View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

**title:**
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**source:**

**URL:**
http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/449/969/

**publisher:**
Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences
Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw
View. Foundation for Visual Culture
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**Vulnerable Bodies. On the Visibility of Political Action**

Translated by Jan Szelągiewicz

**Revealing Oneself to the Other**

Every gathering that uses a public place to manifest political demands—every demonstration, march, picket, and, recently, civil occupation—requires a sort of alliance of appearing bodies. Such a bond transcends mere identification with an engaged crowd and is instead rooted in an attempt at connection based on visual recognition—to act in public is to see an ally in another, to trust what is displayed on the surface, to submit oneself to the will of the flesh because what is inside another person is forever beyond the insight of the inquiring eye. And although the decision to protest out on the streets may be driven by a plethora of different political motivations, one thing remains certain—one cannot exercise freedom of assembly alone.

Assembly, therefore, is visible and the assembled are required to perform corporeal labor to appear to others, as our appearance “has to be registered by the senses, not only our own, but someone else’s.” For Hannah Arendt, the alliance of bodies emerges in the space of appearance that “comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government.”

To act jointly, our bodies encroach upon the visual and audible spheres of others, thus producing “the performative power to lay claim to the public.”

Developing and reinterpreting Arendt’s notions, Judith Butler points out that this embodied communal power is performative in nature and that this performativity “is not only speech, but [...] bodily action, gesture, movement, congregation, persistence, and exposure to possible violence.” The risk brought up...
by the American philosopher—the threat to bodily integrity and the body’s own vulnerability and frailty—manifests itself in the representations of protest we’ve witnessed over the past decade: in images of revolutions sweeping the streets of North Africa and the Middle East, peaceful takeovers of public parks and squares by activists affiliated with movements such as Indignados, 99%, or Occupy Wall Street, or pictures of protesters marching under banners bearing the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag. These images of “embodied” risk are closely related to emergent practices of producing images and distributing them across the media—which have made the Internet-connected smartphone equipped with high-quality photo and video cameras the primary weapon of the modern political activist. Mobile devices are in direct contact with the acting body, not only documenting the event itself from an “internal” perspective, but also communicating—through blurs, unfocused frames, soft shapes, sudden “cuts,” this peculiar “abstract documentarism”7—the sensual dimension of making policy at squares and on city streets. Livestreaming in real time or near-real time, primarily through social media platforms, effects a shift in the perception of space and time: something is simultaneously taking place there and here, then and now.8 This broadens the visual and audible reach of the political event. The act of resistance transcends locale and becomes, prospectively at least, global in reach, which in turn allows it to “summon and sustain global outrage and pressure.”9 In Butler’s words,

> It matters that those bodies carry cell phones, relaying messages and images, and so, when they are attacked, it is more often than not in some relation to the camera or the video recorder [...] We have to think about the importance of media that is “hand held” or cell phones that are “held high,” producing a kind of countersurveillance of military and police action. The media requires those bodies on the street to have an event, even as those bodies on the street require the media to exist in a global arena. [...] Not only must someone’s hand tap and send, but someone’s body is on the line if that tapping and sending gets traced. In other words, localization is hardly overcome through the use of media that potentially transmits globally.10

Those in power make every effort to deprive the protesters of their “right to look” and visualize, and will resort force if necessary. The threat of violence is local: where crowds aim their demands at authorities abiding by freedom of assembly, the
presence of law enforcement or military personnel will be justified with the need to ensure the safety of the protesters themselves. The visible attributes of the state’s monopoly on violence—pistol holsters, helmets or stun guns—quickly become practical tools of restoring public order. If law enforcement decides to use violence in order to “restore law and order,” the depiction of beaten and bodies will determine the new image of public space as a space of restriction, repression, and confinement, all thanks to global mass media.\(^\text{12}\) Attacking the body of the protester, however, is akin to launching an “attack [on] the right itself, since the right is precisely what is exercised by the body on the street,”\(^\text{13}\) in the “space of appearance” which, as we assumed, mirroring Hannah Arendt, precedes all law. That is precisely why contemporary protest movements need to be involved with capturing and disseminating “scenes of violence.” The images of vulnerable bodies should make up a generally available “lawlessness index” and—as particular manifestations of “countervisuality”\(^\text{14}\)—contribute to modern forms of revolutionary iconography. Their dissemination could return visibility to the suffering body, draw attention to the vibrant crowd demanding a “right to look,” and illustrate what is difficult to visualize: the moment a regime loses their social legitimacy. It could also lead to, as emphasized by Nicholas Mirzoeff invoking the work of Jacques Rancière, development of new forms of representation that would better reflect the political interest of the people and the challenges of globalization; representation that would restore the visibility of those heretofore invisible and underrepresented.\(^\text{15}\)

### The Body Against the Cordon

Faith in the emancipatory power of social media can seem naive. Even as it offers users an array of countersurveillance tools, Web 2.0 is itself comprehensively monitored by major multinational corporations and is subject to censorship, while the immense profits generated by the vast network disseminating images across the globe are reaped by a narrow circle of company shareholders. On the one hand, this “visual activism” is pilloried by critics of practices combining aesthetics and politics; in their opinion, aesthetic activity—including generating representation—supposedly draws attention away from practical objectives.\(^\text{16}\) The growing “power” of representation cannot, however, be completely omitted in analyses, especially given the fact that it is often the appearance and spread of suggestive imagery
that triggers political mobilization. However, in the context of the Arab Spring, Elisa Adami argues, the production of images and then their deployment in the public sphere can be perceived as "one of the extended and crucial arenas of revolutionary action"—the aesthetic of imperfection, the blurriness and porousness of hand-held shots constitute new forms of revolutionary documentation, revealing the "dangerous proximity of the image-makers to the field of action proper [...] up to the fatal threshold where the virtuality of image-production turns into the tragic actuality of the producers' annihilation." In this case, the risk of producing a representation of a body engaged in political action nullifies, in a sense, the risk of the image's aesthetic transparency: throwing the spectator off balance sensually puts him in the awkward position of passive witness, calling upon him to participate in the revolutionary effort. Naturally, the effectiveness of this sort of "visual summons" remains debatable.

The emergence of these images of bodily vulnerability, to use Judith Butler's term, is not a direct result of the widespread availability of miniature image- and video-recording devices—they have been a part of the spectrum of visual practices employed by protest movements for quite some time. The process of documenting acts of civic resistance has always been based around the selection—with a photo camera or another instrument—and capture of iconic scenes, supposedly representing what the authorities or regimes are trying to conceal: law enforcement using violence against protesters or violating freedom of assembly, the outbreak of riots and social unrest. The objective of these practices, to quote W.J.T. Mitchell, is "exposing the systematic violence that has been concealed under the veil of «public safety», «stability», and «security»." The possibilities offered by social media obviously generate new aesthetics and ways of seeing politics: the emphasis is shifted from the creation of an icon representing the resistance movement, such as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, or Lech Wałęsa, towards the immediacy of experience, plunging into the here and now, contact with the anonymous multitude, the crowd, the "assembled masses." The figure of the vulnerable body can also be found in a variety of diverse visual forms as well as
historical and political contexts. Pictures of black bodies pressing against police riot shields during protests in the Civil Rights era in the 1960s, pictures and videos documenting die-in\textsuperscript{22} events organized by #BlackLivesMatter activists, and reports from Cairo's Tahrir Square produced by the Mosireen collective all share a specific performative power and all attempt to incorporate the viewer into a community based around the "ethics of bodily vulnerability."\textsuperscript{23} The appeal of these images is clear: get involved, act, demand, tomorrow, it may be your life on the line. Be vigilant, always monitor the government, demand the "right to look" and be transparent yourself—never forget, however, that revealing yourself to others carries the risk of revealing yourself to the authorities. Still, the status of images of vulnerable bodies remains ambiguous. Their power resides in their persuasive and documentary function: they globalize what is essentially local and best submits to inquiry locally. At the same time, however, these images are unstable, susceptible to "hijacking" by the dominant visual orders. The aesthetics of resistance, struggle, and opposition is as appealing to practitioners of "countervisualizing" as it is to the capitalist power structure.\textsuperscript{24}

**Protest as Commodity**

As Women’s Marches were organizing mass demonstrations across the US and law enforcement began its crackdown on activists and locals protesting the Dakota Access pipeline in Standing Rock, Pepsi decided to release a commercial whose main theme revolved around political protest. It’s hard to call it a precedent, as the world of advertising has long been drawing on visual resources of protest culture and exploiting countercultural practices for marketing purposes.\textsuperscript{25} Pepsi utilized the communal aesthetic of protest movements—and their attendant carnival-like nature, diversity of identity, and egalitarian character\textsuperscript{26}—in order to, as the company’s spokespeople later explained,\textsuperscript{27} about the lives of contemporary youths who tend to prioritize values like unity, peace, and mutual understanding. Seen through such optics, Butler’s alliance of bodies does not express a public demand for change as much as form and fashion—it is one of many options available for purchase on the free market of ideas and values. In the music-video like montage, we see our protagonist Kendall Jenner—sister of popular celebrity Kim Kardashian and blogger building her brand primarily through Instagram—leaves a particularly
boring photo shoot and joins a demonstration seemingly made up of only smiling youths. Her participation in the protest isn’t driven by her identification with the demands of other protesters. The latter carry banners adorned with bland, empty slogans and peace symbols. Their protest seems an aesthetic choice, rather than a political one: the sexual appeal of the bodies of protesters chanting, singing, and dancing in public spaces, as well as the diversity of their attire, facial features lusciously portrayed in close-ups, skin tones, and hairstyles are all irresistible to a subject accustomed to material opulence. The variety of available identities, however, is merely an illusion because the ad is surprisingly homogenous in terms of class and aesthetics—the assembled crowd is universally young and fashionably dressed, probably made up of freelancers or broadly defined creatives. The camera lingers on specific faces, picks out the more distinct individuals from the crowd—a man playing double bass, a black teenager breakdancing in loose green overalls, a woman flashing the “victory” sign with her fingers. One of the banners says: “Join the conversation,” as if the demonstration was not a public demand for discussion, but rather an opportunity to meet new, interesting people. Here, the portrayal of individual bodies hinges on their aesthetic differences, while the bodies themselves are defined by their own “superficial” individuality—the latter definitely more photogenic than the physical, corporeal reality of real-life demonstrations. The crowd in the ad is neither a politically involved assembly nor a mass congregation demanding justice and a “right to look,” but rather a collection of attractive individuals for whom protest is just another “fashionable” activity, another role to play or try out.

The Pepsi commercial is the embodiment of a very specific model of capitalist visuality—differences that capital does not consider significant are nullified, while the free market of identities, goods, and ideas is affirmed by a phantasmal community—a public agora devoid of politics—and the problematic, corporeal reality of the assembly is simply removed from view. Against such a backdrop, the “stubborn vulnerability of bodies” is completely invisible: the alliance is formed in the course of intruding into another’s field of vision but without any risk for the bodily integrity of the protesters. Critics of the ad, however, took greatest issue with not with reducing the visibility of contemporary mass protests to clichés of capitalist realism—which
in itself is a rather self-evident element of the soft drink giant’s strategy—but rather with the form of the final confrontation between the vulnerable bodies of the protesters and proxies of the powers that be. As the demonstrators are slowly corralled by the riot police, Jenner breaks ranks, opens a can of Pepsi and offers it to one of the policemen. The image is constructed to resemble other iconic representations of protest: the protester is not separated from the authorities by any physical barrier, her gesture could be construed as provocative, while the policeman assumes a stance that could be perceived as studiously unyielding, his holstered weapon and truncheon by his belt clearly visible throughout the shot. The severe look of the riot police stands in stark contrast to the colorful band of individualists. The crisp blackness of the uniforms, faces shaved smooth, arms crossed within reach of their weapons, an absolute lack of movement, full concentration and readiness for action elicit in us an almost instinctive anticipation of violent conflict, riots, and savagery. The “stark” portrayal of the bodily confrontation with the police actualizes the series of recognizable images that precede it—visual pretexts that have taken root in the public consciousness due to their widespread presence in mass media, and which the Pepsi ad openly manipulates, either maintaining, expanding, or changing their meaning. These visual tropes are simply too many to count, but we will identify the most iconic ones. And so, the Jenner scene clearly references Bernie Boston’s famous 1967 photograph “Flower Power,” taken at an anti-war rally in front of the Pentagon. The young man—in a symbolic gesture of peace—puts flowers into the barrel of a National Guardsman, a gesture mirrored by Jenner’s gift of a soft drink, here representing peaceful capitalist coexistence. The presence of black and female bodies invokes more recent images of bodily struggle: the photographic documentation of #BlackLivesMatter protests, reproduced a thousand times over. Some of the latter images have already been enshrined as contemporary symbols of civil disobedience and civic courage—including the photo of Iesha Evans, a #BLM activist graciously marching towards heavily armed riot policemen, and John J. Kim’s iconic photograph that paints a “heroic” picture of a “staring contest” between a black teenager and a policeman. Jenner’s “spontaneous” decision to join the march, however, actualizes pretexts anchored in popular culture—a curious eye will identify a number of such references, including the famous worker protest scene from Chaplin’s Modern Times.
Obviously, the obverse of the images of peaceful, silent confrontation with the authorities can be found in the pictures of crowds being dispersed by riot police—of bodies being clubbed with truncheons, hosed with water cannons, gassed with pepper sprayed, shot with rubber—and sometimes live—rounds. The most recent of such pictures include the barricades at the Kiyv Maidan, riots in revolutionary Cairo, anti-government protests in Athens, the crackdown in Istanbul’s Gezi Park. The Pepsi ad, however, also actualizes much older contexts, carrying considerable significance in local contexts, but nevertheless globally recognizable. The framing of the police cordons and the fictional protest itself—including portrait-like, frontal shots of the vanguard—bring to mind a series of photographs documenting the famous Selma to Montgomery march that took place in March of 1965. The pictures of civil rights protest, including the one from March 7, brutally suppressed by the police and since then known as “Bloody Sunday,” have been forever enshrined in the canon of photographic reportage (there were TV cameras on site, as well). These pictures include iconic images of protesters lined in a human wall facing a cordon of riot police, and photographs of the subsequent crackdowns, with police setting the dogs on the protesters, clubbing and kicking them, resisting or unconscious bodies carried away.

Typical reporter practice of visualizing protest usually entails selecting a specific scene and pulling a couple of faces, or preferably a single one, to the forefront; then, the photographer transitions from a chaotic portrayal of a frenzied crowd towards an easily recognizable individual—from an assembly of vulnerable bodies towards isolated action, usually an act of spontaneous heroism. This, in turn, transforms bodies that were heretofore wholly anonymous, lost in the midst of a crowd, into emblematic icons of protest, and confers upon them the status of the protesting crowds’ spokespeople. The authors of the ad openly exploit these iconic images in order to develop their own vision of protest as lifestyle, fashion, and commodity. They toy with the audience’s grasp of history, their media “mileage,” so to speak, and their knowledge of individual elements of the recreated scene.
Against convention and viewer expectations, the policemen do not respond with efforts to restore public order—the anticipated explosion of violence—but a gesture of friendliness preceding the formation of a peculiar alliance of consumers. The policeman acknowledges Jenner’s gesture with a knowing smile, takes the offered can and sips, while the invisible border between the police cordon and the protesters begins to blur. The tension dissipated, the only thing imperiling the marching bodies now is the irresistible appeal of unchecked consumerism—a siren song formulated by the glossily alluring commodity-slash-fetish, available here and now, rather than in some distant perspective where political change becomes reality.

The rearrangement of iconic visual conventions in the service of capitalist visuality was met almost immediately with terrible backlash, first throughout social media, on Facebook and Twitter, and later in mainstream press titles including The New York Times i The Guardian. The majority of opinions, produced by activists, journalists, and people from the advertising industry, was unequivocally critical: the ad was widely seen as exploitative, with critics skewering the ad’s ill-advised portrayal of protest as carefree pastime, glossing over the very real risk of bodily harm. What really roiled the critics, however, was not the fact that the ad aestheticized political action, but rather its specific reading of iconoclasticism: its usage of the iconic figure of “body versus authority” to mask the bodily reality of the assembly, understood herein as both the exposure of the acting body to violence, but also—more broadly—as the “frailty of life,” experienced by individuals and groups even prior to their decision to go out and fight for their rights in public. Judith Butler links this feeling of helplessness in the face of almighty forces of global capitalism, shared by the genuinely and potentially excluded, with the creeping precarization of society. Realizing one’s own precarity, “lived as slow death, a damaged sense of time, or unmanageable exposure to arbitrary loss, injury or destitution” is, according to the philosopher, one of the reasons behind the recent wave of political mobilization. Therefore, the very suggestion on the part of the soft drink conglomerate, a symbol of globalization par excellence, that its product may very well serve as an
instrument of unification and assuaging social unrest in times of rising inequality was shocking and outrageous in and of itself. The conglomerate, the critics castigated, has appropriated the iconography of resistance and political struggle, replacing the excluded with a “white, influential, and conventionally pretty celebrity,” who simultaneously serves as an arbiter, a saleswoman pitching capitalist promises of peace, and a regime functionary working to restore public order.

The Body as Icon

The veritable eruption of grass-roots visual polemics turned out to be even more interesting than high-brow debates over the ad. Social media users reacted to the scandal with a torrent of images that were either the complete opposite of Pepsi’s ad or ironically skewered the commercial by bringing up the visual pretexts driving the commercial and framing them in new capitalist contexts. One of the most popular of these visual “footnotes” was authored by Bernice A. King, the daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King—she tweeted a picture of her father forcibly pushed back by a police officer and captioned it with the words: “If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi.” Dozens of iconic images from the Civil Rights era have been reintroduced into widespread circulation—of Malcolm X, of MLK, activists from the Civil Rights Movements and the Black Panther Movement, photographic documentation of sit-ins protests, rallies, and marches, complementing the virally circulating recent portrayals of #BlackLivesMatters protesters, such as the above-mentioned picture of Iesha Evans (her picture was most often cited as the inspiration for Jenner’s gesture, raising outrage at the shameless hijacking of the #BLM icon).

These efforts constituted an attempt to re-hypostatize the figure of vulnerable bodies using widely available digital resources—for a brief moment, the bodily risk of openly engaging in the struggle for political rights, obscured by capitalist visuality, was once again made visible. Significantly, these efforts paradoxically revealed the inherent weakness of emblematic images of protest: their iconic power and their implicit vision of politics as heroic struggle of individuals was surprisingly easily
transposed to market aesthetics based on lofty, noble emotions and boosting individualism. The iconic images turned out to be “empty,” at least to a certain extent: they were easily imbued with new meanings, open to remixing and recontextualization. Curiously, such efforts often led them to becoming their own obverses—symbols of civil disobedience became emblems of subordination to the logic of the free market which sees individuals as consumers above all, regardless of their resistance to such a view. Therefore, the inherent weakness of said images stems from, among other things, the fact that they either do not abide by the rules of “good representation” drawn up by Butler for images of protest, or abide by them only to a degree. Icons represent the crowd in the eyes of external observers primarily interested in finding “powerful” (that is, aesthetically appealing) scenes in order to extract them from their contexts and disseminate them through global media networks. There, the bonds between representation and its local dimension are weakened, thus making them highly vulnerable to hijacking and re-encoding with a different meaning. Such a “heroization” of protest—the fetishization of individuals and isolated symbolic action—obliterates the material dimension of assembly: the corporeality of the crowd, the precarity of the bodies, the risk of appearing in public and “in full view.” Butler, on the other hand, believes that it is paramount to emphasize: image cannot merely report a scene, it needs to be part of the scene and the action itself. Rather than “ennoble” or “symbolize” it, it should instead extend it. As the extension of the “public square” in the media landscape, “located, and [...] transposable,” representations of protest should simultaneously be broadcast globally in spite of their “emphatically local” nature. Only then “those who are elsewhere”—“have the sense that they are getting some direct access through the images and sounds they receive.”

In the traditional, iconoclastic optics, action is situated in a completely different temporal and spatial order than its representation—namely the aforementioned order of immediacy and visualization of politics that can never be freeze-framed without it leading to a considerable loss of information. Ominously, the manufacture of protest imagery can result in the imprisonment of protesting bodies “in the world of images created by the prodigious expansion of the media and electronic communications.” When discussing the category of “imprisonment” or “detainment,” it bears keeping in mind that each gesture of framing—inscribing a given scene into an image—necessarily excludes a portion of the image that
remains outside the frame, in the space of disappearance, so to speak. In this case, banished outside the frame are both the immediacy of action as well as the collective subject undertaking it—that is the politically active crowd, the multitude of bodies united in their desire for change and their own vulnerability. Meanwhile, as indicated by Mitchell and others, contemporary protest movement strive to develop their own radically “antiiconic” iconographies with a “nonsovereign image repertoire,” insisting on anonymity, “renouncing the face and figure of the charismatic leader in favor of the face in and of the crowd, the assembled masses.” Hijacking iconic images—and then diluting them into “weak” memes, imbuing then with a new, ironic meaning—may be seen as a part of a greater battle for new forms of representations of politics, a voice arguing in favor of shifting away from the “selection” of individuality and its heroization towards representation of collective action or action in and of itself. Paradoxically, this practice of “diluting” (which pertains to the method of their employment rather than the images themselves) imbues iconic representations of protest with the theoretical power to judge the status of images portraying vulnerable bodies: it identifies prior ways of (counter)visualizing political action, outlines their inherent potential, the manufacture and reception of iconic images, and the traditional place of the active transmitter and the passive receiver in the visual circulation of meanings. The emergence of a novel political entity—a grass-roots, corporeal, collaborating community—is accompanied by a shift of emphasis away from the crowd-moving power of iconic images towards the very practice of producing images, which in and of itself is a revolutionary act and in which all political entities could partake. What matters is no longer the passive divination of meaning, but rather the immediacy of their manufacture.

The media frenzy over the Pepsi ad seemed to have omitted a number of interesting issues, including the fact that the contains a specific image that is easily problematized within the context of novel, grass-roots practices of protest representation. One of the characters in the ad—a young girl wearing a hijab—joins the protesters with a digital camera in hand. Her efforts to document the protest, however, produce unexpected results—instead of typical “handheld” shots, we see portraits of protesters suffused with the Instagram aesthetic: posed, exact, with not
a blur in sight, devoid of any trace of the visual “dirt” of corporeality. Absent from the ad—and made all the more conspicuous due to its absence—is the material reality of image production: the dangerous circumstances, the vulnerability of the body holding the camera, its vulnerability, and the “weakness” of the very technology used to counter-surveil the authorities. Action can simultaneously be depiction—the sensible is rendered visible in the “diluted” image, thus breaking away from old dichotomies of producer/consumer, transmitter/receiver, and lending credibility to the produced (counter-)information beamed directly to recipients using real-time livestreaming platforms. Thus, the questions posed by the Pepsi ad due to its metavisual potential becomes highly significant—the questions being: “What visual perspective is generated by novel images of vulnerable bodies? How do they produce the “perception” of the body in the midst of political activity?” Bringing up the phenomenon of citizen journalism during the Arab Spring, Elisa Adami argues that in such nonhierarchical visual representation, the surgical precision of iconic images is replaced with the horizontal perspective of the excluded, thus forcing the reorganization of the dominant forms of the “shared sensible.” The political subject it not merely represented here, but produced through (self-)presentation: political manifestations reveal the productive nature of images of protest. The manufacture of new political entities transpires in the course of active attempts to overcome the regime of visuality, to visualize heretofore unseen power relations. The ad, part and parcel of the order of capitalist visuality, offers a sort of metavisual reflection on the diverse forms of representation of political subjectivity: on the one hand, Jenner–Pepsi can in hand—is an integral element of the iconic “cut” and the emergence of the leader-symbol; on the other hand, what we are witnessing is the process of image-making in the face of direct contact with the space of action. And although both eventually yield iconic images, our attention is directed towards novel practices of visual construction of political entities and towards the entity itself: the activist armed with modern, mobile technologies that redefine the relationship between bodily immediacy and the image.

Towards “Embodied Media”

The visual figure of vulnerable bodies—the product of “countervisualizing” practices, initiated by political protest movements and acting upon political realities—transcends various media orders and is “siphoned” off by dominant visual regimes,
and then hijacked by the forces of countersurveillance; as a result, it reveals its own
limitations and entanglements with existing power structures. If creating new, more
inclusive forms of representation is one of the greatest challenges faced by protest
movements across the globe, then the ease of circulating images through social
media networks has the power to both inspire debate on the limitations of prior
countersurveillance methods and negotiate image-making tactics that would
better fit the diffuse, multi-local character of the contemporary “agora of the
outraged.” Iconic images and the “diluted” pictures of vulnerable bodies see bodily
danger as the cement holding together communities of opposition in the course of
their constitution—however, bodies already subject to violence have no need of
icons to represent and lead them. Thanks to the ability to (self-)represent one’s own
actions using private surveillance tools and the ability to publish the images thereof
in global media networks, the once discrete “spaces of appearance” become mobile
and the bodily alliance transcends localness and may very well become universal.
The politically active body becomes an important part of the “antiiconic”
iconography of protest insofar as all attempts at appropriating it—as was the case
with the Pepsi ad—are met with fierce resistance and an eruption of
“countervisualization”: the unearthing and exposure of that which the powers that
be would like to conceal from the ever-vigilant eyes of the people. The postulate
suggesting that all new representations be “antiiconic” is fulfilled indirectly by the
“privatization” of image-making, but not—as Mitchell points out—in the portrayals of
“assembled masses,” but rather in the “diluted images” reflecting the immediacy
and sensibility of action. Our diagnoses, therefore, seem to parallel Butler’s notions
of “embodied media” and that’s why the American philosopher—herself one of the
icons of the Occupy Wall Street movement—will have the last word on the matter:

What bodies are doing on the street when they are demonstrating is linked
fundamentally to what communication devices and technologies are doing
when they “report” on what is happening in the street. These are different
actions, but they both require the body. The one exercise of freedom is
linked to the other, which means that both are ways of exercising rights
and that, jointly, they bring a space of appearance into being and secure
its transposability. [...] In other words, it was only when those needs that
are supposed to remain private came out into the day and night of the
square, formed into image and discourse for the media, that it finally
became possible to extend the space and time of the event with such tenacity as to bring the regime down. After all, the cameras never stopped; bodies were there and here; they never stopped speaking [...] and so could not be silenced, sequestered, or denied.43

Footnotes


3 Ibid., p. 86.


5 Butler, Notes Toward, p. 75.

6 Ibid.


8 Butler, Notes Towards, p. 104.

9 Ibid., p. 92.

10 Ibid., pp. 92–94.

11 The “countersurveillance practices” brought up by Butler—initiated thanks to the emergence of new visual media—can be seen as a function of the aforementioned “right to look,” which Nicolas Mirzoeff defines as “the claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable. The right to look confronts the police who say to us, «move on, there’s nothing to see here.» Only there is; we know it, and so do they.” Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look,” Critical Inquiry 37, no. 3 (2011): p. 474.

The notion of “countervisuality” is introduced in defined by Nicholas Mirzoeff in his book *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). According to Mirzoeff, proper countervisuality is claiming the right to look. “It is the dissensus with visuality, meaning “a dispute over what is visible as an element of a situation, over which visible elements belong to what is common, over the capacity of subjects to designate this common and argue for it”. It is the performative claim of a right to look where none technically exists that puts a countervisuality into play,” p. 24.


One needs to look no further than the self-immolation of Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian fruit seller who set himself on fire to protest police harassment and the many injustices of the Tunisian regime. The news of his act and the images thereof quickly went viral on social media, eventually triggering the Arab Spring. See. Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, p. 253.


Ibid.


Ibid.

See: Butler, Notes Toward.


Mitchell, “Images, Space, Revolution.”


34  Butler, Notes Toward, p. 69.

35  Wong, “Pepsi pulls Kendall.”
36 Butler, Notes Toward, p. 91.

37 Ibid., pp. 91–92.


40 Adami, “How Do You Watch,” p. 72.

41 Ibid., pp. 73–74.

42 Ibid., p. 72.

43 Butler, Notes Toward, pp. 93–98.