

AFTERWORD

Visual Activism

So what then is visual culture now? It has evolved into a form of practice that might be called visual thinking. Visual thinking is something we do not simply study; we have to engage with it ourselves. What we might call visual culture practice has gone through several versions in the past twenty-five years and has now converged around visual activism. For many artists, academics and others who see themselves as visual activists, visual culture is a way to create forms of change. If we review the interpretations of visual culture outlined in this book, we can see how this concept has emerged.

When visual culture became a keyword and focus of study in and around 1990, as we saw in the Introduction, it centred on the question of visual and media representation, especially in mass and popular culture. The shorthand for understanding the issues concerning visual culture at that time was to say it was about the Barbie doll, the *Star Trek* series and everything concerning Madonna. By which we should understand that people were centrally concerned with how identity, especially gender and sexual identity, was represented in popular culture, and the ways in which artists and filmmakers responded to those

representations. I do not mean to say that these issues no longer matter but that the ways in which we engage with them have changed.

The South African photographer Zanele Muholi (b. 1972) is one key example. She calls herself a ‘black lesbian’ and a ‘visual activist’. Her self-portrait resonates with Samuel Fosso’s, which we looked at in Chapter 1 (with Figure 19). Both use leopard-print as a sign for ‘Africa’. Although both are wearing glasses, Muholi’s heavy frames suggest she is an intellectual, while Fosso’s sunglasses were part of his parody. Muholi’s hat places her in modern, urban South Africa. Above all, her direct look at the camera claims the right to see and be seen.

Her work makes visible the tension between the freedoms offered by the South African constitution and the realities of homophobic violence encountered by LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning and intersex) people every day. Legal protection for people of all sexual orientations exists in theory but it is ineffective day-to-day in the townships. Muholi’s work shows how she and other queer South Africans are engaged with their lives and loves in the face of this violence (Lloyd 2014). She wishes to be seen as a black lesbian and to be accepted as such by her peers. In 2014, Muholi gave the keynote speech at the International Association of Visual Culture conference in San Francisco, itself titled ‘Visual Activism’. For the hundreds in attendance, the questions implied by her work were global: What does it mean to be seen to be a citizen in a global era? Who represents us at local and national levels in a globalized society? If the state cannot



Figure 87 —Muholi, *Self-Portrait*

back up its own declarations with actions, how do we represent ourselves, visually and politically?

These questions resonate with the shift in thinking through representation that began around 2001 with the participatory movement slogan ‘They do not represent us’,

which we discussed in Chapter 7. The notion that ‘they do not represent us’ now appears more like a recurrent theme in modern history, from the Chartist claim to represent England to the Arab Spring.

The financial crash of 2007 and onwards in Ireland led to unemployment, emigration and a widespread sense of crisis in government. Art and museums have become a place to try and think through how to respond to this crisis. Artists Megs Morley and Tom Flanagan came across some notes made in 1867 by Karl Marx for a speech on Ireland which seemed uncannily familiar:

The situation of the *mass of the people* has deteriorated, and their state is verging to a crisis [similar to that of the 1846 Famine]. (Marx 1867)

Morley and Flanagan asked three writers to imagine their own speeches on ‘The Question of Ireland’. They then had actors perform the speeches, which they filmed in Ireland’s National Theatre of Irish language, the Taibhearc.



Figure 88 – Still from Morley and Flanagan, *The Question of Ireland*

The result was a three-screen, hour-long film that combined the visual language of avant-garde cinema with the classic political rhetoric of the popular speech. It is a real performance but now it seeks to find a national rather than

a personal identity. Morley and Flanagan go back to the revolutionary past to look for possible futures. The second segment (in the still above) meditates on how Ireland was created as a new nation less than a century ago, with great hopes, but it has not been able to realize them. The speaker concludes that what is needed is a revolution, but not in the classical Marxist sense: ‘Revolutions are about vision . . . a revolution of vision, of purpose, maybe hope’. This revolution is not imagined as violent or confrontational but begins with the simple act of ‘loving ourselves’ in a country known for the self-deprecatory wise-crack. Although this was a film shown in art galleries and museums, its hope and intent was to create change in Ireland, above all a change of vision.

For what has become clear is that the implication of ‘they do not represent us’ (in all the senses of that term) is that we must find ways to represent ourselves. Visual activism, from the selfie to the projection of a new concept of the ‘people’, and the necessity of seeing the Anthropocene, is now engaged in trying to make that change. That effort takes place against the backdrop of ongoing war, from Afghanistan to Ukraine, and especially across the Middle East. It is not a short-term project but one that involves considering how we live our lives as a whole.

In Detroit, the 99-year-old activist and philosopher Grace Lee Boggs begins every meeting with a question: ‘What time is it on the clock of the world?’ In the opening shot of the film *American Revolutionary* (2014, director Grace Lee), Boggs muses: ‘I feel so sorry for people not living in Detroit.’ As you watch the (then) ninety-five-year-old carefully wheel her walker among one of the many urban ruins of the city,



Figure 89 – Still from Grace Lee, *American Revolutionary*

you may wonder if she can be serious. Boggs has devoted her life to Detroit. She moved there in 1955 when it was the global hub of the automotive industry. Detroit gave the world the assembly line, affordable transport, personal consumer credit to buy cars – and, as Boggs likes to point out, global warming via the automobile. In her view, we have now to engage in what she calls ‘visionary organizing’ to think about how life after industrial, fossil-fuel-based culture might be possible. She sees this as exciting and liberating, a chance to move ‘beyond making a living to make a life’. Despite the poverty in the city – now officially affecting 42 percent of the 81 percent African-American population – Grace Lee Boggs sees the future as beginning again in Detroit.

In Grace’s view, we all live in some form of ‘Detroit’. What is called ‘globalization’ is a transition from the industrial economy to something else. What was created at the Ford factories in Detroit was the assembly-line system of

production. A worker carried out the same task over and over again because this division of labour enabled the factory as a whole to produce more cars. Most of the work in a modern Ford factory is done by robots, welding and painting in showers of sparks that might be dangerous to people. One of the tasks of the remaining human labour force is to think of ways to make the process still more efficient. A group of Toyota workers realized that their paintshop could reduce its staff from eight people to three if some changes were introduced. Toyota rewarded these individuals but dismissed five out of eight employees in their paintshops worldwide. Not without reason, the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno has called the new way of working ‘Toyota-ism’, just as the assembly line was known as ‘Fordism’ (2004).

Visionary organizing is a way of thinking about how we might use our creative energies to better ends than cutting jobs and increasing profits. It is another form of visual activism. People around the world are coming to similar conclusions and finding new ways to engage with how to imagine change. In Germany, an opinion poll found that 24 percent of young people expressed the desire to become an artist. I don’t think that suddenly a quarter of all Germans want to be painters or sculptors. Rather, art might seem to be the only way to live a life for yourself in the global economy, as opposed to the dominant so-called ‘service economy’ in which we work, not for each other but for someone else’s profit. This desire to live otherwise lies behind the worldwide surge in participatory media, from YouTube channels to Snapchatting, and performance. Teen bloggers and video-channels on YouTube are finding audiences in the tens of

millions, while 32 million watched the 2014 League of Legends videogame championships in South Korea. Even museums are becoming involved. The proposed M+ museum is described as a 'new museum for visual culture in Hong Kong'. Scheduled to open in 2018, it has already provoked a lively debate in the city as to what visual culture means: is it a way of thinking about contemporary art in the global city? Or is it a set of everyday practices such as graffiti, calligraphy, martial arts films and other aspects of Hong Kong's dynamic city life? Even the most traditional of museums are changing. In 2014, London's Victoria and Albert Museum held an exhibition called *Disobedient Objects* that set out to show 'how political activism drives a wealth of design ingenuity and collective creativity that defy standard definitions of art and design' (vam.ac.uk). One example was a giant inflatable cobblestone, created by the Eclectic Electric Collective for use in street demonstrations. The balloons were a pun on the cobblestones formerly used to build barricades. They make fun of the militarized way that governments try to control their citizens when police in riot gear have to run around trying to pop them. The two moments suddenly interacted with the appearance of Occupy Central. Hong Kong activists downloaded instructions on how to make a gas mask from the Victoria and Albert Museum website, while an Occupy Umbrella – the symbol of the Hong Kong movement – quickly found its way into the London exhibition.

Another side of the same situation was seen in Ferguson, Missouri, after the police shooting of Michael Brown on 9 August 2014. Acting on the understanding that Brown had raised his hands, activists created the meme 'Hands Up,

Don't Shoot' within days. Whereas most memes are thought out and planned, this was a spontaneous re-enactment of what were held to be Michael Brown's last words. The meme became known instantly through livestream and social media. 'Hands Up, Don't Shoot' is one of the first products of the interaction of the Snapchat/Selfie generation, with direct action in the streets, because it creates a new self-image of the protestor. It makes visible what was done even though it was perpetrated out of sight of any media depiction or representation. The grand jury decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson, the policeman who shot Brown, for any crime, took the 'Hands Up' meme across the United States and indeed the world, with solidarity actions in London and elsewhere, using the slogan.

In visual activist projects, there is an alternative visual vocabulary emerging. It is collective and collaborative, containing archiving, networking, researching, and mapping among other tools, all in the service of a vision of making change. These are the goals that the tools of visual culture, which I set out in the introduction, seek to achieve. In 1990, we could use visual culture to criticize and counter the way that we were depicted in art, film and mass media. Today, we can actively use visual culture to create new self-images, new ways to see and be seen, and new ways to see the world. That is visual activism. At the end of this book we can perhaps put it still more simply.

Visual activism is the interaction of pixels and actions to make change. Pixels are the visible result of everything produced by a computer, from words created by a word-processor to all forms of image, sound and video. Actions

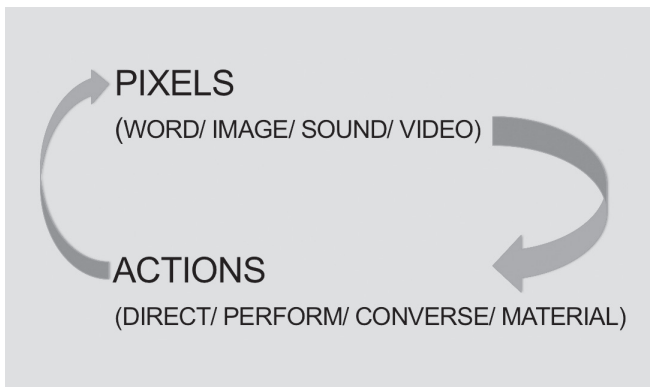


Figure 90 – Visual activism graphic

are things we do with those cultural forms to make changes, small or large, from a direct political action to a performance – whether in everyday life or in a theatre – a conversation or a work of art. Once we have learned how to see the world, we have taken only one of the required steps. The point is to change it.