

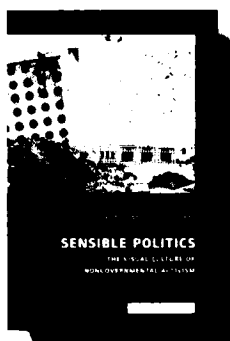
MOBILIZING TACTICS

Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism

Edited by Meg McLagan and Yates McKee

Zone Books, 2012

664 pp./\$36.95 (hb)



We are inundated daily with remarkable and moving images of radical protest, whether taking place in Tahrir Square in Cairo or on the steps of the State Capitol in Madison, Wisconsin, yet we are often unaware of their exact origins or the multiple frames through which they are mediated. This anthology, edited by Meg McLagan and Yates McKee, provides fundamental paradigms needed to understand how the aesthetic

is mobilized for activist purposes. Building on its predecessor, *Nongovernmental Politics*, edited and published by Michel Feher in 2007, it features more than thirty essays and interviews written by a diverse group of academics and nongovernmental activists. Contributions range from the theoretical, such as Judith Butler's poetic discussion of how it is both the bodily and spatial dimensions of public demonstrations that allow the disempowered to contest their marginalized status, to Charles Zerner's case study of Just Food's campaign to legalize beekeeping in New York City, which was banned by the administration of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in 1999.

A key strength of this book is its call to undermine what Thomas Keenan characterizes as documentary photography's role in "mobilizing shame," often used by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to expose human rights abuses.¹ For instance, Roger Hallas defines the potential for "visual activism" in photography through an exploration of Gideon Mendel's photographic installations executed in concert with a variety of NGOs (101). Tackling content, such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic in southern and eastern Africa, Mendel's goal is to reach policymakers who control funding, as well as to inform the general public of these atrocities, with the hope that they will in turn influence legislators. In an analysis of photographs showing Israeli troops assisting Palestinians forcefully displaced from their homes during the occupation of 1967, Ariella Azoulay argues for the practice of "non-governmental viewing," which resists complicity with the aggressor and encourages the viewer to consider what is absent from the frame (40). NGOs who frequently work with governments, such as that of Israel, during what Azoulay terms "regime-made disasters" can then challenge the representation of refugee as victim and concurrently demand accountability from the perpetrators (30).

A second significant contribution made by this book is the way in which the authors distill the complex modes of circulation of images and information that lead to political and social change.

For instance, Huma Yusuf focuses on a period of political instability in Pakistan in 2007 due to president General Pervez Musharraf's suspension of the chief justice of the Supreme Court and Benazir Bhutto's assassination. Yusuf reveals how once the government shut down live television transmissions, citizen journalists turned to cell phone video and text messages, as well as communication via illegal satellite dishes, to assert alternative voices and contest Pakistan's repressive leadership. Further, Negar Azimi reminds us that activists will appropriate digital images to suit their needs and maps how quickly the cell phone video of 26-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan being shot on the streets of Tehran during protests in 2009 became an iconic image for Iran's "Green Movement." After charting Agha-Soltan's history, Azimi concludes that although her death was clearly unjust, it is not really known whether she intended to participate in the demonstrations. For Sam Gregory, however, it is also essential to consider the grave risks taken to disseminate this footage through online platforms, such as YouTube, and asks whether the "terms of service" required by these corporate sites might be rewritten to include the protection of free speech by human rights practitioners.

The recognition that no singular image ever delivers a fixed message, but rather exists on an axis where multivalent debates and dialogues are possible, is most compellingly explored in the book's extended interviews. For instance, Ann Cvetkovich's conversation with AIDS activist and filmmaker Jean Carlomusto centers on Carlomusto's engagement with "queer archive activism," in which the preservation and use of video oral histories of ACT-UP members simultaneously memorializes those lost to AIDS and also serves as an educational resource for the continuing campaign to eliminate the disease. McKee and McLagan discuss the concept of "forensic architecture" with architect Eyal Weizman, who theorizes how maps, satellite imagery, and architectural drawings can act as testimony in zones of conflict, such as the West Bank, Iraq, or Darfur, in ways distinct from human witnessing. Functioning as sensors, this visual material potentially sketches out "an emergent relation between architectural research and international law" (439). Pamela Yates shares with Barbara Abrash and McLagan the challenges of filming *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator* (2011), which traces Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú's journey to bring the former Guatemalan military government responsible for war crimes to justice, and also stresses the importance of embracing digital media for additional outreach. Complementing the film is an interactive website featuring a "memory bank," where anyone in Guatemala or the diaspora can upload their own memories along with photographs, music, and maps that will allow this history to expand and evolve.

Sensible Politics is essential reading for anyone committed to activist art practices and seeking strategies to enable zones of protest in the ever-shifting realm of social media.

JOANNA GARDNER-HUGGETT teaches twentieth-century art history and gender studies at DePaul University.

NOTE 1. Thomas Keenan, "Mobilizing Shame," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2004): 435–49.