

journal of visual culture



Editors' Introduction: Themed Issue on Visual Activism

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A person in a Tyvec hazmat suit enters the frame of the live feed – streaming in real time the aftermath of the Fukushima Daichii disaster – and, after some maneuvering, positions himself in front of the camera. Though the worker's identity is obscured by his uniform and his face is not visible behind his dark mask, his actions are clearly deliberate.¹ As he stands before a Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) surveillance camera, he raises his arm and aims it directly into the lens (Figure 1). The accusatory finger hovers there for around 15 minutes, pointing back at TEPCO, the Japanese electric utility that owns the nuclear power plant and is responsible for managing the effects of leaked radiation that displaced some 50,000 households in the region.

This action was performed anonymously on the morning of 28 August 2011 and broadcast as it happened on the internet. Compelled to respond, TEPCO officials addressed the incident in a press conference, but the finger also points beyond their headquarters, hailing us as viewers into a circuit of looking in which a worker stares down a corporate gaze, as well as implicates anyone who sees the choppy video on YouTube or glimpses a reproduced still. We are each singled out, accused, and drawn into the vectors of watching and being watched. A blog post written by someone claiming to be the 'finger-pointing worker' drew attention to the poor labor conditions faced by the low-paid subcontractors who were putting themselves at risk at Fukushima, and cited Vito Acconci's early video *Centers* (1971), in which the artist pointed into the camera, attempting to keep his arm more or less centered, as an inspiration.² Though Acconci's piece has been taken by Rosalind Krauss as pivotal to her theory of video's 'aesthetics of narcissism', here the same basic formal device is used not to indicate self-regard but as a way to puncture or punch through the screen, shattering any notion of a closed loop of spectatorship (Krauss, 1976: 50–64). Artist Kota Takeuchi, who worked briefly for TEPCO as part of the waste remediation

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Figure 1 Anonymous figure at the Tokyo Electric Power Company, 28 August 2011, video still, Fukushima, Japan (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ijwd2SeOU>).

effort and has incorporated the YouTube footage into gallery spaces for his exhibitions, has not officially revealed himself to be the finger-pointer, instead maintaining some tissue of secrecy as he refers to himself as the worker's 'agent'.

The masked man's potent gesture crystallizes one vision of visual activism, the subject of this themed issue. Here the realm of the visual is marshaled in the service of wider political efforts, as corporate negligence, environmental damage, and worker mistreatment are brought into dialogue with an iconic piece of video art. Moving nimbly between the accessibility of new media and the more controlled atmosphere of the fine art gallery (as installed by Takeuchi), this instance of visual activism turns TEPCO's own machinery of vision against itself. With its canny hijacking of the internet, the finger-pointing worker participates in what Critical Art Ensemble (1996) has termed 'electronic civil disobedience' and Rita Raley (2009) calls 'tactical media'. And while the act might be shrouded by the mystery of the worker's identity, it remains legible as a kind of 'intervention', meant to focus attention on a vital matter, to disrupt business as usual, if only briefly, or even, possibly, to effect change.³

A different modality of visual activism – one perhaps less immediately readable as 'activism' in a narrow sense – is found as the frontpiece for this issue. It is a self-portrait by the South African photographer Zanele Muholi of herself and her partner and collaborator, Valerie Thomas, side by side



Figure 2 Zanele Muholi, *ZaVa XXI SF 2014*, 2014. © Zanele Muholi. Reproduced with permission.

in bed, taken in a hotel in San Francisco (Figure 2) around the time of the 'Visual Activism' conference we convened, in which Muholi was a keynote speaker. In this image, Muholi has on a moisturizing face mask – thickly applied white cream that sits atop her skin – which both offers a glimpse into a normally private ritual of self-care and highlights the racial difference between the pair of lovers. We take the term *visual activism* directly from Muholi, and we credit her for inventing this phrase as a flexible, spacious rubric to describe her own practice, which documents and makes visible black lesbian communities in South Africa.⁴

Muholi's photograph – part of the ongoing series *ZaVa* (begun in 2013) – traffics in the politics of intimacy and the activism of affective and interpersonal exchange. Her double-portrait is charged by the formerly forbidden erotic proximity of black female skin and white female skin. In contrast to the man in the Fukushima live feed, the two women do not look straight into the camera; in fact, their somewhat nonchalant gazes are directed at slightly different places somewhere out of the frame to the left, suggesting we are glimpsing a moment (however staged) that is more quotidian than exceptional. Within the context of South African's history of segregation, the photograph's very ordinariness, including the two subjects' slightly bored expressions, is part of what makes it so striking. In another photograph from the series, Thomas is alone, her head turned away from the lens as she lies among rumpled sheets, her legs blurred out by the selective focus of Muholi's narrow depth of field (Figure 3). In yet another, entitled *ZaVa XXIII, SF 2014*, the artist is lying on the bed, her body curled inward, her back toward the viewer, and some of her hair reaches gently



Figure 3 Zanele Muholi, *ZaVa XXII SF 2014*, 2014. © Zanele Muholi. Reproduced with permission.

toward us (Figure 4). Taken together, the photographs become a meditation on queer texture and a tender, everyday closeness.

That such images are ‘visual’ is self-evident, but why might a photograph of two women in bed be claimed as ‘activist’? The term *visual activism* puts pressure on its constitutive words and raises questions about how we define both the regimes of the visible and the boundaries of activism. Can there be invisible activism? Are other senses or modes of perceiving eclipsed in this phrase? (We will further elaborate on this point below.) And 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; rather, 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. No art is neutral, of course, but the practices examined in these pages largely address themselves to economic, social, and political circumstances with special – if not fully transparent – intensity. In other words, we want to admit and take seriously as visual activism both the jerky, low-resolution video of a Fukushima worker in his suit and Muholi’s lushly printed color photographs of unclothed bodies on a bed.

We are building on rich conversations that precede us within art history, performance, and visual culture, including historical accounts of the intersection of art and politics from well before the 21st century and intellectual arguments about ‘commitment’.⁵ From TJ Clark’s discussion of Jacques-Louis David making public his urgently painted *Death of Marat* in a funeral procession for the martyred revolutionary in 1793 (Clark, 1999:



Figure 4 Zanele Muholi, *ZaVa XXIII SF 2014*, 2014. © Zanele Muholi. Reproduced with permission.

14–53) to theories of contemporary hacktivism, the scope of this subject – and its critical literature – is vast. In the contemporary moment, fierce debates rage in particular about ‘social practice’ and ‘socially engaged art’.⁶ 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.

We believe Muholi’s term furnishes a productive provocation, and we maintain it precisely because it raises so many questions. Some of the contributors to these pages directly confront issues of vision, visibility, and visibility; some actively identify as activists, while others do not. This themed issue aims to ask about, but not resolve, both how art can contribute to political discourse and how activism takes on specific, and sometimes surprising, visual forms that are not always aligned with or recognizable by art-world frameworks. Other questions that have driven our exploration and are sparked by the collision embedded in the term *visual activism* include: How can we engage in conversations about abstract or oblique visual activism, as is demanded in conditions of extreme censorship? How can we approach the complexity of governmental or commercial visual activism to better address hegemonies of visual culture (for example, in advertising and the mass media)? What becomes of the temporal lag that attends such images when the politics of visual production are only made legible in retrospect, with historical distance? How does the past become a form of visual activism in the present? To what degree do forms of visual activism travel, and in what ways are they necessarily grounded in locally

specific knowledge and geographically specific spaces? These queries, some but not all of which are taken up by this themed issue, point to directions for further reflection and research.

Most of the contributions in these pages have been adapted from presentations given at the two-day conference 'Visual Activism', which took place in and around the Brava Theater in the Mission district of San Francisco, 14–15 March 2014. It was an unusual kind of conference, sprawling and open-ended, headed in many directions at once, passionate, casual, and performative. The Brava, and the Mission, have played important roles within the activist landscape of the Bay Area, not least Brava's central place in promoting theater by women of color and the Mission's many murals generated by its Latino and Chicano communities, now threatened by rapid displacement. A workshop on the 'anti-eviction mapping project', held at Galería de La Raza, was but one of the projects sponsored by the conference that concretely addressed the physical siting of our location.⁷

The 'Visual Activism' conference emerged out of two different contexts. The first was that Muholi's earlier work was on view in San Francisco in the exhibition *Public Intimacy: Art and Other Ordinary Acts in South Africa* at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.⁸ The exhibition (and related projects at other sites in the city) included work by other makers, performers, and publishers who – whether or not they can be seen as traditionally activist – emerged from the particular intertwining of visual and social cultures in South Africa. The exhibition and the conference overlapped in at least one programmatic way: the performance titled *Inhabitant*, a work by Vaughn Sadie and Sello Pesa with Ntsona Dance Company (Figure 5), was a component of both. It concluded each day of the 'Visual Activism' conference. *Inhabitant*, originally created for the streets of Johannesburg, where it worked to make live and visible the dynamics of gentrification in that city, was translated to the 24th Street BART station (a few blocks from the Brava), where similar dynamics were – and are – being felt.

The second context informing the proceedings was that 'Visual Activism' was convened as the biennial conference of the International Association of Visual Culture (IAVC). The IAVC as an entity dedicated to bringing together scholars, thinkers, and makers from around the world interested in interrogating visual culture was announced at the 2010 Visual Culture Studies conference in London (we might call this 'IAVC Conference Zero'). The conference 'Now! Visual Culture', organized by Nicholas Mirzoeff at New York University in 2012, became the next. This second event was an important starting point and inspiration for 'Visual Activism', and it served as a model in several respects. 'Now! Visual Culture' managed to integrate visual culture studies with visual culture practice, and enabled broad participation in the agenda-setting and production of the event. It was also especially engaged with justice, protest, and change – informed, necessarily, given the



Figure 5 Ntsoana Contemporary Dance Theatre, *Inhabitant*, 2014, San Francisco. © Photograph Andria Lo. Reproduced with permission.

time and place, by the Occupy events in New York and around the world in 2011–2012. In many ways, ‘Now! Visual Culture’ proposed – perhaps in its intent, and certainly in terms of the discussions that took place – that activism could or should be an essential concern of visual culture as a field of thought and practice. If this proposition continues to emerge as a central concern of those who identify their work with the field of visual culture, it will be a fitting manifestation of the mission of IAVC (drawn up in 2011) as it aims to be not only a knowledge project, engaging with practices of transformation in the study of visual culture, but a political–ethical project, linking visual culture communities and constituencies internationally in ‘sites as various as the museum, the university, the artist’s studio, and emergent alternatives to them’ (IAVC, 2010).

Taking cues from the 2012 proceedings, ‘Visual Activism’ aimed to be a collaborative effort from the start. Dominic Willsdon, who was initially invited by the IAVC to organize the 2014 conference in San Francisco, asked Julia Bryan-Wilson and Jennifer González to join him as co-curators of the event. (He also brought on as project coordinator and fourth collaborator Malia Rose Sanford, whose organizational abilities proved critical to the effort’s success.) We met, both in person and virtually, for more than a year as we planned, changed direction, rethought, refined. From the outset, we wanted a conference that moved across an expansive terrain, one that would include all kinds of participants and audiences in an effort to blur the borders between academic scholarship, on-the-ground organizing, and artistic making.

We developed the conference with five priorities in mind: we wanted to test how activism, in its broadest possible sense, might be core to contemporary thought and practice in visual culture. We wanted to give particular attention to *forms* of visual culture practice, not only because the event was sponsored by an institution of art and design practice (the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) but because aesthetic concerns and visual analysis are at the core of our shared research interests and methodologies. We wanted to emphasize the relationship between the local spaces of the conference in San Francisco and more far-flung sites of contestation. We wanted the convening to follow inclusive, anti-hierarchical protocols, including prioritizing student-led conversations and activities. Finally, because we wanted to do as much as possible to reduce barriers of access to the event, we found a conference site that was fully accessible for those with disabilities, we managed to make the event completely free to attend, and we covered some of the costs of speakers.

Rather than begin by selecting speakers ourselves and hence drawing a predetermined line around a set vision of visual activism, we decided instead to issue a broad call for proposals, to see how others interpreted this phrase and what might be percolating that was not yet on our collective radar. In response to this call, we received more than 400 submissions. Given the surprising number of responses – and the enormous interest that was demonstrated in this topic – we wanted to incorporate as many of those submissions as possible. Ultimately, ‘Visual Activism’ included almost 100 named speakers, and the attendance and participation of more than 200 others.⁹

We selected a few central streams from among these many proposals, clustering papers around prominent themes that emerged from the call for submissions; these topics included environmental justice, queer tactics, networked activism, conflict zones, and population displacement. Thus the agenda of the event was driven by the assembled interests of those who responded to its open call. We also made invitations for keynote speakers, moderators, respondents, and others to produce affiliated projects and encounters in and around the main venue, occupying independent bookstores, alternative art spaces, community centers, and the streets and sidewalks outside the Brava. Our closest collaborators were our colleagues, the faculty and students of the Visual and Critical Studies program at California College of the Arts (CCA), notably Tirza True Latimer, Ranu Mukherjee, and Jordana Moore Saggese. (To name one example, CCA organized a program with Pratibha Parmar at Brava on the eve of ‘Visual Activism’.) Various media, and inter-media events, were pressed into service throughout the two days, including screen-printing demonstrations and a play inspired by Karel Čapek staged by Futurefarmers.

Despite our concerted efforts, international representation among the speakers was hard to achieve, especially since we had limited resources. We decided it made limited sense to fly people from overseas to have a conversation on environmental justice when, in theory, we could talk with them using video calling that promised immediacy and a collapse

of distance. Though we tried to maximize technology in an effort to decentralize the conference, too much of the time it simply did not work – a stark reminder of our dependence upon the very structures of capital that many of our speakers challenged. Nevertheless, participants at 'Visual Activism' represented dozens of countries, and the gathering was unusually and powerfully diverse.

Just as we tried to build upon 'Now! Visual Culture', we hope 'Visual Activism' provides ideas for future IAVC projects. As readers of this journal may know, the IAVC is a more fluid, spontaneous, and provisional entity than its rather formal name suggests. We believe the IAVC will have substance and impact only to the extent that communities of makers, thinkers, and writers continue to use it to assess and advance the purpose of visual culture studies and practice in the coming years.

With this themed issue, we wanted to retain something of the feeling of the conference, in which strict academic formalities were largely suspended. The form, or relative formlessness, of the conference was essential to its meaning. Its openness of structure and process and its inclusive and equitable staging of encounters were perhaps what most expressed the political interests of those present. Due to space constraints, not every contributor could be included in this themed issue. Rather, it was conceived as a way to extend the conversations generated out of the 2014 conference, as well as to create an independent, stand-alone 'textual exhibition' in which images would play a substantial role, actively contributing to our broad theoretical expansion of visual activism. The content of the journal takes a decidedly hybrid shape, including genres of writing that in some cases suspend usual expectations about citational practices. We sought an experimental juxtaposition of formats and encouraged our contributors to approach their texts and images as instantiations of thoughts-in-process rather than finalized 'products', which can too often feel inert on the page.

Though this themed issue was developed out of the conference, we understand it to be quite a different project, and it does not attempt to replicate what took place there. Nor does it attempt a mythic comprehensiveness with regard to the multiple – and rapidly multiplying – modes of visual activism that are proliferating around the globe. No single issue could possibly capture the range and diversity of important material generated by writers, artists, and organizers who are in the midst of rethinking how we conceive both visuality and activism. Nor could one journal begin to account for the wealth of historical examples that precede our current moment. Instead of quixotically grasping for totality, we approached this issue as a curatorial project, aiming to include a focused but varied mix of voices that included artists, activists, scholars, and critics. As we will discuss, some contest the phrase *visual activism*, others embrace it.

In terms of structure, we have organized the texts into sections based on format: Provocations, Portfolios, Articles, Conversations and a Coda. In

short 1000-word provocations, we encouraged six writers, activists, and artists (Ariella Azoulay, Deena Chalabi, Macarena Gómez-Barris, Electronic Disturbance Theatre 2.0, Miguel López, and Tina Takemoto) to think about visual activism by making reference to specific practices or images. We asked artists and activists Aaron Gach, Cheyanne Epps and Kyle Lane-McKinley, and Avram Finkelstein to create portfolios or visual essays, sequencing images together to form an argument that unfolds on the page, accompanied by short explanatory paragraphs.

Five scholarly articles provide in-depth and focused examinations on images, collectives, and tactics that span the globe, including the fraught use of the internet during the Arab Spring (Elisa Adami), the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (TJ Demos), a series of photographs taken in 1979–1980 by French photographer Gilles Peress in Iran (Amy Lyford), the mobilization of absences in the wake of such devastations as Fukushima (Trinh T Minh-Ha), and radical queer youth organizations (Carlos Motta).

In addition, we have included several pieces based on conversations that took place during the conference: a performative text about the challenges of transnational address by Jerome Reyes, Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi and Nine Yamamoto-Masson; the transcript of a discussion between Dominic Willsdon, Teddy Cruz and Favianna Rodriguez; and the question-and-answer portion of a conversation between Zanele Muholi, Selaelo Manny and Valerie Thomas. Lastly, we asked Shannon Jackson, a central voice in this field, to respond to the entire issue as a critical coda or afterword.

Each contribution could be seen as an item on an eccentric checklist in our phantom textual exhibition on visual activism, and we will return to the concerns they raise in more depth. The works depicted and discussed do not speak in a single voice – they are alternately serious and light-hearted, direct and vague, documentary and fanciful. Through this variety, the projects and articles in this issue invite us to consider how vision and visibility are produced within conditions of hegemony and yet can become the driving force, the capillary movement, of people, resources, and knowledge pushing back. A number of overlapping and intersecting themes emerge regarding what visual activism might constitute, how it operates in different contexts, and even how the term might ultimately fail to account for that which it hopes to describe.

In the time that we have worked together on the conference and this themed issue, the urgencies of the present have necessarily had an impact on our thinking and weighted us toward considerations of the current moment. Though the temporal scope of the conference was quite wide, reaching back to the early 20th century, most of the contributions in this journal are intentionally geared toward the last few decades – and in some cases, the last few years. In the time since the conference occurred in March 2014, one issue has exploded into new levels of visibility in the US context: the

movement #BlackLivesMatter, which emerged as a result of more national attention to the persistent state violence against black men and women. First formed in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of teenager Trayvon Martin, #BlackLivesMatter was the brainchild of Bay Area black women activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometti, and has become a major voice in antiracist organizing efforts.¹⁰

As a way to honor this movement, we have included a page of hashtags that circulated from August 2014 (the month in which white police officer Darren Wilson shot unarmed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri) to August 2015 (when Geneva Reed-Veal led a die-in in Chicago to protest the death of her daughter Sandra Bland in a Texas county jail) (Figure 6). It was during these 12 months that we edited this issue, and we wanted to graphically represent some of the phrases that have been ever-present in our own visual fields, seared into our minds' eyes, and have moved us to action. The contemporary use of the hashtag, though often taken as a given, is a complicated visual phenomenon that links typography, text, and an interactive invitation to share, respond, and contest using social media. Hashtags are ways to tag, label, and emphasize phrases amid a sea of information; they are tools of aggregation and connection. Our page of hashtags, however crowded with slogans and names preceded by the recognizable slanted-grid number character, barely scratches the surface; we could have included thousands of others. Each is swarming with visual incident and is loaded with its own particular history, mourning, and anger. They are associated with each other, literally and spatially, when they are used in a string on Twitter. Within the realm of social media, they have become an implicit call to do something, if only to add one's voice to the stream.

These proliferating hashtags about policing and structural racism – whose circumstances too often unfold around contested accounts of what people see, or think they see – indicate how a developed dialogue about the potentials and fault lines of visual activism is needed more now than ever. These hashtags – like all acts of communication – are inherently unstable and open to resignification: #baltimore might help consolidate information about racial injustice in that city at present, but it could also be used to promote the municipality, to tag a local sports team, to showcase a pretty sunset, or to advertise a civic event. Visual activism can be politically conservative activism (and often is). The hashtag #takeitdown, originally referring to the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State House in the wake of a massacre by a white supremacist, was repurposed, within a few short months, by homophobic commentators as a way to insist upon the removal of the gay pride flag. Hashtags change, evolve, and devolve in unpredictable ways, and their mercurial character proves to be both a strength and a weakness. By the time this themed issue is printed, the potency of some of these hashtags might have faded away or been diluted, but we hope our collection might act as an ongoing reminder of the extreme mobility of visual culture.

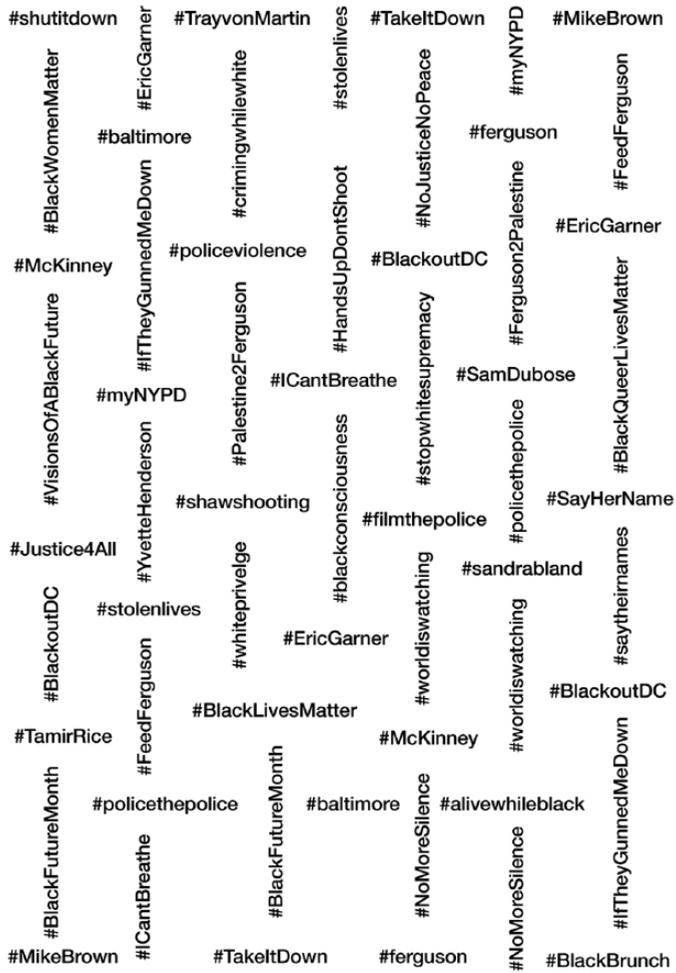


Figure 6 Activist hashtags affiliated with the #BlackLivesMatter movement that circulated during the period this themed issue was being compiled (from August 2014–August 2015). © Word cluster by Betty Ho. Reproduced with permission.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue begin to provisionally map some of visual activism’s potentials and fault lines. The instability of meaning ascribed to images, the complicity of viewers in the construction of interpretations, and the transformation of perception are central to several articles and interviews in the issue. Rather than attempt to write summaries of each text, we turn now to dive into selections from the journal as they have in different ways helped us formulate two crucial questions: How

does the visual culture of the recent or distant past play a critical role in the possibilities of seeing today? And who decides what should be seen, and what should remain invisible? If, as Trinh T. Minh-Ha argues, 'invisibility is built in each instance of visibility' and each is the 'condition for the advent of the other', our study of visual culture needs to always be an inquiry of that which operates at its limit. Employing several poignant examples, she traces the kinds of visual absences and presences that function to critically engage the visual imaginary of politically charged conditions, from the Japanese government and mass media's responses to the Fukushima nuclear disaster to the Chinese authorities' efforts to limit Tibetan access to Western newspapers. About the latter, she writes:

The guards performed their own brand of censorship and started delivering newspapers with missing stories – any article mentioning Tibet favorably was transformed into *a hole* cut into the page. However disconcerting this might have been, it did not deter the Tibetan prisoners from rejoicing upon seeing those *glaring holes*, for they knew each one represented something good someone was saying about Tibet. (emphases in original)

In this case, visibility and invisibility produced the same results.

Calculated omissions can nevertheless also be politically ruinous. Working from a rare 1950s image of a Palestinian man gesturing to the losses brought about by the 1948 destruction of monuments in Jerusalem, Azoulay asks us to imagine why there are so few photographic images of Palestinians showing resistance to their forced evictions. A number of factors are at play, of course, including the restriction of Palestinian access to photographic equipment and processing during this period, and the demand that Jewish photographers produce positive images of the new state. But are these the only reasons? Azoulay insists that we also pursue the question of the archive, and its omissions, censorship, and intentional misattributions, introducing the concept of 'unshowable photographs' as those that 'render from the common the meaning that was violently appropriated from them by prohibiting others from acting and interacting with them'. If, as Jacques Derrida (1996) suggests, archives are not merely 'economic' repositories of the past but, ultimately, promises made to the future, the archival prohibition and silence of libraries in Jerusalem (i.e. the burying of Palestinian traces) reveal such one-sided 'promises' to be an active form of visual erasure.

It is precisely against this kind of silence and erasure that Giuseppe Campuzano constructed the Transvestite Museum of Peru, erected in 2004. As López writes:

Among many other issues, the Transvestite Museum posed two key questions: First, how is one to write the history of subjects who have

been continuously erased from history? And second, what kinds of knowledge do the bodies of sexual minorities produce that are still unintelligible to dominant modes of discourse and narrative construction?

He continues:

It is a question of the demand for a narrative of our own, for fictions able to liberate other forms of existence without which any image of the future worthy to be imagined would be unthinkable.

Without a past, there can be no future; without the visible signs that trace an alternative lineage, even a fictional lineage, existence becomes limited to the always-present conditions of marginality and the pressures of normativity. The activist gesture of creating a museum allows for an imagined community to see itself and be seen by others, despite violent hostilities that continue to threaten transvestites in Peru and elsewhere to this day.

Other forms of violence are at the heart of Epps and Lane-McKinley's collection of drawings of objects (candy bars, hair combs, flashlights) that have been mistaken by police to be guns in the hands of their (mostly black) owners. This simple visual *misperception* creates the conditions for tragic losses of life throughout the United States on a nearly weekly basis. An internet project maps the locations where the incidents occur, and invites users to create street posters with QR codes that will link to the police records of the events. Users also can upload new examples from their own neighborhoods and cities. The artists write, 'When users download, print out, and post up free flyers from the site, they leave a trace in physical space of the sorts of state violence that institutions generally prefer to make invisible.' In a similar way, Burak Arikan's web-based *Networks of Dispossession* traces the structure of wealth and power that underlies Turkey's corporate and governmental infrastructure in order to demonstrate its inner workings. As Deena Chalabi writes, the larger questions at play for Arikan are:

How do citizens respond to their states' capacity (and increasing propensity) to hoard their personal information and to obscure information about decisions that affect them? How does a broad public secure tools that can transform its members from the source of countless data points serving government and businesses into a collective that can reveal networks of power?

Chikako Yamashiro's video *I Like Okinawa Sweet* pursues such relations among business, government, and transnational capital through the lens of intimacy and sexuality. A young Okinawan woman, filmed near a US

military base, compulsively eats multiple cones of an American brand of ice cream on a hot summer day. Heat, perspiration, and melting ice cream render her body a site of 'sweetness', Takemoto argues as part of a larger critique of tourism in Okinawa. American military occupation and American business interests are clearly interlaced; the woman's body is shown to be both overwhelmed by and complicit with the 'sweet deal' that Japan has made with the United States. The video performance entices viewers into classic voyeurism while simultaneously holding them responsible for the larger picture of imperialism and habits of consumption.

Gómez-Barris talks about the plunder of resources and what she calls the logic of 'extractivism', which represents all things and beings as commodities to be removed, bought, and sold. A counter-narrative is provided by Carolina Caycedo's video *Land of Friends* (2014), which highlights alternative ecosystems through a portrait of the Magdalena River in the Columbian Andes; at the end of the video, our viewpoint is literally inverted. Gómez-Barris writes:

Our sense of the river has been fundamentally altered and we know we cannot turn back to an Edenic imaginary that sees the South American elsewhere as separate. That is, the extractivist viewpoint is unveiled as the landscape and inhabitation of our own complicit perception.

We are invited to shift away from 'seeing like a state' – a phrase Gómez-Barris borrows from scholar James Scott (1999) – and to see differently.

Lyford's article on Gilles Peress's photo essay *Telex Iran* (1984) also brings the question of perceptual instability to the fore. She writes:

Telex Iran activates a multivocal, nonlinear visual account of the situation on the ground in Iran as Peress experienced it after the embassy was seized – an account that differs dramatically from the way US mainstream print media pictured those events. Peress's approach emphasizes a more interactive, unstable representation.

What emerges from both of these accounts is the imperative to provide counter-discourses of perception, but also an acknowledgement that learning to *un-see* or *re-see* is not a task easily undertaken. More than a source for point of view, the eye is understood as an ideological organ.

Changing the terms of debate can often be the way to resist the already-established parameters of perception, and is a key strategy in activist methodology. Going beyond a semantic exercise, however, it frequently means putting bodies on the line. We find this effort in the work of Cruz, for example, with his *Political Equator* project that maps the corridor of global conflict between the 30th and 35th parallels north, a zone that encompasses

the Palestinian/Israeli border, the European/North African border, and the US/Mexican border. Removing the neutrality of the geographical concept of 'equator', Cruz invites us to recognize the political valence of all territorial boundaries where *inequality* is the central defining feature. Regarding his project along the US/Mexican border, titled *60 Linear Miles of Transborder Conflict*, he comments:

When global conflict hits the ground, it becomes manifested in the geography. So across the 60 linear miles, I documented places where I would find a collision of ecologies between top-down forces of urbanization, border maps, and social or natural systems.

By taking audiences, activists, scholars, politicians, and artists to the border itself, Cruz emphasizes how visualization of conflict in the territory is also an 'embodied' practice.

Similarly, we see an emphasis on the body as the source of activism in the contributions by Motta and Finkelstein, who argue that in our media-saturated world, the body in public space remains one of the most effective means of communication. Finkelstein introduces us to the Flash Collective – a temporary, interdisciplinary, public gathering for the sake of political and cultural transformation. Motta's study of queer youth activism highlights strategic interruptions of public space through bodily intervention. Whether stripping down to the skin in US House Speaker John Boehner's office or getting arrested in order to inspect an immigration detention center from the inside, these activists put their own bodies at risk in order to draw our attention to the greater risks facing queer immigrant youth on a daily basis.

Lastly, as we have suggested, it is also important to consider the possibility that the term *visual activism* too narrowly defines the kinds of writing, thinking, and making discussed here. Demos notes in his article 'By partitioning activism into its visual components, the visual activism thesis invites a certain paradox, one that similarly risks dividing ethics from aesthetics.' How, he asks, can we separate the visual from other aspects of activism: the auditory, the physical, the historical, the confrontational? Does this framing of activism within visuality narrow its purpose or scope? Does it make activist practices more worthy to be shown in museums and, thereby, potentially neutralized or removed from more political sites of conflict? Looking at two artists' collectives, Demos observes how they both 'stress visuality's inseparability from social movement aesthetics – the multisensorial forms of appearance, social practice, and experience by which collective struggle enters into political purpose'. For Demos, this commitment helps the artists avoid the limits of gallery-based exhibitions. At the same time, we cannot assume that museums and galleries never serve as venues for the re-education of the eye and the politicization of the public. Demos acknowledges this fact through the example of activist photographer

Subhanker Banerjee, whose environmental images of the Arctic take on multiple and divergent meanings according to their circumstances of display. The balance between social transformation and institutional incorporation is a delicate one.

Jackson raises parallel questions about the term *visual activism*, troubling the easy conjoining of the constituent words by considering what of each might be lost in their pairing. Her concluding coda proposes we consider the relations between forms that are militant and those that are elusive, between the benefits and drawbacks of ambivalence, and the ongoing tension of large-scale strategies and small-scale tactics. 'Visuality', she writes, 'is something produced as an historiographical process, even as history is something produced by a visual process.' Taking this observation as axiomatic, the contributors to this issue offer their own insights about how to move forward.

Notes

1. Though the figure's gender identity is also not apparent, we chose the male pronoun in recognition of the fact that the vast majority of hazardous waste removal workers at Fukushima have been men. In fact, in the immediate aftermath of the meltdown, women were ordered to leave the plant and a 'skeleton crew' of 50 workers – all men – remained (see Hobson, 2014: 28).
2. Among its other details, the website includes a drawing of where the surveillance camera was located (see <http://pointatfuku1cam.nobody.jp/e.html>).
3. For more on 'interventionist art', see Thompson and Sholette (2004).
4. Muholi introduced these ideas in her first solo show, *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture*, at Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2004.
5. Bertolt Brecht's Marxist understanding of commitment was scrutinized by Theodor Adorno in his essay 'Commitment' (1962[1974]: 75–89).
6. For one take on these debates, see Davis (2013).
7. This workshop was led by Erin McElroy, who organizes mutual direct-aid actions with Eviction Free San Francisco.
8. *Public Intimacy* was co-curated by Betti-Sue Hertz, Frank Smigiel, and Dominic Willson. A related book will be published in 2016.
9. A complete list of participants and events can be found at: http://www.sfmoma.org/exhib_events/visual_activism_schedule (accessed 20 August 2015).
10. For one history of #BlackLivesMatter, see King (2015).

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