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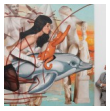
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After Ferguson, A New Protest Culture's Challenge to Art

Ben Davis, Tuesday, December 16, 2014

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Damon Davis
Photo: Sebastiano Tomada via Mic

Walter Benjamin has a line about the Angel of History who sees the past as “one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet." At times this year, it has felt that this could actually describe the unfolding present, piling outrage on top of outrage without end. And just as Benjamin was using this image to raise the question of how you adequately narrate the past, for me this sense of imminent turmoil raises the big question about how you capture the present: How should art relate to this moment? Can it even?

In the week before the frenetic chaos of Art Basel dumped down on Miami, this question is exactly what *New York Times* film scribe A.O. Scott asked, in the latest in his series of art-and-politics think pieces for the paper: “Is Our Art Equal to the Challenges of Our Times?" The answer he gave was “it's complex"—but essentially “no." "[W]e are in the midst of hard times now," he wrote, "and it feels as if art is failing us."

Six years after the worst financial crisis in recorded memory, Scott worries that the culture at large—he's talking about TV, film, music, theater, the whole cultural smorgasbord—hasn't really learned to speak in any kind of new and urgent voice. Visual art gets only a sideways nod

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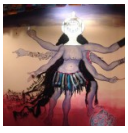
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in Scott's account, which maybe says all you can say about how relevant it feels to the wider conversation. Perhaps, however, it's not that "culture" as a whole is failing, but that the old institutions of culture are not where the present is best finding its voice.

WNYC art critic Deborah Solomon seems to echo Scott's assessment, nominating not a work from a museum or gallery for her end-of-the-year "best of" pick, but the images of the "die-ins" staged in solidarity with the recent protests against police violence across the country. The viral nature of these images is, for Solomon, key: "I think it's time to make the point that Twitter really graduated from being an instrument of goofy selfies and people drinking at parties to being a full-fledged tool for social protest, and social change."

Harvard medical students stage a die-in, December 9, 2014
Via @AshleyBSunshine

In fact, it has been clear for quite some time now that meme culture is setting the tone for what theorist Raymond Williams would call today's "structure of feeling," the specific expressive texture that distinguishes the present from the past. This probably represents the most significant development of grassroots visual culture since the explosion of the graffiti scene in the 1970s: #YesAllWomen or the "Ice Bucket Challenge" (or, hell, the Harlem Shake) are obviously powerful vehicles of collective experience. Consequently, it is quite logical to say that, if you truly want to look for the iconic images from 2014, those moments where viral culture collided with politics—the images of people with arms raised in the "hands up, don't shoot" gesture or the die-in actions that Solomon picks out—have a magnetism that traditional forms of culture can't top. (For myself, the powerful #IfTheyGunnedMeDown meme is the year's most moving invention along these lines, but Solomon's larger point stands.)

#IfTheyGunnedMeDown meme, via SliverDemon Tumblr

This now-obvious fact has huge implications for art (and, indeed, for activism—though that's another discussion). If we accept it, what does it mean for visual artists making their way in this new cultural reality, particularly those who share this sense of the present as demanding response?

Artists can try to engage in the meme game. In the wake of New York's scandalous failure to indict Eric Garner's killer, Badlands Unlimited—the experimental book imprint founded by the great Paul Chan—released a series of book-themed images that read like an agitprop version of oddball art blog, The Jogging: a self-help tome entitled “How to Get Away With Murder," a cookbook called “Ham Sandwiches Are Easier to Indict Than Cops in America" (by "Guy Feieri"), and so on (along with an online "Reading List" on race and police in America). The righteous sarcasm is tonic, though it's worth noting that the weirdest, and therefore most “arty" aspects of them, are precisely what turn them into non sequiturs that are unlikely to circulate more widely. (Why book covers? Why the reference to restauranteur Guy Fieri?)

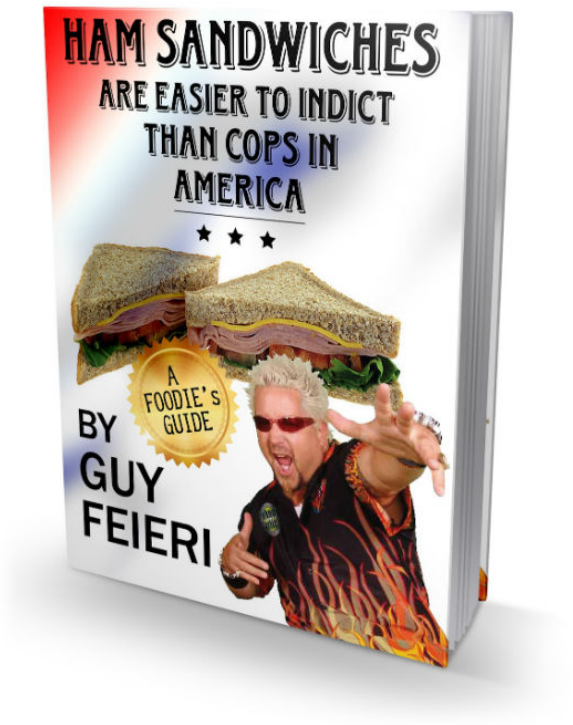


Image from Badlands Unlimited
Photo: Courtesy Badlands Unlimited

Less refined but more true to the form were artist Shirin Barghi's "Last Words" memes, simple white-on-black graphics, each featuring a name of a black victim of police or vigilante violence, a simple emblem, and their reported last words: Eric Garner's heartrending "I Can't Breathe," Trayvon Martin's haunted "Why Are You Following Me?," Oscar Grant's bewildered "You Shot Me, You Shot Me!" Barghi's series is a way to take these individual tragedies and frame them as part of a larger narrative of catastrophe. But "Last Words" can also be read as being about the memeification of politics, cataloguing how rapidly today's viral environment ferments symbols, symbols which can't help become a reference for artists looking to plug into the present's political energies. (This is already happening, from street artist Damon Davis's "Hands Up Don't Shoot" poster campaign, to Hank Willis Thomas's recent sculptural interpretation of "Hands Up Don't Shoot," so incongruous in Miami Beach.)

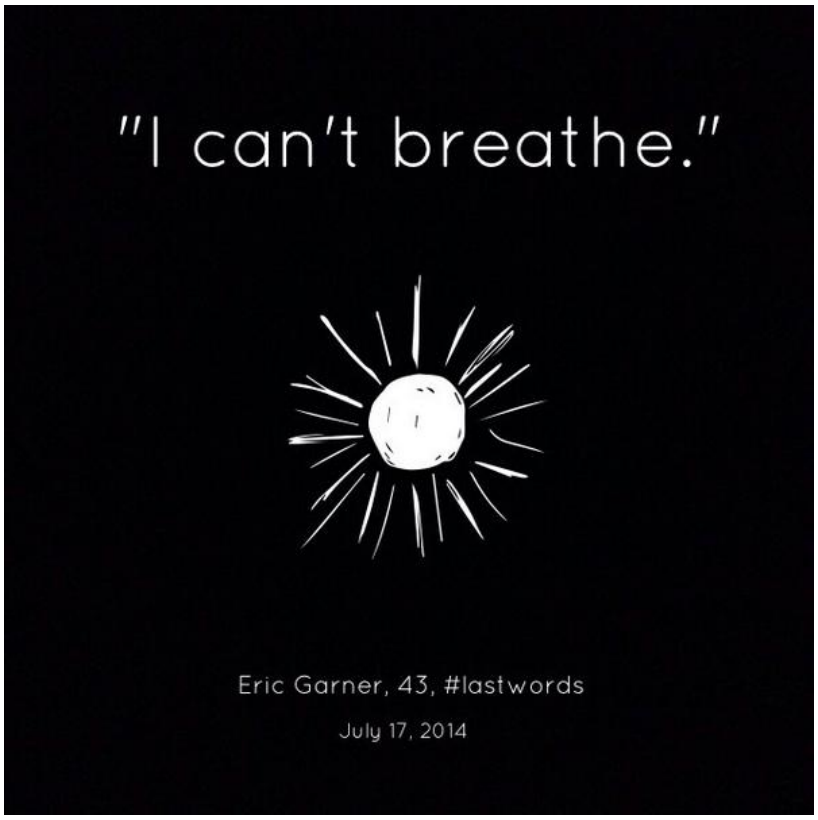
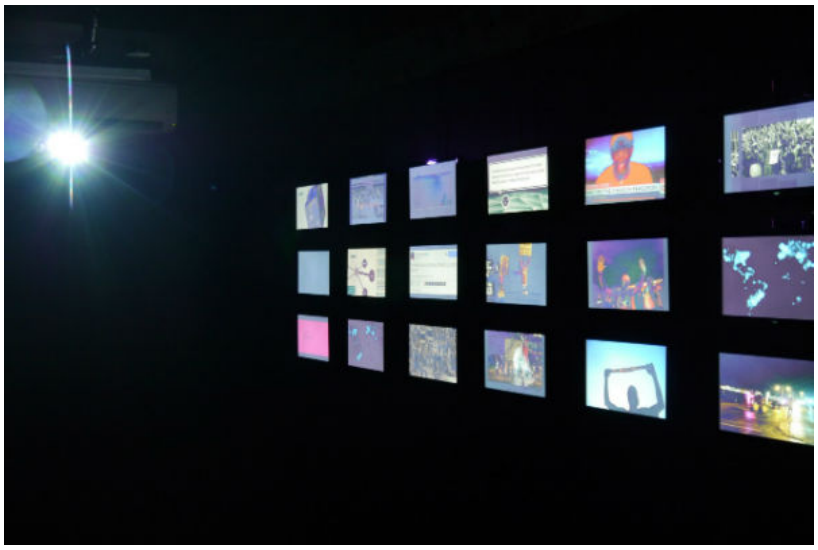


Image from Shirin Barghi's "Last Words" series
Photo: Courtesy Shinin Barghi Twitter, @shebe86

If I review the year, one of the artworks that stays with me is by the collective HowDoYouSayYamInAfrican?, shown at the Bowery's P! art space in the wake of the first eruption of protest around Ferguson. Called *The Way Black Machine*, it was billed as an archive of audio-visual material about Ferguson. It took the form of a wall of frantically flickering monitors, a fusillade of news footage, material from the internet, snippets of activist communiqués.

And yet what struck me about it was not so much how it succeeded in summing up the present but how it failed: *The Way Black Machine* conveys the sense of being in a sea of images that demand response but that overwhelm ability to sum them up; a state of affairs where you *must* respond faster than your ability to pull it all together into an elegant artistic whole. It is *about* artists, called upon by political circumstances, trying to find a new language to respond in present cultural conditions of omnipresent urgency. That, it seems to me, is the situation of visual art right now, and it is in beginning to face it honestly that we might begin to answer whether art can be equal to the challenge of the times.



Installation view of HowDoYouSayYamInAfrican?, The Way Black Machine (2014) at P!
Image: Courtesy P!

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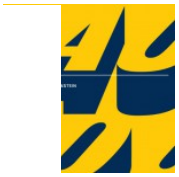

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