni bu neng rao*). The other performer wore a black, niqab-like gown that concealed her head and body completely, and held 'yes to being cool and fresh, no to perverts' (*yao qingliang, bu yao selang*). This performance, which triggered a cascade of responses and discussions on social media, was done in protest against an earlier Weibo post,<sup>4</sup> by the Shanghai Metro administration which decreed that women dress less provocatively in order to avoid harassment on the tube ('Women Protest' 2012). Interestingly, Gao Ling's performance not only achieved international press coverage but also received general support from domestic Chinese media, which condemned men groping women on the tube and defended women's freedom to choose their own clothing.

As Alpesh Kantilal Patel (2013: 65–6) has noted, Gao Ling's works signal important intersections between art and activism in the PRC. This last performance emphasizes the social engagement of art and the interconnectivity (potential and real) between performance art and activism in raising awareness on women's rights and gender issues. In *Cold Wear*, Gao Ling mainly re-used readymade tea strainers (*cha bao*) of different sizes. These implements, which are immediately recognizable to most Chinese people, have a strong cultural connotation and gendered dimension: they belong to the house, and especially to the kitchen, the normative space of and for women. While Patel (ibid.: 63) in his article stresses Gao Ling's use of tea strainers as a critique of the limiting dichotomous understanding of women either as housewives or whores, without excluding Patel's interpretation, it is here proposed to read the use of the tea strainers as a positive re-employment of the readymade with a strong association to women. By engaging with the multi-layered significance and function of tools used in the kitchen, especially by women, such everyday objects can represent the intimacy of the house and the normative housewife, and also be powerfully re-employed to resist women's stereotyped, submissive and prescriptive gender roles. Gao Ling and her collaborations represent the collective potential of performance and its engagement with the public, institutions and the media. According to Gao Ling, none of these ideas originated from a conscious feminist critique, yet the artist agrees that they clearly challenge perceptions of womanhood and the female body (Merlin 2014). Although Gao does not often directly use her own body in her practice, works such as *Nv Quan* and *Cold Wear* enable performance acts and allow the body to enact alternative behaviours to those conventionally prescribed by the social and cultural fabric.

## Li Xinmo

Li Xinmo was born in 1976 in the Heilongjiang province, and after graduating from the Fine Art Academy in Tianjin, she moved to Beijing where she currently lives. Li Xinmo works in various media – mainly performance, painting and photography – and she is an art teacher and art critic as well as a declared feminist as noted on her own website (Li n.d.). In her series of self-portraits, made monthly since 2009 using her menstrual blood, she emphasizes womanhood and cycles, and claims the visceral creative nature of women. Her performance pieces overtly address environmental concerns – *Breathe*, 2006 and *The Death of the Xinkai River*, 2008 (Jaguścik 2018) – as well as women's issues such as abortion (*Memory*, 2013, and *Love is Colder than Death*, 2014, both performed abroad) and rape (*Rape*, Beijing, 2013), and often involve nudity and physical

injury (*National Memory*, 2008, in her Beijing studio (see Plate 34). Of the latter, the artist (referring to herself in third person) stated:

Using a sharp knife, she carved a “1” into her chest – one vertical line, a bleeding cut, the authoritarian dictatorship of one party. The performance concluded with chaos and the sound of roaring tanks. By contrasting national news with individual suffering, this work points to the emotional and physical domination and destruction that occurs against individuals under a dictatorship. The scar becomes a permanent memory of the nation imprinted on the body.

Li 2010

Self-harm pertains to the history of performance art, and in the PRC, it was employed by male artists in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet self-inflicted body pain and injury appears in the visual language of Chinese women artists after 2001 with the work of He Chengyao, as in her *99 Needles* (2002), and later in the practice of Li Xinmo, Sun Shaokun, and few others including Chen Zhe (b. 1989) (Newman 2018: 124–7). In *National Memory*, Li Xinmo is transformed into the nation, as she embodies the whole history of her country; her body is one and many, individual and collective. The artist further makes clear that her body expands beyond the borders of the nation and embraces the suffering of all oppressed people as a ‘site of memory’ (*lieu de mémoire*); a notion borrowed from the historian Pierre Nora (1996: 17). Her bleeding, naked body is unmistakably that of a woman, as Li Xinmo engenders the national trauma of dictatorship and historical suffering as female. Moreover, the roaring of the tanks in the background inevitably resonates with the images of Tian’anmen Square in early June 1989 when the pro-democracy demonstrations were brutally suppressed, and therefore, Li Xinmo’s critique touches upon some of the most sensitive twentieth-century topics for the Chinese government.

Li Xinmo is a founding member of the feminist art group Bald Girls (*Tutou genü*), which gathered in 2012 in Beijing specifically with the aim of creating a feminist response to the Chinese contemporary art scene, but also with the intent to build a stronger transnational feminist dialogue (Bald Girls 2012). The 15-minute performance piece *When I was five* (*Wo wu sui*, see Figure 8.3) was enacted during the event *A Door* (*Yi ge men*), organized by the curator of the Bald Girls Juan Xu (a.k.a. Yong Xian) in May 2013 at Zajia Lab, an alternative cultural space in old Beijing. *A Door*, whose title refers to the opening of a space for women, feminism and art, hosted like-minded Chinese guests, such as artist Yan Yinhong (b. 1967) and the abovementioned feminist activist Li Maizi, and non-Chinese guests, including the Swiss artist, Andrea Thal. In her performance, Li Xinmo walked on stage in a long, white dress, playing the traditional Chinese rattle drum (often a children’s toy). She then sat on the floor, untied a razor blade from a thin cord around her neck, and – in a move invoking Ma Qiusha’s video *From No. 4 Pingyuanli to No. 4 Tianqiaobeili* – placed the blade on her tongue. With the blade in her mouth, and her words thus hard to decipher, she recounted tales of child abuse and rape learnt from co-villagers and friends. One story told of a 6-year-old girl who was raped by a man from their village; as an adult, she moved to the city to work as a prostitute and eventually committed suicide. In another story, a close friend of Li Xinmo confessed that her first kiss was with her father. The third story recalled a friend’s daughter, who was raped by her father when she was five; suffering, shame, and fear kept the child and her mother silent. Finally, Li Xinmo recollected the verses of a poem she had once read: Tears running, blood flowing/ Men get hard, women scream/ Once again I am five.<sup>5</sup>



**FIGURE 8.3** Li Xinmo, *When I was Five (Wo wu sui)*, performance, Zajia Lab, Beijing, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

Of this performance, she wrote: 'Every word and sentence I utter the blade hurts my mouth and tongue. It is in pain that I continue to narrate the story; to utter such an experience is extremely hard, and ultimately I am incapable to really put it into words.'<sup>6</sup> Li Xinmo has pointed out that the razor is a tool used by men to shave their beard, and hence it becomes a signifier of their male behaviour (Li 2010). A parallelism can be established between her abused vagina and her wounded mouth; however, her mouth is also ready to hurt and can thus be linked to the notion of the *vagina dentata* (toothed vagina), which in this case represents the power of women over men as abusers and rapists, as 'every penis is made less by every vagina' (Paglia 1991: 47). This performance evokes an earlier work by Li, *Vagina Memories* (2008): a large photograph of a gun pointing down at a vagina. The piece, which was banned several times from galleries in China, signifies the suffering and pain inflicted upon the vagina through sex, pregnancy, miscarriage and childbirth. Despite the introduction of the *Chinese Anti-Family-Violence Law of 2015*, domestic abuse and violence against women is still very widespread in China and remains largely unpunished (Zhang 2020).

Interpreting performance art requires us to reflect on the notion of the *lived body* as the body-in-situation in which the corporeal and emotional experiences coalesce with gender and sociocultural constructions, and formulate the basis of our knowledge (Grosz 1994: 86–111). Through her *lived body* Li Xinmo relives, and at the same time exorcises, her and others' pain as a way to speak out for all subaltern women and girls who do not have the space or means to

denounce the crimes they suffered, or are too ashamed to reveal their traumatizing experiences of violence and abuse. As her work demonstrates, the politics of the body in performance art by women in mainland China is entangled with wider themes of family violence, women's rights and freedom of speech – the latter in particular a sensitive issue for the Chinese central government. Thus, artists such as Li Xinmo often enact their performances either abroad or in the safety of their studios before a small audience, and only occasionally dare open in public places in the PRC. The return to art shown in the privacy of the artist's studio brings to mind the early 1990s trend of 'apartment art' (*gongyu yishu*), and requires further discussion within the discourses of contemporary art in authoritarian states such as China.

## Sun Shaokun

Sun Shaokun (1980–2016) was born in Baoding (Hebei Province) and in 2005 graduated in painting from the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing, a major art institution in the PRC. She was based in the Caochangdi art district in Beijing, where many contemporary artists reside, until she committed suicide in September 2016. Her mixed-media practice mostly focused on performance often using nudity, self-harm and organic materials such as plants and meat, and largely addressed sociopolitical and gender issues. In her series of performalist self-portraits titled *Remodelling Series* (2013–14, see Figure 8.4), included in the abovementioned 2015 censored exhibition *Jian* (Cui 2016: 63–6), Sun posed in natural settings, naked or wearing a tight meshed outfit, and stuck pine needles and prickly grass directly into her skin and hair. In so doing she rethinks the visibility of hairiness which suggests masculinity and defies the conventional expectation of women's smooth skin; it proposes an alternative model of women's beauty and gendered subjectivity, and perhaps plays with the idea of a masculinity complex. Through her *lived body* Sun blends into nature establishing an intimate connection between the female and mother earth, a connection which is not innate, but instead is painfully yet voluntarily enforced.

Sun Shaokun's performances, including others such as *Harmony* (*He he*, Beijing, 2012) and *Matter Inverted* (*Wuzhi fanzhuan*, Xi'an, 2016) (Sun), recall the visual and conceptual dimension of the 'earth-body' art of Ana Mendieta (1948–85), the Cuban-American artist who also died prematurely in her thirties. In a filmed interview, Sun Shaokun declared that she suffered from isolation, as she felt her art was neither appreciated nor understood (Southworth 2016). This clearly reflects the difficulties encountered by artists who, as a minority, overtly work with issues of social injustice, gender discrimination and women's rights in the PRC. There is a price to pay when breaking from mainstream accepted artistic practices for alternative spaces of self-expression and dis-identification. Unlike most of the world, suicide in China is primarily committed by women, and although suicide has greatly decreased in recent years, mental health issues, particularly in women, are attached to social stigmas and prejudices and thus remain largely unaddressed (Follett 2018). Sun's work resonates with the Sad Girl Theory conceived by feminist artist Audry Wollen as 'the sadness of girls should be witnessed and re-historicized as an act of resistance, of political protest' (2015).

In her 2015 performance, *The Power of Sexuality* (*Xing li*) (see Plate 35), enacted in an open studio in Caochangdi, Beijing, the artist used a book on the history of world warfare and semen previously collected from donors. The seminal fluid functioned as glue while she layered pages





**FIGURE 8.4** Sun Shaokun, *Remodelling Series*, performance, 2013–14. Photo by Han Bing, courtesy of Han Bing.



ripped from the book on her face to create a sort of a beauty mask that impeded her breathing. According to Sun Shaokun this was done to resemble ancient tortures (Sun), slow and deadly. The artist's self-inflicted torture can be seen as a strategy to deplore the sexist and patriarchal practices – represented by the book – that smother women in society. Deploying books, and dismembering their integrity during the artistic process, recalls the experimental work of Huang Yong Ping (1954–2019) – '*A History of a Chinese Painting*' and '*A Concise History of Modern Painting*' Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes from 1987; as the title suggests, the artist washed the two art history volumes into a paper pulp in which the books became indistinguishable and forever mashed together. Semen is rarely found in contemporary art practices in the PRC, previously Gu Wenda used it in his early 1990s works, and Xiao Lu attempted to collect it in her participatory work titled *Sperm* (Jing, 2006). Sun Shaokun's choice of semen added an abject dimension to her performance to declare her irreverent artistic attitude, ready to break taboos and expected artistic behaviours. In the performance her *lived body* experienced the suffocating, and at times deadly, male domination which through wars, conflict, tyrannies and dictatorships, but also via rape and domestic violence, have oppressed women over centuries. The visual power of suffocation as the impossibility to breathe and talk, as the ultimate impediment to women's voices, echoes with Li Xinmo's performance *When I was five* discussed above.

## Conclusion

If we define activism as 'everyday actions by individuals that foster new social networks or power dynamics' (Martin, Hanson and Fontaine 2007: 79) and combine it with Ahmed's conception of feminism as 'the dynamism of making connections' in which feminist actions as ripples in the water come together to create a movement (2017: 3), then the minor episodic interventions of these artists can be seen as feminist activism in the ways in which they resist gender discrimination and advocate for women's rights while denouncing social and political injustice. It is now evident that the works of these women artists – from *Nv Quan* and *Cold Wear* designed by Gao Ling and used in collective performances, to Li Xinmo's and Sun Shaokun's use of their *Lived Body* – may have created (and crucially continue to create) new relationships. Beyond performance art's embeddedness in time and space, their work prompts new thinking and awareness, which can in turn inspire change at an individual or community level, and proposes a space for freedom of expression or even direct action (as in Gao Ling's performances). If we deploy Mirzoeff's definition of visual activism, it is unmistakable that the work of these artists contributes to a visual vocabulary that 'is collective and collaborative' and makes 'new self-images, new ways to see and be seen and new ways to see the world' (2016: 292–3).

As Meiqin Wang confirms, the long-term impact of socially engaged and grass-roots-led art projects is hard to measure and quantify, yet if we abandon a pessimistic attitude in evaluating the impact of such projects, it will be easier to see that these artists, activists and professionals: 'not only advance new social courses, but also create alternative sites for the production and circulation of knowledge and theory about new possibilities of art. In so doing, they accentuate the practical, transformative, and activating power of art for social criticism, place construction, and human development via which they are claiming the right to bottom-up social changes' (Wang 2019: 6357/7730). Similarly, for the artists in this chapter, it is difficult to calculate the impact of their

artworks or their practice, as the responses their works catalyse are constantly in progress, continuing to be seen and discussed. The artists engender minor, political and individual yet collective exercises of deterritorialization for the creation of alternatives in art and activism addressed at women's issues. This chapter shows that art by women in the PRC responds to the politics of culture, body and gender and can be a form of activism, an act of resistance against societal biases, and a strategy for fighting injustice and discrimination against Chinese women. Their art is a tool for change. Gao Ling, Li Xinmo and Sun Shaokun (and many others), even if often overlooked, cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, as their work is grounded in the sociopolitical and artistic contexts that motivate it. Ultimately, the work of these artists sends out an important message of advocacy for social justice and the right to freedom of expression – demands that must be expressed strategically under the often repressive and unpredictable actions of not only the PRC, but all nondemocratic and authoritarian states.

## Notes

- 1 Ahmed (2017: 3). Previous and different versions of this paper were presented at Westminster University (2015) and at the biennial conference of the European Association of Chinese Studies (2014 and 2018). I thank the editors, Bethany Simpson and Alasdair B. for comments and suggestions on previous drafts.
- 2 Xiao Lu, in discussion with the author, June 2018.
- 3 The notion of performalist self-portrait was originally conceived in the 1970s by the American artist Hannah Wilke (1940–93) to describe her own performance in self-representations captured in photographs and videos.
- 4 Sina Weibo is a microblogging platform launched in 2009 and one of the major social media in the PRC.
- 5 Translation by the author from archival material provided by the artist. Original Chinese: 撕裂，流血，男人在勃起，女人在尖叫，我又回到五岁。
- 6 Li Xinmo, personal communication, April 2014.

## Further reading

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# 9

## ‘America is Black,’<sup>1</sup> Indigenous and Muslim

### Tatyana Fazlalizadeh’s public challenges to white nationalism

*Stefanie Snider*

#### Introduction

Immediately following the United States (US) presidential election in November 2016, contemporary multi-media artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh created a new public artwork in her hometown of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Made with drawn portraits and text, Fazlalizadeh’s wheat-paste mural used the artist’s tried-and-true media to respond to the impending threat of the white-washing of the United States through a Donald Trump presidency. The mural’s text read: ‘America is Black. It is Native. It wears a hijab. It is a Spanish speaking tongue. It is migrant. It is a woman. It is here has been here and it’s not going anywhere.’ The *America is Black* mural featured portraits of four people of colour, including Fazlalizadeh’s mother. Fazlalizadeh located the mural in Oklahoma City not simply for its personal significance, but also to actively engage with, and take up space within, a largely white city, state,<sup>2</sup> and region that has a history of social conservatism and Republican voting since at least the 1960s; in 2016, more than 65 per cent of those voting in the state selected Trump as their choice for president (Frank 2016).

Prior to creating this mural, Fazlalizadeh was best known for her series *Stop Telling Women to Smile* (STWS). Pasted on walls internationally since 2012, *Stop Telling Women to Smile* has brought art to the same streets on which women are regularly harassed based on clothing choice, gender expression, sexuality, race, religion and more. Fazlalizadeh showed solidarity with harassment survivors, elevating their voices and visages, while shaming their abusers with larger-than-life images and texts. In *America is Black*, Fazlalizadeh once again activated the public sphere in order to empower and promote populations who, despite their marginalization in US history and politics, form the backbone on which US society is based.<sup>3</sup>



This chapter looks at *America is Black* as well as two other public exhibitions of Fazlalizadeh's work in the United States, *Not Going Anywhere* (2017, Brooklyn, NY) and *Oklahoma is Black* (2019, Oklahoma City, OK), to consider her contributions to contemporary visual activism that centres people of colour, especially Black people, within a time period and location wherein dominant culture seeks to discourage, through active erasure from public sites and rhetorical and physical scare tactics, their citizenship and engagement in the US.<sup>4</sup> As Fazlalizadeh writes, 'representations of marginalized groups in art and media matters', and the seemingly simple acts of visual storytelling that Fazlalizadeh produced and encouraged in her subjects made indelible marks on the landscapes of a country whose federal government seemed intent on quashing the vibrant communities of colour, women, non-Christians and LGBTQIA+<sup>5</sup> people that deserve dignity and respect, and who have deeply shaped the nation (Fazlalizadeh 2019). Fazlalizadeh's drawings-turned-murals created large-scale sites of contemplation and conversation for audiences local and abroad; through her murals, public spaces were visually energized as locations of community that speak against the absencing of marginalized populations in the very streets they have called their own. Fazlalizadeh used intimate, individualized imagery inserted into public spaces to celebrate, commemorate and initiate community activism.

Fazlalizadeh engaged in what literary scholar Ashley Holmes has called 'public pedagogy' in reference to the *Stop Telling Women to Smile* project (2014: 38–9). Because Fazlalizadeh's artwork was produced within 'noncommodified public spheres' for mass, typically local audiences, her work spoke directly to and about the community members it visualizes (ibid.: 39). They simultaneously educated and fostered the significance of marginalized people speaking truth to power; the murals became visual activism because they 'work rhetorically to address local problems and move communities toward social change' (ibid). Because Fazlalizadeh created the portraits and texts used in *America is Black* based on her personal interviews with people directly affected by the 2016 US presidential election of Donald Trump and Michael Pence, she helped to lift up their voices in speaking back to the silencing and erasure from a white-washed and homogenized notion of the nation state. The people Fazlalizadeh featured in the portraits of *America is Black*, *Not Going Anywhere* and *Oklahoma is Black* were the artist's constituency, even if they had seemingly been abandoned by their own government.

In conjunction with the imagery and text of the artworks, Fazlalizadeh's choice of locations for *America is Black*, *Not Going Anywhere* and *Oklahoma is Black* tells us about the geopolitics of activist resistance. In choosing largely white and conservative Oklahoma City as well as the seemingly more diverse, but increasingly gentrified Brooklyn, as sites of public engagement and storytelling, the artist intervened in spaces that on the surface appear rather unlike, but which more deeply represent a similar idea on the limitations of citizenship defined through the intersections of race, religion, gender, sexuality and class. Who counts as a citizen of the USA, where, why and how are questions continually projected at Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC), immigrants, non-English speakers, non-Christians and LGBTQIA+ people in the USA in the twenty-first century. At the same time, Fazlalizadeh's choice of public sites corresponded specifically with the local people she represented in her murals; in focusing on the ways in which geography informs politics and social systems, and vice versa, the artist brought attention to specific community-based actions and discussions that confronted and countered the homogenized version of the US then being promoted by the federal government. Fazlalizadeh's murals addressed social, political and geographical injustice at public sites that were accessible to the people she

included in them. She was speaking first and foremost to community members like herself rather than to gallery owners, financial sponsors, or art historians.

Fazlalizadeh's *America is Black* questioned white supremacist and nationalist rhetoric by insisting on the centrality of people of colour to the formation and formulation of the United States of America. During the 2016 presidential election cycle, and since the November 2016 election, nationalistic propaganda in the US has sought to actively erase BIPOC folks, non-Christians and LGBTQIA+ people from definitions of US citizenship.<sup>6</sup> Actions that targeted new or returning immigrants to the United States, such as the threat of building a longer, more substantial wall on the US / Mexico border;<sup>7</sup> the so-called 'Muslim bans' aimed at preventing travellers from countries with significant Islamic populations from entering the US;<sup>8</sup> and the rescinding of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy,<sup>9</sup> demonstrated the Trump administration's commitment to a white supremacist hegemonic US state. While Trump and his supporters in the US seemed intent on making America white 'again', Fazlalizadeh's *America is Black* project argued that the USA as a purely white, Christian and heterosexual state is, and always has been, a myth rather than a reality. In the Oklahoma City *America is Black* mural and additional artwork made between 2016 and 2019, the artist exposed the language and imagery propagated by socially conservative groups, the US president and other government officials who wished to erase the country's history as a colonizing nation, and laid bare the stakes involved in anti-racist resistance work by Black, Indigenous and people of colour in the USA today. Placed in public sites within the United States, Fazlalizadeh's large-scale murals presented forms of visual activism that simultaneously spoke to BIPOC communities targeted by white supremacy and white audiences alike, although to different ends.

## ***America is Black* (2016) and making space via cultural activism**

The *America is Black* mural featured four pencil-drawn figures in black and grey on a white background. The text was in capital letters to the left of the portraits, with some words in bold, and in multiple-sized fonts. Each portrait was a person of colour; three appeared to be women and one appeared to be a man.<sup>10</sup> Each figure looked out from their space, considering us rather carefully while we, as viewers, studied them. Although we were not given the specific names of these people, the drawings were individualized portraits blown up to an oversized scale, as are most of Fazlalizadeh's figural mural works. This, on its own, implies their significance and their particularity; indeed, the scale of the figures included in the *America is Black* mural is much larger than the text included in the artwork. The largest figure, on the left of this group, was Fazlalizadeh's mother; the artist, in describing the impetus for this mural, wrote: 'I used a couple of recent drawings, one old drawing, and a drawing I did the day before installing this of my mother, to put together a diverse group of folks' (Fazlalizadeh 2016). By incorporating an image of her mother, Fazlalizadeh made obvious that the political is personal – and vice versa. Furthermore, by using her mother's portrait as the largest image, and thus the focus of this mural, Fazlalizadeh showcased her roots as a Black woman from Oklahoma City.<sup>11</sup> Fazlalizadeh's reference to the collection of images she collaged together, both old and new, rendered visible her long-term commitment to producing art for and about people of colour. It visibly linked the past and present, reiterating the message of the text:

Black, Indigenous and other people of colour, especially women, have long been a mainstay of the US population and they are not going anywhere, despite the goals of the Trump federal administration. In this single message, Fazlalizadeh vividly uplifted Black, Indigenous, Muslim and migrant people and starkly challenged white supremacist and misogynist dominant culture. At the same time, by placing the mural in often white-washed Oklahoma City, Fazlalizadeh literally and figuratively put a face to some of those Oklahoma citizens who have been frequently absented from history and politics.<sup>12</sup>

That Fazlalizadeh tends to use hand-rendered pencil drawings as the basis of her murals, including this one, shows a commitment of time and attention to detail in a format – the mural – that is massive in scale and that has a long history within social activist struggles toward recognition, equity and empowerment. From José Celestino Orozco's *Cortés and La Malinche* fresco in 1926 at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, to the 1967 *Wall of Respect* in Chicago by the Visual Arts Workshop of the Organization of Black American Culture, to the enormous paintings created by Syrian refugees in Za'atari camp in Amman, Jordan, in 2017, murals have been a very public way to bring attention to critical issues of marginalized populations and to show both resilience and autonomy in the face of oppressive regimes.<sup>13</sup> We can apply urban studies scholars Michael Buser and Jane Arthurs' concept of 'cultural activism' to Fazlalizadeh's and other public artworks. Defined as a set of conditions that 'challenge dominant constructions of the world; present alternative socio-political and spatial imaginaries; and disrupt relationships between art, politics, participation, and spectatorship', cultural activism is a multi-dimensional approach to considering the ways in which contemporary visual and performance-based actions can intervene within specific locations (Buser and Arthurs 2019: 3). Buser and Arthurs especially emphasize the geopolitical significance and ramifications of cultural activism, as the sites that they describe are community-based and in threat of further commodification and removal from community oversight. In another text, Buser, as well as co-authors Carlo Bonura, Maria Fannin and Kate Boyer, argue that 'cultural activism is not merely capable of constructing meanings about urban space, it also provides the 'prospects for a new progressive political opening' within the wider context of global capitalism through the cultivation of a shared aesthetics of protest' (Buser, Bonura, Fannin and Boyer 2013: 1). Cultural activism and its attendant 'aesthetics of protest' is readily applicable to the Oklahoma City *America is Black* mural as well as other of Fazlalizadeh's public art exhibitions.<sup>14</sup>

The geopolitical and spatial dimensions of the *America is Black* mural and other of Fazlalizadeh's projects is especially significant, as the artworks visually energized specific sites that had clear relationships to those figures Fazlalizadeh has drawn in them. In describing her choice of location for *America is Black*, Fazlalizadeh wrote, 'This work is located in Oklahoma, a very red, Republican state. The site of this piece is just as important to its intent' (Fazlalizadeh quoted in Frank 2016). Fazlalizadeh activated the mural site and its surrounding community from two directions: one, the familiar, through the people she knew, who lived in Oklahoma and who were often erased via behaviours, attitudes and acts of racism, heterosexism and misogyny; and the second, the unexpected, through the re-insertion and reinvigoration of people of colour and white women within middle-American spaces that have been stereotyped as 'purely' and historically white, masculine and socially conservative.

The juxtaposition between the hand-drawn imagery and the monumentality of Fazlalizadeh's mural suggested that viewers need to stop and stare, to take in what the artist presented before them in a considered way. It also marked the space as one of contemplation, wherein viewers

needed to enact, at least briefly, a performance of communication between themselves and the subjects of Fazlalizadeh's artworks, which fostered a sense of interpersonal and community interaction between viewers and the artworks' subjects within their specific locales. The faces beckoned the viewer, but they weren't fully known without some length of examination. The specificity of the figures featured suggested this as well; while not named in the mural itself, the subjects were clearly individualized people, not generic fabrications. Even though historically, many murals have been hand-made, it is relatively unusual to see a mural that features and focuses on a drawing technique, rather than a painted, or especially in the twenty-first century, a digitally designed composition. The drawn marks invited a sense of familiarity and immediacy both in the message of the artwork and in its visual technique. I would describe Fazlalizadeh's personal drawing style as 'selectively unpolished' in that the most salient details of each portrait, typically found in the face, are finely wrought in a wide gradient of tones, but the more extraneous elements of hair, garments and accessories tend to be much more loosely drawn to give us only a basic sense of shape and form. This sketchy quality emphasizes the instantaneous sensibility of the mural and the speed with which Fazlalizadeh undertook the project during November of 2016. She wrote, 'After the election, I immediately knew I wanted to make some public art during my trip to Oklahoma in a few weeks for Thanksgiving. I wanted to make something in a very Republican state that was a challenge to whiteness' (Fazlalizadeh 2016).

The artist moved from idea to finished and hung mural in less than three weeks. The selectively polished look of her drawn images and the flexibility with which she interconnected multiple drawings, from past and present, created a sense of political immediacy as well, as if to emphasize the need to capture people who matter to the USA and who were becoming subjected to greater and greater threats of violence and eradication, before they were further attacked and/or fled for their lives. The use of drawing as the main medium of the murals evoked a gestural, process-oriented form of creation that tied Fazlalizadeh's hand to the subject matter in an intimate way. But rather than making the process about the psychological output of the artist, here it demonstrated a broader engagement with the public and activist realm, in art-making.

## Expanding spaces: Oklahoma and Brooklyn are also Black

Two exhibitions, presented in 2017 and 2019, furthered the visual and cultural activism that Fazlalizadeh's *America is Black* mural made possible. At the time of making *America is Black*, Fazlalizadeh was preparing for an exhibition that would take place in Brooklyn, NY, at BRIC Arts Media in the first half of 2017.<sup>15</sup> Fazlalizadeh's indoor installation at BRIC Arts was entitled *Not Going Anywhere*, the last three words of text included in *America is Black* as well. The text of *Not Going Anywhere* also begins with the statement: 'America is Black.' While the texts shared these initial and final statements, and the same sentiment about the centrality of women, queers, Muslims and people of colour to the population of the United States, the text in *Not Going Anywhere* was much longer and even more specific than *America is Black*. It read:

America is Black. It always has been. It is a man twirling at 3am under colorful lights, sweaty and in love with his boyfriend. It thrives with disabilities. It is migrant. It is a tongue that unapologetically only speaks Spanish. It is a self-regulated womb. It is Native. It has been here

before any White foot touched its soil. It is traumatized. It is hungry. It is a woman. It has always been. It translates for its parents. It transcends borders. It transcends binaries. It is dodging violence on the street. From men. From the police. It wears a hoodie. It wears a hijab. It has kinky hair that smells of coconut oil. It is trans. It's a kiki with friends and nights slept on a park bench. It's a fist in the air and a fiery demand for justice. It always has been. It prays in a New York City mosque. It prays in a South Carolina church. It is my Black mama and my Persian, immigrant daddy. These are not exceptions. These are not Others. These are not descriptions in contrast to what is normal. This is it. It is here. It has been here. AND IT IS NOT GOING ANYWHERE.

FAZLALIZADEH N.D.[A]

Adjacent to this text were four large-scale portraits, two of which were also part of *America is Black*. The other walls included several other portraits of BIPOC subjects, activating the entire gallery space from multiple angles. Accompanying both text and images were recordings Fazlalizadeh made of conversations she had had with people in Brooklyn after election day in November 2016 and people in Washington, DC, on 20 January 2017 – inauguration day for Donald Trump (ibid.). When viewers were in the gallery space they were engulfed in visual and aural conversations with the participant-subjects of Fazlalizadeh's work. This combination of media alongside the time period during which Fazlalizadeh prepared the elements of this exhibition suggest a similar immediacy as the *America is Black* mural. This was art made in direct response, as Fazlalizadeh put it, to 'the xenophobic and misogynistic rhetoric now dominating American discourse' (ibid.). It was art that centred and uplifted the people targeted and violated by this rhetoric.

In early 2019, Fazlalizadeh further expanded her exploration of geo-spatial politics and visual activism in her first solo exhibition staged in her home city and state, called *Tatyana Fazlalizadeh: Oklahoma is Black*, at Oklahoma Contemporary in Oklahoma City.<sup>16</sup> This exhibition included the drawing-based wheat-paste posters and murals the artist is known for, as well as oil paintings, collage, historical images and videos. In her statement for the exhibition, Fazlalizadeh described her motivation for the exhibition contents and title, writing:

The show is titled *Oklahoma is Black* because this state is steeped in black life, culture, and history. [ . . . ] I hope that what these paintings do is tell the black people in this exhibition that they are loved, that they are seen, and heard. [ . . . ] My intent is also to confront. *Oklahoma is Black* is for white folks to be confronted with the people that they have tried to erase or ignore. It is my small celebration of the place and people I call home.

FAZLALIZADEH 2019

As a full exhibition, *Oklahoma is Black* was meant to expose neglected people and histories of blackness in the state, as Fazlalizadeh wrote, in a confrontational manner for white viewers and as a celebratory acknowledgement for Black viewers. This simultaneous gesture of challenge and revelation spoke to multiple constituencies, like *America is Black*: white, Christian, heterosexual dominant culture and overlooked and undervalued Black, non-Christian and queer culture(s) – heirs to the resistance against white supremacy happening in the USA since the sixteenth century.



As with the rooms of the *Not Going Anywhere* exhibit, in *Oklahoma is Black*, Fazlalizadeh's work encompassed the entire multi-room exhibition space, creating a sense of being enveloped by community, family and friends, in multiple materials, colours and textual testimonies. Several wall-sized wheat-paste murals that incorporated drawn portraits, text, and/or historical photographs that Fazlalizadeh found in the Oklahoma Historical Society archives created links between the present and the past, situating the lives and work of contemporary Black Oklahomans in a historical narrative that values communal existence and work. These large-scale pieces were accompanied by smaller oil paintings of a select group of Oklahoma residents made in a technique similar to Fazlalizadeh's drawings: carefully constructed faces that show great attention to the detail of light and line in various shades of brown skin, with sketchier bodies and background settings. In colour oil paint, this technique created images of photo-realistic portraiture mixed with a sense of quick gestural abstraction.

In conjunction with the murals and paintings, two video installations featured the images and words of Black Oklahoma City residents directly through interviews Fazlalizadeh had conducted locally in 2018. In addition to the typical audio / visual components of the videos, shown on monitors in two areas of the exhibit, transcriptions of the videos were located in the gallery spaces, making the words of the community more broadly accessible. This inclusion of text and audio / visual seemed like an extension of Fazlalizadeh's earlier pieces combining text and imagery in the mural-sized artworks, reaching out to viewers in complex and meaningful ways, adding intricate layers to the hand-rendered paintings and drawings in the galleries. This experience was further cemented by the fact that several of those Oklahomans shown in the video interviews were also depicted in the paintings and/or drawings on the gallery walls, with short text excerpts integrated into or next to their portraits. As a result, viewers of *Oklahoma is Black* had an opportunity for multi-media and multi-dimensional engagement with Fazlalizadeh's subjects; they clearly reached out from the walls and spoke candidly to audiences about their personal and professional experiences as Black Oklahomans. Fazlalizadeh's artworks seemed a visual translation of their stories rather than an attempt to speak for them; the images were visual enhancements of, rather than substitutes for, their words.

The inclusion of personal information in these murals reinforced the notion that Fazlalizadeh was one of the participants engaging with the murals as well.<sup>17</sup> In *Not Going Anywhere*, we once again saw Fazlalizadeh use an especially personal reference – her parents – within her larger argument about the United States. In much the same way that the artist used her mother's portrait at the centre of *America is Black*, in *Not Going Anywhere* Fazlalizadeh referenced 'my Black mama and my Persian, immigrant daddy' (Fazlalizadeh n.d.[a]) as a way to insist upon her right to be recognized as an American – not despite her heritage – but because of it. Fazlalizadeh argued that while she might be seen as an infiltrating and infectious 'Other' by white nationalists, in actuality she was one among many marginalized individuals who constituted the United States, and who refused to submit to the violence and racism of the state without protest. In each of the three projects discussed here Fazlalizadeh insisted on her subjecthood as a companion to the other Black Oklahoman Americans she portrayed, intertwining her own story with theirs, and claiming the spaces the artworks inhabited as their own.

Fazlalizadeh's choice of mural locations in Brooklyn and Oklahoma City was concurrently political and personal. Fazlalizadeh has lived and worked in Brooklyn and was clearly a part of the community she was addressing in the BRIC Arts installation. Furthermore, while the artist might

not have chosen a corner in Oklahoma City as the site of *America is Black* solely because she grew up there, the fact that Fazlalizadeh experienced first-hand the systemic racism of the largely white and largely Republican city certainly played a role in the geo-politics of the mural's location. Indeed, in her statement describing the reason behind the mural, Fazlalizadeh noted that she would be visiting her home town for a family holiday, thus reifying her connection to the city itself, but also the importance of speaking out, in one's home community, about violence and social injustice. These sentiments also permeated the *Oklahoma is Black* exhibition at the Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Centre, and Fazlalizadeh's hands, eyes and voice could be seen in multiple forms within this space as well. Invigorating these spaces to make them sites of visual activism both confirmed the place of people of colour in a community where they were outnumbered by whites and challenged white viewers to think about how their attitudes and behaviours were directly affecting the people of colour, especially Black people, in their cities.

Upon installing *America is Black* in Oklahoma City, Fazlalizadeh had hoped to provoke conversations, but also knew that not all responses to the work would be supportive or positive. Indeed, in writing about the artwork, she recognized its inherent ephemerality as a wheat-pasted public mural and expressed her desire to see what physical reactions might come about in response to the work (Fazlalizadeh 2016). According to local news reports after *America is Black* was placed at the corner of NW Twenty-Third Street in Oklahoma City, reactions were mixed.<sup>18</sup> While no vandalism or other actions against the mural were reported, it was taken down by officials of the Oklahoma City government in March of 2017 because it had not gone through the 'proper' channels for approval according to the city's policies (Fazlalizadeh 2017). Fazlalizadeh had had permission to locate the mural where it was placed from the building's owner, but according to Oklahoma City law, artists must go through a proposal process in order for the Oklahoma City Arts Commission to determine 'aesthetic quality, design integrity and [. . .] that a mural is appropriate to its setting, architecture, and [the] social context' in which it is placed.<sup>19</sup> The removal of *America is Black* according to this policy proved the point Fazlalizadeh made with its creation: white supremacy and xenophobia don't simply overlook, but instead, actively erase people of colour and their concerns through nationalistic rhetoric and public policy. Rhetoric about artistic quality and 'appropriateness' in terms of exhibition spaces and subjects has long been used as a mode of censorship for artists working within marginalized communities and showing subjects whose appearances, organizing strategies and messages challenge, overtly or subtly, dominant notions of respectability, acceptability and so-called neutrality.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

The destruction of the *America in Black* mural did not stop Fazlalizadeh from making more large-scale public interventions around the United States. In fact, it was likely a motivating factor for the May–June 2017 project called *When Women Disrupt*, a collaboration with two other women artists of colour, Jessica Sabogal and Melinda James. The artists travelled around California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, creating and recording murals that overtly called out, through text and imagery, the sexism, racism and xenophobia embedded in nationalistic exhortations in the USA. *When Women Disrupt* combined Sabogal and Fazlalizadeh's distinctive styles by marking public sites

with questions and statements that challenged the foundation of white supremacy and misogyny in the USA. The artists wrote:

We are here to serve as a reflection of justice. As artists, it is our duty to uplift the sacredness of women, people of color, the disabled, queer and trans folks, immigrants and the undocumented, and our indigenous brothers and sisters, whom history has forced to believe are less than human. We believe in the right to our own liberation, unbounded by man-made borders, white supremacy, misogyny, and xenophobia.

FAZLALIZADEH, SABOGAL and JAMES 2017<sup>21</sup>

The texts incorporated with the imagery in *When Women Disrupt* were short and direct; they interrogated viewers and implicated them in the perpetuation and benefits of sexism and white supremacy. Questions included: 'Who Does America Belong To?' and 'What does it mean to be white when [B]lack bodies are under constant attack?' Other texts showcased the points of view of the artists by demanding empathy combined with action for people of colour experiencing both insidious and explicit brutality every day, simply for existing in a culture of white dominance. Several murals and posters read: 'White Supremacy is Killing Me'; 'Liberation is Not White'; and 'Make Whiteness the Other'. Using this visual campaign, Sabogal and Fazlalizadeh inserted community members back into the landscapes they had been absented from. The murals and posters remade the landscape in their image and demanded notice. They challenged a white fantasy of America by activating public sites, turning them into visually activist spaces.

In Tatyana Fazlalizadeh's activist art, portraiture and text come together to bring those who have been traditionally marginalized to the centre of US discourse, nationality and politics to lift their voices and empower them in public social spaces. Fazlalizadeh works alongside the people in the communities she too is a part of, to amplify their concerns and visually vitalize the spaces in which they exist. In regard to the contestation of *America is Black*, Fazlalizadeh wrote:

[This] is why taking public space is important for me. Why a lot of the public art I've done has been without permission. It's why [this work] is more than just putting up a pretty picture on an outdoor wall. It's about physically and metaphorically, as a [Black] woman, Taking. Space. Because I don't want to ask white men for permission for anything.

FAZLALIZADEH 2017

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, in which there have been an increasing politics of exclusion in the USA, Fazlalizadeh's visual activism has been needed to work against the messages of xenophobia so widely circulated through governmental policies, mass media and public spaces. Fazlalizadeh's artworks activate a visual politics of place that is essential for conveying the significance of Black and other communities of colour in and to the United States.

## Notes

- 1 The phrase, 'America is Black,' is part of a mural created by Tatyana Fazlalizadeh in Oklahoma City during 2016; see Fazlalizadeh (n.d.[b]).

- 2 As of 2018, the US Census Bureau reported that just over 54 per cent of Oklahoma City residents were white, and non-Latinx and African Americans were approximately 15 per cent of the population (US Census Bureau 2018b). As of 2018, the US Census Bureau reported that nearly 66 per cent of Oklahomans were white, and non-Latinx and African Americans were almost 8 per cent of the population (US Census Bureau 2018a).
- 3 For a detailed history on the establishment of the United States economy via the slave trade and enslavement of Africans and African Americans across the Americas, see Dawson (2002).
- 4 These works can be seen via the following links to the artists website: *America is Black* (2016), see Fazlalizadeh, (n.d.[b]); *Not Going Anywhere* (2017), see *ibid.* (n.d.[a]); and *Oklahoma is Black* (2019), see *ibid.* (n.d.[c]).
- 5 The LGBTQIA+ abbreviation represents Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic and other sexual and gender minorities. The 'alphabet soup', as some dismiss it, is important in terms of creating rhetorical spaces of inclusion for people from a wide variety of marginalized genders and sexualities, and its continuing expansion (e.g. LGBTQQIPA2S+) as well as the use of the plus sign, denotes, as Michael Gold writes, 'everything on the gender and sexuality spectrum that letters and words can't yet describe' (2018).
- 6 While Donald Trump lost the 2020 presidential election in the USA, policies put into place during his term, as well as continuing policies on immigrant detention and deportation and support for law enforcement organizations, show that despite Joe Biden's presidency, racist and xenophobic US discourses on equity and citizenship remain in place.
- 7 During the campaign for the 2016 presidential election, Trump repeatedly promised that he would build a permanent wall on the US–Mexico border as a solution to the perceived problem of illegal immigration by people from Central and South America into the United States. Trump requested funding for such a wall from Congress and other sources since taking office in January 2017 and continued to campaign using this project and its rhetoric about illegal immigration in preparation for the 2020 presidential election. For documentation on this wall campaign, see Quealy (2019).
- 8 For more on Trump's attempts at restricting travel from Muslim-dominant nations to the US, see American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU n.d.).
- 9 The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme, established via a memorandum by Barak Obama and then-Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano in 2012, created a process through which children and young adults brought into the US before the age of 16 by parents who had illegally immigrated could remain in the US by being tagged as 'low priority' for consideration of deportation. The memo in which this was ordered clearly stated that this programme was not meant to establish a 'pathway to citizenship'. In September 2017, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services branch of the Department of Homeland Security stopped accepting new applications for the DACA programme. While the Trump administration attempted to completely halt the DACA programme in the US, as of January 2018 federal courts have ordered that renewal of DACA applications from past recipients must continue to be allowed. This ruling is expected to be challenged and eventually tried at the US Supreme Court (Napolitano and US Department of Homeland Security 2012; US Citizenship and Immigration Services n.d.).
- 10 I am making these assumptions based on limited knowledge of the figures depicted here, using conventional signs of gender, and admit that these assumptions are shaped by cissexism and I could be incorrect.
- 11 In two smaller variations of this 2016 *America is Black* mural created in 2017 and shown in Fazlalizadeh's Instagram account and included in the 2019 *Tatyana Fazlalizadeh: Oklahoma is Black* exhibition at Oklahoma Contemporary (February–May 2019), Fazlalizadeh includes this portrait of her mother as well as a portrait of herself, further underlining this personal and/as political connection.

- 12 In a 2019 text-based artwork called *Ode to My Home*, Fazlalizadeh writes, 'Sometimes, someone will ask, "There are black people in Oklahoma?" when I tell them where I'm from. [. . .] As if we disappeared. As if their attempts to kill us off were successful. As if we didn't survive, aren't surviving, their violence. Every day.'
- 13 In the Americas, resistance art of any media dates to at least the Conquest and colonization by European settlers during the sixteenth century, when Indigenous artists inserted native imagery and stylistic treatment into artwork commissioned by the Spanish Christian colonists (Dean and Leibsohn 2003).
- 14 Following Rancière (2009: 82), the authors move on to define 'aesthetics of protest' as 'a form of protest specifically designed to challenge perceptions . . . of urban life and capital in which certain ways of living and visions of community are deemed unacceptable. The "new political opening" of cultural activism in Stokes Croft, therefore, is found both in the style of protest and in the way that protest "reworks the frame of our perceptions" of urban life' (Buser et al. 2013: 2).
- 15 BRIC Arts Media is a community-based arts organization that produces arts programming in many fields – from television to visual art to live performance – that focuses on supporting artists directly from the community in which it is located. Founded in the 1970s, the organization has been especially interested in highlighting the work of up-and-coming artists and of making arts events economically accessible to the surrounding residents of Brooklyn, and New York more widely (BRIC n.d.).
- 16 Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center was founded in 1989 as a community-based accessible and affordable arts programming and education non-profit institution; the centre professes to 'commit to championing policies and practices that value diversity, foster cultural equity and create an accessible and inclusive environment'. The exhibition space does not charge any admission or programming fees, which does make it economically accessible to a wide range of viewers (Oklahoma Contemporary n.d.).
- 17 Fazlalizadeh notes that this exhibit is, 'coming from my lens, my viewpoint, what I want to say and who I want to represent when it comes to Blackness in Oklahoma' (Fazlalizadeh quoted in McDonell 2019).
- 18 For example, one viewer responded by saying, 'Thank you for creating such a beautiful and healing visual. Never thought I'd see public art like this is OKC or Oklahoma period. Ever' (Morrison quoted in Enchassi 2016). In contrast, however, others saw the mural as a demonstration of division by challenging whiteness in dominant culture in a public way; such critiques tend to follow the neoliberal argument that discussing racialization and racism in the US fosters conflict rather than making space for the potential dismantling of racism and racially based injustice. For example, in a tweet posted by the Women's March that showed a smaller version of the *America is Black* mural, one man wrote, 'This is stupid. America is not a race or color or sexual preference. It is an ideal that personal liberty is good and not oppression,' and one woman wrote, 'So white women can go to hell basically . . . nice' (Griffith and Nilsson in Responses to Women's March tweet 2017). For a thorough discussion of the interconnections between racism and neoliberalism, as well as the myth of a colour-blind or 'post-racial' United States, see Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2011).
- 19 In March 2017, the commission was made up of 15 members, 14 of whom were white and 11 of whom were men. In response to the mural's destruction, Fazlalizadeh wrote:

My mural is 100% not for them. I'm going to submit a proposal. For this mural, and for another mural project I want to develop in OKC. But I'm already discouraged based on that group of commissioners, being a black woman artist, and who/what my art represents. This is why 'diversity' is not only important in the work and faces we get to see – it needs to be behind the scenes. Who is in the room making the decisions. Who is deciding what is a 'quality aesthetic'.



- 20** For one set of accounts of the 'Culture Wars' in the United States beginning in the late twentieth century, see Yenawine, Weems and Wallis (2019).
- 21** The artist statement for the project continued:

Our goal is to travel from one city to the next, in republican areas, to force a new dialogue. Using public art as our tool, we will disrupt white supremacy and the oppressive rhetoric that has been fuelled by our current political climate. We will place small- and large-scale artwork on outdoor walls, confronting communities in the public space with art featuring the words and faces of those they either do not see or, do not want to see. This tour is an act of confrontation and movement – leaving our respective cities of Oakland and Brooklyn – to explore how our art can be effective in these southwest communities.

FAZLALIZADEH, SABOGAL and JAMES 2017

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# 10

## Farida Batool

### A Pakistani visual activist

*Amina Ejaz*

#### Introduction

**T**his chapter, in considering the work of Farida Batool, has an underlying question concerning the character of art-activism in the specific context of Pakistan. Batool's site-specific works and her collaborative endeavours are shaped by Pakistan's complex history, and her own development as an artist-activist is similarly a result of this – as well as developments within art practice. The chapter attempts, therefore, to discuss her work within these contexts, in order to offer some insights into the circumstances governing and shaping activist art in Pakistan.

Pakistan, a postcolonial South Asian country has, in recent years made inroads in the international artworld through creating a dynamic discourse on art. Though artworks created from Pakistan are labelled Pakistani, they are situated in a much more complex historical past where issues of a conflicted postcolonial identity, belonging and dislocation have remained at the forefront. As Iftikhar Dadi an eminent art historian on Pakistan rightfully states: 'Although artists contributed to national life by forming new institutional frameworks for the patronage, exhibition, and reception of modern art—a labor that is an inextricable aspect of their personae—the addressee of their art cannot be simply equated with a Pakistani nationhood marked by aporias and impasses as a consequence of complex historical developments' (2010: 2).

This chapter discusses the work of the visual activist Farida Batool and examines her development as an activist artist, in the context of what Dadi refers to as 'complex historical developments' (ibid.). Batool's work is formed within the political, social, economic and religious turbulence that has beset Pakistan since independence from the British Raj in 1947, as well as the complex genealogy of the nation's art. Since the 1980s, many Pakistani artists have rejected the nostalgia-ridden aesthetics typified by Abdur Rehman Chughtai (1894–1975), and have attempted to investigate controversial social, political and religious issues, eventually developing art as a tool of activism. During the late 1980s, the seeds of a dissident art were sown by a new generation of female artists like Lala Rukh, Salima Hashmi and Naazish Attaulah, and male artists like Anwar

Saeed, who tried to question power, patriarchy and politics. In the 1990s, artists like Imran Qureshi, Ayesha Khalid and Shazia Sikander emerged on the international art scene, advocating a mediation between modernity and 'tradition'. This was a generation that had grown up under dictatorship and saw the rise of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1924–88), who in 1977 enforced Martial Law for the third time in the history of Pakistan, and whose adoption of a dogmatic view of Islam initiated a series of regressive policies that irrevocably changed the face of art. Artists responded to this situation by introducing more dissident and activist content, and since then, post-9/11 in particular, a new generation of Pakistani artists have worked on the themes of violence and extremism that the country has faced internally, whilst also tackling issues of skewed representation and stereotypes. This is the political and artistic context within which Farida Batool's work has developed and can be interpreted. Her work differs from that of Saud Balouch, Imran Qureshi and Ayesha Khalid, for example, who deal with violence as central themes; by more actively trying to instigate change through her artistic practices, rather than simply representing violence. Batool is an artist and an activist who attempts to engage the public, to inform and educate regarding adverse shifts in society, striving to provide the public with some sort of closure and catharsis.

Born in Lahore in 1970, Batool completed her BFA from the National College of Arts. As a visual artist she is interested in investigating Pakistan's political upheavals and tumultuous history. She does not work with traditional art mediums but actively engenders relationships involving the public through her art installations, projects and performances. Batool is an 'activist': an activist artist who emerged in the international art scene in the 1990s. Growing up under the shadow of General Zia-ul-Haq, Batool's practice is informed by a time when alternative voices of resistance were attempting to challenge official hegemonic narratives, issues of gender, and patriarchy in Pakistan. This chapter, therefore, is an attempt to analyse how Batool, who comes from a generation of Pakistani contemporary artists whose worldview was shaped by repression, has learnt to navigate between policies of censorship, opening out a discourse that sheds light on topics that had hitherto been considered taboo.

In 2015, Batool co-created Awami Art Collective (AAC) with her husband Raheem ul Haque, Raza Khan, Sehr Jalil, Mohsin Shafi, Naira Mushtaq, Yasir Azeem, Marria Khan, Asad Ali Changaizi, Ammara Khalid and Haider Ali Khan. The work of AAC is to create a visual dialogue in the public spaces between the people of the city. Interaction, conversations and experience for a peaceful existence is the central aim of the collective. The objectives of AAC, as art activism in relation to urban public space, can be illuminated through a reading of Batool's essay, 'City as Art – Art in a City – City in Protest – Art of Resistance' (2014). Batool examines how Lahore is transformed from an inclusive space for artists and people, into a security compromised area where art sites are covered with barbed wire and subject to increased security checks (*ibid.*). She seeks to evaluate the relationship of the public and space in relation to the everyday surroundings. I suggest that this might be interpreted through Baudelaire's concept of the *flâneur* – meaning to observe modern urban life through 'strolling' or 'loafing' – Batool explores the relationship between the city and public. As she 'strolls', she connects the city, Lahore, with spatial form and social experiences, producing 'spatial imagination', a term she borrows from architectural historian Dell Upton (2008). Chattopadhyay also adopts this concept, arguing that it is a process 'through which social groups work out the relation between social and physical phenomena, establishing links between attributes such as sound, smell, and the nonphysical dimensions of ideas and ideals' (2014). In her

reflections on the relationship between art and activism, Kirsten Dufour argues that, 'activism in art involves working outside of institutions in public space where one is capable of addressing and making use of many modes and forms of culture' (2002: 157). Batool attempts to do what Dufour proposes here; Batool's practice and sites of display are shared and inclusive, often reinterpreting or reclaiming politicized spaces.

## History of Pakistan: a violent brooding place?

Before delving into Batool's artistic practices, it is imperative to view the social history of Pakistan, which I argue is embedded in violence. Violence and Pakistan have become inseparable over the years; it has come to be rooted in the country's history and identity. The earliest and bloodiest instance of violence and mass migration occurred in 1947 during Partition when two separate geographic entities emerged on the world map, Pakistan and India. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal present the harrowing figures of around 17 million people who were displaced across the subcontinent 'ostensibly divided along religious lines for the first time in its history' (2004, 167). This division caused the death of at least 1 million people including Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs in the name of religion and partition. The division of the subcontinent by the British, on the basis of religion amongst other things, eventually came to fuel other problems such as fundamentalism, Islamization and a conflicted postcolonial identity.

On the eve of Partition, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, said that every citizen of Pakistan was free and safe to practice their religion. He clearly separated State and religion, asserting a fundamental principle that all are the citizens of one State (Abbass 2006: 182). However, his proclamation was overshadowed and soon forgotten, as Pakistan's first constitution, written in 1956, declared the country to be the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Religious minorities like Shia, Christians, Hazaras and Hindus, over time became targeted minorities of violence and extremism. The cases of extremism and violence were also a product of the political unrest in the country. Owing to corruption as well as economic and political uncertainties faced by the country since Partition, Pakistan struggled unsuccessfully to maintain politically stable governments, resulting in a string of military dictatorships. The most radicalized dictatorship and military takeover took place in 1977, initiated by Zia-ul-Haq. Backed by the United States as an ally for war in Afghanistan, he used Islamization as a tool to legitimize his dictatorship. Most scholars agree that Zia-ul-Haq made women direct targets of a misogynist state under his purported Islamization project (Jahangir and Jilani 1992). He implemented stringent modifications in the Constitution, including the Hudood Ordinance and Blasphemy Law,<sup>1</sup> from which the country is still suffering. In 1999, Pakistan experienced another coup d'état, led by General Pervez Musharraf. In, *Military Control in Pakistan: The Parallel State*, Mazhar Aziz writes:

We explain that the emergence of the military as the foremost decision-making entity probably creates its own set of precedents and institutions that enables the military to be, in effect, a parallel state, and continue to define the nature of governance within the polity. It is then likely that the civilian governments in Pakistan will remain unstable and weak given the scope of the military's capacity and influence.



The Army's increasing dominance in Pakistan's politics is also because of border tensions with India over the issue of Kashmir. At the time of Partition, Kashmir was owned by Hari Singh but had a population with a Muslim majority of 77 per cent that was willing to join Pakistan. However, India claimed ownership of the region and this issue led to three successive wars: in 1948, 1965 and 1999. Both of these countries still deal with border tensions on a daily basis and the military of both has exploited this to maintain their dominance on either side. Pakistan is not only facing violence internally and through border conflict, but a new situation has arisen since 9/11. A western military presence in the region has brought more violence to the country and has ushered in an era of terrorist attacks. These developments and accompanying tensions illustrate the scope and complexity of the origin of violence in Pakistan, the history of which cannot be understood through simplistic interpretations. Pakistan's history is complex and it does not merit the kind of essentializing to which it has been unfairly subjected by the world media.

## The challenge of art's response to sectarian violence and political killings

In 2015, AAC displayed their first art installation *Hum Jo Tareek Raho mai Maray Gaye (We Who Were Slayed in the Dark Alleys)*; see Figure 10.1 and Plate 36). The Urdu title of the project was taken from a verse of poetry by Faiz Ahmed Faiz,<sup>2</sup> and the installation aimed to critique killings based on sectarian violence. Sectarian violence by religious militants has been on the rise in Pakistan since 1979. According to S. V. R. Nasr, 'Sectarian violence has taken center-stage as militants vie to assert the pre-eminence of their religious communities, gain control of the Islamist discourse and define the nature of state-society relations' (2000: 140). Batool belongs to a Shia Muslim minority group that is marginalized in Pakistani society.<sup>3</sup> One of her very close family members, her first cousin – a renowned doctor – was shot along with his 13-year-old son in Lahore in 2015. No one claimed responsibility for the crime. In the same week, 61 people were killed and about 50 were injured in the bombing of a Shia mosque in Shikarpur, Sindh Province (SATP n.d.). Such violent acts are a driving force behind the site-specific installation of AAC. The collective aimed to pay homage to the people and their families who have lost their lives in the name of ethnicity and religion over the previous decade or so. Saman Tariq Malik observes that Batool, as the backbone of the collective, aims to use public spaces through this display as a 'means to promote peaceful co-existence and to foster an appreciation of diversity in the country' (2015).

*Jhandis*<sup>4</sup> are used as a marker for celebrating independence and other religious festivals like *Eid Milad-ul-Nabi*.<sup>5</sup> These small colourful flags are hung in both private and public spaces and have become a cultural marker. However, in the site display of *We Who Were Slayed in the Dark Alleys*, the same *jhandis* are recontextualized to instead bear witness to the death of people in the name of violence. The names of the victims who were the target of sectarian, political or gender-based killings were displayed on 127 flags. Such projects require extensive investigation and research. Whilst the sources which included the names of the killed people were taken from newspapers, these statistics were of registered cases only – there are thousands more unregistered incidents. The flags were hung in a circle, an installation that was displayed in a 350-metre-long loop. While there was the absence of other visual images in the installation, the presence of Urdu language text on the flags allowed for a different temporal and spatial connection with the audience. The



**FIGURE 10.1** *Hum Jo Tareek Raho mai Maray Gaye* (close-up), Awami Art Collective display in *Bagh-e-Jinnah*, 2015. Image courtesy of Awami Art Collective.

audience could easily see the text on the *jhandis*, for instance one flag displayed: '19 March 2002, Lahore, Fehm-e- Quran Institute's principal Professor Atta-Ur-Rehman Saqib was killed of Blasphemy charges.' While they would have normally read or watched the news on sectarian and political killings in their everyday lives and homes, seeing all the collective names and dates on such a large scale attempted to provoke an aura of reflection, melancholy and sympathy.

This art installation, in its essence, like other examples of activist art 'is grounded in the act of 'doing' and addresses political or social issues' (Tate 2017). A grand public display on a sensitive, religiously charged topic engaging the public from all walks of life was both challenging and inviting for the collective. The site, previously known as Lawrence Garden and now *Bagh-e-Jinnah* (Jinnah Park) signified a place that is accessible to everyone. However, in the past, the garden was a British colonial site that restricted the entry of Indian locals. Therefore, the park acts as a public space which is both inclusive and interactive but also historically contentious at the same time. For western scholars, public space is seen as a constituent element in ensuring positive social relations and well-being (see, for example, Davidoff 1965; and Friedmann 1987). Conversely, Batool reflects the relation between art and the city in the context of Pakistan:

One can either imagine the city harbouring art through installations, sculptures and other artistic expressions in its public spaces or a city with imposed sculptural and ideological monuments decorating its streets and roundabouts. Thus to locate the cityscape within western art and

aesthetic sensibilities by comparing it with major public art events/projects, and permanent installations in western societies is a futile exercise because, Pakistani, or more specifically, Lahori, society did not go on a similar journey.

2014

The aim of Batool's collective is to bring activism and the public together, and in this respect the significance of the *Bagh-e-Jinnah* site as a space for interaction and an activist platform is crucial when viewing *We Who Were Slayed in the Dark Alleys*. Batool is a Professor at the National College of Arts in Lahore, located in the most important site in the city, the Mall Road.<sup>6</sup> It is reminiscent of colonial and Indo-Saracenic architecture and is also itself a site of public protests, which take place in front of the Governor House. The protests are hardly successful, but they do halt day-to-day activities on the Mall Road causing extreme traffic congestion and adversely affecting business: such public protests occasionally attract the passer-by but people are largely immune to such protests; they happen every other day. Batool is calculating in her selection of an alternative site in Lahore, aiming to combine both art and activism in the employment and memorialization of a kind of visual space that can attract people from all walks of life (Malik 2015). Even though the collective's main aim is activism, through this display they do not attempt to bring about immediate radical transformation, but rather a challenge to consciousness: to create an aura of pain and loss whilst raising awareness of socio-political issues in public space.

Multiple activities and conjectures were taking place in Bagh-e-Jinnah during the Awami Art exhibition display. Young school children, once briefed about the exhibition began chanting poetry rhymes, relating their encounter with the installation to their own understandings of violence, terrorism and extremism. Just six months before the exhibition display, a horrific terrorist incident shook the entire country. On the morning of 16 December 2014, extremist militants from *Tehrik-i-Taliban* attacked an Army Public School in Peshawar killing more than 149 students and teachers. Through their performance of singing the children became involved in activism, aligning the incident with a collective trauma. Another spectator recited melancholic verses in local vernacular language. The verses, although in Punjabi (the local vernacular spoken in the province), cut across language and class barriers to address a greater audience and artists. The spectators were not only viewing or interpreting the display but were engaging and responding to it, simultaneously, by making it into another type of shared performance. In this installation, the issue of violence in Pakistani society is deeply figured in the display; it transforms the subversive activist display of *We Who Were Slayed in the Dark Alleys* into an ephemeral participatory art: a new discourse allows for a creative response to state-sponsored, sectarian, and political violence. In this alternative use of city space, Batool aims to address how such issues are either censored or addressed in an abridged version in the media.

## The tapestry from Pakistan is red

Between 2003 and 2004, in coordination with Graciela Ovejero, an Argentinean artist, Batool conducted an art workshop with *Dastak*,<sup>7</sup> a shelter home in Lahore, to create a tapestry as an activist art project (see Plate 37). The project involved a creative exchange between the artists in their own countries; Ovejero sent a printed fabric to Batool in Pakistan to imprint images of

personal records, connections memories, and desires. The tapestry already had various examples of Ovejero's own works from around the globe. However, Batool wanted to document the artworks from the shelter home with a particular purpose – she wanted to archive the testimonies, desires and benign wants of the women who leave their houses and occupy shelter homes. The women from the shelter home were the victims of domestic violence. When Batool asked them to paint on the tapestry and to draw images from their past, most of the women refused. Their past experiences had left deep emotional scars which they did not want to recall, instead – in agreement with the artist – they decided to paint 'dreams of a better future' (Batool 2004). Finally, thirteen women agreed to collaborate with Batool, amongst them was Safia, a 25-year-old clad in traditional *shalwar kameez*.<sup>8</sup> According to the artist she was excited to paint on the tapestry because she had never painted before, Safia wanted to paint her dream house; an activity that was a distraction from her uncertain present. Safia, like other women, was seeking refuge from gender-based violence. Unfortunately, after leaving the shelter house, her resistance to being forced to marry the brother of her sister-in-law would eventually lead to her murder in the name of 'honour'. To commemorate her contribution and life, Batool expressed the following, 'Another woman has been killed. Safia was murdered by her brother on the 22nd of September 2004 in Faisalabad in the name of honor. She is one of the many unfortunate women who is sacrificed at the altar of honor by their family members while the State remains a silent observer' (ibid.).

According to the studies of the World Health Organization (WHO), 15–71 per cent of women encounter sexual or physical violence by their intimate partners (Nasrullah, Haqqi and Cummings 2009: 193). Violence is reported to be most prevalent in rural settings (ibid.). 'Honour killing' is 'a form of domestic violence that has been described as a custom in which most women and sometimes men are murdered after accusations of sexual infidelity' (ibid.). Safia was one of those unfortunate ones who was literally cut into pieces by her first cousin and father, because she wanted to marry someone outside her caste – or as Pakistanis would call it – out of her *Baradari*. While Pakistan's Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2004 aimed to safeguard the rights of women against 'offenses committed in name or on the pretext of honor', the state failed miserably to hold accountable those deemed guilty of such crimes (ibid.: 196).

Mentor, art activist and artist Salima Hashmi has been instrumental in inspiring Batool's practice. Hashmi has also been involved in producing activist artworks that revolve around feminist discourse. Hashmi's own inclination towards activism is in part due to her relationship with her father, prolific and leftist poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Both Hashmi and Batool faced and experienced Islamization in the 1980s, a dark period in the political and social history of Pakistan that relegated the role of women and minorities.<sup>9</sup> This legacy is addressed in their co-authored work, 'Reframing the Contexts for Pakistani Contemporary Art' (2009). Here they asserted that the military dictator Zia-ul-Haq's government blatantly imposed patriarchy in the name of Islamization. During Zia-ul-Haq's rule, the discourse of Islamization was perpetuated in the slogan, 'Chador aur chaar diwari' (Veil and the four walls of the house), which attempted to confine women to the private space of the home. It was not just domestic women who were distressed by this new state-imposed regulation – it also profoundly agitated women artists who came to public spaces in the 1980s and protested against the government's reforms. Batool tries to shed light on the existing and compromised position of these underprivileged women, to whom *chador aur chaar diwari* 'ideals' applies. Women like Safia are killed every day only because they have a voice that is threatening to such ideological customs and beliefs.

Batool's collaborative tapestry project covertly asks questions about the role of women in Pakistani society. Through this example of art activism, we can also start locating other reasons why activism works differently in Pakistan; namely because of its fractious relationship with religion. Some argue that, unlike the West, Muslim majority countries, including those within the Middle East and South Asia, resisted modernity because of what certain factions claimed were its unIslamic principles. These challenges to transformation, change and progress are not only faced in their home countries but also by Muslims residing abroad. Scholars argue that there are specific challenges that Muslims face in the West when dealing with pluralism, democracy, human rights, individualization and gender issues (Toğuşlu and Leman 2014: 11). Such change requires stability and gradual evolution; this is not an easy process but 'sometimes happens brutally, creating violence, rupture, and failure' (ibid.: 12). It will take some time for women in Pakistan to own public spaces and claim their rights; outright opposition will simply invite resistance or worse where women will be labelled un-Islamic or mavericks by the religious extremists, with perhaps devastating consequences.

## **Line of control: unapproachable boundaries**

Another of Batool's art activist projects, *Line of Control* (2004), is a critique of both imagined and geographical borders and boundaries. A boundary can be considered as an imaginary line or demarcation that becomes more palpable through violence (Flood and Morris 2001: 327). The history of violence between India and Pakistan has been briefly discussed in the earlier part of the chapter. On 16 February 2019, forty Indian soldiers died in a bomb attack in one of the deadliest acts of violence in Indian occupied Kashmir, Pulwama. India blamed Pakistan for the attack as one of the militant groups in Pakistan accepted the responsibility of the killings. This is just a recent example of how both countries were on high alert due to the severe threat of war. The border with Kashmir, also called the Line of Control, has often been a target of violence. As Bose and Jalal comment, 'despite a much longer shared history, marked by as many commonalities as differences, post-colonial India and Pakistan have for the most part been treated as two starkly antithetical entities' (2004: 167). Despite these hostilities, the residents of both countries share similarities including food, visual culture, music, films and languages. Bearing these contradictions in mind, Batool adopts a unique narrative of interpreting borders. It is pertinent to mention that Pakistan and India share many borders: every day the Wagah border at Lahore holds a ceremony to mark its closure. There is a performative and ceremonial act of exaggerated display by the guards from both the sides, where they showcase their power and masculinity. Many people from Lahore and other cities often visit Wagah to view this ceremony. The way both sides interact during this ceremony is reflective of some of the themes that Batool tackles and negates in *Line of Control*.

*Line of Control* (see Plate 38) is a lenticular print accompanied by a series of reference works Batool produced in collaboration with her Indian classmate Mantej Singh. In this series she has tried to juxtapose borders with mirror images, lines, bodies and performance. For Batool, it is important to challenge the fixed notion of borders for it assumes that people, histories and cultures are static or even irrelevant. Sometimes borders are coherent, at other times they can also become a paradox. Batool and Singh, both students in Australia back in 2005, shared similar cultural histories and backgrounds. Yet, the mainstream media of India and Pakistan both exploit and fan hostilities. The friends created photographs in which they shared the same spaces. The reflection



of the sharing of space in a photograph is an attempt by Batool to make people interrogate the existence of borders, those imagined and those represented in the media.

Line of Control has been exhibited on various international platforms. Inspired by the reflection and the mirror image of Lake Saif-ul-Malook (see Plate 39),<sup>10</sup> Batool connects the masculine and feminine body to recreate a mirror image, positioning them next to each other, extremely close so that the distinction between male and female blurs. Batool's work is timeless; it is motionless, sensual and sexual. She visions the mirror images of photographs she took of the mysterious lake, juxtaposes the idea and appropriates it using the body. However, one can only trace the contours of the form, not the entire body. Had the photograph been overt in displaying bodies in full, it would have become controversial. The mirror image of the body, being linked to sexuality and equated to territory, provokes questions about ownership, control and perception.

## Conclusion

This chapter has offered a consideration of the works of an activist artist, Farida Batool. In contemplating this work an underlying question has concerned not simply the character of art-activism but its specific form in the context of Pakistan. It was argued, therefore, that the formation of Batool's art, and her activism, is inextricably linked to the complex history of Pakistan and the Indian subcontinent. Batool's work emerged within the political, social, economic and religious turbulence that has beset Pakistan since independence, as well as corresponding developments within the nation's art, particularly the transformations since the 1980s, when the seeds of dissent were sown amongst a new generation of artists growing up under military dictatorship. Hereafter, the face of art was changed irrevocably as artists responded to repression, violence and state-sponsored religious dogmatism through the introduction of these as themes in their work, at the same time tackling problems of distorted representation and stereotypes.

Whilst Batool's practice formed within this context of artistic innovation infused with politics, her approach, and that of her AAC collaborators, can be distinguished from the main currents emerging during this era in its being primarily an activist art. Her work does not simply represent violence and repression, it attempts to provide the public with a degree of finality and the possibility of renewal by dynamically involving them in her art projects. Alongside the AAC, she tries to instigate change through her artistic practices: to create a visual dialogue in the public spaces between the people of the city.

It is suggested that the site-specificity of Batool's work is a key part of her art-activism, but this in itself cannot be understood in isolation from its context within Pakistan society and its history of colonial repression, dislocation, dictatorship, western military interventions, and sectarian violence. So, it can be argued, sited work might be a common feature of contemporary western art practice, but Batool's employment of such a strategy can only be understood through its location in Pakistan. Her work explores the relationship between the city and public in Lahore through its siting in places with multiple and overlapping histories, as is the case with *Bagh-e-Jinnah*, the location of the *Who Were Slayed in the Dark Alleys* installation. Here, memories of a place restricted to Europeans during the colonial era coexist uneasily with its present use as an inclusive and well-used public space. It is argued that this context shapes the spectator's viewing, interpretation, engagement and response to the installation, making it into a type of shared

performance informed by these different memories and uses infusing the site. Thus, it can be argued, *Who Were Slayed in the Dark Alleys*, an installation aimed to critique sectarian murder, engages its spectators on different levels and is effective through a combination of its form and overt content and its site-specificity. If the siting of *Who Were Slayed in the Dark Alleys* gives one indicator of the specificity of art-activism in Pakistan – setting it in contrast to public art installations in western countries to which it bears only a superficial resemblance – other works indicate this difference in terms of the dominance of religion in society, its role in perpetuating oppression of women, and the intersection of this with pervasive violence, at its most extreme in the widespread practice of honour killing. This is manifest in *Tapestry from Pakistan is Red*, a very different work to *Who Were Slayed in the Dark Alleys* in terms of its siting and content, but also involving collaboration with a public, as does all Batool's work. A final work discussed in this chapter, *Line of Control*, similarly addresses violence, in this case that in relation to the border with India-occupied Kashmir and the terrible impact of dislocation on the nation's psyche. Batool here challenges fixed notions of borders, suggesting that their supposed coherence can only be sustained by thinking of people, their histories and their cultures as immutable.

A key distinction separating Batool's art-activism from superficially comparable forms of sited art in many other locations, is the danger she faces. Batool is conscious and vigilant of the risks and threats associated with her activist works. Violence has been a by-product of a certain skewed version of religion laid down by Islamization in the late 1980s; it has left a lasting impression on the psyche of an entire generation of artists. As a result, it has stimulated many artists to produce work that must be understood against the backdrop of this complex socio-political milieu. Batool is one of those artists who is taking the risk of engaging with the public on the violence that is a part of Pakistan society and its history: state-sponsored violence, political murder, sectarian killings, the conflicts around borders and dislocation, the horror of honour killings and gender-based violence.

## Notes

- 1 The Pakistan Penal Code punishes blasphemy against any major religion, varying from harsh penalties to death. This law was implemented by the British colonials but made more 'Islamic' and severe under Zia-ul-Haq. This law has led to violence and killings against Christians and Ahmedis, who were declared non-Muslims under Zia's regime.
- 2 Faiz Ahmed Faiz was a prolific leftist poet and author of the Urdu language. He was the editor of *The Pakistan Times* and a member of the Communist Party. In 1951, Faiz was arrested for being a leftist and allegedly plotting to overthrow Liaquat Ali Khan's government. He spent four years in prison and under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's regime, he self-exiled himself in Beirut. Part of the Progressive Writer's Movement, through his award-winning activist writings, Faiz sought to empower the masses.
- 3 Shias or the followers of Shia Islam are also called the adherents of Ali. Shia Islam is one of the two main branches of Islam whose members believe that the Islamic Prophet Muhammad appointed Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor and the (Imam) leader after him. There is a discrepancy over this with the Sunni Islam. Shia Islam is the second largest branch of Islam but is a minority in Pakistan. Due to the difference in beliefs historically, there have been killings and violence amongst both sects around the world.
- 4 Urdu word for 'small flags'.

- 5 Celebration of the birth of Islam Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).
- 6 The Mall Road or Shahrah-e-Quaid-e-Azam is a significant road in Lahore, Pakistan. It has important sites in Lahore from the Mughal and colonial eras. The High Court, Governor House and Lahore Museum are also located on Mall Road.
- 7 *Dastak* is an Urdu word for 'knock'.
- 8 A loose trouser and shirt that is worn by both men and women of South Asia.
- 9 Islamization became a central policy of Zia-ul-Haq between 1978 and 1988. Through Islamization, he sought to create an Islamic state and enforce Sharia (Islamic) law.
- 10 A mountainous lake that is located at the end of Kaghan Valley, near Naran in the north of Pakistan.

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# 11

## Jason deCaires Taylor's submerged sculptures and the iconography of slow violence

*Karen Stock*

Jason deCaires Taylor creates sculptures that are installed on previously barren patches of the ocean floor and designed to foster biodiversity. The sculptures are life-casts of human figures in pH-neutral cement that, once submerged, become home to all manner of sea life. These artificial reefs redirect tourists away from natural reefs, create habitats for a range of sea life, disperse hurricane activity and raise awareness regarding the delicate balance required for sea life to thrive. DeCaires Taylor has created two underwater museums. MUSA (Museo Subacuático de Arte) was founded in 2009 in collaboration with the National Marine Park and the Cancún Nautical Association. Museo Atlántico was installed in 2016 in the Atlantic Ocean close to Lanzarote in the Canary Islands.

In this chapter, I focus primarily on MUSA as a way to make positive ecological change as well as redirect the touristic gaze toward art and conservation. The reverence typically reserved for unique art objects is transferred to both the sculptures and the sea creatures who act as co-performers. Rob Nixon's exploration of slow violence is particularly relevant to the damage being done to the environment. The degradation of ecosystems is rendered nearly invisible by society's increasingly shrinking attention span. I argue that deCaires Taylor's sculptures are one way to give physical form to slow violence through the creation of anthropogenic icons that turn the sculptures into a kind of performance art with sea creatures subsuming the human form. Learning to look at the world more thoughtfully and seeing, on both a physical and ideological level, is a type of activism that can lead to societal and ecological awareness.

Jason deCaires Taylor is concerned particularly with the 'invisibility' of the aquatic world and observes that most people are blind to the havoc being wreaked beneath the surface: 'I think most people actually look past to the horizon. So I think there's a real danger that we never really see the sea, and if we don't really see it, if it doesn't have its own iconography, if we miss its majesty, then there's a big danger that we take it for granted' (for example, Mission Blue II; deCaires Taylor 2015). The vastness of the sea makes it extremely difficult to perceive the fragility of this ecosystem.



I propose that the damage being done to oceans across the globe, and the specific threat to coral reefs, exemplifies Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence. In his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon observes that 'one of the most pressing challenges of our age is to adjust our rapidly eroding attention spans to the slow erosions of environmental justice' (2011: 8). This perceptual slowing down runs counter to everything else in contemporary society, which values speed and venerates the spectacular. Nixon poses the question: 'How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world?' (ibid.: 3). Jason deCaires Taylor's sculptures are one potential answer to this question. In these works, humanity is gradually erased, and the self-centred exceptionalism that characterizes the Anthropocene era is repeatedly parodied as human beings become the substrate colonized by sea creatures. The very name of this speculative geological era, Anthropocene, risks legitimizing a self-involved anthropocentrism and isolating humanity as a 'kind of super-agent' that is a 'quasi geological force' (ibid. 2017: 23). The story of the Anthropocene should rather highlight the 'vast tangle of imperfectly understood intersections between human impacts and nonhuman actors' (ibid.: 28).

Nixon and deCaires Taylor each speak of the representational challenge involved in making environmental degradation both visible and compelling. Nixon calls for the reinvention of visual symbols, that tell 'arresting stories . . . adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects' (2011: 3). The visual arts are uniquely suited to capture the attention of a public who is unwilling or unable to digest graphs, charts and statistics. DeCaires Taylor's sculptures provide visual evidence of the entanglement of species which are reliant on one another but exist in differing temporal scales. In order to see the effects of climate change, the 'temporalities that are relevant for developing a politics of time in the Anthropocene – such as minute and incrementally accumulating processes of change, or the long duration of geological time, or even the temporal rhythms' of non-humans must be made available to the 'human sensorium' (Davis 2015: 12). This essay explores the expansion of the human sensorium through the intersection of artwork and sea creatures in order to make slow violence visible through the creation of anthropogenic icons.

## MUSA

Coral reefs cover less than one percent of the oceans but are home to nearly one-third of all marine species (Scales 2014: 20). Their stunning biodiversity is greater than any other ecosystem on land or sea. They also provide food and employment for people from among the poorest countries on Earth (Sheppard 2018: 13). However, the seas have become thirty percent more acidic since the industrial revolution, rising sea levels endanger the reef's position in sunlit shallows and rising water temperatures cause the corals to bleach and die.

In 2005 Jaime Gonzalez, director of the Isla Mujeres National Park of Mexico, was distressed by the damage done to the reefs from 87,000 tourists annually (Vance 2013). Gonzalez considered banning divers from the reef but was advised this would mean years in court and have little chance of success. Instead, Gonzalez approached Jason deCaires Taylor who had already created the Molinere Underwater Sculpture Park off the west coast of Grenada. The numerous installations at

MUSA, over 500 sculptures by several artists, have diverted about half of the tourist traffic from the natural site and increased the biomass of various species (deCaires Taylor 2015). MUSA is an amalgam of art museum, natural history museum and wildlife preserve with connections to marine scientists, NGOs and the tourist industry (Picken 2016: 63). Marine biologist Helen Scales observes that more than '50 species have been spotted in and around the sculptures' (Smillie 2016). DeCaires Taylor also aims to empower local communities and 'provide an important icon of residents standing in defence of their seas' (n.d. 'Conservation'). He primarily uses locals as models for his sculptures, working with the community and getting help from the diving association, fisheries and the local community college (Patel 2014).

Each sculpture is made from pH-neutral marine cement and reinforced with fibreglass to withstand a hurricane. Corals spawn, releasing sperm and eggs into the water, only once a year so the timing and placement of the sculptures are extensively researched. The sculptures are positioned down current from natural reefs and, with their minutely pitted surfaces and abundant crevices, provide a favourable place for corals to reside. The success of the works can be measured, in part, by how quickly the human form is effaced by sea life.

For example, holes were bored into the sculpture *Man on Fire* (2009) so that the work acts as a nursery for damaged coral (see Figure 11.1). *Man on Fire* began as a recognizable individual, the



**FIGURE 11.1** Jason deCaires Taylor, *Man on Fire*, Mexico, 2009. © Jason deCaires Taylor. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage/ARS 2021. Photo: Jason deCaires Taylor.

local fisherman Joaquín Adame Sutter, but in a relatively short span of time, four to five years, his features are erased by the activity of sea creatures (Archibold 2012). He is host to fire coral which can cause a chemical burn to exposed skin. The sculpture implicitly contrasts the mercurial licking of flames to the slow growth of coral. This metaphorical self-immolation makes space for non-human life.

The typical formal analysis of an art work is stymied by the sculpture's steady fluctuation in appearance. There is no singular state of *Man on Fire* that is more authentic than any other. As sponges, algae and coral stake their claim to faces, clothing and bodies the recognizable features become beautifully grotesque. This evolution is most pronounced in photographic triptychs which show the model, the sculpture and the sculpture colonized with sea life. As faces become obscured, the presumed hegemony of man is relinquished. There is something slightly alarming in seeing the facial features become blurry with the nose and mouth blocked by colourful protrusions. This microcosm evokes the global struggle of all life forms and the resilience of small daily battles that can lead to change.

The majority of works are placed between 4 to 14 meters deep, which is the depth of the greatest biodiversity and they become home to corals, sea urchins, crustaceans, algae and sponges. Corals exist in the euphotic or sunlit zone which varies depending on water opacity but is determined by how far light can penetrate. This is where most of the life in the ocean is found. These relatively shallow depths are also accessible to guided visitors through scuba diving, snorkelling and glass bottom boats. Visitors with varying skills in snorkelling and diving therefore have multiple ways to experience the sculptures.

The artist explains the importance of contextualizing the space as a museum: 'Museums are places of preservation, of conservation and of education. They're places where we keep objects of great value to us, where we simply treasure them for them being themselves' (deCaires Taylor 2015). This reframing encourages visitors to perform a conceptual shift and view natural spaces with reverence. The contextual power of the museum should not be underestimated. For example, millions of people visit the Museum of Modern Art annually, look at Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), and accept, even if they do not understand, its significance. The physical and ideological framework of the museum changes a visitor's perception and the reputation of MoMA itself helps transform a bicycle wheel and stool into art. The waters of Cancún are far more problematic as a context for both art and ecological activism.

The Caribbean is linked with the four S's which are 'sun, sea, sand and sex' which has led to 'derogatory—and often accurate—stereotypes' of tourists (Honey 1999: 10). DeCaires Taylor recognizes that 'Cancún is famous for spring break, tequila and foam parties' (2015). However, because of MUSA there is 'now a little corner of Cancún that is simply precious for being itself' (ibid.). There are many 'different ways of gazing within tourism' and deCaires Taylor's works bend the gaze away from narcissistic pleasure and toward environmental awareness (Urry and Larsen 2011: 3). MUSA creates a context for education and thoughtful viewing, thereby changing the semiotic landscape of the touristic space. Jonathan Culler argues that 'tourists are the accomplices of semiotics' since in their travels they are 'reading cities, landscapes and cultures as sign systems' (1981: 128). MUSA functions on several levels so that the submerged sculptures can be 'read' by visitors as signs of environmental stewardship and works of art; the type of slower looking expected when viewing art can also be a gateway to seeing slow violence.

## Slow violence

In the new millennium, speed has become a 'self-justifying, propulsive ethic' and many people are too distracted to practice the sustained attention required to see the slow violence of ecological degradation (Nixon 2011: 8). The ever increasing rapidity of society is a physiological and psychological change that has the potential to impair perception and therefore render the complexity of tragedy invisible. Typically, violence is understood as 'an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space and as erupting into instant sensational visibility' (ibid.: 2). Events that fall outside of spectacular time, the root causes and far-reaching ramifications of spectacular violence, remain unseen and unacknowledged. Slow violence 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (ibid.). The immediate flood or hurricane receives intense media coverage, but the rising sea levels and shifts in weather patterns are too complex and protracted to sustain the public's attention.

Environmental violence must be seen, and fully perceived 'as a contest not only over space, or bodies or labor, or resources but also over time' (ibid.: 8). In order to perceive slow violence, society needs to consciously reject speed as a lifestyle. This requires a shift in perception so that other species, and the planet itself, are not measured against the pace of humans. Nixon suggests: 'To render slow violence visible entails . . . redefining speed: we see such efforts in talk of accelerated species loss, rapid climate change and in attempts to recast "glacial" – once a dead metaphor for "slow" – as a rousing, iconic image of unacceptably fast loss' (2011: 13). These iconic images of loss are a way to make time visible, not shallow time such as the seconds of a download on your computer, but time in its 'range of temporal scales' as geological, historical and shallow time woven together (ibid.: 2). A significant challenge is how to visualize time and make slow violence visible. Society requires, 'creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency' (ibid.: 10). DeCaires Taylor's sculptures are one answer to the pressing need to represent slow violence and call attention to unspectacular time.

## Icons

Anthropocene iconography is typically categorized as aerial views of the earth that showcase the industrial might of humanity. T. J. Demos explains that 'Anthropocene iconography both portrays the remarkable extent of the human-driven alteration of earth systems . . . and documents the dangers of the unintended consequences of such ventures' (2017: 28). These images do not simply record the story of man's dominance but also reinforce the narrative of human exceptionalism. These scenes, with their 'God's eye view,' may inspire awe but not a sense of involvement or responsibility (Alaimo 2017: 90). The Anthropocene icon has focused almost entirely on terra firma. The 'acidifying seas' which are the 'liquid index of the Anthropocene,' are largely invisible even as the demise of this ecosystem reverberates throughout the globe (ibid.: 89).

Jason deCaires Taylor offers a counter-narrative that originates beneath the water's surface and redefines the anthropogenic icon. Rather than representing exploitation and domination, the work represents stewardship and relinquishing control. One of the original benefits of the icon was the ability for images to speak to the masses in a way inaccessible to the written word. In today's world, the statistics and information from scientists that show the effects of climate change need to be translated into the iconography of slow ecological violence in order for people to engage with this knowledge. For example, exhibitions on climate change in natural history museums are rich in facts but 'not emotionally inspiring' (Lidstrom and Aberg 2017: 234). The story that needs to be told is one that engages the viewer on a scale that is simultaneously planetary and personal.

DeCaires Taylor aims to achieve this balance. He explains: 'I am trying to portray how human intervention or interaction with nature can be positive and sustainable, an icon of how we can live in a symbiotic relationship with nature' (Keltner 2011). The permanent inhabitants of MUSA are life-casts of local people that are highly accurate and detailed. However, once they enter the water, and the frame of the museum, they become distorted reflections of society. Some works are a clear display of humanity's foibles. *Inertia* (2011) depicts an obese man sitting on a sofa, with garbage at his feet, a half-eaten hamburger in his lap and a television in front of him. *The Bankers* (2011) shows a group of businessmen with their heads buried in the sand, wilfully ignorant of the damage caused by predatory capitalism. Other works have more open-ended messages.

*The Silent Evolution* (2010) is composed of more than 400 statues created from around 90 models from the nearby fishing village of Puerto Morelos. However, this is not a community portrait. The sculptures are placed in tight clusters, (see Plate 40) that encourage fish to aggregate, but each figure is frozen in their own moment with no relation to one another. A little girl clasps a small handbag and tilts her head up expectantly, a wizened man holds a broom and a woman holds her hands clasped in prayer. The figures appear oddly alone with the repetition of the same figures throughout the large crowd contributing to the uncanniness of the scene.

These icons give material form to the interdependence of species, the fragility of life and the precariousness of identity. The people who model for the sculptures are both immortalized and sacrificed to the sea. Once submerged in salt water, the conventional likenesses are transformed and the ageing of the figures is measured, not by the appearance of wrinkles and grey hairs, but by the accumulation of other lifeforms. Ideally, within six to ten years, only vaguely human shapes can be discerned beneath the brilliant kaleidoscope of colours and textures (see Plate 41). The works are commonly described as sculptures, but they could more accurately be understood as performances. This is a unique form of theatre in which the performers, the sea life, are in deadly earnest as the viewer watches a pantomime of their own destruction. Loss and growth become simultaneous moments, and humans are imbricated into the geological time of the ocean.

Corals are living and growing rock. They are polyps that secrete limestone to create their own calcium carbonate skeletons. The growth of corals is arduously slow by most standards but, since the coral is building its own limestone substrate, it should more properly be measured against geological time. In that context, coral growth is extremely rapid. If undisturbed a reef can grow for thousands of years, but in only one summer can suffer significant loss. Corals are both biologically fragile and geologically long-lived. The demise of reefs is incremental, microscopic and lacks the tug at the heartstrings of more charismatic sea animals. Coral relies on algae that nest in its



skeleton. When the coral is stressed, by any number of factors, the algae are expelled. Although the polyps can still get some sustenance, they are vulnerable to disease and will eventually experience an unspectacular death. There is no dramatic final breath but only the emptying of the oceans as species that rely on coral slowly disappear. These are the performers in deCaires Taylor's art and in order to watch this drama the viewer, either in person or through photography, must step down from the 'God's eye view' that has defined Anthropocene visibility.

According to Felicity Picken, the icon as fashioned by deCaires Taylor is 'not found in the stasis of an object or image . . . but is embodied in the symbiotic, living relationship between culture and nature; an in-between that is radically open to ontological politics' (2015: 104). These works elide numerous binaries such as nature / culture, animate / inanimate, slow / fast and exist in a liminal space that celebrates the unpredictability of life in all its forms. The 'living relationship' that Picken identifies can be expanded to include the viewer / tourist, and unwitting semiotician, who constructs a sign system as they decipher these icons. DeCaires Taylor's artworks can only truly function as activism with an audience to complete the triad between sculpture, nature and viewer. The creation of alternative Anthropocene narratives invites the viewer to participate in recognizing the threat of climate change. Nixon calls for the need to shift 'the window of time through which we view planetary change . . . and reconceive of humans as simultaneously organic and inorganic actors' (2017: 27). The submerged icons of deCaires Taylor encourage this reconceptualization as man is turned to stone and becomes an inanimate platform for life.

For Nicholas Mirzoeff, the 'Anthropocene-aesthetic-capitalist complex of modern visibility' has become so deeply embedded into society that it is nearly impossible to discern the war against nature that has been raging for centuries (2014: 213). He labels the dominant aesthetic of the Anthropocene era as 'anaesthetic' since society has become numb to images of industrial pollution. For Mirzoeff, visibility is understood as the exercise of power, the production of history and the determination of who is seen – and who is not. Countervisuality, or exercising the right to look, is a rebellion against the visibility that has been created by empires and industries. Exchanging the look is a type of performance that recognizes the other in 'order to have a place from which to claim rights and to determine what is right' (ibid. 2011: 1). Therefore, employing the 'right to look' is an assertion of identity and an act of rebellion.

This concept of countervisuality compliments Nixon's call to make slow violence visible. The people who are typically denied the 'right to look' are also those who will be the earliest victims of climate change. Mirzoeff and Nixon expand upon an environmentalist leitmotif of making vision both a vehicle and metaphor for social awareness. The nineteenth-century ecological activist George Perkins Marsh comments in his 1864 book: 'Sight is a faculty; seeing, an art. The eye is physical . . . and in general it sees only what it seeks. Like a mirror, it reflects objects presented to it, but it may be as insensible as a mirror, and it does not necessarily perceive what it reflects' (2009: 15). Seeing, in Marsh's sense of the word, has become an even more endangered art form in the new millennium as the eye has been supplanted by digital screens that promote insatiable and insensible viewing. Seeing nature, viewing art and witnessing slow violence are different facets of active looking which is foundational for social change.

DeCaires Taylor comments directly on the theme of looking, or rather humans' inability to see in works installed at the Museo Atlántico. *Crossing the Rubicon* (2016), includes thirty-five figures moving toward a wall that 'is intended to be a monument to absurdity' and 'represents the tipping point when the environment can no longer sustain human life' (deCaires Taylor n.d.



**FIGURE 11.2** Jason deCaires Taylor, *Disconnected*, Lanzarote, Museo Atlántico, 2017. © Jason deCaires Taylor. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage/ARS 2021. Photo: Jason deCaires Taylor.

'Museo Atlántico'). Many of the people look, not on the wall in front of them, but down at phones or tablets. They cannot even be bothered to look up and bear witness to their own demise. A person oblivious to their surroundings is a familiar sight that takes on a haunting and profound dimension in this piece. These figures are icons of our societal addiction to devices and blindness to slow violence. A single figure is positioned on the opposite side of the wall, peering through the gaps and taking pictures. He is a paparazzo. A figure who feeds the insatiability for spectacle but who ironically inhibits 'the right to look' through wielding the camera as a weapon to capture and objectify another person.

*Disconnected* (2017), also installed in Spain, shows a young couple posing for a selfie; however, their faces are flat planes of cement (see Figure 11.2). Selfie culture is symptomatic of human myopia regarding other species and the natural world. Ironically, this continual self-documentation eradicates individuality, as seen in the disturbing featureless heads. In being seduced by the current 'culture of stimulus' society is forgetting the art of seeing and in the process losing a part of our humanity. Claire Colebrook provides a stark warning: 'We are not just losing one of our critical powers – our power to represent or synthesise what is not ourselves – we are losing our very selfhood' (2014: 30). Learning to look thoughtfully and see nature is a form of activism. Returning the gaze of the other and practicing active viewing, rather than passively ingesting visual stimulus, is a step toward greater change.

## Conclusion

Ecotone is a term used in field biology to characterize the 'border zones between adjacent communities of vegetation where . . . life forms that ordinarily require discrete conditions meet and interact' (Nixon 2017: 30). This is an apt metaphor regarding the hybridity of deCaires Taylor's projects that are part activism and part tourist attraction. The sculptures undermine the binary of nature/culture and collapse viewing art and nature into one exercise. These museums also work effectively within overlapping systems of tourism and environmental activism. The projects exist in their own ecotone that leave scholars and scientists perched, somewhat uncomfortably, on the edges of their respective disciplines. However, if the networks that enable slow violence are going to be exposed, then we must trespass into someone else's habitat. T. J. Demos makes this call to arms: 'We must all join the struggle for climate justice, doing so from our respective disciplinary, cultural, economic, or otherwise-situated points and that also means challenging the very divisions of specialisation in the first place' (2016: 29). For deCaires Taylor, this includes collaborating with the business of ecotourism. This may not qualify as radical activism but proponents of deCaires Taylor's works see MUSA as 'generative human intervention in the ecosystem' that utilizes the rapacious tendencies of the tourism industry to make a positive difference (Picken 2015: 66–7). From my perspective, deCaires Taylor's works are both a literal platform for biodiversity and a conceptual platform from which to discuss the complexity of activist art. The works are multi-species and multi-temporal icons of slow violence that are submerged in the 'liquid index of the Anthropocene', to repeat Alaimo's phrase (2017: 89). DeCaires Taylor positions humanity in geological time, calls attention to the living rock of coral and drafts the tourist gaze into the service of environmental activism.

DeCaires Taylor's sculptures forecast a submarine world in which the human animal is largely irrelevant except as real estate for colonization. Deloughrey argues that the 'sculptures' temporal and multi-species engagements' symbolize the collapse of linear time and are a gesture of 'anticipatory mourning' of the lost multi-species lives of the future (2017: 36). There is a role reversal in this aesthetic relinquishing of control that draws attention to the genuine violence enacted against oceanic ecosystems. Blindness to slow violence is essentially a choice, a habit that can be unlearned, just as truly seeing nature is a skill that can be nurtured. The creation and interaction with art, whether above or below the waves, is a path back to our humanity. Whether society will move in that direction is an open-ended question.

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# 12

## Keeping the peace

### The visual in the ‘struggle’ of non-violent activism in a global existential crisis

*Darcy White*

In October 2018, the environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR), established themselves on the streets of London with an urgent message and three demands.<sup>1</sup> In Spring 2019, they returned – installed a large pink boat and temporary home in Oxford Circus, transformed Waterloo Bridge into an instant garden, demonstrated in Parliament Square, blocked some roads and made some noise – and by so doing exploded into our consciousness, thereby proliferating as a global movement at an astonishing pace. As an organization set up in May 2018 to address the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE), it had been three years in the planning, which included comprehensive research and evaluation of the approaches, tactics and success rates of numerous contemporary and historic activist groups, and led to the formation of a movement with nonviolence as a core principle. The later stages of this planning process also included the work of a dedicated team of experienced designers and artists who were invited to create a design approach for the visual elements of XR’s campaign; a process which initially took six months and is ongoing. All of this is well documented through several short films, interviews, talks and panel discussions, accessible via open access on the Internet.<sup>2</sup> The chapter outlines the key principles of the design approach and the resultant visual materials and the messages they convey. The discussion centres on the UK, where Extinction Rebellion was founded, to examine the central role of the visual in XR’s work, and the claim that this visual strategy serves not as a brand but as a glue that links the movement together.<sup>3</sup> But, moreover, I draw on Judith Butler to consider how this visual strategy supports XR in the ‘struggle’ of nonviolent activism.

Extinction Rebellion has taken an admirably firm position against commercial image production and merchandising in order to produce a consistent message about the need to drastically reduce consumption. Despite this the design team have created a highly effective visual identity, with its ‘we-do-it-together’ principle of self-made graphics and image-based campaign materials that, despite their short life, have achieved a level of significance that led to some examples being collected by the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London, and put on display in July 2019, as

part of their Rapid Response Collecting project. Curator Corinna Gardner described XR's visual strategy as 'remarkable from a design perspective' because 'we could all recognise it as a call for climate action' (Gardner 2021), a factor that in large part can account for its success.<sup>4</sup> The chapter considers this design strategy in relation to XR's framing of the CEE; its causes and impacts.

However, as T. J. Demos argues in his short paper – *Extinction Rebellions* – of 2020, for environmental campaign groups and protest movements, and those who study them, the way in which this emergency is understood – 'and by extension the Anthropocene's political geology' – is likely to lead to 'radically different approaches to art, activism, and scholarship' (2020: 16). Any serious evaluation of the aesthetic choices made by such groups, must, therefore, acknowledge that such choices are informed by the basis upon which the origin and ongoing cause of the CEE is understood, as well as on the approach favoured for its proposed solution. I argue that the approach taken by XR UK is not only shaped by the given understanding of the CEE, but additionally, has been informed by the limitations imposed by the wider political and media context.

Moreover, an awareness of the different potential framings of this emergency is also required; whether in terms that focus on carbon and decarbonization, or through what is too often referred to by the problematic term 'climate justice'. When all aspects of justice are collapsed into this term, the focus on climate obscures wider political, social, racial, global, indigenous, intergenerational, intersectional, and interspecies issues of justice. For the purposes of this discussion I will use the term 'justice' to refer to all impacts of the CEE upon people's lives and livelihoods and to cover all aspects of intersectionality including race, gender, class, the experience and legacy of enslavement, colonial extraction and exploitation, in the service of capitalism – also understood as 'racial capitalism' – the system that has historically produced, and now perpetuates, the CEE.<sup>5</sup> All issues of justice are inherently linked to, yet often absent from, the framing of the CEE in terms of its root cause, global affects and the proposed solutions to it. Indeed, now that we have entered the era of 'loss and damage' and have confirmation of the first 'official' climate change famine, issues of justice could not be more relevant nor more urgent.<sup>6</sup>

This discussion will consider such issues in relation to critiques of Western environmentalism in general, and to Extinction Rebellion specifically. In both instances these criticisms come from voices representing the Global South, including those with diasporic connections with that part of the globe, and Indigenous peoples in the Global North – described collectively as the 'majority world' – who, for reasons stemming from their lived experience and in anticipation of the future, foreground issues of (in)justice; for there are some serious allegations to attend to here.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most hard hitting of the general criticism has been that levied by Sudanese Ambassador, Lumumba Di-Aping, in an unswerving assault on Western environmentalism, first during the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in 2009 (COP 15), and subsequently in 2018 during a lecture – *The Global Climate Ghetto* – when Di-Aping charged environmentalists with finding 'no inconsistency between their environmentalist ideology' and their 'discrimination, racism and colonialism'.<sup>8</sup> In light of such criticisms, environmental groups, including XR, have been pressed to examine and assimilate these issues, and revise their strategies and messaging. The chapter considers the extent to which XR's design programme and visual strategies frame and communicate the disproportionate, unjust, catastrophic impact that the CEE is having on people of the Global South; people who it is widely acknowledged have contributed least but stand to suffer most. It takes the suggestion made by Demos that XR's framing of the CEE emphasizes carbon/decarbonization at the expense of addressing issues of justice, and I explore this through an investigation of the visual elements of this

strategy. In this way the chapter considers whether the politics of justice are ‘sensible’ in Rancière’s terms – as in apprehensible through the senses – in XR’s visual strategy and materials. Indeed, I will argue that there is a case to answer; that justice is not sufficiently evident in the design language and materials, particularly as used on-the-ground by some XR UK activists, and that this stems from XR’s stated aim to be ‘beyond politics’. This position is premised on the conviction that the crisis is too big, too serious and too urgent for ‘business as usual’ politics; further rationalized by the group on the grounds that they are not seeking election, but instead advocating the establishment of Citizens’ Assemblies (Extinction Rebellion 2021). I argue that this has resulted in a reluctance within the movement to identify and name the social, political and economic system that exists through the structural distribution of wealth and social power – the root cause of cause the CEE – and the very system XR purports to challenge.

However, the ultimate objective of this chapter is to examine, through an exploration of Butler’s concept of ‘grievability’ in relation to the ‘struggle’ of nonviolence, how the principle of nonviolence can only be sustained in concert with the principle of justice (2021). Grievability, is the term coined by Butler to assert the worth of all humans ‘in a world where some lives are more clearly valued than others, and that this inequality implies that certain lives will be more tenaciously defended than others’ (ibid.: 28). This concept is therefore fundamentally concerned with issues of justice – to be avowedly nonviolent and yet evade issues of justice presents an inconsistency that undermines XR’s ‘struggle’, if both issues are understood as inextricably connected, as Butler argues they are. Therefore, this chapter examines the visual strategies employed by XR in the frightening context of the climate, ecological – and fundamentally human – emergency, questioning whether it is adequate to the task of indexing the root cause of the CEE and its impacts in the Global South, to the economic and political interests of the North.

## **Visual communication: Extinction Rebellion’s visual identity**

Fictive images of landscape and nature, as used in advertising and corporate PR messaging, have long been engaged in creating and perpetuating reassuring myths of an unspoiled natural world, contributing to a visibility of everyday climate change denial and serving to distract from the exploitation of the earth’s resources by industry, commerce and governmental interests. It is against this strong current of misinformation, that environmental campaign groups and protest movements are forced to operate – a challenging context further aggravated by a co-opted and irresponsible media. Whilst particular kinds of images have been created and mobilized by environmental groups as important tools of communication and identification, the scale, complexity and urgency of the environmental emergency, leads to questions about the limits of representation and the power of images to contribute to societal change in a world already saturated by images. But moreover, for the purposes of this enquiry, there is a more precise question about the potential of such images to convey the systemic cause and human impact of the CEE; particularly the global reach of this impact. Butler poses this question: ‘We are living in a time of numerous atrocities and senseless death, to be sure, and so one of the enormous ethical and political questions becomes: What are the modes of representation that are available to us to apprehend this violence?’ (2021: 185).

Extinction Rebellion's design success has been determined by the skilled approach of the design team; Clare Farrell Co-founder of Extinction Rebellion and Miles Glyn, Clive Russell and Charlie Waterhouse – all Co-founders of the XR Art Group – whose well informed design process, together with an enthusiasm and diligence applied over a six month period of creating and testing designs, resulted in a 'design programme' capable of delivering a visual schema that is both instantly recognizable yet readily adaptable so that it can underpin everything that XR do; to the extent that Waterhouse claims: 'Extinction Rebellion isn't just a global political protest – it's an artistic movement' (Change Incorporated 2020). Indeed, the various temporary premises where the materials are created are known as The Arts Factory; alternatively referred to as XR's Atelier.<sup>9</sup> Waterhouse continues: 'it's a really creative rebellion . . . to have joy in what we do is really important because . . . the situation is so desperately sad' . . . 'this is not just about reversing carbon emissions' . . . 'we've got to change the way we live' (ibid.). Moreover, as Clive Russell suggests, XR's re-imagining of the notion of rebelling – notably through their slogan 'Rebel for Life' – has successfully created a positive association for a concept that hitherto was 'considered negative by mainstream culture' (OU 2020).

It is not my purpose to give a comprehensive account of the full range of XR's visual materials – instead, I will outline the approach, the vocabulary, and the three design rules which the movement asks its rebels to adhere to, namely: a designated colour palette (that avoids historical associations with political parties); two XR designed fonts – FucXed Caps and another for lower case; and the Extinction Rebellion logo. By now most of us are familiar with the hourglass Extinction Symbol which was designed in 2011 by the London street artist ESP, and then with agreement utilized by XR. This is now widely recognized, leading many to refer to it as 'this generation's peace symbol' (Gardner 2021). Then there are the coloured flags; the sharp monochrome woodblock prints depicting various types of flora, fauna and human skulls; other expressive graphics such as Shock Face; and the big pink boat (other colours are available). Also key are the straight to-the-point slogans written in crisp, distinctive fonts; these combine to create a livery for Extinction Rebellion that carries its message to the world: 'we're fucked', 'time is running out', 'rebel for life'.

This approach is intended to provide a basis upon which everything can then be 'expanded by other people' (OU 2020). This is key and also helps to keep the visual identity of XR's activism strikingly fresh and noticeable. Mariam Aboelezz explains that in a 'protest landscape' there may be countless numbers of protestors and placards – all of which are 'competing for attention . . . to be captured by people's eyes, camera lenses', so they must be 'striking' and bring 'the message across effectively' (ibid.). To this end a core principle underlying the entire design approach across all aspects of their communication – written, spoken and visual – has been to ensure that it is 'very visual, very real', as Farrell explains; to 'keep the words fairly concise and fairly simple' (ibid.). Therefore, the language is 'quite clear and bold' and this follows through in the visual language, too – which favours hard-edged letterpress fonts and woodblock prints (ibid.). This use of bold language was borne of a conviction that the situation is so urgent that the movement has to 'tell the truth'. Farrell describes hanging an enormous, highly visible, banner over the side of Westminster bridge stating: 'CLIMATE CHANGE. WE'RE FUCKED' – as 'an experiment in language', necessary because 'nobody would say it' (ibid.). Frustrated by the self-imposed limitation on direct and open communication observed in other environmental groups, where such organizations acknowledge privately that they are 'engaged in a strategy of managed defeat', XR's repost to this

is to tell it as it is (ibid.). Such boldness and honesty was expressly aimed at shifting public perception through provoking public debate – ‘to shift the Overton Window’ – as Farrell says – ‘arguably we’ve done that quite well’ (ibid.).

The team took inspiration from a number of historic art and design initiatives and made them their own: the craft ethos of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement more generally, the Bauhaus, the Suffragettes, the activities of the artists and art students of the *Atelier Populaire* during the May 1968 events in Paris,<sup>10</sup> and Eduardo Paolozzi, among others; as Clive Russell explains, they ‘adopted a lot of those ideas and brought them into the twenty-first century’ (Change Incorporated 2020). Glyn and Farrell highlight the importance of a professional approach:

The anarchistic traditions of working with your hands and getting them dirty doesn’t mean the outputs should be trashy. We’ll hand-paint banners and make sure they’re as sharp as possible, thinking about how this might look in photographs . . . but the odd drip looks really good. We need to embrace imperfection in a world where everything is too shiny.

2019: 121

However, the success of XR’s design approach is double-edged; anticipating the possibility of being copied, the design included an inbuilt resistance to co-option; noting the example of the Bauhaus at a different moment of social upheaval. Even so, when moving through the streets of London, or travelling on the tube in the spring and summer of 2019, the concept of ‘Rebellion’ was visibly on-trend – already being co-opted for the purposes of advertising all manner of merchandise and services.

The V&A’s Corinna Gardner recognizes XR’s range of visual materials as ‘an excellent example of graphic design’ . . . ‘graphic design that is both digital and physical and really addresses the challenge of the twenty-first century’ (2021). The design has made good use of an evolving media context where the advent of new information technologies has been a game-changer for protest, marked by a proliferation of DIY style banners and placards that Gary Younge argues has ‘caffeinated the nature of protest’, creating a virtual presence that ‘can be both huge and elusive’ . . . they might ‘mobilize sometimes millions of people but they can disappear . . . as quickly as they appear’ (OU 2020). Philip Seargeant is also clear that forms of social media have had a profound impact leading to ‘almost a celebration of this home grown creativity expressed through placards’ because ‘people will take a photograph of it, the photograph will spread online’ and ‘might get picked-up by a newspaper’ (ibid.).

Another important aim was that the design would afford the potential for building a sense of group cohesion and community, founded on the expectation that individuals and groups will acquire the templates and printing blocks and print the designs for themselves – with what Gardner, describes as that ‘sense of “I have done it, but collectively we are stronger”’ (2021). Therefore, in addition to the three rules, there is a further caveat; that everything should be hand-produced – as Miles Glyn comments – ‘working collectively together . . . that’s really important’ (OU 2020). This is central to the success of XR’s wider strategy and actions – many of which are highly creative and visually spectacular – a range of event types with performances, costumes, masks, caricatures, stunts, some including ingenious built structures, other using intertextual references and visual puns. These are conceived and created by the wider membership which produces a disparate array of acts and interventions, but all supported and given cohesion by the



aesthetic of XR's livery and materials; designed 'to look unified; not uniform' (Glyn and Farrell 2019: 122). Clive Russell describes this as the 'glue that holds the spaces together' (Change Incorporated 2020). Such designs, together with the visual activist stunts, events, interventions, and disruptions have been used by XR rebels across the world.

Demos employs the term 'mediagenic' to describe XR's direct actions such as gluing on, road-blocking and 'performing funerals for a future' for the purposes of getting 'government to declare and act upon climate emergency' (2020: 15). However, I suggest that such actions are often much more authentic than this term might imply. The regular appearances at XR events of brigades of Red Rebels (as they are known), offer genuine expressions of the deep sadness and grief felt by so many rebels and onlookers (see Figure 12.1).

The Red Rebel Brigade is a performance artist troupe originally conceived by a Bristol-based theatre group and 'symbolises the common blood we share with all species' that 'unifies us and makes us one. As such we move as one, act as one and more importantly feel as one' (Red Rebel Brigade 2021). It is perhaps this final point that comes closest to embodying a commitment to justice at XR events (see Plates 42 and 43).<sup>11</sup> The, by now, obvious success of XR's design programme has made a significant contribution to the challenge to government, and arguably offers further opportunity for this movement. XR's creativity, joy and freshness all lead to a heady combination of excitement and cohesion but also important is the way this helps to ease the very real feelings of bleakness experienced by most rebels at some time or other. However, while the



**FIGURE 12.1** *Sheffield Red Rebels and Funeral Cortege, 2019.* Courtesy © Georgina.

approach to collective making is important to community building, and the presence of the Red Rebels articulates compassion and grief for the suffering experienced across the globe, I question whether this is anywhere near sufficient for addressing the issues of justice and collectivity that arguably will be needed to successfully face all that the CEE portends.

## **Scholarship under emergency conditions: issues of (im)partiality**

It is generally agreed within the movement that the first eighteen months were successful in-so-far-as Extinction Rebellion's message gained widespread attention such that the CEE is at last on the political agenda here in the UK and in the Global North more generally. When XR started, public awareness of the extent of environmental crises was uneven and climate change denial was widespread in those parts of the world which were not, at that point, being palpably affected (the effects were there of course, but obfuscated by PR spin created by government and corporations alike). However, with the passing of time, not only has that message landed but it now looks less alarmist and increasingly proportionate. This chapter was conceived in December 2018, around the same time that I became a member of XR and – as hardly needs stating – much has happened since. As I write now in August 2021, the areas being directly affected are no longer confined to the Global South, but are more evident in the highly populated areas of the Global North, such that their status as newsworthy has been increased by their sheer proximity. This, together with greater public awareness and trust in climate science and evidence of mass extinction – particularly as a result of the publication of the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on 9 August 2021 – has led to widespread frustration at the paucity of effective policy and action taken by governments, but particularly those in the Global North.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the deadly COVID 19 pandemic has exposed inequalities along racial and social class lines across the globe. Such changes have affected XR's work. My task has therefore been complicated by the difficulty of examining a moving target. Indeed, the evocation of movement is of course apposite – Extinction Rebellion is a movement – mobilizing a radical challenge to the systemic causes of planetary climate breakdown and mass extinction; purposefully fluid and ever evolving to resist being readily co-opted, commodified and contained, so that its dissenting voice is not diminished. This fast pace of development presents problems for the researcher, but my task has also been complicated by my own place in the movement and the academic desirability of being detached from the subject of my enquiry. Mindful of this, I have purposefully not involved myself in any of the XR art groups, but have instead taken on other kinds of roles within my local group.<sup>13</sup>

It seems that I am not the only art historian who has been thinking about these things. The instability and shifting character of the environmental emergency – indeed, the entire context of urgency – affects scholarship where our relationship to the subject matter and fundamental understanding of the CEE will shape our interests and investments, and this is no less the case when analysing the visual dimensions of activism. Demos's discussion *Extinction Rebellions* begins by highlighting our emerging academic situation – at least as far as the humanities is concerned – in observing that scholarship is 'unaccustomed to operating in post-Anthropocenic emergency conditions' and that, as scholars, we need to take care (2020: 14). Perhaps more than

at any other time, the criteria of ‘distanced observation, critical thinking, and slow research’ need to be upheld because, argues Demos, they are ‘imperative in helping us to determine future courses of action’ both ‘politically’ and with regard to the operation of ‘aesthetic practices and media’ of environmental activist groups such as XR (ibid.). As already acknowledged, my status as a participant observer disqualifies me from fulfilling the first of these scholarly criteria, but more importantly from my perspective, there is a pressing need to understand better the means adopted by environmental activist groups as they work to avert catastrophe through radical transformation. I will examine what I take to be the points of antagonism when it comes to the framing of the CEE by such movements, and fully concur with Demos in his appeal for ‘environmental justice movements that stress complex socioecological understanding of climate breakdown’ (ibid.: 16).

## Critiques of Western environmentalism

Extinction Rebellion was formed in the UK in response to what was perceived as the combined failure of mainstream constitutional politics – with its inherent short-termism and unquestioning dependence upon a growth model of a consumer economy – together with the limitations of environmental campaign groups, because it was believed that neither were open and honest with their respective constituents about the existential threat posed by environmental breakdown. This situation is compounded by the huge influence of some newspapers in the UK, the power of their owners to prevent debate, to exclude alternative voices, to perpetuate fallacies and racist ideologies, and the failure of both print and broadcast media to adequately represent the nature and extent of the crisis. Commentators agree that the steep rise in social protests in recent years is due to an increased frustration with this situation; Gary Younge suggests there has been a ‘failing to cohere some of the . . . bigger cries for help, change, reform. That the old parties aren’t cutting it’; while Philip Sargeant notes that ‘people are trying to find ways of getting their voice heard. Being able to put forward a political message without the backing of other political institutional forms’ (OU 2020). Extinction Rebellion was therefore created as an alternative space in which citizens could act and be heard; in Arendtian terms – a ‘space of appearance’ (see Figure 12.2 and Plate 44).<sup>14</sup>

Like Western environmentalism more generally, XR has been criticized for what is understood as a failure to centre issues of justice. This presents a profound problem for XR – in terms of public perception and public relations – one that threatens to undermine its project of building a movement large enough to exert sufficient pressure to bring about fundamental change. Arguably, this would be the case for any environmental protest group because of the perceived redundancy of mainstream constitutional politics in the UK and further afield; the rise of populism; plus the lack of a democratic media (a problem that cannot be over-estimated). All have contributed to an undermining of trust and deepening fear of radical or extreme politics from all sides. In the spirit of trying to build a broad-based movement, and following a core XR tenet, some rebels actively avoid alienating those who prefer centrist politics; however, others feel disenfranchised by the apparent distancing from leftist ideology and internationalism. It is perhaps not surprising that the notion of ‘beyond politics’ is difficult to sustain. As Demos has argued about environmental groups more generally: ‘Rather than proposing a shared, universal political horizon, environmentalism forms a rift-zone of conflict and antagonism, with one’s emergency threatening to erase another’s,





**FIGURE 12.2** *Media Barons, XR Free the Press Action, London, 27 June 2021. Courtesy © Ci Davis.*

potentially compounding oppression and making solidarity across difference ever precarious' (2020: 16).

In May 2019, the Wretched of the Earth collective published 'An Open Letter to Extinction Rebellion'; a thoughtful and constructive appeal that began by welcoming XR as an 'encouraging sign' and for their 'energy and enthusiasm' but moved quickly to laying bare the real 'truth' of the CEE: 'the root causes of the climate crisis – capitalism, extractivism, racism, sexism, ableism and other systems of oppression' (Wretched of the Earth 2019).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, they insisted 'bleakness is not something for the future' but a lived reality for 'indigenous, working class, black, brown, queer, trans or disabled' people who experience the structural 'violence of capitalism' (ibid.). In appealing to environmental groups to engage with the 'complex ways in which social, economic and political systems shape our lives', there was an implied criticism of what they took to be XR's single-issue campaign; they argued that the complexity of systemic violence 'needs to be reflected in the strategies too' (ibid.). They also alluded to issues of 'exclusion and silencing' and to the neglect of 'intergenerational knowledge', particularly of indigenous communities who have long understood that 'protecting the environment is also protecting ourselves' – all of which they argued, is overlooked when environmental campaign groups in the Global North focus on 'the science' (ibid.). They called for the implementation of a systemic transition with 'justice at its core', one which 'refuses to sacrifice the people of the Global South to protect the citizens of the Global North' (ibid.). The letter

ended: 'It is crucial that we remain accountable to our communities, and all those who don't have access to the centres of power' – without which 'the call for climate justice is empty' (ibid.).

In October 2019, criticism came from a different source, as a result of an action at Canning Town tube station at the end of a two-week Rebellion in London. Intended as an act of nonviolent disruption, it provoked a confrontation during which a protestor was forcefully dragged from the top of a train by angry would-be passengers – a disturbing incident only contained when other members of the public stepped forward to calm the situation. This action led to sharp criticism from many quarters largely because the action had stopped people during the rush hour in a predominantly working-class area. These two events triggered a painful period of internal reflection and dialogue within XR, whereby individual members and groups considered whether issues of justice were sufficiently represented in the strategy and messaging.

As the crisis deepens our potential to avoid climate genocide may depend upon the ability of those with a platform to ensure that their message is clear and strong – but not simplistic. Demos points more generally to other groups who are better 'attuned to social justice frameworks of political analysis', who foreground the root cause of the CEE within 'long histories of colonial oppression, land dispossession, and the ongoing structural violence of extractivism and petrocapitalism', because, for those at the front line of such impacts 'the rebellion against extinction is something altogether different than present struggles for decarbonization' (2020: 15; see Plate 45). However, I would like to suggest that the 'rupture' noted by Demos, is not simply between different environmental organizations but within XR itself – here my discussion deviates from that of Demos (ibid.). For some members of XR, the movement has been so intent on keeping the media and messaging line clear and straightforward – and moreover 'beyond politics' – that it has been slow and even resistant to centring issues of justice; not only in terms of the impact of the CEE but also in terms which clearly acknowledge its root cause in capitalism; whether this is framed as racial, consumer, petrochemical capitalism, or something else. This led to deep tensions and even a schism within the organization; the most significant example occurring when the national XR United States group became strained during a process to adopt a so-called '4th Demand' (an additional demand to foreground climate justice) with the consequence that a breakaway group was formed – calling themselves XR America – and from which the original group distanced itself because it understood the new group to be founded on 'the false and discredited idea that the Climate and Ecological Emergency . . . is separate from social justice' (XR US).

Such internal dialogues led to a reframing of XR UK's 'strategy' in ways that do more to foreground justice issues. I suggest that one way to evaluate this is through an analysis of its visual identity; by attending to a politics of the 'sensible'. Indeed, some of XR's problems are manifest and traceable in its visual communications where a lack, or insufficiency, of direct representation of justice issues, impinges on the coherence of XR's visual message and, moreover, threatens to undermine the foundational nonviolent philosophy of this movement; an argument I will develop in the next section.

Drawing on Benjamin, Rancière and Azoulay – the 'politics of the sensible' and 'political aesthetics' – McLagan and McKee expound the many ways that activist images circulate through the media, across a range of platforms, and the relational processes through which such images acquire meaning. McLagan and McKee's study of the visual culture of nongovernmental politics provides a useful approach. Their project enquired into the ways in which the political intent of a given message, or media form, is made sensible to the prospective recipient; founded on the



premise that ‘Politics revolves around what can be seen, felt, sensed . . . what is perceptible, sensible, legible’ (2012: 9). This of course raises the equal and opposite issue of what is being left out of the picture – what is not ‘sensible’ in other words. Indeed it echoes the final point made in the Open Letter of Wretched of the Earth, that if the accountability of environmental groups such as XR to the Global South is not apparent – or ‘sensible’ – then ‘the call for climate justice is empty’ (2019). Images and symbols may be created but their effectiveness is dependent upon the ways in which they are employed and circulated, because the ‘representational world of visual culture that somehow encodes and represents the political’ does not stand outside of the political realm but must be understood in terms of the ‘domain of the political’ (McLagan and McKee 2012: 9). Indeed, Meg McLagan’s key point is that ‘claims’ don’t simply ‘exist in the world; they have to be relayed, remediated, and reframed in order to be able to circulate’, and that this involves a process of ‘social labor’ (2012: 304–19). In other words, if we apply this to Extinction Rebellion, it is not enough for XR UK to claim to care about justice – for the claim to be meaningful it has to acted upon in order to be perceived as such, taken on board by others and recirculated (2021). This way it gains credibility and respect.

Suspicion of Western environmentalism has a long and well-deserved history. A key example can be seen in relation to the work of Lumumba Di-Aping, Sudanese Ambassador to the United Nations during the Copenhagen climate conference of 2009. Di-Aping was also chair of the group known as G77 plus China (G77–China); 132 developing nations who, under his leadership, agreed to negotiate as a block in talks to establish a target, in terms of degrees of warming, for measures that would limit global temperatures to a figure relative to the pre-industrial baseline, of no higher than 1.5 degrees Celsius. However, they were unaware that the G20 group had already agreed privately to an average global temperature limit of 2 degrees Celsius – a figure with catastrophic implications for the Global South – this was leaked to Di-Aping, prompting him to call a press briefing at which he presented his response; remembered as ‘one of the greatest, and most significant, political interventions in our lifetimes’ (Lahoud 2018).<sup>16</sup> Di-Aping described the leaked text as ‘asking Africa to sign a suicide pact, an incineration pact’ (Batty 2009), because ‘hidden in the scale of the global average temperature increase were the differentiated hazards and vulnerabilities of climate impact’ (Lahoud *ibid.*).

Nearly ten years later, with no substantive actions having been taken on the CEE by the countries of the G20 / Global North, and with the effects seriously deepening, Ambassador Di-Aping levied another biting critique. In October 2018, he gave a lecture – *The Global Climate Ghetto* – in which he accused the countries of the Global North of a level of inaction that imperils those in the Global South.<sup>17</sup> However, of particular significance to the discussion in this chapter is that it was not only governments and other official bodies that came under fire; environmental groups also received very serious criticism – particularly those based in or resourced by the Global North. During an acerbic – yet, in places powerfully poetic – statement, Di-Aping launched a critique of those who, he said, exhibit a ‘belligerent animosity towards developing countries’ – first, ‘the quintessential Western establishment types’; second, a group he referred to as ‘the clevers, the . . . insiders and members’ and ‘fossil fuel heavyweights’; followed by those who constitute the environmental movement:

And the third group, are the anti-ecological environmentalists. They who love trees, forests and organic food, but find no inconsistency between their environmentalist ideology and

discrimination, racism and colonialism. In their conceit, they believe that they can be anti-fascist and hate blacks, Asians, immigrants and embracing discriminations against women, the working class and the poor. . . . They are burning flesh.

Di-Aping explained that a 2 degree global temperature rise represents 4 degrees for Africa, where from this perspective: 'two degrees the riches are theirs. Two degrees, we are dead and they are not. Two degrees, do they care? Four degrees, and we don't live and they won't live. Do they know? Shouldn't they care?' (Di-Aping 2018). Evidence to support these statements is widely available.<sup>18</sup>

## **An issue of justice: non-violence / peaceful protest as a both a principle and strategy**

Thus far this discussion has outlined the visual strategy of Extinction Rebellion; it has detailed some of the criticisms that have been levied at environmentalism in general and of XR more specifically; and it has confronted the problem of scholarship in a time of emergency – in an era of human-induced environmental catastrophe on a pan-human scale; where some inhabited regions of the world are far more severely affected than others; where rich nations have largely created the catastrophe and poor nations suffer; and where as a result of this disparity of wealth, responsibility and suffering there are entrenched geopolitical power relationships. For these reasons, if environmentalism is focused only on the singular issue of carbon/decarbonization, this will have devastating implications for the global poor. Such a simplistic approach, in its avoidance of issues of justice, evades the root causes of the emergency, rendering invisible the material conditions of life as lived for millions in the Global South now, and the existential threat for billions in the future. I am now going to venture into the ethical implications of this concern, and as already indicated I do this as an XR activist, without the comfort of the customary academic distance that my profession largely depends on – meaning that this is in part a personal journey of enquiry to examine how myself and others are implicated in the methods adopted within environmentalism in general and in Extinction Rebellion more specifically.

This section unpacks the inter-relationship between the core principle of nonviolence and the visual strategies employed by XR, but I must insist at the outset that nonviolence is not an easy strategy to pursue as an activist – indeed, Butler describes it as a 'struggle' – more precisely, that nonviolence 'is not an absolute principle but the name of an ongoing struggle' (2021: 23). For Butler, nonviolence is 'manifest in solidarity alliances of resistance and persistence' and should not be characterized 'as a weak and useless passivity', since 'Refusal is not the same as doing nothing' (ibid.: 202). In fact, the necessity of such 'solidarity alliances' is testament to the difficulties presented by nonviolent struggle – indeed, the discussion has already touched on XR's visual programme in relation to community building and group cohesion.

In *The Force of Non-Violence* Butler, draws on Arendt, Benjamin, Einstein, Fanon, Foucault, Freud, Mbembe and others – all colossal thinkers – to examine the principle of nonviolence within activism and its relevance to the current moment. I take the core elements of Butler's argument to examine the environmental activism of XR and the role played by the visual in supporting its commitment to nonviolence; but first it is necessary to reflect upon what is meant by the terms

‘violence’ and ‘non-violence’. Butler describes them as ‘disputed terms’, beginning by saying that for some ‘wounding acts of speech’ can be called ‘violent’, thus the concept is not limited to the ‘physical blow’, moreover – and this is especially relevant to my argument – Butler insists that the term is also inclusive of ‘social structures or systems, including systemic racism’ (ibid.: 2).

At the same time Butler argues that from the standpoint of those in authority – those ‘states and institutions’ – the term ‘violent’ is used strategically to describe the articulation of ‘political dissent, or of opposition’ through modes that include ‘Demonstrations, encampments, assemblies, boycotts, and strikes’ . . . ‘even when they do not seek recourse to physical fighting’ (ibid.: 2–3). Thus, the term is leveraged to justify the use of state security forces. So, while activists may labour to adhere to the ideal of nonviolence, their actions may, nevertheless, be strategically framed in terms of its opposite.<sup>19</sup> In this way, and following Walter Benjamin’s argument in his famous essay ‘Critique of Violence’ ([1920] 2004), Butler argues that violence as a term and concept ‘*is always interpreted*’ and that interpretation is always dependent upon the frameworks used, and moreover that such frameworks are ‘sometimes incommensurable or conflicting’ (2021: 14). This line of enquiry is pursued through *The Force of Non-Violence*, where Butler argues that at times the given framework of interpretation means that violence ‘appears differently’ or, perhaps worse, ‘altogether fails to appear’ (ibid.). It is this last point that particularly interests me in relation to the task at hand. My purpose here is to reflect upon the question of whether there is something that we are not seeing; a violence that is being obscured or occluded when we apprehend the visual elements of some nonviolent actions of environmental movements. I think this is an important question for our understanding of environmentalism, in relation to the work being undertaken by activists; but particularly that of Extinction Rebellion. Work so important that, indeed, our lives may depend upon it. I will return to this question.

The ‘struggle’ of nonviolent activism, is founded on a number of things – first, it is not easy to disrupt members of the public and to feel both the weight of their annoyance (and sometimes physical violence) and the mental and physical force of some policing tactics, and yet not retaliate. Moreover, there is considerable personal discomfort and indignity to withstand during disruptive nonviolent protest: anxiety, fear, hunger, cold, pain. When activists put themselves into certain situations, for example going limp in passive resistance to police force, then they are knowingly putting their bodies in harm’s way; Butler describes this as ‘entering the field of violence’ (ibid.: 22). It is also important to note that nonviolence is not necessarily derived from a serene or placid disposition – again, as Butler suggests, it is often ‘an expression of rage, indignation, and aggression’ (ibid.: 21).

Consider for a moment how and why activists hold fast to nonviolence as an ideal. First, how: there is training involved through which activists learn techniques in how to keep calm; how not to actively resist arrest; how to protect themselves by knowing and asserting their legal rights; how to de-escalate a heated situation; and how to be a support to other rebels. Techniques of NVDA have to be learned and vigilantly pursued.<sup>20</sup> In addition the ‘joy’, already mentioned by Waterhouse, of working together as part of a creative movement, also helps to mitigate stressed situations. The time spent in planning and rehearsal, sharing food, and even cleaning up after the action all contributes to the collective experience and strengthens group cohesion (see Figure 12.3).

The ‘carnival’ spirit of many actions can be irresistible, liberating and empowering; but this is discussed elsewhere and I’m not going to elaborate.<sup>21</sup> However, Clare Farrell describes the enormous value of having performance activists such as the Red Rebels Brigade at XR events,



**FIGURE 12.3** *Cleaning up after 'Blood of our Children' event, Sheffield, 2019. Courtesy © Georgina.*

where they come in part to bear witness, but they also have a considerable calming effect as they move slowly and silently in procession through a rebellious or occupied area and 'bring a very, very low energy into the space' (Bis Pub. 2020; see Plate 42).

Next, why? The founders of Extinction Rebellion have said that they studied previous movements before devising XR's principles and strategies. Looking at the substance of the five principles of the Spanish Indignados/15M group it is clear that this is one such example; their first principle asserts a 'firm rejection' of 'violent tactics' (Postill 2014: 348). They embraced nonviolence for 'its collective intelligence' and 'revolutionary logic'; going so far as to describe nonviolence as the DNA of the movement (ibid.:149). John Postill discusses the relative merits and demerits of nonviolent activism for bringing about change, in terms of its identifiable effectiveness as a political strategy, but – quoting Samad – argues that for those movements that do adopt nonviolence it is necessary to be 'fully devoted to it, for there is no room for half-measures' (ibid.: 348).<sup>22</sup> Indeed, for Butler the pursuit of nonviolence has important far-reaching implications: 'the most persuasive reasons for the practice of nonviolence directly imply the critique of individualism and require that we rethink the social bonds that constitute us as living creatures' that 'certain "ties" required for social life . . . are imperilled by violence'. In short: 'Nonviolence as a matter of individual morality thus gives way to a social philosophy of living and sustainable bonds'; that 'when any of us commit acts of violence, we are, in and through those acts, building a more violent world' (2021: 15, 19). Thus, for Butler, as for so many other thinkers and activists, nonviolence is the precondition of building a better, more just world; where the ties of social life are meaningful.

Returning now to the ‘numerous atrocities and senseless death’ outlined earlier in this discussion, where the necropolitics of capitalism, the root cause of the CEE, is a violence perpetrated on the majority world of the Global South, I restate the question expressed by Butler: ‘What are the modes of representation that are available to us to apprehend this violence?’ (ibid.: 185).<sup>23</sup> In the way Butler uses it here, does ‘apprehend’ mean to perceive and understand, or to arrest and put a stop to? Both interpretations are implied by this pithy question, since she is referring here to the ‘sphere of appearance’ – a space in which to be seen and heard – in order to bring about social change, as ‘part of a politics of equality’ as elaborated here:

For nonviolence to escape the war logics that distinguish between lives worth preserving and lives considered dispensable, it must become part of a politics of equality. Thus an intervention in the sphere of appearance – the media and all the contemporary permutations of the public sphere – is required to make every life grievable, that is, worthy of its own living, deserving of its own life.

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Elsewhere, Butler ponders on those info-graphic conventions that use lines and curves, in ways that are intended to represent the loss of life – calling into question ‘the status of the graph, and the line, as an adequate way of understanding life and death’ . . . ‘How do we make life and death graphic?’ (2020). In other words, how should we approach ‘portraying people and communities’ – to make visible this grievable life – in a way that will ‘respect the dignity of their struggle’ and avoid representing them ‘as “the vulnerable”?’ (ibid. 2021: 186–7). To use the everyday phrase now widespread in activist circles – how do we amplify the voices of those on the front line? Such questions are directly pertinent to what we might think of in terms of the issues of representation, the ethics of visualization, and the politics of vision, when considering images or graphic representations related to the CEE – particularly when they depict the so-called ‘vulnerable’; better termed the vulnerable-ized – or better still the grievable – as Butler suggests. This brings me back to Demos’s point about some activist, artistic and/or scholarly accounts producing reductive or simplistic representations of what is happening and is at stake in this crisis. But can this be avoided, when arguably the visual forms produced for activism are always at risk of reproducing simplicity, because the messages carried by banners and other protest formats, which need to be ‘striking’ in order to stand-out, are necessarily truncated (OU 2020)?

Let’s look again at XR’s livery of images and symbols – the materials of the design programme that supports its many and varied mediagenic actions designed to disrupt and to ‘spread the message’ (Glyn and Farrell 2019: 122). But what message? The design team explain that their aim was to produce a framework that could flex when the message needed to shift – that the movement would begin by focussing on ‘the threat’ but then might need to change tack (Bis Pub. 2020). But what does this ‘threat’ look like? If we consider the vastness and complexity contained in this deceptively succinct term, we begin to appreciate the scale of the challenge to represent meaningfully this ‘threat’; for the ‘threat’ of the CEE has many different aspects and stages that occupy the zone between the ‘threat from’, and the ‘threat to’. First, the causes – such as extraction, industrial production and emissions, consumption, and waste. Next, the direct effects on the environment – factors such as loss of air quality, changing weather patterns, extreme weather events, rising temperatures, thawing ice caps, forest fires, droughts, floods and rising sea levels.



Finally, the wider and deeper effects on the living world – habitat and species loss; crop failures; the human suffering of hunger, illness, social unrest, war, displacement and death. Clearly these are by no means exhaustive lists and moreover give no account of the inter-relatedness of factors; providing a mere gesture towards the complexity of the ‘threat’ to help evaluate XR’s messaging.

The images and symbols created by the arts group: the hour-glasses that warn of time-running-out; ‘scary skulls’ – human and animal – together with depictions of flora and fauna convey messages about death and the ever-expanding list of lost species; Hi-Viz fabrics signal a general alarm; the FucXed Caps carefully designed to signify unease, dissonance and chaos to better convey the blunt truths of the words they spell out – all these are used alone or in support of the ‘mediagenic’ actions for which XR is renowned. But missing are representations of people – of humanity in the fullness and richness of its diversity – those who are or soon will be affected by such threats, those who have indigenous and intergenerational knowledge of sustainable living, those who have been battling the effects of adverse weather patterns – whose very humanity justifies the status of ‘grievable’ and from whom we must all learn so much. Among these are the displaced, the starving, the drowned, the murdered, the victims of wars induced by the fight for resources and the effects of climate breakdown.

It is here that the age-old dilemma of picturing atrocity comes into focus in a discussion of a visual strategy that chooses not to picture the vulnerable-ized and condemned. If environmental movements evade picturing the human impact of the CEE – in the fullness of its global reach – then those who constitute the collateral damage of capitalism are rendered invisible by the current visual vocabulary of XR and other major Western environmental movements, because these movements claim the need to be single-issue or ‘beyond politics’, because they do not want to alienate particular social and political constituencies, then those people caught by these horrors are doubly ‘erased from view’ (Butler 2021: 24); first by the self-imposed media blackout of the mainstream press, and then by the campaign groups supposedly acting to prevent such horrors – and this makes little sense.

The mediagenic actions of XR have been dismissed by some as mere ‘image events’; Kevin DeLuca claims they are now ‘so routine’ that they ‘often appear exhausted, even trivial’ leading to a decline in their impact as they compete for attention on television and on the ‘ever-proliferating social media platforms’ (2021: 216). The risk of appearing ‘trivial’ is undoubtedly a concern; as one observer asked of the Spanish indignados if they ‘are so angry, why are they laughing so much?’ (Postill 2014: 341).<sup>24</sup> Similarly DeLuca questions the sincerity of such XR actions, asking: ‘Is a media event staged according to the dictates of PR discourse even an event?’ (ibid.: 218). I take issue with this dismissive use of the terms image or media ‘events’. Activists are using the means available – and doing so creatively – to bear witness, to inform, to sound the alarm, and make visible the grief they are undoubtedly feeling. But in a media landscape that is literally hell-bent on maintaining the system it feeds on, committed to tropes designed to dissemble and obfuscate in support of that system, then perhaps the message needs to be clearer – even more direct and transparent. That XR is happy to state that ‘WE’RE FUCKED’ yet is entirely unwilling to use the same level of directness in pointing to the historic and ongoing systemic cause of the crisis – namely capitalism – signals confusion, political naivety or complicity, and undermines trust. This unwillingness stems of course from the principle of being ‘beyond politics’ and explains the lack of visual representation of money, wealth, overconsumption, and inequality – note how quickly this moves from the language of economics to the language of justice. The representation of crisis

takes many forms and all are, by definition, serious and warrant being taken seriously, however some relate to the realm of the immediately evident, material reality while others rely on the potential of the human psyche and power of foresight to imagine and anticipate that which are for now, for many of us, abstract consequences (see Figure 12.4).

In a short article published in 2019 in the journal *Biodiversity*, Vanessa Reid reflected on the problem of trying to reach people through campaigning, noting the success (in terms of media visibility) of Greta Thunberg's activism – the Swedish activist who began her protest outside the seat of national government in Stockholm, in August 2018, aged 15. Reid raised the question – in essence perhaps one that many have of us in campaigning groups have been asking – 'how is it



**FIGURE 12.4** *Empathy*, opening of August Rebellion, 23 August 2021. Courtesy © Ci Davis.

that we need . . . a schoolgirl to wake up to the reality of climate change?’ When ‘climate change scientists have been shouting ‘the facts’ for decades’ (Reid 2019: 75). Reid’s tentative conclusion suggests that ‘it’s the raw human element’ that ‘*people* and their stories – move *people*’ (ibid.). This last statement exemplifies the everyday language of affect – about how we reach people at an emotional level not just on the level of rationale and heightened moralizing or alarm. If we fail to represent the grievable of the majority world, then the status of invisibility that we may unwittingly assign them will inevitably worsen their chances of survival in the unfolding, impending catastrophes over which those powerful political forces in the Global North are presiding. This begs the profoundly difficult question of whether any activist movement, or any individual action, qualifies as nonviolent if it evades the core threats of an extractivist, consumption dependent, capitalist economy – for capitalism depends upon violence – meaning that capitalism and nonviolence are mutually exclusive concepts and to avoid acknowledging this constitutes an epistemic violence upon the grievable. This does of course mean that any environmental movement that pursues nonviolence must do so wholeheartedly, for as Postill concluded, the pursuit of nonviolence must have no ‘half-measures’ – it requires full devotion (2014: 348).

## Concluding thoughts

Both art and the activism with which it is associated take different potential forms in relation to how the emergency is understood and framed. When environmentalism and activism conceive of crisis purely in terms of climate and the imperatives of decarbonization, this obscures wider political, social, racial, global, indigenous, intergenerational, intersectional, and interspecies issues of justice. Extinction Rebellion’s principle of ‘beyond politics’ furthered by its aim to create an alternative democratic space in which citizens can act and be heard, has led to an unwillingness to meaningfully address the causes of the crisis, in terms of the systemic violence underlying an exploitative, extractivist, racialized capitalism within which the effects of CEE are distributed highly unevenly. This unwillingness creates a problem for XR which was conceived as an avowedly nonviolent movement, because, according to Butler’s analysis, any understanding of violence must include systemic racism – which by turn means the racism that underpins the capitalist economics on which our current system depends. Central to my argument here is that the acknowledgement of such violence is not currently part of the environmentalism of many movements of the Global North – including Extinction Rebellion – such that the claim to nonviolence is perpetually undermined if this violence ‘altogether fails to appear’ in their visual strategies and actions (2021: 14). So, it is argued that a strategy of nonviolence fails the test of credibility if it does not recognize and make legible the violent underpinning of CEE, and that XR, by not addressing and bearing witness to this, is obscuring this violence.

There is an urgent need to investigate the visual modes whereby systemic violence and injustice can be apprehended, felt, sensed, made sensible, and this must involve the difficulties and dilemmas of picturing atrocity, of representing the displaced, the starving, the drowned and the murdered. A fully effective nonviolent activism and its accompanying strategy of visual materials is one that is not passive or evasive. It must necessarily have the aim of building solidarity with others, which involves a commitment to making visible, producing a visibility that can be felt and sensed, relayed and circulated. Drawing once again from Butler, this suggests that embracing

justice as core to the nonviolent principle underpinning XR's environmental activism constitutes another element of its 'struggle'.

XR's design programme has been highly successful in terms of effective communication, changing the way people think about both rebellion as a positive force for action, and the need to confront the urgency of the CEE. Notwithstanding, there remains a danger that issues of justice are less than apparent to 'audiences' of XR actions – despite the stated intentions of Extinction Rebellion as an evolving movement. What would it look like to picture justice? Perhaps, as Butler argues, 'a new imaginary is required – an egalitarian imaginary that apprehends the interdependency of lives' (2021: 203). If modern (so-called) liberal states are based on systemic violence and if protest is treated as violence, then, in order to create spaces with maximum potential of attracting public support, for building 'solidarity alliances', for envisioning a future world beyond the current system, nonviolent tactics must necessarily foreground visual signifiers that demonstrate profound regard for others – to make justice, as a core goal, visible.

## Notes

- 1 The three demands are: 1. Tell the Truth, 2. Act Now, 3. Go Beyond Politics (Extinction Rebellion 2021).
- 2 See also Glyn and Farrell (2019).
- 3 Not to say 'brand' identity which this movement strongly resists – partly for its links with the commercial world but more importantly for its association with the branding of slaves to signal ownership and status.
- 4 Corinna Gardner, Senior Curator of Design and Digital, V&A; the V&A's 'rapid response' initiative began in 2014; the Extinction Rebellion items include a selection of woodblocks and printed patches (V&A 2017; Wong 2020).
- 5 Cedric J. Robinson 'racial capitalism' (1983): a capitalism whose impact creates inequality not only within a class hierarchy, but which is underpinned by exploitation of people, racialized as black from the Global South, over the 500-year history of capitalism from the Transatlantic slave trade, through colonialism and globalization of neocolonial relationships; a capitalism impacting on other intersections, such as patriarchal capitalism, could also be understood as important. For ease, I will use the term 'capitalism'.
- 6 Professor Saleemul Huq, Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD), Dhaka, stated that July/August 2021 marked the 'official' beginning of the 'era of loss and damage from climate change' – the time from which there can be no question of the scale of human cost and suffering already being felt in the Global South (Huq 2021).
- 7 I will use the term 'Global South' for its consistency with some sources discussed here.
- 8 This is referred to in Demos (2020); COP 15 (2009).
- 9 Full name: Autonomous Anarchist Arts Factory or =AAA-Factory (Glyn and Farrell 2019: 121).
- 10 See Deaton (2013).
- 11 The Red Rebel Brigade was devised by Doug Francisco and Justine Squire from Bristol's Invisible Circus for the Extinction Rebellion Spring uprising in April 2019 in London.
- 12 The IPCC is the United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change – see also below.
- 13 Although I have worked at home using some of the XR graphic design templates and design rules.

- 14 Arendt (1958) – see also the discussion in the Introduction to this anthology.
- 15 This open letter was written in collaboration with ‘dozens of aligned groups’ (Wretched of the Earth 2019).
- 16 Adrian Lahoud, Dean of the School of Architecture at the Royal College of Art, London.
- 17 Hosted by the V&A Museum in conjunction with the Sharjah Architecture Triennial and the Royal College of Art London. 4 October 2018.
- 18 Particularly that collated by the IPCC – see, for example, IPCC (2021).
- 19 See Chenoweth (2021), Postill (2014), Jackson (2021) and Jackson, Gilmore and Monk (2019).
- 20 Non-Violent Direct Action.
- 21 See also Kalyva, Chapter 1, in this anthology; Notes from Nowhere (2003: 173–302); and Tunali’s excellent discussion (2020).
- 22 For a wider discussion, see John Postill, William Meyers and others on the only partial role of the peaceful protest advocated by Martin Luther King in the US anti-segregation movement (Postill 2014); probably the most comprehensive study of the effectiveness of nonviolence has been undertaken by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan (2011) and Erica Chenoweth (2021).
- 23 Mbembe ([2016] 2019).
- 24 Eduardo Romanos, reprinted in Postill (2014: 341).

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# 13

## Montage and vernacular spectatorship

### The role played by YouTube channel AnarChnowa as a tool of video activism in post-14 January 2011 Tunisia

*Marianna Liosi*

#### Introduction

In 2011, media theorist Robert W. Gehl raised the question about whether YouTube and Facebook might be considered an archive of emotional objects: 'digital objects that have meaning within the context of social connections.'<sup>1</sup> They [social media site users] are processing this digital archive: sorting their contacts into lists, liking this status update, commenting on that photograph, or sharing a virtual gift' (Gehl 2011: 1239). Media scholar Wolfgang Ernst sees cyberspace as an intersection of movable elements that can be shifted by a series of algorithmic operations, therefore 'in electronic, digital media, the classical practice of quasi-external storage is being replaced by dynamical movements "on the fly" as a new quality' (Ernst 2004: 4). In fact, according to Ernst, preservation of contents is achieved through their transmission, and the digital archive is a form of repository that emphasizes exponentially this aspect. Furthermore, Ernst stresses a substantial distinction, that is that the archive registers, calculates instead of telling stories, or speaking to us. In fact, only additional, secondary narratives are able to give order to amorphous materials contained by the archive (ibid.: 3). Therefore, we as users can be considered as all mini-archivists in what we can call the information-management society (Parikka 2013).

Drawing on these understandings of social networks and the role that users play within them, I find it relevant to focus on the evolving meaning and transformation of the so-called vernacular videos filmed by citizens during the twenty-nine days of the Tunisian revolution between the self-immolation of 26-year-old street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi (17 December 2010) and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's flight (14 January 2011), in post-14 January 2011 Tunisia. In fact, whereas these amateur clips were disseminated virally online during the twenty-nine-day phase of the

upheaval, they have fallen through progressive non-circulation into invisibility, in the aftermath of Ben Ali's toppling. This evidence leads to a critical questioning of the function of social networks as archives for preserving the clips online, and has also suddenly conveyed the fear of the dispersion of testimonies. This anxiety of loss has been reinforced especially by the occasional erasure of clips from YouTube by the platform's algorithm, mainly due to changing policy on violent or graphic content or the shutting down of the channel.

With particular reference to the term 'vernacular', filmmaker, journalist, and author Peter Snowden has defined an unprecedented typology of videos that are non-commercial, non-professional, shot by anonymous citizens during protests and collective gatherings in public space, and shared via YouTube and other social networks with no, or only minimal, post-production. These videos belong to the multiple series of gestures and actions through which individuals gather, both online and offline, to enact the people as the possible subject of *another* history (Snowdon 2014: 411). Following theorist Judith Butler (2016), Snowden defines 'the people' of the Arab Uprisings as a performance. They are 'part of the process of constituting themselves as a collective subject' (Snowdon 2014: 405), and the videos they shoot and circulated online belong to that action. At the core of Snowden's analysis is the crucial role played by YouTube, which is not simply a platform where videos are uploaded. Rather, it is a digital object, medium, and tool that is itself revolutionary, because it both embodies and spreads the revolution.

The preservation of the amateur visual accounts shot during the Arab Uprisings has become an increasingly crucial issue due to concerns over the role played by, and limits of, social media as an archive, and the intervention of activist groups and state institutions in archiving these historical documents. The question of what kind of archive social media is for these militant, non-monetizable videos became urgent when the shift of the footage from hypervisibility to invisibility became evident and threatening. Indeed, due to the unfolding of regional politics and media agendas, the local and distant viewer-user's relationship to this footage has radically changed over the years. Emotional traces of engagement expressed widely from users all over the world through likes, shares, and comments have stopped, both globally and locally. In addition, social networks' changing algorithms have affected the circulation of the vernacular visual account in question. As is well known, videos with an evidentiary value in relation to atrocities and violations of human rights can be, and actually are, easily removed by the system with little regard for their contribution as valuable testimonies. This risk of erasure is even more evident when one thinks that the status of the videos changed post-14 January 2011, when the audio-visual materials became legal evidence for identifying crimes against Tunisian citizens over the course of the transitional justice that the country embarked upon (Belhassine: 2019a–c; Guelali: 2019). Therefore, their potential disappearance from online repositories threatens the possibility of justice.

Regarding conservation and preservation of the vernacular videos, Tunisia is a unique case among the countries that experienced the Arab Uprising, in which state institutions support the creation of a precious repository for the sake of the national memory of the upheaval, apparently without a hidden agenda. Both independent and institutional actors have attempted to create a shared narrative, a collective memory of the twenty-nine-day phase of the Tunisian revolution, as a tool of resistance against manipulative narratives spread by post-14 January 2011 political parties in power, and the fragmentation and dispersion – or even obliteration – of both historical traces and civil intentions. All these issues run in parallel with a growing sense of frustration and disillusion among local citizens, who progressively feel the failure of the political uprising that they began.

Within this framework, it seems worthwhile to analyse a case such as AnarChnowa YouTube channel and video mash-ups, which alongside Tunisian hip hop musicians,<sup>2</sup> and other activists' projects such as the educational YouTube channel *Draw My Science*, have the ambitious aim to blur the division between militancy and entertainment online (Ben Ismail 2017). The relevance of AnarChnowa's videos is inscribed in the specific development of the internet and social media in the country during Ben Ali's government, a digital context that was subject to state control and censorship. Before and during the upheaval a limited variety of content circulated online, mainly on Facebook and at a smaller scale on YouTube. Moreover, while Zuckerberg's service has been the predominant social network used by citizens and activists to express dissent, spread information and testimonies of the protests, during the twenty-nine-day phase, YouTube remained underdeveloped in the country, although it was broadly used by the Tunisian diaspora to circulate videos internationally. In contrast, in post-14 January 2011 the extreme fragmentation of intentions, goals and purposes that concerned Tunisian society during the process of democratization was also displayed by the huge range in the types of content boosted by the end of censorship and disseminated by Facebook and increasingly YouTube.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, I question the development of YouTube and the potential use of it as an activist tool, in post-14 January 2011 Tunisia. I anticipate that the free use of the platform of YouTube by Tunisian users could bring unexpected developments in terms of new forms of expression, alternative uses, as well as political engagement of this supposed archive post-Ben Ali's flight. Within this framework, AnarChnowa is a relevant case-study because it takes advantage of the wide distribution afforded by YouTube for spreading creative products that can increase political awareness, and circulate empowering counter-messages to its fellow citizens. In particular, focusing on AnarChnowa's video-episodes I aim to observe the effects of the retrieval and recombination of the clips shot during the twenty-nine-day phase of the revolution with others entirely retrieved online on the internet. It is worth noting that the phenomenon of found footage filming, and especially the reuse of amateur videos of the Arab Uprisings, is not new. I suggest that Tunisian documentaries such as *Dégage* (2012) by Mohamed Zran and *Plus jamais peur* (*No More Fear*, 2012) by Mourad Ben Cheick, can be considered the first moving-image products within the cinema field that show a fascination for clips shot during the revolutions.

Therefore, I question the narratives that emerge from AnarChnowa's montage of the vernacular videos, and what these stories tell of the current situation of Tunisia. I anticipate that the video-remix, meaning the recombination of videos created by AnarChnowa will contribute to supporting the circulation and preservation of the digital testimonies in question, as well as resist any counter-revolutionary, misleading narratives, manipulation, or falsification of the clips. Furthermore, I question in what way, if any, AnarChnowa as filmer and spectator-user contributes to reinterpreting, redefining and integrating the vernacular videos of the twenty-nine-day phase of the Tunisian revolution in the flow of history and the collective memory. And secondly, I explore the role played by the online users in these new narrations by watching, sharing and commenting.

## The vernacular spectator as a storyteller

As I mentioned above, according to Snowdon vernacular videos do not only enact performance in public space but are the performance itself –which both takes place offline, where physical



bodies act, and online. Furthermore, filming and sharing are considered to be the two sides of the same subversive act (Riboni 2015, 95–110). I argue that both AnarChnowa as the author of the videos, and the users can be defined as *vernacular spectators*. In using this term in this way, I offer an extension of the definition of vernacular videos described above, inspired by the reflections of media theorist Michele White (2006) and scholar Giovanna Fossati (2012) on the figure of the spectator and its creative role. Furthermore, I argue that millions of onlookers – physically or culturally distant from the occurrence – who witness the events through the mediation of the screen are also part of this subversive act by contributing to the circulation of videos and attributing meaning to them by commenting or simply making views grow by watching YouTube’s playlist or Facebook’s News feeds. If the role of performer and audience overlaps, then the act of sharing involves the amateur videographers filming the circumstances where they were immersed and also those who were informed and had access to the events through the filter of a technological device. Fossati stresses the blurring distinctions between the filmmaker, as a creator of images, and the spectator, as consumer. In this sense, she recognizes the category of found-footage filmmaking as a classification that describes two practices: that of the filmmakers, who create new meanings by appropriating and assembling footage taken by someone else; and the practice of the spectator who, by remixing, turns into an author. Moreover, Fossati recognizes that presenting a film, and making it accessible to an audience, are inherent aspects of the practice of archiving, together with collecting and preserving it.

The understanding of the spectator as an active figure emerges also in Michele White’s reflections. In rethinking how the internet/computer viewer is engaged, rendered, and regulated, White borrows the term ‘spectator’ from film studies, an appropriation of lexicon and meaning that is quite unusual in the context of the internet. She starts from the definition given by theorist Judith Mayne (in White 2006: 6), who states that: ‘spectatorship indicates the processes of watching and listening, identification with characters and images, the various values with which viewing is invested, and how these ideas continue even after the spectator has stopped viewing’. White stresses that ‘references to Internet and computer spectatorship should highlight how individuals spend time reading and viewing as well as writing and interacting’ (2006: 8–9), broadening the spectrum of possibilities for the viewer to be identified as an agent and not only when he or she comments or registers a ‘like’.

Based on these reflections, I stress that the vernacular spectator is not only one of the main figures integral to the phenomenon of vernacular footage of the Tunisian revolution, but is also involved in the process of archiving, preservation, circulation and resignification of the clips, post-14 January 2011. In this sense, I identify AnarChnowa and the online users as vernacular spectators. By taking part in the practices of found footage filmmaking, AnarChnowa by the act of watching and editing these *objects trouvés*, and the users by the act of consuming and commenting, enact a form of militancy. This engagement unfolds through boosting the circulation of videos via the online behaviours of editing, sharing and commenting. Therefore, I interpret the moving-image product as a unitary narrative produced by a vernacular spectator able to recontextualize the clips over time, in the post-14 January 2011 period. This relocation shows a reattribution of meaning to the audio-visual materials, which says something about the current social-political situation of Tunisia today.

## The case-study: the YouTube channel AnarChnowa

AnarChnowa is a web series initiated by its cyberactivist namesake; a young student based in Sidi Bouzid. Sidi Bouzid is a town, located in the south of Tunisia renowned for the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on the 17 December 2010 – considered to be the official start of the Tunisian revolution. In considering the aesthetics and aims of the AnarChnowa channel, this geographical and political background must be considered, not only for the sake of contextualization, but because both have a specific influence on the content, narrative, and perspective of the videos. The name AnarChnowa is a wordplay made up of the term ‘anarchy’ and *Chnowa*, which in Arabic means ‘What is it?’ AnarChnowa is a satirical channel grounded on a simple concept – probably unprecedented in Tunisia. Using fast-paced and rich montage, AnarChnowa summarizes recent events from mainstream media communication such as TV or radio and regularly uploads these videos for viewing online. AnarChnowa’s aim is to critique at three levels: the present Tunisian political and social context; the mode in which these issues are articulated, represented, or manipulated by the media; and the quality of Tunisian mainstream media itself.

Although the activist AnarChnowa operates as a single entity, detached from a collective, he is well connected with the music scene, especially with hip-hop and other activist collectives, such as Manich Msameh (We Don’t Forgive). Using the seemingly endless potential of the internet as an archive, AnarChnowa carries out intense searches and selects content from various fields, remixing it using irony and black humour. AnarChnowa anonymously authors these derisory video montages that deal with the most debated or controversial social, political, and cultural issues in the country, and questions of public interest, which often remain deliberately underdiscussed, misrepresented, or even censored by the media. Consequently, AnarChnowa targets both the most popular means of communication in the country and its actors. Using a caustic and satirizing perspective, it stresses the media’s role and limits in providing a mediocre service with opaque information to the local audience. Spread via the internet – in particular on YouTube, Facebook, and Vimeo – AnarChnowa’s caricaturist commentary embeds a meta-reflection on the digital, and the function of the abovementioned platforms as possible alternative tools for information, which are, however, problematic.

AnarChnowa started the channel in February 2016 and it was active and regularly updated until 2017, when it broke off for almost a year, restarting at the end of October 2018. Sources of inspiration for the cyber activist are the American talk programme *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, which started in September 2015; John Stewart’s *The Daily Show*, a satirical news programme on the Comedy Central (the American pay television channel), which ran from 1999 to 2015, as well as Egyptian Bassem Youssef’s *El-Bernameg*, another caustic news programme, which ran from 2011 to 2014.

The principal source of the enormous variety of found and manipulated visual and sound materials from Tunisian, European, and North American culture is the internet.<sup>4</sup> Here, it is important to stress the impressive effort by AnarChnowa of gathering well-known, iconic audio-visual references, which enable the viewer to be taken back to an epoch, an historical moment, or a remediated experience with alienating, uncontextualized materials united by the single aim of orienting or disorienting the viewer. Alongside visual excerpts, music is extremely relevant within the narrative construction proposed by AnarChnowa. Hip-hop musicians, and particularly their

lyrics, play a crucial function as a tool to denounce, critique, and resist – both socially and politically.<sup>5</sup> In each episode multiple topics unfold. Excerpts taken from local materials found online in Arabic are manipulated and edited in dialogue among them, responding one to the other in a way that makes clashes, contradictions, and paradoxes leap out. At the same time, they are brought into a dialogue with clips (often excerpts of iconic movies or TV shows) in English, French, and sometimes also other languages, which contribute to the creation of an absurd and hilarious tale.

The videos are conceived as single independent episodes, they are not linked, and they are not required to be consumed in sequence. All videos follow a simple and recurring structure that can be described in three parts. First is the Introduction: here the juxtaposition of symbols, such as the renowned monogram of the capital letter A for anarchy and the iconic picture of V (the anarchist revolutionary dressed in a Guy Fawkes mask; see Figure 13.1), followed by an introductory sentence, pitched somewhere between the dystopic and grotesque in style, introduce the desecrating nature of the upcoming narration.<sup>6</sup> The main narrative is composed of a remix of numerous excerpts from a huge variety of online sources.<sup>7</sup> The result is a fast, rhythmical, and delirious montage, which is alternately enlightening and nonsensical. Following the video's mental associations, aesthetic recalls, clashes, similarities, visual and sound excerpts, and dialogue is sometimes like following a script, with lines that respond directly to each other and underline the ridiculousness or the paradox of the situation depicted. In other cases, contradictions are embedded in a single excerpt, which when isolated from its original context speaks more forcefully. The final clip is normally constituted by a slide on which a short message is typewritten. This message aims to conclude by means of an open question,<sup>8</sup> an excerpt of a song,<sup>9</sup> one sentence summing up the content of the videos, offering a moral lesson,<sup>10</sup> or an excerpt from a poem.<sup>11</sup>



**FIGURE 13.1** AnarChnowa, logo, YouTube channel AnarChnowa.

Language also plays a crucial role in AnarChnowa. Its target audience is Tunisian users and as the narrative is composed by Tunisian broadcasters, AnarChnowa's video montage is predominantly in Arabic. However, clips in English and French, and occasionally German and Italian, are used and put in heated dialogue with those in Arabic. As a result, we see a rhythmical narrative with an apparent glocal taste. Although not the clear target and purpose of the channel, AnarChnowa's future intention is to translate all episodes into English in order to reach non-Arabic speakers.

Each video is not devoted to one single topic. AnarChnowa touches on themes such as terrorism, the criminalization of the consumption of cannabis, religious extremism, migration, the economic crisis, and revolution – to name just a few. This seemingly nonsensical juxtaposition of anecdotes spanning time and space is, in reality, based on subtle comparisons that aim to enforce meanings and messages, express agreement, disagreement and judgement about questions raised. However, connections among topics or mental associations are not always comprehensible. Through these possible gaps and lost meanings, the author plays heavily with two variables: collective imagination and time. Displaying emblematic visual references as well as widely recognizable characters and images from the Arab and Western world, juxtaposed with a myriad of anonymous, unknown vloggers, or footage, AnarChnowa deals with subjects that are common knowledge but also his own and his user's imagination and memory.

Another key element in AnarChnowa's narrative is time, which jumps constantly between past and present and back and forth through the history of Tunisia before and after the revolution. AnarChnowa gathers black-and-white archival footage alongside the news of the day; uprisings from 1984 (the so-called *Emeute du pain*) together with 2016 civil protests; public speeches by former dictator Habib Bourguiba are juxtaposed with those of his follower, Ben Ali, former President Béji Caïd Essebsi and so on. Within the wider and all-encompassing narrations provided by AnarChnowa, I will look into the space that the footage of the twenty-nine-day phase of the revolution find in here, the ways this footage interacts with present images, and the transformation to which it has been subjected. As media arts theorist Virginia Kuhn says, the 'remix is a form of digital argument that is crucial to the functioning of a vital public sphere' (2012: 1).

## **AnarChnowa's montage recombines vernacular video and shows the contradictions of post-14 January 2011 Tunisia**

Watching the clips available on YouTube, I could find only two amateur videos shot during the twenty-nine-day phase of the revolution that have been edited within the narrative written by AnarChnowa.<sup>12</sup> The first is footage of the murder of Hatem Bettahar (see Plate 46), which occurred on 12 January 2011, in Douz, a town in the south of Tunisia.<sup>13</sup> The episode starts with a display of the frivolity of the media and entertainment environment. At the core of the episode are the shifting alliances of the politicians from Ben Ali's regime, particularly their reshuffle into new parties during the democratic transition and their repositioning toward the revolution. In this intricate landscape, the clip of the murder of Hatem Bettahar brings back a large open wound for Tunisian society, which concerns several martyrs whose exact number is still uncertain and for whom very little has been done to determine fault. Here, there is the closing sentence: 'There are two types of people in revolutions: Those who make the revolution and those who benefit from it,' which express not only the concerns of AnarChnowa but those of a wider segment of society.

The second clip, that of lawyer Abdel Nasser Laouini screaming fearlessly and proudly, 'Ben Ali ran away!' is also iconic (see Plate 47). AnarChnowa's episode unfolds through anecdotes of bribes and police corruption, but the core of the video revolves around the nostalgia for the former regime. Nonetheless, this nostalgia is a different kind of feeling, compared to what had emerged thus far, because it does not concern the revolution. In this specific montage, we see nostalgia expressed by a number of citizens – not only privileged layers of society, but also lower ones – for the Bourguiba as well as the Ben Ali regimes. Taking the case of the much debated return of Bourguiba's statue to Avenue Bourguiba, Tunis – an extremely expensive operation for an economically collapsing country – AnarChnowa revealed the dichotomy of a state where part of its inhabitants regret the dictatorship and its harmful effect on democracy. By using a technique that might be defined as overdubbing, AnarChnowa creates a revealing and paradoxical effect: excerpts from *Al Jazeera* depict a noisy crowd in the main road in Tunis hanging posters of Bourguiba and exalting him, while the voiceover describes a crowd gathered together for receiving favours.<sup>14</sup> Here the clip of the lawyer Abdel Nasser Laouini, in which he yells 'Ben Ali ran away!' is followed by an excerpt from *Tunisvisions*, in which a man with a phone yells in return, 'Bourguiba is back!' This scene repeats four times and is followed by nostalgic citizens who still celebrate Bourguiba.

It's worth stressing that the video mash-ups on AnarChnowa channels are especially interesting, when compared to other samples of found film footage, because the spectators also contribute to the narrative through their online comments.<sup>15</sup> I understand social media platforms as spaces where forms of active participation and civic engagement are possible, and 'users [as] recipients and consumers, producers and participants of culture; they may be considered amateurs and citizens as well as professionals and laborers' (van Dijck 2013: 83; *ibid.* 2009). A user's engagement might manifest itself in different ways (likes/dislikes, shares, comments, views count). I will focus on the online communications, their form and content, expecting that these textual contributions to the visual storytelling proposed by AnarChnowa, mirror different and ambiguous levels of engagement of the viewers-users with the manipulated audio-visual materials and the narration, that emerge from them. Online communication is normally formed of simple, short, messages written in slang. Rarely do such messages represent a full articulation of thoughts, most often they are immediate reactions to posts. The online comments on AnarChnowa episodes respond to these characteristics.

As stated by media scholar Zizi Papacharissi: 'A political opinion posted on a blog or a video parody posted on YouTube present an attempt to populate the public agenda, as a potential, privately articulated challenge, to a public agenda determined by others. In the truest form of democracy, negotiation of that which is considered public and that which is considered private takes place within the public sphere' (2008: 241). However, online communications on AnarChnowa's channel can be partially categorized as 'hasty opinions' (Jeffrey B. Abramson et al. 1988 in Papacharissi 2004: 270), rather than 'rational and focused discourse' (Papacharissi 2004: 270). But in contrast with my expectations, looking closer at the forms and terms of textual reactions, the messages that respond specifically to the footage of revolution within the visual narrative do not emerge in a particular way, neither in terms of content nor in terms of quantity. For example, in relation to the clip of Hatem Bettahar's murder, out of eighty-five comments, only one person, a relative of the victim, writes to ask for the erasure of the clip from the montage as it would be 'too shocking for the wife and the children to watch it'.<sup>16</sup> Concerning the video of lawyer Abdel Nasser Laouini (who yells 'Ben Ali ran away!'), two comments are repeated, which add more emphasis to the textual



sequence created by the montage: 'Ben Ali ran away Bourguiba is back'.<sup>17</sup> It might be worthwhile to consider that satire creates distance from the original work (Willet 2009), and this might explain the few or very partially engaged reactions of the viewers to amateur footage depicting such loaded moments of the uprising. Conversely, according to activist Azyz Amami, the clip of Bettahar is already rooted in the Tunisian imagination and is featured as a negative connotation. Indeed, as I also argued, the clips tend to recall some of the most problematic and painful current issues in Tunisian society. In this case, I refer to the process of transitional justice, which includes a report issued by the Bouderbala Commission.<sup>18</sup> The 'Ben Ali Hram!' clip recalls another crucial point, which is the assumption that, despite the end of dictatorship and the democratic transition, there has been no real political change in post-14 January 2011 Tunisia. However, the widespread sense of nostalgia for Bourguiba and Ben Ali's era that is tangible daily across social layers and class is a notable signal of a change in society. This feeling for the previous political and social status quo is neither new nor specific to Tunisia. For instance, similar nostalgia has concerned former socialist countries post-1989 once the fallen system was no longer regulating labour and the economy.

## The genre of the mash-up as a tool for expanding history

By attentively selecting public declarations, comic sketches, dramatic footage, archival excerpts, or funny scenes that pass unnoticed in the flow of information and images, AnarChnowa reveals and exposes all the contradictions, lies, and ambiguities circulating in the Tunisian public sphere in the public debates, political speeches, information, or entertainment.<sup>19</sup> The internet is AnarChnowa's archive, his experience offline and online are his guidelines. To analyse the aesthetics and the militancy of AnarChnowa's video production, I will focus on the mash-up as a particular form of montage. The mash-up is defined as a technique that consists of the recombination of pre-existing heterogeneous audio-visual material as a unique and brand-new composition with specific expressive connotations. Film theorist Eli Horwatt observes specifically the articulation of this technique in art: 'Mash-ups are an amalgamation of multiple source materials which are montaged together to produce exquisite corpses from film fragments. The term was first used in conjunction with art to refer to the radical combinations of songs made by Jamaican club DJs' (2009: 84). Although the mash-up as a genre has widely proliferated on YouTube as a pop, low-culture product or emblem of do-it-yourself culture, 'the politically oriented mash-up video subgenre has its roots in the rich and diverse history of left-leaning, often deeply antiauthoritarian, creative traditions' (ibid.: 80). This technique has been employed since the 1920s – for instance, by Soviet filmmaker Esfir Shub, who started cutting American Hollywood films in order to provide critical commentary, and has since evolved exponentially within the art domain (McIntosh 2012: 1). We can also find all these characteristics in AnarChnowa's video production, whose task is like that of the DJ. The DJ conceives 'linkages through which the works flow into each other, representing at once a product, a tool, and a medium', states curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud (2002: 40). In AnarChnowa, the footage is selected and used for what it is in the archive of the internet, in other words, as decontextualized fragments in a flow, potentially transmissible from one story to another, and copied endlessly, whose *citoyennité* remains in the background.

Similar to the ways in which the algorithm interprets images as data, citizens' clips are turned into digital objects among many other commercial, entertaining, institutional, and grassroots

digital objects. AnarChnowa reuses them alongside found footage of films, news, and entertainment broadcasts, as images within a flow, and as democratically accessible, available, and as searchable as the objects in the vast digital archive of the internet. According to film theorist William C. Wees (1993) and his perspective on montage of found footage in film, both appropriation and collage use montage to dislodge images from their original context and emphasize their 'images-ness', but only collage actively promotes an analytical and critical attitude towards those images and their use. Cinema historian Christa Blümlinger (2013) quotes the Mu Group, which remarks that a characteristic of collage is that it doesn't remove the alterity of the elements gathered together in a temporary composition. Rather, the collage promises to be one of the most effective strategies for putting into discussion the illusions of representation.

The appropriation enacted by AnarChnowa extends the spectrum of truth, displaying other possible articulations of its unfolding narratives. Juxtaposing the multiplicity of contradictory discourses – the opportunism of politicians and public figures who constantly change positions and opinions in order to achieve their personal advantages; fake or manipulated information that has been circulating for years by the indiscriminate voices of politicians, citizens, journalists, and entertainers around, against, and in favour of revolution – AnarChnowa's montage reveals with great accuracy the confusion that results from the fragmentation of goals, interests, and purposes affecting Tunisian society today. This statement seems to define the game of revelations enacted by AnarChnowa, of which also the users who comment upon the videos become aware. By appropriating and manipulating them, he creates a fiction, which viewers perceive as the disclosure of the reality, or at least a plausible version of it. Yet, more than this, he shows the failure of having a single, commonly shared narrative that is able to provide an overall historical reconstruction and interpretation of the revolution and history. However, whether in the future a shared chronicle of events would ever exist remains still an open question. AnarChnowa's decontextualization and assemblage of audio-visual fragments, as single excerpts within the new narrative, challenges the ongoing relevance of the term 'decontextualization' within the realm of the internet and social networks. In fact, in this domain, only titles, short descriptions, and users' online communications can help in framing pictures or clips, which already visually appear as isolated fragments, one next to the other according to the recommended system of ranking. However, Amami's remark concerning the clip of the murder of Bettahar makes clear that this specific footage, is not only so deeply rooted as to be now invisible but has already been so thoroughly decontextualized by politics and media over the intervening years, that it has assumed different meanings in the context of the ongoing, present circumstances.

## **Fiction carries truth against amnesia**

Reflecting upon the connection between authorship, which in participatory culture includes spectatorship, and the act of sharing, scholar Gabriel Menotti claims that 'the authorship of an internet video becomes diluted through the process of distribution. The more it spreads, creating precedents for remixes, mash-ups, and alternative versions, the more the video becomes a collective, almost folkloric manifestation' (2011: 75). These considerations support my analysis of the montage footage produced by AnarChnowa and resulting comments made by online

spectators, in terms of an articulated political remix made by the cyber-activist within the process of the construction of fiction. Gilles Deleuze (1983) defines montage as the composition and the assemblage (or what he calls *agencement*) of movement images, which constitutes an indirect image of time.<sup>20</sup> These characteristics of montage are heightened and stretched in AnarChnowa's editing. If, as claimed by Jean-Luc Godard (1998), montage allows one to see, AnarChnowa selects found footage from the internet, five years on, to reveal the bipolarization of his country and the foggy reality as it appears through the lens of the media. The Tunisian cyber-activist also targets current affairs, particularly the weaknesses in his country. Similarly, drawings by Z – the most prominent Tunisian caricaturist and author of the blog *DEBATunisie* – regularly intervenes 'on the *res publica*, representing in a critical and humorous way the national current affairs' (Lecomte 2009: 14). However, while Z claims that his work 'represents what is not seen, making use of imagination, and tries to draw what happens behind the curtains of power' (Interview, 26 March 2019, Tunis),<sup>21</sup> AnarChnowa stresses, instead, what is visible and flowing at great speed under the eyes of everyone, which is however, rendered invisible, because of its hyper exposure.

The non-linear narrative written by AnarChnowa has the peculiar characteristic of spanning decades of visual media and sound extracts. This implicitly produces a sense of historical continuity and consistency. At the same time, it contributes to re-signifying the present by the means of reconstructing memories, contextualizing the events of 2010 to 2011 with past uprisings, the period of the dictatorship, and with events post-14 January 2011. According to art historian Georges Didi-Huberman (2008), the multiplication and the conjunction of images, however lacunary and relative they may be, constitute many ways of showing, in spite of all, what cannot be seen. If the decontextualization of an audio-visual object by the cut and edit, can be interpreted as a way of multiplying images and meanings, as Didi-Huberman's observation seems to imply, then the natural loss of connection of the excerpts from their frame of reference as clips in their entirety turns into an extension of possibilities instead of loose meanings. In this sense, editing acts as an agent of transformation, which makes fiction precisely the tool of revelation and conveys the increasing awareness of the social and political context Tunisians have been living in.

The term fiction includes and recalls a variety of meanings, but the definition given by Marc Augé seems most interesting here. As an anthropologist, he argues that 'fiction occurs when there is a selection, the selection is already the start of fiction. There are beginnings of fiction when I propose modes of interpretations' (Augé, Didi-Huberman and Eco 2011: 79).<sup>22</sup> Therefore, giving a specific value at the initial moment of choice, from Augé's perspective, attributes a crucial value to the research phase, which in the case of AnarChnowa occurs among found footage and visual traces from personal or cultural memories. It is precisely within this moment of research that the construction of new perspectives and scenarios take place. In this sense, according to Papacharissi, the reactions of users can be interpreted as 'reflective of the high spreadability and virality of the stream. The fairly high volume of mentions could indicate a level of conversationality, indicating that the people participating in the stream were collaboratively co-creating a story about the event' (2015: 6). By appropriating and manipulating footage, AnarChnowa draws a fiction, which the viewers perceive as the disclosure of the reality, or at least a plausible version of it. The interlocutor of AnarChnowa's channel is therefore addressed and invited to enter the conversation by filling gaps in meaning. Yet, the montage leaves little space for imagination. Viewers feel, instead, led by AnarChnowa across a fictional path to the disclosure of the truth.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

My analysis of the AnarChnowa YouTube channel and its video contents verifies, in part, some aspects of my hypotheses and provides a specific perspective on video activism. Concerning my expectation about the evolution of YouTube in Tunisia as a means more and more used by local citizens for sharing dissent, AnarChnowa is a very iconic example that demonstrates the potential development of YouTube post-14 January 2011, as a platform that can be increasingly employed by Tunisian users as an activist tool – as was the case during the twenty-nine-day phase of the revolution, though in a limited manner. Indeed, the channel is an example of a social media trend in the aftermath of Tunisia's liberalization of entertainment channels that combined satire, video activism, and political critique. It also stresses the emancipatory possibilities offered by YouTube, but also Facebook and Vimeo, as spaces where critics of the mediocrity of mainstream media can be raised. However, the existence of these video mash-ups are emblematic examples of a product that is self-reflective. The video episodes spread in the same domain that originated it. Therefore, while they use social media in a militant way, they are subject to the same dynamics that can bring on an invisibility or obliteration of the contents.

This reflection leads to another of my initial questions about to what extent the footage of the revolution has been reused years later in other narratives as a signal of their persistence in the collective memory. I argue that it is no longer the point of discussion. The digital items deal directly and indirectly with preservation through their recirculation online. In fact, the video mash-ups analysed here, show that through selecting, filtering, appropriating, and sharing, the creators of these audio-visual materials, as vernacular spectators, enact the circulating of materials in the digital archive. They put these items in connection with those offline, which might never have circulated; they perform these fragments, according to their experience as observers and citizens, and contribute to catalysing antagonisms and opposition in narratives, that although personal, seem currently, to mirror the widest visible landscape of the country. In this sense, AnarChnowa as vernacular spectator enacts social media as a digital archive in its most expanded conception.

In regards to the new narratives that the video episodes of the channel write, through the montage, AnarChnowa's commentary, on the one hand, highlights the mediocrity of the media that deliberately presents any socially and politically relevant issue in such an opaque way that it is deprived of any criticality. But on the other hand, it emphasizes the plural, antagonistic, conflicting liberation of voices, that have resulted since the end of the dictatorial regime, but also a manipulated, and deceptive information stream that inevitably persists in a corrupt system.

Also, concerning my question about the engagement of the online users in the narrations proposed by AnarChnowa, it emerges that the users of the channel are engaged through embodying the mediated narrative and the counter-truth that it reveals, rather than by developing further considerations, as a means for expressing consensus. In this sense, their participation is evident but the forms in which it becomes concrete seem ungraspable. The space the footage of the revolution has found online post-14 January 2011, has been extremely limited. However, instead of remaining invisible on YouTube rankings, AnarChnowa rescues it from the invisibility of the online sphere. As such, this footage enters into the flow of history – or at least, the history as written by AnarChnowa. More importantly, AnarChnowa's narrative-commentary and the viewers' textual or embodied expressions of support provide a space for displaying the evolution of

vernacular footage as *symbole en mouvement*,<sup>24</sup> its fragile additional meanings *in fieri* as well as its conflicting relationships with the present and the past.

## Notes

- 1 From an email exchange with Robert W. Gehl, 4–21 September 2017. Gehl initially uses the term ‘archive of affect’, but he later mentions that with the term ‘archive of affect’, what he means is ‘archives of emotional objects’, as what has been saved on Facebook or YouTube are statements and media objects tied to emotional states and capacities.
- 2 See, for example, VIPA, Tiga Black’Na, Pazaman, Massi, who co-founded and revolve around the collective DEBO Tunis, as well as A. L. A, El Castro and others, members of the collective Zomra.
- 3 According to political analyst, and writer Hosni Mouheli, what one can observe online currently mirrors the reality offline. Obviously, the liberalization of the use of social networks enabled users to film everything, any episode of corruption or injustice, and I interpret this partly as the heritage of the vernacular videos.
- 4 Sources include DailyMotion, YouTube channels, Facebook, Vimeo, websites, mainstream commercial television or radio channels. Among the formal media used, specifically in Tunisia, are: Elhiwar Ettounsi, Nessma, Al Jazeera, Tunisia 1, Tunisia 2, Tunisia 7, Alwatanya 1; all radio channels that also have a live stream via their website, such as: Mosaïque.fm, Shems.fm, Jawara.fm and so on. Among the international media sources are: Nilesat (communication satellite), Le Petit Journal, France 24, NBC News. Among the movies used – those I could recognize – are: *Ghost Busters*, *Kill Bill: Volume 2*, *Taxi Driver* and so on.
- 5 Among these music celebrities are A.L.A, EL Castro, Hamzaoui Med Amine and Kafon. However, other musicians belonging to the mainstream scene, such as Moez Toumi and others, are also frequent characters.
- 6 The videos start with the channel’s logo, which is followed by a Siberian husky lying on a white background. ‘Play’ is written on the black screen, anticipating the typing of a text in white, while we hear the typical sound of characters being typed by an analogue typewriter. The text reports: ‘These sections are the only remaining legacy of the Tunisian Civilization after its extinction in 2088. Scientists say that what you are going to watch now may affect negatively on your mental perception. Till now, the reasons behind the suicide of this nation are still unfathomable.’
- 7 Among the materials are: movies, cartoons, news broadcasts, children broadcasts, TV shows, music clips, amateur videos, vlogs and memes created by AnarChnowa, which have all been edited together for aesthetic effect using glitches, fades, juxtapositions of different visual and sound extracts and so on.
- 8 For example, ‘Where is this leading?’
- 9 For example, ‘Houmani,’ by Hamzaoui Med Amine and Kafon (AnarChnowa 2016b). As reported by a user on the website quora.com: ‘The word has no meaning in Tunisian dialect but was invented by these artists and it means “The Hooder”: anyone who passes most of his time in the hood doing nothing.’
- 10 For example, ‘Teach your kids other than what you have learned and prepare them for a time that is different from yours’ (AnarChnowa 2016c).
- 11 See the lines written by Tunisian author Sghaier Ouled Hmed.
- 12 I have limited my observation to videos from Season 1 and 2, the series ‘Hors-série’ and ‘Collaboration’, totalling twenty-four videos, alongside an overview of the metadata (number of views, likes and dislikes). I did not include those censored by the platform for copyright reasons and I have excluded the episodes uploaded or visible only on Facebook.



- 13 Hatem Bettahar was a thirty-eight-year-old Tunisian researcher and professor, working at the University of Technology of Compiègne, France (AnarChnowa 2016d).
- 14 In his text titled 'A Taxonomy of Digital Video Remixing', Eli Horwatt (2009: 84) states that, 'overdubbing is a practice which involves dropping the soundtrack of a film and creating new dialogue or using dialogue from another source'; quoting from the video voice over, 'These people came from long distances to this place which has been designated for them to receive some of the allocations that will be distributed on them from dough material (meaning favouritism/nepotism) and the young volunteers – each one as they can – distribute this matter to the people according to the family members of each person and their needs and requirements of this article' (AnarChnowa 2016e: 04:49).
- 15 The users seem to respond to the micro-narrative created by AnarChnowa's montage by recalling personal memories or references that the clip might raise and do not distance themselves from it. However, I have to state that these more articulate communications are rare in comparison with the larger amount of one-word comments, such as 'top', 'bravo', 'artist', which are seemingly irrelevant, use of dirty language (including swear words), emojis, monograms, for example, 'hhhh' or imitating sounds/expression typical of the spoken language and blessings, or 'I bless your mother/parents,' which is also typical of spoken interactions. Indeed, looking at the communication's dynamics, comments are not always consistent with the topics raised by AnarChnowa, even if they concern the most problematic and central issues in current Tunisian society. And when they are, as, for instance, in reaction to politician Chokri Belaïd's public speeches and the topics of the Reconciliation Act, Isis and nepotism/corruption at the levels of politics, security and economics, only a few of them out of many others articulate an opinion in a direct connection.
- 16 See AnarChnowa's (2016d) video, and the comments by the person with the pseudonym 'samido': 'Bonjour. J'apprécie votre travail mais s'il vous plait enlevez la dernière scène de l'assassinat de Hatem Bettahar. Je suis un parent lointain et ça serait trop choquant pour sa femme ou ses enfants de voir ça.'
- 17 Here, Abdel Nasser Laouini's footage is interpreted in dialogue with the crowd praising Bourguiba, and not as a separate, self-determined clip, which would recall an iconic moment in recent Tunisian history.
- 18 The Bouderbala Commission (derived from the name of its President, Taoufik Bouderbala) is a fact-finding commission on abuses committed from 17 December 2010 until the end of its mandate on 23 October 2011, the date of the elections of the National Constituent Assembly. In 2018, the commission 'drew up a list of 338 cases of deaths, out of them 86 were prisoners, 14 law enforcers and 5 from the army. The number of injured increases to 2,147, out of them 62 were prisoners and 28 law enforcers.' In April 2018, the complete list of killed and injured victims was issued by the commission to former President Béji Caïd Essebsi, who apparently never publicly released it. See Samoud (2018).
- 19 Recurring characters from the Tunisian political, entertainment scene featured include: Habib Bourguiba, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali Tunisia's former president, who died in September 2019), Béji Caïd Essebsi (Tunisia's first freely elected president who passed away in July 2019), Rached Gannouchi (co-founder of the Ennahda Party and serving as its 'intellectual leader'), Chokri Belaïd (lawyer and politician who was an opposition leader with the left-secular Democratic Patriots' Movement, he was assassinated in February 2013), Azyz Amami (blogger, activist, his figure was crucial for the civil mobilization during the revolution and post-14 January 2011) and Jalel Brick (Tunisian cyber-activist, blogger, politician living in Paris), to name a few.
- 20 In his book, *Cinéma 1. L'Image-mouvement*, Deleuze (1983: 46–7) states that montage is: 'l'opération qui porte sur les images-mouvement pour en dégager le tout, l'idée, c'est-à-dire l'image du temps, [ . . . ] une alternance rythmique, [ . . . ] le montage, c'est la composition, l'agencement des images-mouvement comme constituant une image indirecte du temps'.

**21** Z, interview, 26 March 2019, Tunis. My translation from the French.

**22** My translation from the French.

**23** For example, Rtiba salem:

Why don't we see such stories in our media and they tell you that there is no more favoritism and we want to build a country on the basis of freedom my diiiiick you are making us suffocate in this country there is nothing to like either you clap or you stay as you are and they wonder why our kids don't like anything how I hate you die extinct.

ANARCHNOWA 2016c

By 'clap', he probably means favouritism, he means agree and turn the eye on the wrongdoings for your own interest and clap for those who have the power (ibid.).

**24** *symbole en mouvement* – as defined by Augé, Didi-Huberman and Eco (2011: 91), inspired by Aby Warburg's *migration des symboles*: 'Symbol in movement is a symbol which is affected by a modification, even a crisis in the relationship with what it symbolizes.'

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# 14

## Sociality, appearance and surveillance in digital political activism

*Stefka Hristova*

**B**etween 25 June and 30 June 2015, 26 million people applied a rainbow filter to their Facebook profile page in order to show their support of the US Supreme Court's decision to legalize gay marriage. This staggering number exceeded the 6 million Facebook users who openly identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community. This was not the first time Facebook had been used as a platform for political action on behalf of this community. In March 2015, 3 million users changed their profile picture to the Human Rights Campaign's red equal sign logo. And, on 31 October 2016, more than 1 million people checked-in into the Facebook location for the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in solidarity with the on-the-ground protest against a proposed oil pipeline project and in a conscious effort to confuse authorities about who was present at the site. In all of these instances, Facebook users chose to show temporary solidarity with larger political movements by visibly adopting a similar profile or similar location. While these actions have been dismissed as inconsequential, I argue that they created Arendtian 'spaces of appearances' in which individuals came together under the banner of 'sociality' and demonstrated that large-scale visibility projects do have the power to both exhibit political capital and curtail surveillance.

In this research project, in thinking through the Facebook events as instances of digital political activism, I propose an analysis of the role that sociality, manifested in spaces of appearances, plays in political struggle. I am evoking here Hannah Arendt's notion of a 'space of appearance' which she theorizes as a public political space 'where freedom can unfold its charms and become a visible, tangible reality' (1965: 33). In a 'space of appearance' political discourse is visualized through both discourse and action. Sociality constructs a visual field that engulfs and obscures traditional social structures. It offers a more elastic, broad umbrella for expressing solidarity and allows for the visualization of larger political capital. This visualization of a large number of sympathizers has become a crucial component of digital activism in an age when big data has become the leading qualifier for cultural significance. In other words, sociality has gained increasing importance because we live in a data-driven society. The loose structure of social media and its evocation of 'connective' rather than 'collective action,' shore up political capital in the context of the social in so far as it makes visible a large public response while at the same time obscures the



edges and details between belonging and sympathizing, between those within and those around a collective. Sociality, thus, also offers an important alternative to the social and, as such, masks the spaces of appearances and complicates the possibility of direct surveillance through the introduction of high volume and blurred social boundaries. In other words, it is precisely because spaces of appearances are structured by sociality that they become not readily legible as spaces of surveillance.

## The banner

The Rainbow flag was conceptualized and crafted by Gilbert Baker on 25 June 1978, in downtown San Francisco for the Gay Freedom Day Parade. It was to represent ‘a global struggle and a global human rights issue’ (Antonelli and Fisher 2015). Its eight vibrant colours running horizontally constitute a rainbow. Weeks before the legalization of same-sex marriage by the US Supreme Court in 2015, the Rainbow flag was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) as part of its permanent collection (ibid.). In an interview with MOMA’s curator Paula Antonelli, Baker asserts that ‘the rainbow is so perfect because it really fits our diversity in terms of race, gender, ages, all of those things’ (ibid.).

Gilbert’s recollection of making the flag offers an important insight into the materiality, physicality, effort, innovation and resolve that went behind the crafting of the rainbow:

I decided the flag needed a birthplace so I didn’t make it at home – I made it at the Gay Community Center at 330 Grove [Street] in San Francisco. We took over the top-floor attic gallery and we had huge trashcans full of water and mixed natural dye with salt and used thousands of yards of cotton – I was just a mess [from the dye], but [it was] beautiful fabric, organically made. I wanted to make it at the center, with my friends – it needed to have a real connection to nature and community.

ANTONELLI AND FISHER 2015

His narration pulls together the materiality of the cotton, the dye, the trash can and the streets of San Francisco. Gilbert and friends came together to create an everlasting banner of recognition and inclusion while simultaneously fearing the prosecution by the police for this highly visible dissent. In thinking about this narrative, I want to engage with the question of how does the making and display of a physical rainbow flag during an on-the-ground movement relate to virtual draping of the flag over one’s Facebook profile picture in the aftermath of success? I begin with a discussion of the power of the Rainbow flag to this day to carve a space for building connections, for making friends and for establishing communities that value difference.

On 26 June 2015, celebratory rainbows were to be found everywhere. Forty-six years after the beginning of the gay rights movement and thirty-seven years and a day after the emergence of the rainbow flag, the United States Supreme Court ‘ruled that same-sex couples can marry nationwide, establishing a new civil right and handing gay rights advocates a historic victory’; the White House was lit up in rainbow colours (de Vogue and Diamond 2015). The celebration took a physical expression as ‘[h]undreds of same-sex marriage supporters flooded the plaza and sidewalk in front

of the Court to celebrate the ruling, proudly waving rainbow flags and banners with the Human Rights Campaign's equal sign, which have come to represent the gay rights movement' (ibid.). This event, as Justice Scalia noted, was a moment of celebration by everyone who supported same-sex marriage: 'If you are among the many Americans – of whatever sexual orientation – who favour expanding same-sex marriage, by all means, celebrate today's decision. Celebrate the achievement of a desired goal' (ibid.). It was a moment in which members of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as allies to the same-sex marriage cause, celebrated an important political and legal victory. While it was a moment of appearance, this celebration was also seen as a moment of surveillance in the face of 'outing' those who have not openly expressed either belonging or sympathy to the cause. The same-sex marriage legalization has been an important milestone on the rocky path to equality in the United States, where plenty of cultural, political and social practices still heavily discriminate against members of the LGBTQ+ community.

## Facebook's dual role

Facebook's primary business of user data collection for government and commercial purposes have made its essentializing characterizations of LGBTQ+ community members problematic. According to a recent article on Facebook and surveillance published on *Forbes.com*:

While Facebook agreed to remove its treason category due to its illegality in all countries (left unspoken was its limited marketing use which means it likely was generating little revenue), a company spokesperson stated that the company would not be removing other categories that could place individuals at grave risk of arrest or death. Noting that homosexuality categories can be used by LGBTQ advocacy groups to reach people interested in those topics, the company said that they would not be restricting their use of homosexuality categories or any of its other sensitive topics categories even in countries where they are illegal.

LEETARU 2018

Facebook's profiling system works based on the aggregation of data. The Facebook newsroom reports 1.4 billion users neatly divided into social categories such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, geographical location, etc. Social media feeds off the size of its network. It is through the mass accumulation of nodes that it gains its social capital. Digital activism, too, has become significant through the numbers game. The space of appearance is a space of numeric significance. The adoption of the Rainbow flag filter was seen as an important politically symbolic move not only because users were able to see each other's profiles turn rainbow, but also because the Facebook system saw and showed that the users were part of a 26-million-person cluster. The rainbow became visible because it was numerically significant. Mobilization, as Stefania Milan has aptly argued, now lies not in the politics of identity, but rather in the politics of visibility (2015: 53). Further, visibility is measured through the aggregation of data. It is quantified. Data here was harnessed in the arena of the political in a way that did not subvert the corporate politics of Facebook but diverged from the platform's mission of articulating users into social categories that are then sold as data to government and corporate clients.

## The filter

Between 26 June and 30 June 2015, 26 million people applied temporarily a rainbow filter to their Facebook profile picture in order to show their support of the Supreme Court's decision to legalize same-sex marriage (Kelley 2015). The Facebook rainbow filter visually overlaid one's profile picture with a semi-transparent version of the LGBTQ+ flag. One's face was lined top to bottom with red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple stripes. The Facebook infrastructure has made the profile picture of each user central to its manifestation. Each comment posted on the so-called user 'News Feed' displays the profile picture and message of a 'friend.' Each post on the newsfeed, regardless of whether it contains original or shared content, is accompanied by a small profile picture. The profile picture is thus not only visible as the main profile image on the user's timeline but also as a trace of the user's activity on other users' newsfeeds. The profile picture thus becomes the most recognizable trait of a user. The change of the profile to contain a Rainbow filter weaved a rainbow in which a user expressed sympathy with others who have done the same and whose rainbow profiles were appearing in their news feed.

The filter was created during a weekend-long Hackathon at Facebook by two interns, Austin and Scott. This time, Menlo Park, the heart of Silicon Valley, rather than the Gay Community Center of San Francisco became the site of remaking. The symbol of gay rights was to be transformed into a symbol of solidarity and support of gay rights and adapted to a broad global social media platform. The original intention behind the filter was 'to give people a quick way to join us in celebrating Pride' (Schultz 2015). According to Alex Schultz, one of Facebook's Vice Presidents, it was 'an awesome coincidence' that the filter was ready the same day that the US Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage.

The Rainbow filter team yielded digital code to render the flag instantly accessible to the Facebook community and the wave of rainbow extended on social media. The team commented:

When we set out, we wanted to make it easy for people to show their support. The interface needed to be simple and the engagement experience instantaneous. The product consists of a single view depicting a preview of the rainbow profile picture, a text field for a caption and a button to update the photo. This view loads quickly by using CSS layering and deferring the image processing until after the person has decided to use the new photo. The overall network footprint of delivering a preview with markup code is nominal, especially in comparison with downloading an image not distributed across our CDN. By removing all nonessential server processing and stripping away UI chrome, we made it fast and easy for people to update their profile pictures.

AZIZ, McMILLIEN and LIU 2015

The staggering number of 26 million users with rainbow profiles exceeded the 6 million Facebook users who openly identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community (Kelley 2015). This was also not the first time Facebook had been used as a platform for political action on behalf of this community. In March 2015, 3 million users changed their profile picture to the Human Rights Campaign's red equal sign logo (Matias 2015). The emphasis here was on the power of a collective display of the colour red throughout the social network in order to demonstrate the presence of

widespread support for same-sex marriage prior to its legalization. During this earlier iteration of the Facebook flag meme, one's face was completely replaced with the red logo. Rather than replacing one's identity with a flag, the rainbow filter allowed individuals to express their allegiance by literally 'wearing' the colours of the movement while at the same time preserving their own individual identity.

## Digital activism

The Facebook Rainbow filter event has been discussed as an instance of ineffective online activism. Nathan Matias provided an alternative reading of this event in an article for *The Atlantic*, 'while some might argue a rainbow-colored profile is a lazy way of showing support, it could be an act of great courage for the person changing their profile' (Matias 2015). But in harnessing the social media website as a platform for political expression, users subverted the corporate intentions of the platform. As Oliver Leistert has argued:

[e]ssentially, the differences in goals that corporate social media platforms aim at and those of activists like the Occupy LA movement could not be more drastic: whereas Facebook's and Twitter's primary interest is an increase in revenue via targeted advertisements, selling user data and social relations to the highest bidder, emancipatory social movements challenge the commodification of sociality and, in general, commercialization of everyday life.

LEISTERT 2015: 37

The dual function of the platform as a commercial advertising machine on one hand and as a platform for social activism in reconfiguring the purpose of data on the other is evident in the case of the Rainbow filter as well. The check-in feature became an example in which Facebook's geolocation capability was actively being harnessed by police authority as a space of surveillance and as well as by sympathizers of the cause, in order to create a space of appearance in which it was no longer easy to distinguish and thus marginalize those who were physically present at Standing Rock based on their Facebook feeds. Sociality here redefined check-in as a place of solidarity.

Digital political activism in these Facebook cases emerged neither as a replacement of offline activism nor as a counter-commercial alternative site of discourse but, rather, in conjuncture with – and even within – the logic of the algorithmic structure of social media. In the case of the Rainbow filter, the code emerged out of the Facebook corporation itself and was widely adapted partly because, in this instance, Facebook was indeed taking a political stand as a company. The filter created a space of appearance in which surveillance of the LGBTQ+ community became obscured through the sociality logic of the connective network.

## Sociality

Sociality here is a productive term in rethinking political movements in the age of social media. Fleshed out in the field of social anthropology, the term refers to 'a dynamic relational matrix

within which subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive, and continually plastic and malleable' (Long and Moore 2012: 4). Sociality is understood as a tendency to associate with others via solidarity – 'we stand with' rather than belonging – 'we are members of'. It stands in tension with the social and configures the potential for relationships differently, based on opportunistic, temporary, tactical, open, larger, fluid, less exclusionary, more fragile alliances. Whereas the social is associated with formal institutions as well as durable membership to social groups, sociality augments the social and provides temporary elasticity of the political.

Lina Dencik and Oliver Leistert have argued that while sociality augments the social, the technological changes the very nature of sociality. With regards to social media, they argue that the term itself 'requires caution if not even rejection since it euphemistically refers to the services of large companies that shape and ultimately redefine – in the interest of their shareholders – the very nature of sociality' (2015: 2). While I agree with the authors that technology does change the nature of sociality, I argue that we should not adopt a position of technological determinism. Facebook, in this instance, supported same-sex marriage and indeed created the technology of the Rainbow filter. It builds upon political precedent and allowed for a connected expression of political support. Sociality here is neither apolitical nor permanent. Sociality in the digital social network functions on the premise of spontaneity and sympathy. Nicolas Long has eloquently articulated the important traits of sociality in his discussion of the virtual experience of the game *Ultima Online* where the players engage in 'a matrix of fleeting, sympathetic, and seemingly spontaneous relations' (Long 2012: 113). These ideas carry over to the Facebook environment as well. Spontaneity, sympathy and individualism mark sociality in the context of the virtual. The sociality that this Rainbow filter visualized is one that Nicolas Long has termed as 'sympathetic individualism.' As Long argues, sympathy in sociality provides 'a way of conducting relations – in which individual(ist)s allow other individuals to live however they might wish to, and take pleasure in each other's successes' (ibid.: 110).

Sociality endows political movements both in their digital and analogue form of expression with a demonstration/appearance of social capital. An alliance based on sociality rather than social belonging changes the way we are to understand what Bourdieu calls 'social capital' as well as the ways in which social capital built on sociality can be harnessed in politics. Bourdieu theorizes social capital as 'the social obligations ('connections')' (1986: 243). These social obligations are articulated 'through a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively-owned capital' (ibid.: 248–9). Thus, Bourdieu argues that 'the volume of social capital possessed by a given agent [firstly] depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize' (ibid.: 249). For Bourdieu, then, social capital is based on one's belonging to stable and durable collectivities. Social capital is articulated through social networks. Here, I would like to extend the idea of social capital and argue that in the context of social media, it becomes articulated through the dynamic relationships of sociality. Both sociality and social capital share their dependency on solidarity. Solidarity however is linked to membership in a group. As articulated by Long, sociality depends on solidarity and sympathy. Social capital based on sociality does not require membership. In the cases of the Rainbow filter as well as Standing Rock check-in, capital is derived on the level of displaying or visualizing in colour or via space affiliation of one's sympathy in a dynamic network of relations. The Facebook rainbow filter and the geolocation check-in feature both visualized not only the ways in which sociality can



function as social capital for each 'sympathetic individual' but also how social capital resting upon sociality can potentially support present and future social and political movements.

Much has been written on the importance of social capital – understood as social belonging, to political and civil movements where social capital is seen as a determinant of social action. A contemporary example of this research trajectory is Kent Portney and Jeffrey Berry's study of the role of neighbourhood associations as a resource for social capital in efforts of civic engagement. The authors lament the current political context as one that has long shifted from the town square to a life of 'splendid isolation, relating to friends but paying little attention to our community' (Portney and Berry 2001: 70). In this distributed environment, they argue for a return engagement with the neighbourhood since it functions as a 'wellspring' for social capital (ibid.: 71). The idea of social capital as an outcome of a social movement has also been extensively addressed. Mario Diani, however, argues that social movements 'do not merely rely on existing social capital: they also reproduce it, and sometimes create new forms of it' (Diani 2001: 209). Thus, the relationship between social capital and political movements is one of circular dependency. Social capital based on sociality, on a social network loosely structured by social media, is made active when made visible. It is in the visual expression of its large accumulation that social capital proves powerful in a society that increasingly privileges big data as its metric of success.

## Colour

Colour has historically been a central element of the construction and the visual expression of both the social and the political. Colour has been used to mark both those seen as deviant and asked to stand as a mark of surveillance – here the most obvious example being the Jewish Yellow Star during the Nazi Regime. It has been used extensively to distinguish between social groups along the lines of nation, class, race, gender and sexuality. The most obvious places where this function of perceived unification can be observed are national, state and city flags. As Manlio Brusatin eloquently writes, 'Tricolor flags were raised as demonstrations of unity and nationalist ideas achieved, consecrated once again to a resurgence of popular patriotism. In the same manner, the colored uniforms of the armed forces were able to dress entire populations who now, as individuals and citizens, could possess, along with colored clothing, a homeland and a destiny' (Brusatin 1991: 127). Colour in flags has also become a subversive tactic in expressing one's position as equally legitimate. The Human Rights Campaign flag, the Rainbow flag and the Transgender flag are only a few instances in which a flag becomes both a rallying banner but also a technology for visualizing popularity. Colour becomes the visible expression of political capital. Both the form of the flag as well as the presence of unified colour have been foundational for establishing the appearance of unity and the surveillance of those on the margins. On a more profound level, colour is an integral part of the formation of community. As Jennifer Slack and I have argued:

Colour constitutes community, unity, and difference both in terms of relations in-colour as well as in—specific—colours. Both colour and colours fold onto and interpenetrate the structures of political, civil, and cultural communities to which one belongs or from which one is excluded. Whether living in community or outside community, one lives those relations, literally, in-colour. Colour and colours fold back on one another in relations of differentiation, hierarchy, inclusion,

and exclusion that both enable and curtail possibility in both mundane and dramatic ways. Colour is as much pleasure as pain, as much life as death, as much inclusion as exclusion.

2016: 10

## Sociality in-colour

We are familiar with circumstances in which the social is marked by colour, one example being traditional warfare, as well as instances in which sociality becomes expressed through colour as in sports fandom. We have seen the dawning of the sports team colours at key moments of battle not only by members of the official fan club of the team but also by casual supporters. One's possibly temporary and non-committal allegiance gains power through its visual expression. The proliferation of colour speaks to the accumulation of social capital and the articulation of a substantive, yet transient, collective. The intentional act of being 'in-colour' visualizes a solidarity made of fleeting, sympathetic and spontaneous relations. This act stands as a celebration and an affirmation of a struggle, a widescale congratulation from the audience in the arena in-colour. This act of being purposefully in-colour visualizes one's orientation towards sympathetic individualism.

In the case of the Facebook Rainbow filter, even, if in this instance, colour marked capital made visible only in the aftermath of a political victory, it articulated a sociality as visual affective relations and illuminated the accumulation of social capital in this political struggle. Examining sociality in-colour is important for understanding not only the world of sports but also, more importantly, the contemporary political process. In visualizing sociality, it provides important evidence and contributes to the social capital of the political struggle. Sociality in-colour holds the potential of energizing the spontaneous simultaneously, of acting as glue in creating the political collective rooted in sympathy, as fostering not only fleeting relations but also sustained and substantive political change. To speak of the Facebook Rainbow filter is to speak of an act of intentionally visualized sociality. And, more specifically, of sociality expressed in-colour. It matters because it offered a visual display of the amassed social capital of the LGBTQ+ political movement.

Political alliances that take intersectionality as a foundational premise can increase their potency by activating a network-based not exclusively on social belonging, but rather one that extends to include those who are sympathetic outsiders. The political struggle that embraces sociality displays and deploys larger political capital and has the potential of greater political impact.

## Sociality via geolocation

Colour provided one type of canvas for expressing sociality in digital political activism. Geolocation supplied another way of achieving a similar result. In the case of the Standing Rock protests over the Keystone oil pipeline from the fall of 2016, 1 million Facebook users from around the world 'checked-in' at Standing Rock in order to introduce noise into the social media surveillance practices of the local police department by making it harder to distinguish between the on-the-ground and on-the-web activists.

Facebook added a geolocation 'check-in' feature back in 2010. It allowed users to tag themselves as well as their friends at different locations. This performative visual declaration of 'presence' has

been coupled with wide-spread surveillance. Facebook's check-ins, as well as general posts, are routinely analysed by platforms such as Geofeedia. In this case, a Facebook message circulated asking for people to check-in into Standing Rock in order to 'overwhelm and confuse' police agencies after local police officers arrested close to 140 protesters. The initiative thus was not driven by Facebook employees but rather originated from Facebook users. The message on Facebook read: 'This is concrete action that can protect people putting their bodies and well-beings on the line that we can do without leaving our homes' (Kleinman, 2016). The Morton County Sheriff's Department publicly rejected the idea that they are using Facebook as part of their policing strategy. The announcement, fittingly, was posted on Facebook. According to an article in *The Atlantic*, however, 'the North Dakota government's IT department list Geofeedia as a social media tool' (Meyer and Waddell 2016). Thus, there was a notable discrepancy between the public statements and the practice of surveillance via social media.

Here, the political capital of sociality yet again was harnessed through the numbers game: the 'check-in' action was considered significant because it helped show the widespread support for the protests and at the same time obscured the clear line between on-ground and virtual supporters. Both sociality in-colour and sociality via geolocation became significant because they harnessed and repurposed the big-data culture in which we currently live.

## Sociality, appearance and surveillance

Xavier Marquez has clearly shown the ways in which an Arendtian 'space of appearance' is intertwined with the Foucauldian notion of 'space of surveillance'. He offers a powerful understanding of the 'space of appearance' as 'a setting where individuality emerges from self-disclosure among equals' (Marquez 2012: 7). Marquez argues that in this temporary equality emerges the possibility for novel relationships, for the articulation of what he calls 'sociability' and what I refer to in the project as 'sociality.' He eloquently writes that:

The equality refers to the possibility that those in the space can relate to each other as equals. In spaces of freedom, the normal status and class distinction that regulate interaction in everyday life are temporarily (albeit imperfectly) suspended and no longer pose large obstacles that prevent participants from treating each other as equals. Although participants in the space are shaped by their roles in other parts of society (for example, as employees and employers), their common situation ideally and temporarily frees them from having to play those roles. They can create novel relationships (such as constitutions and forms of education and sociability) and thereby create 'something new' for themselves.

IBID.: 12

Furthermore, in the space of appearance, this equality endows visibility with power; power 'produced by people who stand in symmetrical relations of visibility to one another' (ibid.:13). This visibility, as opposed to the vertical visual regimes of surveillance and discipline, 'preserves human plurality' (ibid.: 24). The space of appearance is not exempt from being the space of surveillance as Marquez carefully shows. I extend Marquez's work by further suggesting that spaces of appearance with their embrace of sociality are able to disrupt the surveillance gaze temporarily,

precisely because through their visual equality they obscure a look into the different social categories that have become its constituents. In other words, the large milieu of participants in spaces of appearance appears equal to each other and to those attempting to survey them. The power of appearance thus lies both in the ability to see each other as allies as well as in the ability to obscure on a large scale a view into who we are as individuals. In the case of the Facebook Rainbow filter and Standing Rock, colour and geolocation functions in similar ways as they articulate sociality on the basis of visual similarity, hence the visual summoning of a 'space of appearance.' Furthermore, sociality in both cases evoked affective relations of seeing: of seeing others and yourself temporarily in the same colour, in the same location, in the same collective.

In thinking about surveillance in relation to sociality, rather than society, to social affinities rather than social structures, is to address the nature of what David Lyon calls 'emerging culture of surveillance' (2014: 72). Lyon writes that in the contemporary moment surveillance has become 'natural, normal [. . .] an everyday social experience, from a serious security issue to an incessant demand for data from numerous organization to a playful part of mediated relationships' (ibid.). In the space of social networks, the space of relationships, users are not only aware of ubiquitous surveillance – but also becoming aware of ways in which this ubiquity can be playful and obscuring as it complicates the perceived indexical relationship between the social and the social network, society and sociality. The answer to the question 'who we are' becomes implicated in a relation with whom do we associate. 'Who we truly are' becomes hard to determine when all 26 million of us stand underneath a unifying banner.

Lyon's take on Facebook here is important. He writes: 'Facebook helps to alter our perception about many things – notoriously, such as how 'friend' is defined – so that at the level of design our imaginaries, our way of thinking about and responding to the social world, are affected' (ibid.: 81). Lyon notes that the social imaginary is structured by hidden surveillance practices performed by the Facebook corporation itself in which data is collected and sold to third parties. He argues, that while we are visible to each other, we are unaware of who else might be the purview of our activities. To be seen is thus as Marquez argues, both a space of appearance and surveillance. Visibility here is playful, liquid, ephemeral and connective. Being visible not as an individual, not as a member of a collective, but as a 'friend' of a cause offers a radical way of rethinking both appearance and surveillance. This logic has proven effective in political activism in both the digital and analogue form.

As a space of the appearance of political activism, the Rainbow filter and the 'check-in' feature also articulated a space of surveillance. As Stefania Milan has warned, 'visibility in an online environment that discloses relationships makes a movement transparent to its opponents, facilitating surveillance and repression' (2015: 63). The Rainbow filter with its evocation of sociality in-colour and the check-in feature with its evocation of sociality via geolocation, however, curtailed the ability of the surveyor to distinguish the social construction of a group from the social extension of the group's network. Here identification goes only to the level of the ally rather than of the group member. In these spaces of sociality, activists and allies stood appeared together and thus obscured the legibility of surveillance. This murkiness functioned well in deterring classificatory schemas about belonging and rather establishes a multi-coloured blanket that stretches over a multiplicity of users to create a unified public supportive of same-sex marriage and of Native water rights respectively. These two instances of visual activism also offered a tactic appropriation of surveillance and the enacting of what Milan describe as 'sousveillance' (ibid.: 65). For Milan,

'sousveillance' offers a form of 'inverse surveillance' where activists can turn surveillance practice onto the surveyors themselves (ibid.). Articulated as a collective, activists and allies were able to pinpoint the agents of surveillance and to develop tactics for evading control.

Sociality has emerged as a powerful tool for deflecting surveillance in both digital and analogue contexts while, at the same time, creating a space of appearance that demonstrates vast social and thus political capital. From a Rainbow profile to a check-in, the idea of solidarity has brought together people from all walks of life into a shimmering sheer protective fabric. Sociality has become a semi-transparent cover under which joint appearance complicates surveillance and professes the power of standing together.

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# 15

## Rendering the invisible visible Menstrual activism in contemporary India

*Sugandha Sehgal*

### Introduction

*I am going to paint bare bloodied bodies till you are comfortable with it.*

ISHA YADAV, 'ISHALOGUE', *INSTAGRAM*, 13 OCTOBER 2017.

The contemporary feminist movement in postmillennial India is increasingly becoming networked and image centric as young, urban and digitally literate women take to the 'digital streets' thereby reconfiguring notions of everyday feminism in the present cultural moment (Gajjala 2019: 20). The rise of new forms of everyday visual feminism/s in online spaces is the product of a paradigmatic shift towards the everyday visual in contemporary digital culture.<sup>1</sup> Set against this larger framework of everyday digital visual culture/s, this chapter maps the beginnings of a nascent aesthetic trend in the digital visual realm, that is, the rise of radical feminist visual narratives on menstruation as found on Instagram.

This newfound form of menstrual art and/or activism employs consciously different tactics, methodologies and politics from grassroots menstrual activism as found in the rural heartland of India. While the latter works closely in the realm of infrastructural change and knowledge production, the menstrual movement on Instagram remains an exclusively privileged, digital discourse espousing new forms of menstrual protest centred on the visual politics of the menstruating body. Explicitly graphic, urgent and intimate, these narratives represent 'a bloody, messy and embodied version of menstruation' a new and 'rebellious' version, different from other forms of 'bloodless' and 'respectable' activism/s (Bobel and Fahs 2020a: 958). However, despite its radical potential, the movement remains restricted to a specific geographical and class demographic profile, that is young, urban, middle class and educated women with a certain cultural and technological capital. This chapter raises the issue of whether the Instagram hashtag *#menstruation matters* belongs to the rural female subject living on the other side of both the

menstrual and digital divide. The conception of a 'digital divide', generally attributed to Lloyd Morrisett, was coined to 'describe the chasm that purportedly separates "information haves" from "information have-nots"', and holds true in the Indian context with multifarious local conditions of access to the internet across different socioeconomic classes (Eubanks 2007).<sup>2</sup> Borrowing from Morrisett, this chapter propounds the category of the menstrual divide to refer to the rural and semi-urban female population of India, often living without access to clean water, safe menstrual products and other infrastructural prerequisites.

This chapter explores the feminist implications of a visual engagement with the politics of menstruation in the everyday image cultures of Instagram in postmillennial India. This is the overarching research concern guiding the discussion as I explore the possibilities offered by the digital visual medium as a site of feminist resistance to mainstream menstrual discourse. Vanessa Tiegs – a contemporary American menstrual artist, best known for her work *Menstrala* (2000–3), a collection of eighty-eight paintings in menstrual blood – writes about her politics, 'I have chosen to address menstruation visually' (Tiegs 2011: 222). Much like Tiegs, several Indian artists/activists are deploying the visual medium as a chief tactic of their menstrual activism in online spaces. The idea that the 'visual is political' (Bobel and Fahs 2020b: 1005) rings true of the contemporary social media landscape in postmillennial India that seems to be brimming with visual menstrual narratives. The visual becomes an efficient mechanism in countering the larger invisibility of the bleeding body in the collective cultural imagination.

The epigraph to this chapter, borrowed from the Instafeed of Isha Yadav, a young contemporary Indian artist might as well serve as the manifesto of this nascent menstrual movement on Instagram. Yadav's social media statement succinctly brings forth the centrality of the visual as the defining tactic of contemporary menstrual activism in the digital domain. Bold and provocative, the statement sums up the artistic/activist credo of visibilizing bare bloodied bodies, in order to train and discipline the spectator into a comfortable visual tolerance and acceptance of the same. Much like Yadav's act of painting bleeding bodies, the Instagram menstrual stories studied here constitute the locus of an everyday feminist discourse on menstruation, gender and politics of embodiment. The act of consuming these visual narratives constitutes a form of feminist resistance to a culture that hysterically denies the visual presence of the menstruating body. Collectively, these Instagram artists are ushering in a new era in the nascent cultural history of the menstrual movement in the Global South with their newfound emphasis on visual forms of protest. These artists are blasphemously making the spectator see what must never be seen, that is, the spectacle of the menstrual body in the digital visual realm.

I draw upon the works of Julia Kristeva (1982) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994) for framing the present discussion. Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject provides the overarching theoretical framework for understanding the moral panic and hysteria produced by the abject, menstruating body. Grosz's conceptualization of the female body as a form of 'corporeal seepage' also proves useful in my engagement with the larger cultural fear of the leaking female body (ibid.: 203). A select few case studies hashtagged: #period, #blood and #red, establish Instagram as the primary field of these new forms of visual menstrual protest. The artists studied here include Rupī Kaur, Pranjali Dubey, Arunima Bose, Lyla FreeChild and Isha Yadav; all of them young, digital artists with a shared radical feminist politics centred on the visibility of abject menstrual blood. Nikita Azad's digital menstrual campaign against period stigma, *#Happy to Bleed* (2015) is also briefly discussed as a unique form of menstrual politics combining offline and online modes of protest. The chapter

concludes with an examination of both the promises and limitations of this newfound menstrual movement in the digital visual domain.

## The abject menstrual body: fear of fluidity

In order to better understand the 'visual taboo' that is the menstruating body (Badoni 2019), a theoretical engagement with Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject body proves immensely useful (1982). The bleeding body in the Kristevan paradigm is essentially a horror inducing, abject body. Kristeva's conceptualization of abjection helps us better understand why we withdraw in visceral disgust from an accidental sighting of a menstrual stain or likewise an artistic representation of menstrual blood. Reading a select few feminist menstrual narratives on Instagram using Kristeva's theoretical paradigm of abjection proves fruitful in the present study. The menstrual artists/activists studied here consciously deploy the tactics of 'abject activism', disgust and shock to compel the spectator into thinking critically about the menstrual body (Barkardottir 2016: 79). The abject menstruating body – that which is a horror that must remain invisible – becomes the focal point of these contemporary feminist iterations and articulations against menstrual invisibility.

Kristeva argues that 'the horror of abjection has two paradigms: the excremental and the menstrual' (1982: 71). The abject body with its horror inducing excremental and menstrual functions is perceived as a threat to 'the proper and the clean body' (Grosz 1994: 192). By placing menstrual blood alongside vomit, human excrement and open wounds, etc., Kristeva's paradigm of abjection reveals why menstrual blood is such a threat. She further adds that 'the abject is what disturbs identity, system, order. The in-between, the ambiguous' (ibid.: 4). Kristeva argues that the abject body inspires horror because it questions the 'impermeability' and 'solidity' of flesh by 'making the inside outside' (ibid.). Iris Young further argues that 'the abject challenges our affective investment in solid body boundaries' (2005:109).<sup>3</sup> Grosz notes a distinction that is made between 'polluting fluids' that 'dirty the body' and 'clean fluids'. Unlike the clean fluids of the body such as tears and semen, 'polluting fluids' such as pus, vomit, faeces and menstrual blood belong to the realm of the abject (Grosz 1994: 195), and therefore, must remain hidden as they pose 'a threat to the center – to life, to the proper, the clean' (ibid.: 207).

I borrow the concept of the 'patriarchal abject' to understand how patriarchy controls the (in)visibility of menstrual blood to maintain the health of the symbolic system (Jenson 1991: 193). Radical menstrual artists/activists contest the multiple erasures of the menstruating body in mainstream visual discourse by countering it with a relentless hyper visibility of the same in online spaces. The 'patriarchal abject' gaze that invisibilizes the menstrual experience is replaced by a radical celebratory gaze that normalizes the sight of the menstruating body. Further playing on the politics of the gaze, the artists/activists turn around the cultural logic of the seen/unseen by forcefully making visible the 'horror that must remain unseen' that is 'the fluidic, leaky and monstrous body' (Cole 2014: 67). Perhaps this explains why the bleeding body is relegated to the space of the bathroom in mainstream visual discourse, the dirty sphere containing women's 'private fluidity' (Young 2005: 109). The bathroom also becomes the clinical site of incessant washing and cleaning of the menstrual body, a site of labour, which restores the body to its proper and clean form.

It was precisely the site of the bathroom, the dirty, private Other of women's menstrual lives that was foregrounded in the work of Judy Chicago, an early proponent of radical menstrual art in America in the 1970s. Most of the artists studied here may easily claim a 'discursive lineage' with Chicago's menstrual art back in the 1970s (Vigneault 2018: 2). Chicago's art/activist practice was centred on an 'open and radical visualization of menstruation' (ibid.: 1). One of her earliest interventions, *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972), a walk-in art installation was a visual compendium of all things related to women's private, menstrual bodies such as pads, tampons, and cups. By allowing the spectator to walk into a menstruation bathroom, Chicago brought forth the hidden horrors of women's menstrual bodies. The fact that it was an art installation made the experience even more visceral as the spectator could walk in, see and closely experience the space at a material, tangible level, thereby making the encounter more unsettling. Rupī Kaur, a diasporic Indo-Canadian artist, also deploys a similar politics of the space of the menstrual bathroom in her *Period* series (2015), I will return to this later in the chapter.

Similarly, Chicago's other controversial representation of the menstrual body in her notorious lithograph, *Red Flag* (1971), was a close macro photographic shot of a bloodied tampon being pulled out of a vulva. It got as close-up and frontal with the menstruating body as the medium allowed. Some of the early responses to Chicago's photograph were confused as the spectators struggled to identify the object shown as a tampon. One finds a similar attempt to familiarize the sight of the bleeding body in Arunima Bose's feminist rewriting of Chicago's photograph. Bose is a young, contemporary Indian artist, popularly known as the Vagina Lady on Instagram. Her Instagram post *Those Days, These Days* (16 February 2017), reads like a feminist revisiting of Chicago's radically notorious lithograph (see Figure 15.1). Much like Chicago, Bose's representation exclusively focuses on the bloodied tampon and the hairy vulva. By consciously keeping the other details out of the representational frame, she ensures that the bloodied body becomes the vortex of engagement between the spectator and the image. Both works offer a close shot of the bloodied, leaking vagina, thus bringing it closest to Kristeva's abject body that provokes horror in the onlooker. In both it is primarily the shock of the visual that jolts the spectator into thinking about the everyday, corporeal realities of the bleeding body. Instagram provides space for new forms of feminist visual expression and much like Chicago's artistic lineage allows 'radical visualization/s' of the otherwise hidden menstrual body (Vigneault 2017: 1).

Chicago's works can be read as one of the earliest examples of a feminist and aesthetic practice that mobilized the political agency of the menstruating body through the visual medium. Daniella Manica argues that certain works 'mobilize aesthetics not through the sublimated body, the beautiful body of grace and proportion but *rather through the abject body*' (2017: 10). In most of these Instagram narratives, the abject, menstruating body becomes the focal point of the conversation. Josefin Helga Persdotter draws attention to what she terms 'abjectification', as an activist strategy 'that uses the abject position to destabilize societal structures' (2013: 15). Showing menstrual blood brazenly and explicitly in the digital visual domain speaks directly from the 'abject position', employing a deliberate and visceral politics of disgust meant to rudely jolt the spectator into thinking critically about the menstruating body.

Ruth Green Cole's work on the importance of 'visualizing the menstros' (monstros) remains crucial in this regard (2014: 65). Using an interesting pun to bring to light the alleged monstrosity of the 'menstros/monstros body', Cole draws attention towards the need to create 'new and meaningful narratives within visual culture' (ibid.). Instagram becomes the space for the production,





**FIGURE 15.1** Bose, Arunima, *Those Days, These Days*, Instagram, 16 February 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

consumption and circulation of precisely such radical visual narratives on menstruation; stories that are raw, authentic, honest, bloodied and personal. In a culture where the 'patriarchal abject' controls the visualization of menstrual blood as 'abject waste', these artists turn menstrual blood into an object of aesthetic representation and personal feminist expression (Dyer 2016: 2). These visual conversations perhaps may not be deemed as significant as other forms of grassroots menstrual activism with concrete, visible, on the ground action but nonetheless play a crucial role at a larger discursive level.

In 2019, Martand Badoni published an article in Outlook India called, 'Junk the Taboo. Period', to draw attention to the need to 'resist the visual taboo' of menstruation and break the silence 'visually'. Writing on the significance of the 'graphic quotient' in contemporary visual engagement with the bleeding female body, Badoni suggests that it is precisely the visual, the graphic image that becomes so 'explosive' in public imagination. Badoni's observation on the 'explosive' potential of graphic representations of menstruation proves useful in my engagement with a select few Instagram stories that consciously deploy the shock of the visual as an activist strategy. The emphasis on the visual as a mode of protest becomes the common factor underlining the menstrual narratives studied in this chapter.

Apart from Kristeva's theoretical model of abjection, the concept of fluidity also provides a crucial framework for understanding the cultural horror and hysteria associated with menstrual fluid. Elizabeth Grosz envisages female corporeality as 'seepage' best described as a 'complex,

leaking, seeping liquid . . . a formless flow, a viscosity, a secreting' (1994: 203). The association of female embodiment with an intrinsic and uncontrollable fluidity, 'a formless flow' that threatens to spill over boundaries and confuse inside/outside is at the core of the larger cultural fear of female bodily fluids. The menstrual leak speaks of a threatening female corporeality that refuses to adhere or conform to 'the laws governing the clean and proper body' (ibid.: 195). Lyla FreeChild, a leading menstrual artist in contemporary India based in Jaipur, rewrites the cultural meanings of the menstrual fluid through her artistic/activist practice on Instagram. In the next section, I use Grosz's theoretical conceptualization of fluidity to engage with FreeChild's menstrual art that remains premised on a radical feminist celebration of menstrual fluidity.

## Understanding menstrual taboos in mainstream Indian culture

Lyla FreeChild confronts the digital spectator with the raw materiality of menstrual blood, its texture and colours in her everyday menstrual stories on Instagram. She refuses to treat menstrual blood as an abject fluid, much like excremental waste that must immediately be flushed down and made invisible and instead makes art out of it. She shares visual representations of her tactile experiments with menstrual blood as she plays with, smears her fingers in, and uses it as an aesthetic medium with which to paint. Moreover she actively contests the period stigma in mainstream Indian religious thought by blasphemously collecting and exhibiting menstrual blood in objects deemed sacred in Hinduism such as empty coconut shells and the sanctimonious plant of *tulsi*. There is a deliberate politics of shock and provocation at work here as FreeChild's art challenges the alleged ritualistic impurity of the menstruating body in mainstream sociocultural ethos.

Menstrual discrimination is a lived reality in present day India affecting women's everyday lives in more ways than one. A menstruating woman, considered to be impure and unholy, is not allowed to enter any space deemed sacred such as the domestic kitchen or a place of worship. Constructed as a taboo in traditional Hindu practice, menstruation is regarded as a source of defilement making the menstruating woman a sight that must be shunned. In many parts of the country, menstruating women are forced to live in separate hutments outside the main domestic establishment and allowed re-entry only after ritualistic bathing and cleansing of the menstrual body. Suneela Garg and Tanu Anand argue that in traditional thought all women are considered impure and incur pollution 'through the bodily processes of menstruation and childbirth' (2015: 185). Writing on the subject of 'menstruation and food taboo' in India, Sharanya Deepak argues that menstruating women in India are not allowed to 'touch foods considered godly or holy' (2018). Using food taboo as a lens to understand menstrual taboos reveals complex everyday cultural tensions surrounding the menstruating body in present day India.

The taboo surrounding menstruation has led to an all pervasive silence and culture of shame around the subject. Mainstream advertising discourse, marketing menstrual products, never show red colour and remain cloaked in a sanitized vocabulary consisting of polite euphemisms. In Western anthropological writings on the 'sociology of menstruation', scholars argue that 'as blood, menstrual discharge is out of place, breaching the natural bounds of the body that normally contains it' (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 26). Victoria Newton, explaining the cultural fear surrounding

menstrual blood, argues that it is alleged that 'blood as a substance (from a male viewpoint) should be kept within the bounds of the body and only released through injury. Menstrual blood flows freely and transgresses the boundaries of the body' (2016: 34), signifying an uncontrollable female fluidity, a 'seepage' that defies all boundaries and order (Grosz 1994).

FreeChild's radical menstrual experiments with sacred food and plants need to be placed within this larger context of menstrual taboos in Indian sociocultural ethos. Her digital menstrual activism actively challenges the alleged association of the menstruating body with ritualistic impurity and defilement. Her Instagram stories challenge the larger cultural fear of menstrual blood as she embraces and celebrates the intrinsic fluidity of the female body. In these stories, FreeChild redefines the polluting blood as a magical fluid, a source of nurture and sustenance rather than a source of contamination and defilement. Consider her Instagram post, *#A handful of fluid* (21 July 2017), that offers a close shot of a white coconut shell full of stark red, palpable, material menstrual blood, thus visually juxtaposing the pure white with the supposedly impure red (see Plate 48). The image visually plays around with the idea of menstrual pollution and purity as symbolized by the use of colours red and white respectively. Moreover, FreeChild's intervention employs shock and provocation as activist strategies by staging a scene of ritualistic defilement that uses a coconut – otherwise deemed a spiritual object in Hinduism – filled with impure menstrual blood. She teasingly plays with the visual and moral sensibilities of the spectator by collecting menstrual blood in a coconut shell; an abject fluid that, in terms of the prevailing cultural norms, must immediately be discarded or else at best contained through menstrual cups, tampons and pads. FreeChild also plays around with the relationship between the menstruating body and food in some of her works. Menstruating women in India to date are not allowed to touch certain food items such as pickles, which it is believed will go sour due to their impurity. Coconut, an object used in everyday religious rituals is also considered a holy food of the Gods. FreeChild's *#handful of Fluid* thus hits hard at the roots of both religious dogma, as well as food taboos associated with menstruation. Similarly, her other Instagram posts on menstrual blood and food items resembling it, such as beetroot juice, deliberately play upon these associations between menstrual pollution and food. In one of her stories, she juxtaposes a jar containing menstrual fluid collected over a period of time with another one containing beetroot juice. Teasingly calling it *Uterine Juice and Beetroot Juice* (21 January 2017), she posits the former as an edible juice produced by the female body and brings out the reality of menstrual food taboos in present day India (see Figure 15.2).

One of FreeChild's most controversial Instagram narratives involved the controversial act of feeding menstrual fluid to sacred plants. This Instagram story rewrites the dominant cultural script surrounding menstrual blood and posits it as a fecund, life-giving source. In one of her interviews, FreeChild shared her scandalous personal story of feeding menstrual blood to sacred plants such as *Tulsi*: 'I fertilize my plants including the sacred tulsi with my blood', the artist confessed shocking the moral and religious sensibilities of the reader (Bahuguna 2017). *Tulsi*, considered a holy plant, is often found in the courtyard of traditional Hindu households. The plant carries symbolic religious and medical currency in mainstream Indian culture. FreeChild shared images of her blood smeared fingers pouring menstrual fluid out of cups into the sacred plant on Instagram. Her story titled *Blooming* (5 February 2017), depicted blood filled menstrual cups blooming and sprouting leaves (see Plate 49). She rewrites menstrual blood as an aesthetic medium and a fertilizer thus questioning its supposed impurity.



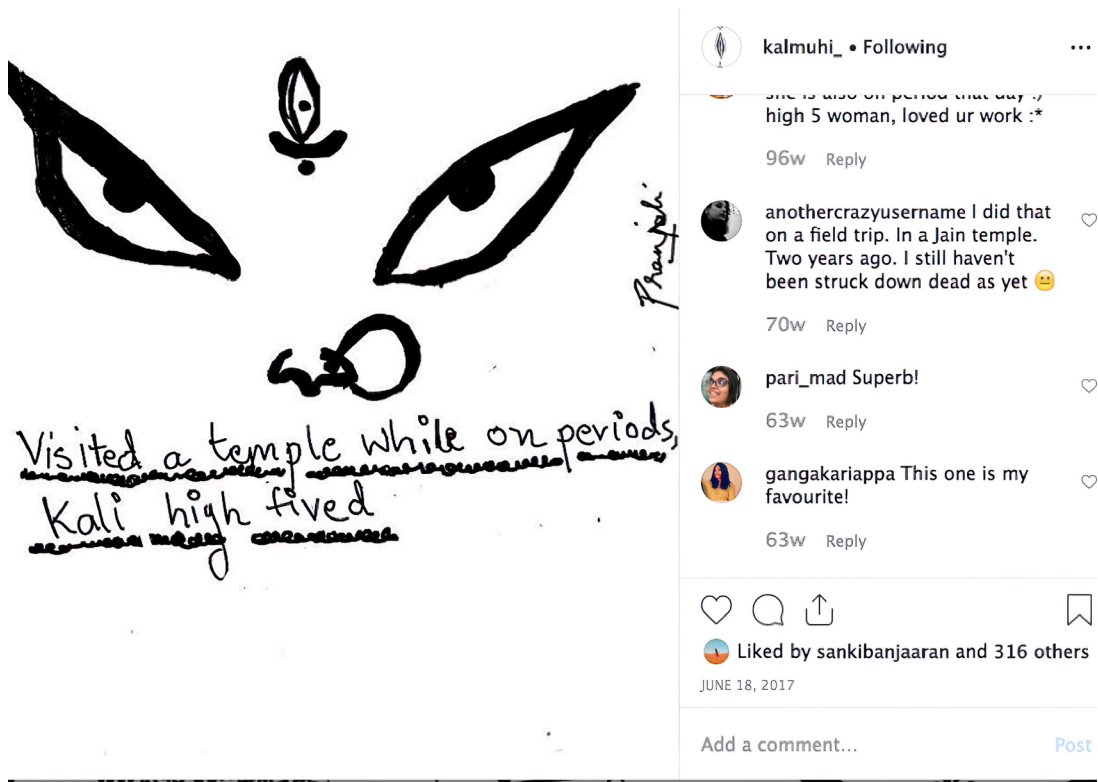
**FIGURE 15.2** FreeChild, Lyla, *Uterine Juice*, *Beetroot Juice*, Instagram, 21 January 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

FreeChild's menstrual art engages the spectator at a visceral level and consciously so. I employ Daniela Manica's phrase, 'blood related shock effect', to best describe her Instagram menstrual art/activism (2017: 10). Manica argues that 'body abjection pushes the limits of engagement and drives the artist and the audience into radical experiences' (ibid.: 10). Her aesthetic/political practice challenges the audience's capacity to visually ingest provocative representations of the bleeding, female body. Both intensely personal and political at the same time, FreeChild's work deploys 'abject activism' to destabilize dominant patriarchal understandings of female corporeality as a dirty/leaking entity (Barkardottir 2016: 79). Her art/activism is centred on the politics of the open ended and fluidic menstruating body, a body of excess that threatens to spill over into dominant visual culture.

Pranjali Dubey, another contemporary feminist artist, known as 'Kalmuhi' on Instagram also questions the ubiquity of period stigma in Indian sociocultural ethos. Traditional Hinduism premised on the contrary ideas of pollution and purity does not allow an impure menstruating woman to enter any sacred place of worship such as a temple. It is believed that the presence of a menstruating worshipper will defile the Gods. Whereas, the Hindu *Sakta* tradition is marked by a valorization of the feminine based on the idea of a menstruating goddess.<sup>4</sup> Lucia Birnbaum locates the worship of Goddess figure within the larger context of the Hindu *Sakta* tradition. The *Sakta* tradition, based on the figure of the Devi or great goddess 'validates the mysteries of the female body' (2008: 48). Birnbaum further argues that 'menstruation remains central to understanding *Devi* in *Sakta* tradition' (ibid.: 49).

Dubey's Instagram doodle *Kali High Fived* (18 June 2017), borrows from the *Sakta* tradition to contest the prohibition of entry of menstruating women in places of religious worship in present day India (see Figure 15.3). The illustration depicts a close, half profile of the face of a goddess, apparently Goddess Kali, a symbol of feminine fecundity in the Hindu *Sakta* tradition. The caption reads, 'Visited a temple while on period. Kali high fived'.<sup>5</sup> The artist uses humour and a feminist playfulness to paint the Goddess as a feminist sister in arms who secretly rejoices at the presence of the forbidden female menstruating worshipper. Goddess Kali, often associated with the *Sakta* valorization of the feminine is seen as a part of the worship of the triad consisting of 'the woman-earth-goddess' (Patel 1994: 69). The Goddess, of Dubey's doodle; the clandestine menstruating worshipper; the artist; and the Instagram user – together become sisters-in-arms in the fight against period stigma in mainstream religion.

Juxtaposed against the *Sakta* validation of the female body and its processes, is a hyper masculine religious discourse hysterically centred on a fear of menstrual pollution. The *Sabarimala* shrine devoted to the figure of a celibate God Ayappa, in Southern India, an example of this cultural phobia is obsessively guarded against the presence of women of menstruating age. The last part of this section discusses the recent Sabarimala controversy and Nikita Azad's unique digital



**FIGURE 15.3** Dubey, Pranjali, 'Kalmuhi', *Kali High Fived*, Instagram, 18 June 2017. Courtesy of the artist.



menstrual campaign *Happy to Bleed* (2015), produced in response. Structured around a similar discourse on the ritualistic impurity of the menstruating body and sacred spaces, *Happy to Bleed* (2015) was one of the first instances of an organized feminist protest contesting menstrual taboo in contemporary India.

Azad's hashtag campaign was launched in November 2015 in the wake of a controversial statement made by Prayar Gopalakrishnan, a religious chief of the Travancore Devaswom Board, administering the temple affairs of the popular Sabarimala shrine in South India. Gopalakrishnan's notorious comment, captured in the headline: 'Let Machine to Scan Purity Come, Will Think about Women Entering Sabarimala', sparked off one of the biggest controversies on menstrual oppression in contemporary India (The News Minute 2015). Azad carefully distanced her *#Happy to Bleed* campaign from the temple entry issue and stated her fight was against menstrual taboos. She wrote, in a now famous letter addressing the temple chief: 'We chose menstrual taboos as an immediate response to the TDB's chief's statement.' (Azad 2015) Questioning the regressive sociocultural and hyper masculine ethos of the Sabarimala shrine, Azad's letter became the focal point of feminist mobilization against the period stigma in the digital domain.

Later the *#Happy to Bleed* campaign replaced the traditional activist placard with a sanitary napkin and invited women to upload their pictures. This led to social media being flooded with images of women holding messages inscribed onto sanitary napkins in red colour. Some pictures were candid, accompanied by personal narratives on why women were happy to bleed. Azad's campaign tapped into everyday and personal stories of feminist protest by asking women to share their narratives of why they were happy and proud to bleed. In most of the campaign visuals, the participants stare defiantly into the camera, and the sanitary napkin, soiled or clean, occupies the central frame as a symbol of protest. This became the face of the campaign. There was a definitive emphasis on this visual trope as a form of everyday protest in Azad's campaign as it borrowed from the political and visual currency of the menstruating body.<sup>6</sup> According to Badoni, *#Happy to Bleed* was primarily about posting personal pictures to 'break the silence visually' (2018). Some posts were candid, personal and together formed a feminist coalition of sorts where women shared their most personal, everyday experiences of menstrual discrimination in contemporary India. Azad's campaign remains a unique feminist intervention deploying the radical potential of the digital visual medium in contesting larger menstrual invisibility in mainstream culture.

This section has attempted to establish the cultural ubiquity of menstrual taboos in the everyday fabric of contemporary Indian society. The social media menstrual interventions discussed here bring to light the promise held by the space of the digital visual, as a site of everyday resistance to menstrual oppression. The next section attempts to map the rise of a new visual feminist discourse on the menstrual question in contemporary India, espousing a different politics centred on the sight of the 'radical menstruating body' (Bobel, 2006).

## **#Menstruation #blood #red: Instagram as a field of protest**

The hashtags used in this subtitle consciously point towards the graphic quotient of the narratives of menstrual resistance found on Instagram. Isha Yadav's rendering of the menstrual body in her Instagram story titled *Period Day* (9 October 2017; see Plate 50), is graphic in its politics and may be best described using one word: bloodied. The image depicts a young woman sprawling on the

bed, her gaze averted from the spectator while the central representational frame is occupied by a blood-soaked vulva. The idealized vulva is clean, hairless and non-bleeding whereas the real vulva is hairy and bloodied. The image is problematic because it shows free flowing menstrual blood, rather than a flow neatly contained in menstrual absorbents. The vortex of the spectator's engagement with the image lies in the shock of blood, frontal and direct. The accompanying hashtags such as *#blood*, *#body* and *#bleeding* make the visual and feminist politics of Yadav's image specifically corporeal, signifying the image as an act of embodied protest against menstrual oppression. In this story, Yadav writes about 'painting bare bloodied bodies till [you] are comfortable with it' clearly establishing the visual as a significant feminist tactic against menstrual invisibility (Yadav 2017).

Yadav's work belongs to a newly emergent terrain of everyday visual activism on the politics of the menstruating body that has emerged on Instagram in India in the second decade of the twenty first century. In this section, I explore a select few menstrual stories to demonstrate that this nascent menstrual discourse as found on Instagram is brazen, irreverent, unabashed, intimate, bloodied, corporeal and deliberately provocative in its feminist politics and aesthetics. Instagram menstrual discourse espouses a hitherto unprecedented form of radical feminist politics signifying a playful activist approach towards menstrual stigma, very different in its tactics from other forms of grassroots menstrual work in the rural heartland of India.

Furthermore, this nascent menstrual activism in the digital domain is as much about graphic representations of menstruation as it is about the varied responses to the subject, such as shock, disgust and withdrawal. Writing in the context of her visceral art installation *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972), Judy Chicago observed: 'however we feel about our own menstruation is how we feel about seeing its image in front of us' (Delaney, Lupton and Toh 1988: 276). Both the image and the act of consuming the image become crucial as Chicago locates any form of visual encounter with a representation of menstruation in the realm of the ocular and the visceral. How we react to an image of menstruation is a signifier of how culture teaches us to feel about our own menstrual bodies. Chicago's artistic statement compels the reader to critically think about their own response to the sight of a bloodied sanitary napkin, or accidental menstrual leak, or bloodstains in a public washroom – or likewise to its artistic representation on Instagram. The menstrual artists/activists examined in this chapter seek and provoke a particular response through 'engaging the spectator at a visceral level' (Meagher 2009). Proposing a new 'feminist aesthetics of disgust', Michelle Meagher asks: 'why do we find bodies like this so difficult to look at?' (ibid.). If the menstruating body presents a 'visceral difficulty', then there is a deliberate politics at work here in making such bodies visible on Instagram and thereby challenging the visual and visceral capacities of the digital spectator.

I suggest that Instagram menstrual art/activism in contemporary India represents a newly envisaged, radical politics premised on raw, authentic and personal expressions of everyday menstrual experience. Taken together, these Instagram narratives come closest to Bobel and Fahs' conceptualization of a radical, bloodied, and a mutinous form of 'menstrual embodiment' (2020a). There is a deliberately chosen politics of shock, disgust and provocation as young digital feminists increasingly take to explicitly graphic representations of menstrual blood, leaks and stains. The movement, if it may be called so, is anarchic and bloodied in its politics as well as in its aesthetics, and consciously so.

In March 2015, Rupri Kaur, posted a photograph of herself on Instagram, titled *Period* – it depicts her lying in bed, fully clad, facing the wall, showing her blood-stained grey pyjamas and bedsheet to the spectator.<sup>7</sup> The image took the internet by storm, where it was replicated, shared and extensively circulated across various contexts. Kaur's period photograph, an affront to the visual senses, was immediately pulled down by the censoring algorithms of Instagram. A single image became the epicentre of one of the biggest transnational feminist controversies on menstrual oppression in contemporary digital culture.<sup>8</sup> The defining image of Kaur's series depicted the artist lying in her blood-stained pyjamas as if caught unawares. Though consciously staged and performed before the camera, it appears like an accidental photograph capturing an accidental menstrual leak. Both the artist's pyjamas and the sheets used were light coloured, making the red stain stand out in contrast, while the artist's pose in turning away from the lens, makes the stain the vortex of visual engagement. We catch ourselves voyeuristically staring at the blood stained pyjamas as the artist sleeps in a position of vulnerability facing the wall. The other photos in the series consisted of candid scenes from the space of the menstrual bathroom, scenes involving blood stained bathroom tiles, toilet bowls and clothes. The bathroom becomes a site of symbolic washing, where free flowing menstrual blood and running water operate as twin tropes. Kaur's use of the space of the bathroom established a kind of 'discursive lineage' with Judy Chicago's 1972 installation: *Menstruation Bathroom* (Vigneault 2018: 2). The visual shock of red blood bespattered shower tiles against the pristine, clinical white of the bathroom floor seemed deliberate and calculated. Marissa Vigneault argues that 'shock is precisely the reaction that wrenches an image out of the banal and into the provocative, through forced confrontation' (2018: 3). Kaur's photo series deployed visual shock as a strategy by not allowing the spectator to look elsewhere – forcibly confronting them with disquieting images of menstrual blood.

Borrowing from Shannon Docherty's menstrual manifesto, I argue that Kaur's *Period* was much like 'smearing menstrual blood all over your face' (2010: 2). It was the 'shock of disgust' that was most discomforting about the image (Meagher 2009). Also, Kaur's series spoke to the spectator in terms of its everydayness as it depicted banal moments in the cyclical lives of menstruators. Laura Winnick described Kaur's series as 'honest', 'casual' and 'everyday' in its portrayal of the menstrual experience – she wrote, 'Kaur's series evoked an embodied, shared knowledge in period having people . . . We know these everyday moments as intimately as the artist does' (2018). Breanne Fahs rewrites the political, transgressive meaning/s of the menstrual stain as a 'gendered form of graffiti', a 'symbol of the impossibility of containing the female body and its troublesome fluids' (2016: 33). The menstrual stain, up close and frontal was a feminist slogan, a visible marker of protest in a culture that dreads the stain and/or leak as an abhorrence. Kaur's *Period* series established Instagram as the newfound site of a feminist visual activism centred on the politics of the menstrual body.

Everyday menstrual stories on Instagram also challenge the culture of shame and silence in which mainstream Indian advertising discourse remains embedded. A select few hashtags such as *#bleed red*, *#red not blue* and *#pad ads* reveal that Instagram allows menstrual artists/activists to contest mainstream menstrual culture/s of concealment, shame and secrecy through everyday feminist expression. Pranjali Dubey contests the sanitization of the menstruating body in mainstream advertising discourse by deploying a characteristically feminist irreverence, humour and confident sarcasm. The Indian femcare industry and mainstream media worlds of advertising

have actively contributed to the erasure of the menstruating body from contemporary visual culture. The femcare industry with its wide plethora of sanitary products such as pads, tampons and cups constructs menstruation primarily as a 'hygiene crisis' that must be managed properly (Kissling 2006). The visual and linguistic vocabulary of mainstream advertising is centred on a language of hygiene, cleanliness and freshness. This also explains the sanitized blue ink, the clinical gel of sanitary napkins advertisements that spares the spectator the horror of red. The pristine white pants worn by the menstruating women in Indian advertisements, the blue gel and the promise of an invisible period collectively point towards 'the denial in advertising' (Radhakrishnan 2015).

Dubey challenges the use of medical blue gel in mainstream Indian advertisements in her Instagram doodle called *We are women, not squids*. (27 June 2017, see Figure 15.4), which offers a sarcastic take on the use of such clinical colour palettes. A large sized sanitary napkin with a provocatively shocking red spill dominates the central frame of this representation thus making the choice of colour the locus of its aesthetics and feminist politics. To the question – *What do you mean it is red?* – the female figure in the doodle is said to 'spurt it out on patriarchy' and replies – *Yeah, we are women, not squids. It is blood, not ink.*<sup>9</sup> The caption provided by the artist is also an angry, feminist act of spurting blood on the 'patriarchal abject' that controls 'the visualization of menstrual blood as waste, dirt and abject' (Cole 2014: 66). The hashtags accompanying Dubey's doodle explicitly mention *#ads* thereby placing it in direct confrontation with mainstream visual representations of menstruation in popular culture. Another interesting hashtag – *#Bleed red* – is used by Dubey to make a political statement on the absence of, supposedly, horror-inspiring red in mainstream advertising discourse. Such Instagram narratives are important as they foreground the red that remains conspicuously absent from the larger public imagination characterized by a sanitized 'menstrual imaginary' (Dyer 2016).



**FIGURE 15.4** Dubey, Pranjali, 'Kalmuhi', *We are women, not squids*, Instagram, 27 June 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

## Whose feminism is it anyway? A critique

Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs caution against the use of binaries, an either/or framework to determine 'one, right way to do menstrual activism' (2020b: 958). This holds true of the menstrual movement in contemporary India that branches off into two modes of action: grassroots, rural activism geared towards infrastructural needs; and urban, digital activism directed towards a discursive, cultural critique. However, the act of showing blood on Instagram may not mean much to the Indian rural female subject, who struggles to meet basic infrastructural needs of water and sanitation. The brouhaha over showing menstrual blood on social media remains at best a Western postfeminist fad, which becomes horribly incongruous in the Indian rural context. The rural/urban and grassroots/digital binary becomes useful in understanding the two modes of menstrual protest in contemporary India as long as we remain wary of valorizing one, at the expense of the other. While the former works in the realm of public health and infrastructure, the latter is cast in a radical feminist framework that works as a discursive and cultural form of protest in online spaces.

The visual politics of the menstrual stain provides an apt framework for drawing a distinction between the two differing modes of menstrual activism in postmillennial India: grassroots, rural juxtaposed against the digital, metropolitan mode. The Indian government has national guidelines on 'Menstrual Health Management'; an important official document and public toolkit for the generation of menstrual knowledge in rural India (Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation 2015).<sup>10</sup> Part Four of the document advises on Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) infrastructure in schools, including clean and separate toilets, flowing water, safe disposal mechanisms – among other things – as essential infrastructural components. However, interestingly, the guidelines also mention 'a well positioned mirror so that girls can check for stains on their clothes', thereby reiterating the need to control the visibility of the much dreaded menstrual stain or leak (ibid.: 18). The document unwittingly contributes to a reification of menstrual taboos by highlighting the need to control the visibility of menstruation.

Consider now for the sake of a comparative analysis, a digital illustration made by *Kahaaniwale*, an artist's collective contesting taboos through graphic storytelling as part of their digital campaign called *Achhi Ladki* (20 July 2017).<sup>11</sup> The Instagram image titled *Achhi Ladki – meaning 'the good girl'* – carries a message saying: 'Stop giving her pain because of stain' (see Plate 51). In this image, the *Achhi Ladki* wears her menstrual stain proudly and confidently, much like a feminist tattoo on her light-coloured pants, or like Fahs' bloodied 'graffiti' (2016). The girl wears all the visible markers of her middle class, urban identity made evident in her clothing and appearance. The same stain of official MHM discourse that must be checked constantly in the mirror is consciously foregrounded as an object of artistic representation in the latter. The two examples may be used to draw a distinction between two representational domains, that is, the pedantic official discourse and the provocative, graphic digital discourse on the politics of menstruation. The visual digital discourse on menstruation is explicitly graphic and affronting, unlike the official MHM discourse that aims to instruct and generate knowledge on best menstrual practices. Class dynamics also become crucial here, as the former is majorly both produced and consumed by digitally savvy, educated and middle-class women, while the latter targets a young, rural and semi-urban, often illiterate female population. While the former works as a radical feminist and cultural critique, the latter focuses on the on-the-ground, infrastructural initiatives. The visual grammar/s of each of



these realms are at variance; as the digital mode uses explicit imagery, while the official MHM mode abounds in sanitized representations.

The Instagram menstrual discourse traced in this chapter, remains at best an exclusively digital phenomenon belonging to middle class, educated Indian women living in cities. The discussion concludes by drawing attention towards the class dynamics of the nascent radical menstrual movement on social media in postmillennial India. Abject menstrual art/activism, as found on Instagram often fails to reach women in rural and semi urban India; those living on the other side of the digital and menstrual divide, without access to basic infrastructural needs and/or enabling technological contexts. One must question if these radical forms of menstrual resistance have any critical, feminist resonance with young women living in the rural heartland.

The majority of the radical menstrual images examined in this chapter have been produced, consumed and circulated within specific circuits of digital access often not available in non-urban, non-metropolitan contexts. Further, this form of Instagram menstrual activism speaks to a particular cultural demographic, that is, educated, digitally literate, middle-class women living in cities, with a certain degree of cultural capital, technological access and linguistic proficiency. The nascent menstrual art/activist movement on Instagram remains at best a niche form of feminist politics, a privileged and exclusively digital discourse with limited resonance in spaces beyond the immediate digital.

A critique of these nascent feminist iterations and articulations of a radical menstrual subjectivity may also translate into a larger critique of the radical feminist position. Radical feminist politics centred on 'tactics of visibility and representation' remains 'limited' in several ways (Barkardottir 2016: 9). Showing abject bloodied bodies on Instagram doesn't translate into solid, on-the-ground action or change, and Barkardottir warns of the pitfalls of a 'limited politics of visibility' as a 'means to an end' (ibid.). After all, conducting radical aesthetic experiments with one's menstrual blood in the privacy of our middle-class bathrooms with fresh running water, and then sharing it on Instagram, remains at best a form of privileged feminism. It is an affordance that is seldom enjoyed by rural women who often live without the everyday luxury of a private menstrual bathroom or basic water and sanitation facilities. One must remember that Instagram hashtags such as *#Menstruation Matters* can only belong to a specific class demographic, thus giving rise to new forms of inclusions and exclusions in both online and offline contexts.

## Notes

- 1 For more on the 'postmodern globalization of the visual as everyday life', see Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999).
- 2 Many living in the rural heartland of the country do not enjoy access to digital technology.
- 3 See Young (2005). Her chapter on 'Menstrual Meditations' offers a brilliant insight into the 'private fluidity of the female body'.
- 4 In North-East India, the figure of the menstruating Goddess becomes an object of worship. The mythical Goddess Kamakhya of Assam is a menstruating Goddess whose fecund biological cycle is celebrated annually during the menstruation festival called Ambuvachi.
- 5 Dubey / *Kalmuhi* – no longer available online.
- 6 *Happy to Bleed* stories can be accessed at Bhandari (2015).

- 7 Rupī Kaur's controversial image can be accessed in Rao ([2015] 2017).
- 8 For more on Kaur's *Period* series controversy, see Dewey (2015).
- 9 Dubey / *Kalmuhi* – no longer available online.
- 10 I use the National Guidelines on Menstrual Health Management, December 2015, published by the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Government of India, as a prototype of official and policy material on the subject of menstruation in rural India.
- 11 Interestingly *Acchi Ladki*, when translated means the 'good girl'. The campaign was a feminist take on the notion of respectable, middle-class and proper Indian femininity. For more on the campaign, visit their Instagram page (#AchhiLadki).

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# 16

## Unruly images

### The activist visibility of technical and bodily disruptions on Instagram

*Vendela Grundell Gachoud*

#### **Introduction: a cross-disciplinary perspective on visibility and activism**

**V**isual activism is not only a kind of activism but also a kind of visibility. I build this claim on my work with glitch art and disability aesthetics, two practices that are rarely analysed together though they both criticize limiting norms (e.g. Grundell 2016, 2018). I argue that the visibility of these practices generate critique as much as their topic and context do. This agency risks being lost when visibility becomes an instrument for illustrating societal issues. Instrumental images may be strong in their explicit clarity, yet they depend on a presupposed transparency that rather obscures the mediation of the issue to which it directs attention. The key role of visibility in acting out resistance may then go unnoticed. In turn, a reduced visibility reduces activist impact. Counteracting this omission is vital in a network society whose 'socio-digital condition' operates through systems in which a lack of access to data becomes a disability (Ellis and Goggin 2015: 39; see also, e.g., Castells 2013). This condition is both ubiquitous and ungraspable as its premises stay hidden while they govern a flow of images that shape identities, for instance by normalizing stereotypes about various users and uses. Such rhetorical limitations get harder to scrutinize in the flow – and therefore, more acute.

In response to the spread of a socio-digital normality since the 1990s, glitch art and disability aesthetics scrutinize stereotypes by challenging our modes of seeing through technologies and through technological mediations. I focus on two spearheads in these respective fields, Kurt Weston and Rosa Menkman, who address norms about visibility by exploring visual impairment and by impairing visual technologies. These explorations support activist uses of photography, a medium centred on one sense – sight – that is at once given and stressed, privileged and precarious.



To contribute much needed research on the visual dimension of activism, I put forth the hypothesis that visibility gains an activist agency if it challenges notions of normality that limit our modes of seeing. In line with this hypothesis, my aim here is to analyse how activism manifests in images that challenge visibility beyond its instrumental function as illustration – images that make us see a societal issue differently by making us see differently altogether.

I test the hypothesis with a methodology that ensures a rich account of visual signification. The account unfolds in an innovative analytical model that combines media studies on technological dependence and disruption (e.g. Galloway 2004; Betancourt 2014, 2016) with disability studies on normativity and diversity (e.g. McRuer 2006, 2018; Ellcessor 2016) in a qualitative case study grounded in art historical image interpretation informed by semiotics and phenomenology (e.g. Andrews 2011; Schneider 2011). On this basis, I treat visibility as a multisensory and multimodal entwining of sight and seeing with visualization and visibility – thereby situating photographs as embodiments of the contested visual vocabularies that shape the social imaginary (e.g., Mitchell 2005; Mirzoeff 2006).

The cross-disciplinary framework facilitates an understanding of the dynamic between rules and unruliness as it captures the integration of social and technical systems that together situate images – and the bodies that they mediate – within a structure that defines what counts as normal (e.g. Cryle and Stephens 2017; Hamraie and Fritsch 2019). This unruliness stems from a questioning of how socio-digital rules normalize ability as a standard for optimized performance in a neoliberal discourse of austerity and augmentation. While rules favour things unbroken, the unruly accepts brokenness as core to the being and becoming of both individuals and systems. In dialogue with queer critiques against normality (e.g. Butler 1988), this acceptance empowers our vulnerability in a world that is poorly structured (e.g. May 2017: 1–7). To acknowledge entanglements between individuals and systems, I reconceptualize the glitch from technical error to systemic friction: as a disruption that is close and deep enough to reach from the intimate to the generic, and back.

With this approach, the case study demonstrates an affinity between two kinds of friction occurring under the socio-digital condition. The friction of glitches in a technical machinery causes ‘a sudden phenomenological intrusion, a break in the order of logic’ (Manon and Temkin 2011: 7). The friction of disabilities in a social machinery causes ‘ragged edges and blunt angles [. . .] right before their eyes and yet invisible to most’ (Siebers 2008: 65). Glitch art and disability aesthetics intrude on the invisible order of socio-digital ability. By being blunt and ragged, at an angle and on edge, their break of a prescribed logic directs attention to both societal issues and their mediation. In doing so, they activate the unruly body (Siebers 2006: 30, 64–5, 68; McRuer 2006: 6–7, 19, 31–4; *ibid.*: 2018: 22). I expand this bodily unruliness to include both human and non-human bodies: that is, images and the technologies that enable them.

I home in on the artists’ accounts on Instagram since this online platform is a prime exponent of a neoliberal visual economy and therefore a prime opportunity for activism embedded in the systems that govern digital image production and circulation (e.g. de Cauter, Roo and Vanhaesebrouck 2011; Mahoney 2020; Cocq and Ljuslinder 2020). The next section presents an analysis of images posted between 2016 and 2019, four of which selected for in-depth reflection, and followed by a concluding discussion. This discussion expands on key positions in the framework: particularly those of disability aesthetics scholar Tobin Siebers’s notion of disability as an ‘othering other’ (2008: 6), and media theorist Alexander R. Galloway’s notion of a glitch as an ‘injured, sore, and unguarded condition’ (2004: 206) related to political philosopher Todd May’s

notion of 'living vulnerably' (ibid.: 115–17, 166–7, 178–83, 197). The results are crystallized into two tactics because they reveal systems that limit our spaces for action, systems closed by default unless an intervention opens them up (e.g. de Certeau 1984; Garcia 2013). This small yet scalable investigation serves a tactical intervention by connecting aesthetic and conceptual inquiry, in a rare close-up of how unruliness takes form and makes meaning.

## **Activist visuality: two interventions**

### ***Kurt Weston: From the body to the machine***

Kurt Weston (b. 1957) went from fashion photographer to activist artist in response to losing his eyesight as a side effect of HIV/AIDS in the mid-1990s. He developed a new visual aesthetic along with a new perspective on visuality grounded in his experience of having limited peripheral sight in his right eye and no sight in his left eye. This aesthetic hinges on assistive devices that also facilitate Weston's everyday life like magnifying loupes, low vision optometry glasses, monitors with enlarging software and LED-illuminated camera controls. The latter indicates that he still uses a regular camera, which gains an assistive character as a tool to see. However, one significant change is that the camera often is a scanner. The scanographs are predominately self-portraits that serve the purpose of mediating blindness to a non-blind audience. Moreover, they do so as an insider's expression of going blind rather than being blind: in other words, a disabling process rather than a disabled identity.

The emphasis on disability as a process rather than an identity underpins Weston's activist stance. The sense of otherness arising from an identification as gay, HIV-positive and blind is an individual stigma, but one shared collectively across a diverse spectrum of abilities: 'we are all headed toward decay and disability' (Weston in McCulloh 2009: 100). I argue that this shared otherness is central to understanding disability aesthetics both as art and as activism since it emphasizes our vulnerability in a network society where a compliance with the socio-digital condition is necessary (e.g. Grundell 2018). This compliance motivates the need for assistive technologies to keep us functional in socio-digital settings, both online and offline. Weston interrogates this compliance when he incorporates such devices into his images – and then incorporates the images on Instagram, which is a key exponent of the network society.

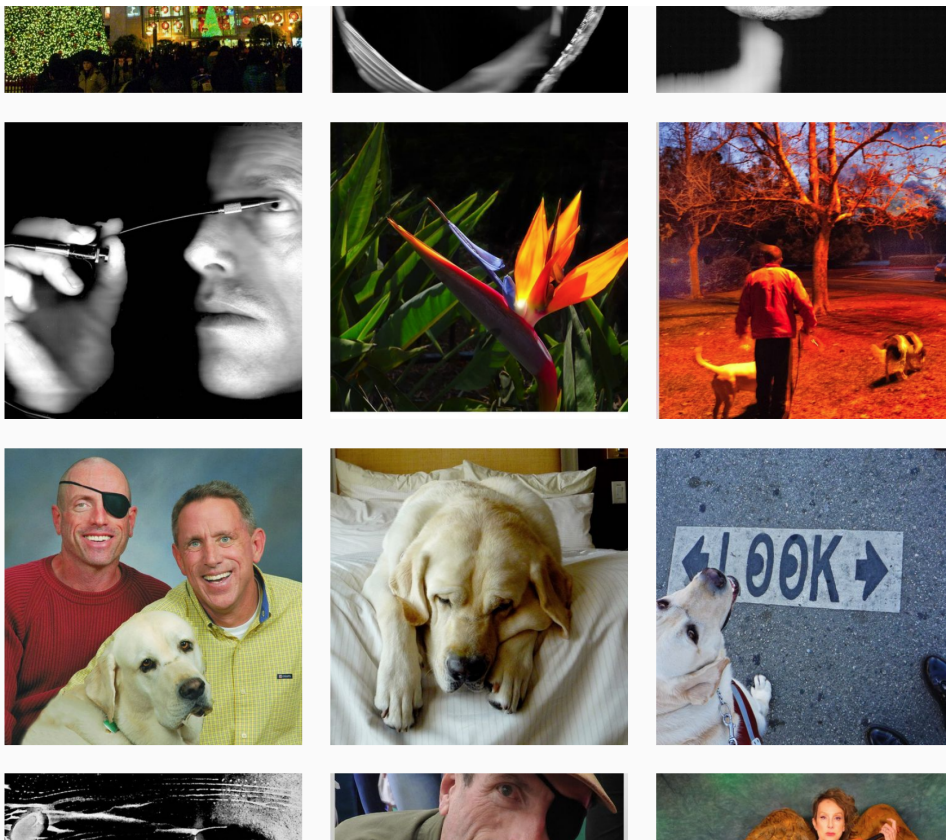
On his Instagram page (@kurttweston), Weston introduces himself as 'world-class photographer / legally blind since 1996 / blind visionary experimenting with altered views and perspectives' and a link to his art project *Healing Garden*. Despite the ambitious tone, the account is small – 189 posts and 160 followers – but numbers are less relevant to this analysis than these images being here. The mix of private and professional images reveals and resists the limitation of the social media platform, utilizing its networked structure to an activist effect.

The limitation pertains to the visuality of the platform as a social space, which mirrors the experience of interfacing with user-generated content across online networks where social interactions increasingly define each other visually. Like in other online galleries, the available viewer settings present the images either in a grid or in a sequence: two variations on a relational structure that directs the viewer's gaze towards coherence with what appears next. The display design favours a signature style, on the individual page and in the general feed of posts from

friends and recommended users. However, the average styles dominating the feed limit a signature style that stands out too much in the prescribed space. Images that do not conform to the norms of the platform, to social norms embodied in visual norms, thus become more conspicuous here than in a design that is more adapted for diversity. A physical gallery might more easily accommodate diversity with specific areas for visitors to move freely in between, but the current market logic generally favour conformist signature styles everywhere.

Weston's signature style stands out as a conspicuous aesthetic in both my feed and his own. At the same time, the aesthetic changes between his photographs are not always obvious at first glance since they are dispersed throughout the display of the account. Instead of secluding private and professional images into two separate accounts, they mingle so that art and life link up in a shared area. The brief introduction prepares the viewer for seeing art, but the individual artworks interleave with other images in a way that creates multifaceted relations.

The multifaceted mix is notable throughout the gallery, here spanning from September 2016 to December 2018 (see Figures 16.1 and Plate 52). The six posts in the centre of Figure 16.1 – from December 2016 – show *The Procedure* from the *Blind Vision* series, a flower sold at a recent exhibition and several appearances of the guide dog Ambrose including in a studio



**FIGURE 16.1** Kurt Weston's Instagram Gallery, Screenshot 2019. Courtesy © Kurt Weston.

portrait of the artist together with his partner. The surrounding images at the top and bottom edges of the screenshot show details of a Christmas tree at San Francisco Union Square, a selfie, the exhibited image *Advent Angel*, and three *Blind Vision* images among which *Losing the Light* had just been awarded and sold. The six posts in the centre of Plate 52 – from February 2017 – show Weston's vacation in Maui, his dog Sparkles, and four samples from his art projects *Blind Vision* and *Color Blind: Eye of the Beholder*, *Magic Magnifier*, *Glasses* and *View Master*. Around the six posts are *View Master* and *Braille Vision* from the same series, another Maui view, details of Ambrose, flowers and a butterfly.

These two representative samples from Weston's page demonstrate how visual activism can take form as an intentional intervention and as an unintentional consequence of interacting with a given curated space. The scale and character of this account suggest a more personal approach than explicitly dedicated accounts like Disability is Diversity with 1,026 posts and 18,700 followers. I argue that disability politics still happen here, in the mix of private and professional content. Weston's way of combining, captioning and tagging images address disability with an inclusive nuance that shifts the topic from its common designation as a special issue for a fringe group towards an everyday life shared by many.

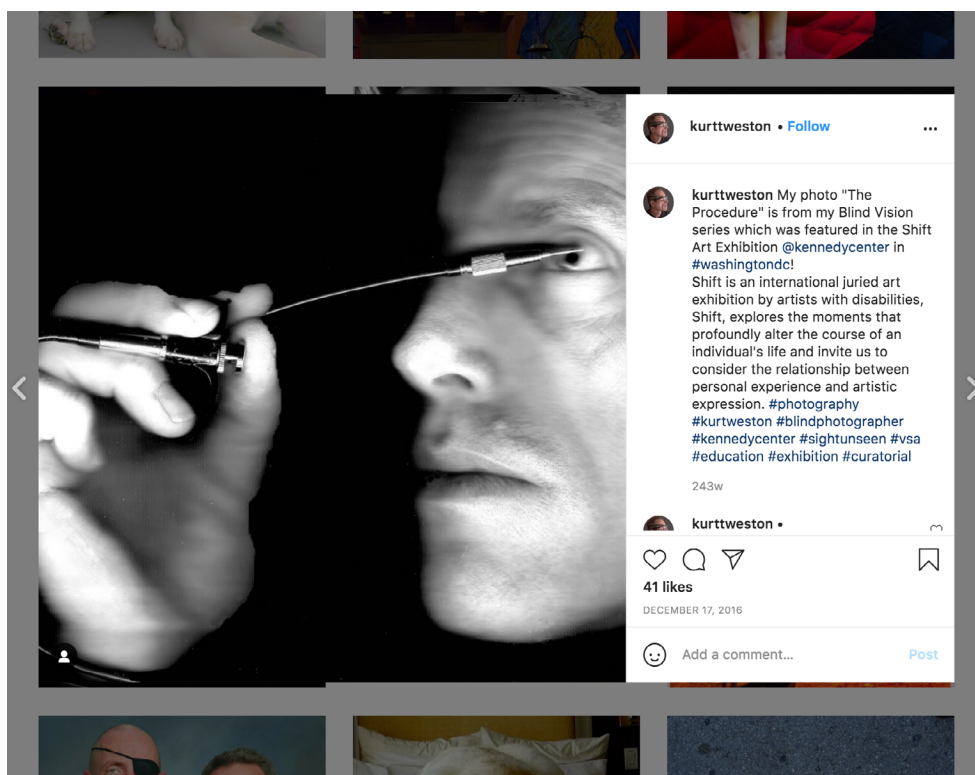
The artist's name appears as a tag only 63 times, yet a cluster of accompanying tags connects him within and beyond a disability community. Avoiding the tag #disability, which would bring him into such a community with its 832,000 posts but also narrow his reach with a possibly stigmatizing label, his recurrent connections are both more specific, like #blindphotography with 5,624 posts, and more generic, like #photography with 419 million posts. Rather than aligning with activist institutions like Disability Arts Online, with only 77 posts and 1,394 followers, Weston intervenes into the mainstream by joining his work to the 503 million posts found under the tag #art. Tags specific to visual media and spaces, like #lens with 3.6 million posts and #gallery with 23.4 million posts, anchor Weston's work in a field of professional art photography while such numbers point out that social media platforms like Instagram may counteract the discrimination barring disabled artists from mainstream fine art venues. The tag #colorblind is both specific and generic since it connects his art project bearing this title to 160,000 similarly tagged posts across the platform. The twenty-one images of Ambrose echo this double connection to communities living with and without disabilities, linking both to the 137,000 posts tagged #guidedog and the 145 million tagged #dogsofinstagram.

The tags signify a frequent crossover between professional and private content. Many tags add a location, like @california with 71.3 million posts, or a feature, like #sunshine with 64.1 million posts – generic enough to normalize living with blindness while inviting the specific experiences that a blind person might have of California or sunshine. Weston's captions underline the crossover. For instance, the image of the butterfly seems to be a personal memory for many since 12.3 million posts use the tag #butterfly. Yet, this butterfly also represents 'endurance, hope, change and life' – a theme explored in Weston's art projects *Seasons in a Prayer Garden* and *Healing Garden*, which spills over to the images of natural beauty that abound here. Likewise, the tag #lovewins gains an activist depth next to the portrait of the artist with his partner and his guide dog. Shared by 6.1 million posts, here this tag connotes defiance when considering Weston's own 'journey into otherness' (Weston in McCulloh 2009: 100). Defiance shows in the captions of artworks too, when he presents *Magic Magnifier* as 'transcending the physical world and altering perception' and presents *Glasses* with the question: 'What glasses are you seeing the world

through?’ Regardless of what brings you to this account, such captions invite a reading of the images as activist since they encourage a response of critical reflection.

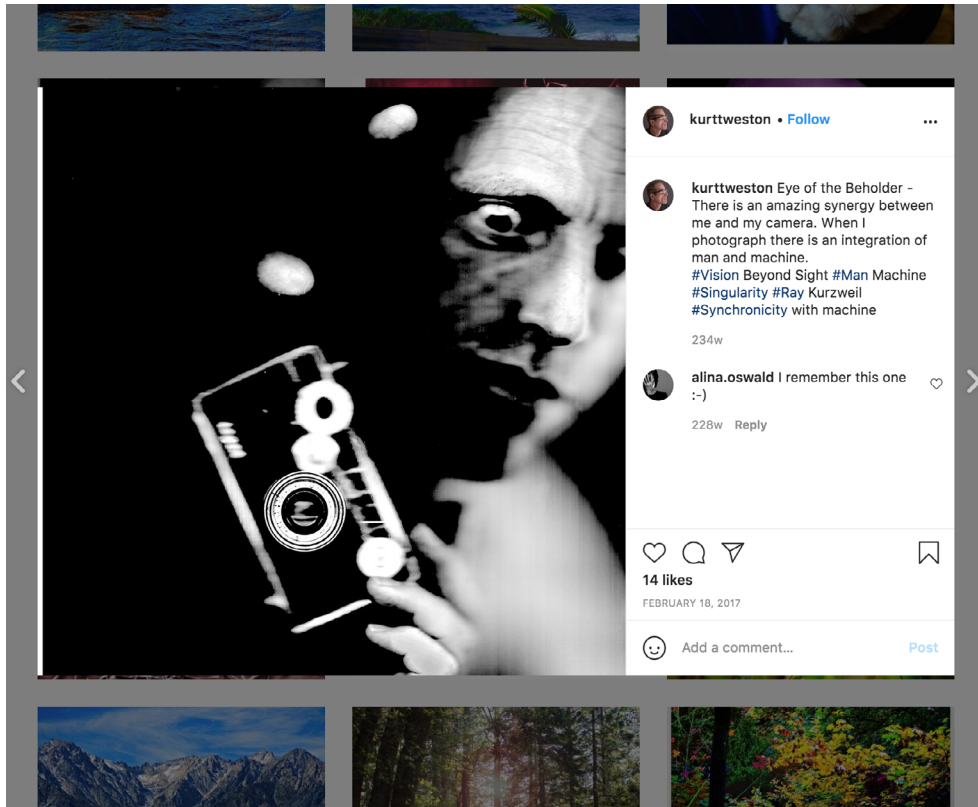
A closer look at two images (see Figures 16.2 and 16.3) shows how Weston’s activist stance develops visually in this networked environment by relating the viscosity of the body to the viscosity of the technology that mediates the body. Moreover, the appearance of these images in gallery and museum exhibitions – in analogue networked environments – adds interest to this display as a user-generated space emerging in between the conventional art institutions and the social media commons that organizes contemporary visual culture.

Posted on 17 December 2016, an image entitled *The Procedure* stands out in the feed due to its stark motif and aesthetic (see Figure 16.2). Like other images in the *Blind Vision* series, this is a self-portrait created with a scanner. The technical properties of the production process shape the aesthetic as they give a shallow depth of field with heavy contrasts and patchy blurs, modulating the artist’s face and hand as they press against the scanner glass. The left side of the face and the right side of the right hand dominate the visual field, the illuminated space of the body mirrored by a surrounding expanse of flat black. This negative space appears massive rather than empty, enveloping the body so tightly as to encroach on it while both articulating and disarticulating its textures and boundaries. A dynamic between embodiment and disembodiment unfolds in these



**FIGURE 16.2** Kurt Weston, *The Procedure* (2011), Instagram, Screenshot 2019. Courtesy © Kurt Weston.





**FIGURE 16.3** Kurt Weston, *Eye of the Beholder* (2004), Instagram, Screenshot 2019. Courtesy © Kurt Weston.

details, as the face and hand appear as separated parts yet retain a visceral physicality that becomes palpable with their extreme proximity to the pictorial plane.

The tension mounts around and through the body – the darkness caused by the scanner lid pressing down on the body, the body pressing down on the scanner glass as the harsh light passes upwards and across. This tension is concentrated to the object bridging the space between hand and face, visually keeping the body together: a camera shutter release cable, meant to represent a syringe (Weston 2021, email to author). Weston's fingers curl firmly around the cable as he directs its tip towards the retina of his left eye, the eye that can no longer see. This move adds to the tension in the image and points to the complexity of its title. The procedure is a medical one, recalling a treatment that accelerated Weston's blindness instead of restoring it as planned. This background is missing here but is included for instance in an artist statement, an exhibition catalogue and a biography (McCulloh 2009: 100; Oswald 2012: 115–35; Weston 2021). However, the caption states that this series featured in *Shift*, an international juried art exhibition by artists with disabilities that 'explores the moments that profoundly alter the course of an individual's life and invite us to consider the relationship between personal experience and artistic expression'. The title and the caption hint at this medical experience as just that moment, giving the image a documentary straightforwardness.

The image's documentary dimension supports Weston's activism by pointing to the doubly disabling experiences of going blind and undergoing a botched treatment. These experiences occasioned the creation of the image, which thus exists due to an activist drive to share a personal experience publicly to transform its implications. As a result, the private trauma enriches a collective discourse about vulnerabilities that affect everybody – meaning, everybody – in a network society whose neoliberal market logics favour a slim ableist definition of normality. This interweaving of the personal and the professional, the private and the collective, finds a pragmatic form in Weston's Instagram gallery. In a row of three, the artwork *The Procedure* is followed by a flower featured in an art exhibition and an evening walk with the guide dog in the park, continuing in the next row with a family portrait. They all express aspects of living life with disability but mix in a way that avoids stereotyping.

I argue that the visuality of the image pushes its activist drive since the aesthetic overruns the verbal framing. The caption and the tags transcend disability by linking to both #photographer and #blindphotographer. Yet, the image does so without any clues to blindness. The image embodies a vulnerability to disablement as the syringe-like cable anchors the mediation, whose uncertain technical operation mirrors an uncertain medical operation – as well as mirroring the literal and metaphorical uncertainties of photographic operations, from staring into a scanner lamp to haring the capture on Instagram. Weston's grip on the invasive object signals a reclaiming of the agency that he lost when the treatment injured instead of cured him. This performative turn subverts the procedure done yet leaves a question about the implications of doing it yourself. The image performs activism as an act against acts done to you, leaving neither disabled nor other viewers off the hook. The visual means that Weston employs thus echo the negotiations between individual and system that define social and technical ability (Siebers 2008: 54, 188–90; McRuer 2018: 19).

While *The Procedure* exemplifies visual activism by calling attention to an embodiment of disability that subverts a stereotypical visualization, another image from the *Blind Vision* series does so by calling attention to how the subversion is created. Posted on 18 February 2017, an image entitled *Eye of the Beholder* stands out with a similarly stark motif and aesthetic but switches the syringe-like cable for another piece of equipment: a camera (see Figure 16.3). Both syringes and cameras serve to enhance eyesight through technological protocols for processing external light, here incorporated into images produced in the internal light of the scanner. They signify how light vacillates in the process of losing eyesight, underlining Weston's focus on going blind rather than being blind. While referring to his reality as a blind photographer, they function as props: the cable cannot insert anything into the eye and the camera cannot capture any photographs. The objects hold a double status as real and fictional, turning a lived-through trauma into a dramatization that helps to process it. Again, this reclaimed agency hinges on visualization, in the optics of the camera and the optics of the eye – his own and other eyes, as the title suggests.

Weston and his camera divide the pictorial space in *Eye of the Beholder* – one at each end of a diagonal that marks his lean towards the right-hand side of the image, into the glass where the scanner light illuminates his body and away from the compact darkness where it does not. Two soft fingertips accentuate the midline, above the sharp metal frame of the camera held in the left hand with the little finger flattened between the exposure button and the glass. Blotchy black outlines the nose, mouth and chin tilting off this axis. Forehead lines and veins, eyebrow bone

and nose ridge whiten as they touch the glass. The left side of the face with the blind left eye blurs beyond the depth of field as the right edge of the image cuts across, left shoulder hinting at the body behind. A white and black rim emphasizes the bulge of the right eye, the eye with peripheral vision. The rounds of the eye, the fingertips and the camera align so that their visual echo signals a prosthetic connection: 'to photograph to see' (McCulloh 2009: 2). The caption and the tags state Weston's sense of synergy and synchronicity in 'the integration between man and machine', promising a future where technology reconfigures impairment. While Weston's reference to himself and his camera repeats a conventional understanding of the interface as a harmonious coordination between man and machine (e.g. Merriam-Webster), 'man' may be any human and 'machine' may be any technology with which to shape and express a self.

In my analysis, the integration between Weston and his photographic apparatus includes his Instagram images that avoid isolation under labels like art and disability. The online gallery extends the scope of disability-themed exhibitions like *Sight Unseen* and *Shift* by mixing strictly curated artworks with seemingly spontaneous personal posts. The artist's statements condense everyday moments that infuse the art with references to real life, appearing next to or on top of each other in the see-through display grid. The social media interface emphasizes this mix as it encourages searching, following, saving, sharing, commenting and taking pictures from inside the app. While these features are inaccessible to some users with disabilities, this visual integration supports a social integration since it emphasizes the social dimension of visibility – like Weston's aesthetic does, rooted in the changed perspective on seeing that his changing eyesight caused. His interest in self-exhibition – 'starring myself as an abnormal, anti-conventional, and culturally marginalized body' (Weston 2018, email to author) – fits a social media logic that favours able-bodied users yet subverts the logic by creating multiple contexts for his images and for himself. His multiple visual presence in this social space refutes ableist visualizations of what a blind photographer is or does. Whether you find disability-related images like these by intention or by chance, their subtle confrontation facilitates activism with a visibility that tactically disrupts our modes of seeing – our default modes as sighted users.

### ***Rosa Menkman: From the machine to the body***

Rosa Menkman (b. 1983) is an artist, curator, and researcher in the field of critical media art since the early 2000s. This activity becomes activism through Menkman's focus on technical accidents, whose resulting noise 'can facilitate an important insight into the otherwise obscure alchemy of standardization via resolutions [that] imposes efficiency, order and functionality' (Menkman n.d.[a]; see also, e.g., Grundell 2016). Her work channels this insight in visual form by disrupting the hidden protocols of pervasive digital systems, thus developing alternate ways to use technologies that shape our perceptions: to see the machines that see us. With her work exhibited in international art institutions, and a strong presence online, Menkman's user-generated alternatives benefit from a conventional exposure that they also help to challenge.

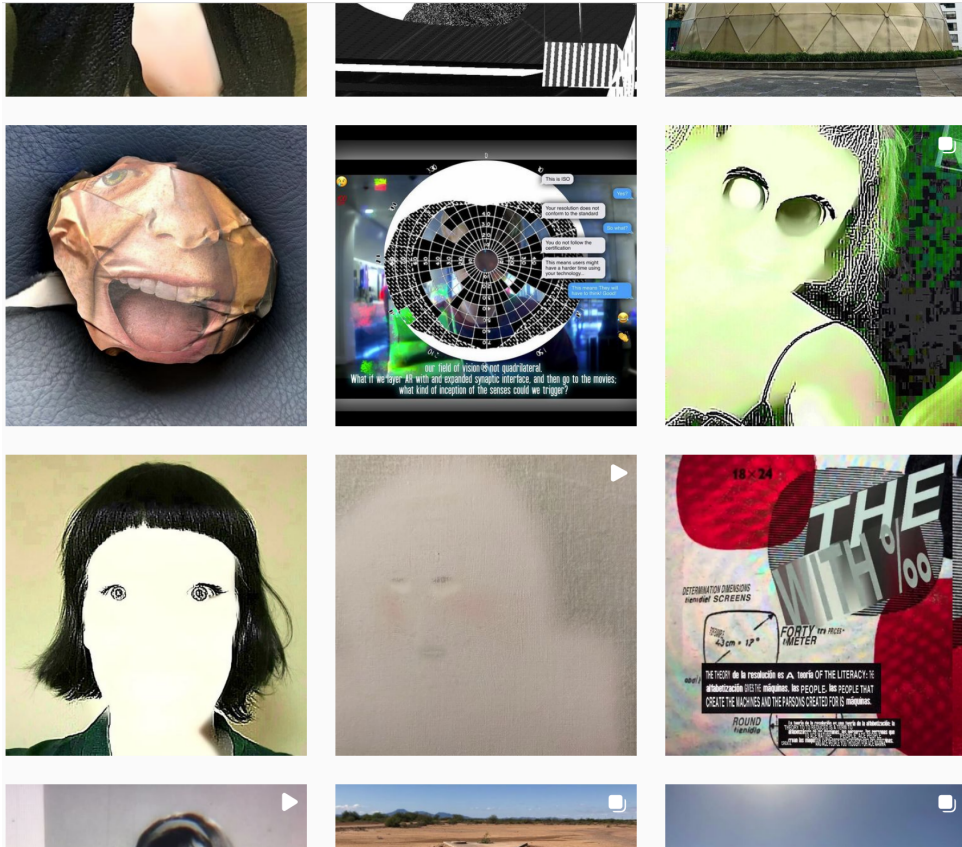
Menkman's practice serves as activism with a specifically visual character because its noise challenges mainstream network society. Noise bothers the limits of the visual, which are redrawn as the socio-digital condition increasingly integrates computers and cameras through what

Menkman calls the 'alchemy of standardization'. The devices that dominate our image-laden life thus perpetuate this undisclosed yet formative process. For instance, key features are habitually designed and marketed presupposing a sighted user, who enables the production and circulation of images that are geared towards visual perfection and thereby confirm the sighted norm. Visual activism targets the ableist ideal behind this process by revealing it as both enabling and disabling. If Weston does so by using his impaired sight to reveal how his more perfectly sighted viewers embody a prejudiced privilege, Menkman does so by disrupting this privileged sight as her images reveal the prejudice below their perfect surface.

The artist introduces herself on her Instagram page (@menkman) with a link to her project hub Beyond Resolution. No other statement situates the account within the social context of her work or life. This account is older and larger than Weston's account is but contains fewer posts: 3,068 followers and 117 posts from 25 December 2012 until '22 hours ago'. Rather than mixing private and professional content, as Weston does, Menkman's content is mostly professional but presented in a casual tone that invites a personal response. This response amplifies the social activity that is mediated through the account, especially since tags are so scarce. The sample posts include only one tag once, in connection with the Next festival in Bratislava – #leaderlady, referring to the artist's exploration of imagery with models who appear at the beginning of film reels to test the rendering of colour.

Menkman's presentation suggests a continuous curation of content, suited for users who are familiar with her work and suited for the platform. While following the standard structure, tiny differences between Weston's and Menkman's accounts indicate that their social activity serves by complementary tactics. Weston's tags enable the constant reconnection that is needed to carry the activist content of his images out from a social margin towards mainstream audiences across the platform. Menkman's captions, and the visitors' comments, enable her images to reconnect in another direction: out towards the platform's networks but from within its technological infrastructure that the artworks visually disrupt. The analysis of Weston's account clarifies a similar disruption as his artworks deconstruct visual equipment and their socially situated meanings. Weston's mix of personal and professional content, which makes visible the platform's limitations and possibilities for addressing ableist notions of normality, links up with Menkman's mix of noisy content with content that is not noisy and therefore looks normal according to the mainstream discourse of visual technology. While neither artist causes any technical disruption to the platform, on whose operability they depend for visibility, their visual noise enters the viewer's experience of browsing through a feed that habitually favours smooth transitions. In doing so, they demonstrate how the visual level of online social activity can translate into visual activism. Their different approaches exemplify how users move through the same platform along routes that may never intersect – but also how users can set up a link between them with a simple search, like I do when conducting this analysis. With Weston's route in mind, two posts in Menkman's gallery are detailed next (see Figure 16.4 / Plate 56 and Plate 53).

The six posts in the centre of Plate 53 – from March to April 2019 – document Menkman's residency at Computer Graphic Arts Society in Tokyo during Japan Media Arts Festival. These posts contain snapshots and videos, in altogether thirty-two still and moving parts. They comprise a visit to Nezu Museum and the art collective teamLab's installation at Mori Building Digital Art Museum, two examples from Menkman's series *365 Perfect*, views from the residency space with an exhibition at Ginza Sony Park and the recently published first image of a black hole. The



**FIGURE 16.4** Rosa Menkman's Instagram gallery. Screenshot 2019. Courtesy © Rosa Menkman. (See also in colour, Plate 56.)

six posts above and below the screenshot – seventeen parts, from February to May – show details of exhibited artworks as well as visits to the Kihoku observatory. The six posts in the centre of Figure 16.4 and Plate 56, from November 2018, contain altogether fourteen snapshots and videos. A slide from a course that the artist teaches at Kunsthochschule Kassel followed by three portrait experiments and a screen-based piece tagged in Bratislava, and the print paper used to wrap fast-food in Bogotá with a gaping face that resembles the artist's work. Around these six posts, twenty-three parts – from October and November – detailing commissions for the festivals in Slovakia and Colombia, like the #leaderlady noted earlier, alongside art-related travels to for instance the Corona Satellite Calibration Targets in Arizona.

These two representative examples on Menkman's page confirm an observation from Weston's page: interactions within this given space shape a visual activism even beyond intention. The visual structure, where each post is a single unit in a grid or a sequence, enables a viewing mode that, in turn, enables a relational structure where interactivity builds on coherence. The display structures both content and context since a signature style gets attention for standing out in the fast-paced feed while the signature itself depends on a coherent iteration in the individual gallery. A coherent style may thus generate a context that is easily re-cognizable but simplifies the content: visually



clear but socially shallow. Against this streamlining tendency, Menkman's aesthetic complicates the content rather than simplifies it. Her distinct visual style offers a distinct social engagement by pointing out how technologies steer the user's creation and experience of content. As the selected posts make clear, it does so with elements that are integral to the display's design since they facilitate the construction of a context that links each post to the networked environment within and beyond Instagram.

In the sample posts, the emerging context extends in several directions through captions and comments as well as the inclusion of multiple parts – elements that open the given format to further complexity. For instance, the post from the digital art museum (see Plate 53 – top middle) connects experiences of experimental art with everyday life in network society. The caption conveys the artist's interest in installations that explore the materialization of light and its effect on human perception, but also her concern when such installations become spaces for selfies more than for self-reflection. Her note about 'a strange hybrid of theme park and what they call an "exhibition" [. . .] a weirdly derivative commercial clone' echoes in replies that weave macro and micro aspects of networked experience: escapism, accessibility, attention span. Other posts expand their context by utilizing this networked experience. In the nine-part post from a residency (Plate 53, bottom right), Menkman shares images from a work-in-progress exhibition with pieces by herself and fellow participants, as well as links to her presentation slides on Flickr and to her website where the research that underpins the art is published awaiting its official release. In this expanded space, intimately detailed art comes closer to the viewer than it would do elsewhere while also interlacing with what is not quite, or not yet, art. Two posts with screens (see Figure 16.4 and Plate 56) convey Menkman's resolution theme, the one in the bottom right referencing it as a theory of literacy visualized in a montage of languages and the one in the top middle playing it out as a chat between the system ISO and a non-conformist counterpart that may be human or non-human. Only a caption situates the two posts in different contexts by linking the latter to the artist's academic course on screens: 'there is not 1 story on the screen and I don't even try to give a full, final story'.

A closer look at two images (see Plates 54 and 55) exemplifies how Menkman's activity in this networked environment takes a visual form that facilitates activism. While Weston's activism starts with the body and extends from there towards a technological apparatus that enables or disables bodily differences, Menkman starts with the enabling or disabling of the apparatus that affects bodies through its mediation.

An image posted on 11 March 2019 stands out in the feed due to its ambiguous aesthetic, whose high-pitched colours and blunt shapes complicate a direct reading (see Plate 54). The exaggerated graphic elements are apt to garner the attention of a browsing visitor, but the difficulty in achieving a clear interpretation halts the feed's flow and thus resists the viewing mode of easy consumption that this platform makes desirable by design. This theme – desire by design – comes to the fore in the unpacking of this post.

The facticity of the graphic elements situates the image in between figuration and abstraction. The abstract areas dominate a pictorial plane that only admits surface play: a flat white section punctuated by black patches fills out diagonally from the left edge, its irregular border passing into billowing green strands surrounded by a choppy red around the top and right edges. Here and there, pixelated patterns hint at the glitching that cause this aesthetic. However, the abstract areas draw my eyes straight to the most figurative element: a hand. A left hand with curled fingers that

modulate the flesh, linked to the main material mass by the green tint and the thin line from its fingertips to the black patch. Along this line are the letters 'ck'. The caption fills in the rest: '365 perfect Shutterstock model'. My mind fills in the human presence.

The arrow in the image provides a shortcut that explains the connection between image and caption, as I click through nine stages that revert the artist's noise-inducing process to reveal a model sourced from the stock photography company Shutterstock. The letters 'ck' stem from the watermark stamp that appears across an image when you use it without paying the fee. Clicking forwards again, each stage adds noise when the artist runs the stock image through Perfect365 – a mobile imaging software for virtual makeup – but disrupts the app's technical process to subvert its conventionally desired result. The subversive edge emerges in the playful misuse of generic tools, implemented with slogans like 'augmented reality beauty' (Perfect365 2021) – a marketing veneer of empowerment through deleted blemishes and whitened skin. Menkman empowers the dismantling of veneer by dismantling visual tools that produce and reproduce beauty industry standards, showing how the veneer of language is inextricable from the technical mediations of bodily veneer. All are surfaces that users interface with in the networked environment: all become interfaces. Instagram gives space both for these tools to integrate users via direct image sharing and for Menkman to criticize this integration by reminding users of the control systems hidden under the surfaces.

A similar post, from 15 November 2018, expresses the artist's critique in a caption that indicates both incentives and implications of her creative process:

An AI listens to a trap tutorial and follows the rules, upside down. A 3D.obj tries to make a selfie with the help of a beautifying selfie software. Text recognition software interprets 30–70 years of image color test cards. . . What a mess, but of course it's beautiful! Software engenders distortions in our perception, it gives us the freedom to manipulate and change optics and meaning. We should not ask what is real, or what is fake, but what scope does the software offer us here, what is the expectation, and what is bias? (See Plate 55.)

Visually and verbally, both posts address the selfie culture generated on Instagram. The first post uses the beauty app to disrupt a conventionally beautiful image of a model, the second post uses it to disrupt a self-portrait. Menkman used the app hundreds of times over a year, re-saving each iteration until 'the artifacts of a re-compressed JPEG and the absurdity of our beautifying standards are amplified' (n.d.[b]). The nine parts in Plate 55 shows only distortion – the visitor never arrives or returns to a source that is recognizable as photographable realness, which the app ensures through its face detection service developed for putting on makeup correctly. At the same time, the next two gallery posts broaden the spectrum of photographable realness (see Figure 16.4). The first (bottom left), captioned 'selfie', is a still image of a clearly outlined face with eyes and hair intact relative to the whiteout of other features. The second (bottom middle), captioned 'selfie with perfect365', is a video loop where three openings in a monochrome grey surface, textured like a softly spray-painted wall, occasionally reveals eyes that blink and a mouth that opens to emit a machinic sound. Displayed together, these posts stretch what counts as photographic normality.

Menkman's posts exemplify how the curation invites the visitor to engage: a curation that is structural, personal, intended and random. The design of the platform and of the individual material

shape the content, and the sequence and order of presentation, along with captions and comments. Furthermore, constant editing creates new constellations. A sibling to Plate 54 and 55 reappear in a post from the artist's residency in Tokyo in Plate 53 – and a new addition has moved the spread so that it includes the recently published first image of a black hole.

Nonetheless, Instagram as a one-on-one medium leaves us alone with our experiences. In Plate 54, the nine-part post begins with the biggest visual challenge as the most disrupted image is the vantage point of the sequence. When reversing the disruptive process, the stock image loses its status as a source for normal representation. The tension around visual normality thus affects available viewer positions. Having located some recognizable detail as a point of reference, I backtrack through the more indiscernible details to piece together the image. The choppy red supports the outline of a head, the green strands turn into hair, the black patches correspond to eyes that punctuate an even expanse of skin and the thin line becomes what it always was: a mascara wand, held in a similar way as Weston holds his syringe-like cable (see Figure 16.2). The pictorial plane admits to a background and a foreground – a three-dimensional body in photographable space. The key to this transformation is the dynamic of recognizability: finding a relatable body, unenhanced.

The images in Plate 54 and 55 begin in figuration and end in abstraction. I backtrack the other way. This movement indicates that the platform and the image encourage different viewer modes and roles. My search for familiar signs aligns with the platform's implicit ideal of coherence, but also shows how Menkman's work pushes against this ideal. The disruptive visuality activates the viewer to change modes, from the comfort of knowing what to see to the discomfort of reconciling contradictory input, and thus take on the role of exploring the unfamiliar or unknown. The neighbouring posts nudge this exploration onwards as they connote experiments with visual technologies, including another sample from the same series – recognizable enough to read and satisfy curiosity quickly. Such surroundings still help to build a context that confirms the noise of everyday devices, and the images they generate, by presenting disparate representations that all carry signs of vulnerability. Peeking out behind the close-up of Plate 54: in one corner, lights from the digital art show called a manipulative 'stage design for selfies', and elsewhere, shadows left by heat rays from an atomic bomb. Behind Plate 55: the abstract patterns of dithering, an intentional addition of white noise to reduce digital distortion – but also a state of nervous shivers (e.g. Merriam-Webster). At the opposite edge of the screenshot, the intentionally unnerving selfie resulting in a white blur of face and representational support. Unrelated images, but for the vulnerability of the technological apparatus and the vulnerability of the bodies integrated with it.

These disruptions extend the label of art accidentally yet purposefully, pointing to embodied and embedded noise: to what may or may not be glitched. To leave the visitor in this noise – to react to, interact with and act on – is a key to activating a switch in the modes and roles of viewing. Though you must log in to Instagram to access this mode, I argue that Menkman uses the platform tactically so that this activation takes on the significance of activism.

## Concluding discussion: a tactical use of legibility

[T]actical effects are allegorical indices that point out the flaws in protocological and proprietary command and control. [. . .] In its injured, sore, and unguarded condition, technology may be

sculpted anew into something better, something in closer agreement with the real wants and desires of its users. This is the goal of tactical media.

ALEXANDER R. GALLOWAY In *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (2004: 206).

[D]isability operates symbolically as an othering other. It represents a diacritical marker of difference that secures inferior, marginal, or minority status, while not having its presence as a marker acknowledged in the process. [. . .] [O]ne might say that the symbolic association with disability disables these identities, fixing firmly their negative and inferior status.

TOBIN SIEBERS in *Disability Theory* (2008: 6)

I conclude this chapter by probing the results of the case study, which demonstrate how visual expressions can generate and convey an activist stance. My vantage point is the exposure of vulnerabilities contingent in pervasive systems, controlled by the network society through technical and social protocols that integrate generic and intimate aspects of our lifeworld. As the analysis makes clear, this exposure connects glitch art and disability aesthetics that explore the visual operations of digital images on display online – an operation that becomes a tactical opportunity for visual activism. Setting Menkman and Weston in dialogue with Galloway and Siebers, I argue that the disruption of order that forces a social system to expose its deviant as an ‘othering other’ is akin to the disruption of order that forces a technical system to expose itself in an ‘injured, sore, and unguarded condition’. I approach this kinship with May’s understanding of vulnerability as a disruption of our sense of self, inevitable in our poorly structured world yet manageable if we recall how ‘rules or norms may be challenged by what is happening in the activity’ (2017: 14, see also *ibid.*: 1–2, 19) – an activity that, in this case study, expands into activism.

While Menkman and Galloway work on technical systems, and Weston and Siebers work on social systems, together they address social relations dependent on technological infrastructures that require a physical investment from their users. As users handle devices and navigate platforms, these infrastructures organize the embodied experience of presence in the network society. With so much of this society organized by visual means, especially how we construct and communicate our individual and collective identities, this presence is a visual presence. Both to claim presence and to grant it involves visibility: visibility, visualization, seeing, sight. Social norms thus take the form of visual norms: normal technologies enable normal images that in turn enable the user to count as normal. This process of enablement becomes disabling when it excludes certain users and uses. The negotiation about what counts as normal is at once social, technical, physical – and visual.

The photographic apparatus, especially on platforms like Instagram, both contains and generates vulnerability as it steers, tracks and targets the presence of users in the digital flow. Photography is fitted for containment as the medium stabilizes the random, redundant and noisy goings-on that happen to stick at the fleeting moment of exposure. At the same moment, the apparatus captures its own stabilizing process so that it becomes visible as a process – as an unstable unfolding of instances and elements that bring their randomness, redundancy and noise along with everything else: the goings-on go on. A disruption of visibility threatens a social, technical and physical system by revealing that it shares the vulnerability of its users.

The analysis connects visibility and vulnerability as Menkman and Weston visualize precarious relations between individuals and systems. Spontaneously or planned, they articulate a vulnerable

visuality that becomes an incentive for activism. Moreover, this vulnerability underpins images that expand the instrumental visuality of activist images; images whose visuality is perceived as transparent enough to mediate their content quickly and efficiently. My detailing of aesthetic specificities suggests that the images here are quick and efficient, too, yet they also demand attention to how materiality and situatedness anchor the momentum of their mediation. Therefore, they perform a resistance that doubles their potential: a visual activism through content and through form. Consequently, I argue that they provide support for my hypothesis that visuality gains an activist character if it challenges notions of normality that limit our mode of seeing. In short, not only a visual activism but also an activist visuality.

I substantiate my claim about an activist visuality by drawing out two tactics as key results of my analysis. Both tactics target legibility – first, the legibility of the image and, secondly, the legibility of the system where the image is displayed.

Weston and Menkman complicate legibility by undermining the reading of a coherent narrative that is visually accessible on a coherent surface. Fragmented layers of assembled bits break up the unified image, breaking the viewer's preferred position – a 'command and control' that mirrors how Galloway describes the system which determines viewer positions. Coherence and unity become harder to uphold when Menkman and Weston post unrecognizable selfies that connote selves who are uncomfortable in limiting categories of classification, thereby recognizing yet disregarding the ableist norm that socially and visually constitute users within technological infrastructures. Visual devices and platforms produce and reproduce this norm through the images that they enable. The case study exemplifies how images can reveal and resist the norm by visualizing differences with empathy, sharing how the reading of an image can be a struggle to see. The constellation of differences in this analysis points out that the break occurring in them both signals the impossibility of a unified body – human or non-human, neither or both, extending into one another as the techno=logical apparatus and the sensory apparatus become increasingly integrated. In both cases, this disruptive process takes place through a tweaking of visuality that begins in the production of the image and continues to challenge modes of viewing and reading in both the artists and their audiences. This visual tweaking hones an activist stance.

The display of these images on Instagram further emphasizes the relation between legibility and user modes. The platform incorporates users and images into a systemic structure, that is – into a space that is always already curated. At best, this structure encourages us to become our own curator. At worst, it discourages us from sharing anything that could disrupt the curatorial order too much. The case study describes how this order is simultaneously social and visual, for instance as it assumes a sighted user who adapts to a fast-paced feed with little time for reflection beyond an easily accessible surface. When Menkman and Weston insert less legible content into this highly legible structure, they support an activist visuality by amplifying the contrast between the flow of the system and the friction of the individuals in it. In doing so, they join the participatory cultures that circulate potentially deviant images in a media landscape where normality hinges on social, technical and physical ability. By entering a context that often excludes them – where, for instance, both users and images confirm the sighted norm – they use the systems that enable their images yet disables these systems at the same time. They use the structure to share a user-generated content that questions which user is discursively encouraged by the system. While the structure abounds with linguistic elements, from code base to verbal frame, my analysis suggests that the images drive this negotiation about legibility – about what and who reads as normal. To



reconnect with Siebers and Galloway, such images maintain an unruly presence that calls out how protocological and proprietary systems discriminate against otherness.

These two disruptions of legibility serve as tactics because they reveal and resist limiting conditions. To notice conditions that limit you is a tactical beginning of change, which is the end-goal of activism. The case study gives a rich example of an activist dimension to visual creation and display, rooted in the agency of the images and directed towards the systems that shape their materiality and meaning. By locating this visual activism to this context, the cases offer an alternative to the instant communication that characterizes mainstream activist images as well as mainstream cultures online. The work of these artists rather sneaks into the mainstream, in a subtle intervention that invites us to reflect on what, how and if we see. The images become tactical when they reveal not only the intervention as a break but also that brokenness is a part of being and becoming, resisting the ableist discourses that exclude it. In doing so, they refuse to preserve equanimity to instead take on the 'stress and conflict' that drives political change as a form of radical care (May 2017: 115–17, see also *ibid.*: 178–83, 197).

The viscosity emerging in the analysis intervenes into the basic systems of networked life that manage and mediate vulnerability while being unsettled by it: by the technical, social, and bodily deviation from the always already able. This viscosity invites all viewers to face their vulnerabilities. The 'injured, sore, and unguarded condition' thus exceeds the ableist technical system to become a quality of its users and their images, and the 'othering other' exceeds the ableist social system to facilitate a mutual empathy. This shift is a way of what May calls 'living vulnerably' – because 'we can blunt the force of some of our suffering with acceptance, but we cannot occupy a space beyond it' (2017: 197, see also *ibid.*: 166–7). While May reduces glitches to 'pointless suffering' (*ibid.*: 168–9), my analysis shows that glitchability aligns with May's view that acceptance begins when we recognize our lack of control (*ibid.*: 193–4). An experience of being glitched, not as an ontological essence but a socially situated disruption, is disabling in a way that is not restricted to bodies defined as disabled. All of us are the othering other: injured, sore and unguarded. To acknowledge this shared vulnerability is key to a sustainable community.

To conclude, my account of the interplay within and between digital images and their online displays shows how visual elements can gain a semiotic significance that encourages the viewer to take an activist stance. I argue that Weston and Menkman operationalize a critique against limiting notions of normality through the viscosity of their images. They thus participate in a visual negotiation about what counts as normal at the discursive border of ability and disability as it cuts across the social, the technical and the bodily. They do so by breaking and blurring borders, exposing the underlying prejudice that limits what bodies and technologies – and, especially, bodies in technologies – can do and be. Bringing their differences together highlights how this negotiation hinges on viscosity to both uphold and upturn limiting systems. In this way, they suggest a workaround to the depression that May suffers in a world that is 'badly put together' (2017: 2).

This productive and progressive case study shows how activism manifests in images that challenge viscosity beyond its instrumental function as illustration – images that make us see a societal issue differently by making us see differently altogether. The analysis thus fulfils its aim, furthering cross-disciplinary research on the activist potential in images at the intersections of the human and the non-human, as well as inviting further inquiry that complements quantitative approaches. Moreover, the pared down circumstances of this small-scale investigation call out an

individual address that matters from an activist perspective since it is the experiences of individuals that drive collective movements: see it to change it. Here is a reminder that all users can be activists if we critically engage with the systems that constitute our identities through our everyday media interactions. Since today's systems are overwhelmingly visual, engaging with visuality becomes a key tactic. For instance, the double role of the photographer as observer and critic holds a tactical potential for anyone to intervene into systems that limit their space for action. Whether or not we feel unruly, we can initiate the unruliness built into the photographic medium, as observers who question the means of observation like Weston and Menkman do. Online platforms like Instagram continue to be vitally important to this tactical questioning, since they offer a chance to explore the premises of a curated space that caters to the neoliberal visual economy of contemporary network society as well as to explore how to make that space our own as part of a sustainable community. In this chapter, we find a potent example of how to do just that.

## Further reading / viewing

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