The Spectre of the People: Populism and Photographic Culture

Julian Stallabrass

Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Portrait of Louis XIV in Coronation Robes*, 1701

When political power is concentrated upon a single person—a monarch or a dictator—it is possible to represent the one with the figure of the other so that, say, the body, resplendent robes and regalia of Louis XIV are a visual emblem of absolute power. If the king had two bodies, one physical, the other the mystical embodiment of his authority, they may come into

friction as the frailties and imperfections of the first threaten to pollute the second.[1] In idealised portraiture, however, as in Hyacinthe Riguad's famed depiction of Louis XIV, all appears in elaborate and serene accord.

Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830

Ever since the rise of democracy, however, the visualisation of political power has become a complex and fraught matter, and the sovereign people have been elusive, slipping in and out of uncertain and contested forms of representation. The question of how—or even whether—to represent the people has been continually controversial.[2] Is the power of the sovereign people to be represented in images of their parliaments and assemblies at work, or as people labour collectively to transform society and the environment, or as they gather in public to protest and assert their popular legitimacy, or (as with Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*) in revolt

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[1] Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieaval Political Theology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1957.

[2] For a fine analysis, see Stefan Jonsson, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008.

as they attempt to seize power? Depending on one's political affiliations, any of these alternatives may be considered partial, inadequate or even dangerous.

The rise of populism intensifies these dilemmas of representation. Far from Parliaments legitimately representing 'the people', for many they have become the embodiment of elitism and corruption. Protest and even rebellion stride to the fore but once again there are furious contests over who has the right to act as the true people. That deep conundrum is closely connected to the continually shifting ground on which the highly elusive concept of populism rests.

Theoretical views of populism are remarkably varied: for some, it is the grounding of all democratic political activity; for others, a mere illusion, the fleeting product of temporary assembly, or a performative and rhetorical style of politics.[3] Because all democratic politics involves visual performance, and populism intensifies its importance, lens-based media play a central in its conduct. This is due to their documentary character—which immediately raise controversies over truth and fakery, authenticity and public relations—and their deep historical connection with the processes of democratisation out of which populism springs.

The definition of populism is particularly hard to tie down because most political theorists believe that it spans both the left-right divide, and that between mass participation and authoritarian rule. Indeed, we can point not just to the familiar populists of the insurgent left and right, as they stand against the prevailing global order, but also to populist supporters of free trade and neoliberal 'reform' (Thatcher, Fujimori and Berlusconi among them).[4] This complex and uncertain term becomes even more elusive when we think of the difference between Greek and English words: in Greek, 'laikismos', 'populism', which is close to the English 'demagogy' always carries a negative connotation, and a positive popular movement is named 'laikotita'; in English the same word can be used for both.

Some attempts to resolve the contradictions think of populism as the attachment of a variety of 'thin-centered ideologies' to a particular manner of doing politics which foregrounds simple language, vulgar behaviour, the manufacture of enemies and crises, along with simple solutions; others as an insult applied to any political movement that dares stray from the neoliberal

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[3] For a collection which gathers many of these contending views, see Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser/Paul Taggart/ Paulina Ochoa Espejo/ Pierre Ostiguy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017. The idea that populism is constitutive of all political discourse finds influential expression in the work of Ernesto Laclau. See his book, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London 2005.

[4] Stuart Hall analysed the 'authoritarian populist' character of Thatcherism in Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, Verso, London 1988.

orthodoxy; and others as an essentially performative style in political discourse and image management.[5]

No exhibition can hope to settle those complex questions of definition, and certainly not this one since its artists offer very different perspectives on populism. Some stand horrified by the rise of authoritarian, nationalist, religious and racist populisms; some celebrate the assembly of 'the people' in protest; some seek to act for those who have been declared enemies of 'the people'; and others to satirise at least one out-group, the super-rich; others again to describe and analyse aspects of populism, even those that they find troubling and threatening.

Atelier Nadar, Portrait of the novelist Gaudichot-Masson, undated

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[5] See respectively, Cas Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist, *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2004, pp. 541–63; Marco D'Eramo, 'Populism and the New Oligarchy', *New Left Review*, no. 82, July-August 2013, pp. 5-28; Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2016.

Walter Benjamin thought that it was no coincidence that, around 1848, the invention of photography paralleled the bourgeois revolts that endangered the old regimes of Europe. Photographic portraiture lent visual substance to bourgeois individualism, as seen in that class' solid self-presentation before the lens of Nadar, David Octavius Hill and many others.[6] Even in the mid nineteenth century, photographs were made of a few of the countless victims of capitalism and imperialism—from slaves and child labourers to the casualties of invasion and occupation—and live on, haunting democracy with their implicit claims.[7] Photography, as it became quicker and more mobile, could be turned to document human rights abuses—for example, Twain's 'incorruptible *kodak*' delineating the horrors of King Leopold's Congo regime.[8] It also swiftly became a tool in elaborate political performances and the massaging of persona, condensed through photography in face, clothing, bearing and gesture.[9]

Elsewhere, I have analysed a category of contemporary art that performs a populist role by claiming to speak to ordinary people, rather than remain bound to the abstruse maunderings of the elite art world.[10] What this means in practice is simple, accessible work, often made out of branded persona, and highly marketable to billionaires and middle-class enthusiasts alike, so that the same Banksy image may hang in a blue-chip private collection and as a poster on a teenager's bedroom wall. Among the most prominent practitioners, we may think of Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami, Zeng Fanzhi, Tracey Emin, Maurizio Cattelan and, of course, Jeff Koons, or more recently Beeple.

[6] Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings. Volume 2. 1927-1934*, Michael W. Jennings/ Howard Eiland/ Gary Smith, eds., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, pp. 507-30. See also Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1989, pp. 132-3.

[7] On such claims, see Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books, New York 2008.

[8] Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of his Congo Rule*, second edition, The P.R. Warren Co., Boston, Mass. 1905, pp. 39-40.

[9] See, for example, Peter W. Kunhardt Jr, *The Photographs of Abraham Lincoln*, Steidl/ Meserve-Kundhardt Foundation, Göttingen 2015.

[10] 'Elite Art in an Age of Populism', in Alexander Dumbadze/ Suzanne Hudson, eds., *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, John Wiley & Sons, Oxford 2013, pp. 39-49; 'Populist Art and the Condition of Criticism', in Hubert Locher/ Stephanie Marchal/ Beate Söntgen, eds., *Judgement Practices in the Artistic Field*, Edition Metzel/Verlag Silke Schreiber, Munich 2023.

Vangelis Vlahos, *This event has now ended (July 7, 2015),* 2016-2017, detail

There is a distinction between art which takes populism as its subject and that which seeks to be populist. In photography, think of the divide between Martin Parr, who in his recent work explicitly tries to make work about and for 'the people' out of a strongly marketised persona, and—showing here—Vangelis Vlahos who, as we shall see, alludes to political crisis and populism using a complex conceptual frame.[11]

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[11] On Parr's recent work, see Phillip Prodger, *Only Human: Photographs by Martin Parr*, National Portrait Gallery/ Phaidon Press, London 2019.
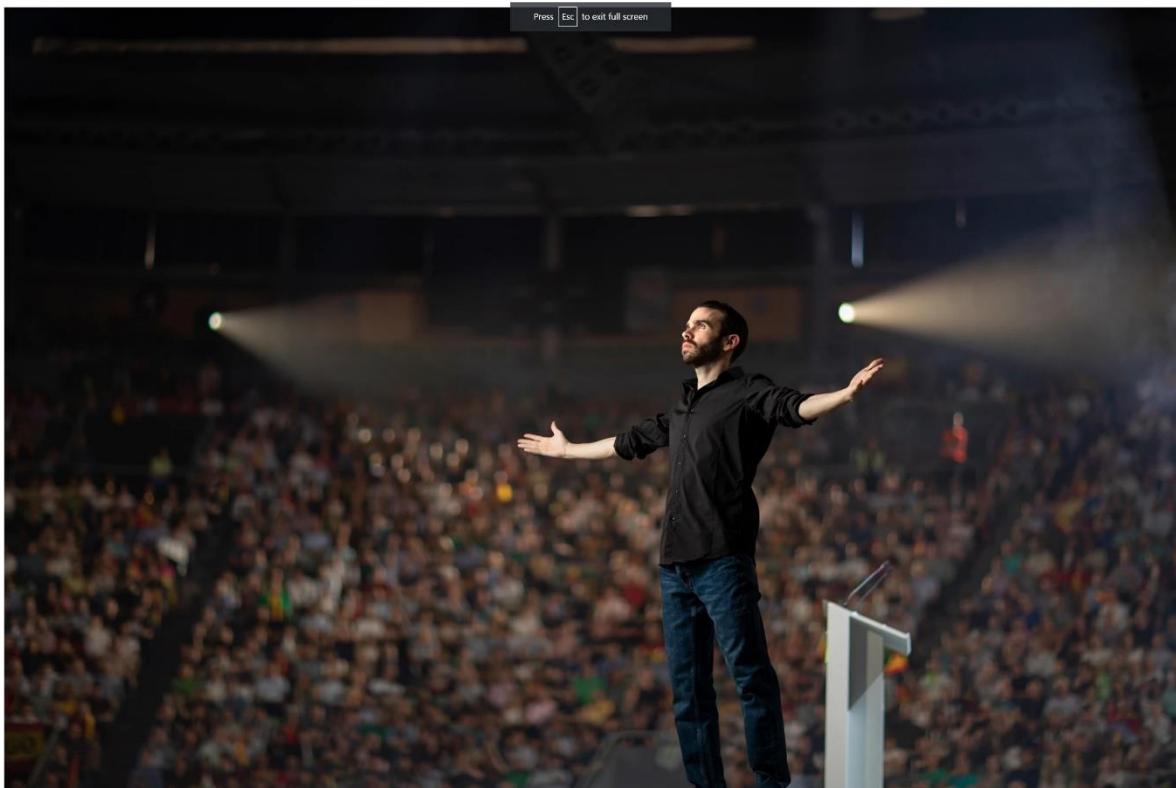
Daniel Mayrit, image from *One of Yours*, 2022

Given the close connection of photography and democracy, perhaps there are also overlaps in photographic practices which are both about populism and are populist. The work of Daniel Mayrit is a possible example, as he performs for the lens in a fictional populist campaign. We will later return to this relation and overlap. What Mayrit does very effectively is point to the camp aspects of populism which can make it difficult to disentangle critique from enactment. That camp quality was once emitted by fascism: in Natalia Ginzburg's novel, *All Our Yesterdays*, one character wonders, in the midst of the war, about the comic side of Mussolini:

> But anyhow, surely one might laugh for a moment at the comic words of Mussolini. No, said Cenzo Rena, Mussolini was no longer comic and no longer made one laugh. He had made people laugh for a very long time, when he wore spats and a top hat, and when he had himself photographed with tiger cubs in his arms, and when he walked with his hands on his hips amongst sheaves of corn and country housewives. But with every year he had become a more and more joyless thing. His big statue-like face passed through towns in motor cars, stuck itself out, big and waxy, from balconies, becoming with every year more big and more bare. And gradually everything that was made in Italy came to be

made as it were in the image of that statue-like face, even fountains and stations and post offices imitated the architecture of that face, and ministers and officials tried to look like it and succeeded, no one knew how but they succeeded, gradually they too developed immense bare, waxy heads that at once made you think of a station or a post office.[12]

The extravagant nature of populist leadership certainly has its comic side, and it is explored here by various artists. Yet as populism in many nations proves more resilient than its enemies had hoped in the light of its regimes' often lamentable performance during the pandemic, those who laughed at Bolsanaro, Johnson, Erdoğan, Modi or Trump may now feel as Cenzo Rena does.

The main exhibition of the PhotoBiennale explores the many aspects of populism through photography and video: among them, who are 'the people', do they even exist (and if so, how, when and for how long?), can they be grasped visually, are they the source of hope or dread, how are they condensed in the figures of their would-be leaders, and how do they assemble and behave in political protest? And who stands—or is put—outside 'the people', in terms of rights, living conditions and representation? And, in a linked theme, how are the visual aspects of political performance employed in the political fallout, to right, left and otherwise, from the crisis of the neoliberal centre?

The exhibition is organised in four main overlapping parts: the contested representation of mainstream politics, especially as it falls into crisis; populist leaders and their followers; those excluded from the category of the people, and how the boundaries are policed; and finally populist protest from both ends of the political spectrum.

Democracy and 'The People'?

Ever since the neoliberal turn of the late 1970s, and even more after the economic crisis that began in 2007, the basis of liberal democracy had been eroding. The major parties that had represented class blocs either transformed themselves or weakened and died, political participation went into steady, long-term decline and the election of governments had only a pallid effect over the supposedly technocratic management of the economy.[13] In many nations, all this is still the case. Given the opaque manner in which decisions are made—especially in the

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[12] Natalia Ginzburg, *All Our Yesterdays*, trans. Angus Davidson, Daunt Books, London 2022, p. 325. The novel was first published in 1952.
[13] One well-known account of this development is Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, Verso, London 2013.

EU which has efficiently insulated itself from democratic pressures—how is such a politics to be represented?[14] The issue is exacerbated by the similar forces that bear down upon journalism and the media as chronic underfunding leaves scant resources for investigative reporting, and billionaire media magnates ensure servile relations to corporations and the super-rich.[15]

Boris Mikhailov, *Parliament*, 2014–17

[14] Among a huge literature on democracy and the EU, see Perry Anderson, *The New Old World*, Verso, London 2009.
[15] A fine analysis of the weakening and corruption of the British press is Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News*, Chatto & Windus, London 2008.

Boris Mikhailov and Craig Ames deal with the representation of this faltering politics. In his series *Parliament*, Mikhailov makes photographs of glitching TV screens showing politicians at work, in which their figures are grotesquely split apart and distorted among out-of-synch scanning lines. Plainly, the series points to the stuttering and glitching of democratic politics and the media alike. It has particular resonance in Russia, where for decades Mikhailov made work as the nation moved out of and then back into autocracy, as its young democratic institutions came to function in form only, and its media were given the option of serving the regime—or extinction.

Glitching serves as a metaphor for the fissuring of the public sphere, not just in social media with its individually tailored feeds but in overtly partisan and knowingly mendacious TV channels such as Fox News.[16] The dislocated rectangles also evoke Suprematist constructions in a poignant move that both refers to the deeply split political and artistic character of Russia and the Soviet Union in the late 1910s and 1920s, and to the utopian, ideal and even mystical concerns of its artists as they faced, so they hoped, a new dawn.[17] By contrast, the tawdry nature of present politics is only too evident.

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[16] That Fox News was knowingly spreading lies for commercial advantage was demonstrated in the lawsuit taken out against it by Dominion. See Sam Levine/ Kira Lerner, 'Fox and Dominion Settle for $787.5m in Defamation Lawsuit over US Election Lies', *The Guardian*, 18 April 2023.

[17] Malevich's extensive writings are a remarkable record of those ideals. See K.S. Malevich, *Essays on Art*, 2 vols., trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus/ Arnold MacMillin, Borgen Forlag, Copenhagen 1971.

Craig Ames: *Official Portraits for a Post-Truth Era: Boris Johnson*, 2019/ 2023

Ames completely covers the faces of well-known politicians, variously autocrats and authoritarian populists, with dazzle camouflage patterns. It is surprising how recognisable the figures remain from the clues of head shape, dress and stance. Dazzle camouflage is meant to confuse the onlooker about the speed and direction of travel, and this serves as a good analogy for the ways in which politicians distract from their services to big business, especially by invoking enemies—whether it be migrants or those on welfare or 'cultural Marxists or those who question conventional gender roles—from within the security of their distinctive sartorial armour. In these series, both Mikhailov and Ames play with caricature. This simplicity of address

could itself be called populist, but there is a sense in which the manner and often the success of such overt and shameless political manipulation calls for a direct and plain redress.

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

Bani Abidi grew up in Pakistan, a nation which has faced fundamental challenges to its very existence. Its boundaries were hastily drawn by British colonial officials with criminal indifference to the consequences, it split apart in 1971 when Bangladesh seceded, and its intermittent democracy has wilted under the constant shadow of the military. So the illusion of natural nationhood is weaker there than in more secure and settled nations. A sense of the artificiality and absurdity of power and privilege marks much of Abidi's work, with its strong current of wry, detached yet sardonic satire. In *The Reassuring Hand Gestures of Big Men, Small Men, All Men*, the way that male leaders use their hands is examined in a mock typology that highlights the rhetoric of power and the illusion of control. These leaders are very various, spanning technocrats, populists and even revolutionaries, and include John F. Kennedy, Fidel Castro, Winston Churchill, Muammar Gaddafi and Narendra Modi. In drawings, Abidi has similarly anatomised the forms of security barriers and the intercoms that control access to wealthy

homes in Karachi.[18] The politicians' gestures are another form of bulwark against the poor and the unruly.

Carey Young, *We the People (After Pierre Cavellat)*, 2013

Carey Young also foregrounds gender in her sustained work about the judiciary. In her monumental photograph, *We, The People*, a judge's robes and wig hang on a washing line, pointing to the unrepresentable character of modern political power and the law. Or, in her video work, *Appearance*, in which we are confronted with judges in person—all women—the

[18] See Nada Raza, 'The Politics of Space', in Anne Dawood, ed., *Bani Abidi: Videos, Photographs and Drawings*, Green Cardomon, London 2009, pp. 68-9.

paradox of the law's embodiment is made plain, as the signs of aging, make-up, small marks of disorder and personal quirks of dress and self-presentation meet the regalia of office. In some close-ups, we can see a judge's pulse: the two bodies of the king, indeed.

Carey Young, *Court Artist (Supreme Court)*, 2023

At the PhotoBiennale, Young shows a related work, *Court Artist (Supreme Court)*, showing a photograph of a photograph of the US institution about which intense controversy has swept, particularly over women's rights to abortion. The artist's profile—recognisably female—appears sharply reflected in the picture's glass while the Court members, all but one male, are thrown out of focus. Thus the faces of justice are blurred into a generic projection of a sinister patriarchy.

While Abidi and Young examine the projection of power through bodily presence, Stefanos Tsivopoulos and Vangelis Vlahos do so through architecture, décor and bureaucratic apparatus. Both made works following the financial crisis as Greece came close to economic collapse. Austerity was the bitter medicine widely prescribed, although in Greece from 2010 it was applied in a particularly severe and drastic form, and later enforced by SYRIZA and the EU against the democratically expressed will of the Greek electorate, which had voted in a referendum to reject the treatment.
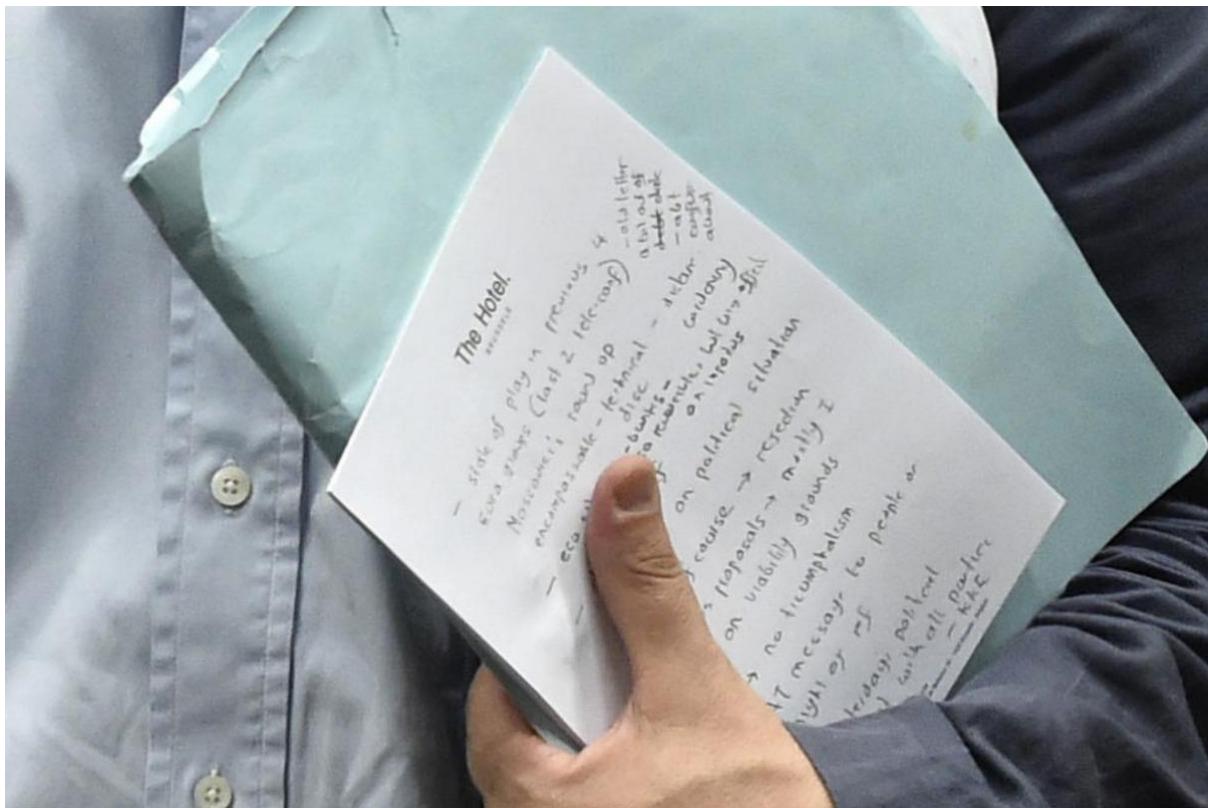
Vangelis Vlahos, *This event has now ended (July 7, 2015),* 2016-2017, detail

Vlahos elaborates a moment in which, during a 2015 Eurogroup emergency meeting in Brussels, Greek Finance Minister, Euclid Tsakalotos, posed for photographs with his notes visible to the cameras. Since this was just after the bailout referendum, the prospect of betrayal hung in the air. Naturally, what was visible in the notes was pored over for clues about the government's intentions, especially on social media, as this photographic revelation illuminated a fragment of what would normally have been hidden from the electorate whose will was about to be flouted.

Vlahos' work is a conceptual presentation of the evidence to be deciphered. We see a grid of found photographs of the documents as held by Tsakalotos, a timeline of his activity that day, and a list of words picked out from the images. In an emulation of bureaucratic form, it calmly presents its materials, leaving viewers to arrive at an interpretation. Vigilance is a duty of democratic citizens but is has lately often lapsed into pathological forms in conspiratorial thinking.[19] So Vlahos suggests that the ordered bureaucratic and technocratic procedure of mainstream politics may work to produce, through its secrecy and immunity to democratic pressure, the irrationality of conspiracy theory.

[19] For an analysis of the culture of conspiracy theory, see Kit Messham-Muir/ Uroš Čvoro, *The Trump Effect in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture: Populism, Politics and Paranoia*, Bloomsbury, London 2023, ch. 1.

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

In *Geometry of Fear*, Tsivopoulos used a period during the crisis when Parliament was suspended to video the assembly chamber, making a quiet, reserved and uncanny work. The neoclassical order of the architecture and décor is set against what viewers know to be the clamorous debates that flanked the hiatus, which was itself a sign of the depth of the crisis. In one moment in the video, Tsivopoulos subtly alludes to this divide: for the most part, all of the microphones that stand before each seat point in roughly the same direction, but at one point the camera dwells on two that face each other as if in confrontation. Tsivopoulos has also made work using the archives of the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation. These became victims of the financial crisis and were shut down—temporarily for they were reopened by the new SYRIZA government. During the time when it seemed that the archives had been consigned to oblivion, the artist commented about this remarkable assault on Greek collective memory that the loss was deeper and more traumatic than the economic one: 'there might be creditors of money but there can't be creditors of history'.[20]

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[20] Quoted in Hilde de Bruijn, 'Archive Crisis, or Shaking Up the Shelves of History: Media Images from the Recent Political Past of Greece', in Stefanos Tsivopoulos, *Archive Crisis: Shaking Up the Shelves of History*, Japsam Books, Princeton 2015, p. 5.

Leaders and Followers

A major feature of many populist movements—especially but not only those of the authoritarian right—is that they rest upon charismatic and divisive leaders who condense and embody their political power. Right-wing populist movements have a strong urge to cut out corruptible intermediaries, even political parties, which become mere vehicles for the projection of the leader's persona.[21] The paradox of these figures is that, as an embodiment of their chosen people, they have to appear as simultaneously typical and exceptional.

Charlie Chaplin, still from *The Great Dictator*, 1940

Adorno pointed to the extreme narcissism of these little big men who magnify common characteristics to cartoonish excess, continually craving adoration without ever giving it, and flaunting their power and libido. Hitler, his prime example, was a bizarre composite of King Kong and a suburban barber. Adorno connected the appeal of this contradictory persona to the painful mismatch between the promise of autonomy offered by bourgeois ideology, and the

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[21] Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?*, Penguin Books, n.p. 2017, pp. 35-6.

constricting life experiences of work and consumption that undermine and shatter the self.[22] Without reducing populism to fascism, much of what Adorno wrote still applies.[23] To take a recent example, Silvio Berlusconi shared many of the characteristics and conditions of many Italian middle-class males: he had affairs, corrupt dealings and problems with the law, but did so on a massively magnified scale.

Vladmir Putin, 2015

Such leaders perform power through speech acts—and their visual equivalents—which bind up utterance, image, gesture and action.[24] While all politicians attempt to summon up realities with their words, populists lay stress on these performative actions, often as signs of dynamism and authenticity in rough and provocative words and behaviour. So, to think of Berlusconi once again, among many provocations, he caused a scandal with a scurrilous schoolboy jibe about Angela Merkel's physique (look it up if you don't remember). The male leaders tend to project

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[22] Theodore Adorno, 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda', in Andrew Arato /Eike Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, Continuum, New York 1982, pp. 126-7.

[23] For an excellent analysis of the differences, see Enzo Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*, trans. David Broder, Verso, London 2019.

[24] J.L. Austin, 'Performative Utterances', in *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1961.

bodily excess as a symbol of power (Trump, Modi, Putin and Johnson); female leaders tend towards a cross-dressing projection of business-like masculinity (Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni, among others). Since such performances are needed to keep populist movements fired up, their leaders are condemned to endlessly and insistently repeat them. Thus, as has often been pointed out, Trump did not allow his election as President to put a stop to his continual campaigning. We are not far from artistic persona and performance here—not far, in fact, from the media presence of Warhol and all who have followed him.[25]

Daniel Mayrit, *One of Yours*, 2022, as installed in *Spectre of the People*

This affinity is made crystal clear in Daniel Mayrit's photographic simulation of a populist campaign in which the artist performs as the leader, complete with posters, balloons and a cardboard cut-out figure. Heavily branded, marketed and stage-managed, his handsome, cheesily charismatic leader bravely confronts his enemies (in the guise of a young Black man), greets his star-struck fans, and receives the endorsement of celebrities, including Berlusconi and the Pope. Like Putin—though not shirtless—he poses with a horse. Although the project is mostly about images, the candidate does offer a manifesto. It reads, in part:

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[25] For an attempt to bring out some of the parallels between artistic and political populist performance, see Messham-Muir/ Čvoro, *The Trump Effect*.

We have to put our people first. Our people, first. In a world with no respect for our traditions, without values and without order, who should we trust but ourselves? They think we are outdated. They feel ashamed of our customs when they are surrounded by their cultural elites. They despise the Christian roots of our civilization. They hate our traditions, but respect those of others above all else. They forget the teachings of our parents and grandparents. They defend as fanatics that men and women should hate each other, and they teach that to our children in our schools.

It is an all-too-familiar script, and Mayrit needs only slight exaggeration to tip it into the realm of parody. This project, *One of Yours*, systematically highlights the specific character of right-wing populist manipulation as carried out through photography.

Canto VI

The Recrudescent

Craig Ames, *The Infernal Divide: Canto IV: The Recrudescent*, 2019/ 2023

There is some shared territory with Craig Ames in his series, *The Infernal Divide*, in which he collages found images of populist leaders, both from the left and the right, into fragments of Gustave Doré's illustrations to Dante's *Inferno*. Dante's writings, of course, have held huge sway over Western imaginings of hell, and Doré illustrations remain their most influential visual interpretation, so one well-worn set of tropes meets another in caricature, as the over-the-top rhetorical gestures of Ames' politicians echo those of the tortured and their tormentors. The dramatically altered scene of Brexit-ridden Britain is seen here as an uncanny hell, both weird and familiar, bestrode by the ludicrous juggernauts of its invention.

Joan Fontcuberta & Pilar Rosado, *Beautiful Agony*, 2021, as installed in *Spectre of the People*

Among the qualities that male populist leaders try to project—and this is more than implied in Mayrit's work—is that political vigour as expressed through the body may be linked to sexual potency. A subset of those leaders (for example, Berlusconi, Johnson and Trump) have made a point of publicly flaunting their sexual profligacy, and the endless jokes about their sex lives only serve to reinforce their charisma for a certain class of fan. Using deep-fake technology, Joan Fontcuberta and Pilar Rosado push this association into absurdist territory, simulating explicitly what is merely implicit in the dress, swagger and leering persona of certain populist leaders. We

may know something about the affairs of these politicians but we certainly don't want to *see* them. Yet, entering Fontcuberta and Rosado's installation, we encounter in grotesquely exaggerated form a few notorious Lotharios undergoing the *petit mort*. If such figures normally teeter on the edge of a risky erotic frisson, the artists launch them into the abyss of ridicule and repulsion.

Sinna Nasseri has travelled extensively across the US, documenting its divided political culture, not only at rallies and other campaign events but also among people in their daily lives. He has made short videos of Trump supporters who certainly make the supposed potency of their hero a theme of their performances—painting 'Fuck Covid' and Trump's face onto their naked breasts, or brandishing flag and shield as a portly Trumpian Captain America.

Sinna Nasseri, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 2020

In thoughtfully composed images, Nasseri has particularly photographed the deep divide over Black Lives Matter—the protests, the often violent police response, and the battles over memorialisation, in which unofficial counter-monuments have been built to commemorate those killed by the police, and old Confederate monuments to white supremacy have come under attack. More generally, Nasseri presents a wide-angle panorama of US society and of its often

politically and economically precarious population as they struggle in a febrile, polarised and heavily armed political scene.

Christian Lutz, from the series *Protokoll*, 2003-7

Shortly before the financial crisis, Christian Lutz published a fascinating photographic series about the polite conduct of mainstream politics, especially the reserved, bureaucratic means of conveying distinction—the tailored suits, red carpets and banquets, the architecture of democracy, occasionally garlanded with confected shreds of regalia such as military ribbons, ceremonial robes and coats of arms.[26]

Later, shocked by the rise of right-wing populism in his own country, Switzerland, Lutz embarked on a project to photograph its political and cultural manifestations across Europe, and the environment out of which they emerge. The result is a bleak and compelling vision which describes, analytically but not without sympathetic insight, the attempts of populist supporters to

[26] Christian Lutz, *Protokoll*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zurich 2007.

find a footing in a decaying environment which is a clear register of their abandonment by the political elite.

Christian Lutz, image from *Citizens*, 2021

Lutz fixes on the shoddy and unkempt character of this environment, strewn with trash, and the often careless and cack-handed attempts at order and cultural assertion. Historic buildings are dilapidated and neglected, or jammed up against ugly modern structures. Amid all of this, Lutz's subjects, when they are not drifting alone through the dispiriting landscape in extreme ennui, gather together in quasi-military parades, brandish weapons or dress up as monarchs.[27] Dark threats seem to lurk behind these mundane and sometimes pathetic scenes. Lutz's work effectively inhabits the world of Félix Guattari's *Three Ecologies* in which psychic, social and ecological damage reverberate against and reinforce each other—to produce alienation, fear and hatred.[28]

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[27] Christian Lutz, *Citizens*, Edition Patrick Frey, Zurich 2021.
[28] Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar/ Paul Sutton, Bloomsbury, London 2014.

While the friend-enemy relation may be one basis for political power, populists are marked out by the overt manner in which they pick out and target their chosen enemies for denunciation and open them to violence.[29] Kimberly dela Cruz's courageous photographic work in the Philippines shows a scene in which political charisma and populist mobilisation harnessed the apparatus of the state to kill tens of thousands of victims. President Rodrigo Duterte—seen in one of dela Cruz's images in full flow at a rally—selected drug dealers as his mobilising enemy, promising the electorate that he would order the police to kill them, and pack out the funeral parlours.[30]

Kimberly dela Cruz , Rodrigo Duterte raises his fist during his presidential campaign in Manila on May 7, 2016, days before he won the election by 6 million votes.

Dela Cruz's work is the result of deep immersion in the lives of those blighted by this state violence, as they mourn their loved ones, support one another, and try to halt the death squads and get justice for their victims. Proximity and sympathy are united in her photographs, as with consummate skill she uses available light—often that of the urban night—fine composition and

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[29] On the friend-enemy distinction as the basis of politics, the influential and notorious statement is Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1996.
[30] These remarks were widely reported. See, for example, Radhika Chalasani, 'The Philippines' Deadly Drug War', *CBS News*, 3 November 2016.

sequencing of the work to produce a cogent and emotionally powerful account of the consequences of this fascistic policy.

All state power is lethal. It is deadly in the slow violence, to take just a couple of examples, of the refusal to act against air pollution or to assure the safety of the railways.[31] It is there—usually in secret—in the drones and death squads sent out nightly to murder anyone in the vicinity of those whom algorithms have fingered as likely enemies.[32] The death squads in the Philippines are a flagrant instance of a wider practice, in which the dead are paraded to terrify the poor and stiffen the political resolve of those who like to think of themselves as superior.

DISNOVATION.ORG, *ONLINE CULTURE WARS*, 2018-2019, detail

This current of lethality should be borne in mind when looking at DISNOVATION.ORG's *Online Culture Wars* map, a superficially entertaining taxonomy of political characters, images and memes. Their poster and wall chart maps the ocean of mainstream politics and populism between the longitudes of authoritarian and libertarian, and the latitudes of economic left and

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[31] See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2013.
[32] Jeremy Scahill, *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*, Nation Books, New York 2013; and also my book, *Killing for Show: Photography, War and the Media in Vietnam and Iraq*, Rowman and Littlefield, London 2020, chs. 13 & 14.

right. So, for example, Steven Bannon and Pinochet occupy the authoritarian right corner, and Chomsky and Anonymous the libertarian left.

The chart is complemented by a video, *The Persuadables*, which explores the particular character of online manipulation as politics is filtered through social media and the smart-phone interface. DISNOVATION.ORG's work takes up the tradition of Dada, Situationism, tactical media and hactivism, raising political awareness through Quixotic actions such as trying to user-profile the digital monopolies.[33]

DISNOVATION.ORG, *THE PERSUADABLES*, 2019, video still

If for Neil Postman television was a massive assault on the seriousness, depth of engagement and sustained reasoning that once characterised print culture, the current engines of distraction, addiction and polarisation are another few turns of the screw.[34] And if oil and gas companies have knowingly trashed the ecosphere and endangered the human species, it should be of little surprise that the digital media monopolies will not allow the 'externalities' of far-right threats to

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[33] See Alessandro Ludovico, 'Profiling the Profilers (Excessive Big-Mining Data as a Riposte Strategy)', in DISNOVATION.ORG, *From Surveillance Capitalism to Glitch Capitalism*, Lighting Source, Milton Keynes 2020, n.p.
[34] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Methuen, London 1987; for a striking analysis of the effects of the new media culture, see James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*, Verso, London 2018.

democracy, a mental health epidemic and an increasingly autophagic culture to stand in the way of maximising users' exposure to adverts.

All this said, DISNOVATION.ORG's chart cannot show the marked distortion in the media panorama between left and right, definitively demonstrated by Yochai Benkler and his collaborators in their book, *Network Propaganda*.[35] On the right, the nuttiest stories and images circulate and are amplified; on the left even plausible lies— for example, the charge that, given his long friendship with Jeffrey Epstein, Trump might be a paedophile—have a short life before extinction by fact-checking. The result is that left populists, armed with assault rifles, are not to be found storming Washington pizza restaurants to rescue the children supposedly enslaved there by the Clintons and other cosmopolitan Satanists.

The Excluded

Daniel Leal-Olivas, UK Independence Party Leader Nigel Farage poses during the launch of a national poster campaign urging voters to choose to leave the EU ahead of the EU referendum, in London June 2016.

If 'the people' often falter as they come into representation, those who are excluded from the category by various political actors are often exposed to lurid imaging as they are imagined as enemies. This part of the exhibition juxtaposes some images that satirise the excluded alongside those that attempt to humanise them, and envision them asserting their civic rights. It would be invidious to show right-wing images that demonise out-groups (one may think of Nigel Farage's

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[35] Yochai Benkler/ Robert Faris/ Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Oxford University Press, New York 2018. See the extract in this catalogue.

hate-mongering poster for the Brexit campaign that showed a long queue of non-white immigrants, along with the slogan 'Breaking Point'). Both right and left populisms seek to exclude various groups from 'the people': while both agree that the established elite should be excluded, the left also targets the super-rich, and the right refugees and migrants. The neoliberal 'centre', in contrast, while it rarely uses the words 'the people' without qualification, spurns many of those who vote for populists, as in Hillary Clinton's self-sabotaging remarks about the Trump-supporting 'deplorables'.

Paolo Pellegrin's photographic series, *Sevla*, provides an accomplished humanist account of a group of Roma living in Italy. The photographic tradition of humanism, widely thought to be defunct at the end of the twentieth century, has undergone a revival in the age of the NGO and digital media. Within that broad field, a few highly skilled practironers, of which Pellegrin is one, can hold to the old ways and make photographs that self-consciously evoke the greats of the 1930s or the 1950s.[36] As with dela Cruz's project, although in less traumatic circumstances, Pellegrin engages in a deep, long-term and ongoing engagement with his subjects.

Paolo Pellegrin, image from *Sevla*, 2015-ongoing

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[36] For an excellent account of the current state of humanism in photojournalism, see Helen Lewandowski, *Humanism Revisited: The Aesthetics and Distribution of Photojournalism, 2000 to 2020*, PhD Thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2023.

Living in poor circumstances on the outskirts of Rome, this extended Roma family attracted Pellegrin because of their closeness and devotion to each other:

> I love these people, I love this family, and I feel so comfortable with them. I like the work that I'm doing. So, I decided to continue making the series. Three years later, every time I go to Rome, I see them.[37]

Underlying this celebration of human intimacy, however, is the dark undertow of Italy's long history of right-wing populist rule—from Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Salvini's Lega to Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia. While no government in Italy has exactly been a friend to the Roma, all of these have declared them as an enemy, encouraging hate crimes against them, and subjecting them to police harassment, eviction and even deportation. The leader of the current government, Giorgia Meloni, is an open admirer of Mussolini who also persecuted and expelled the Roma. Against such racism, Pellegrin insists on the humanity of his subjects, and may imply that mainstream society—beset by loneliness, angst and mental illness—has something to learn from them.

Edgar Kanaykõ Xakriabá, The camera as a bow and arrow, a tool with which to resist and fight, 2017

Despite certain visual similarities, Edgar Kanaykõ's work with indigenous people in Brazil is distinct from Pellegrin's humanist documentary mode: Kanaykõ is first not an outsider looking

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[37] Rena Silverman, 'Paolo Pellegrin: Sevla', Magnum site, 9 July 2018: https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/society-arts-culture/paolo-pellegrin-sevla/

in but an indigenous Xakriabá person; second, his photography is indissociable from his activism for the cause of his people—in defence of their rights to the land and their environment against the interests of loggers, miners and the beef industry; third, that Kanaykõ, as his statement for this catalogue makes clear, makes his work out of an indigenous world view which takes in the sentience of not only people but animals, plants and certain objects.

Kanaykõ's work shown here was made during the years of Bolsanaro's rule, during a deadly populist alliance of the military, police and armed militias, evangelical Christians and agribusiness which declared indigenous people the political enemy—a primitive obstacle to Brazil's economic progress which lay in the exploitation of the Amazon.[38] Facing this existential threat, Kanaykõ's photography celebrates indigenous culture and activism alike. Where, for example, Sebastião Salgado's poetic photography of indigenous life in the Amazon vaunts and seeks to defend a prelapsarian and Edenic world of forest living, unsullied by modernity or commerce, Kanaykõ's work shows active subjects, protesting and making their own media.[39]

Edgar Kanaykõ Xakriabá, Indigenous blood—not a drop more: people of all regions of the country meet in a mass movement against attacks on their rights and territories, 2022

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[38] For an account of the Bolsanaro regime and Lula's recent victory, see André Singer, 'Lula's Return', *New Left Review*, January-February 2023, pp. 5-32.
[39] Sebastião Salgado, *Amazónia*, Taschen, Cologne 2021.

The narrow victory of Lula over Bolsanaro in October 2022 has granted indigenous people some reprieve but has also showed that the forces that drive the destruction of the Amazon remain powerful and dangerous—and not just to their immediate victims but to us all.

While the Roma and indigenous people have long suffered from being declared outside the normal rules of politics and rights, there are occasions in which groups of people are suddenly thrust into that position. It is remarkable that in the 2016 Brexit referendum, the three million EU citizens who lived in the UK had no vote. In the wake of the result, as the Conservative government held to a 'hard Brexit' that would mean leaving the single market, the rights of those people were plunged into a realm of bewildering uncertainty, which was added to the disturbing realization that many Leave supporters were motivated by xenophobia. The hard Brexit decision was made to court the loyalty of those who hated and mistrusted immigrants: in a threatening speech, Prime Minister Theresa May had labelled the members of an ill-defined cosmopolitan elite as outsiders, saying 'if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere.'[40] Given such official sanction and the vast number of anti-immigrant stories marched through the right-wing media, there was a steep rise in xenophobic and racist abuse and assaults.[41]

Uta Kögelsberger, postcard from *Uncertain Subjects*, 2017-2020

Uta Kögelsberger, an EU citizen long settled in the UK, made a complex series of works about this deep transformation, entitled *Uncertain Subjects*. She photographed people affected by Brexit

[40] 'Full Text: Theresa May's Conference Speech', *The Spectator*, 5 October 2016.
[41] For an analysis, see Ros Taylor, 'Hate Crime Did Spike After the Referendum – Even Allowing for Other Factors', *LSE Blog*, 19 March 2018; https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/03/19/hate-crime-did-spike-after-the-referendum-even-allowing-for-other-factors/

in their homes, baring their bodies to signal their new vulnerability, looking into the lens and relaying their views about the situation. To take just one example, Phil Laidler, a strategy consultant and a British citizen, states that 'There is no place for me in a country of intolerance, fear, delusion and isolation.'

First sent out as postcards in a mail art project and later shown on billboards and in public performances, these images highlighted the sense of deep disorientation, disgust and shame that many people, British and EU citizens alike, felt about the referendum result, not to mention the chaotic and noxious process that followed. Some of Kögelsberger's subjects are privileged people—doctors, business people, artists and academics—who suddenly found themselves in the unusual position of being unmoored from their rights.

Uta Kögelsberger, *Uncertain Subjects*, 2017-2020, as installed in *Spectre of the People*

As in Azoulay's analysis of photography as a claim to citizenship rights under an implicit civil contract, in Kögelsberger's portraits these uncertain subjects direct their gaze at the viewer to

assert their rights as citizens.[42] Their bare shoulders point to the alternative, to the animal conditions of those expelled from the political realm into a 'bare life' reduced to biological function, of whom the archetypal contemporary figure is the refugee.[43]

Once a political enemy has been declared and the category of 'the people' is delineated, its borders must be policed: internally by racist and xenophobic institutions, and externally with physical barriers. Right-wing populists take as one of their core values a hostility to immigration which is presented as a threat to the ethnic, religious and cultural homogeneity that cements the people together, and must be defended from dilution, pollution, swamping and the like. In Hungary, Victor Orbán has stated that the Western world is committing suicide through the combination of immigration and its low birth rate, against which nemesis he pitches a white, heterosexual, fertile, Christian and patriotic alternative. '[…] we stopped the Turks at Vienna', he says, and must continue the long fight for racial purity.[44]

Rafał Milach, image from *I Am Warning You*, 2019

[42] Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*.
[43] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998.
[44] Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 31st Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp, 23 July 2022, *About Hungary* site, 25 July 2022.

Rafal Milach's series, *I Am Warning You*, examines the physical infrastructure of the Hungarian barrier against incursions from the east: 500 kilometres of fencing and wire meant to keep out refugees, mostly from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. The title is taken from an automatic message which is broadcast in various languages near the electric fence:

> Attention, attention. I'm warning you that you are at the Hungarian border. If you damage the fence, cross illegally, or attempt to cross, it's counted to be a crime in Hungary. I'm warning you to hold back from committing this crime. You can submit your asylum application at the transit zone.

Milach has also made a series about Trump's border wall with Mexico, another redoubt of purity. Trump, of course, only augmented what had already been put in place by his predecessors, including George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Rafał Milach, image from *I Am Warning You*, 2019

In Milach's display for the PhotoBiennale, the images form a single strip—an uninterrupted visual barrier. In a restrained, factual style, they show the drones, fences, watchhouses, guards,

dogs and cameras. Rolls of razor wire edge rural lanes or cut through farmers' fields and woodland. The ugliness and aggression of these mostly steel-grey structures of exclusion are set against calm, sylvan landscapes. Milach states that he is 'interested in how the ideology manifests in architecture. Orban's wall—or rather fence—is a strong pillar of anti-migrant propaganda and fuels the right wing populist policy of Hungarian government.'[45] Thus the grey barrier is a baleful emanation of Orbán's quasi-democracy.

In writing of Milach's work, Ziemowit Szczerek reminds us of how Hungary was radically shrunk after its defeat in World War I so that the borders now so assiduously defended were those imposed by the victors. Their aggressive policing, he suggests, is a form of nationalist compensation.[46]

On the right, those excluded from 'the people' are migrants, 'welfare cheats and scroungers', racialised others, Muslims, and an elite defined less by wealth than by cosmopolitanism, higher education and professional standing. On the left, of course, it is the 1% or even the 0.1%, the materially wealthy. This elite is not merely excluded from 'the people' by the left but excludes themselves, doing as much as possible to establish separation from their threatening other—the rest of us—with landed estates, mansions, gated 'communities', limousines, helicopters, and private yachts and planes.

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[45] Rafal Milach, 'I'm Warning You: Rafal Milach on the Orban Wall', Magnum site, https://www.magnumphotos.com/newsroom/society/im-warning-you-rafal-milach-orban-wall/

[46] Ziemowit Szczerek, 'Sacred Borders' in Rafał Milach, *I Am Warning You*, GOST Books, London 2012, p. 13.

Kostas Kapsianis, Thessaloniki 2013, from the series *Bliss*

In his series, *Bliss*, Kostas Kapsianis explored Greece to make a long photographic study of the barriers that the rich erect around their property, and the architecture, urban planning and planting of this segregation. He did so over a period when the issue was at its most fraught, during the long financial crisis. As with Milach, his depictions seem to be flat assertions of fact—straightforward, detailed and restrained. His subjects are usually seen under even lighting, allowing the forms of buildings, walls and landscape to come to the fore, just as it does in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. A poolside enclave is hemmed in by concrete walls and barbed wire; the architecture of gateways and entrances, adorned with cameras and floodlights, is bare and intimidating; an ancient symbol of warning, a roaring stone lion, stands lost amid the sparse expanse of walls, fences and driveways.

next image

Kostas Kapsianis, Thessaloniki 2013, from the series *Bliss*

Kapsianis' photographs are slyly deceptive for at first they seem inoffensive yet compel an act of close attention to what we often pass by, unthinking and accepting. The tidy bushes that mark boundaries, the sleek concrete walls and the defence offered by high elevation raise the thought: what would this place look like in a society less drastically unequal? Or in a society in which more land was held in common and there was less need for demarcations and defences of property?

Lauren Greenfield, Socialite and former model Ilona Stolie with her daughter Michelle, four, in their Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired mansion situated in Rublyovka. From the series, *Generation Wealth*

The self-aware trophy wife in Lauren Greenfield's photograph, who wears a pullover declaring 'I'm a Luxury', grew up in modest circumstances and remembers a childhood of safety and free play in the streets. Now, she told the photographer, she lives behind huge, ugly fences, in fear of the dangerous Moscow that lies beyond.[47]

Greenfield's major project, *Generation Wealth*, is a complex and long-term examination, not merely of the lives of the 1% but of how a distinct idea of extreme wealth—a Hollywood fantasy—has become pervasive in the wider global culture. Many of those who are not among the 1% aspire to be so, and in the meantime to look, for a moment and a photograph, as if they are. The Hollywood model is vulgar, venal and vain, but these features are proudly worn as badges of ambition and personal excellence; it is an excess of 'bling, celebrity and narcissism' in which Versailles meets Versace; it is also, of course, the world of the Kardashians—and of Trump.[48]

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[47] Lauren Greenfield, *Generation Wealth*, Phaidon, London 2017, p. 432.
[48] Ibid., p. 11.

Lauren Greenfield, Ruby and her *damas* (maids of honour) ride from church to the reception for Ruby's *quinceañera*, Huntingdon Park, California, 2001. It was a struggle for her parents to cover the $16,000 cost of the event. From the series, *Generation Wealth*

Greenfield, who has a talent for drawing people out, makes her photographs with the willing collaboration of her subjects, many of whom she spends much time with as she tracks their changing lives. Greenfield is acutely aware of the heavily gendered roles played out in this glitzy world in which beauty is an asset, aging the opposite, and in which girls from infancy are schooled in the laborious art of becoming sexualised 'princesses'. The super-rich tend to insist on a strictly patriarchal family life.[49] In Greenfield's filmed interviews, the gilded mask is often laid aside to reveal a host of mental and physical problems—the neglect of children, eating disorders, depression, and the constant anxiety of hyper-material competition. The rich, and those who want to be so, are not happy.

Greenfield's view is a moral one in which the financial crisis was a lesson—one, as it turned out, poorly learned.[50] If a sufficiently clear mirror is held up to this culture, those who gaze into it will recoil in horror and realise that there is more to life than money. And since her mirror is of

[49] See Chrystia Freeland, *Plutocrats*, The Penguin Press, New York 2012, p. 85-7.
[50] Greenfield, *Generation Wealth*, p. 11.

remarkable clarity, perhaps some do. But the culture as a whole, insidious and increasingly global, and backed by powerful forces and continual media exposure, will not so readily evaporate.

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

An entirely different approach to the rich is taken by Dougie Wallace, a photographer who stalks his subjects in the street with a camera rigged with multiple flashguns. This apparatus gives the effect of a perverse and unforgiving fashion shoot which exposes every frailty and pretension. Wallace definitely does not collaborate with his subjects but momentarily confronts them. In his book, *Harrodsburg*, he recorded the inhabitants and passersby of a long-wealthy but rapidly changing area of London in the vicinity of the famous department store.[51] Here old English money is being driven out by Russian and Arabian oligarchs, many of whom amassed their vast fortunes in murky circumstances. As a by-product of the services offered by the City, London

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[51] Dougie Wallace, *Harrodsburg*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Stockport 2017.

has become, with government connivance, a welcoming home to the corrupt and criminal rich who are encouraged to launder their money in its superficially gentlemanly environment.[52]

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

Many of these people object to being photographed—at least like this—as can be seen in their startled or hostile expressions. Wallace's flashguns pick out the collision of body, plastic surgery, jewellery, accessorising and clothing, in which one element often undermines another. In one image, hands adorned with an expensive watch and jewellery, a Harrods' bag around the wrist, clutch *Tatler* and *The Daily Mail*, a telling ideological combination. Wallace uses photography to stage political antagonism: here an enemy is identified, picked out indeed from the background with an intense burst of light, and made to squirm. Theoretically, there is an alignment with the recent work of Chantal Mouffe, who has argued that to counter right-wing populism the left

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[52] See Rowland Atkinson, *Alpha City: How London was Captured by the Super-Rich*, Verso, London 2020, ch. 4.

needs an emotional appeal based on an openly declared antagonism towards the oligarchy. Without it, there can be no extension of democracy and no progressive hegemony.[53]

Occupations and Demonstrations

Brexit protestors at a Remain march, London 2018

Anyone who has taken a camera to a protest knows that its use can rapidly change things. Once, seeing a small group of Brexit supporters at a Remain march, I began to photograph them: the men, who seemed to have made a point of conforming to type, started to shout and gesticulate wildly. As soon as I lowered the camera, they quietened down again.

The last section of the exhibition looks at the subaltern performance of populist political dissent, including its forms of assembly and march, costumes, placards and banners—and acts made for

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[53] Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, London 2018. See the extract in this catalogue.

the camera. With the rise of social media, protest has become ever more saturated with image-making so it is unsurprising that increasingly photojournalists are arrested at protests—even in those nations that are not actively suppressing dissent—since making images of protest has become a crucially important way of protesting.

Views of the nature of popular protest are extremely various—spanning conservative denunciations of the mob as creatures of mindless passions and dangerous violence; the idea that 'the people' are contingently made anew in each of its assemblies; and the analytical view that the common forms of protest are both durable and conventional. The first, although it was long influential, need not detain us much, and is in any case less heard now that mobs often serve the right.[54] The second finds sophisticated expression in the work of Judith Butler who argues that the people, ever fluid and changeable, coheres fleetingly through protest and assembly, and takes a different form in each unique context.[55] By contrast, the conventional character of social-movement protest, and the narrow range of circumstances in which it can be sustained, has been the subject of long historical and sociological research by Charles Tilly and his collaborators.[56] From the late eighteenth century, forms of organisation and protest evolved that have remained remarkably constant, and have sought to demonstrate to bystanders and ruling powers alike their legitimacy, as expressed with firm commitment to their cause, along with the unity, worthiness and large numbers of their assembled adherents.
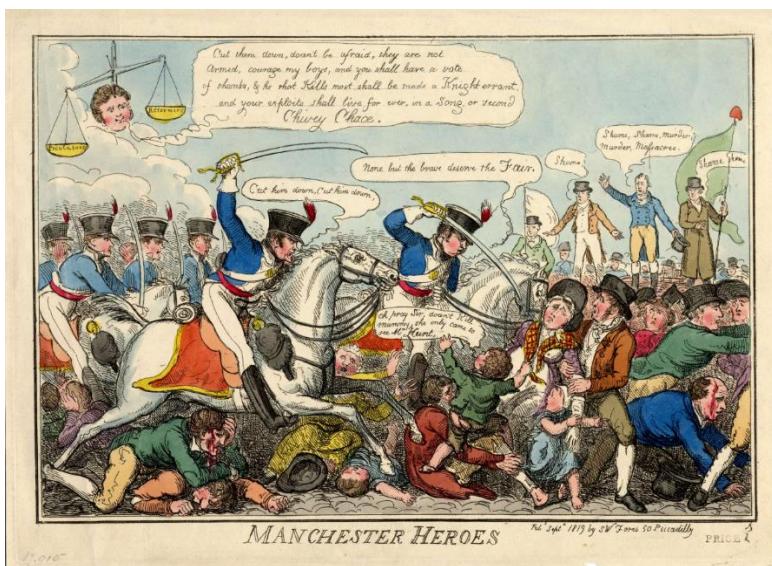
George Cruikshank, etching depicting the Peterloo Massacre, 1819

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[54] Such prejudice found systematic and influential expression in Gustave Le Bon's work, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, first published in 1895.
[55] Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2015.
[56] See, for example, Charles Tilly/ Lesley J. Wood, *Social Movements, 1769-2008: What is Different?*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder 2009.

Emerging in regimes which had some democratic component, however faint and compromised, and regularly campaigning for an extension of those rights, such protest survived and grew under the ruling powers' often fragile and wavering toleration. In 1819, one of the earliest mass demonstrations for parliamentary reform was brutally suppressed when protestors were massacred by troops at Peterloo. Protest is plainly becoming once again unviable in a variety of authoritarian regimes—for example, in Putin's Russia where it is met with immediate arrest and long prison terms. Under a populist government, which plans to allow the police to suppress any protest that causes some loosely defined 'disruption', the UK is moving in the same direction.

The uniformity of forms of protest and revolt, and their documentation, is the subject of Wolfgang Scheppe's analysis of the 1968 uprisings in Paris, *Taxonomy of the Barricade*, a remarkable archival exploration of their photography by the media, the demonstrators and the police. His book examines the genres to which such imagery conformed, and includes the first helicopter surveillance images ever made of the protesting masses.[57]

Wolfgang Scheppe,*"Barrikadenwetter" (Barricade Weather)*, 2023, as installed in *The Spectre of the People*

[57] Wolfgang Scheppe, *Taxonomy of the Barricade: Image Acts of Political Authority in Paris, May 1968*, NERO, Rome 2021.

For the display at the PhotoBiennale, entitled *Barrikadenwetter*, Scheppe, with the assistance of Sara Codutti and Eleonora Sovrani, shows a triptych which focuses on the barricade, while contrasting these three types of image-making: on the left wall, photography made by the insurgents, and on the right wall, that made by the police. In the middle, a printed curtain shows reproductions of the Parisian daily newspapers from May 1968.

The twentieth-century barricade is a social-movement phenomenon, not one of revolution, as in the past. In his history of barricades, Eric Hazan shows how they failed in the face of new military tactics, especially the use of artillery. The Paris rebellion of June 1848—in which the proletariat stood alone, isolated from their erstwhile bourgeois allies—marked the end of the barricade as an effective military barrier. As Hazan notes, the proletariat's defeat was a dismal one, falling into an abyss of silence, unmarked and unrecorded.[58]

Tilly shows that the forms of social-movement protest have not greatly changed. The same cannot, of course, be said for the making and distribution of images of protest, and the silence that befell the June events would be very difficult to achieve now. Two highly contrasting ways of representing protest culture, as it struggles to survive under authoritarian-populist regimes, known for their intolerance of opposition and frequent recourse to violence, are seen in the work of Prarthna Singh and Ana Carolina Fernandes.

Since it came to power in 2014, the BJP regime under President Narendra Modi, has been transforming India's secular governance in favour of a Hinduism nationalism which openly persecutes other religious groups. It has been remarkably successful in jailing activists, suppressing dissent and chilling the opposition, edging India steadily towards a one-party quasi-democracy.[59]

Under this authoritarian regime, protestors know that they are risking their liberty and their lives, as did Prarthna Singh when she made her series, *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh*. This portrayed women who left their working-class neighbourhood, Shaheen Bagh, to occupy a major highway in Delhi to protest a discriminatory anti-Muslim law that violated the secular constitution by basing citizenship rights on religious grounds.[60]

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[58] Eric Hazan, *A History of the Barricade*, trans. David Fernback, Verso, London 2015, pp. 95-6.

[59] Among many accounts, see Arundhati Roy, 'India's Hindu Right Are Willing to Bury Democracy', *Jacobin*, 7 October 2020; https://jacobin.com/2020/10/arundhati-roy-india-bjp-modi-delhi-protests-cremation

[60] Prarthna Singh, *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh*, self-published, New Delhi 2022.

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

In formal portraits, Singh primarily shows us the faces and the dress of the protestors as her sitters look into the lens. As in Butler's writing, a diverse group is formed for a particular purpose, cohering as a collective, and creating a contingent unity. The protesters' activism is not seen here but implied, and this artistic move has a particular logic: these women occupied a space, disrupted life around it with their bodies, barricades and encampments. Their presence

was the mainstay of their protest, and it was their bodies that they put into grave danger. To each side of the portraits, we see a pair of photographs that show the art works, graffiti and placards that the protestors had made, and then the void left after they had been destroyed by the police.

Prarthna Singh, images from *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh* (Every Evening Belongs to Shaheen Bagh), 2019-20, as installed in *Spectre of the People*

Given the fearsome reputation of the regime, anti-BJP photographic work is rare, so it is worth comparing another example—that of Gauri Gill. Using a large-format camera, she meticulously recorded the bricolaged structures erected by protesting farmers who blockaded New Delhi in a successful campaign to stop 'reforms' which would have abolished agricultural protections and destroyed their livelihoods. Both Gill and Singh honour the diverse forms of occupation in straightforward, detailed documents which highlight the type of protest in which determination and fortitude is expressed through stasis, and by building and making things.[61]

Ana Carolina Fernandes' activists protest under similar dangers. Environmental, labour and community activists in Brazil are regularly killed with the tacit encouragement of the regime, as

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[61] Gill's project is called *A Village on the Highway*. See Ravi Ghosh, 'Vehicles for Change: Gauri Gill on Capturing the Indian Farmers' Protests', *British Journal of Photography*, 8 June 2023; https://www.1854.photography/2023/06/gauri-gill-v-a-farmers-protests/

less often are the journalists who cover their actions or get too close to unveiling government corruption. Fernandes documents a rich and diverse urban culture in which she highlights the creative aspects of the protest movement—astronauts appear on the beach, which is also festooned with balloons to mark the casualties of the pandemic, statues are given Covid masks, and effigies are burnt in the street. The carnivalesque atmosphere of some of these protests are more dangerous to the regime than the temporary up-ending of hierarchies famously analysed by Bakhtin.[62]

Ana Carolina Fernandes, Pandemia: On Copacabana Beach the NGO Rio de Paz demonstrates in memory of the 100,000 Brazilians killed by Covid-19.

In contrast, this protest is persistent and evolving, and driven by the insurrectionary will to overthrow a regime that had come to power by murky judicial manoeuvrings that had removed prominent opposition candidates, including Lula, from the field. Photography and video also mark a difference: while the police will do their best to beat activists to the ground and angrily destroy the art that they have made, in images the protesters' creativity lives on and circulates.[63]

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[62] M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1984, ch. 3.
[63] See David Graeber, 'On the Phenomenology of Giant Puppets', in Catherine Flood/ Gavin Grindon, eds., *Disobedient Objects*, V&A Publishing, London 2014.

Like dela Cruz and Kanaykõ, Fernandes is a partisan photographer, dedicated to her diverse urban subjects and their insurrection.

The Archive of Public Protests, image from *Parade Square*, 2021

An equally partisan but aesthetically different work is seen in the video from The Archive of Public Protests (A-P-P), a collective which gathers and distributes photography and video of Polish protests against the authoritarian-populist Law and Justice governments. They protest its attack on abortion rights, indifference to the climate crisis, and more generally its xenophobia, homophobia and misogyny. Various A-P-P members, including Rafał Milach, edited the video from stills and short clips, setting them to music. In its amassing of images of protest logos, banners, slogans, marches, flares, costumes and gestures, it has a subterranean affinity with Scheppe's typological work. As it proceeds over a hypnotic hour, the video covers many causes and forms of protest, and towards the end has a section on the paramilitary riot police, followed by a grouping of raised middle fingers, and finally—and optimistically—the 'V for Victory' gesture. A-P-P write that the archive, far from being static documentation, can be turned to activist purposes so its material 'can become a banner in your hand, a poster on a building, a picture on a wall […] a part of a bodily gesture, an agent of transformation and political change […]'.

Stallabrass, Spectre of the People, p. 50

Nearby the A-P-P video, MacDonaldStrand show a triple-screen video called *No More Flags*. Comprised of stills of right-wing nationalist demonstrations in the UK and the US, the flags and banners carried by the protestors have been blanked out to a dead white. The camera sometimes tracks across the stills, and sometimes takes a blown-up fragment of an angry face or a macho pose. The soundtrack is of shouted English nationalist slogans. Since their aggressive chanting is assumed to produce an allergic reaction in the gallery-goer, MacDonaldStrand hold up these protesting groups for condemnation: here Butler's performative assembly is set against Le Bon's credulous and irrational crowd.

MacDonaldStrand, *No More Flags*, 2021, video still

Unlike, say, a few of the invaders of the Capitol building in January 2021 who wore bizarre costumes, many of these protestors play up their uniformity in dress, hairstyle and behaviour: as the artists state, this parallels 'the blank, monocultural and diminished society that they try to promote and celebrate'. However, as Angela Nagle and many others have shown, the malignant cultural creativity of the far- and alt-right should not be underestimated, even as it tends towards that imposition of white, patriarchal conformity that MacDonaldStrand expose.[64]

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[64] Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, Zero Books, Winchester 2017. See the extract in this catalogue. Among other sources in a large literature, see Christian Fuchs,

In *Citizens*, Lutz examined the conditions under which people move towards the far right. Dimitris Michalakis' striking photographs of the Greek crisis set the context of economic collapse and its myriad consequences, including homelessness and hunger, against the massive and sustained left-wing and anarchist demonstrations that protested the imposition of austerity. When it comes to dealing with populist governments, the EU has been notably less tolerant of those of the left than those of the right—or to put it another way, of departures from economic rather than constitutional orthodoxy. In Greece the effects were dire—economic output fell by a quarter, there was massive unemployment, especially among the young, and to make things worse, the neoliberal 'reform' imposed on the nation removed protections for workers at the very time when they were needed most.[65] In bleak and melancholic images, Michalakis describes the collapse, the revolt and its suppression.

Dimitris Michalakis, rubbish picker in Nato Avenue, in the western suburbs of Athens

While some populist governments of both left and right have engaged in mild improvements in welfare provision, much of the neoliberal armour remains intact—despite the pandemic, trade wars, military wars, and protectionist measures.[66] When the popular measures that would improve the lives of many are largely unexpressed across the political spectrum, attention moves to more pliable identity and cultural issues. Photography, born and raised with democracy and its persistent populist component, and closely entangled with both, is a crucial medium in this field of contention. We have seen that it takes many different forms: artists make work that is overtly faked or asserts the truth of its recording; they make work that is various conceptual, typological, cartographic, satirical, humanist and activist.

Daniel Mayrit, image from *One of Yours*, 2022

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[66] For a concerted argument that a real and lasting change has occurred, see Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Great Recoil: Politics After Populism and Pandemic*, Verso, London 2021.

To return to the issue of the overlap between photography made about populism and populist photography, one point of their intersection may be in the work of Mayrit, Fontcuberta and Rosado—a witty, camp mode in which (as in the writings of Oscar Wilde) surface lightness is the lure for serious intent. We may wonder who is in on the joke, and who is the assumed superior viewer that is set against the uneducated rubes who fall for the macho strutting of populist leaders. Such work implicitly constructs another 'people', one open to a lighter, more playful, and less cruel humour than Angela Nagle's right-wing trolls and their descendants. Another overlap may be found in the accessible, collaborative, partisan and participatory documentary of protest which, at least ideally, unites artists, subjects and viewers in a populist rebellion against oppression. Again, the challenge here, as raised by MacDonaldStrand, is that those creative forms invented on the left are now also found in the insurgency of the right. This work, like that of Dougie Wallace, is open in its antagonism: unlike the pallid technocracy of left-wing parties that promise the more efficient management of an unchanged system, such art identifies the enemies, and delineates a people forged in oppression and resistance.