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Essays

Between Rebel Creativity and Reification: For and Against Visual Activism

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Abstract

Examining the advantages and limitations of the term ‘visual activism’, this essay considers three case studies: the artist–activist work of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, a France-based collective dedicated to rebel creativity as part of the alter-globalization struggle for a world of economic equality, environmental sustainability, and social justice; the Grupo de Investigación en Arte y Política (GIAP), until recently based in Chiapas, Mexico, where members have worked closely with the Zapatistas and their revolutionary politics of aesthetics and autonomous ecologies; and the photographer Subhanker Banerjee, who has dedicated himself to representing, researching, and politically organizing around Arctic environmentalism in recent years. All have used visual elements creatively in their practices to expand their political engagements, just as they have variously mobilized the political elements of their practices to redefine what art means today.

Keywords

activism • aesthetics • ecology • political art • social movements

It is through the image, the revolutionary, distant image, the image that overthrows all the laws of thought, that mankind finally breaks through the barrier. (Aime Césaire, ‘Poetry and Knowledge’, *Tropiques*, 1945)¹

Revolt is contained by overexposure: we are given it to contemplate so that we shall forget to participate. (‘On the Poverty of Student Life’, pamphlet issued by the Situationist International in 1966)²



Figure 1. Bike Bloc, 'Put the Fun Between your Legs', Copenhagen, 2009. © Photograph: The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination. Reproduced with permission.

In 2009, hundreds of activists formed Bike Bloc and swarmed the streets of Copenhagen, riding creatively re-engineered cycles (Figure 1). It was a day of protest against the compromised directions of COP 15, the United Nations (UN) climate change conference, one of many attempts (and failures) of global governance to agree on solutions to the environmental crisis wrought by fossil-fuel capitalism's historical and ongoing release of greenhouse gases that is pushing us toward catastrophic conditions. The rebel cyclists, targeting the conference center, aimed to distract the city's militarized police securing the corporate-state control of the debate and protecting it from the incursions of civil society's non-governmental organizations (NGOs), environmentalists, and engaged citizenry. The tactic succeeded in assisting dissident delegates involved in UN negotiations to break out of the fortified meeting and join activists who had transgressed security barriers, so as to state publicly that the discussions were unfairly dominated by corporate lobbyists and the bullying representatives of over-industrialized countries.

Behind the Bike Bloc action – alternatively called Put the Fun Between Your Legs – was the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Labofii), an artist-activist 'affinity of friends' initiated by John Jordan and Isa Fremeaux to celebrate 'the beauty of collective creative disobedience' as part of the alter-globalization struggle for a world of economic equality, environmental sustainability, and social justice.³ In preparation for the Copenhagen intervention, they mobilized an art exhibition (at the Arnolfini gallery in Bristol) as a social space given over to the production of cycles, images of which, and of the larger protest action, circulate online and on Labofii's

website. One of the exemplary cycles was also included in *Disobedient Objects*, an exhibition of activist tools organized in 2014 by Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London, where it represented the social and political mobilization that is the ultimate focus of Labofii's energies.

For the practitioners, social engagement comprises the 'rebel creativity' they are after, including the friendships formed in political solidarity in preparation for the event and during its actualization.⁴ *Rebel* signifies the disobedient energies directed against conventional and unjust governance and, when joined with *creativity*, defines an approach to the inventive aesthetics – visual and objective, theatrical and affective, bodily and intersubjective – of joyful activism. Activism's visuality, in other words, is inextricable here from the rehearsal, pedagogy, practice, and recording of collective direct action, just as its strategic publicity and archived forms of mediagenic documentation (objects, photographs, videos, and texts) are supplementary to the demonstration itself, the overarching goal being to combat the unsustainable capitalist growth economy and challenge its exclusive, antidemocratic political system. To isolate the mere visuality of the cycles, or 'reify' them as art objects or autonomous visual forms – to invoke the Marxist category of the thingification of social relations, the transfer of human intersubjective properties to the sensuous world of commodity objects – would potentially court the very betrayal of political engagement. It would risk practicing what Labofii terms contemporary 'iconophilia, the worship of pictures' that represents 'the seeds of the society of the spectacle' – implying a depoliticized culture mediated by alienating commercialized imagery, one that displaces participation with overexposure – 'which we are now suffering, and which we wish to destroy'.

* * *

Labofii's statements point up the risk of 'visual activism', which I take to refer to politically directed practices of visuality aimed at catalyzing social, political, and economic change. While the concept offers a provocative proposal to think through, considering in the process what is productive and useful about visual representation in today's context, it also identifies numerous potential dangers that demand critical attention. This is especially the case given current visual-cultural tendencies marked by mediatized social fragmentation, migrant images capable of endless reformatting, and compromised arenas of presentation (especially commercial galleries and corporate websites) riven by conflicting interests. The term splits visuality into its activist dimension while also implying a conservative, non-activist imagery, just as visual activism splinters sensation, discounting non-visual elements from its terminological proposal. In this regard, if *activism* names a multisensory, collective, and situated form of being-in-the-world posed against constituted powers, then *visual activism* may be methodologically debilitating to its very political purpose.

Related varieties of this notion, moreover, have received pointed criticism in recent years, particularly in relation to political art presented in commercial

art galleries, fairs, and magazines – contexts offering no political alliance, and even existing in economic and political opposition to the displayed work. While ‘visual activists’ might side with the so-called 99 percent, the very fact of working within dominant art institutions, according to Andrea Fraser, ‘ensconce[s] many of us comfortably among the 10 percent, if not the 1 percent or even the .1 percent’, a demographic that tends to support the right-wing agenda of corporate neoliberalism, wealth inequality, and the destruction of the social state.⁵ ‘If our only choice is to participate in this economy or abandon the art field entirely’, Fraser (2011: 124) argues, ‘at least we can stop rationalizing that participation in the name of critical or political art practices or – adding insult to injury – social justice.’ Given that choice, Labofii opts for creative non-participation. Invited to the Donaufestival in Krems, Austria, in 2015, Jordan and Fremeaux discovered several fossil-fuel corporations among the event’s funders; they could only decline the invitation, but with an open letter in which they wrote:

For us at the Labofii the goal can be summed up in a sentence: *to remove the ability of the rich to steal from the poor and dismantle the ability of the powerful to destroy our biosphere*. The role of art for us is to make this process as creative, desirable and effective as possible – to stop the war of money against life in the most beautiful way possible. Sadly we don’t see how we can do this by being part of the Donaufestival without violently tearing our ethics from our aesthetics. (emphasis in original)⁶

By partitioning activism into its visual components, the visual activism thesis invites a certain paradox, one that similarly risks dividing ethics from aesthetics. To think through its provocations and challenges, yet without surrendering its potential advantages, I consider here three examples of activist practitioners: in addition to Labofii, the Grupo de Investigación en Arte y Política (GIAP), until recently based in Chiapas, Mexico, where it has worked closely with the Zapatistas; and the photographer Subhanker Banerjee, who has dedicated himself to Arctic environmentalism in recent years. All have used visual elements creatively in their practices to expand their political engagements, just as they have variously mobilized the activist potential of visibility to redefine what art means today. As such, each navigates carefully around the dangers of reification so as to enact activism’s rebel creativity – proposing current approaches to what is a long-standing avant-garde tension between representation and politics (as indicated by Césaire’s revolutionary image and the Situationist International’s warnings regarding the overexposure of revolt).

* * *

Notorious for assembling an insurgent clown army in the UK, running courses in postcapitalist culture, researching real-existing utopias across Europe, and reclaiming the streets from the fossil-fuel driven motorization of London, Labofii positions itself between art and activism, poetry and politics,

theater and rebellion.⁷ The group sees insurrection itself as an art form, aiming to ‘shape reality’, not show it. Although its members are practitioners of collective creativity, their antipathy for art’s dominant institutions is clear: ‘We champion artists who escape the prisons of the art world, who stop playing the fool in the corporate palaces and apply their creativity directly to the engineering of social movements.’ Surpassing representation, they enact experiments in non-hierarchical self-organization, direct action, and ecological sustainability – as with *la r.O.n.c.e* (an acronym formed from the words *resist, organize, nourish, create, exist*), their current long-term project situated in the south of France, where they have formed a communal living and work space in which to practice permaculture gardening, organize workshops in civil disobedience, and launch interventions against the reigning order of environmental governance. (Currently they’re preparing for the COP 21 meeting in Paris in fall 2015.)⁸ As they explain, ‘We refuse to wait for the end of capitalism, but attempt to live in spite of it.’⁹

With Labofii, the label *visual activism* does not sit comfortably. Immediately skeptical of the implied division of representation from the world of praxis, the group opposes the prospective loss of the significant multisensorial dimensions of political engagement: ‘Change for us is created by a multiplicity of senses which touch our dreams and desires, not just the eye.’ For them, the term potentially reifies activism’s collaborative social relations, given the implication of visual activism’s distanced and diverted mediation of direct action and its full range of embodied and social experiences. In counter-distinction, ‘Labofii’s aesthetic goal is this: building affinity groups rather than informing strangers of issues through visual language.’ As they explain, ‘We judge our work by how it can help the construction of groups of creative rebels who can share an insurrectionary imagination and resist together’, fomenting what they term a ‘rebel creativity’ that is part of a ‘prefigurative politics’, enacting the world they desire in the here and now.¹⁰

Consider Reclaim the Streets (RTS), the British anti-automobile movement of the 1990s from which Labofii emerged. Visuals such as posters and flyers promoted the carnivalesque street parties, documented photographically, showing thousands of people taking back the streets from cars and creating a spontaneous, unauthorized urban commons gained via civil disobedience, physical occupation, and the collective manifestation of festive, rave-like atmospheres. Participants made voluminous costumes to drape over stilts-walkers whose billowing skirts hid insurgents drilling into pavement and planting trees under the drone of amplified music and waves of dancing (Figure 2). Labofii ‘sees art and activism as inseparable from everyday life’ and treats ‘*insurrection* as an art and *art* as a means of preparing for the coming insurrection’. For Labofii’s members, creating the terms of postcapitalist life requires restructuring the senses – opening one’s tastes to organic, self-produced veggies; reveling in the sounds of collective disobedience; joyfully placing one’s body in a collective blockade against police advances; visually surveying the unfolding of mass uprising. At the same time, the group resists fetishizing visuality, although this reservation



Figure 2. Reclaim the Streets, M41 Party, 13 July 1996. © Photograph: Nick Cobbing. Reproduced courtesy of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination.

does not prevent its participation in exhibitions – like *Disobedient Objects* – perceived to advance its political goals, expose unaffiliated viewers to its position, and intervene politically in an institution’s otherwise conventional programming.¹¹

Still, one key concern relates to the threat of art’s defusing activism by objectifying its visual elements. What good is promoting visual activism if the results are directed toward being aesthetically enjoyed, spectacularized, marketed, sold, and consumed by those in the political opposition? One egregious example in this regard recently was when Creative Time’s 2011 exhibition *Living as Form* – ‘a broad look at a vast array of socially engaged practices that appear with increasing regularity in fields ranging from theater to activism, and urban planning to visual art’ – traveled in 2014 to Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, which possesses extensive research-and-development connections to Israel’s colonialist military technology industry. The traveling objects – detached from the generative context of social movements and violating the international Boycott, Divest, and Sanction campaign – contributed to the cultural camouflaging of the Israel Defense Forces’ (IDF) military–industrial complex, extending a veneer of cultural open-mindedness by virtue of the art’s credentials of criticality, which catalyzed protest from several artist participants.¹² Labofii has had its own instructive experiences with art institutions, as when its Bike Bloc project was suddenly dropped by Copenhagen Contemporary Art Centre (CCAC), which originally commissioned it as part of the citywide exhibition



Figure 3. Website of Grupo de Investigación en Arte y Política (GIAP).

RE:THINK: Contemporary Art and Climate Change in 2009 (although the cooperative Candy Factory ultimately hosted the intervention). The curators, it turned out, did not want actual activism, only its visual representation: ‘pictures of politics’ that one ‘could control’.

* * *

Another case in point is the Grupo de Investigación en Arte y Política (GIAP), a research collaboration founded in 2013 by Italian sociologist Alessandro Zagato and Chilean art historian Natalia Arcos (Figure 3). The group investigates the aesthetics and politics of revolutionary movements, especially the Zapatistas’ long-standing, indigenous-led rural assertion of political, social, and environmental autonomy. Emerging out of long-term political alliances with their subjects – particularly in Chiapas, Mexico, where they have been based until recently – Zagato and Arcos also research the Abahlali in South Africa (part of a post-Apartheid shack-dwellers movement struggling against evictions and for placing the social worth of housing over its economic value), the Kurdish of the YPG (the Democratic Union Party that defends Kurdish autonomous spaces in northern Syria), and the Mapuche in Chile (especially the indigenous fight in south-central Chile and southwestern Argentina against corporate forestry and state extractivism). Their research results in website presentations, publications, and exhibitions, such as their participation in *Rights of Nature: Art and Ecology of the Americas* at Nottingham Contemporary in 2015, for which they contributed an archive of Zapatista visual culture, including political prints of Escuela de Cultura Popular Martires del ‘68 (ECPM68) and the colorful folkish-revolutionary paintings by Beatriz Aurora.¹³

Like Labofii, GIAP insists on the inseparability of visibility from activism – what it terms the ‘poetic dimension of emancipatory politics’, wherein imagery is inextricable from the ‘rebel infrastructure’ of revolution, as defined by the Zapatistas’ *juntas de buen gobierno* (collective, rotating government boards), which oversee autonomously managed clinics, hospitals, schools, agroecology, and the community’s independent legal system, all set within the Zapatistas’ defended zone of geopolitical autonomy.¹⁴ Visual activism, for GIAP, is integral to bringing about real, material transformations in forms of life: ‘This aesthetic/poetic dimension is decisive in the prefiguration and production of new forms of emancipatory politics’, meaning

collective initiatives opening egalitarian spaces at a creative distance from the state and the capitalist system, and which go beyond the failure of 20th-century attempts to bring about equality, and therefore beyond saturated forms of organization (like the party and the union) and teleological visions of history.

At the same time, they remain guarded against artistic and mediatized appropriations of rebellious visibility, particularly romanticized revolutionary imagery that is denuded of political traction, forming what the Zapatistas term a ‘complex maneuver of distraction’, such as charismatic portraits of Subcomandante Marcos.¹⁵ That said, GIAP willingly presents its visual research in artistic contexts (as at Nottingham Contemporary), especially when those contexts – particularly non-profit ones, removed from art-market imperatives – represent sympathetic conceptual projects, providing the potential to build transnational alliances and facilitate critical pedagogical programming that helps develop political understandings of gallery presentations.

This position explains GIAP’s dedication to disseminating representations of revolutionary practice, even while the group asserts the irreducible socio-political embeddedness of those representations in actual, ongoing movements:

We consider the EZLN [Zapatista National Liberation Army] as the movement which best illustrates this intersection of aesthetics and politics. In their praxis, poetics integrates worldviews, particular forms of doing and organizing, conceptual articulations, new definitions, and a specific use of language. According to this perspective, ‘visual activism’ cannot be seen as a parallel or *accessory field of production of meaning* – as contemporary art (or propaganda) conceives itself vis-à-vis society – but as organic to a political creation, as real as the Zapatista autonomous communities. (emphasis in original)

Exemplary is the work of ‘Camilio’, the pseudonym for the Chiapas community-based peasant-painter who grows food and participates in collective health, education, and community projects but is neither a full-time artist nor academically trained (Figure 4). His paintings are sold at

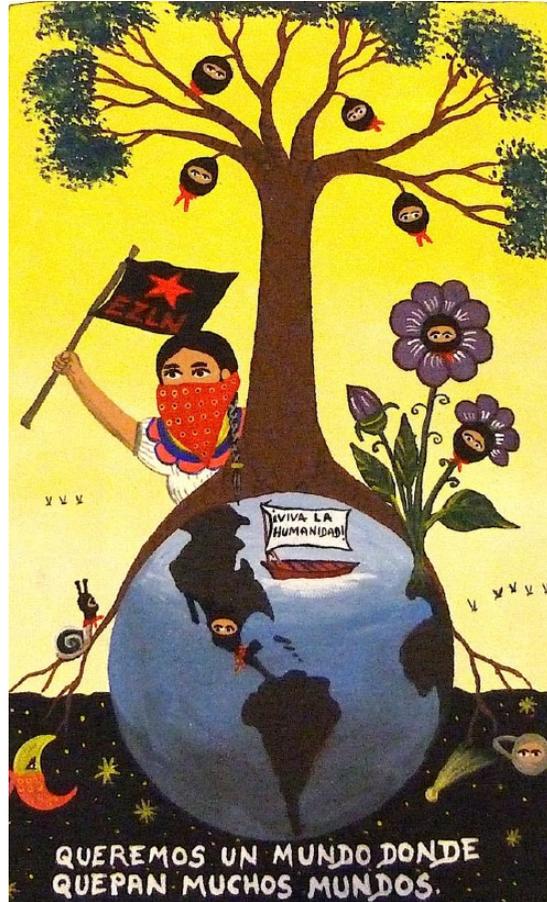


Figure 4. 'Camilio', *Untitled*, c. 2015. © Grupo de Investigación en Arte y Política (GIAP). Reproduced with permission.

affordable local rates in San Cristobal, with profits flowing back to his community. Their imagery is redolent with indigenous iconography joined to revolutionary resurgence: Mayan ruins, bandana-clad planet Earths, native corns and flowers, and moons and snails wearing balaclavas join demotic, hand-painted texts relaying Zapatista cosmological poetics – *Queremos un monde donde quepan muchos mundos* ('we want a world where many worlds fit'):

All these elements (anonymity, repetition, no obsessive pursuit of 'newness' or difference, affordability, overcoming the separation between manual/intellectual work, no individual fame, no feeding the ego, collective aims, support for a real and rebel cause) [explains GIAP] make us think of him as a militant rather than an activist



Figure 5. Subhankar Banerjee, *Polar bear on Bernard Harbor, Barter Island, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska*; appearing on *Democracy Now!* website, 14 May 2015.

– the difference being, the militant is pledged to full-time struggle for equality, justice, and survival, whereas the activist, for these researchers, pursues part-time and shifting issue-based engagements.¹⁶

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If Labofii and GIAP 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 – then the photography of Subhankar Banerjee draws on the gallery-bound potential of visual activism toward this objective.¹⁷ The Indian-born American photographer, writer, and activist has worked for Arctic conservation and indigenous human rights over the last decade, exposing the multifaceted impacts of resource wars, extractivism, and climate change on the Far North. Banerjee has also operated at the forefront of ecocultural activism and environmental humanities research, writing consistently about political ecology on his website and for online independent news sites, and speaking as a commentator on indie media platforms like *Democracy Now!*¹⁸ On 14 May 2015, his iconic image of a polar bear appeared on the show’s program, accompanying an interview with the artist-activist regarding the Obama Administration’s recent decision – opposed by many environmentalists – to approve Shell’s request to conduct offshore drilling in summer 2015 in the Chukchi Sea, which scientists estimate contains approximately 15 billion barrels of oil (Figure 5). In his interview with *Democracy Now!* host Amy Goodman, Banerjee added his support for protestors fighting to stop Shell’s drilling plans, referring to the so-called ‘kayak-tivists’ swarming

around Shell's Arctic-headed Polar Pioneer oil rig docked temporarily off the Emerald City coast. The 'paddle-in-Seattle' flotilla constituted a protest action by the Shell No Coalition, comprising environmentalist and activist groups like 350Seattle, the Mosquito Fleet, Rising Tide, Bayan USA, and the Backbone Campaign. Given the likelihood of industrial accidents in pristine waters lacking adequate infrastructure to aid cleanup operations, the presidential decision, Banerjee (2015) observed in the interview, can only be understood as 'irresponsible and reckless', and one that places 'a national and an international ecological treasure' at unnecessary risk. (Obama later reversed this decision in October 2015, denying Shell request for further Arctic leases following the corporation's unsuccessful oil exploration earlier that summer). As such, Banerjee's image of the polar bear appearing on the coast of the Beaufort Sea amid pools of melting ice in 2001, reappearing during flashpoints of ecoactivism, has come to serve as a placeholder for visualizing the terms of the wider debates around the manifold impacts of fossil-fuel caused climate change. As a moving document of a threatened life-form endemic to the biodiverse Arctic, it has repeatedly served as a motivating agent for political transformation.

Like Labofii and GIAP, Banerjee opposes the appropriation of his work by institutions adverse to his environmental politics. One exhibition in particular, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land, Photographic Journey by Subhankar Banerjee* at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum (2 May–2 September 2003), is telling: a month and a half before the opening of the show, which included the polar bear photograph in Figure 5, a heated debate erupted in Congress over President George W Bush's proposal to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil exploration. Meanwhile, Banerjee's *Seasons of Life and Land: Arctic National Wildlife Refuge* was nearing its publication, and the publisher, Mountaineers Books, sent an advance copy to the Washington, DC, office of the Alaska Wilderness League, a national conservation organization dedicated to conservation of Alaska's nature, with whom Banerjee had collaborated in the past. The Alaska Wilderness League, in turn, sent the book to Senator Barbara Boxer, Democrat from California, whose office selected the polar bear photo, blew it up to poster size, and enabled Boxer to display the image on the floor of the Senate, mobilizing its visual evidence to demonstrate the northern environment's fragile and life-filled habitat, contesting pro-drilling claims of Republicans that the area is merely a vast, empty wilderness. The 18 March debate was covered by C-Span, with Banerjee's photograph featured prominently – subsequently, it has appeared extensively in mainstream media, from *The New York Times* to Fox News – and thanks to the momentum of international activists (including Greenpeace and the Alaska Wilderness League), the drilling proposal was successfully defeated (see Banerjee, 2010). The story is a remarkable reminder of the political potentiality of visual evidence, operating even at the highest levels of governmental politics.

Evidently, the Smithsonian curators were quite startled by this sudden politicization of Banerjee's images just before the opening of his show, and allegedly bowing to pro-drilling political pressure, decided to move the

exhibition to a less visible location. In addition, they abridged Banerjee's extensive captions that placed his photographs within a distinctly politico-ecological framework, opting for the presentation of beautiful – albeit decontextualized – images of the Arctic landscape with minimal titles.¹⁹ It was this act of marginalization and censorship that occasioned Banerjee's subsequent exhibition – this time with full captions – at the California Academy of Sciences later that year, a rejoinder to a series of events that evidences a fascinating struggle between public museums, scientific organizations, and governmental institutions over the political meaning of Banerjee's images.

Indeed, this short photographic history presents a startling example of the transformative power of images – a potent visual activism – one integral to campaigns to redirect corporate–governmental energy policy, even if one public museum attempted to contain that power. While decontextualization remains an ever-present threat to the political traction of images, as dramatized by the Smithsonian, the ability of images to operate in different contexts can also productively serve the mobile requirements of activist energies, at one moment exerting pressure on congressional debates, at another aiding campaigns to halt Shell's Arctic drilling plans, and at still others, visualizing speculative debate and aesthetic experimentation. The latter occurs when Banerjee mobilizes his photographs in his web-based publications to propose rights claims for non-human agents. Considering the negative impacts of environmental change in the Arctic, Banerjee (2013: 33–43) has asked publicly, should we not also establish 'Access to Food as a Fundamental Species Right' in the same way that the United Nations declared 'Water a Fundamental Human Right'? Banerjee's example demonstrates that visual activism, capable of intervening in a range of institutional sites, can effectively generate political drive via museum exhibitions and internet-based systems of reproducibility and distribution, even if it can also be subject to institutionalized repression. Where visibility is not divided from activism, the affective power of imagery can inspire collective struggles to transform political, economic, and environmental arrangements.

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It is clear that these artist–activists do not identify their practices solely as visual activism, an activism that operates primarily in and through the realm of the visual. While they all do indeed employ carefully considered visual elements in their work, these elements remain an inextricable part of a larger assemblage that constructs political activity, comprising multisensorial forms of experience tied to social movements, framed and mobilized by discourse, all of which determine the variable meanings and effects of images. In this regard, it is useful to take into account the conceptualization of 'sensible politics', which, as McLagen and McKee (2012: 17) define it, avoids a reductive 'image-centered analysis' that risks obscuring 'the embeddedness of cultural forms in broader campaigns that facilitate and build (though never contain) the architecture of circulation'. Against visibility's perceptual isolation, they focus attention on the 'image complex' – identifying 'the

channels of circulation along which cultural forms travel, the nature of the campaigns that frame them, and the discursive platforms that display and encode them in specific truth modes' (p. 22) – a methodology that insists on reading aesthetics and political movements as mutually constitutive. It is precisely that mutually constitutive complex of words, images, and social experiences that defines the practices of the groups under discussion here, and which offers a useful formulation alternative and complementary to visual activism.

If we are to contest the fetishization and reification of visibility – its detachment from political struggles in a world of migrant images possessing indeterminate, continually shifting meanings – then we need to investigate further the mutually informing links between visibility and activism (see Demos, 2013). In this regard, I remain suspicious of calls for a 'duty-free art', a concept that attempts to rearticulate the terms of critical autonomy and liberate art from political service, but which seems to repeat an outmoded avant-gardist conceit that we can no longer abide: 'duty-free art ought to have no duty – no duty to perform, to represent, to teach, to embody value', argues artist and theorist Hito Steyerl (2015: 10): 'It should not be indebted to anyone, nor serve a cause or a master, nor be a means to anything.' Does this stance, however, not play into the hands of visibility's apolitical circulation, which ultimately serves the market itself? Against this prospect of a frictionless aesthetic, the current catastrophic convergence of contemporary global society – defined by environmental crisis, economic inequality, militarism, and corporate neoliberalism – demands nothing less than a newly articulated ethico-political imperative.

In the past I have challenged the view that patronage or context completely determine the meanings of visual forms. Contrary to the arguments of critics who have debated the terms of political art practice in recent years,²⁰ I have argued that we grant context too much power when we deny the possibility of the viewer's margin of critical maneuverability within spaces of commercial enterprise that, nonetheless, to some degree, do play a role, albeit not a totalizing one, in establishing the conditions of reception. Still, with the growth of the market in recent years and its incursion into ever more spaces of creativity and criticality – including the increasing corporate sponsorship of cultural events and exhibitions, whether by Koch Industries or BP, and the privatization of public institutions such as museums and educational systems – it has become a matter of urgency to develop sites of independence, experimental, non-capitalist cultures, and forms of artistic life beyond the dominant structures of economic exploitation, the naturalization of finance, and the hypocrisy of green capitalism.

Considering our work as researchers, students, and teachers of social movement aesthetics, including its visual activism, we should continue to ask: how can we study and discuss the aesthetics of politics as embedded in social struggle, addressing images in their complex channels of circulation, but most importantly in relation to the activist alliances and intersectionalist solidarities that offer the best hope of changing the political equation of

conventional corporate-dominated governance? Doing so, we support alternatives of creative autonomy in which expression is not a matter of picture politics or duty-free visibility, but a visual activism directly attached to the places and practices of social engagement, democratic self-governance, and ecological sustainability.²¹ As Labofii's Jordan asks:

In an age of extreme crisis, the key questions artists, activists and curators need to ask themselves are: Can these institutions be machines for amplifying our potential to radically transform the status quo, forms of redistribution of cultural and material capital, or do they simply reframe rebellion into a past tense, an immediate retro refit of revolt? Are museums public spaces that can become alternative common spaces of debate and action planning to reclaim the rights of the city, or are they palaces carefully engineered for us to play the fool in, whilst outside the kings and queens continue to play Russian roulette with our future whilst enriching theirs?

Notes

1. Césaire is cited in Bonney (2014). Thanks to John Jordan for this reference.
2. UNEF Strasbourg (1966), cited in Jordan (2014).
3. See <http://www.labofii.net/about/>
4. J Jordan and I Fremeaux of Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination email to the author 13 May 2015. (All subsequent quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from this email.)
5. Jordan (2014) points out, for instance, the paradox of recent cultural exhibition funding regarding the 2013 *Global Activism* exhibition at ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, which included activist objects used in protesting high-speed rail development in Stuttgart and was sponsored by the nuclear and coal-burning power company EnBW, and the Steirischer Herbst 2012 festival in Graz, whose theme was 'Truth Is Concrete: Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art', and which was sponsored by Steiermärkische Sparkasse, investors in coal-fired power and biotechnology's privatization of seeds and industrial agriculture in the developing world.
6. See Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (2014) and <https://www.climategames.net/>.
7. <http://labofii.net/about/>
8. See the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (2012).
9. <http://labofii.net/about/>
10. Graeber (2009) offers a useful overview of the complex social formations out of which Labofii emerged, in particular People's Global Action of 1999, the worldwide network of radical social movements, grassroots campaigns, and direct actions in resistance to capitalism and in support of social and environmental justice, including the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico; Brazil's Landless Farmers' Movement (MST); the Indian Karnataka State Farmers' Association (KRRS, a grassroots Gandhian direct action movement, renowned for its 'cremate Monsanto' campaign involving burning fields of GM crops); and anarchist groups like Italy's Ya Basta! (emerging out of autonomia), Reclaim the Streets in the UK, and various indigenous and agrarian movements and radical labor unions.

11. In this regard, one might also position Labofii alongside the rebel creativity of the Occupy movement, as discussed in McKee (2014). McKee quotes artist-organizer Amin Husain of MTL Collective, who explains:

We understand art as a training in the practice of freedom, without having to seek legitimacy from art institutions. In our work, we do not simply add an artistic flair to this or that campaign. Theory and research, action and aesthetics, debriefing and analysis – this entire dialectical process is our art practice. It is through this process of learning by doing, of testing and refining our power in an uncertain terrain that we expand the space of imagination, and move forward to the next action with new relationships, lessons and questions.

12. See www.bdsmovement.net/ and Heddaya (2014).
 13. Curated by TJ Demos and Alex Farquharson, with Irene Aristizábal (see <http://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/art/rights-nature>).
 14. As GIAP (1 May 2015, personal correspondence) explains:

The groundbreaking developments of the Zapatista autonomous project show us how engaging it can be to achieve popular control over a territory, and be able to creatively produce a real alternative to capitalist destruction. Today for example, the role of agroecology, a holistic model for designing sustainable and biodiverse agroecosystems, has assumed an enormous importance for these populations. On the one hand, the movement's entire agricultural production is sustainable and free from GMOs and agrochemicals, it protects biodiversity, and it is managed collectively. Particularly important is the struggle to preserve the varieties of corn (the primary and daily food) present in Chiapas from being contaminated by transgenic corn patented by multinational agrochemical companies. On the other hand, for lacking resources, and for being extremely marginalized, these communities strategically use agroecology to achieve food self-sufficiency, which constitutes one of the economic grounds of their autonomous project. The Zapatista example can stimulate the development of critical ideas of 'ecology' as organic to the broader struggle for equality, and not just as a separate instance, or a technocratic problem of administration.

All subsequent quotes are from this correspondence, unless otherwise noted.

15. See Galeano (2014):

They can only see those who are as small as they are. Let's make someone as small as they are, so that they can see him and through him, they can see us. And so began a complex maneuver of distraction, a terrible and marvelous magic trick, a malicious move from the indigenous heart that we are, with indigenous wisdom, challenging one of the bastions of modernity: the media. And so began the construction of the character named 'Marcos'.

16. One might consider, as well, the relations between 'visual activism' and the 'militant image', as in Third Cinema, which is also inextricably tied to revolutionary struggle (see Eshun and Gray, 2011; Solanas and Getino, 1997: 33–58).

17. Among the texts informing my thoughts here are: Flood and Grindon (2014), Greenwald and MacPhee (2010), McKee (2014), McLagan and McKee (2012), and Notes from Nowhere (2003).
18. See <http://www.subhankarbanerjee.org/banerjee.html> and Banerjee (2012).
19. For a discussion of the larger context of the controversial political reception and censorship of Banerjee's work at the Smithsonian, see Dunaway (2009) and my forthcoming book, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (2015).
20. I am thinking of examples such as Fraser (2011), Holmes (2003) and Steyerl (2010).
21. Such a methodology would answer the call for 'militant research', or 'theoretical and practical work oriented to coproduce the knowledges and modes of an alternative sociability, beginning with the power ... of those subaltern knowledges', practices 'created by the collective itself and by the ties to counter power in which it is inscribed, pursuing its own efficacy in the production of knowledges useful to the struggles', as explains Colectivo Situaciones (2003). Also see Mirzoeff (2013).

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