

## Editorial

# Global Queer and Feminist Activism: An Introduction

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## ABSTRACT

Queer and feminist visual activism has various origins across the globe and has emerged in a fluid cultural field of visual arts, popular culture, and protest aesthetics. Given the current context of gender backlash, these forms of activism have become urgent, and so too has scholarship that engages with global queer and feminist visual activism. In this special issue, we engage with the richness of activist aesthetics at the intersections of popular culture, subculture, art and activism, and other forms of visual political communication, not by attempting to contain these manifestations, but by offering a set of navigational tools. We conceive of three primary forms of queer and feminist visual practice – protest, process and product – each with its own histories and epistemologies. Each of these forms offers the capacity for resistance and collaboration. By opening up cross- and inter-disciplinary perspectives, and conversations across diverse global contexts, struggles and possibilities, we aim to expand on existing scholarship both geographically and conceptually. A central motivation for this work has been to think beyond the image; to be able to capture and engage with the activist communities (and the activism) behind and alongside the image and produced through the image. Taking the notion of social practice as an integral part of the ‘process’ of visual activism, we identify three emerging themes across the articles in this special issue: refusal, care, and thriving.

**Keywords:** visual activism, feminist and queer activism, aesthetics of protest, social movements, global south

## INTRODUCTION

Feminist and queer visual activism ranges from individual everyday expressions of visual disruption and dissent to collective, organised events such as direct action and protest. In using visual language and strategically employing aesthetics to gain attention, to contest, to amplify, to cross linguistic barriers, to mobilise, to unite, to affect emotions, to document gendered social injustices, to produce counter-narratives or to simply document one’s existence, a radical act in a climate where you are deemed dispensable – queer/feminist visual activism both expands beyond, and transgresses, the neat categorisations of visual political communication and activist art.

Renowned art critic Lucy Lippard joked about the Trojan Horse as the first activist artwork; ‘based in subversion on the one hand, and empowerment on the other’ (1984: 341). Certainly, both registers – a challenge to existing social structuring and a strengthening of individuals that facilitates political claims – are present in many visual acts.

Rancière's (2006) 'distribution of the sensible' ('partage du sensible'), is useful to think through the ways in which the visual might intervene in the political. 'Partage' is both what is shared, and how it is divided; what is 'sensible', that which is available to our senses, the way in which we access the political. Artistic practices have the capacity to visibilise power structures and expose existing hierarchies, and in so doing the potential to disturb or overturn them (the 'distribution of the sensible'). Rancière views artistic practices as inherently democratic modes of being, with the capacity to institute practices of equality, to 'inscribe a sense of community' (2006: 14). Within the current global context of populist backlash against the post-WWII rights consensus, in which gender and sexuality are positioned as a central political fault line (Goetz, 2020: 12), practices that both build queer/feminist communities and disrupt (unjust) norms are vitally important. So too, in this context, is scholarship that documents these practices (Lewin, 2021; Nazneen and Okech, 2021).

In this special issue, we seek to critically engage with the richness of activist aesthetics at the intersection of art and activism, and other forms of visual political communication, not by attempting to contain these manifestations, but by offering a set of navigational tools. By opening up cross- and inter-disciplinary perspectives, and conversations across diverse global contexts, struggles and possibilities, we aim to expand on existing scholarship both geographically and conceptually. While most elements of visual activism are clearly visible, others (such as the relationships built and sustained through this work) tend to remain unseen. A central motivation for this work has been to think beyond the image; to be able to capture and engage with the activist communities (and the activism) behind and alongside the image, and produced through the image. For example, in this issue, authors address how activism extends to community-building and worldmaking energised by art spaces. This includes an elucidation of how, in the aftermath of the devastating 2020 explosion in Beirut, visual practitioners reorientate in the 'terrains of material loss, traumatic grief, reclamation, and resistance through their art and activism' (Skinner, this issue).

Another ambition of the present special issue is to foreground scholarly work beyond Anglo-American perspectives. However, as middle-class, white cis queers, working in Western academia, our positionality produces particular limitations. We have tried, where possible, to mitigate against this, by engaging scholars from diverse contexts as contributors to this special issue and implicit in this collection, is a politics that advocates for a trans- and intersectional feminist approach, against a gender-restrictive world view, and in strong support of cross-movement coalition building.

## ACTIVISM ACROSS CULTURAL SPHERES

Queer and feminist visual activism has emerged in a fluid cultural field of visual arts, popular culture, and protest aesthetics. It deliberately transgresses established demarcations of the political sphere. We see this reflected, for example, in the feminist insistence that the 'personal is political'; a framing which links individual experiences of oppression, abuse and discrimination, to systemic structures of patriarchal norms, inequalities and violence. This claim has been key to breaking oppressive silencing. It features across numerous feminist uprisings, not least the #NiUnaMenos ('No One Less') movement in Latin America (López, 2020) and the #MeToo movements (Mendes et al., 2018; Huang and Sun, 2021). These movements encourage participation through the public sharing of (often kept private) experiences of gendered abuse and sexual violence.

A fluidity across cultural spheres is also strikingly present in queer activism. Queer visual protest evokes and expands across popular culture, art and activism, often blurring the boundaries of each. In his book *Queer China*, Hongwei Bao (2020a) picks up on this and points to the entwinement of community-based cultural and artistic production with queer political activism. He demonstrates the centrality of artistic culture to social, political and legal change. This understanding points to the 'soft power' potential of cultural and artistic production not only to transform social attitudes but also to impact on social, political and legal change.

Popular culture aesthetics are frequently integrated into queer and feminist protest repertoires (see [Figure 1](#)) (Lewin and Jenzen, 2023), and the visual iconography of queer and feminist activism is sometimes integrated into popular culture<sup>1</sup>. Traversing these realms completely is the visual activism of internet memes. As a form of bricolage and citizen creativity, memes often incorporate popular culture visuals (from film, tv, cartoons, ads etc), and offer us a good illustration of how popular culture references and visual language are recontextualised in digital visual activism, a practice that facilitates access to political discourse. Although existing literature predominantly associates memes with online misogyny and alt-right politics (Drakett et al. 2018), memes are also extensively used

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<sup>1</sup> See for example drag performance contestant Cheddar Gorgeous on the mainstream tv show *Drag Race UK* (2022) wearing a pink triangle outfit featuring the ACT UP slogan SILENCE=DEATH wrapped around it, which sparked a conversation about HIV/AIDS stigma on the show. See: <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/life/cheddar-gorgeous-praised-for-vital-hiv-discussion-on-drag-race-uk/>



**Figure 1.** A Lesbian Avengers poster featuring blaxploitation star Pam Grier. Courtesy of Carrie Moyer and DC Moore Gallery, New York.

to speak back to sexism and conservatism (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015; Brantner et al., 2020) and feminist memes are produced and shared in many places across the globe (Horvath, 2021; Parahita, 2019).

Feminist memes, Rentschler and Thrift (2015: 329) argue, ‘create online spaces of consciousness raising and community building’ where laughter is mobilised as a critical tool, often evoked by visual absurdism’ (342). Such use of humour is also effectively used in many other forms of feminist and queer visual activism. For example, humour, Leng (2020: 109) writes, ‘was central to the “imagination and vision”’ of the 1990s lesbian direct action group The Lesbian Avengers, formed in New York and later spreading across the US and Europe. Similarly, Melissa Wilcox (2018) in their book about the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an activist group of queer drag queen nuns, proposes ‘serious parody’ as an activist strategy, which ‘simultaneously critiques and reclaims cultural traditions in the interest of supporting the lives and political objectives of marginalised groups’. But of course, humour is not exclusive to progressive critiques, and can equally be utilised in backlash responses to feminist or queer campaigns, as demonstrated in Maja Brandt Andreassen’s (2021) study of memes that seek to ridicule the #MeToo campaign.

The polysemic and semiotically unstable nature of image-based activism, including memes, is illustrated in the much-debated example of the ‘Gay Clown Putin’ meme<sup>2</sup>. Originally the photo montage artwork depicting Putin in pop-art style make up was used on a protest sign to draw attention to a new law in Russia, banning so called ‘propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations’. However, since the image became an internet meme it has been recontextualised to carry variously homonationalist, anti-Russian, pro-LGBTQ+ as well as homophobic messaging in contradictory ways (Baker et al., 2019; Cooper-Cunningham, 2022; Wiedlack, 2020). Other visual artefacts have played similarly ambivalent roles in terms of international politics and gender and sexuality rights (e.g., the ‘OneLove’ armband during the 2022 men’s FIFA World Cup in Qatar; the 2021 PR campaign by the Swedish Armed Forces featuring a squad of combat clad armed soldiers carrying a rainbow flag<sup>3</sup>).

Similarly, the visual repertoire of LGBTQ+ ephemera and iconography, such as the rainbow flag, has been widely integrated – captured you could argue – into the visual language of corporate marketing. This is generally speaking a less contested form of appropriation as it is widely regarded as a positive embrace of the LGBTQ+ community and a visual shorthand to signal associated values such as inclusion and diversity. However, increasingly, critical voices are raised about ‘pinkwashing’ (Puar, 2007) and corporations’ surface engagement with social values. We argue there are numerous problems with the marketisation of the visual language of queer

<sup>2</sup> See for example <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/gay-clown-putin> or do a search engine image search.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.qx.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/svd.jpeg>

activism. First, in corporate activism, we are, fundamentally, interpellated as consumers, not citizens, to pursue LGBTQ+ rights. This, we think, changes not just the tenor of activism, but significantly curtails the conditions on which we act. Second, imbued in the many adverts incorporating rainbow visuals is the fundamental neoliberal and capitalist message that the free market will bring about social good, and that acts of consuming goods will bring gender and sexual liberation. When corporations position themselves as the drivers of gender and sexuality social change this works to limit the space for queer activist expressions and excludes messages that don't align with the corporate agenda. A further obvious issue arising here is that only a very narrow and normative version of queer life can be evoked in the incorporation of gender and sexual diversity in the marketing of consumer goods and services: it has to be palatable, relatable and interesting to mainstream audiences.

Another form of digital visual activism distinctly framed by neoliberal ideologies and particular technological and affective visual economies is selfie activism. As Jenzen (2022: 2) points out 'for LGBTQ+ youth, self-expression, identity formation, and social interaction often mesh with activism and other forms of political discourse', and selfies, TikToks and YouTube vlogging are part of these practices (Raun, 2016; Tortajada et al., 2021). Social media visual and audio-visual testimonials are embodied forms of activism, often originating in the individual, personal experience or expression, but with the potential to create online counter publics (Jenzen, 2017), or 'affinity spaces' (Wargo, 2017) supporting community formation and social media activism around global LGBTQ+ rights.

Vivienne (2017) highlights the ways in which feminist and queer selfie cultures demonstrate a particular investment in the notion of 'empowerment' as linked to both the act of producing and sharing images that challenge normative (e.g., hetero and homo normative, cis and trans normative, racially and ableist normative) beauty and body ideals and producing affective affirmations by celebrating authenticity (in self-expression), difference and individuality. Simplistic notions of 'empowerment' via self-expression feature centrally in depoliticised forms of (post)feminism (see Thomas, this issue). Yet, producing alternative visual representations for marginalised communities who have historically been subjected to disciplinary visual regimes and damaging stereotypes, is a form of visual activism that ultimately aims for social change. This is clearly illustrated by articles in this special issue, such as Lucie Fremlova's writing on the queer Roma activist intervention of producing new visual representations of queer Roma people, and by Ace Lehner, offering insights into how selfies by trans people can become a powerful way of challenging the very narrow and deeply normative mainstream visual field of trans corporeality. Vivienne's critique (2017: 130) notes how cultural practice relating to selfies is both generated in and generative of tensions between 'compliance with mainstream norms and claiming difference by defining new categories'. For some groups, who are extensively denied self-representation, and political voice, and who are routinely challenged at an ontological level, or subjected to necropolitical targeting (Butler, 2020), producing selfies becomes a practice of evidencing one's day to day existence, which, we argue, takes on a particular political meaning, for example in the case of trans youth. Mirzoeff (2020: 12) suggests contemporary prolific digital visual culture of self-expression 'is not global narcissism but a symptomatic response to the experience of rupture and the crisis of the representation principle, from politics, to mental health and the possibilities of appearance. What people are trying to create are not just images but a just image of their own situation'. Selfie activism thus offers a corrective, but considered collectively also speaks loudly of new social possibilities; the possibility of living differently, seeing differently and loving differently.

Visual communication has been central to Western feminist activism from suffragette poster art and fashion, to the mid-20th century new social movements' (Habermas, 1981) protest repertoires. These have incorporated tactics such as performance, cultural jamming, craftism (Fountain, 2021) and other forms of cultural creativity. Visual communication remains central, across the many diversifications of feminisms, with visuals centring women's (dissident) bodies and intersectional oppression. The history of global feminist and queer activism has often been dominated by Western perspectives. However, feminist direct action has a long history in the Global South, often incorporating performance, visuals and embodied protest. Writing about reproductive rights activism in Argentina, Sutton and Vacarezza (2020: 731) comment that 'political disputes around abortion are paradigmatic of the crucial role that images can play'. Very recently in the *Zan, Zendeji, Azadi* (Woman, Life, Freedom) uprising in Iran, we have seen striking documentary images of state violence, and poignant images of defiance and solidarity. These speak both to the state control over women's bodies, and its inability to repress the significant resistance to this control. The Shaheen Bagh protests in Dehli, in 2020, saw thousands of women protesting the discriminatory Citizen laws imposed by the Indian government (Chopra, 2021). In both instances, the visual power of bodies appearing in alliance, creating 'movement, congregation, persistence' (Butler, 2015: 75) was mobilised. As Çağatay et al. (2021: 230) discuss, in feminist and queer 'bodily practice[s] of collective assemblage' and 'corporeal and affective solidarities', the 'body is not only an object of oppressive powers but also a site of resistance' with implications that involve complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, visibility and hyper-visibility, and vulnerabilities (Figure 2).





**Figure 2.** Shaheen Bagh – soft power: The library at Shaheen Bagh protests brought protestors together in a unique setting of discussion and deliberation © Deepta Chopra.

Queer activism and community building have pronounced visual and performative styles and modes of expression, from the movement’s appropriation of the pink triangle to the many variations of the colourful Pride flag, originally designed by Gilbert Baker in 1978, and later the Progress Pride flag developed in 2018 by non-binary artist and designer Daniel Quasar<sup>4</sup>, and to the glittery and fierce unicorn gifs of the internet. Pride parades, one of the best recognised collective expressions of LGBTQ+ activism, simultaneously enact visual spectacle, protest and prefigurative enactment, also exemplifying how global and local visual expressions enmesh. The rich repertoire of visual outputs by queer AIDS activist organisations in the 1980s and 90s, such as ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and Queer Nation<sup>5</sup>, features many examples of striking visual art and graphic arts, including some by well-known artists such as Keith Haring or the artist collective Gran Fury. Their very prolific output of artwork comprised billboards, stickers, fliers, adverts, and posters to go in public spaces including a large banner in the style of fashion advertising to be placed on the side of buses, featuring same and different gendered ‘couples’ of different ethnicities kissing, accompanied with the slogan: “KISSING DOESN’T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO”<sup>6</sup>. This artwork exemplifies a multi-purpose strategy that visually references promotional culture yet contains a public health message and reverberates the anger felt in the community toward the health authorities and drugs industry. The example also illustrates a wider interest and expertise in early queer AIDS activism to adopt a considered media strategy using video and other techniques, thus shaping the aesthetics of queer activism to follow. There is a further body of writing on LGBTQ+ visual responses to the everyday trauma of HIV/AIDS (Burk, 2013; Cvetkovich, 2001; Gott, 1994), including the AIDS memorial quilt project (Capozzola, 2002; Fountain, 2021) that we suggest also should be included in the remit of feminist/queer visual activism.

Another key characteristic of much queer activism is the aesthetic sensibilities of LGBTQ+ subcultures, incorporating not just the semiotics of shared subcultural references, but the energies of the club scenes, the ball rooms, the streets, and erotic spaces, mixed with subcultural rebellious visual language of dissident desires<sup>7</sup>. Often

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-progress-pride-flag>

<sup>5</sup> Some of these have been archived and featured for example in the 2009 exhibition *ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993*. See: <https://carpenter.center/program/act-up-new-york-activism-art-and-the-aids-crisis-1987-1993>; See also The ACT UP online archive: <https://actupny.org/index.html> and The POC voice in ACT UP and Gran Fury (2015): <https://documentsofresistance.com/2015/07/18/the-poc-voice-in-act-up-gran-fury/>

<sup>6</sup> The poster is from 1989. See <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O76239/kissing-doesnt-kill-greed-and-poster-gran-fury/>

<sup>7</sup> See for example the recent Rebel Dykes exhibition: <https://www.rebeldykeshistoryproject.com/rebel-dykes-art-and-archive-show>

marked out as ‘trespassers’ (Puwar, 2004) in dominant culture and cultural institutions, queers invent their activist strategies in response. This may involve ‘invading’ (ibid) spaces that are not meant for you, or sabotaging a particular aesthetic order by introducing excess, or eruptive humour where there should be seriousness, or by insisting on communication where there should be a blank space. Queer street art and graffiti, exemplifying such interventions, have recently drawn more scholarly attention (Tsilimpounidi et al., 2022; Smalls, 2022) as well as community led initiatives to document these ephemeral forms of activism<sup>8</sup>. In this special issue, Flavia Meireles’s piece on activists hacking Rio de Janeiro street signs relates to this theme<sup>9</sup>. We think here also of madison moore’s (2018) book *Fabulousness* which speaks to an intimate relationship between fashion and queerness and foregrounds dramatic forms of self-styling as part of activist aesthetics. moore defines fabulousness as ‘an embodied queer aesthetic practice’ that employs creativity and spectacle to work against social exclusion (moore, 2018: 22). Echoing moore’s work, we suggest that fabulousness, understood as an expression of the will to radiate joy, flourish, and thrive in the face of homophobia, transphobia, racism and misogyny can be understood as a form of cultural and visual activism from below.

It is important to note that feminist/queer activism is not limited to identity politics and gender and sexual identity based civic rights issues. In today’s global struggles it is important to recognise that inequality rooted in colonial structures cannot be separated from inequality based on gender, sexuality and class. Relatedly we see feminist and queer involvement in a range of different social movements and protests, including the peace movement (Kokoli, 2022), anti-austerity movements such as Occupy and the Indignadxs (Trujillo, 2018), environmental movements, anti-authoritarianism movements such as the 2013 Gezi Park protest in Turkey (Unan, 2015), and solidarity coalitions such as the UK based Lesbian and Gays Support the Migrants, and before that, during the British miners’ strike in 1984-5, the formation of the London Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (Kelliher, 2014). A key area for feminist/queer activism beyond identity-based mobilisation remains sex workers’ rights. The visibilising of stigmatisation and discrimination affecting sex workers’ lives and safety (Waring, 2020), through visual activism across the globe, provides very urgent counter narratives rooted in queer and feminist sex-positive ethos. Examples include Kat Mansoor’s documentary short *A Vida Política*, which documents the fashion label ‘Daspu’ (das=‘of’, pu-from puta=‘whores’), created by the NGO Davida, in Brazil; a visual intervention that works to end discrimination against sex workers, and Robert Hamblin’s work with the black trans women sex worker support group Sistaaz Hood (Lewin, 2020a).

Queer and feminist visual activism has various origins across the globe. Closely linked to individual and collective self-representation, visual communication is central to feminist and queer activists’ claiming of political voice. Bao (2020b: 299) points to how, ‘for sexual minorities in the Global South, instead of waiting passively to be represented—or misrepresented—by mainstream media and heteronormative societies, or by their counterparts in the West and the Global North, they have learned to use digital video cameras to represent themselves’. In a forthcoming book, Juana María Rodríguez, foregrounds Latina sex workers’ self-representations and problematises how images shape perceptions of sexual labour. Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s (2015) point that the undervaluing and obscuring of ‘epistemologies of the South’ leading to an implicit predisposition of prioritising knowledge emanating from Western perspectives is true also in gender and sexuality activism and related scholarship. Such epistemologies, as highlighted by Munro and Pérez-Sánchez (2017) tend to position Western feminist and LGBTQ+ activism as ‘liberating’ women and sexual minorities in the Global South, without acknowledging the ‘deep, ongoing entanglement of the Global North in the creation of homophobia and gender policing around the world’ (ibid). In this special issue, we seek to explore feminist and queer activism from across the globe, foregrounding gender and sexuality activism in the Global South.

The South African activist and photographer Zanele Muholi deliberately articulates their practice as visual activism. In so doing, they foreground the political nature of their work, in which their activist intent is not located exclusively in the subject matter, representation or content but in the multiple activities created around it (Thomas, 2017: 270; Lewin, 2020b). The wide-ranging and comprehensive nature of Muholi’s activism, as someone who has built and sustained queer communities, serves as a powerful demonstration of how much can be missed by an epistemology that limits itself to a focus on image or artefact. Their work opens up dimensions of the politics of form as well as the aesthetics of politics and, as such, offers an ideal place to begin exploring feminist and queer visual activism.

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<sup>8</sup> See for example The History of Queer Street Art exhibition <https://thei-i.com/projects/a-history-of-queer-street-art-group-exhibition/> and Daniel Albanese’s Twitter & Instagram @queerstreetart; and the Pansy project by artist Paul Harfleet <https://thepansyproject.com/>

<sup>9</sup> NB: This article has been withdrawn at the author’s request.



**Figure 3.** National Coming Out Day 1988 artwork by Keith Haring © Keith Haring Foundation.

## THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

In this special issue, we are interested in expanding the notion of visual activism beyond the image. We will go on to offer some frames for conceptualising feminist and queer visual activism located outside the image later in this introduction, but here we will start by thinking epistemologically, beyond the image, by considering the politics of visibility, as central to these liberation movements.

The symbolic act of ‘coming out’, making oneself visible, constitutes one of the master frames of LGBTQ+ activism (Saguy, 2020) and draws our attention to the centrality of both individual and group visibility to the movement (see [Figure 3](#)). Visual activism is a political struggle over presence and over visibility, through which gender and sexual identities are discursively constructed and maintained. The ‘explicit assertion of presence’ (Berlant and Freeman, 1993: 199) that characterises Pride events, a mix of street protest, spectacle and party, can be traced through LGBTQ+ activism more broadly as it has developed since the 1960s and is epistemologically linked to the notion of visibility and the visual (see [Figure 4](#))<sup>10</sup>.

Visibility is also linked to the creation of community, by creating a sense of belonging and collectivity; recall Rancière’s articulation of art as ‘inscrib(ing) a sense of community’ (2006: 14). Increased visibility of a marginalised group is not, of course, the same as increased rights or the end of discrimination. Rather, visibility is often compromised, and can even bring increased victimisation. Currier (2012) and Tucker (2009) have both shown how queer Namibians and South Africans strategically shift between visibility and invisibility to protect themselves. Jones (2020) notes that lesbian communities in South Korea prioritise safety over visibility, due to an ever-present threat of homophobic and misogynist violence. Metzger and Ringelberg (2020: 162) highlight, that an increased ‘visible materiality – especially of Black transgender bodies – also gets many among us killed’. So, it is important not to naively link ‘visibility’ to ‘acceptance’ (Jackson et al., 2018). As Jones (2020: 273) points out, there is a power dimension to the Western LGBTQ+ movement’s visibility politics, that has ‘shape[d] global LGBTQ politics by normalizing high visibility strategies’ often casting community formations that don’t pivot around visibility and outness as priorities as ‘backwards’. Also questioning the taken for granted benefits of increased visibility, Nelanthi Hewa (2021) highlights how ‘stories of sexual violence in the media operate within a capitalist system of visibility’, with a detrimental impact on how survivors are perceived with disbelief and hesitation. Visibility has, despite these tensions, evolved as a central trope around which much feminist and queer activism has been conceptualised.

<sup>10</sup> For critiques of the de-politicization and lifestylisation of Pride events, see for example Conway, 2022.





**Figure 4.** Istanbul Pride 2008. An enormous Pride flag covers the entire street in an ‘explicit assertion of presence’. Image by Turkish Flame via Wikimedia Commons.

The political importance of visibility and the ‘freedom to be public’ (Queers Read This manifesto, 1990 cited in Brown, 2015: 76) were central to action groups formed in response to the AIDS crisis, like ACT UP and later to queer and trans activist groups such as Queer Nation, Transgender Nation, Lesbian Avengers and OutRage!, not least because of mainstream society’s purposeful invisibilising of people living with HIV and AIDS. Their strategies included visually impactful direct action to claim public space, sometimes in the form of angry confrontation and sometimes in the form of more quiet intimate acts such as public kiss-ins (see Brown, 2015). Similar inventive direct actions have been staged by feminist activists, for example, the Guerrilla Girls’ interventions in art spaces (see Perry and Krasny in this issue), FEMEN, Sisters Uncut, #LasTesis flash mobs and various reproductive health rights demonstrations. Dress has been a key semiotic resource for some of these performance protests, for example, the many assemblies featuring protestors dressed in the characteristic red robes and white bonnets worn by the women in the tv drama *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a visual reference to the dystopian drama’s patriarchal rule over women and their reproductive rights. The visual impact of these red robes and white bonnets is powerful beyond the popular culture intertextuality: the anachronistic dress is stark and simple, cloaking protestors, who form a united mass, in blood-red anonymity (Jenzen, 2018).

## STUDYING VISUAL ACTIVISM

Approaches to studying visual activism, broadly speaking, fall into three main categories: the study of visual culture from within the discipline of art (history and theory); the study of visual political communication from within the fields of political science and social movements studies; and the study of visual communication from within media studies. We find strengths and weaknesses within all of these approaches, and argue that researching queer and feminist visual activism, not least because of its many different contexts and modalities, requires an interdisciplinary approach that draws on both arts, cultural studies and social sciences methodologies and epistemologies, and that incorporates a decolonial lens and decolonial research methods (Davis, 2023; Karam and Mutsvauro, 2021).

We find there is good reason to challenge dismissals of activist artistic work as inherently inferior due to its overt political motivations and priorities and would question the contrasting yet equally reductive position that regards “‘protest art’ as authentic, and art based in galleries or museums as inauthentic – because of their complicity with global capital (Demos 2016)’ (Lewin, 2020a: 16). Within the field of political communication research, we see



the need to challenge the longstanding suspicion of ‘affective, cultural and aesthetic forms of communication’ (Aiello and Parry, 2020: 111) to better engage with a diversifying repertoire of visual political communication employed by actors across different social movements. Venti et al.’s (2019) and Lilleker and Veneti’s (2023) work does so, by attending to both theoretical and empirical concerns in visual political communication. It situates visual images in relation to communication technologies, political practices, and civic engagement, but conceptualises visuals primarily as *tools* for political communication. We would argue for a more holistic understanding of protest culture as visual culture. Nevertheless, their work, alongside collections such as *The Aesthetics of Global Protest* (McGarry et al., 2020) demonstrate not just a visual turn in political communication studies, but a growing interest in the visual communication strategies and styles of social movements and ‘citizen-led forms of political communication that represent instantiations of collective action and protest’ (Venti et al., 2019: 10) to which we seek to contribute.

Developing interdisciplinary approaches that expand on both the notion of aesthetics and ideas about where activism or political action are ‘located’ in processes of resistance, dissent, projection or mobilisation, including creative expressions, we suggest, is needed to critically explore contemporary feminist and queer movements. This begins perhaps with a rejection of the limiting notion of aesthetics as exclusively linked to art-forms or visual culture. Nato Thompson’s (2015) perspective on living and social practice as *form*, alongside Olcese and Savage’s (2015) theorisation of ‘social aesthetics’ is a good starting point for this. Social aesthetics, they propose, is ‘the embedded and embodied process of meaning making which, by acknowledging the physical/corporeal boundaries and qualities of the inhabited world, also allows imagination to travel across other spaces and times’ (2015: 720). In our thinking on different protest practices below, we seek to foreground the social, and argue that, in feminist and queer settings, the social is also the political. What this points toward is a conceiving of aesthetics ‘as a practice, a resource, a choice with instrumental and expressive components’ (McGarry et al. 2020: 17).

Extrapolating the notion of social practice as an integrated part of visual activism, we engage below with process as a specific dimension that offers fresh perspectives on feminist and queer activism. This has an affinity with sociological work that mobilises visuals in participatory action research or work aimed at voicing marginalised groups’ social and political visions and demands for change, exemplified by participatory visual methodologies in research (e.g., Pink, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2018; Burkholder, 2020) where the co-production process with participants as much as the creative output constitutes the enabling frame for collective action.

As is clear from the previous sections in this introduction, our engagement with feminist and queer activism is not limited to socially engaged art. But that is not to say that art institutions are not part of the field of visual activism research. To the contrary, we suggest it is important to consider how cultural institutions both create opportunities for and limit activist opportunities. In the vein of institutional critique, in this issue, Perry and Krasny tackle the question of how art museums respond to interventions – both activist and scholarly – that expose their patriarchal structures. Challenging institutional practices and power dynamics remain important for queer and feminist critiques (Sullivan and Middleton, 2019; Smith, 2015) as is the building of alternative collections and archives preserving subcultural cultural memory (Cvetkovich, 2003). From an adjacent perspective, the symbolic cultural power of the category ‘museum’ itself has been mobilised by activist projects such as The Museum of Transology<sup>11</sup>, displaying objects and artefacts collected from trans people to offer a reorientation away from the sensationalising, pathologizing and stigmatising frames dominating mainstream media and cultural representation.

There is a rich body of scholarship focusing on activism and art specifically (e.g., Felshin, 1995; Thompson, 2015; Sholette, 2022; Shipley and Moriuchi, 2023), some with a specific focus on feminist visual activism and embodiment (Sliwinska, 2021) or feminist art in relation to the concept of political imagination (Mullin, 2003) or queerness in relation to artistic production and reception (Horne and Lewis, 1996). Enhancing this vein of research is the growing body of work on transgender art and visual culture. A special issue of *Journal of Visual Culture* (Metzger and Ringelberg, 2020) offers a useful introduction to this field and Gossett et al.’s (2017) edited collection *Trap door: Trans cultural production and the politics of visibility*, dealing with the complexities of trans visibility in a climate of increasing discrimination and violence has been a key inspiration for the present special issue.

The broader field of visual culture studies incorporates some further valuable frames for thinking about visual activism and the aesthetics of protest. This includes critical work on ways of seeing (hooks, 1992; Mirzoeff, 2015) and queer/feminist considerations of the politics of the gaze beyond cis and heterosexual visual regimes, which Jenna Allsopp in this special issue expands on, by theorising the ableist gaze. Visual culture studies also expands research beyond fine art to incorporate spheres such as design. A key contribution to thinking about queer visual activism from a design point of view is Andrew Campbell’s (2019) *Queer X Design: 50 Years of Signs, Symbols, Banners, Logos, and Graphic Art of LGBTQ*. Often downplayed or overlooked in social science approaches, these methodological frames help elucidate important aspects such as how formal components, including composition, perspective, shapes, colour and texture are used as semiotic resources (Aiello and Parry, 2020) and how meaning

<sup>11</sup> Curated by E-J Scott, UK 2017. See <https://www.museumoftransology.com/about>

is constructed in the encounter with visual images, in the looking. It is through these types of studies we gain insights into what activist artefacts and queer and feminist visual production can tell us about the culture and society they are produced and consumed in.

We also find that it is necessary to expand the study of visual activism beyond the image. It is important to consider the work that images do, across the phases of production, mediation and circulation, and reception. In the digital context (but not exclusively) the social practice of sharing images, and the co-creative processes of mixing and manipulating images carry activist meaning in themselves and are functional in the formation of both connective and collective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Wargo, 2017). Furthermore, the visual practices of protest, process and product, that we outline below, centrally involve images and visual communication, but also, significantly, expand on the situating of the activist impulse, intention, affect and effect beyond visual artefacts or performances themselves. In short, we make a case for an interdisciplinary queer feminist approach that mobilises the historicising, aesthetic and post-structuralist methods of visual analysis but also situates visual activism in relation to media practices, social movement theories and the broader visual dimensions of social life. Following this ethos, in this special issue, we have invited researchers to consider both the aesthetics of visual activism; the work the visual does in communities, movements and public discourse; and political (visual) acts such as purposeful reimagining (of pasts, presents and futures), or wilful claiming of spaces and places and the visual field.

## STRUCTURING LOGIC

Drawing on Lewin's (2019) work on Queer visual activism in South Africa, we conceive of three primary forms of queer and feminist visual practice – protest, process and product – each with its own histories and epistemologies. Each of these forms offers the capacity for resistance and collaboration. A central element of feminist and queer activism's aesthetic and imaginative powers is their potential for queer/feminist worldmaking, which involves community-making outside the logic of heteronormativity or emerges through what Buckland (2002: 86) calls 'pre-political configurations of community'.

Visual activism is perhaps most obviously political when linked to *protest*, and certainly most of the scholarship on visual activism in the United States and Western Europe emerged in the wake of the occupy movement (Doerr et al., 2013), and the movements of the squares, and is linked to protest. In this form protestors mobilise the visual image to provoke, support and sustain their struggles for political change; what Matynia (2009) describes as enacting 'performative democracy'. The first scholarship that explicitly articulates this form as *visual activism* is Cvetkovich's (2003) writing on the queer HIV/AIDS protest movements of 1990s New York. More recently, protest-based visual activism has also involved taking down the visual symbols of institutionalised racism – statues of imperialists and slave traders – by Rhodes Must Fall (#RMF) and Black Lives Matter (#BLM) protests in Cape Town, Antwerp, Tennessee, and Bristol. Nazneen and Okech (2021: 231) note that 'protests have become the leading route through which feminist movements have organised against austerity, corruption and authoritarian regimes across Europe, the United States of America, Latin America, Africa, and Asia'.

Visual Activism as *product* in which artefacts make discursive interventions as 'visual acts', as opposed to 'speech acts' (Austin, 1962) is a form strongly associated with Zanele Muholi's photographic work, which is closely tied to the fine art market (Lewin, 2020b). Products are crafted for display, primarily in galleries, museums and cinemas; these products carry political content, as they interrupt and contribute to the canon. These products *do* things, 'the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity, politics – [have] a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life' (Hall, 1996: 443).

Queer and feminist crafting might be seen to fit predominantly into this category of product. Matt Smith's ceramic and textile work, and his curating, explore the representation of queer and marginalised histories with/in the museum space (Smith, 2015). Smith's work, which involves intervening in the museum space by placing new works alongside the existing collections and rearranging objects from the permanent collection to recontextualise them, is influenced by the American curator Fred Wilson (Smith, 2015: 12). Portia Malatjie and Nontobeko Ntombela's 2022 exhibition, *When Rain Clouds Gather: Black South African Women Artists, 1940-2000*, makes an important contribution in bringing together work, much of which has not been publicly exhibited or acknowledged before. The exhibition makes visible the aesthetic and intellectual contributions of Black women to South Africa's art history. Relatedly, Lara Perry and Elke Krasny (this issue) urge museums to take responsibility for their role in normalising sexual violence and challenge them to adopt curatorial policies that work against it.

Visual Activism as *process*, our final category, has a long history in a variety of contexts, but is perhaps most closely documented in participatory research and education contexts (Clover and Stalker, 2007; Lewin and Shaw, 2021), particularly when these are linked to social movements (Watkins and Shulman, 2008). The focus of much of this work is on facilitating participatory creative and visual processes, designed to engage with participants on a particular issue, to facilitate critical reflection, and to build cohesion and catalyse political conscientisation (Freire, 1968; Boal, 1979). This includes the participatory visual methods used in social and action research, such as

photovoice, digital storytelling, and participatory video (Mannay, 2016), This category also includes community-based art (Naidus, 2009). Often, there are rich processes associated with what appears to be ‘protest’ or ‘product’ oriented work, and a focus on these categories can, for example, miss the social interactions formed through the processes of image production or circulation (Lewin, 2019).

## SITUATING GLOBAL QUEER AND FEMINIST VISUAL ACTIVISM

The contributors to this special issue offer us a set of contextually situated cases of resistance, dissidence or protest that centre questions of aesthetics and the visual. Attention is given to both theoretical and ethical questions as well as to insights gained from empirical research. Contributions reflect both international queer and feminist activism, as well as activism and its conditions in specific geographical and cultural contexts, including Brazil, China, Lebanon, South Africa, the UK and the USA. Articles by Lucie Fremlova and Jenna Allsopp highlight the particular intersectional contexts and visual regimes imposed on queer Roma and the representation of queer people with learning disability, respectively, thus also illustrating the centrality of visual self-representation for marginalised groups within the broader spectrum of LGBTQ+ communities. Filmmaking as activism has a long history with an emphasis on documentaries and has been given academic attention. In this special issue however Xiyang Wang and Jenna Allsopp orientate our attention toward less researched aspects of filmmaking as activism by thinking about processes of production and dissemination as locations for activism beyond the films themselves. Activist filmmaking can also be thought of as a form of craftism and craft is a central visual and material mode of making in feminist and queer activism and culture (Kempson, 2015). In this special issue several articles relate to craftism as a creative principle, for example, Nana Soares’s consideration of strategic mixing of retro style images with queer sexual health messaging in digital collages that would otherwise risk being censored on social media platforms. Several theoretical considerations also emerge across articles, such as museums’ complicity in the normalisation of sexual violence, and how institutions navigate feminist and queer critiques. This is discussed here by Lara Perry and Elke Krasny. A central theoretical consideration reflected in several other pieces including those by Anna Stielau, Priya Raghavan and Kylie Thomas is the limitations of activism.

Anna Stielau’s work offers a decolonial queering and undoing of the idea of activism. Through an engagement with work by Zanele Muholi, Jean Brundrit, and Nolan Oswald Dennis, she expresses a deep suspicion of the individualising and instrumentalising nature of the activist discourses that celebrate the heroic above the ordinary. In so doing, she argues against a focus on purpose and efficacy, with the legacy of imperial violence this implies, instead advocates for a relational ethics of maintenance and care.

Lara Perry and Elke Krasny, explore visual activism within the museum space, in relation to the curatorial choices underpinning the display of artworks depicting sexual violence. Their analysis invites reflection on the museum’s complicity in the normalisation of sexual violence against women and appeals to its curatorial obligations to work against this.

Chloe Skinner’s work documents an artist space in Beirut that became a space of refuge and belonging for a queer community in the wake of the 2020 blast. Skinner describes the work of three visual artists, whose practice becomes the architecture within which they navigate their loss and begin to reclaim their space in the city.

Jenna Allsopp’s work explores the ‘Queer Freedom’ strand of the Oska Bright Film Festival, UK, and specifically two artists associated with this strand. She argues that through a mutually affirmative process, they refuse the public understandings and representations of learning-disabled people’s sexuality, and capacity for artistic expression.

Xiyang Wang’s article is an appreciative inquiry of, and introduction to, three films by queer, participatory, Chinese documentary filmmaker He Xiaopei. Wang notes that He Xiaopei has employed film to document and empower participants. He Xiaopei’s use of self-deprecating humour is evident throughout this article, including in her giving the Directorial credit for her film to the main character, in response to their appropriation of the storyline.

Lucie Fremlova’s article documents a process in which queer Roma activists use self-representation to work against the reductive and essentialising stereotypes within which they have historically been constructed. In the participatory action research project Fremlova writes about, her participants upload their self-images into a stock photography library, as an archival intervention which refuses existing misrepresentations of queer Roma.

Nana Soares’s article deals with digital visual activism that employs visual style and typography as instrumental strategies to circumvent censorship of queer pleasure activism. Her case study features the work of SENTA – a Brazilian, ‘pleasure-activist’, sex education Instagram feed that employs humour and a vintage aesthetic both to appeal to its audience and camouflage its sexually-explicit messaging. Soares’s recognition of sex education as a political project is particularly pertinent in the current backlash context in which sex education has become a central site of contestation.



Ace Lehner explores the self-representations of non-binary Black British trans femme multi-disciplinary artist Travis Alabanza, on Instagram. They situate Alabanza's work against a history of portrait photography as mechanism of colonial control, and one that worked to continually fix and reiterate raced and gendered binaries. Their work claims the category of 'trans' as an explicit refusal of these binaries, challenging the mainstream visual representation of trans and non-binary people.

Priya Raghavan situates Malawian-born, Johannesburg-based tapestry artist Billie Zangewa's work as a quiet refusal of the white (colonial) male gaze, 'a Black woman's reclamation of the terms under which she is looked at'. Like Kylie Thomas, she notes the complexities of claiming self-care as political, but recognises its importance as a strategy of survival and resistance. Thomas discusses Zangewa's work alongside other contemporary feminist fibre artists. She points to a discomfort felt in reading Zangewa's work as a form of feminist resistance, given the limits of the feminism this implies. Ultimately, both readings of Zangewa's work question the boundaries of the political when operationalised by the art market.

## EMERGING THEMES

We identified three strongly emerging themes across the articles in this special issue: *refusal*, *care*, and *thriving*. Heather Love (2017: 127) in writing on refusal, notes that the 'historical exclusion of queers from normative definitions of intimacy, the family, reproduction, and basic human thriving has resulted in the production of a crucial resource, a *resistance to the world as it is given*' (our emphasis). This active refusal to accept existing ways of seeing and knowing, and associated material implications, is prevalent across all the articles in this special issue.

Raghavan employs Tina Campt's (2019) idea of 'black visibility' as a mode of witnessing that is a practice of refusal. In an approach that resonates with Love's, she writes about 'the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise'.

Refusal also resonates in the conceptions of activism. Many of the assumed binary oppositions associated with activism are challenged, for example seriousness and humour, empowerment and marginalisation, pleasure and politics. Furthermore, refusal also resonates in the conceptions of aesthetics. For example, Raghavan (this issue) notes that Zangewa's depiction of domestic scenes refuses 'the patriarchal and colonial binary between the private and the public, feminine and masculine, blackness and whiteness, and their corresponding opposition in high and low art'.

Ace Lehner's article on Travis Alabanza, shows an artist working against fixed meaning. Alabanza's multiple portraits refuse a singular reading of identity, against a trans stereotyping. Like the participants in Fremlova's research, who create a self-imaged counter archive, this can also be read as a form of visual activism concerned with de-spectacularising media images. This move is not just limited to achieving more authentic representations, it also queers the idea that visual activism is first and foremost about gaining attention.

Anna Stielau writes against a framing of activism as 'doing', in which particular subject positions afford agency, and those without this capacity are considered 'less worthy'. In a focus on 'decompositions', on unthinking the world as we know it, she refuses the binary between 'doing', and 'being undone'. In Perry and Krasny's piece, they refuse a curatorial approach that valorises artworks above their context, and normalises sexual violence against women, by not critically acknowledging its presence. The SENTA Instagram account in Soares article 'hides' text within visuals in a refusal of the censorship of social media platforms.

Almost all of the articles here touch, in different ways, on the notion of care. Care, as an everyday investment in self and community, as a contribution towards creating spaces of belonging (Buckland, 2002; Thompson, 2015; Holland-Muter, 2017). Alongside this notion of building caring communities, is one of care as responsibility, or taking care. In Perry and Krasny's article, they invite museums to better curatorial care around work implicated in normalising sexual violence. Here the idea of crafting returns. Raghavan, writing on Zangewa's silk tapestries, notes the slowness of fibre art production as 'hostile to capitalist and neo-liberal temporal ... rationalities ... which overinvest in haste'. Within this work, as with other feminist fibre art, the slow craft requires a temporal logic that moves away from a linear, masculinist, imperial notion of time (Motta and Bermudez, 2019). What the process of crafting affords, is an architecture that allows for a suspended or liminal time, one that allows time to care, to connect, to reflect – this alternative temporality exists in different ways across all our three modalities of visual activism. Think, for example, about the out-of-time nature of much protest, or the space held for relationship building in participatory visual processes, or the way in which museums allow for critical reflection.

To return to Heather Love (2017: 127) and her writing on refusal again – the 'historical exclusion of queers from normative definitions of intimacy, the family, reproduction, and basic human thriving has resulted in the production of a crucial resource, a *resistance to the world as it is given*'. Striking in this text is the articulation of 'basic human thriving'. It is an interesting idea, because it elides two things that are normally kept separate – basic needs and a more substantive well-being beyond survival and, in its refusal to separate them it stresses the

fundamental importance of *thriving*. For queer and feminist communities, the capacity to survive and to reach towards thriving, has been significantly dependent on the building of intentional communities, ‘a mode of being in the world that is also inventing the world’ (Muñoz, 1999: 121). Berlant and Warner (1998) articulate this as ‘queer worldmaking’. Rancière’s reading of artistic practices suggests that with their inherently democratic and egalitarian modes of being (2006: 14) they offer a special relationship with the building of communities inherent in queer/feminist worldmaking.

Ultimately what is at stake in all of this work is a refusal of dominant forms of visibility, representation, and social recognition, and the related political claims that these afford. And, a practising of inclusive and nurturing ways of being, and doing, that recognise a democratic mutual interdependency. There is an ethic of care at stake, a communal care, and, as Raghavan and Thomas underline, self-care only as it relates to a political, collective care. As Tanke articulates in a reading of Rancière’s work – ‘what Rancière teaches is that the field opened up by the aesthetic regime of art contains the promise of the much more difficult art, the art of living well’ (Tanke, 2010: 15). We are interested in art both as a refusal, as ‘a constitutive force in the building of social movements’ (Holmes, 2012), driven by a ‘determination not to be governed thusly’ (Feher, 2007: 14), and as a practice of care and inclusion.

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