overSEAS 2018

This thesis was submitted by its author to the School of English and American Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts. It was found to be among the best theses submitted in 2018, therefore it was decorated with the School's Outstanding Thesis Award. As such it is published in the form it was submitted in **overSEAS 2018** (http://seas3.elte.hu/overseas/2018.html)

EÖTVÖS LORÁND TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM

Bölcsészettudományi Kar

DIPLOMAMUNKA

MA THESIS

„Nem a Mi Nevünkben": Vizuális Aktivizmus a Kortárs USA-ban

"They Don't Represent Us": Visual Activism in the Contemporary US

Témavezető:

Dr. Bán Zsófia

Professzor

Készítette:

Kuzeev Sergei

Amerikanisztika MA

2018

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ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with *visual activism*—an emergent phenomenon of today's urban culture that appropriates diverse artistic practices for the purposes of propagating political and social agendas. The work is aimed at devising a conceptual model within which visual activism can be identified, analyzed, and put to practice on the basis of both the available theoretic developments in the field of visual culture and the witness accounts and insights of practicing activists. As a result, this thesis delivers the following findings:

1) visual activism is most substantively manifested as the re-iterated politics of representing identities in public discourses;
2) the basic vehicles of visual activism are strategic witnessing (i.e. direct exposure of evidence) and culture jamming (i.e. recycling of mass cultural codes);
3) the instrumentation through which visual activism pursues its objectives includes the appropriation of physical and digital space, decentralized networking, and the use of the new media.

The pivotal tactics of visual activism are examined in the thesis from the historical, theoretical, and practical standpoints, including within the framework of the "Occupy Wall Street" campaign of 2011 as a case in point, classifiable as visual activism on the grounds of its goals, organizational tactics, and the techniques of implementation.

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Introduction

This work is dedicated to *visual activism*—an emergent phenomenon of the contemporary urban culture that consists in the appropriation of diverse artistic practices for the purposes of propagating political and social agendas. Though visual activism has become, over the last years, a legitimate object of study within the framework of visual culture and a number of other academic fields, including new media theory, minority studies, and social anthropology, to name only a few, it still lacks consistent theoretic coverage. That said, in this work I have made an attempt to devise a conceptual model within which visual activism can be identified, analyzed, and put to practice on the basis of both the available theoretic developments and the witness accounts and insights of visual activists themselves. As a result, this thesis delivers the following findings:

1) visual activism is most substantively manifested as the re-iterated politics of representing identities in public discourses;
2) the basic vehicles of visual activism are strategic witnessing (i.e. direct exposure of evidence) and culture jamming (i.e. creative recycling of mass cultural codes);
3) the instrumentation through which visual activism pursues its objectives includes the appropriation of physical and digital space, decentralized networking, and the use of the new media.

In the final Chapter I refer to the "Occupy Wall Street" campaign of 2011, classifiable as visual activism on the grounds of its goals, organizational tactics, and the techniques of implementation. Rather than giving a detailed account and the chronology of the "Occupy Wall Street" events, this Chapter is meant to showcase how visual activism might be approached within the conceptual model that I have previously outlined and how its essential practices—appropriation of public space, recording and disseminating evidence through social media, creation of weak ties and building non-hierarchical

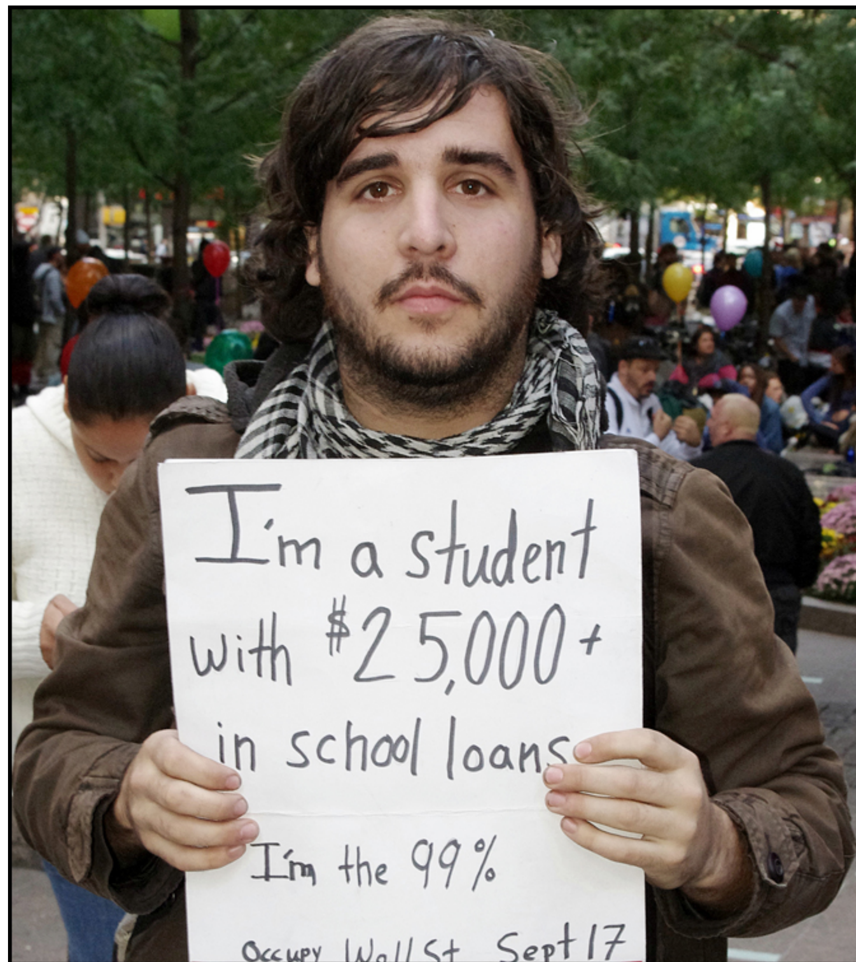
networks on the basis thereof—work jointly to raise public awareness, enforce new angles of view on unprivileged and marginal social groups, and, as a result, enable social change.

Chapter 1. Visual Activism: Theories and Perspectives

1.1 Contexts and Definitions

Various sources testify to the fact that the term "visual activism" was first used to a sensible effect by the South African photographic artist Zanele Muholi in 2014 during her keynote speech at a visual culture conference in San Francisco to provide insight into her own work, which consisted in documenting and publicizing the everyday life of the SAR black lesbian communities (Bryan-Wilson *et al*. 7; Mirzoeff "How to See" 290). This coinage was readily adopted to refer to various artistic practices in which visual means—photography, video footage, performance, and others—appear as an integral part of social or political campaigning or, as in Muholi's case, as the manifest denouncement of neutrality rather than a conventional political protest. In other words, and as expressly underscored by the contemporary advocates of visual activism, these practices are centered on propagating diverse social and political agendas, while their aesthetic dimension, though not altogether abandoned, would emerge as a relational factor (Bryan-Wilson *et al*. 8).

This was the philosophy of, for instance, the "Occupy Wall Street" campaign, which started in the autumn of 2011 in New York as a culture jamming street protest and undertook to visualize the uncertain fortunes of those victimized by the stranglehold of the neo-liberal economy and global capital. For this purpose, several thousands of campaigners were enthusiastically creating and disseminating ingenious slogans, politicized selfies, and video stills as new forms of socially-sensitive artistic expression (Pic. 1).



Pic 1. *A "WeAre99%" selfie, Tumblr (September 2011).*

Later, the techniques and methods of visualization launched by the Wall Street "occupants" were put to use by the "Black Lives Matter" activist groups to display the photographic evidence of police violence and systematic racism veiled behind the political correctness. The "punk rogation" staged by the Russian "Pussy Riot" balaclava trio in an orthodox cathedral, the attacks of topless "Femen" activists from Ukraine on prominent politicians, and the "Strike Debt" agitprop placards designed by Quebec students rebelling against the high tuition fees in state-funded universities—these are just a few examples of what would classify as visual activism, a new form of creative protest born to the post-industrial networked society.

This account entails a number of theoretical and codification vicissitudes, the most challenging of which is drawing the line between visual activism and "socially engaged art"—a phenomenon not unknown to the twentieth century's audiences and academic

community. Moreover, as visual activism tends to appropriate the most innovative and unconventional means of artistic expression that might be unrecognizable by the established art institutions, its discursive frameworks and affiliations remain hard to compartmentalize. And while the debates are still in progress with individual artists and activist groups proposing diverse solutions and methods of regimentation, what has become articulate over the last years is that visual activism, irrespective of whether it can or cannot be encapsulated by the contemporary art, is best approached within the domain of what is known as "visual culture". T. J. Demos, a significant theorist in the field, suggests viewing visual activism as the "middle ground" between art and grassroots politics, i.e. in terms of clash between the aesthetic and the ethic: since a visual activist's work presupposes direct interaction with the audience, it should aim at producing an ethical response in a viewer rather than at being recognized as a work of art by museums and critics (Bryan-Wilson *et al.* 20). The above-mentioned campaigns, as well as the individual and small group actionism, that I classified as visual activism, should be therefore conceptualized not as simply evolved or re-iterated forms of performance art and street protest—though they do, of course, inherit much of their goals, practical principles, and paraphernalia—but as the contemporary politics of visuality and network mobility, i.e. what visual culture as a discipline is primarily concerned with.

Prominent visual culture scholar Nicolas Mirzoeff suggests in his latest works that visual activism should become central to the discourse of visuality in a globalized society and that its main point of divergence from the traditional "socially engaged art" lies in the array of tools and practices that it sets into motion, including networking, collaborative creation, and mapping ("How to See" 290, 297). He maintains that while throughout the 1990s the main scholarly concern of a visual culture academician was the "critique of representation" (with post-colonial theory, gender and queer studies, and other post-structuralist modes of enquiry sharing the same purpose), nowadays, the focus has shifted

in a more practical direction: "Today, we can actively use visual culture to create new self-images, new ways to see and be seen, and new way to see the world. That is visual activism" ("How to See" 297). This means that the new politics of visuality are more readily shaped today through participation and engagement, which—without reneging on the rich theoretical background that the visual culture has accumulated over the last decades—should become the very method of investigation. And, given the importance of the visual activism's political dimension, its ability—or, at least, incentive—to catalyze social change, this whole undertaking might as well be colligated, according to Demos, as "a multisensory, collective, and situated form of being-in-the-world posed against constituted powers" (87).

1.2 Investigation Frameworks

Apparently, the practices of visual activism could become viable after the visual experience as such had evolved into the dominating force of both mainstream and "high" culture, in the age of what was famously termed by William Mitchell as the "pictorial turn", i.e. "the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading" ("The Pictorial Turn" 16).

In view of the technical advances that had brought to life new modes of information production, consumption, and exchange, it had to be acknowledged on part of many scholars that the long-established discourse of the "world-as-text" had been challenged profoundly by the new understanding of the "world-as-image". Thus, according to Mirzoeff, "western philosophy and science now use a pictorial, rather than textual model of the world" ("Introduction" 5). This realization, in its turn, was further linked in critical theory with the lingering problem of identity (racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, etc.): on the one hand, post-structuralist thinking made the representation of identities in the mainstream culture a prime scholarly concern and, on the other hand, the centrality of

visual experience to identity building was readily recognized by the most prominent thinkers of the post-industrial scholarship (Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and others).

Indeed, it is beyond argument that during the last decades visual means of information transfer (primarily, film, television, photography, and digital image) have become, in this way or another, our doors to reality. Moreover, visual representation has a long tradition of being, among other things, an efficient tool against bigotry and ignorance: images turn viewers into direct witnesses and rival textual evidence as they overcome linguistic constraints and cross political boundaries. In difference from words that often appear as bearers of cultural bias, that need translation (i.e. are routinely distorted when used across different linguistic environments), and that are loaded with inherent metaphoric structures affecting their interpretation rather incalculably, images are capable of "acting directly", of being a straightforward proof. This ability of visual experience to affect viewers without resorting to the cognitive patterns of the language has been debated heatedly for many decades now, and there is still no clarity as to whether sensory experience can be at all interpreted without recourse to linguistics. Given the persistence and the complexity of this debate, however, some researchers managed to experimentally establish that exposure to images may prompt "a heightened awareness identifiable in bodily changes that precede rather than follow the cognitive or rational assessment" (Milne *et al*. 184).

The power of images should not, of course, be idealized: as has been extensively evinced photography and even documentary footage can be manipulated and invoke various interpretations as a function of changing contexts, quality of media, and other factors. But what is hardly deniable is that their ability to represent is still of unique impact and that manipulation and forgery are easily detectable, whereas it is in the nature of the language to rely, primarily, on culture-specific associations and metaphors properly

identifiable and decipherable via a "super-structure" or a meta-language (for instance, artificial languages, formulae of logics, image schemes, etc.). It is of little surprise then that in the course of human history this quality of images has many a time proved to be of a distinct social and emancipatory potential, as "the adage that a 'picture is worth a thousand words' was never more valid than in the battle for and against civil rights…" (Berger 9). This is not, however, to say that there is an ironclad boundary between images and words—on the contrary, it is unstable and may shift across contexts and environments. Moreover, visual experience is still subject to interpretation, i.e. it relies on a certain form of semiosis, a "visual language" with its own rules and conventions. Visual culture emerged as a discipline, or a tactic, of studying this language.

Though initially founded with a goal of "expand[ing] the parameters and methods of visual art history" (Jackson 173) and though its first researchers were mostly preoccupied with the nature and the constitutional properties of the image *per se*, visual culture as a field of study gradually shifted its focus to evolve into a "fluid interpretative structure centered on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups in everyday life" (Mirzoeff "Introduction" 11) and, thus, became a discipline with a strong potential for social analysis rather than an abstract scholarship of mental patterns. The applicability of visual culture to the study of a broad spectrum of social processes and phenomena was foregrounded already in structuralism and early post-structuralism (both of which are, largely, language-oriented intellectual movements), when such notions as Foucault's "scopic regimes", de Bord's "society of spectacle", Baudrillard's "simulacra", and other references to the power of vision made their way into the mainstream scholarship. And there is yet another dimension to visual culture that emerged during the last decade—the study of how the established norms of visual representation are challenged via today's artistic, political, and social practice. This not only expands the existing discipline's theoretic horizons and enhances its practical relevance, but, in fact,

molds it into a “political–ethical project, linking visual culture communities and constituencies internationally in sites as various as the museum, the artist’s studio, and emergent alternatives to them” (Bryan-Wilson *et al*. 11).

1.3 Politics of Representation

As I have noted above, what is essential for all forms of visual activism and what was the driving force of its prototypical forms found in the post-war human rights movements in the US and Western Europe, is the problem of representation. In its elemental sense, representation occurs when someone or something acts on behalf of or stands for someone or something else, which could be individuals, groups, objects, or ideas. And while the representation is a fundamental phenomenon of human culture embraced within the semiotic theory, what shall interest us here is the political representation, the web of relations that emerges between the representatives and the represented, the effects and the complications that it entails.

Political representation in its most evolved forms is the basis of today’s western democracies, but, however advanced it might seem to be, it is neither flawless nor consummate: there are always marginalized voices and interests that find themselves under–represented, misrepresented, or not represented at all. This lack or impropriety of representation stood behind the street protests of the 1960s and 1970s and led gradually to the uprise of the neo-liberal political practice of emancipation: granting equal economic and political rights to women, various ethnic and racial groups; de-criminalization of and promoting marriage equality to sexual minorities; ensuring accessibility and inclusiveness for the physically handicapped, etc. All of these developments are the result of implementing the politics of *identity*, by which Manuel Castells understands a “process by which a social actor recognizes itself and constructs meaning primarily on the basis of a given cultural attribute or a set of attributes” (22). Indeed, according to many scholars—especially those of the Neo-Marxist specter—the affirmation of excluded identities in the

public sphere and giving them a share of political power is what has now replaced the traditional class struggle, which has been seen for over a century as the major driving force of societal progress (Castells 22).

This is what a today's visual activist is engaged in following the long-established path of street protest and direct political action: filling the gap. Individual activists like Muholi make visible the problem of discrimination and inequality of black lesbian women in the SAR, while "Occupy Wall Street" activists voice the interests of the American youth, which feels deprived of future by investment funds and big corporations. The very slogan "*Que no! Que no! Que no nos Representan!*" (Spanish for "*No! No! They Don't Represent Us!*") was both the political demand and the undersong of the "M-15" Movement formed in Spain following the street protests of May, 2011. And while all this would hardly classify as a political action, i.e. conventional activism (not to mention its institutionalized forms—electoral participation, formation of political parties, etc.), it can definitely be viewed as the strive to re-iterate the existing politics of representation and to change the way of "being seen" by those in power.

By definition, a visual activist is the one who subjects political demands and agendas to visualization. Depending on the initial activist's motivations and goals, street activities may be important (or integral) in raising awareness, but what always matters most is their aftermath—the visual diary that is created as a result and that is further disseminated through various media (primarily, social networks). This means that visual activists aim at producing powerful imagery that would be persuasive, representational, and, above all, aspirational.

Thus, the visual diary of the "Black Lives Matter" movement—in addition to the numerous photos of the protest action and of the police violence—would also include the murals made by various street artists in many American cities (Pic. 2), as well as the 45-minute documentary "*Black Men Dream*" filmed by Shikeith Cathey, in which several

black men (some of whom are naked) simply have to answer two questions: "When did you become a black man?" and "What makes you happy?".

Pic. 2. *"We Define Wealth" mural in Oakland, CA.*

Author: EESUU, photo by Graff Hunter (2015)

There is, however, one further development here that may, on the one hand, rather uncontrollably interfere with the creator's design and, on the other hand, surprisingly surpass its inherent ambition. It is the possibility of what Mitchell termed as "image-thing", when, through the interaction between the audience and images, the latter become alive and move away from being strictly representational ("The Pictorial Turn" 36). This simply means that the viewer is able of creating meanings by directly addressing the visual and that, consequently, collective spectatorship may be of an unpredictable force. The frameworks, within which images are decoded by the viewer, depend on intrinsic cognitive, intuitive, and emotional mechanisms, among which, according to art historian Ernst Gombrich, the prior viewing experience—that is, the aggregate of images that we store in our memory, however remote—is of paramount importance (250). In other words,

the impact of an image upon viewers can be predicated on their cognitive bias, cultural experience, and, ultimately, archetypal reasoning.

This specific problem of making the representation work predictably (or of being able to correctly interpret its immediate and long-lasting effects in changing cultural, temporal, and other contexts), which I only mention here briefly, is immensely complex and is researched extensively by the academe. But what is essential to the practice of representation in visual activism is linking it to the notion of "symbolic representation", which is best illustrated by so-called iconic images that have over the time become universal metaphors for an array of concepts and situations.

The power of iconic images lies exactly in what visual activists strive to produce: making an imprint in the viewer's mind and, ultimately, becoming a universally accepted and widespread representation of a certain idea. Thereby empowered symbolic representation serves to legitimize its object so that it is no more taken critically and is considered authentic by its very nature (Lombardo and Meier 17). Thus, for instance, the photo of the Soviet soldiers raising a red flag over the downfallen roof of Reichstag in May, 1945 is symbolic of the end of Nazism and the Soviet takeover of Berlin, while the famous picture of Marylyn Monroe with her skirt fluttering above the subway manhole came to be associated with the liberated female sexuality.

The production of images that would in a similar fashion represent ideas and connect to memorable visual experiences is the activist's ultimate task: through the impact that is thuswise produced, a viewer—if not driven into a physical action—is at least subjected to the arousal of sympathy or change of attitude. And it is of a particular interest that such visual production may be representative of not only social concepts and political demands, but of entire ideologies. Thus, it is believed by many that the widely broadcast images of 9/11 attacks and their aftermath—with the Twin Towers in flames, rescue workers appearing from Ground Zero, and people jumping out of windows—were accountable to a

great degree for the emergence of the strong anti-Muslim sentiment in the US following the terroristic acts (Hug 246). Just like there is a war of ideologies—between the secular West and the patriarchal Muslim world—there is a war of imagery as a vital part thereof, when a caricature of the prophet Mohammad would be set against a photo of the American flag ablaze, while numerous pictures of bellicose beardies and veiled women in black garments would respond to the images of mistreated and mutilated prisoners of Guantanamo. A similar symbolic weapon served its purpose during the “Occupy Wall Street” campaign of 2011: the widely circulated viral video still of a policeman pepper-spraying a female activist literally drove many people onto the streets to protest against the police violence.

1.4 Visual Rhetoric

In the previous section I have referred pointedly to the production of symbolically representative and persuasive visual experiences as the ultimate goal of a visual activist. In order to identify the mechanisms that underlie the possibility of reaching this goal, I shall need to invoke the concept of “visual rhetoric”, which is most commonly understood as the use of visual production to persuade and convince the audience through its vividness, originality, and aesthetic properties (Seliger 600), though, in a stricter sense, “to qualify as visual rhetoric, an image must by symbolic, involve human intervention and to be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating” (Foss 141).

According to the visual culture theorist C. Hill, “vividness” (i.e. ability to arouse emotional response and sympathy) is the basis of the visual rhetoric; moreover, the media (or the type of experience) itself pre-determines its default rhetoric force: in the chart below various media and experiences are rated based on their degree of vividness, hence, the rhetoric potential (31):

<u>More vivid information</u>	actual experience
	moving images with sound
	static photograph
	realistic painting
	line drawing
	narrative account
	descriptive account
	impersonal analysis
<u>Less vivid information</u>	statistics

There is no reason to disagree with this rating given that live experience, photography, and film (both staged and in the form of live photo reports and video footages) are indeed the preferred media of most visual activists around the world. This understanding of the rhetoric power of the visual dates back to the very dawn of the film and photography, which are not only able of enhancing viewers' emotional response by "going back" to their lived experience and thus enabling to perceive it more self-consciously, but, also, of re-creating this experience quite realistically even if it was not actually lived. This should require certain multi-dimensionality and special effects (sound, kinetics, etc.), which are used extensively in contemporary video and installation art and which have become the staple feature of today's Hollywood entertainment film industry, not to mention the latest advances in the "virtual reality" engineering. But even deprived of this technical ornamentation, the rhetoric power of images played an essential role in visual activism long before it had been shaped as a legitimate practice: from the nineteen century's photographs of lynching and the living conditions of the people of color to the imagery of grassroots homophobia of the pre-Stonewall era in the US and the photographic evidence of the holocaust—all this became, to a great degree, the driving force of street protests, as well as of the legal action that eventually followed (Olson 10).

It is worth noting that visual rhetoric is often referred to as a separate field of study, rather than a constituent part of the visual culture, and that various alternative names of this discipline may be encountered elsewhere: rhetoric of symbolic action, rhetoric of non-oratorical forms, pictorial persuasion, rhetoric of visual conventions, and many others. Evidently, the growing importance of the visual media studies in the light of the new patterns of information transfer and consumption would steadily bring more attention to this type of scrutiny, which—once started mostly as a historic investigation into the use of visuals for the purposes of propaganda and advertising—already became a powerful framework of social enquiry with numerous interdisciplinary links with other fields, including American studies, gender studies, art history, and theory of communication, to name only a few (Olson 11).

1.5 Strategic Witnessing

The live experience, to whose manifest rhetoric potential I have referred above, is closely related to the notion of "witnessing", which is of special significance to visual activism practices and the media scholarship in general. According to John D. Peters, witnessing is a communicative practice that "raises questions of truth and experience, presence and absence, death and pain, seeing and saying, and the trustworthiness of perception—in short, fundamental questions of communication" (707). In view of the proliferation of visual evidence (in the form of, mainly, photographic images and short videos) of both political action and of personal lives broadcast and exposed via social media platforms, some scholars identify our time as the "era of the witness" (Wievorka), while others, even more pointedly, argue that the concept of witnessing is today more central to the study of culture and communication than the traditionally adjuvant notions of representation, mediation, reception, and dissemination (Frosh and Pinchevski 2). To be able to describe these developments more innovatively, Toronto's university professor Steven Mann coined the term *"sousveillance"*, i.e. watching "from underneath" as

contrasted with “surveillance”, which literally means “watching from above” in French (Joyce 60). The goal of *sousveillance* is, then, to monitor the activity of authorities and to record all evidence of their misdemeanor with the purpose of arousing public awareness: this is what happened, for instance, on January 1, 2009 in Oakland, California, when a police officer shot the unarmed black man Oscar Grant—a few videos of the event uploaded on YouTube and Witness.Org became viral and soon led to mass street action (while the officer was later charged with murder).

According to Peter Gabriel—a famous British singer and songwriter, who founded the WITNESS non-governmental organization in 2001 with the purpose of collecting video evidence of violation of human rights in various part of the world through a network of voluntary reporters—“a camera at the right time at the right place can be more powerful than tanks and guns” (qtd. in Cohen 186). The role of a visual activist consists, hence, not only in collecting evidence, but, more importantly, in shaping this evidence to produce desired effects. To differentiate between passive witnessing and the activist’s work, some scholars suggest using the term “strategic witnessing” (Ristovska 3) or referring to this process as “bearing witness”, since the latter “exceeds seeing” and anticipates participation and involvement on the part of the audience, which becomes increasingly relevant in order to drive social change (Tait 1221). Strategic witnessing may be thus conceptualized as the performance of the three consecutive tasks: 1) obtaining the agency, i.e. self-motivating to bear witness; 2) attaining the voice, i.e. producing the evidence; and 3) compelling the audience, i.e. articulating the message; all of these are a result of premeditation, creative effort, and commitment, since being a strategic witness is “subject to struggle, not privilege; it is something to be accomplished, not simply given” (Ashuri and Pinchevski 136).

The major part of the evidence that is made available through the visual activists’ work is a reference to strife and suffering. On the one hand, these are the images of

violence and unarmed resistance that are able to produce an overt emotional response (for instance, the viral video still of pepper-spraying during the “Occupy Wall Street” campaign or of an unarmed black woman approached by several gunned policemen during one of the “Black Lives Matter” street actions (Pic. 3)). On the other hand, there are activists who self-inflict damage—whether real or symbolic—to turn the viewers into resolute and compassionate witnesses. This is, for instance, the path chosen by the Russian visual activist Pyotr Pavlensky, who, at various instances, cut his ear lobe, stitched his mouth, hammered his testicles to the Red Square pavement, and put himself inside a roll of barbed wire with the purpose of visualizing brutality of the authoritarian rule.

Pc. 3. *Detention of a BLM protestor in Baton Rouge. Photo by Reuters (2016).*

The visual rhetoric of this and other analogous action tends, arguably, to ultimately become *performative* in the mold of certain speech acts described by John L. Austin in his seminal work “*How to Do Things with Words*”: here the visual text is composed of *perlocutionary* utterances (101) that have real consequences, intended or unintended, in triggering a series of reactions to unravel the system.

Visual activists are now able to convert their witnessing into eye-catching and powerful imagery thanks to the technology that has become affordable, compact, and

extremely easy to use: taking a photo, recording a video, or starting a live stream are performed by a couple of taps on the screen of a mobile device. The technology of strategic witnessing has proved to be so effective over the last years (not only in artistic, but, also, in the judicial sense) that it has been profoundly professionalized. Today, in addition to a digital camera, visual activists use applications aimed at ensuring safety of their data and privacy of witness accounts. Thus, for instance, the famous *ObscureCam* application (which is itself a part of the comprehensive *SecureSmartCam* suite) encrypts and hides the recorded data and allows obscuring faces of people that figure on videos (now also available on *YouTube* as part of the default functionality). This and other applications and software not only enhance the productivity of visual activists and allow them to choose the optimum format of the evidence to be released to social media, but, also, protect activists from authorities by helping to keep their identities secret.

1.6 Culture Jamming

While strategic witnessing approaches the possibility of social change from a rational standpoint, the second major visual activism tactic—“culture jamming”—employs a different perspective and relies on parody and stultification instead of direct exposure of violence, strife, and injustice. In its primary sense, culture jamming refers to the “[undermining] of marketing rhetoric of multinational corporations, specifically through such practices as media hoaxing, corporate sabotage, billboard “liberation”, and trademark infringement” (Harold 190) and, thus, constitutes a creative response to the omnipresence of commercial advertising and corporate public relations strategies.

Culture jamming is an intervention into what appears as the monolithic structure of the dominant consumer culture, whose practices are shaped and policed by global brands and mainstream politics, but—in difference from strategic witnessing or conventional street protests—this intervention builds on the appropriation of the imagery created by the

agents of oppression themselves. The tactic goal of this engagement is, thus, to blatantly "bring [the pop culture's] image factory to a sudden, shuttering halt" (Lasn 128).

Some of the most well-known US culture jammers of the recent decades will include, for instance, Reverend Billy and his "Church of Stop Shopping", the US-Canadian *Adbusters* magazine (which played a crucial role in the orchestrating of the "Occupy Wall Street" campaign), and the Biotic Baking Brigade, to name only a few. While Reverend Billy organizes carnivalesque performances that mix religious symbols with contemporary consumer trivia (e.g. rallying with crucified Mickey Mouse in front of Disney souvenir shops), the *Adbusters*—"a global network of artists, activists, writers, prankers, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age" (Sandlin and Milam 328)—is famous for its "fake ads", in which global brand identities are questioned and re-iterated to point to the adverse effects of their consumption and to the destructiveness of the lifestyles that they promote (Pic. 4).

Despite their generally non-violent and parodic incentive, some of the culture jamming moves are classifiable as sabotage and demarche. Thus, for instance, the members of the British "Space Hijackers" activist group once entered several big retail shops in London with the "EVERYTHING IN STORE HALF PRICE TODAY!" message on their T-shirts; they acted out as real shop assistants and helped customers select "discounted" goods—needless to say, it all ended in big confusion at cashiers and even led to the shutting down of operations in some of the network stores. Culture jamming is not exclusive of various forms of mildly aggressive conduct against those whom activists identify as originators and custodians of dominant political and cultural values. Thus, another US-based activist group—Biotic Baking Brigade—expresses its discontent by heaving (or, as they call it, "delivering") real pies in the faces of public figures, including Noble prize winner Milton Friedman, Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, and WTO ex-Chief

Renato Ruggiero, with the simple idea of disparaging their status: “Pie is a great equalizer. How wealthy and powerful are you with pie dripping off your face?” (Harold 201).

Pic. 4. *“There a little McDonalds in everyone.” Adbusters No. 44, author: Karen Kapoor.*

The specter of possible culture jamming tactics is extremely wide with advanced leafleting, artistic vigil, banner hang, blockade, debt strike, electoral guerilla theater, flash mob, human banner, and space occupation among many others (Boyd and Mitchell). As seen from this non-exhaustive list, culture jamming would virtually embrace any activity that is based on the principles of appropriation and inversion with an ostensible element of “the theater of absurd” used to unsheathe the absurdity of mainstream politics and to challenge the general audience’s submissiveness to the existing culture codes.

In other words, and as is clearly seen from the what *Adbusters* does, culture jammers ascribe new meanings to the “memes” of the popular culture. A meme is a media virus that quickly spreads throughout the audience in the form of advertising jingles, quotes from TV shows and movies, or commercial slogans that seamlessly enter the

everyday vernacular and serve to define a cultural identity (Sandlin and Milam 332). By way of disruption, activists use the power of the existing memes to cogently showcase the unethical nature of corporate brand advertising and political populism. When viewed from this angle, the oeuvre of *Adbusters* and other similar media may be seen as antidotes or vaccines against the mainstream cultural memes as they counter-act the messages that the established trends undertake to enroot.

It is generally acknowledged that from the historical perspective contemporary culture jamming draws on the Situationist movement founded in France in 1957 (Firat *et al*. 211). Following the principles laid out in the "*Society of Spectacle*" by Guy Debord—one of the movement's most prominent advocates—Situationists enthusiastically attacked consumerism and conservative political initiatives by way of "detournement", i.e. by visualizing the manipulative techniques that lie at the heart of the modern "spectacle". Their offspring includes, among others, the Dutch "Provo" movement that held numerous happenings in central Amsterdam in the 1960s, and, most notably, the American Yippies—at once an ironic reference to hippies and the abbreviation for the International Youth Party, an anti-authoritarian and anti-war movement, which tried to subvert the dominant cultural values (with the omnipotent American Dream being on top of the list) through creative performances and theatrical street action based on the following principle: "instead of making your own culture, it's more effective to hijack the dominant culture and make it mouth your message" (Hoffman 329). Later, these approaches to civil protest were not only continuously put to practice, but, also, made their way into the critical theory: thus, the works of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin on the "carnival culture" that is positioned outside the domain of the officialdom and that draws heavily on the folk humor (164—169) received universal acclaim and are often cited in visual and literary studies.

Culture jammers follow a route so distinctly different from that of strategic witnesses (though their ultimate goal of instigating social change is, of course, shared) as they find themselves disillusioned with the effects of rational communication: the activists of this stance often argue that engaging with facts and arguments is no longer conclusive and in itself discredited by those in power (Firat *et al.* 211). Without overtly denying the possibility of sober dialogue and conventional political debate, culture jamming, however, suggests an alternative path to winning the day. And, most importantly, this strategy has not been left unnoticed or rejected by those who have the power of defining a cultural agenda: such US TV shows as "*South Park*", "*Family Guy*", and "*Colbert Report*", to name only a few, are largely based on the practice of culture jamming.

Lastly, as a form of visual activism, culture jamming outstands with its great potential for being collaborative and engaging. Indeed, *Adbusters* encourages its readers to submit their fake ads, collages, articles, and general musings on the subjects of contemporary politics, while Reverend Billy's website abounds with free ready scripts of performances to be staged by the members of his "congregation" in line with the local specifics. This turns a typically passive pastime (for instance, consumption of commercials) into the active participation that contributes to the re-defining of one's relations with power structures and, most notably, to the creation of communities based on creative interaction and a system of shared values.

1.7 Themes, Forms, and Spaces

Now that I have briefly covered the essential constituents of visual activism as a phenomenon that appropriates artistic instrumentation and puts the rhetoric of the visual at the service of social protest and call for action, I need to say a few words of what subjects it commonly concerns itself with and what forms it takes. Many sources evidentiate that visual activists around the world would most willingly engage in the examination of environmental issues (with climate change and nuclear waste disposal on top of the list),

gender politics, queer tactics, social injustice, interactions between the secular society and religious institutions, and the population displacement (especially, the problems of illegal migrants and refugees), while their theoretical preoccupations would generally include "the instability of meaning ascribed to images, the complicity of viewers in the construction of interpretations, and the transformation of perception" (Bryan-Wilson *et al.* 16).

One of the fundamental assumptions that lie at the heart of many of the visual culture's theoretic endeavors is that *the eye is an organ of ideology*. Following this tradition, visual activism sets a high value on how images are viewed and what follows from this viewing—in other words, it is the direct responsibility of the activists to teach their audience to "un-see" and "re-see", i.e. to provide counter-discourses of what seems to be well-known, to suggest new angles and points of view on the habitual, or, to put it simply, to challenge the status-quo, be it in the realm of women's rights, mortgage interests, or air pollution. A work of a visual activist is, at the very least, a hard-to-resist invitation to engage in a debate.

As visual activism is in many ways distanced from conventional art, there is no problem of genre limitations and respectabilities: some of its forms are easily recognizable (photography, film, performance, painting, sculpture, installation, etc.), while others would hardly classify as art at all (hashtagging, mapping, street vigilance, etc.); but what constitutes the true nature of the contemporary visual activism and what appears to be its conspicuous trademark is its predilection to contaminate, collage, and erase boundaries between various practices to achieve cumulative effects. Thus, as we shall further see, the visual diary of the "Occupy Wall Street" would at once explore the territories of performance, fashion show, documentary footage, culture jamming, and much more. Moreover, many activists would not isolate text from image and obviate the dividing lines between the verbal, the written, and the shown so as to produce a multi-faceted amalgamated experience of "seeing". A fine example of this tactic is the "Call Us by Our

Names" performance staged by the US activist Leith Wallace in downtown Philadelphia: while the artist pretended to be a black man shot to death and was lying under one of the most popular tourist attractions—the huge "LOVE" letters installed in the central square—and a black girl to the right was holding a placard with the name of the action, tourists and passers-by, nevertheless, continued to make and then post their selfies with the letters on the background, which caused a lot of controversy in social networks (Pic. 5).

Pic. 5. *"Call Us by Our Names" performance by Keith Wallace in Philadelphia (2014).*

By virtue of the work they do, the status of visual activists remains largely self-definable, and they commonly do not seek the recognition of established artistic institutions: "Some enter the conversation as activists, turning to art and the visual in order to inspire engagement on a social issue. Others enter the conversation as artists invested in the creation of complex visual structures, deploying their primary artistic expertise in relation to social issues" (Jackson 175). The issue of artistic kudos remains dysfunctional on both sides: most visual activists would not only reproach the "pure" art for having no power of representation and the embodied value, but would—out of the anti-establishment

(or, sometimes, even anarchic) sentiment that is quite common in these circles—also attack art institutions (primarily, museums, galleries, and academies) and refuse to cooperate: "What good in promoting visual activism if the results are directed toward being aesthetically enjoyed, spectacularized, marketed, sold, and consumed by those in the political opposition?" (Demos 90, 97).

Though not all of the visual activism we know of is radically oppositional and some of it, indeed, is present in museums and at art fairs, regularly powwowed and canvassed at various conferences and in workshops, its anti-establishment inherency makes activists perennially search for and ultimately discover new cultural sites, where they can create, develop, and display their work. Thus, shabby neighborhoods of big cities, dilapidated and deserted hotels, factories, and hospitals become new (counter–)cultural venues. This has already changed the face of many cities: apart from Reichstag, Berlin is now famous for its squats occupied by visual artists and other unconventional types, while some neighborhoods of New York, Chicago, and Mexico City have turned into open-air museums of street art that do not charge their visitors.

But what makes visual activism to all intents unique and what marks its radical departure from traditional art practices is its collective, collaborative nature. It is at once pedagogy, rehearsal, practice, direct action, publicity, and demonstration, in which dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of "activists" (whether they label themselves as such or not) participate either sharing the same physical ground or being united only by way of virtual networks. This aspect of visual activism—its networking dimension and the technology that enables the new modes of participatory action and exchange of visual information—will be the subject of the next Chapter.

Chapter 2. Public Spaces and Networked Communities

2.1 Public Space and Right to the City

Urban theorists Hardt and Negri once called a city "a factory for the production of the common" (Hardt and Negri 350). Indeed, since the inception of the modern city—with the *metropolis* as its definitive manifestation—where people mingle through the participation in a shared and diversified economy, including the economy of pastime and visual pleasure, urban residents have had to be approached as a *sui generis* community with idiosyncratic political, social, and aesthetic demands. Throughout the twentieth century—and especially after the thunders of the World Wars had tailed away and the post-bellum world had begun to recoup from squalor and havoc—the quality of urban life and, most remarkably, the extent to which it caters for the needs of the emergent post-industrial urbanites have been prioritized in both Western capitals and in the megacities of Southeast Asia, the new dominions of financial power and wealth. With more than half (two-thirds by 2030) of the world's population living in cities (Castells xxxii), less social inequality, and the proliferation of middle class, the main concern of the developed world has shifted from physical perdurance, sanitation, and other essentials to the provision of city dwellers with equal access to the exercise of their identities, to personal growth, and freedom of expression—all of these being the capstone missions of visual activism.

Quite possibly the most influential and enduring theory of the new urban order—albeit with prevalent anti-bourgeois overtones—was articulated in 1967 by Henri Lefebvre in his seminal essay "*The Right to the City*", which continues to inspire the new generations of left-wing activists and city insurgents. Devised initially as a response to the urban crisis following the distress of transition from the industrial to the post-industrial lifestyle with its anxieties of overcoming the alienation and enabling people of varied (but increasingly unitized) social backgrounds to function as a community, it became the driving force of a vibrant political action. Lefebvre identified the roots of the crisis as the

intrinsic traits of the capitalist economy, which, in his mind, encourage inadequate urban growth and lead to social disparities and the deterioration of the environment. Together with French situationists and the emergent human rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s on both sides of the Atlantic, the works of Lefebvre buoyed numerous street protests and the grassroots momentum that we now see as the predecessors of the contemporary visual activism.

The idea of claiming the "right to the city" has not been abandoned ever since and is being re-iterated nowadays with due regard of what constitutes the fundamental principles of today's urban economy, i.e. digitalization and consumerism. Going back to Guy Debord's terminology, a contemporary city is a stage set for a market spectacle with its shopping malls, entertainment parks, and over-crowded tourist attractions as places of worship that create the "geography of nowhere" (Zukin 112). The breath-taking landscapes of New York, Chicago, Las Vegas, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, and of their visibly homelier, but still increasingly decontextualized European counterparts stoutly manifest new urban development paradigms, whose paraphernalia—high-speed transportation, affluent neighborhoods, chic shopping alleys, diverse fast food chains, and entertainment venues—are bound to re-constitute our identities, as "how we view the world and define possibilities depends on … what kinds of consumerism we have access to" (Harvey 15). But despite this consumerist bonanza, what to many seems camouflaged is the question of how *meaningful* and *creative* the metropolitan life actually is—and this is the core of the new urban activism centered, primarily, around the concept of "public space", its accessibility, creative potential, and inclusiveness.

Being the common "property" of its dwellers, the public space, a space, according to Hannah Arndt, "where I appear to others and others appear to me" (qtd. in Miller *et al.* 39), is to be superintended collectively based on the subtle balance of interests, rather than privatized and turned into a consumerist artifice. The discourse of public spaces and the

conjoint urbanism trajectories has been especially prolific in the last decades with the research foci as diverse as minority identities, environmental behavior, and collaborative labor. Moreover, in the post–9/11 world, this concept has been designedly politicized to address the ethic of video surveillance and police control in response to terrorist threats, drug dealership, and illegal immigration among other urban travails. Some scholars go as far as suggesting that the "spatial logic" of contemporary capitalism is driven by the "fear of crowds", when public gatherings are criminalized, while public spaces become sanitized, i.e. "deprived of their life only to be later simulated in a corporate form inside shopping malls and plazas" (Gerbaudo 32). And while some call for the reinforcement of public safety, there are others who blame this policy for the escalation of alienation, anxiety, and xenophobia. All around the world urban activists—including artists, homeowners, immigrants, parents, planners, squatters, students, teachers, urban farmers, and others— would vehemently oppose the attempts of the authorities to privatize and remodel public spaces into income-generating venues, as well as protest against neighborhood zoning, pedestrian movement limitation, and ill-thought gentrification, which defaces sites of historic and aesthetic significance, inflates housing prices, and spawns marginalized landscapes of city outskirts and ghettoes (Schmidt and Cohen 100).

This fight for the preservation and enhancement of the public space has been intense enough to convert its topography into a metaphor: Istanbul's Taksim square with its tiny park saved from housing a mega-mosque, New York's Wall Street "occupied" during two months by thousands of protestors, Cairo's Tahrir square as the first and the most impressive venue of the "Arab Spring", and Kyiv's Maidan, which now functions in both Ukrainian and Russian as a synonym of first choice for coup d'état—these and other locally and globally inspired cases of civil unrest are a testimony to the fact that "a public space praxis [is] … a vehicle to encourage, facilitate, and organize groups toward common understandings and collective action" (Hou 100).

This, on the one hand, gives rise to the novel practice of *commoning* based on the assumption that "the relation between the social group and that aspect of the environment being treated as a common shall be both collective and non-commodified—off-limits to the logic of market exchange" (Harvey 73) and, on the other hand, encourages city dwellers—both socially unprivileged and well-grounded—to search for the opportunities of disrupting the conventional logic of surveillance, control, and segregation by re-inventing the idea of public space with a creative twist. From "occupation" and "sleep-in" protests to variegated theater of gay prides, guerilla graffiti, and city sculpture, this new insurgent urbanism has become an increasingly visualized epitome of post-industrial, multi-cultural citizenry making a stand for its right to inclusiveness, tolerance, individual safety, and freedom of expression. Thus, the re-appropriation of public spaces, ascribing them new meanings, and modifying their appearances is an essential part of visual activism.

The "insurgent urbanism", which follows historically in tracks of street protest and the mayhem that it occasionally causes, is a relatively recent development that spread across the globe at a surprisingly quick pace. Thus, for instance, the "Right to the City Alliance" formed by low-income tenants of color in Atlanta in 1997 with active branches in San Francisco and New York advocates for a more livable urban environment and the creation of safe public spaces for the socialization of the local LGBTQ community. Similar activist groups are noticeable in dozens of other big cities and metropolitan areas: Oregon's "City Repair", which converts street intersections into local gathering places; London's "Space Hijackers" that do "guerilla city planning" (installing benches in empty spaces, etc.); San Francisco's "Critical Mass" group which demands that public streets be vacated from cars; or Berlin's "eXperimentcity" collective which converts city's waste lots into cooperative and eco-friendly housing (Harvey 3). Elsewhere, visual and urban activists—community leaders, graffiti artists, street photographers—unite with the purpose of re-iterating relations between professional city planners and citizens and instigating

change through presenting the visual evidence of unequal access and lack of vertical mobility.

The tactical goals and the practical approaches of an urban activist can be extremely diverse and include, according to the research of Jeffrey Hou, “street reclamation, guerilla gardening, parks advocacy, disability activism, counter-surveillance, anti-billboard lobbying, street artistry, progressive urban planning and design, and more” (231); however, his tentative classification of such practices would comprise the following umbrella types (13, 14):

- **Appropriation**: temporary or permanent suspension of ownership of official public spaces;
- **Reclamation**: reuse and adaptation of abandoned urban spaces;
- **Pluralization**: making existing public spaces more heterogeneous;
- **Transgression**: crossing the boundaries between public and private for temporary occupation;
- **Uncovering**: rediscovery of otherwise hidden and overlooked public spaces;
- **Contestation**: organizing protest activities.

As a result, the public spaces that have undergone these developments or have become the locus of struggle will, by implication, become “adaptive” (flexible in terms of use), “assertive” (challenging the dominant spacial practices), and, finally, “negotiative” (allowing for the dialogue and the confluence of identities) (Hou 100).

As aforesaid, these tactics form part of the site-specific visual activism, which we saw, for instance, during the “Occupy Wall Street” and the “Black Lives Matter” campaigns; moreover, the experience and the appreciation of this struggle for the public space helps visual activists assert themselves in the realm of the virtual space, to which I dedicate the rest of the current Chapter.

2.2 Digitalization, New Media, and Networks

Since the times of Lefebvre and French situationists, the tactics and, especially, the instrumentation of activists have undergone some fundamental changes: most notably, due to the technological advances of the recent decades, the concept of the public space—whose democratization and inclusiveness were of major concern—has been amplified or, indeed, overpassed by the virtual space. First, there appeared convenient means of remote communication in the form of mobile phones, which were later complimented with digital cameras and basic means of photo and video editing. But it is when digital images could be immediately uploaded to media file sharing services via the Net that visual activism appeared in its present form. It all led to the emergence of new visual technologies, including digital newspapers, 3D photos, image databases, self-captured videos, virtual exhibitions, and mashups to name only a few, which could truly unleash the creative potential of visual activists and artists. Moreover, the digital infrastructure is becoming more affordable each day, as the difference between smartphones (or tablets) and computers is blurred, software is cheap or free, and the bandwidth is surplus.

As I have mentioned, the first ground-breaking advance was digital photography. When it emerged on the market in the 1990s, many scholars went as far as predicting the end of photography and film (Chun 15): whereas the analog image is, according to Roland Barthes, "an emanation of a past reality" rather than a copy thereof (88), the digital image conclusively erases the links between the event and the evidence. In other words, it is bound to challenge the belief in the photography's ability to picture reality "as it is", since, on the one hand, it can be easily manipulated and, on the other hand, it is not a depiction of reality, but a numeric code of 0s and 1s that is read by the processor and is generated on the screen. Notwithstanding these implications, according to Wendy Chan, an influential theorist of software and computer technologies, the digital has paradoxically become the redeemer of the analogue: first, it is indispensable in saving pre-digital media (images,

books, paintings, and more) from the inevitable decay, while, at the same time, it has "not erased the media types", but contributed much to their subsequent proliferation and diversification (139). Digital technology did more, of course, than just that—it is often credited with expanding our horizons in understanding the nature of information and the symbolic, and as there is plenty of specialized research on the subject, I will here confine myself with these introductory notes.

Apart from the digital image, another means of revolutionizing visual activism (and human life in general) was Internet, World Wide Web, or simply the Net. Started as a military project in 1969 and commercialized for public use in the 1990s, the Net has become by far the greatest global network of both specific and non-specific data that the humanity has ever known. Even by most modest estimates, around 4 billion people actively use Internet today (statista.com), and this number continues to grow daily at the expense of, primarily, Asia and Africa. Doubtless, the "digital divide" still prevents many people of Latin America, Middle East, South-East Asia, and, especially, Africa, from accessing the Net freely and cheaply, while censorship thrives in autocracies; but the general trend, nevertheless, is the Net's becoming a universal indispensability.

What the accessibility of the Net and the development of its digital content have brought about in the first place is the emergence of new modes of communication—communication that vanquishes distance and time, and, most amazingly, that enables exchange of diverse types of data (voice, image, video, text) in a variety of interactive ways. In these new communication systems "the reality itself (that is, people, material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience" (Castells 404), i.e. they can produce integrated visual and audial experiences (with the imitation of sensory

perception already available beyond the experimental form), which the scholar Manovich called “transcoding” (Sweeny 80).

This process of transcoding lies at the core of what has been termed as “new media”, whose novelty, as compared to traditional media, can be summed up as the adoption of (Lister *et al*. 12):

- New textuality (hypertext, hashtagging, memes);
- New ways of representing reality (immersive virtuality, digitalization);
- New relationship between embodiment, identity, and community (shifting the personal and social experiences of time, place, and space)
- New relationship between media and physical body (technological prosthetics);
- New patterns of organization and production (access, ownership, regulation).

In other words, the following 5 attributes will characterize—more or less amply—the essence of new media: “digitality”, “interactivity”, “hypertextuality”, “dispersal”, and “virtuality” (Lister *et al*. 13). Though virtually all Internet-based media are built today on these principles (including if they are simply “branches” of traditional offline media, e.g. websites of newspapers, TV channels, and radio stations), some of their pioneering and most widely known representatives deserve a separate mention—*YouTube*, *Wikipedia*, *MySpace*, *WordPress*, *Live Journal*, *Flickr*, *Pinterest*, and, of course, the social networks of *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *Twitter*, which I will discuss later in more detail, since their significance for visual activism is paramount.

The prevalence of Internet-based communications changed many of the core practices of the predecessors of visual activism in the form of street protest and “socially-engaged art” in view of the following advances (Joyce 105—111):

—**Access to information**: publications, news reports, etc., including what is usually suppressed from mainstream channels;

—**Dispersal of information**: creating websites, blogging and image/video-sharing, etc.;

—**Coordination and decision-making**: open/closed site memberships, online forums, e-voting, collecting feedback, etc.

All of these processes are visibly driven by the logic of aggregation, i.e. moving larger audiences in focus and enabling their participation in various online or offline activities, as well as simply raising their awareness, while what have been the main preoccupation of the pre-digital era activists—mobilization, reporting, and critique—now require less time and material resources: producing viral videos and disseminating them via social networks is less time-consuming and more budget-friendly than traditional guerilla (making leaflets, drawing graffiti) or institutionalized practices (organizing exhibitions or discussion clubs). Moreover, using new media does not preclude visual activists from capitalizing on traditional media, which increasingly relies on the topics and trends retrieved from online sources thus *volens nolens* contributing to the "mainstreamification" of activist groups and their agendas. But, probably, the main advantage of the Net in this context is its being open and free to everyone, with all attempts of censorship easily surmountable with just a little of technical expertise (thus, for instance, forbidden websites may be accessed and official firewalls may be bypassed through VPNs and anonymizers).

Internet infallibly offers to visual activists "a flexible and decentralized communication infrastructure" and enables more effective "cooperation around well-defined projects, as well as the creation of open narratives" (Joyce 101). The most influential activist movements around the world, including "Occupy Wall Street" and "15M", as well as the revolutionary mobs of Istanbul, Cairo, and Kyiv, managed to efficiently combine online and offline agency to advance political reform, thus attesting to the "symbiotic potential between the street and the Net, able to cross the information barriers posed by big mainstream media" (Russel 70).

2.3 Virtual Communities and Social Media

Internet is, first and foremost, a digital network, i.e., most basically, “an interconnected group of devices that use digital code to transmit information” (Joyce 2) or, more specifically, a communication infrastructure with distributed connectivity that is able to connect its users not only to the center (if this at all exists), but with each other. Being organized as a fuzzy collection of data nodes, supplied, at the same time, with powerful data search tools (*Google*, *Yandex*, and other search engines), the Net as a communication continuum can hardly be viewed as a strictly hierarchical structure, since all prioritization of one online source over another (with the exception of advertising) is based on the number of hyperlinks that lead to this source, or its “quotation index”—the page-ranking principle used by *Google*. Page rank is a fluid parameter, and the overall connections between websites are subject to change depending on an array of factors that are hardly to predict and calculate, which, on the one hand, makes the Net a relatively egalitarian place for self-expression and, on the other hand, sets the pattern of a decentralized network.

Decentralized networks have been most famously described as those based on the “SPIN” model, i.e. “Segmented” (consisting of numerous smaller groups), “Polycentric” (containing multiple influences), and, finally, “Integrated” (with all segments interconnected) (Joyce 104). Evidently, setting up and maintaining such complex networked structures offline would be either totally impossible or too complex in terms of control (and all offline networks we know of—from social movements and religious organizations to global governments—need a more stable and factored hierarchy). The Net, in contrast, made it possible to setup, operate, and elaborate smaller de-centralized networks. Due to the fluidity and the ease of response to the ever-changing circumstance, these online or virtual communities that consequently emerge —informal, non-authoritarian, free—are becoming viable alternatives to traditional social movements, interest groups, and rigid organizational patterns. Being free form the influence of

dominant powers, SPIN networks are difficult to control and subdue, while the open and personalized narratives and alternative perspectives that circulate within these networks contribute to broad participation and better awareness. In his study of networked societies, Manuel Castells—a prominent urbanist and a scholar of the post-industrial age—emphasizes this role of private judgment by referring to this new form of communication as “mass self-communication”, i.e. “self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception” (xxx).

Lastly, what decentralized networks promote is “weak ties”, i.e. they enable interaction between short-time acquaintances—followers, subscribers, viewers—rather than friends (that is why this *Facebook* label is quite misleading), which proves to be more efficient as far as the promotion of ideas and the dispersal of information are concerned (whatis.techtarget.com). As a side-effect of the permanent weak ties building process, these networks help overcome what many theorists of the “postmodern condition”—in the range from Lyotard to Habermas—saw as the anxiety of atomized individuals. Though not unanimously and with a number of serious reservations, virtual communities are now often seen as an antidote to civic disengagement and a way of overcoming the said anxiety—thus, they are referred to as the “frontier homestead” or as the “heart of the newly revived public sphere” (Chun 172):

> Computer mediated communications, it seems, will do by way of electronic pathways what cement roads were unable to do, namely connect us rather than atomize us, put us at the controls of a ‘vehicle’ and yet not detach us from the rest of the world (Jones 11).

The formation of SPIN-type communication networks already at the dawn of the Net has gradually led to the emergence of *social media* (or social networks, with both terms used interchangeably), which provided a revolutionary interface for online communities

and greatly contributed to the development of visual activism as we know it today, or even were the pre-requisites of its very existence.

Social media can be defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Obar *et al*. 7). Given the significance that the study of social media has for the scholarship of today, there is a striking variety of perspectives, each with its own focus, on what constitutes the essence of the phenomenon. The definition given above suits media studies and visual culture as it accentuates the social media’s centeredness on autonomous content generation and transfer, whereas the focus may shift to technology (the briefly mentioned Web 2.0 stands, in short, for enhanced interactivity), sociability (differences between online and offline communication patterns), or even the coexistence of family members on the same network (Schiltz 10).

The chosen perspective will likewise affect the list of social media websites—some would go as far as including *Wikipedia* on this list, for instance—while those most commonly mentioned are *Facebook* (with its Russian counterpart *vKontakte* and Chinese *WeChat*), *Twitter* (Chinese analog: *Sina Weibo*), *YouTube* (Chinese analog: *Toudou Youku*), and *Instagram* plus, arguably, *WhatsApp*, *Viber*, and *Telegram* instant messengers, since they can be used in a similar fashion. These platforms are by far the most popular and widespread media in the world today: according to the recent estimates, there are 2.2 billion users of *Facebook* (statista.com), 1.3 billion users of *YouTube* (with ca. 30 million visits and 1 billion videos watched per day) (fortunelords.com), and 330 million active users of *Twitter* (statista.com).

In the recent decade, in addition to being the preferred casual communication platforms, social media have been able to facilitate collective civic action as seen, for instance, from the developments in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt in 2011—what has been famously labeled as the “Arab Spring” was largely viable thanks to social networks,

through which the rebels were able to communicate, exchange ideas, and schedule events. Their experience was replicated later in various parts the world for the accomplishment of similar goals—for instance, in Turkey, whose president R. Erdogan once said: “To me, social media is the worst menace to society” (qtd. in Russel 88) and made all attempts to shut down *Twitter* and *YouTube* in the country. It is also a widely known fact that most of the social media are banned in China as spearheaded by the Chinese Communist Party’s superior officials in order to fend off grassroots criticism. As visible participants of the current political life, social media also affect voters’ behavior: thus, it has been statistically proven that those candidates for the US Senate and the House of Representatives who have more *Facebook* “friends” are 80% more likely to win elections (Obar *et al*. 1—2). Social media may even serve as official information outlets: during the Israeli-Palestine clashes of 2008—2009, when all journalists were banned from the conflict zone, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube* became the only reliable sources of information for global audiences, especially when the Israeli Ministry of Defense setup their own *YouTube* channel for live footages. And, lastly, the social media activity of prominent public figures—with the US President Donald Trump as the most vivid example of the recent years—contributes significantly to the agendas of traditional mainstream media all over the world, while some “posts” and “tweets” may even become the basis for legal action.

Since both in the number of users and, hence, in the potential effects that they can produce on their audiences, social media surpass all other known offline and online platforms of information transfer, they have become the most intensely used tools of visual activists for the orchestration of partially offline (“Occupy Wall Street”, “Black Lives Matter”, etc.) or exclusively online campaigns (“No H8”, “Turning the Internet Red”) (Pic. 6).

A typical scenario of a social media-driven campaign would include the following consecutive steps (Schlitz, Boyd and Mitchell):

1. Creation of a group (community) page to announce the launch of a campaign, attract followers, and prospective participants.
2. Creation of campaign visuals (banners, hashtags, videos, ads, etc.) through the collective effort of sympathizers.
3. Active reposting of the campaign visuals and group page information.
4. Use of the group page as a notice board for event schedules, campaign rules, and other information.
5. Use of the group page as a visual diary of the campaign with videos, photos, collages, reports, etc. in a variety of formats.

As a rule, big-scale and celebrity-associated campaigns, even if they are solely staged online, would leak into other media, including official websites, mainstream TV shows, and printed press, thus creating larger awareness and outgrowing the local settings. To achieve this aim, visual activism of today, especially its digital form, resorts to use of several interwoven tactics known as "hashtagging", "meme" creation, and "virality" (Boyd and Mitchell ix–x).

"Hashtag" is a complex phenomenon that quite specifically integrates image and text. Primarily, hashtags were devised to be the "ways to tag, label, and emphasize phrases amid a sea of information" (Bryan-Wilson *et al*. 15), i.e. they appear as keywords or prompts which laconically point to the nature of the information that a certain text or image is concerned with, and they are typically preceded by the slanted grid number (#). As for their primary function, hashtags are used to enable the systematization and the searchability of the enormous array of data kept on social networks, but today hashtags are much more than just a cataloguing tool—they have become interactive invitations to act and an art of its own kind. Thus, the *#blacklivesmatter* hashtag was used to aggregate evidence and mobilize crowds against the police violence and was therefore adopted as the campaign's name and the red flag message; the *#muslimrage* was used in the notorious

Twitter debate of 2012 over the islamophobic cover of *Newsweek*; and the playful *#stoph8* became a well-knit call against homophobia on *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* (Pic. 6).

Pic. 6. *A NOH8 campaign photo, author: James Cummings (2011).*

Hashtags have evolved into a unique genre of digital art as they intermingle, allude to each other, and collide, as was the case with *Twitter's #takeitdown*—first, an appeal to take down the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State House, it was appropriated by homophobic commentators that insisted on taking down the gay pride flag. Hashtags are thus not stable, they "change, evolve, and devolve in unpredictable ways, and their mercurial character proves to be both their strength and weakness" (Bryan-Wilson *et al.* 15). The fairly recent phenomenon of the *hashtag politics* is a path that some activists choose to engage in conversation, amplify attention, and provide feedback: a hashtag is now a message in itself, especially on *Twitter* with its limited number of characters per one posting ("tweet"). That is clear enough that to stand out and to proliferate hashtags need to be imaginative and creative, which is often achieved through wordplay and allusions—

such was, besides the aforementioned *#stoph8*, the *#UKUncut* hashtag used in the campaign against the tax dodging policies of the UK branch of Vodafone.

It may be said then that hashtags have the potential of growing into “memes”, i.e., as I have mentioned previously in the discussion of culture jamming, cultural units and shared points of reference that may include buzz words, catchy melodies, quotations, fashion trends, rituals, and iconic images. Such slogans (and hashtags, if used for that purpose), for instance, as *“black is beautiful”*, *“No taxation without representation”*, and *“We are 99%”* are memes born out of the visual activism in recent years. Their ability to spread among large audiences at great speeds is today referred to as “virality”. Memes are metaphorically analogized with viruses—tiny biotic entities that mooch inside living organisms—as they are able to travel in social networks and penetrate their most remote corners through sharing and reposting. Thus, “viral” content becomes the designating symbol of a visual campaign or a fact of popular culture, as was the case with “Gangnam Style”—a music video by the Korean singer Psy, which received 2 billion views on *YouTube*.

To bottom-line the subject at hand, I would further give a brief overview of the virtues and the shortcomings of using social media in visual activism as they are mentioned in the joint research of J. A. Obar, P. Zube, and C. Lampe, which is based on interviews with community leaders, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and individual activists (14—17). The advantages would thus include:

1. Outreach potential and the possibility to create awareness in larger audiences.
2. Engaging feedback loops, i.e. enabling conversation and dialogue between group members and with onlookers and opponents.
3. Increased speed of communication and the connection between remote campaign brain centers.
4. Cost-efficiency (use of the social media’s activism potential for free).

The disadvantages or the loose ends vary in the degree of manageability and would include:

1. Finding a single voice when the purpose of a campaign is blurred due to the multiplicity of participants.
2. Weak separation between personal and organizational use of social media.
3. Opaqueness of dedication, i.e. the difficulty of immediately measuring the degree of actual commitment.
4. Digital literacy gap and the closely associated issue of the digital divide.

It should be mentioned that, as far as the relations between visual activism and social media are concerned, there exist pessimistic perspectives as well. One of the most prominent contemporary commentators on the issue Evgeny Morozov, for instance, suggests that the heavy reliance of visual activism on social networks might result in what he refers to as "slacktivism", i.e. "feel good activism that has zero political or social impact", but "creates an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group" (xii). Another noticeable concern is the social media's ability to create more opportunities for surveillance and control on the side of the authorities and repressive governments (Joyce 12), which is amplified by the growing number of cases of persecuting users based on their "tweets" and "reposts", especially in the countries with strong authoritarian trends in home politics (Russia, China, Turkey), as well as in democratic Western societies that, over the past decades, have been forced to limit the freedom of speech for the sake of promoting tolerance towards immigrants, sexual and ethnic minorities, various other underprivileged or challenged groups of population. Nevertheless, millions of activists around the globe continue to share the belief that social media are the "tools that promote and celebrate freedom" (Russel 82), which is only confirmed by the hostility of officials. And this belief lingers on despite an array of other controversies, be they the individual privacy,

commercialization of social networks by corporations, or social anxiety caused by the lack of offline communication. It cannot be denied that the symbiosis of visual activism and social media, their ability to jointly call for and produce change, already led to tangible results and proved to be an outstanding source of inspiration.

Chapter 3. Visual Activism of "Occupy Wall Street"

3.1 "Occupy Wall Street" as a Spectacle of Representation

"Occupy Wall Street"—OWS for short hereinafter—is hard to subsume under a single account, as it was, depending on a chosen perspective, a political campaign, a street performance of unprecedented continuance, an act of civil disobedience, and, above all, an attempt of jointly implementing the practices of visual activism that I have outlined in the previous chapters. Profoundly influenced by the events of the "Arab Spring" in Egypt and Tunisia and by various remonstrative movements in Europe and Latin America ("M15", "Indignados", etc.), OWS not only led millions of people worldwide to recovering their right to protest and comment on the mainstream politics, but it also gave birth to powerful memes ("We are 99%", "We shall not be moved", and others) and managed to piece together disparate activist practices within the framework of a unified multi-faceted campaign that was held with the same degree of intensity and devotion both on the streets of New York and elsewhere online. On a temporary and dynamic basis OWS assembled "living subjects, physical space, material infrastructure, technological devices, cultural forms, and organizational practices" (McKee 101) to challenge the status quo and to prefigure an alternative—though a largely utopian—world. Hence, its political agenda, if such ever existed in any coherent form, turns out to be of lesser significance than the way in which the multitude of OWS activities was orchestrated through shared leaderships, collective effort, and cultural intervention to the public space or, as the reporter Albert Sgambati put it in his "Photo Essay of Occupy Wall Street", the way the campaigners were "amazingly adept at harnessing technology while understanding the power of an individual

voice and the necessary cacophony and vitality needed in reaching collective consensus" (7).

According to most accounts, the starting point of OWS was the call of *Adbusters*—a Canadian magazine that I have mentioned previously as a popular Internet-based culture-jamming media—launched the call to "occupy" Wall Street:

> On September 17, [2011] we want 20,000 people to flood into the lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months. Once there, we shall incessantly repeat one simple demand in a plurality of voices… (qtd. in Mirzoeff "How to See" 273)

This text was accompanied by the now classic poster of a ballerina balancing on the back of a bull (Pic. 7) and the hashtag #OccupyWallStreet, which was meant to become viral on social networks, especially *Twitter*—the social media of choice on the early stages of the campaign. *Adbusters* was too optimistic in figuring tens of thousands of participants, as on the set date only a few hundred people came and started their "occupation" not of the Wall Street itself, but of the small and generally overlooked Zuccotti Park situated nearly in front of the New York Stock Exchange. Such was the commencement of a two-month campaign that would exert significant influence on and re-iterate the feel and look of the New York's financial district. On that same day—September 17, 2011—the "occupants" would gather to hold a "General Assembly" in order to jointly accommodate their goals and aspirations. Gradually attracting thousands of new campaigners through domestic and worldwide media coverage, the Zuccotti camp would remain on spot for approximately two months—right until its eviction by the New York police on November 15, 2011—during which it would host numerous debate sessions, speeches from public figures, theatrical performances, makeshift music concerts, street-art happenings, and open-air exhibitions randomly documented and made visible via social media, especially *Twitter* and *Facebook*, thus overcoming constraints of the physical space and creating the feeling

of ubiquitous "occupation". Moreover, though quite scarce at the beginning, OWS expediently captured the attention of the global media and secured massive public support with 46% of the Americans reporting to sympathize with its cause in October 2011 (Gerbaudo 103)

Pic. 7. "*Occupy Wall Street" poster, Adbusters (July 2011).*

The distinct novelty of this campaign was the action of "occupation" itself: in difference from conventional street protests in the shape of rallies, marches, and demonstrations characteristic of, for instance, anti-globalist movements throughout the Western World, the "occupation" is the seizure of public space for an indefinite period of time that is meant to create a "blockage of official flows and functions in order to re-appropriate time, space, and resources for the reproduction of collective life against the

relationships of wage and private property" (McKee 88). In other words, rather than a staged protest, or a series of protests, the "occupation" is, in the first place, a communal experience of creating an alternative public space—a city within a city—based on the principles of collectivity, unbiased participation, plurality of views, and distributed leadership. The OWS camp became a proceleusmatic environment, which in most accounts is approached through the language of art and ritual, rather than street politics: thus, various public figures who attended the camp—in the range from prominent academicians (Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, and others) to celebrities (Michael Moore, Rufus Wainwright, and others)—captured this experience as that of seeing an "artistic spectacle", looking at the "canvas on which a new world was being painted", and even as being in a "sacred place" awaiting the arrival of a "new messiah" (McKee 100). All these accounts and the abundant artistic production that outlasted the camp itself thanks to social and mainstream media testify to the fact that OWS was an endeavor of propagating a new form of public life within a global metropolis and of convening a new form of the "political commons"—a place for open discussion and collective effort, while the very focus of OWS on the practice of utterance—be it in the form of statements, manifestos, speeches, performances, photographs, videos, songs, self-made posters, etc.—is the manifestation of its performative tactic of "saying as doing" (Russel 5).

It seems essential to pay due regard to the site-specificity of the campaign: a significant urban landmark, Wall Street and the adjacent area is home to New York Stock Exchange and Federal Reserve, as well as to the headquarters of numerous banks, insurance companies, investment funds, and other institutions that represent the power of the speculative capital. Wall Street is the metonymy for the planetary assemblage of finance that crosses all boundaries and determines economic policies, currency exchange rates, and stock market indexes on a global scale. But on the other hand—and this is what makes this location truly unique—Wall Street and the surrounding "financial district"

feature iconic architecture and art objects, that is, they are a major tourist attraction and the concertation of the celebrated New York's "entrepreneur" spirit.

The participatory nature of the "occupation" was manifested, in the first place, through the "people's mic", which could be used by anyone to convey their agendas, thoughts, and claims in the act of "collective deliberation about what to do together, both in small working groups and the broader assembly" (McKee 102). A "people's mic" or, in some accounts, a "human's mic" is an earlier invention of anti-globalist movements, which consists in repeating speaker's words by the crowd in a wavelike fashion to enable the participation of those at the rear, i.e. it is the orderly use of the audience's voices to amplify sound. Moreover, in order not to interrupt the speaker and keep the gathering well-organized, the audience was encouraged to use the special hand language known as the "Occupy Hand Signals" (based on various forms of the sign language used by the military and in other surroundings), whose simple "dictionary" was freely available to the campers in the form of a leaflet (Pic. 8).

The very look of the hastily erected camp consisting of insubstantial tents, its vulnerability and physical precarity were a metaphor of the ruined American Dream, hence, a suitable habitat for the chronically unemployed and indebted, including those whom the liberal media had labeled as the "creative class", i.e. artists, writers, designers, musicians, etc. Judith Bultler, who was an OWS speaker herself in October 2011, described this precarity as a symbol of economic insecurity, disposability, and expendability, and as a basic social bond between the people that found themselves discarded from the neo-liberal economy (Butler 12—13).

Pic. 8. The "Occupy Hand Signals" leaflet.

As I have mentioned above, one of the first OWS initiatives was the "General Assembly" aimed at working out the campaign's agenda through participatory democracy, in which everyone's voice is heard and each individual initiative deserves considering. But this was not an attempt of unified governance—conversely, it legitimized the campaign's unique dysfunctional style of decision-making with all significant moves taken by individuals and groups of kindred spirits without any preliminary agreement or consultation with others. OWS never had centralized leadership or central apparatus—some of the decisions, mainly those concerning the communal needs of the camp (disposal of trash, food delivery, etc.) were made collectively through discussion in work groups (more than 70 in number by the second month of the "occupation") represented by "spokes councils", whereas as to the campaign itself, it reminded more of an impromptu festival of local talents. OWS—however spontaneously and reflexively—was re-creating the *social* as such in all its complexity and with all of its chaos and disorder, as it was a place, according

to Arendt, “of appearance [that] comes into being wherever men [and women] are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public space” (qtd. in Mitchell 4). Given this diversity of manifestations and the autonomy of the participants, a coherent discourse of OWS political demands is not easily constructed; it can be said, however, that its most elemental idea was the struggle for representation.

At the very beginning of the occupation the campaigners made an extensive use of the slogan coined earlier by David Graeber, one of the OWS spearheads, which then became the campaign’s first viral meme—*“We are the 99%”*, whose ideology is based on Stiglitz’s assumption that “The upper 1 percent of Americans are now taking in nearly a quarter of the nation’s income every year. In terms of wealth rather than income, the top 1 percent control 40 percent.” (qtd. in Mirzoeff “How to See” 274), and that this 1% of the US wealthiest continued to thrive despite the global financial crisis and economic recess, which began roughly in 2008. “We are the 99%”—“a creative and emotionally powerful from of visual thought” (Mirzoeff “How to See” 275) —quickly became a meme, a hashtag, and a slogan. Its straightforward appeal consisted primarily in its inclusion of the majority—despite the differences in individual cultural, social, and political creed and backgrounds—rather than radical activists or supporters of a specific cause. Both active campaigners and onlookers used this slogan when making “selfies” which included laconic hand-written texts telling their stories. These photos were then published on *Tumblr*—a digital scrapbook website—which contributed a lot to the growing support of the campaign:

> ‘My parents put themselves into debt so that I could get a fancy degree. It cost over $100 grand and I have no job prospects. I am the 99%’; ‘I am 20 years old and I can’t find a job, because I have no experience. And I have no experience because I

can't find a job. I am the 99%'; 'I am a single mum of four, college student … I go hungry every day. I am the 99%.' (Gerbaudo 9).

These stories touched upon a great number of problems—from expensive healthcare and house rents to low wages and unfavorable environmental conditions. Through these often naïve, flippant, and tenuous formulations, however, there emerged an image of social utopia, a view of an alternative society, which, following the steps of the Marxist thinking, placed its focus on the unprivileged classes and groups without any recourse to their own responsibility for their life and perdurance. But such is the unifying force of the collective lamentation, the euphoria of being heard (by, at least, fellow misfortunates) accompanied by the faltering hope of change, that the naiveté and facetiousness of these messages make them powerful artistic statements. The *Tumblr* campaign resulted in creating collective identity of the "common" people and turned OWS into a global spectacle and a protest, with which the absolute majority were bound to sympathize.

This would hardly be possible if OWS were not so closely associated with creative artists instead of political opposition leaders and government officials, as "the occupation was initiated by media artists, sustained by performers, and promoted by graphic artists and filmmakers" (Moore 208), while the campaigners themselves—especially in the aftermath of the "occupation", when "Occupy" became a proper noun used to retrospectively refer to a certain activism pattern—were termed as "artivists" and "creactivists". From the very beginning the "occupation" was, both in the minds of its participants and numerous witnesses, likened to a politicized performance, or a happening aimed at reaching political goals, which, undoubtedly, dates back to the "political spectacle" staged by French Situationists, Dadaists, Futurists, and other artistic movements of the twentieth century within the framework of the "carnivalesque culture" theorized about by Mikhail Bakhtin. OWS refused to employ conventional political representation models in favor of open-to-all, direct, unvetted participation, which is much in the spirit of

the contemporary artistic discourse, especially that of performance (with the likes of Nate Hill, Pyotr Pavlensky, and Wafaa Bilal at the forefront of the genre).

The *Tumblr* selfie project—the first media success of OWS—soon made its way onto the streets, when campaigners started writing their own stories and short slogans on bits of cardboard with felt-tip pens. The proliferation of signs was in great measure made possible by the availability of recycled pizza boxes: in the early days of the "occupation" hundreds of pizzas were ordered to Zuccotti Park by OWS sympathizers from all around the world. The wit and the insight that these hand-made signs often conveyed was enhanced by their general feel of the "low-key" authenticity in difference from mass-produced or professionally designed placards used in official events. These small handmade billboards became a trademark and an aesthetic signature of OWS, while the most remarkable of the slogans—born on the spot rather than borrowed from official agendas—were based on mass cultural allusions, displaced quotations, word play, and semiotic self-reflexivity: "*The beginning is near*", "*Lost my job, got an occupation*", "*I'm so angry I made a sign*", and "*Shit is fucked up and bullshit*", which was, perhaps, the most accurate rendition of the nonsensical nature of the *status quo*, which the protestors aspired to disrupt (Pic. 9).

The entire northern part of the Zuccotti camp was converted into an open-air artistic studio, while the signs themselves were displayed all around the park and its perimeter throughout the "occupation" period. This self-curated spontaneous display was remarkably "horizontal" in nature: not only professional skills were not required to produce a worthy OWS exhibit, but no permission had to be asked to become a featured artist of the "sign garden". This communicated a sense of outstanding polyphony, or of what Bakhtin termed as "heteroglossia", i.e. a "dialogical cacophony of singular voices actively creating space in common … instead of observing from the passive position of an audience" (McKee 104). Within the loose organizational structure of OWS, the line between a camper and an

onlooker was poorly demarcated—everyone was encouraged to contribute and celebrate the opportunity of self-expression.

Pic. 9. *Flickr photo. Author: Scott Lynch (November 2011).*

In some of the accounts of OWS the Zuccotti Park occupation is viewed, primarily, as a redemption of the Greek agora—a place for participatory democracy and collective decision-making. Though such reading is plausible as far as the OWS political and social agendas are concerned, the Zuccotti camp was more than just a gathering ground—rather, what the act of "occupation" was devised for was an attempt of converting a public space into a "communal life-support zone resistant to both the market and state-sanctioned versions of public assembly" (McKee 102). The camp created a sense of a responsible community preoccupied, to a great measure, with the process of building up a new form of communal living. Thus, it re-created the expedient architectural form of a tent and organized its own People's Library, which consisted of thousands of books donated to the camp and which became a camp's landmark and a knowledge bank available to all campaigners. A few weeks after the start of the "occupation" there appeared a field kitchen (and, by its second function, the place where the OWS monetary donations were kept),

which allowed making simple meals so as not to depend on free pizza deliveries. And, finally, as if in response to the famous rhetoric question "Who takes out the trash after the revolution?" and after the New York Mayor Blomberg's threats of evicting the camp for sanitary reasons, OWS set up the People's Sanitation Department, within which campaigners took turns to regularly clear the territory of the park from litter. The viability and the longevity of the "occupation" are a cogent evidence of the fact that this communal experience—albeit not in line with the urbanistic policies of the megapolis—is sustainable, reproducible, and full-fledged.

While the communal practices of OWS are illustrative of the practical and utilitarian aspects of the "occupation", what is of crucial importance is the principles of the community that the camp managed to devise and continuously maintain. The most contested dimension of the campaign on the overall is its horizontal networked structure enabling it to function as a non-hierarchal space, where "everyone is heard and new relationships are created" (McKee 109). If it were not the numerous accounts of those who stayed with and simply visited the camp, this might have been utopian to suggest that these network models can travel beyond the virtual world, whose sense of communality is deprived of spatial and, to a large degree, temporal dimensions. It took less than two months for the global audience to be led into believing that the public space can be effectively appropriated (in one of the most heavily surveilled urban neighborhoods in the world) and that the authorities can be denied the exclusive right of its regulation and disposal—at least, for a reasonably long period of time.

It is widely known from OWS witness accounts that the everyday life of the camp consisted mainly in organizing and participating in "people's mic" events, meetings, workshops, and discussion groups often attended by public figures, including musicians who gave free concerts (Rufus Wainwright, David Crosby, and Graham Nash among others). Thus, the Zuccotti park became not only a place for participation, but, also, for the

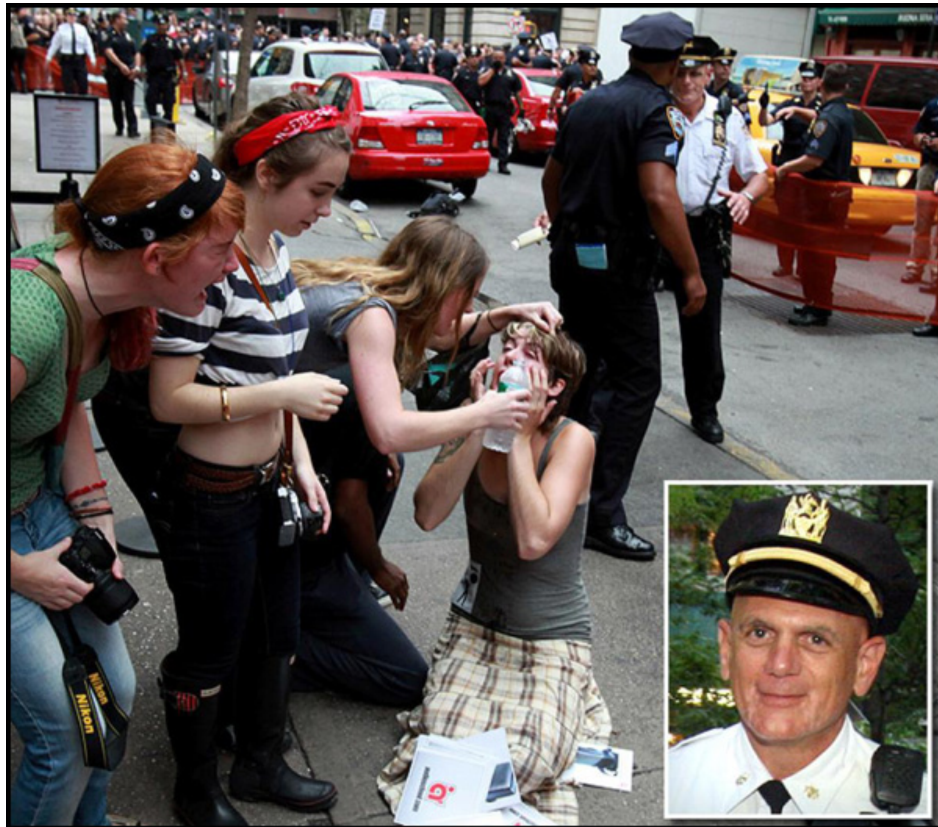
sharing of knowledge and face-to-face communication between the people, who often found themselves estranged and atomized in a big metropolis. A "beautiful, exciting thing, which does not happen in public space in New York" (Gerbaudo 122)—this simplistic summary of a night spent at the camp by a college student is similar in its emotional appeal to thousands of others—some in the shape of songs, short films, essays, gallery exhibitions, and books—which evidentiate with all clarity that this joint communal, artistic, and communicative experience made a profound impact on the metropolitan population. But what is of even more importance is its nationwide and global influence attained through the combined effort of social media actors and commentators, as well as through the mainstream media, which I will discuss in the next Chapter.

3.2 Witnessing and Media Coverage of "Occupy Wall Street"

At the very beginning of the campaign, OWS—given the relatively small number of participants—was mostly overlooked by mainstream media and had little impact. Things started to change, however, when the imagery of the camp life and the protest activities started to make an extensive appearance on social media, with the evidence of unmotivated police brutality and violence responsible for the decisive turn in the level of media attention. From the very start, the camp itself was engaged in all of its creativity and the practice of participatory democracy under the eagle eye of the New York Police Department (NYPD), which made all attempts to thoroughly survey the area and keep the campaigners at bay in case of their potential runaway and, however vaguely expected, seizure of new land plots or buildings. And it was the NYPD's consistent brutality that galvanized the mass support of the OWS and brought thousands of new participants to its cause.

The first widely known occasion of the police action inadequacy was recorded on September 24, when tens of thousands of *YouTube* viewers could see a short video in

which three unarmed young women were pepper-sprayed by a police officer during a minor demonstration that did not seem to pose any danger to the public order (Pic. 10).



Pic. 10. *A still from the "pepper-spraying" YouTube video with the identified face of Anthony Bologna. NYDailyNews.com, author: Jefferson Siegel (September 2011).*

The footage went viral in almost no time and caused a lot of debate on social networks, but when, four days later, a second video appeared with the same policeman—quickly identified by Internet users as Anthony Bologna and brought to court a year after the OWS eviction—spraying other protestors with the only purpose of getting them out of his way, the stage for the public uproar was finally set. Evidently, Bologna and other police officers were caught unaware of the novelty that had already been tested during the "Arab Spring" and other protest activities and that pre-conditioned the further success of OWS: personal smartphones with digital cameras. The Zuccotti camp was not televised at the time—only surveilled with the surveillance footage available exclusively to policemen—hence, the law enforcers believed that their behavior would not be exposed except through

spoken evidence, which would hardly classify as a hard proof under the circumstances. But those videos immediately uploaded to *YouTube* and other social media proved to be of enormous efficiency, and when the police forces realized their potential they occasionally used strobe lights to prevent people from using digital cameras. Already a week after the second widely advertised episode of pepper-spraying went viral online and featured on several TV shows on *CNN* and *MSBNC*, the association of New York trade unions held a march in support of OWS, in which 15 thousand people took part. This was how OWS quite quickly came into the nationwide and global spotlight.

The mainstream media, though at first quite unwillingly and askance, had to join the clamor when reports of misfeasance and motiveless arrests began to circulate: such was the case of the mass arrest of 700 activists on Brooklyn bridge on October 1 (ironically, it was staged to protest against the police violence). Journalists and reporters working on site did not escape the same destiny: on the day of eviction, for instance, ten journalists were arrested, including those from the *National Public Radio*, *Associated Press*, and *New York Daily News* (Russel 46). The area of the camp itself was barricaded by the police from the outside (with an observation tower erected nearby) in order to hamper access of onlookers, who had to confine themselves with standing outside and snapping images of the protestors, though camp dwellers made every effort to get as many people as possible inside to participate in their activities. This agenda alone—the inadequate response of the authorities to the grassroots democracy—became the "performative utterance" of OWS: the activists took every opportunity to showcase the grossly hostile reaction of those in power to what was devised as an unarmed, peaceful protest that consisted in demonstrations, public disputes, and various culture-jamming events. The police classified the "occupation" as the disturbance of everyday life in the neighborhood, while, to all intents and purposes, the only "crime" that the campaigners could be charged with was the

"occupation" itself—a symbolic act rather than a consistent political action of a revolutionary stance in the mold of Tahrir events or the Ukrainian "Maidan".

OWS activists, onlookers, and professional journalists—both working *in situ* and simply reposting the evidence widely present on connectivity media—were "in effect delivering meta-story about the story being reported, provided by people connected into digital social networks" (Russel 48). Naturally, these stories were distinguished by a special feel of unprecedented immediacy and authenticity: these were emotional texts and personal accounts, images and videos, mostly of unprofessional quality, which provided a vital insight into the life of the camp that was, for the reasons outlined above, not readily visible from the outside. Moreover, the visual experiences that circulated on social media were "preparing the terrain symbolically for [further] protests" rather than simply "a means to facilitate the reverberation of episodes taking place on the ground" (Gerbaudo 117). And though the legacy media lagged behind the social networks with only 3% of the total OWS web coverage at the time of the "occupation" (Russel 49), their gradual involvement helped raise awareness and was in many ways crucial for the astronomical growth of solidarity, especially outside New York. This breakthrough in OWS media coverage and the levels of global support was achieved after the OWS masterminds had hired the "*Workhouse Publicity*" PR agency, which was charged with designing a media strategy for the campaign. One of their most impressive tactics was creating an extensive OWS online photo gallery advertised to around half a million of the company's high-rank subscribers, including prominent politicians, opinion-makers, and celebrities (Russel 46).

Still, apparently, these were the social media that throughout the period of the "occupation" remained its main propaganda outlet. *Tweeter* and *YouTube*, due to the high degree of their connectivity, smartphone integration, and ease of use, played the most prominent role. Most of the "tweets" were posted to inform active and potential participants of the planned and current events (for instance, marching routes, whereabouts

of meetings, etc.) and of breaking news, such as arrests and searches, while *YouTube* videos captured protest scenes, camp activities, and police violence. Following the logics of the connectivity media, these videos, "tweets", and accounts were first published by activists themselves and live witnesses and were then collected and spread by reporters with larger audiences and solid reputations (for instance, Liz Flock from *Washington Post*), which helped deliver them on thousands of screens almost instantly, while the principle of hashtagging made this sea of information easily searchable and well-organized.

In addition to the established social and legacy media, OWS had its own freely distributed information outlets (not to mention a great number of pamphlets, brochures, and posters), of which the following three were the most eminent: *Occupied Wall Street Journal*, *Occupy Gazette* and *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy*. The *Tidal* would be in a league of its own, since it published essays and articles of prominent academicians and intellectuals that theorized about the campaign and voiced their sympathy with its cause; this legitimized OWS as a proper scholarly subject and greatly helped dissociate it from consuetudinary anarchistic and anti-globalist throngs.

As noted by Mirzoeff, OWS and its media strategies "involved creating, performing, and disseminating memes in urban public space and across social media networks to involve, extend, and create a political subject" ("How to See" 283) and, as seen from the aforesaid, the role of the social media for OWS was twofold: raising awareness through spreading accounts of the camp activity and as a means of orchestrating the protest. From the very beginning the media of choice to perform the said functions was *Twitter*, and OWS was on its initial stages even dubbed as the "Twitter Movement": according to a report published in 2011 by the social media company "Attention", *Twitter* was getting 82.5 percent of mentions related to OWS, while the share of *Facebook* was only 2.8 percent (Gerbaudo 114). This is easily explainable by the fact that *Twitter* was not only the key means of initiating the campaign, but was used extensively in the "pre-occupation"

period for the purposes of tactical coordination, while the official OWS *Facebook* page was only launched on September 24, after the camp had settled in Zuccotti Park. Before the start of the physical "occupation", there were only two *Facebook* pages that laid the ground for the campaign—that of the New York movement branch and of *Adbusters*. Neither of them received broad attention with jointly less than 1,000 "likes" before September 17, 2011, but their traffic increased substantially in the following weeks. All this leads to the conclusion that the virality of the OWS-associated memes, videos, and photos was firmly based "on the ground" and followed the reverberations of visual evidence from the OWS camp in *Twitter* conversations. Apart from creating solidarity between the campers and online sympathizers, this media aspect of the campaign led activists into heated discussions about what media were most utile and representative for the efficient propagation of the OWS message: at some point, there were attempts to replace *Twitter* (its status of a big corporate American brand was criticized by some of the OWS more radical supporters) with its "anarchist" alternative *Vibe* and with *Foursquare*—a location tagging service, which, however, did not seriously weaken *Twitter*'s positions. Twitter remained the main campaign's media instrument and information outlet with the *#OccupyWallStreet*, *#OccupyWallSt*, *#OWS*, and *#OccupaywallstreetNYC* hashtags functioning as the efficient digitalized liaison between the offline "occupation" and the online audiences scattered all around the world. And though the social media were used primarily for orchestration (i.e. to provide information and coordinate crowds), they were also a powerful source of emotional feedback, and the campaign's "cardiogram"—as one of the prominent OWS activists Michael Premo recounts, they "provided a better platform to radiate out the love and emotion that was happening there … It had a different sort of relevance in terms of radiating that out to many people…" (qtd. in Gerbaudo 123).

The Zuccotti camp was finally evicted on November 15 at the instigation of the land owner company; the protestors resisted the eviction to the best of their abilities, which

resulted in more than 100 arrests, including of 10 journalists from mainstream media. And while several "re-occupations" were attempted within a year after the eviction with no notable effects, the long-standing impact of OWS consisted in laying the ground for a big number of autonomous projects and campaigns that OWS participants and supporters launched in its aftermath. Many of them bear "Occupy" as part of their names and, in fact, as a legitimized reference to the visual activism tactic of "seizing" not only physical spaces, but various notions and phenomena: "Occupy University", "Occupy Student Debt", "Occupy Technology" and many others. The offshoots of OWS were numerous, and its global impact was felt outwardly in 2014 when "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" took place in Hong Kong. Appropriating the practical experience of various movements and grassroots initiatives that sprang up in the new millennium, OWS pieced all loose ends together and set forth a reproducible model of unarmed creative protest fed on social media coverage and culture jam. Rather than changing the actual politics and influencing global neoliberal economic agenda, the campaign focused on the heterogeneity of its participants to raise the problem of (mis)representation of various social groups in media and in official discourses and to provide the *visual* critique of the status quo. And this achievement—despite the numerous accusations of OWS of under-representing minorities and of the failure to articulate its demands in political terms—was not left unnoticed, as we now live in the "post-Occupy" world.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have made an attempt to give a coherent and structured account of visual activism as a recent development of urban life and an instigator of potential social change. Conceived and utilized as an innovative mechanism of representing group identities, visual activism employs a multitude of tactics—both inspired by the technological advances of the recent decades and those rooted in renowned historical antecedents—to aestheticize and re-iterate the entrenched concepts of social class,

grassroots initiative, participatory democracy, emancipation, and collective action. In this regard, I find it of vital importance to thoroughly analyze and provide a conceptual framework for this phenomenon, which re-articulates the relationship between the agents of power and the society at large. In the course of elaborating the thesis I undertook a close study of the available academic sources that address contemporary visual activism and its predecessors, as well as of the witness accounts of various campaigns with the special focus on "Occupy Wall Street", which, in my opinion, provides the most vivid illustration of the theoretic assumptions discussed at length in the first two Chapters. I hope that this work might serve as a starting point for a more profound and comprehensive study of the subject at hand.

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