

Thronging Bluff Face

Jemima Wyman's many masks

Chari Larsson

If every discrete uprising is a repetition, a citation, then what happens has been happening for some time, is happening now again, a memory embodied anew, in events episodic, cumulative, and partially unforeseeable.
Judith Butler in *Uprisings* (ed. Georges Didi-Huberman)¹

Jemima Wyman

Visual Resistance (Guy Fawkes Mask, V for Vendetta, Anonymous, Occupy Movement ...), 2012
hand-cut digital photographs
Courtesy the artist, Milani Gallery and Sullivan + Strumpf



Australian-born, Los Angeles based artist Jemima Wyman has positioned camouflage and mimicry as the cornerstones of her practice. Wyman's body of work is replete with the iconography of contemporary protest culture drawn from the Occupy movements, as well as the Arab Spring and European revolts against austerity measures. She works fluidly across multimedia, sculpture and performance, photography, video, fabric design and archives. Wyman is the quintessential bowerbird, drawing from the largest and most unruly archive of all—the Internet. Like performance art, mass protests tend to be ephemeral, and rely on documentation and transmission through the Internet and social media.

Wyman's longstanding interest in activist visual culture intersects with a broader renewal of interest in crowds and public forms of assembly. Since large numbers of protesters assembled in Egypt's Tahrir Square in early 2011 demanded the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, there has been a renewed focus on crowds, collective action and theorisations of radical or agonistic formulations of democracy.² Broadly speaking, radical democracy calls for the expansion of democracy beyond minimalist forms of participation. Thinkers as diverse as Laclau and Mouffe and Jacques Rancière have argued that conflict is an integral part of liberal democracies and requires cultivation.³

Responding to this surge of activity, *global aCtIVISm* curated for the ZKM Center for Art and Media

in Karlsruhe by Peter Weibel in 2013–14 posited as the thesis of the exhibition that democracies are in crisis, eroded by the corrosive effects of neoliberal capital. Deficiencies in representative democracy and the unequal distribution of wealth have led to a new type of spontaneous, non-institutional mass protest. Weibel argues this disenfranchisement has led to innovative forms of global activism that rely on basic human rights, such as the freedom of assembly, but also artistic and performative practices.⁴ It is in this convergence between performance, art and theatre where the practice of Jemima Wyman sits.

Another key exhibition relevant to this global discussion around art, politics and activism is *Soulèvements* curated by French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman for the Jeu de Paume, Paris, in 2016. Capturing the long and rich history of collective resistance Didi-Huberman's curatorial departure point was Aby Warburg's incomplete project, *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1925–1929). Warburg famously created a montage of images from his photo library to trace the recurrence of gestures. For Didi-Huberman the collision of images creates fresh lines of enquiry. Warburg's enigmatic formulations of *Nachleben* (afterlife) and *Pathosformel* (pathos formula) informed a key provocation for Didi-Huberman: "How do images draw so often from our memories in order to give shape to our desires for emancipation?"⁵ Certain emotional gestures migrate and reappear, after long periods of

dormancy, and are invested with a heightened degree of intensity.⁶

These reference points are useful for considering Wyman's recycling of images as they circulate throughout her work, migrating across temporalities and contexts as the escalation of intensities and pressure points. Her practice is diverse and multifaceted, drawing on questions of feminism, collective identities and activism. In 2005 she formed CamLab, an ongoing feminist collaborative practice with Anna Mayer that began when they were graduate students at the California Institute of the Arts. The collaboration is based on social practice work and public engagement. In 2015 CamLab was the Wanlass Artist in Residence at Occidental College in Los Angeles. As one of the schools under investigation by the US Department of Education over its handling of sexual violence on campus, the residency provided a particularly potent pedagogical platform for exploring issues of power. *With Respect To ...* (2015–16) encompassed three components: the first, *The Reguarding Room*, was an exhibition consisting of art-historical images of rape and sexual assault. The second, *Searching Centre*, was a space designed to conduct workshops with students. The final, *Holding, Hearing Court* was a space where participants could select and deliver a public address from a binder containing a range of source texts.

Philosopher and cultural theorist Boris Groys also affirms that "The phenomenon of art activism is

central to our time.”⁷ For Groys, the acceleration of art activism signals a reinvigorated attempt to combine art and political activism, as an alternative to abandoning art that “tries to make art itself useful.”⁸ Groys’ essay is a welcome update to an intellectual tradition that has sought to describe the irreconcilable tension between art’s autonomy and its union with life, and the need to overcome the binary oppositions that led to the failure of the avant-garde, as famously identified by Peter Bürger: “the avant-gardistes’ attempt to reintegrate art into the life process is itself a profoundly contradictory endeavour. For the (relative) freedom of art vis-à-vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance.”⁹

We might say that Wyman has taken up Groys’ challenge by reactivating the visual language of the avant-garde. Wyman is part of a broader impulse in contemporary art currently reconsidering the power of photomontage deployed by Dada artists such as Hannah Höch in the 1920s and 1930s. Take, for example, a series of Wyman’s collages (from 2008) where she draws from the historical avant-garde device of montage and reasserts its contemporary use value. Like the collective Soda_Jerk and filmmaker Harun Farocki, Wyman selects images and creates new contexts

and associations. *Visual Resistance (Guy Fawkes Mask, V for Vendetta, Anonymous, Occupy Movement ...)* (2012) consists of the repetitive application of the Guy Fawkes mask. Popularised by the cult movie *V for Vendetta* (2005), and adopted by the online hactivist group Anonymous, the mask has become a popular icon among protest groups to conceal identity and evade surveillance. The Guy Fawkes mask allows Wyman to put into play one of Aby Warburg’s fascinating ideas: images from the past return to haunt the present, crossing geographical and temporal boundaries.

Wyman’s collages do not offer a vanishing point or orthogonal lines to organise the spectator’s gaze. There is only the collage’s surface for the gaze to skate over, shifting from one Guy Fawkes mask to the next. The mask solicits the gaze, only to repudiate it. Masks paradoxically conceal as well as reveal a collective identity. They draw attention to shared concerns, while protecting against identification and reprisal. In his classic study of *Crowds and Power*, published in German in 1960, Elias Canetti formulated the characteristics of various types of crowd behaviour. His analysis is particularly helpful for understanding why the mask is such a powerful tool for disruption. Canetti writes: “The tension created by the contrast between its appearance and the secret it hides can become extreme. This is the real reason for the terror the mask inspires. ‘I am exactly what you see’ it proclaims ‘and everything you fear is behind me.’ The mask fascinates and,

at the same time, enforces distance.”¹⁰ The spectator’s mastery over the image is undermined. Furthermore, the mask manipulates the spectator’s desire to reconstitute the centred, modernist subject, only to displace it. The mask exists as a series of surfaces.

Other iconic masks featuring in Wyman’s work are the multi-coloured balaclavas worn by feminist punk band Pussy Riot. Imprisoned in the wake of their trial and conviction for the “punk prayer” performance in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior in 2012, three members of the band were convicted for “hooliganism” and sentenced to two years in a Russian penal colony.¹¹ The balaclava quickly circulated to become a global symbol of resistance and challenge to state authority. The agency of the protesters is drawn from their anonymity. Paradoxically, it is the very absence of individual identity that constitutes a collective force standing for a larger idea. In highlighting the importance of Pussy Riot’s anonymity, Slavoj Žižek wrote: “This is why they wear balaclavas: masks of de-individualization, of liberating anonymity. The message of their balaclavas is that it doesn’t matter which of them got arrested – they’re not individuals, they’re an Idea. And this is why they are such a threat: it is easy to imprison individuals, but try to imprison an Idea!”¹²

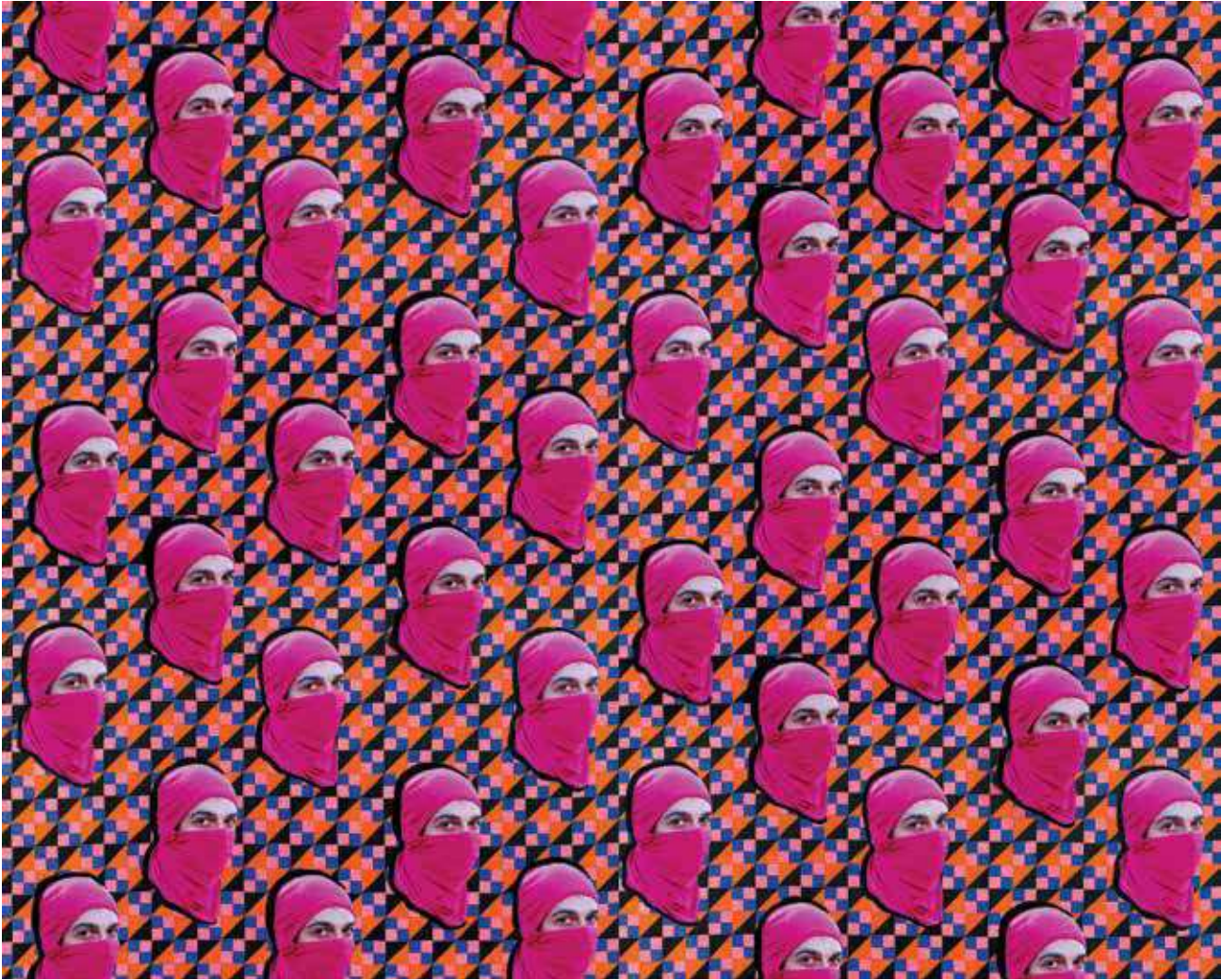
The unresolved tension between anonymity and collective identity, visibility and invisibility is the subject of a 2014 performance, *Thronging Bluff Face*, that took place at the



From top:
Jemima Wyman
Free Pussy Riot Crazy Quilt, 2012
sewn digital photos on tie-dyed
t-shirt sections
Courtesy the artist, Milani Gallery
and Sullivan + Strumpf

Jemima Wyman
Bandana Masks, 2015
hand-cut digital photographs
Courtesy the artist, Milani Gallery
and Sullivan + Strumpf





From top:
Jemima Wyman
Propaganda Textiles (Pink Bloc protestor at Gay Pride in Copacabana, 13th October 2013), 2015-17
 custom-made, 40-page fabric swatch book
 Courtesy the artist, Milani Gallery and Sullivan + Strumpf

Jemima Wyman
Thronging Bluff Face, 2014
 live performance in Long Beach, California
 Courtesy the artist

Opposite:
Jemima Wyman
Conjuring Radical Openness and Conjuring Power, 2015
 bronze bust, custom steel pedestal and custom-printed textiles
 Courtesy the artist, Milani Gallery and Sullivan + Strumpf



Institute 4 Labor Generosity Workers & Uniforms at Long Beach in California. Wyman performed, her identity concealed by a patchwork quilt made up of various assorted prints including paisley bandanna patterns, camouflage material, and her own fabric designs. In this way Wyman exploits the audience's desire for unmediated access to the artist's body privileged by live performance, while simultaneously displacing this desire.¹³ To accentuate this point, the costume is replete with not one, but three masks that can be worn interchangeably. The performance continued Wyman's ongoing fascination in camouflage as a tool to enable the female body to evade objectification by the male gaze. The mask used as a form of camouflage permits the subject to surreptitiously return the gaze, further creating a disturbance in the visual field.¹⁴

The ambiguity between presence and absence, transparency and opacity

is continued in *Conjuring Radical Openness* and *Conjuring Power* (2015). Underneath the bronze mask bust, there is nothing, only a void. The protester's identity remains concealed. The bust is surrounded by vivid fabrics, revealing Wyman's interest in the history of Soviet avant-garde textile design. During the 1920s the Bolsheviks experimented with utopian dress in the search for innovative types of clothing appropriate for the new society that was being created. If every mask and pattern is a repetition, something new and powerful is created with each iteration. The visual language of the Russian avant-garde returns from the past, haunting the present, as Wyman asks us: is this the fabric for our time?



Chari Larsson is a lecturer at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University.

¹ Judith Butler, "Uprising," in Georges Didi-Huberman (ed), *Uprisings*, Georges Didi-Huberman, Paris: Gallimard / Jeu de Paume, 2016, p. 36_2 See, for example, Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge, Mass: London: Harvard University Press, 2015; Alain Badiou et al., *What is a People?*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016_3 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, New York: Verso, 1985; Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999_4 Peter Weibel, *global aCTIVISM: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, MIT Press, 2015_5 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings*, Paris: Gallimard/ Jeu de Paume, 2016, p. 18_6 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms*, trans. Harvey L. Mendelsohn, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016_7 Boris Groys, "On Art Activism," *e-flux*, no. 56, 2014: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60343/on-art-activism/>_8 Ibid_9 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 50_10 Elias Canetti, *The Crowd*, London: Gollancz, 1962, p. 376_11 The literature on Pussy Riot is enormous. See, for example, Masha Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot*, London: Granta, 2014. On the afterlife of the balaclava as a transnational icon, see Caitlin Bruce, "The Balaclava as Affect Generator: Free Pussy Riot Protests and Transnational Iconicity," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 12:1, 2015_12 Slavoj Žižek, "The True Blasphemy", 2012: <https://art-leaks.org/2012/08/07/slavoj-zizek-on-pussy-riot-the-true-blasphemy/>_13 Amelia Jones, "Presence" in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal*, 56:4, 1997_14 See Anya Bernstein observed that during Pussy Riot's trial, once de-masked, the members did not escape the sexualised gaze. See Anya Bernstein, "An Inadvertent Sacrifice: Body Politics and Sovereign Power in the Pussy Riot Affair", *Critical Inquiry*, 40:1, 2013, p. 239