

curves with straight lines. In what remains a very militarized society, the “hard” options are more culturally and politically palatable, even though the “soft” options are more likely to be effective.

The underlying question is really how we see the changing world around us. From the Greek philosopher Aristotle we inherited the idea of unity of time and place, meaning that what is depicted should be seen from a particular place over no longer than a single day. The visual system of perspective, known to the ancients and revived to dramatic effect in the European Renaissance, added the injunction that what is seen should be taken in by a single spectator from a single, identifiable place. To see the changing world, we will have to set aside all of these time-honored strategies. We need to compare across time and space and learn to see from other people’s perspectives as well as our own.

As the examples in this chapter from Guam to the Mississippi River show, we also have to change our understanding of time. Deep time is changing in front of our eyes. If we don’t take into account the worldwide situation, we will constantly be caught by surprise. Developed nations largely ignored reports of sea-level rise in the Pacific because they assumed it would not affect them and were taken by surprise when the 2011 tsunami overwhelmed seawalls in Japan and released substantial quantities of radiation from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the atmosphere, the Pacific Ocean and beyond. “No man is an island,” wrote John Donne in seventeenth-century London. We are now all connected and change itself is changing.

CHAPTER 7

CHANGING THE WORLD

On January 1, 1994, as the world was getting over its New Year’s Eve festivities, the Zapatista rebel army came out of the jungle in Chiapas, Mexico, and declared, “¡Ya basta!” (Enough!). The action was timed to coincide with the commencement of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which removed trade barriers between Mexico, the United States, and Canada. The EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation/Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) was formed to create alternatives to globalization for the local Maya and other groups, concentrating on civil rather than armed resistance. The Zapatistas made skillful use of media to spread their concept of a politics “from below, for below,” issuing a series of “Declarations from the Lacandon Jungle” online. They saw changing media and politics as two parts of the same process. The Zapatistas have a talent for media-friendly events. Their spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, became something of a media personality, always appearing wearing a ski mask and smoking a pipe.

Many have credited the Zapatistas with the invention of “hactivism,” activism online that seeks to disrupt the operations of government or corporate websites. One of the first such actions followed violent incursions by the Mexican army, leading to the displacement of five thousand people. The Zapatistas and their allies then undertook a virtual sit-in on the Mexican government’s website on June 18, 1999. Due to the relatively unsophisticated web security at that time, people were able to participate in the virtual sit-in using simple HTML script. They insist that these actions are electronic nonviolent civil disobedience, rather than criminal actions. In their Sixth Declaration, the Zapatistas announced that they envisage “a world where there is room for many worlds, a world that can be one and diverse.”¹

Taken together, these approaches amounted to a new form of “representation” for the era of globalization. *Represent* has two distinct meanings here. First, representation is the way we depict events and experience in other form, whether on film, in photography, or via any other medium. For the Zapatistas, participatory media events like the virtual sit-in are not just a form of publicity for their cause, but rather are examples of the kind of world they hope to create. With the spread of global digital culture, this participatory approach to media is far more widespread and understood than it was in 1994. Second, *represent* means the representative system of government, in which individuals are elected or appointed to represent the interests of others. However, once in place, these representatives have a good deal of latitude to decide how to act. The Zapatistas

wanted to empower people to govern themselves in what has been called direct democracy. Although people found them inspirational worldwide, it was only in Chiapas that they were able to create lasting change. In fact, their concept of participatory democracy using digital media was better suited to the new global cities. Working through this doubled concept of representation is the second component of the new visual thinking required by the era of globalization.

REBEL CITIES

Global cities around the world, from Cairo to Istanbul, New York to Madrid, have indeed since become places of protest, claiming what the scholar David Harvey has called “the right to the city” (2013). It is here that the young, urban, networked majority are questioning both forms of representation. In 2001, Argentinian protestors brought down no fewer than five governments using the slogan “They do not represent us.”² Their call raises the question as to whether the new global majority can represent itself both politically and visually, or whether the visible oligarchies generated by globalization will continue.

The double question of representation first jumped from peasant areas to global cities in Argentina. After its military dictatorship collapsed in 1983, Argentina took on extensive loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the 1990s, it was compelled by the IMF to introduce a stringent austerity regime. Even these measures

failed, so that in November 2001, the government converted people's personal money into an asset that could be used to repay the international loans. The result was that if you went to the ATM, you could not get money out. Financial order had broken down. On December 19 to 20, 2001, the people of Buenos Aires spontaneously revolted, followed by the rest of the country. A city of some 13 million, Buenos Aires extends over roughly 80 square miles. Its people forced both the existing government and then four new governments to resign over the space of a month (Sitrin 2006). This was the first of the new attempts to change the world by making the global city into a rebel city. The new majority had found a new way to call for change. The exasperated call "Enough!" had given rise to "¡Que se vayan todos!" (Let's get rid of all of them!) because they do not represent us. Which means that "we" have to do it ourselves.

The movement for self-representation that began in Latin America spread worldwide, enabled by social media and other Internet-based platforms. It gained global attention with the Arab Spring and the subsequent global Occupy movement in 2011. These movements tried to find new means to represent people, who participated both as individuals and as "the people." Using social media and political action, the people first claimed a name, whether as the *indignados* in Spain, the 99% in the United States, or simply "the people" in Tunisia and Egypt. Then they found a space: Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Zuccotti Park in New York, Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt. From these places, the

movements claimed not to represent but to *be* the *indignados*, the 99%, or the people, respectively. They asserted the right to look and to be seen, online and in city space. This new self-representation used smart phones, graffiti, websites, social media, demonstrations, and occupations.

In Cairo, those in the square claimed to *be* Egypt, not to represent it. This claim was sufficiently powerful that leaders fell and regimes changed. For a time, it seemed as if the Arab Spring and other movements really might change the world. The rebel cities rarely dominated their entire country, however, so national leaders were able to reassert the claim to be the true representatives of the people as a whole, often making strategic use of state media. Now that this wave of claims to the right to the city has subsided, we can look back and see how it changed visual culture, from North Africa to North America. These movements were the first to use global social media to try and create visual thinking about representation and social change: where do we go from here?

2011 AND AFTER: NORTH AFRICA

If visual culture is a performance, as we saw in Chapter 1, then the Arab Spring began with a dramatic opening act. In Tunisia, one person became the representative of the consequences of state repression. Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi was a fruit seller who dramatically set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, in frustrated protest against police interference with his work and the regime in general.

Such self-burning had precedents in the 1960s, as part of protests against the Vietnam War and the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe. Bouazizi lived in a small town called Sidi Bouzid, close to a mining town that had been occupied by protestors for six months in 2008.

One year earlier in the city of Monastir, about 124 miles away from Sidi Bouzid, a young man selling doughnuts had also had enough of the police restrictions on his attempts to trade, and he set himself on fire in front of a state building. Nothing happened. A year later, Mohamed Bouazizi repeated the act, whether in conscious imitation or not, and Tunisia underwent a revolution. Why did his act resonate with the public when the earlier one did not? The difference was simple: the diffusion of the news by Facebook and other forms of peer-to-peer communication. Facebook did not cause the revolution, but it allowed for the dissemination of information. People were ready to act because climate change had brought drought, leading to high food prices, all in the context of political corruption, mass unemployment, and widespread unrest.

Social media enabled people to set aside the unseeing of this crisis required by the regime. People still had to act as a result of that information for there to be social change. After Bouazizi's death, further acts of protest were extensively covered by al-Jazeera, the Qatari satellite news channel. When these new forms of representation interacted, his suicide set in motion a process whereby people concluded enough was enough, the regime did not represent them, and thus they had to take over their own country.

During the 2011 revolution, the French self-styled "artist" (artist/activist) who calls himself JR realized a transformation of Tunisian visual culture was happening. The only portrait photograph seen in public in Tunisia for the past forty years had been that of the former Tunisian dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. JR organized an "inside out" representation of Tunisia, putting the formerly invisible people into public space. It was intended to be a transformation of unseeing into seeing. Working in conjunction with Tunisian bloggers, and using only local interlocutors and photographers, the goal was to create a series of one hundred portraits of people who had participated in the revolution. Printed as 3 x 4-foot posters, they were flyposted across four cities in Tunisia, including startling examples stuck on the former secret-police commissariat and on the facade of one of Ben Ali's former houses.

The project was called artocracy, meaning the rule of art. Yet this open-access project was strongly criticized in Tunisia. "Why only one hundred?" was the common refrain. For the revolution was widely held to have been the work of the people, not a subset of heroes. JR's posters did not—and perhaps could not—adequately represent the revolution. No one wanted to replace autocracy, the rule of one person, with the artocracy of one hundred, even as a joke. JR's visual thinking was not sufficiently sharp.

The Egyptian uprising of 2011 and after was perhaps the most striking effort to re-create representation and transform visual thinking. The young population of Egypt's cities rose up in the face of a significant food

crisis caused by the North African drought, which was surely linked to climate change. As the Center for Climate Security has shown, while they did not “cause” the events, “the consequences of climate change are stressors that can ignite a volatile mix of underlying causes that erupt into revolution.”³ Social media networking was also an essential factor, as was the density of urban population in Cairo and Alexandria, where over 10 million people live. Fully 70 percent of the Egyptian population is under the age of thirty, while official youth unemployment was 25 percent or more during the revolution. All these factors combined to make the Egyptian revolution. It would be better to say that “Egypt” was remade in Tahrir Square and it continued to be redefined and re-represented until the army put a stop to it.

Although it is a major global corporation, Facebook was a key tool of the 2011 uprising in Egypt. It began with 400,000 “likes” on the “We Are All Khaled Said” Facebook page in 2011. Khaled Said was a blogger who was arrested and tortured to death by Egyptian police in 2010. The virtual assembly on his Facebook page enabled in part the mass demonstrations of January 2011 by making visible a substantial alternative social group. For over thirty years, the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak had been able to prevent any such demonstrations in physical space. Facebook was also used to communicate news and dates for action. The date January 25, 2011, was set on Facebook as the day for mass action, a call disseminated both in the streets and via Twitter. Over ninety thousand people “liked” the

Facebook page. Hundreds of thousands actually took to the streets, for social media had catalyzed the movement in ways that had not been seen before. The sheer size of the turnout took everyone by surprise, from the organizers to the police and the outside world. The regime no longer represented the people.

A street battle on January 28 opened Tahrir Square to the newly configured people. It was perhaps the closest to the nineteenth-century revolutions that we are likely to witness. The difference was that it was seen live via the Internet and on al-Jazeera, whose coverage of the Arab Spring circumvented the efforts of the dictators to downplay what was happening both within their own countries and globally. The battle of Kasr al-Nil Bridge, which decided whether the demonstrators would take over Tahrir Square, was a real and violent conflict. Nonetheless, perhaps because it was being watched live, the Egyptian police did not use live fire and the army pointedly did not intervene. This was not a contest of sheer power, as a military battle might be. It was a battle over who controls public space: the ordinary people or the forces of public order? After January 29, 2011, the people were able to create their own order for the first time in thirty years of dictatorship.

Tahrir Square was an unlikely space for liberation, an irregular shape formed between sets of government buildings and a usually jammed traffic intersection. It owed its existence to the British colonial administration wanting to clear lines of fire in front of administrative buildings, as we saw in nineteenth-century Paris (Chapter 5). Tahrir Square

became a space of active resistance to the dictatorship from below, as well as the place to provide the protesters with health care, food, and media “broadcast” via the Internet. In this way, the square became a kind of technology in itself. It created the very possibility of political action and gave new meaning to the concept of public space. In short, it was both a new form of visual representation and the claim to be politically representative, crosshatched in a new experience of space. The square became, as it were, a projector, superimposing these new ideas over the old Tahrir Square, where the secret police and Mubarak’s New Democratic Party had both had their headquarters.

From its first days, the revolution was condensed into the slogan: “The people want the fall of the regime.” In this phrase, a self-image formed where there was none before. In the eighteenth century, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau described what he called “the general will,” the force and power of public opinion.⁴ This had been repressed in Egypt for thirty years. Over the course of eighteen extraordinary days, a new general will was formed, and it was captured live on TV. Its subject, the people, forced the dictator to yield because it was clear that they, not he, represented Egypt.

After the occupation of Tahrir Square, the social movements in Egypt produced new forms of visual thinking, including “street art,” graffiti, and video collectives. Graffiti was startlingly new for Egyptians, because the dictatorship had maintained absolute control of public space. Graffiti is a way to reclaim public space for discussion. It

can reach people who might not see mainstream media, let alone go to an art gallery, in a country where UNICEF documents 26 percent of the adult population as being illiterate, disproportionately women.⁵ As such, the graffiti that flourished in Cairo and Alexandria could drive political debate and open new senses of possibility until the coup led by General Sisi in June 2013. ‘Particular spaces, like Mohamed Mahmoud Street in Cairo, where Mubarak’s Ministry of the Interior had once orchestrated a reign of police terror, became central locations for this visual discussion. After the coup, a law was proposed against “abusive graffiti,” which appears now to be in effect.

One young graffiti artist, Mohamed Fahmy, who calls himself Ganzeer (meaning “bicycle chain” in Arabic), describes himself as a “contingency artist.” In other words, his work responds to the needs of the moment in whatever way seems right. He thinks of this as participatory art in this sense: “art that participates in dealing with the immediate struggles and concerns of the audience.” It thinks along with its audience, rather than for it. While he accepts that the revolution itself has failed, at least for now, “it does not mean that the effects of the revolution should not find their way into art and culture.”⁶ His first work during the revolution included a graffiti memorial to a sixteen-year-old protestor killed by police and a widely used PDF pamphlet on how to conduct a protest. He later described how he was motivated to write the handout when he saw that the demonstrators could not respond to police tactics.⁷ The pamphlet gave specific ideas on how



Figure 78. Ganzeer, *Tank and Bread*, Cairo

to organize, and advised people that a photocopy is more secure than a web post that can be tracked down by the authorities. After the fall of Mubarak, Ganzeer set himself the marathon project of creating street portraits of all 847 people who died in the revolution, known as “the martyrs.” He had only accomplished three of these portraits by the time he left the country in 2014, making it unlikely that his martyrology will ever be accomplished.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which was running Egypt in 2011, persisted in painting over these three memorials. Ganzeer responded with a piece showing an enormous, full-size army tank bearing down on a man on a bicycle carrying a tray of bread. The human figure was dwarfed by the machine. As the Arabic for *bread* also means “life,” the graffiti piece suggests that army rule was being opposed to free life. In the photograph in Figure 78, you can also see the signature work of Sad Panda on the far right, added, as it were, to Ganzeer’s piece, as well as

posters and other graffiti. The wall has become a place for visual conversation.

In May 2011, activists held a Mad Graffiti Weekend to restore the memorials. Ganzeer circulated a sticker called “The Freedom Mask,” showing a masked, gagged head with the caption “Greetings from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to the beloved people. Now available in the market for an unlimited time.” This sarcasm led to his arrest, but after he tweeted his situation, so many people came to the police station that he was released without charge.

In October 2012, Ganzeer held a formal exhibition of his work, called *The Virus Is Spreading*, at the Safarkhan Gallery in Cairo.⁸ The work explored questions of freedom, sexual identity, censorship, and Islam. The pieces included a dramatic image of a blindfolded man sewing his mouth shut. A wounded cat, who has lost one eye and is covered in bandages, was an updated version of the symbol of Egypt. The show extended across several floors, making beautiful use of calligraphy on the walls, following the widespread use of such graffiti in Cairo. One example from early 2013 posted to a blog read: “O stupid regime understand my demand: freedom, freedom.” Other graffiti artists like Sad Panda also participated. The exhibition was quickly denounced by Islamists as heresy. Ganzeer published an open letter in reply:

Do you know any group of liberals that have prevented the construction of a mosque? Has a liberal person

ever criticized an art exhibition on the grounds that it was Islamic—and even sought punishment for its participants?⁹

His point was that no liberal Egyptian had sought to prevent Islamic groups from carrying out their way of life but the reverse was certainly not true. In response to this active threat of censorship, Ganzeer and his fellow street artists like Keizer and Sad Panda used the Internet to archive their work (cairostreetart.com). A Google Maps mash-up indicated where and when the work was posted. Users were invited to “like” the link on Twitpic and Flickr but not on Facebook, which was now too carefully under surveillance. The website cairostreetart.com was taken down in 2014, presumably by agents of the new military regime or by people not wishing to endanger themselves.¹⁰ In April 2014, Sampsa, a street artist also known as the “Finnish Banksy,” told a reporter:

In Egypt, some of these street artists are being visited by police weekly. They . . . are trying to find more subversive ways because they are being tracked down, via social media, physically. Thousands of people have been picked up and put in jail.¹¹

Others have turned up drowned in the Nile. Ganzeer himself had to leave Egypt in May 2014 after being accused of activism for the Muslim Brotherhood, and the country is currently undergoing a new wave of repression in which social media is closely monitored.

For the online counterarchive was a key tactic in creating new means of engagement. An important example is the nonprofit media collective Mosireen. In its own words, Mosireen was

born out of the explosion of citizen media and cultural activism in Egypt during the revolution. Armed with mobile phones and cameras, thousands upon thousands of citizens kept the balance of truth in their country by recording events as they happened in front of them, wrong-footing censorship and empowering the voice of a street-level perspective.¹²

In January 2011, at the height of the uprising, Mosireen was the most-watched not-for-profit YouTube channel in the world. Its activities came to center on documentary and media activism, meaning using video to show the world what was happening in Egypt in the face of domestic censorship and international ignorance. It archived the revolution, with ten terabytes of video already collected by 2013. Mosireen hosted busy open workshops in media techniques on a pay-as-you-can basis. Screenings of its videos were arranged outside, circumventing the need for Internet access. During the occupation of Tahrir, it even created Tahrir Cinema, projecting films for the occupiers.

The heart of Mosireen’s work is its videos. These remarkable films, from the center of the revolution, were made with skill and courage, often beautifully edited and composed. They were posted online within days of the events they depict, and English subtitles appeared on

a second version hours later. The films from the January revolution of 2011 are extraordinary documents from the middle of a popular uprising. They consist of montaged video clips taken on the streets of Cairo during the protests. There is no commentary or narrative. Contrary to many Western media reports, women are involved in all the actions. Detail is provided by comments from the participants themselves. In a film like *Martyrs of the Revolution* (2011), Western viewers may be shocked by the graphic violence.¹³ Military police vehicles are seen running over protestors in the street at high speed. A soldier deposits the body of a protestor in the trash. Wounds from rubber bullets, truncheons, and live ammunition are shown. The cameras are right among the crowd, so the filmmakers placed themselves at the same risk as the other participants. A clip shows a young man installing graffiti; another shows a woman declaring that everyone in Tahrir is now her son Ahmed, killed in the protests; still another shows a defenseless young man on his own being shot by the authorities. At the end, a three-column list of the names of those killed takes over two minutes to play.

Perhaps the most polished of Mosireen's films during the revolution appeared in January 2012. *The People Demand the Fall of the Regime* took as its title the signature chant of the Tahrir movement.¹⁴ It montaged scenes of everyday life in Cairo with the preparations for a protest, culminating in a vast crowd chanting the words of the title. The film is set to Wagner's overture to *Das Rheingold*, a famously beautiful and haunting piece of music. A woman

cradles a newborn, a singer composes a new piece, and people celebrate in front of a public television. But this is not a romantic view of the revolution. Again, viewers are confronted with the brute force used by Mubarak's regime in its desperate attempt to cling to power. The final shot shows the still-astonishing sight of Tahrir under occupation, with its cluster of tents in the center where food and medical care were distributed, surrounded by people as far as the eye can see.

In 2013, the film *The Square*, nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary, gave a vivid insight into the daily lives of five activists in the Egyptian revolution, including key organizers with Mosireen. There are extensive disagreements over both tactics and fundamental principles in the group, but they find themselves drawn together by their resistance first to the dictatorship and then to the regimes that came after. The film follows their transition from believing that overturning the dictator Mubarak would amount to a revolution in itself, to a realization that the process may be long and that their task is to oppose each and any regime that does not enable the representation of the people in all senses. We see young people being trained in how to use cameras and take video. At one point, Ahmed, a young street organizer, reflects on the relationship of the two forms of representation. "As long as there's a camera, the revolution will continue," Ahmed suggests. Meaning, that as long as people can see what is being done, they will continue to demand a regime that truly represents them. Ahmed sees the overthrow of

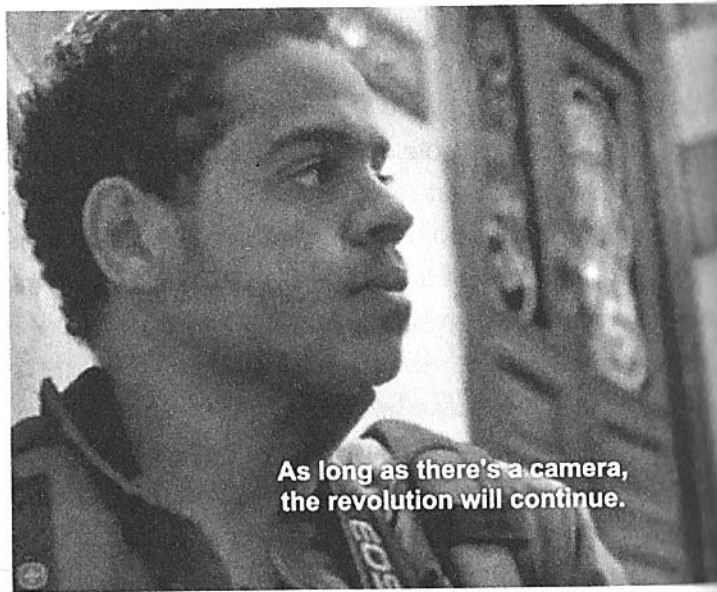


Figure 79. Still from the documentary *The Square*

the Muslim Brotherhood and the subsequent takeover by General Sisi and the army as just two more steps in this process. While it may now seem from outside that he is far too sanguine, given the thoroughgoing domination of the Sisi regime, only time will tell.

The North African uprisings of 2011 combined social media with street protests and online archiving to create a new form of visual culture activism. In highly censored societies like Tunisia and Egypt, the chance to depict yourself and others in public, let alone to express political opinions, was a rupture with decades of past experience. The resulting visual thought created hope, made the revolutions possible, and helped drive them forward. This is not

to call the Arab Spring a set of Facebook revolutions. But it is the case that a networked and young population, experiencing food scarcity due to climate change, used visual activism on- and offline as a key component of their urban uprisings.

2011: OCCUPY WALL STREET

Perhaps it is not surprising that this visual activism and visual thinking was strongly resonant in New York, a hub for both professional media and aspiring media producers. In July 2011, the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* launched a call to “Occupy Wall Street.” *Adbusters* began as a not-for-profit movement to repurpose advertisements, using skilled designers to create different meanings than were intended. Known as culture jamming, this kind of satirical play on mass media is intended to cause the viewer to question what he or she sees.

One well-known example is the fake ad in figure 80, which shows the golden arches of McDonald’s displayed on a heart monitor in a hospital emergency room. *Adbusters* placed them above the caption “Big Mac Attack!” to remind us that eating fast food is quite likely to give us a heart attack from all the fat and salt in the burgers. On July 13, 2011, *Adbusters* posted this call on its blog:

On September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months.

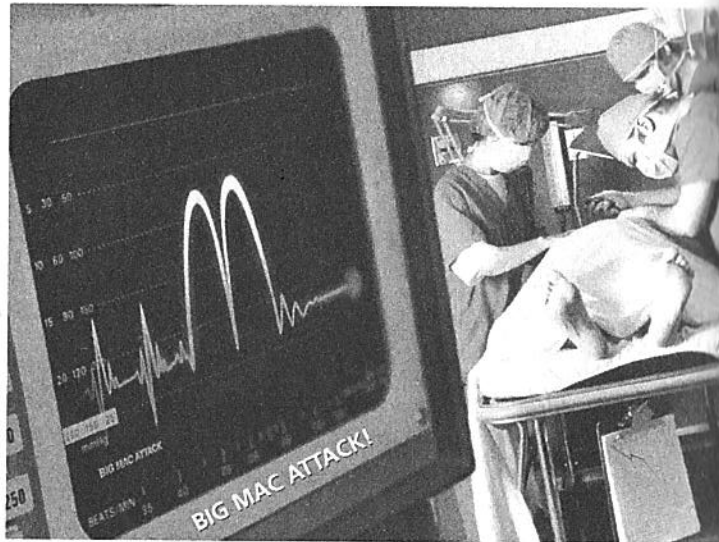


Figure 80. *Adbusters*, “Big Mac Attack!”

Once there, we shall incessantly repeat one simple demand in a plurality of voices.

Tahrir succeeded in large part because the people of Egypt made a straightforward ultimatum—that Mubarak must go—over and over again until they won. Following this model, what is our equally uncomplicated demand?¹⁵

Six weeks of organizing later, on September 17, about two thousand people gathered in a little-known public-private park, called Zuccotti Park, close to Wall Street.

Almost at once, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) departed from the *Adbusters* plan. *Adbusters* had hoped that street protestors could take over Wall Street itself, one of the

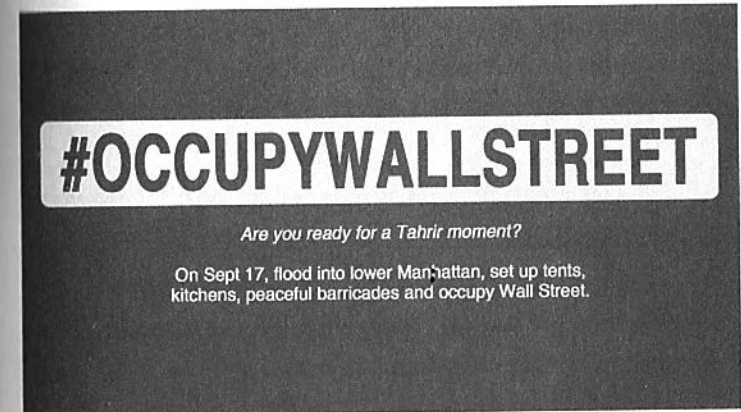


Figure 81. *Adbusters*, “Occupy Wall Street”

most heavily policed streets in the world. Knowing this, New York organizers planned to camp close to Wall Street, rather than on it. Nor did OWS want to push one single demand as *Adbusters* had suggested, because it did not want to claim to be representative. Rather, each of its ideas—and many more—became a slogan on someone’s sign. OWS refused to make demands on the grounds that this was an autonomous self-governing movement. Unlike Tahrir, which claimed to be Egypt as such, OWS declared New York City to be “occupied” for two months (September 17–November 13, 2011). This was not a military occupation but a takeover of the city by the people who are normally overlooked on Wall Street, such as the young, the unemployed, and the homeless.

OWS seemed to give a place and voice to such people, especially those who had been made invisible by financial globalization. Collectively, they did not claim to be or to

represent all the people but rather the 99%. The 1 percent left out was the group identified by economist Joseph Stiglitz as the wealthiest of all:

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. . . . Twenty-five years ago, the corresponding figures were 12 percent and 33 percent.¹⁶

From Occupy's point of view, the 1 percent continued to benefit despite creating the recession that first ruined the global economy, and then being bailed out for doing so. In discussions at Zuccotti Park, activists decided that if the wealthiest were the 1 percent, then everyone else must be the 99% (Graeber 2013). Perhaps the most significant effect of the Occupy movement was to reintroduce discussions of inequality into mainstream American culture, although little has been done to change the wealth divide.

A Tumblr called "WeAreThe99%" was created to allow people to tell their stories, and to represent themselves. Tumblr is an easy-to-use blogging site that does not require its users to have their own website or host. It is mostly used by young people as a kind of digital scrapbook.

"WeAreThe99%" was a creative and emotionally powerful form of visual thought that appealed first to young people but then became widely known. People posted photographs of themselves holding written texts describing their situation, a politicized form of the selfie we looked at in

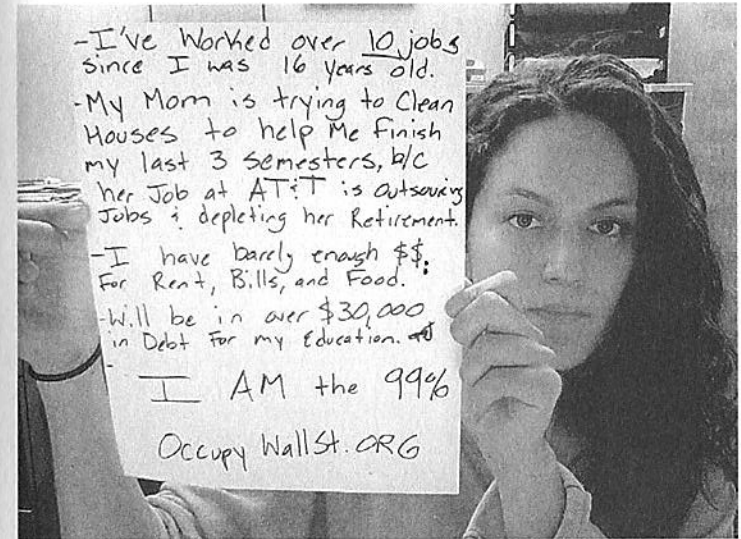


Figure 82. Still from "WeAreThe99%," Tumblr

Chapter 1. Often they concentrated on the way in which they had tried to play by the rules but ended up in financial disaster anyway. Student debt was a key topic, as were unemployment, layoffs, cutbacks, benefit "retrenchments," outsourcing, pension depletion—all the vocabulary of everyday financialization. The stories were all the more powerful and moving because they were compressed into one image with only as many words as could fit onto a single sheet of paper.

The signature object of the Tumblr, the handwritten sign, migrated to the actual Occupy sites. Made with a felt-tip pen on bits of cardboard box, such signs conveyed the force of authenticity that the mass-produced signs often seen at professionally organized protests do not. Many were simply spontaneous. There was wit, irony, and insight

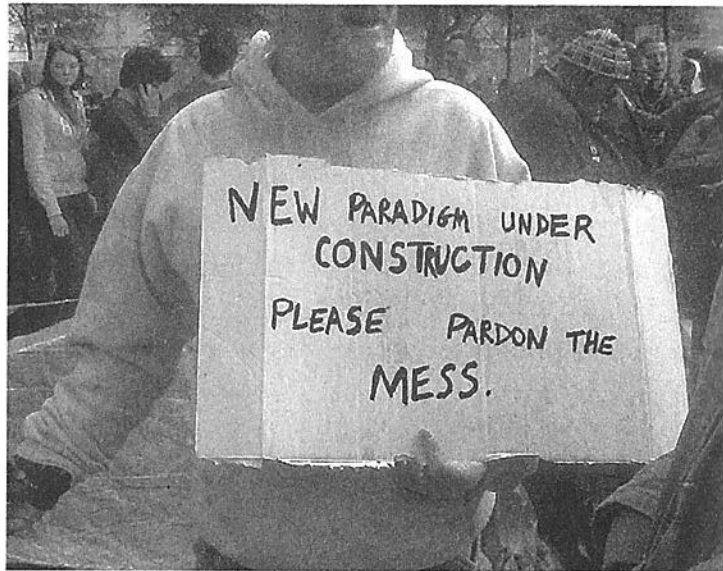


Figure 83. “Occupy Wall Street” sign

in a way that the canned slogans of organized campaigns often fail to achieve.

The sign in Figure 83 expressed the sense that making an alternative autonomous society was going to be a messy process and that there would be a period of transition. And that it would be fun.

Whether protestors were aware of it or not, the British artist Gillian Wearing had used this tactic in her conceptual art project “Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say” (1992–93). Wearing gave a piece of paper and a marker to people for them to write whatever they wanted and then photographed them.

In one example, taken from a series of about six hundred altogether, the sign read: “I signed on and they would not give me nothing,” meaning that a claim for unemployment benefits had been denied. The author appears to be homeless, given the location in a Tube station, his backpack behind him, and the can of beer next to it. That might not be the case, but when we see these pictures in an art gallery, we cannot follow up with questions as to why the claim was denied or what the person is doing. We don’t even know his name. Perhaps that is part of the reason that Ganzeer said that conceptual art was useless for the Egyptian revolution.

By contrast, signs at OWS were always an invitation to a conversation. Many people would stand with their signs on the edge of Zuccotti Park facing Broadway, precisely in order to get into conversation with passersby. Popular signs might win honks from passing cars or waves from tourist buses. Others provoked intense debate.

There was no more popular sign with the occupiers than this: “Shit Is Fucked Up and Bullshit.” The sign scatologically and humorously summarized the entire *WeAreThe99%* Tumblr and indeed the whole movement. It bluntly stated how everyday life was often experienced during the recession in a way that the mainstream media would never allow. Its phrasing was far more common online, especially on Twitter. Both media scholar McKenzie Wark and philosopher Simon Critchley used the slogan as the title for their writing about Occupy. The anonymous author of the iconic sign clearly had art skills. The sign was made from canvas stretched over a frame, like a painting,

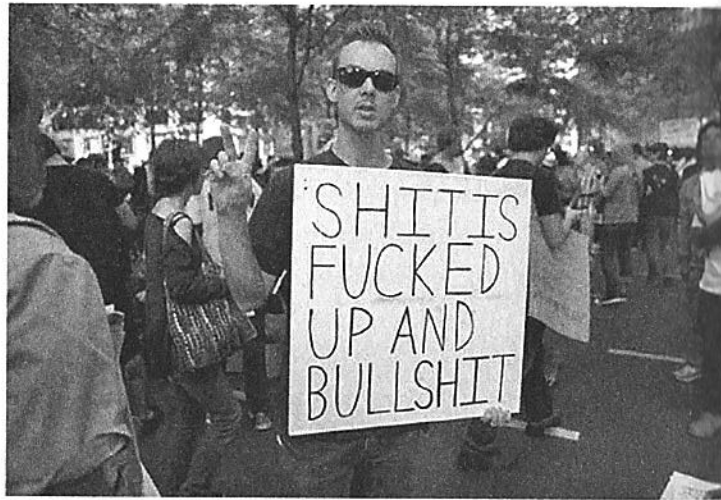


Figure 84. “Occupy Wall Street” sign

and the artist’s calligraphy followed the rules of graphic design. OWS had many professional artists associated with it, who formed working groups with names like Arts and Labor. These signs were not shown in a gallery, like Wearing’s prize-winning work, but were being looked at by people who may not even have been aware of such spaces. It was a reclaiming and a reimagining of representation, the assertion that there was something to see there.

SPRAY HERE FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENT

At first, OWS had relatively small impact. It was the distribution of photographs and video on social media showing police violence that proved decisive in making the occupation take off. A curious meme (a widely reproduced and circulated



Figure 85. Still from YouTube video of Officer Bologna pepper-spraying protestors

visual image) of women being pepper-sprayed by police has since emerged across three continents as a catalyst for social movements. Pepper spray is an intensely concentrated form of chile pepper made into an aerosol. Patented in 1973, it was first used by New York police in 1994.¹⁷

On September 24, 2011, thousands of people watched a video of the pepper-spraying of three young women by a New York Police Department officer. The women were already “kettled” behind unbreakable plastic netting and posed no apparent threat to public order. The sight of young white women being subjected to this disproportionate force was shocking, though it is of course true that people of color have long suffered such violence at the hands of the police, only mostly out of sight and offline. The video went viral. Soon versions were posted in slow

motion with captions inserted to show what was happening, keeping the event in the news. The hacker collective Anonymous then identified the officer involved as Deputy Inspector Anthony Bologna on September 26 by enlarging a still of his badge and using its information to find him.

Two days later, September 28, a second video emerged showing Bologna spraying other protestors, apparently just to move them out of his way. Although police officials defended him at the time, they declined to support him when the case came to trial a year later. During the civil rights era, television had exposed the violence of police. There were no TV cameras at Occupy for the most part, and Bologna, an older officer, might not have been aware of how new media could make worldwide news. At this point, the occupation was days old and only a few hundred were involved. On October 5, the New York area trade unions called a solidarity march for OWS. Fifteen thousand took part. There were actions at university campuses across the country. Officer Bologna deserves part of the credit.

In June 2013, although global media had declared the wave of social justice uprisings to be finished, it began again. A new movement appeared in Istanbul, Turkey, in defense of Gezi Park, the last public green space in Istanbul. The Erdogan government wanted to turn the park into a mall-cum-Ottoman-theme-park-cum-mosque. Like the reconstructed Berlin castle discussed in Chapter 5, this rebuilding was intended to complete a new form of social authority in the city. The heavy-handed police response again created a popular backlash.



Figure 86. Orsal photograph, *Woman in Red*

Once again, a photograph of a woman being pepper-sprayed went viral. Now known as *Woman in Red*, the photograph shows a gas-masked policeman spraying a well-dressed and unthreatening young woman with such force that her hair flies in every direction. This photograph was, however, taken and distributed by the giant media agency Reuters, rather than by a protestor. What had previously happened from within the social movement was now being orchestrated by the mainstream media.

And then it happened again in Brazil. Protests against a rise in basic transport costs, while the government was building sports stadia for the World Cup and the Olympics, suddenly brought tens of thousands onto the streets. A sense of fairness and social justice was mobilized. And this

time it was an Associated Press photographer who got the image of a woman being pepper-sprayed.

As in Istanbul, a woman carrying nothing more than a summer bag is directly targeted by a fully armored policeman. Such use of pepper spray has become routine, and the only difference is that the mainstream media are now reporting it. When they do, it has given a noticeable impulse to the social movements concerned. The concept “Move on, there’s nothing to see here” is unpacked in this action. On the one hand, the police make sure protestors can see nothing by dint of spraying their eyes with pepper. But the media representation of the scene brings many other people into the protest. What began as a social media meme has become a mainstream media pattern of reporting that unintentionally reinforces the events that are being covered. This set of effects, from protest to social media, mainstream media, and back to protest, is indicative both of how the new global situation has changed and how change itself is now a key subject for anyone interested in the visual.

Occupy and other urban protests had the advantage of working in a media environment that was already saturated with images and therefore with an audience skilled in visual analysis (even if they might not put it like that themselves). The 99% Tumblr and the pepper-spray video went viral in part because their audiences were adept at sharing and disseminating media content. There is an emerging method from such protests. To create a meme takes conscious effort. The 99% slogan was the result of

intensive discussion among highly aware activists, and is usually credited to David Graeber, now a professor at the London School of Economics. For the meme to work, it requires a preexisting network. If something is shared among a few dozen people, it’s unlikely to gain traction. Reach a thousand people and the friends of their friends on Facebook alone will total over 25 million. OWS built a network where it could directly contact hundreds of thousands of people, so, at two degrees of separation, enormous audiences could be reached.

None of that matters unless the “performance” is right. The very word *occupy* struck a chord in 2011, creating offshoots that ranged from Occupy Museums to Occupy Technology and Occupy Student Debt. It has continued its global impact in 2014 with the emergence of Hong Kong’s remarkable Occupy Central with Love and Peace movement. The handmade and homemade quality of the media objects created by Occupy Wall Street resonated still further in a moment where focus group–tested, professionally produced work often seemed wildly out of touch with the difficulties of everyday life. Put in a formula, visual culture activism in 2011 involved creating, performing, and disseminating memes in urban public space and across social media networks to involve, extend, and create a political subject, such as WeAreThe99%.

Perhaps this wave of revolt in global cities has ended or, as its protagonists might put it, been repressed. Nonetheless, uncoordinated and often very distinct moments of unrest remain a feature of the global scene. The Kiev

Maidan protest of 2013–14 was a determined revolt against the government whose motives were never clear and whose consequences led to the division of Ukraine. Protests in Bangkok, Thailand, at the same period were actually opposed to democratic elections. The Hong Kong actions in 2014 were directed in theory at the 2017 chief executive election, but also had in mind the long-term future of the former colony and its anticipated return to the Chinese system in 2046. After police shootings went unpunished across the United States in 2014, the #BlackLivesMatter movement has disrupted and reclaimed public space across the country. So the motivation and outcome of the urban revolts are not consistent or a given.

If we look worldwide we can see that the combination of increased urbanization, mass youth unemployment, and climate change–driven unrest is set to continue. In 2013, youth unemployment in Greece and Spain exceeded 50 percent, while in the Eurozone countries as a whole it was 25 percent. In South Africa, 52 percent of young people were unemployed, a figure that reached 59 percent in Detroit, Michigan. According to the Palestinian Authority, 41 percent of young Palestinians were without work in 2013 and significant unrest followed in 2014, especially in Gaza.¹⁸ A 2014 report on the national security consequences of climate change, issued by a team of eleven retired generals and admirals, noted that these impacts had gone from being a threat multiplier to “catalysts for conflict” in the course of seven years from 2007.¹⁹ In the same week, scientists reported that the West Antarctic ice

sheet was set to break off and melt, causing in and of itself a 10-foot rise in sea level, albeit possibly over centuries.

The urban population, mostly living in delta and coastal cities threatened by sea-level rise, continues to grow, with over 1 billion people now living in informal housing (Davis 2006). That means one in three people in the developing world live in slums. All the new urban experience takes place in less than 3 percent of the world’s surface, providing the intensity of contact to create change. And these people are increasingly networked, even in developing nations. The selfie was just the first form to emerge from this networking. Imagine a selfie of “the people.” It’s hard to see all this as anything other than a catalyst for continued change in ways that we cannot yet fully anticipate or imagine. In all the reports on these changes, one of the most notable features is the call for a better imagining of the future. At the heart of imagination is the image. Visual culture has to respond day to day in its effort to understand change in a world too enormous to see but vital to imagine. At one level, it serves as a form of academic “first responder” connecting present-day situations to longer histories. It seeks to understand the total visual noise all around us every day as the new everyday condition. And it learns how to learn about how the visual imagination, visual thought, and visualizing combine to make worlds that we live in and seek to change.