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3.6 A call to bear witness

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'SOLIDARITY'

In a recent exhibition at a small gallery in East London called Four Corners, I meander amongst photographs of protests in the UK (Figure 3.6.1.). Images of scenes full of posters with slogans such as 'SMASH CAPITALISM', 'SUPPORT TRICOWOMEN'S EQUAL PAY STRIKE', 'GAY LIBERATION IS OUR LIBERATION', 'TROOPS OUT NOW!', 'STOP THE RACIST BILL', 'NATIONAL HEALTH NOT NATIONAL WEALTH'. I stand in front of a photograph of an eighty-year-old woman jumping over a barbed fence, photographs of women with scarves on their heads holding banners against racism, people in wheelchairs, others lying on the asphalt stopping London buses by passively resisting, smiling people marching for Black lesbian liberation. The exhibition titled *Photographing Protest: Resistance through a feminist lens* presents the work of twenty-seven women and non-binary photographers from the 1960s until today who engaged not only in recording scenes of social activist movements but also in actively constructing the narratives of these struggles through their participation in protests, the designing of banners, magazines and other publications. The exhibition presents a compressed history of social struggles in the UK. By staging work from feminist photographers, it both elevates the role of women and queer activists that often go unnoticed in rights campaigns, as well as directly counters the male gaze that dominates established photojournalist practices. The purpose of these photographs is to communicate the scenes of struggle to those who were unable to be present. The political dimension of their work is to grow these movements by creating more visibility. By capturing protesters shouting, singing or raising their fists these artists and cultural workers invite us, a wider public, to witness these events through the images.

The exhibition frames these photographers as both documentarians and activists, also introducing a tension between the two roles. The catalogue quotes Sally Fraser, one of the photographers who decided to give up on photography after covering many of the marches: 'I wanted not to be continuously in the observer position. I wanted to be part of it' (2022, p. 5). This quote and the exhibition at large present an interesting framing in regard to the position of the witness, the struggle for visibility and its relationship to political action. How could we think of the act of witnessing in the struggle towards social justice and especially in a time of environmental emergency?

The time span covered in this exhibition, from the 1960s until today, traverses a vast duration of technological development, where the practice of photography has changed significantly. Protests today are not only recorded by professional journalists but also by the



Figure 3.6.1 Elainea Emmott, 'Solidarity', 21.01.2017.

participants themselves who constantly produce audio-visual content that they immediately upload through various social media channels. As such they complicate the distinctions between the observer/documentarian and participant. They also complicate the question of witnessing of such events. It is now possible to follow not only protests remotely, but also uprisings, bombings, scenes of active battle and other events of conflict by streaming clouds of images and videos through the intimacy of our phones. The way mediated evidence circulates, is consumed and arbitrated implicates viewers in secondary witnessing, a position that holds political potencies as well as dangers. Far from simplifying the narrative, this hyperconnectivity demands different reflexivities in digesting and responding to this content responsibly. It calls for a mapping of political power as it is distributed through the realm of visibility. How do we avoid the traps of misinformation? How do we take care not to neglect other political occurrences that are not as easily documentable? No longer having to depend on the executive summaries of professional journalists, online audiences need a whole set of new skills to parse the noise and direct their political attention where it matters.

To our eyes and ears

In his 1984 speech *Confronting Governments: Human Rights* Michel Foucault suggested that civil society is tasked with 'bring[ing] the testimony of the people's suffering to the eyes and ears of governments' (Foucault, 1984: 474). In other words, our role as citizens of the world, as an international body politic, is to raise the events of suffering towards visibility; to mediate between the ones who suffer and the ones who are in power and thus are responsible for managing life. Unfolding Foucault's proposition, Yates McKee in his article '*Eyes and Ears*': *Aesthetics, Visual Culture, and the Claims of Nongovernmental Politics* highlights how this function of civil society, or of international citizenship as Foucault describes it, translates to a series of aesthetic practices by artists, activists and nongovernmental actors that negotiate the power of images. Images, or image-texts as McKee calls them, contain both textual and acoustic dimensions, and encapsulate the function of technical apparatuses to determine the power of the visible. Following Jacques Rancière who developed the theory of the *politics of aesthetics*, McKee uses the examples of a handful of projects in order to demonstrate the way aesthetic means claim political power in practice. Rancière's conception of the 'distribution of the sensible' is a useful formulation for us here. He states: 'Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time' (Rancière, 2013: 8). It is thus equally important to highlight not only what is seen, but also what is left out, and to advocate for the visibility of such events that fall outside the public lens. Both Rancière and Foucault understand the distribution of the sensible, which many would consider a cultural function, as a political power. Culture elevates events, concepts, ideas and histories into visibility, digesting and translating them, and in doing so outlining their political potency. Indeed, McKee as well describes cultural work as a set of complex and diverse aesthetic practices that are tasked to navigate a field of power. 'Drawing on the vocabularies of art history, anthropology, and film theory, this mode of analysis challenges the idea of "culture" as either a bounded set of agreed-upon values or a rarefied class of artifacts, understanding it instead as an unstable network of signifying practices, technical

apparatuses, and institutional power relations that hail subjects in multiple, overlapping, and often contradictory ways' (McKee, 2007: 330). Cultural work is thus not a simple, politically neutral act, but a deeply implicated work that keeps negotiating the value of certain political relations over others by striving to reach more eyes and ears.

An example of such aesthetic cultural work that aims to elevate questions of injustice to both the eyes and ears of governments, the judiciary and the court of public opinion, is the Forensic Architecture investigation of the murder of Pavlos Fyssas by Golden Dawn (Forensic Architecture, 2018). This event immediately gained national importance in Greece as it came at the pinnacle of Golden Dawn's political power, being both a criminal organization and at the time a political party with representation in the Greek parliament. The incident was observed by a number of witnesses on the ground, including the police officers who were present at the crime scene but failed to prevent it. It was also recorded by a few private security cameras. The resulting footage was of low resolution and only captured the incident from a distance. Additionally, the official criminal investigation and the court proceedings that followed revealed a series of sound recordings from the ambulances that were called to the scene, from the emergency response centre and from the police communications with their headquarters. Each of these pieces of audio-visual evidence was treated separately in the official investigations, analysed and presented in court in full. Yet there were a few discrepancies in the timing of these files, mostly deriving from incorrect metadata. In order to fully synchronize the files, Forensic Architecture, at the request of the family of Pavlos Fyssas and their legal representatives, started to look for links between the mute video files and the blind audio files, what slipped between the eyes and ears. Through spatial queues, and the tracing of actors that crossed multiple image planes, the investigation started to create a web of connections between the different pieces of evidence. It was the arrival of the ambulance that was captured both in the video and the audio that became the catalyst for the synchronization. The resulting investigation which was both presented in court and published openly through the Forensic Architecture website and multiple other news channels and exhibition spaces presented the incident through a perspective that resembled a control panel. By combining image and sound, the investigation offered a synthesized real-time viewing of the event through multiple channels. It offered a type of witnessing that we might call *hyper-witnessing*, as it was a synthesized perspective that none of the witnesses on the ground had access to at the time of the incident. Technologically enhanced it was both a witnessing of the event from a distance as well as a newfound audio-visual proximity. This simple act of synchronization and alignment amplified the understanding of the event and offered viewers a chance to really understand how the incident played out.

This type of aesthetic amplification for the purposes of an investigation is what Eyal Weizman and Matthew Fuller in their book *Investigative Aesthetics* call *hyper-aesthetics*. Hyper-aesthetics utilizes the perceptive capacity of multiple entities: human and non-human, technological and environmental, in order to amplify our perception of certain events of interest. Hyper-aesthetics allow for an expanded political field of investigation by suggesting a collaboration between diverse entities. Most importantly, I would suggest that hyper-aesthetics can amplify citizens political power by allowing them to become educated secondary witnesses to a larger number of events. As Weizman and Fuller have it 'to be politicized is to increase one's ability to be aestheticized to the world' (Fuller and Weizman, 2021: 36).

Hyper-aesthetics then creates political subjectivities that are enabled by an expanded field of perception.

The insensible

The constant exposure to violent imagery creates a difficult type of secondary witnessing, existing in a condition that scholar Jacob Lund describes as *contemporaneity*, a state where we are constantly connected to multiple distant realities and times at once (Lund, 2019). The simultaneous access to mediatized information presents multiple challenges to the politics of visibility, as well as our positions as global witnesses. Importantly contemporaneity creates an uneven distribution of political attention. Well-documented events dominate the political stage while other acts of violence that do not lend themselves to straight-forward imaging practices, fall through the cracks of representation and get lost in the clouds of data. As Fuller and Weizman argue, governments also exercise aesthetic power by either controlling media or by producing hypes around certain events that allow other actions to go unnoticed (Fuller and Weizman, 2021: 91–103). And although these practices of diversion are not new, the recent condition of intensified contemporaneity and hyperconnectivity exacerbate aesthetic power. This is clear in the Greek context, for example, if we consider the way that constant military threats by Türkiye's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan dominate Greek news and fuel a sense of insecurity. Is there space for the news of a different type? Do we hear as often about events of slow violence (Nixon, 2011) such as the slow leaking of toxic waste from dumpsites into the Marathon lake near Athens? Do we know how to witness oil spills from shipwrecks or the contamination of the Aegean Sea through the ship-breaking practices in Aliağa?

Understanding the political as the distribution of the sensible means paying attention to the zones of opacity that fall out of the public gaze. While there are now multiple techniques for investigating incidents with an overload of audio-visual material, there are other incidents which do not lend themselves to the same public scrutiny. Incidents of domestic violence, migrants being pushed back across borders through closed military zones or the slow toxic contamination of soils and waters slip through the cracks of traditional evidentiary representation. They form what Kathryn Yusoff calls the *insensible* (Yusoff, 2013). Insensible worlds for Yusoff are the incalculable, unknowable, uncertain lives and environments of our non-human kin that are both protected and threatened by this lack of visibility. Especially at a time of an urgent ecological and climate crisis, these insensible worlds demand new approaches to investigation and new strategies for creating political interest.

How to bear witness to something that cannot be seen or heard in the metrics of a traditional event of violence, to something that cannot be sensed immediately by the human body yet still affects the bodies of humans and other Earthly inhabitants? Could we expand the notion of witnessing in order to make urgent that which might seem distant?

Witnessing an expanded body

Elsewhere, I have followed feminist, posthuman theory to propose the understanding of the human body not as a distinct body hermetically sealed by its skin but as a constantly expanding assemblage of matter. In the notion of an *expanded body*, I trace the space

occupied by all the material bits that come to be part of a human body within its lifetime. This includes an average of thirty-five tons of food, 62,400 lt of water, 242.2 million litres of air, 3,400 kg of faeces and 37,300 lt of urine (Varvia, 2021). This rendering of a body spans multiple dispersed locations at once. As such it challenges the notion of physical presence that is a precondition for any act of witnessing. While our eyes and ears and other organs capable of sensing stay close to our body's centre, the matter that comes to be part of our bodies, including these sensing organs, exists in multiple sites in a pre-individuated state (Simondon, 1992). This dispersed matter may not be capable of sensing the distant worlds that it is a part of per se, but it is, in a sense, witnessing earthly practices by its mere physical presence. Practices such as industrialized agriculture, toxic contamination of waterways, the burning of forests and the production of plastic by-products, affect the particles of air, water, nutrients and toxins that come to be absorbed by human bodies. What happens if we consider all these multifaceted, textured and mutating particles of (human) matter, as mediatic surfaces that register the memory of their journeys? What stories do they have to tell?

In a recent seminar, Achille Mbembe elaborated on a quote from Frantz Fanon to develop the theoretical framework of an Earthly Community. The quote which is the closing sentence from the book *Black Skin White Masks* goes like this: 'My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!' (Fanon, 1986). Mbembe's analysis of this prayer helps unpack the way the material body carries with it the histories of violence and colonialism that determine human subjecthood and the way the body itself can be considered an archive. I will not attempt to recreate Mbembe's examination here (I can only encourage readers to seek it out) instead I will endeavour to consider this prayer and Mbembe's understanding of it, in relation to the notion of an expanded body. If we were to ask our *expanded bodies to make us always into people who question*, what sort of questions would they bring about? It seems to me that we could read Fanon's prayer as an invitation to *witness* the way we are entangled with other organic and inorganic Earthly inhabitants. Witnessing the world through the material singularity of the body is enough to keep us busy for more than a lifetime. I do not suggest that we should be exhaustive, but rather that we can use this invitation strategically, diving into the relational affiliations we have with distant landscapes in order to make those far away troubles more urgent.

Witnessing beyond the sensible, means paying attention to those relationalities that fall beyond the perceptual sphere of humans. To really let our bodies invoke these questions, requires not only a phenomenological attunement, but also careful study of material flows. In this sense, witnessing through our expanded bodies would mean witnessing beyond the empirical, in a sort of post-phenomenological fashion, while simultaneously being grounded in the materiality of our flesh. This practice requires study and the aid of our nonhuman kin. It is also what Weizman and Fuller suggest with their term hyper-aesthetics. 'Such aestheticization is not only perceptual, but also may involve creating existential or conceptual dispositions through experience, attention, even by studying' (Fuller and Weizman, p. 36). In this sense I would suggest that to be politicized one needs only to start by being aestheticized to one's own extended body. Investigating the relation between the material self and the body of the Earth, not only through the senses but also through the close study of the insensible is the way to locate oneself within the Earthly community. It means to redraw our relation to the material commons as one that is not of individual subjects sitting distinctly next to each other, but rather temporal singularities of matter that individuate and

transindividuate (Simondon, 1992), forming perceptual vantage points, and storing memory while they transform through mediation.

Here I follow Richard Grusin's powerful concept of *Radical Mediation* which 'treats mediation as the process, action, or event that generates or provides the conditions for the emergence of subjects and objects, for the individuation of entities within the world' (Grusin, 2015: 137–8). Grusin allows us to consider mediation as the way that subjects and objects form and transform when they interact or are in relation to one another. Mediation thus has an ontogenetic function. 'For radical mediation, all bodies (whether human or nonhuman) are fundamentally media and life itself is a form of mediation' (Grusin, 2015: 132). How could we then learn how to witness our own expanded bodies as media and as mediating forces? Whether it is hyper-aesthetics or another form of hyper-witnessing, this process of careful attunement has a political potency. As we witness all the ways that our material bodies are implicated in global flows, we operationalize a material proximity to distant creatures and critters. At the same time, we witness the plasticity of our bodies as we allow ourselves to be affected by the world that passes through us.

A call to action

A call to bear witness to our expanded bodies is not a passive call to observe from a distance events that are irrelevant to us, but an invitation to be implicated by understanding an event through its multiple mediatic expressions and through all the ways that our human lives are complicit in it. In this form of militant secondary witnessing, we become sensitized to the way our actions are involved in the lives of other Earthly co-inhabitants and don't shy away from our responsibility towards future generations. Rather, enabled by hyper-aesthetics, working with organic and technological sensors, we form political alliances and sensibilities that allow us to engage with complexity. Yusoff advises that to really pay attention to the insensible, to respond to it responsibly, we must slow down our gaze, to consider justice work as one that needs to span across generations. This is not to delay our actions, but rather to consider the effect of our actions beyond the small scale of our local and temporary social contracts.

To respond to Sally Fraser's call at the top of this article, we are never fully passive observers, we are already implicated in the worlds of conflict, whether we are cognizant of it or not. That does not mean that we are already doing enough to address these urgent ecological problems. On the contrary, the call to bear witness is a call to map out our own complicity. By understanding how our lives are fully entangled with violent Earthly practices, we aim to draw a different type of responsibility. Not only towards alien others, but first and foremost towards ourselves, and the lifeworlds that sustain us.

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