***The Spectre of the People*, Thessaloniki PhotoBiennale 2023**

KATHIMERINI **newspaper**

Interview feature with Giota Mirtsioti

October 2023

Daniel Mayrit, from the series *One of Yours*, 2022

Giota Mirtsioti: Can populism be visually captured?

Julian Stallabrass: The visual is vital to the way political populism works—whether it is the bearing, dress and gestures of a leader at a photo-op or the way people get across their views at a protest. The continual process of making, circulating and viewing images is necessary for populist movements to sustain themselves. But there is a deeper implication to your question: can populism be adequately captured by images alone? Probably not, but artists' explorations of its visual nature are key to understanding it—and acting to change it.

GM: What is the difference between the visualization of political power and the visualization of the people?

JS: The ideal of much politics is to bring the two into alignment, or at least to appear to do so. Autocratic power is easily represented in the figure of the monarch or tyrant, but it is much

harder to find a convincing representation of democratic political power as a vehicle for the will of the people. Even more so when that power, as so often, serves other interests entirely. Part of the exhibition looks at the crisis of mainstream democratic politics—for example in Boris Mikhailov's glitching TV images of politicians talking. Another part satirizes the way that populist politicians try to become that weird mix of exceptional and typical, both embodying the people and being somehow above them. Think of Trump, Berlusconi and Modi, among many examples. In a nightmarish installation by Joan Fontcuberta and Pilar Rosado, this paradoxical persona meets a too-vivid rendition of its supposed sexual prowess.

Prarthna Singh, from the series *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh* (Every Evening Belongs to Shaheen Bagh), 2019-20

GM: Given the vague concept of populism, how dangerous can a visual representation be or how beneficial?

JS: We all know of dangerous images that do the work of defining a people and declaring others as enemies and outsiders. Images are regularly used to spread hatred in right-wing TV, newspapers and across social media. But there are also populist movements that act to build solidarity and extend democracy. The photographs of protest in the exhibition by partisan artists, closely linked to the protestors, are an example of that. Working in very dangerous circumstances, they make images which show people asserting their rights, and the creativity of their dissent. So Kimberly dela Cruz works amongst those protesting the war on drugs in the Philippines, Ana Carolina Fernandes documents the protest culture that built to oppose Bolsanaro in Brazil, and Prarthna Singh shows portraits of women occupying a highway to oppose Modi's discriminatory laws. These are dangerous images, too, to the powers against which they act; and dangerous to their makers, given the intolerance of those regimes to opposition and willingness to use violence.


1 Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq
2 Ronald Reagan
3 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
4 Alexander Lukashenko
5 Jair Bolsonaro
6 Tony Blair
7 Imran Khan
8 Narendra Modi

Bani Abidi, *The Reassuring Hand Gestures of Big Men, Small Men, All Men*, 2021, detail

GM: How can the true be distinguished from the false, the authentic from the staged which serves public relations?

JS: Images rarely make statements in the way that sentences do, we can rarely say that they are simply true or false. Of course, they can be designed and turned to serve truth and falsehood. Images are crucial to the staging of politics, which is often an attempt to manufacture a reality

through performing words and actions. So, when the authoritarian populist Margaret Thatcher declared 'there is no alternative', what she said was a lie but also an attempt to make it true. The visual aspect of this performance often has a conventional character, which Bani Abidi maps out in her collage, *The Reassuring Hand Gestures of Big Men, Small Men, All Men*. Politics, she implies, is gestural in more than one sense.
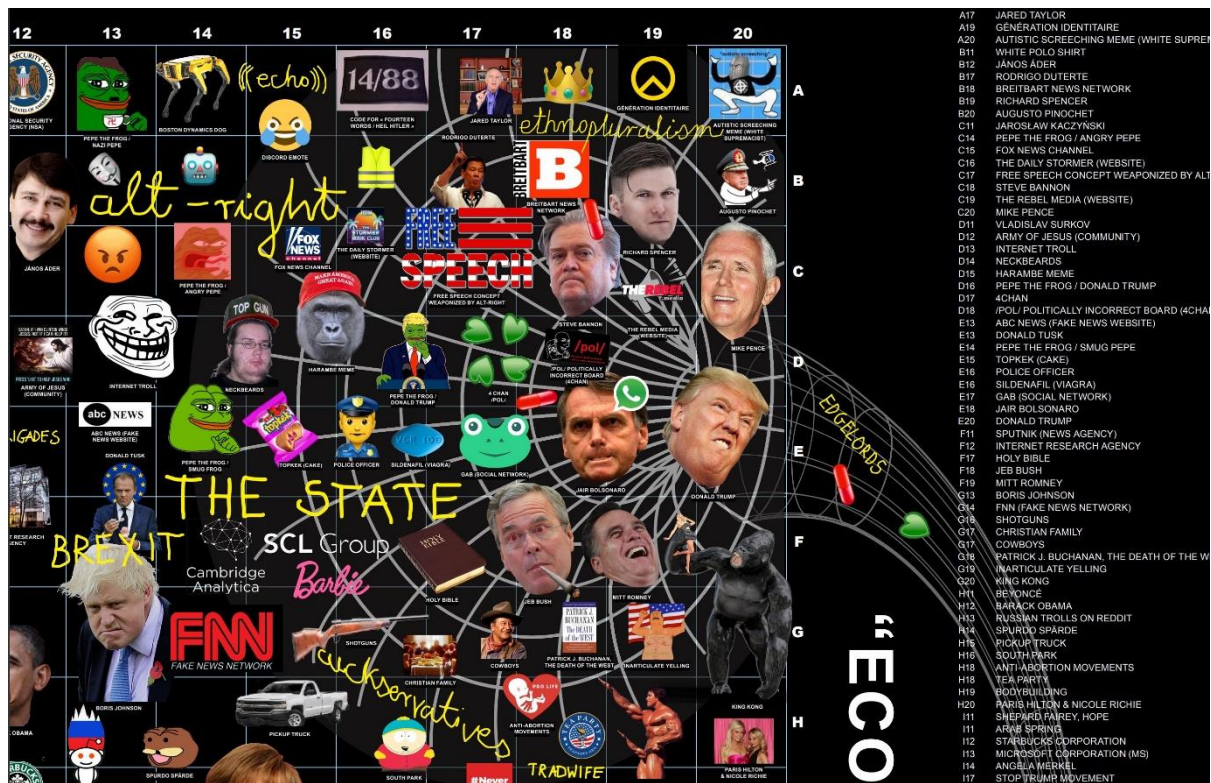
DISNOVATION.ORG, *ONLINE CULTURE WARS*, 2018-2019, detail

GM: How much has the visual portrayal of 'the people' changed through social media? What are the risks involved and what are the benefits?

JS: The promise of the Internet once seemed to be that it would break open the media monopolies, so dominated by big business and conventional elites. It did at first, and many diverse voices benefitted. The evolution of social media monopolies has altered the character of that control: they seek less to regulate what people say than to prod them towards an addictive level of engagement that will yield as much profit as possible. So they use their algorithms to foster what winds people up most—identity issues, culture wars, resentment, hatred and conspiracy theories. More or less ironically expressed far-right opinions have been the primary beneficiary. The artists' group DISNOVATION.ORG map the resulting scene in a darkly entertaining vision of leaders, icons and memes. Only belatedly has the old establishment realised the threat to the shotgun marriage of capitalism and democracy that all this poses.

Stefanos Tsivopoulos , *Geometry of Fear*, 2012, video still

GM: How do the artists you selected capture the concept of populism?

JS: There are five main ways, I think: the images of protest I talked about already, and the way that the people can cohere in acts of dissent; then the satire of populist leaders, also found in the work of Daniel Mayrit, who has invented a populist leader in photography as a way of examining the way such figures present themselves. Various artists also document the lives of people who have been thrust outside the category of 'the people' (for instance, Paolo Pellegrin's remarkable work on a Roma family living in Rome) or those who put themselves outside by flaunting their wealth and privilege, as seen in the work of Lauren Greenfield and Dougie Wallace. Then there are those who describe the followers of authoritarian populism and the conditions in which it grows. Sinna Nasseri does this for the US, and Christian Lutz for Europe. Finally, there is more conceptual work that allusively highlights political representation—Abidi, as we have seen, but also Stefanos Tsivopoulos, Vangelis Vlahos and Carey Young.

Dougie Wallace, from the series *Harrodsburg*, 2013-2016

GM: There are researchers who consider hawkishness a negative phenomenon and others who support the possibilities of mobilisation in a democratic and emancipatory direction. In either case, can photography be seen as the predominant means of achieving the goal?

JS: I believe that all of the artists shown in the exhibition, in one way or another, seek to make a difference in the world—and not only for their own advantage! A tremendous weight of passivity and conformity bears down on researchers in the form of bureaucracy, government regulations and surveillance, and systems of incentive and punishment. Some do resist it, especially perhaps when it comes to researching the history and practice of photography and video. It would be too much to claim that they are the predominant means of turning research in a democratic and emancipatory direction, but they are one proven and important way.