

BOOK REVIEW

Sensible politics: the visual culture of nongovernmental activism, edited by Meg McLagan and Yates McKee, New York, Zone Books, 2012, 662 pp., US\$36.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-935408-24-6

In a world where nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) strive to integrate strategies of visual communication in order to support a specific political agenda or inspire social activism, the methods, approaches and challenges pertinent to these associations can be complex. Activists, photographers, documentary filmmakers and visual artists can all struggle to make sense of the impact their work might have on the communities that they document, examine and work within. *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism* is an attempt to understand and analyze the pathways in which visual media are utilized through networks and disseminated amongst platforms. Examining the propagation of images within political contexts, this compendium of case studies includes essays and interviews, and probes the use of visual media throughout cross-disciplinary spaces that give credence to the valuable connections between aesthetic and political approaches. A comprehensive collection of 28 essays and 4 interviews, *Sensible Politics* scrutinizes the dynamic relationships innate in the vast range of collaborations between the visualization of political issues and the culture of nongovernmental activism.

Throughout the book, the spectrum of topics is immense, yet the essays are tight and focused. However because the book covers an assortment of subjects, it is best to selectively pick and choose which essays are pertinent to one's own areas of interest. Whilst the majority of articles are geared toward analysis of film, photography and the visual arts within the spheres of political activism, the book also contains many outliers. For example, a food activist might find Charles Zerner's short essay on nonprofit initiatives to legalize urban beekeeping in New York City the takeaway from this tome. Whereas Part Four of the book focuses on diversifying the scholarship surrounding architecture within a nongovernmental framework; this section's intellectual niche might inform a distinctly architectural field, yet fall hollow for those invested in film or photography. For readers with wide interests, this book provides a plethora of case studies to digest. As a native New Yorker, I found Zerner's essay on the struggle for rooftop honey throughout the five boroughs as relevant to my interests as Sam Gregory's two articles on WITNESS and video activism. Although these topics inhabit different domains, they share links to activism and the visualization of political struggle. Scholars whose work is associated with lens-based media might find this collection most useful, yet the collection provides valuable bonds between topics and includes essays that speak to activists, artists, historians and academics alike.

Divided into five parts, *Sensible Politics* situates creative practices within the context of political activism while at the same time raises a bounty of critical and timely questions. Each section includes a number of independent essays. The five sections consist of 'Part One: The Persistence of Photography', 'Part Two: Disobedient Bodies, Circulating Images, Archival Traces', 'Part Three: Cinema, Documentary, Political Effects', 'Part Four: Expanded Architectures' and finally, 'Part Five: Multiplying Platforms'. In Part One, Thomas Keenan critiques the photography of Trevor Paglen, whose work captures the layers of unseen intelligence behind United States' covert operations after September 11. Keenan interrogates the value of Paglen's blurred imagery and insists that these forms of documentary artistry are critical to fuelling further conversation. Whereas in the second section, Huma Yusuf examines the different journalistic approaches that began to emerge in Pakistan in 2007 after General Pervez Musharraf suspended the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. Yusuf follows the trajectories of both old and new media in the years following the state of emergency that was declared in early November of that year. She interrogates the vague legislative responses to the proliferation of citizen journalism (blogs, tweets, YouTube videos) by politicians in Islamabad during the initial surge of citizen media.

Sensible Politics combines both the writings of academics and social workers, as well as those of artists. In Part Three, Kirsten Johnson, the cinematographer behind Laura Poitras' 2010 film, *The Oath*, reflects upon the visual choices she made and the landscape encountered as she attempted to visually capture the trial of Salim Hamdan, Osama Bin Laden's former driver, which took place in Guantanamo Bay. Johnson's movements were highly restricted and the lack of transparency within the legal process itself further reduced the limitations of Johnson's cinematography. Her inability to film Hamdan in person forced her to focus on the surrounding details, topographies and landscapes in the hope that this imagery might subtly illuminate both the seriousness and helplessness of Hamdan's predicament.

The book also includes a number of interviews. Part Four includes a conversation with the Israeli architect, Eyal Weizman, who is the Director of the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmith's, University of London. Weizman discusses his relationship with the Palestinian Ministry of Planning, as well as his long association with B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. In the final section, Part Five, Charles Zerner examines the restrictive history of beekeeping in New York City and recounts the campaign by the New York City-based organization, Just Food, in its quest to legalize urban beekeeping in New York. A preview from each section, the above glimpses provide hints to the wider range of topics found throughout the book.

Like a honeybee in search of spring flowers, the titles of each section of McLagan and McKee's collection of commentary illustrate the unique and comprehensive nature of this rich and multifaceted potpourri of reflection. Yet this variance of case studies provide hints toward broader interconnections while asking scholars to ponder which insights might surface within a complicated and overarching field. Some readers will find themselves frustrated by this expansive multidisciplinary attempt to make sense of the visual culture that pervades multiple types of political activism. Others who delve into this collection will agree that the range of topics is a breath of fresh air, perhaps akin to multi-floral wildflower honey from a city farmer's market, providing something for everyone.

Sensible Politics is an ambitious compilation of writings that succeeds in offering an assortment of critical reflection for scholars and students from a variety of backgrounds and interests. Visual media and political artistry is ever expanding in its artistic approaches and use of public platforms for dissemination of ideas and political action. Seemingly, these creative interactions become stronger as more sectors of society begin to experiment with social justice and methods of visual representation. *Sensible Politics* does a fine job assembling arguments around these interconnections, while illuminating both the strengths and fragile nature of these multiplying relationships.

Ben Lenzner

University of Waikato

ben.lenzner@gmail.com

© 2015, Ben Lenzner

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2015.1031574>

Copyright of Studies in Documentary Film is the property of Taylor & Francis, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.