

# Book Review: Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism

by Blog Admin

July 9, 2013

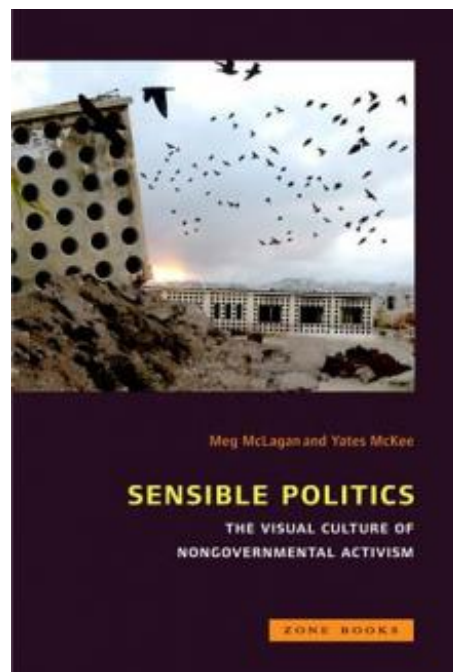
*Political acts are encoded in medial forms – punch holes on a card, images on a live stream, tweets about events immediately unfolding – that have force, shaping people as subjects and forming the contours of what is sensible, legible, and visible. In doing so they define the terms of political possibility and create terrain for political acts. **Sensible Politics** considers the constitutive role played by aesthetic and performative techniques in the staging of claims by nongovernmental activists. Relevant for students of anthropology and social psychology as well as media and communications and politics, the book will be equally useful to anyone who wants a deeper understanding of how images and visual culture surround and affect individuals and society, writes **Kate Saffin**.*



**Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism.** Meg McLagan and Yates McKee. MIT Press. November 2012.

## Find this book:

*Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism* is a collection of essays by and interviews with art historians, anthropologists, political theorists, activists, artists, filmmakers, and architects. Each chapter explores an aspect of the visual culture of nongovernmental activism, and how the images that are created and seen, go on to define, create, extend the possibility of, and act as a terrain for, political actions. The editors are [Meg McLagan](#), a cultural anthropologist and independent filmmaker based in New York City who currently teaches at Columbia University, and [Yates McKee](#), also based in New York City and an art critic and organiser with various Occupy projects, and a member of the editorial collective of [Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy](#), a movement publication that comes out of the Occupy movement.



Divided into multi- chaptered and multi- voiced sections covering photography, circulating images and activism, cinema and documentary, architecture, and the use of multiple platforms, the book considers how static or film-like images are often used to back up the claims of nongovernmental activists, and enable them to gain public support and political influence. This book sets out to help the reader understand how visual aesthetics and performative techniques play their part and that “attending to political aesthetics means focusing not on a disembodied image that travels under the concept of art or visual culture, nor on a preformed domain on the political that seeks subsequent expression in medial form. Instead, it requires bringing the two realms together in the same analytical frame”.



In the “Persistence of Photography” section, many essays comprehensively examine the sustained importance of the photograph in war and peace, violence and rescue, right and wrong, and during and after events that NGOs wish to focus on, as well as how the photograph still represents much of our articulated understanding of identity, citizenship and exile. Ariella Azoulay uses the Israeli- Palestinian context to analyse what she refers to as a “regime- made disaster” and the place of the photograph. Regime- made disasters are “not only produced by democratic regimes, but in some cases constitute them”. Azoulay goes on to point out that “regime- made disasters can occur without being acknowledged and recognised as a disasters” often due to the fact that such events lack characteristics such as “spontaneous eruption, arbitrariness and randomness. Instead they are part of an organized, well – ordered and well- grounded system of applied force that feeds on the institutions of the democratic regime and that is safely anchored in them”. The importance of the photograph in such a situation is paramount and informs the opinions and understanding of such events both within the body politic and regime that is applying the force and to the wider world. Azoulay includes photographs of Israeli soldiers offering water to kneeling and handcuffed Palestinians, and explains thoughtfully how such images become known truths and as such have created in the minds of citizens a perceived goodwill of the Israeli government and military, which has meant “for decades, Israeli Jews have been able persistently to avoid any acknowledgement of an existing Palestinian disaster- the Nakba”.

Professor Roger Hallas discusses the changing understanding of what constitutes photojournalism, and uses the work of South African photographer Gideon Mendel and his journey towards visual activism to illustrate the tension between observing and affecting. Hallas describes how the images and photojournalism that accompanied the discourse around the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa often represented a “dominant iconography of the impoverished AIDS victim” and fed in to “the ideological construction of the Third World as a site of intractable poverty, chronic hopelessness, and recurrent human disaster”. These images did much to counteract the thoughtful and progressive arguments around access to antiretrovirals and the “normalization concerning HIV/AIDSs that occurred in the late 1990s in the Global North”. Gideon Mendel’s work with NGOs such as the Terence Higgins Trust, Treatment Action Campaign and Oxfam is an example of the increasingly common collaborations between photojournalists and NGOs as other commissioning channels disappear, and as the need for strategic communications by NGOs increases to secure funding streams. Mendel has attempted to reframe and change the direction of travel of the discourse around HIV/AIDS in Africa by empowering his subjects to become part of the process that constructs the images, and by creating photographs that demand answers and solutions and are forward looking, rather than hopeless. Naming individuals in images and placing the words that they have voiced in accompanying text serves to make those in the images “people embedded in social relationships and networks” rather than reinforcing the “victim tradition of documentary representation...which continues to present documentary subjects as anonymous embodiments of social and political disasters or metonyms of the human condition”.

In the section *Disobedient Bodies, Circulating Images, Archival traces* the chapters sit together in a slightly less coherent way but include great essays that explore the images and politics of demonstrations, such as Allan Sekula’s *Waiting for Tear Gas* series of photographs taken during protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999, and how a viewer can be encouraged to see themselves in the place of the protestor against an authority figure like the police. The journalist Huma Yusuf discusses how the use of new digital technologies have affected not only the response and reporting but also the form that political action takes in Pakistan, and the theme of the volume, immediacy and intimacy of amateur images and videos of tragedies, and their dissemination and dispersal is discussed in different contexts.

In *Architecture*, the use of maps and their relation to the legality of planning and building is discussed in an interview with architect Eyal Weizman. How geopolitics can be read and projected via a map, and how a map can simultaneously become an image, and a form of protest, and a legal document, is illuminated via his work with Palestinian communities and Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Weizman describes the West Bank as “a fragile landscape that has gradually turned in to something he understands as political plastic- a territorial arrangement that is continuously shaped and re-shaped by political forces”. He has for many years been developing a spatial representation and analysis of the area by synthesizing fragments of maps and plans to understand and document how “planning is employed to cause material damage to Palestinian communities by splintering and fragmenting the logic of their regional economy” and so by reading geopolitics in architectural and planning details, Weizman has been developing notions of architectural crime and forensic architecture. A map produced by Weizman and his team as part of a report called *Land Grab* detailed the West Bank and gave a time based forensic reading of architecture and planning in terms of international and human rights law and “contemporary colonialism”. It had a colour gradient to “make sense of expansion and of an ongoing process” and as soon as it was published became a tool for others to download, update and upload material to, including the army itself, and it was a map that could be read navigationally, and it was an image that could be understood instantly by a diverse audience. Such powerful images and Weizman's later work have found homes and audiences across the disciplines of architecture and political commentary and art, and Weizman's and his teams stretching intellectual assault on his subjects is extremely engaging.

*Sensible Politics* interestingly and engagingly interweaves political and communication theory with art critique and psychology. The book is long but each chapter stands alone and so the book can easily be dipped in and out of. The technique of going straight to practitioners and asking them to reflect upon their own work and the work of nongovernmental activists allows the subject of political aesthetics to be approached from multiple angles, much as how any visual communication is seen in many different ways by different people and organisations. The commentators bring a sense of immediacy and application in the real world, as well as an opportunity for the reader to question their own understanding of political and social messages and images that they have consumed. The book will be very relevant to students of anthropology and social psychology as well as media and communications and politics. It is equally useful to anyone who wants a deeper understanding of how images and visual culture surround and affect individuals and society, and how the reading of any visual message is profoundly contextual, time-linked and event based. Essential reading for activists!

---

**Dr Kate Saffin** has worked as a medical doctor in London, Sydney and Paris and is a qualified General Practitioner. Most recently she completed the Masters in Public Health at King's College London and has subsequently worked for a think tank and as a freelance researcher in public and health policy. She currently works in a policy role for a UK government department. Her research interests lie in international development and the intersections between health, the environment, economics and politics. [Read reviews by Kate.](#)