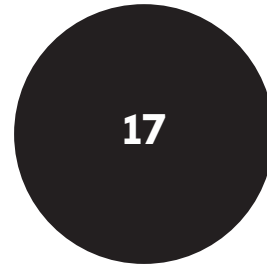




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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture**

**title:**

*Protesting Images*

**authors:**

Editorial Team

**source:**

*View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 17 (2017)

**URL:**

<http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/518/980>

**publisher:**

Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences  
Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw  
View. Foundation for Visual Culture

## **Protesting Images**

We open this issue with an image that is both ambivalent and ambiguous: a powerful document, an image referring to a specific act of protest and a protesting image at the same time. It documents a site of self-immolation – a site that literature had already chosen for such an act of protest in 1979<sup>1</sup> – the solitary, desperate act of an ordinary man opposing state power. The enactment or visualization of this kind of protest is brief –



Photo Rafał Milach

so brief that the event itself could easily be overlooked, and simultaneously so spectacular that it cannot go unnoticed by a passerby or onlooker, but an affective and political after-image keeps recurring as a trace. As problematic as such means of political struggle are, these acts of protest articulate the crisis of the so-called "democratic" language of political protest, a crisis whose history and geopolitical context range from Vietnam to the USA, Tibet, former Czechoslovakia, the former USSR, Tunisia, and Poland. Rafał Milach's photograph – kindly shared with us by its creator – is the image of a site of death with a "makeshift memorial," and as such is reminiscent of similar images, for example the one taken at the site of Michael Brown's shooting. The photograph places us in the midst of things with a sense of belatedness and loss; its tight framing brings us too close, and yet we remain distant as we are arriving at the site after the fact. Its ambiguity contributes to its power: as a protesting image it can stand both with and against the protester; it commemorates or questions this form of protest, yet at the same time does not take sides. The loss of a human life, and the loss of freedom protested against by an everyman who set himself on fire in 2017, in the middle of Europe, in the center of Warsaw, in broad daylight, are mourned and opposed in this photographic image. In this issue, we predominantly look into the visual culture of protest – both contemporary and historical – pointing towards the complex, equivocal, and

changing relations between images and acts of resistance. Here is a poignant after-image.

The general opinion is that images serve as mere representations of social phenomena: tools to record reality or comment upon it, supplementary to reality and derivative of real-life events, issues, and processes.

Looking at the workings and dynamics of social movements, images have traditionally been perceived as supplemental, as objects supporting the struggle for change, but which remain by-products – helpful, yet gratuitous. However, a close analysis of effective social movements proves that images are active social and political actors. Images can shape desires, provoke

action, provide means of group identification, and offer visibility to those excluded from the visual field – to name but a few ways in which images manifest their agency. It is especially at moments of crisis – and we consider the current moment as such – that images gain agency, which allows them to be at the forefront of social change and history making. Precisely because images are an important part of contemporary life worldwide (easily shared despite territorial or cultural "boundaries"), it is obvious that implementing change requires the active use of visual media. If images are not derivative of reality, but rather its crucial element, then to change lived realities we also need to change images and to create diverse, non-exclusive, horizontal tools of visual communication, expanding the languages of protest.<sup>2</sup>

In the **Point of View** section, we invite you to browse through our selection of young Polish artists protesting with images – visual statements commenting on the languages of protest, artistic/activist practices aimed at introducing new languages. In her essay, Magda Szcześniak addresses the visual strategies and imagery we found most intriguing and powerful (whether playful or more traditionally engaged).



A makeshift memorial for Michael Brown on the spot on a Ferguson, Mo., street where his body lay for about four hours after he was shot by a police officer on Aug. 9. Credit Joe Raedle/Getty Images (source)

The thematic section of the journal, **Close Up**, includes a moving essay on Michael Brown's tragedy and the poetics and politics of the black body (and the black corpse) by Iben Engelhardt Andersen, an academic researching teenagers as tragic figures in contemporary US culture, and the Danish translator of Judith Butler's *Frames of War*. And it is Butler's concept of precarious life and vulnerability which offers a framework for the discussion of the visual figure of the fragile body as the agent of protest in the essay *Vulnerable Bodies. On the Visibility of Political Action* by Marcin Stachowicz. In his notes from "field work" on Zuccotti Square in New York City, American ethnographer Michael Taussig shares with us his politics, affects, and failures in being a citizen and a public intellectual. In writing about and participating in the Occupy movement, Taussig proposes to "occupy ethnography" and produces a textual-visual struggle to testify to and objectify (as academics do) a unique protest, an occupation, a crisis, and a moment of solidarity. He thus writes: "Occupying Wall Street inevitably means occupying how we talk, how we talk in public, how we learn and teach, and how we write ethnography (about our own tribe). All this is up for grabs. Otherwise there is no occupation."<sup>3</sup> We are delighted to include the Polish translation of his essay, originally featured in *Critical Inquiry*. This section also includes an essay by the French scholar of Arabic Studies, Cecile Boëx, who explores moving images (especially amateur videos) in Syria and their relationship with politics and conflict. *In Defense of the Common Good* by Katarzyna Warmuz examines the Chilean mural tradition, both leftist and conservative, through the lens of the theories of W. J. T. Mitchell and Jacques Rancière.

Inspired by questionnaires published in *October* – such as those on Materialisms (2016) or the Contemporary (2009) – we sought responses about protesting images from a number of artists, writers, curators, critics, and activists. Their answers were laconic and elaborate, surprising and anticipated, polemical and consentient. Among the respondents are Angela Dimitrakaki, Bojana Piskur, Wolfgang Tillmans, W. J. T. Mitchell, representatives of the KPP (Consortium for Post-Artistic Practices, Poland), Wilhelm Sasnal, and Witek Orski. You will find their visual and textual reactions in the **Perspectives** section.

In the **Panorama** section, we present Katarzyna Bojarska's Polish translation of one of the most significant essays in contemporary critical and political theory, Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics*, which will soon be published in Polish as part of his book *The Politics of Enmity* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Karakter, 2018). His work resonates uncannily with Andersen's and Stachowicz's articles elsewhere in the journal. This section also includes the English translation of a chapter from the recently published book *Kultura wizualna w Polsce. Spojrzenia* [*Visual Culture in Poland. Looks*], entitled *Banner*, by Magda Szcześniak and Łukasz Zaremba. The essay seeks to outline a Polish tradition of "protesting images." As the authors point out, what seems most interesting is "whether it is possible to create something that resembles a banner or placard, and what role artists can play in the creation of powerful images which evoke and channel emotions, draw people together and drive them to take action."<sup>4</sup> They discuss interesting historical cases, as well as current imagery and visual strategies of protest movements such as the Black Protest – the women's general strike in Poland on Monday October 3, 2016.

In **Snapshots**, we invite you to read three reviews of "protesting films": French feminist actress and director Amandine Gay's *Ouvrir la voix*, discussed by Agnieszka Więckiewicz; Peter Watkins' monumental *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, thoroughly analyzed by Michał Pospiszyl; and Raoul Peck's recent documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, examined by Iwona Kurz. Additionally, Jakub Banasiak reviews the exhibition *140 uderzeń na minutę. Kultura rave i sztuka w latach 90. w Polsce* [*140 Beats Per Minute. Rave Culture and Art in 1990s Poland*], and Joanna Bednarek writes about Katarzyna Czeczot's book *Ofelizm*.

Living in "interesting times" requires making room for a certain polyglossia of the languages of protest: generous resource to make use of and share.

Please help yourself!

**Editorial Team**

## Footnotes

1 See: Tadeusz Konwicki, *A Minor Apocalypse*, trans. Richard Lourie (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999).

2 Magda Szczęśniak wrote more extensively about this in her: *Visual activism – protest and emancipation through images*, [https://issuu.com/evensfoundation/docs/medialiteracy\\_singlepages](https://issuu.com/evensfoundation/docs/medialiteracy_singlepages), accessed January 20, 2018.

3 Michael Taussig, "I'm so Angry I Made a Sign," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Autumn 2012), 83.

4 Magda Szczęśniak, Łukasz Zaremba, "Banner," *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 17 (2017), <http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/514/966>, accessed January 20, 2018.