

Simon Sheikh
**Positively
Protest
Aesthetics
Revisited**

e-flux journal #20 — november 2010 Simon Sheikh
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The relationship between picturing and politicking has long been a concern of political movements, as well as of politically minded artists. And so both asked: how to make representations political without being caught up in the politics of representation? How to be politically “correct” in one’s production of images? These were, famously, the problems posed by Walter Benjamin’s essay on the artist as producer, a text that Hito Steyerl deliberately mirrors, if not quotes, in her polemical essay “The Articulation of Protest.” Her text also gained notoriety almost instantaneously when it was first published on the by-now-legendary *republicart* website shortly after the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999, an event – most crucially, one that was broadcasted through Indymedia – that became one of the two examples employed by Steyerl in her investigation of two terms: *articulation* and *montage*.¹

The first term, articulation, stems from political theory, and the second, montage, from filmmaking, and together as well as apart they are put into play by Steyerl in connection with political action. And this is exactly where the polemics and controversy lie: how does one depict a political movement, and how does a movement visualize itself? If there is an aesthetics of protest – as suggested by the Indymedia film production *Showdown in Seattle*, as well as the historical example Steyerl contrasts it with, Godard and Mieville’s *Here and Elsewhere* – is there also a set of images produced by the protest itself, and not only through representations of it? In other words, Steyerl asks if a movement organizes itself around a sequence of images, around what she calls a montage:

How are different protest movements mediated with one another? Are they placed next to one another, in other words simply added together, or related to one another in some other way?

Although both examples are used as just that, as *examples* of political imagery, it is clear that Steyerl has more sympathy for Godard and Mieville’s agonizing over possible juxtapositions of images than for Indymedia’s journalistic claims of authenticity, which have obviously irked many media activists and Indymedia associates alike.

What is at stake is the very nature of the assemblage – whether images are placed next to each other on a single visual plane or sequentially, as the famous minimalist dictum would have it. Steyerl suggests that this is not so simple an operation, not politically, aesthetically,

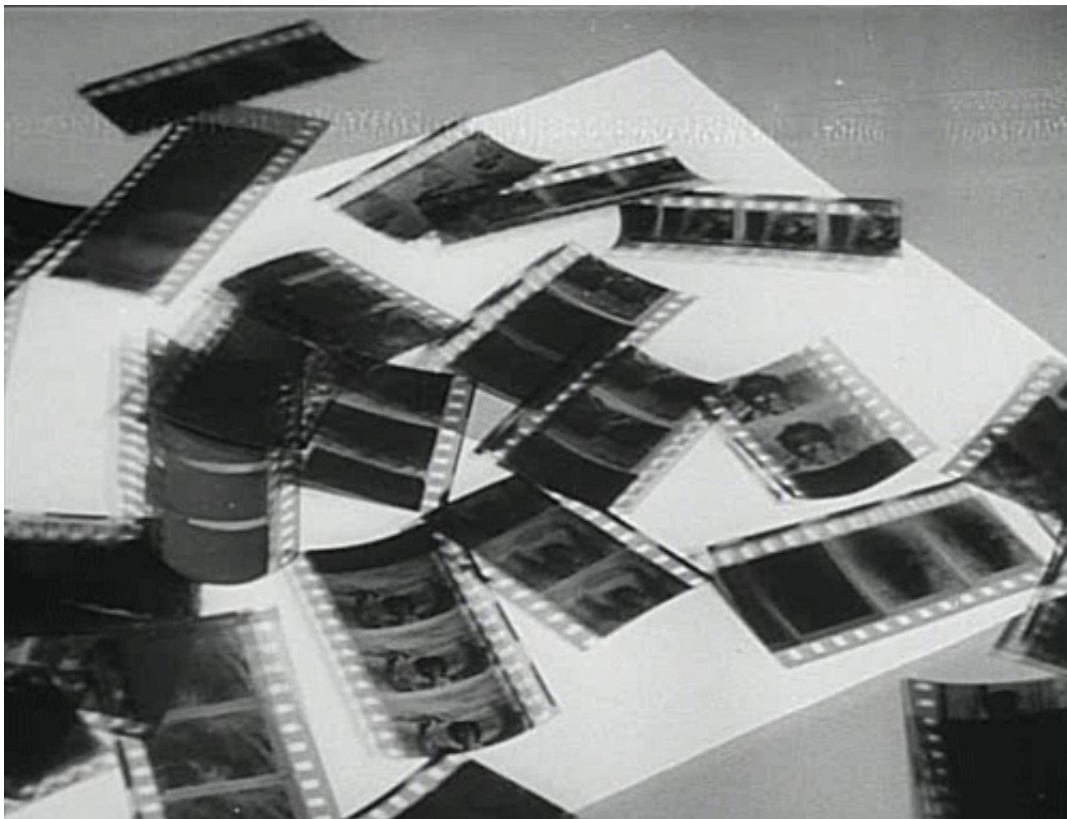
or, for that matter, political-aesthetically, since images in a montage always follow each other in a particular sequence, an order that forms meaning and discourse, that produces the subject of politics. So the order of the sequence constitutes the movement's articulation, not its expression: with montage articulation always becomes narration through the decision to include this image and not that one, to place this image before that one, or this image after that one, and so forth. And this is precisely where the dispute over image production resides. I have met several media activists who read no further than Steyerl's opening gambit, not because of the essay's level of abstraction, but due to the implications for political imaging as political action.

Or, to put it more concretely: the camera's placement in the field of action during actual protests, as well as how, and how quickly, the captured images are edited and distributed, mean that action, and presence within the field and temporality of action, dictate how the image is produced, and thus how a *protest* is represented rather than any predetermined aesthetic program. Steyerl's critics have frequently made the counter-argument that there is no time for aesthetic reflection in the

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very moment, the very act, of filming during a protest, and that camera placement, and thus angles and frames, are purely pragmatic and circumstantial. The sort of stylistic awareness found in Godard and Mieville's film is a luxury one simply cannot afford on the front lines of battle: the camera needs to be right here, right now, in order to capture as much of the truth as possible. It is a matter of truth production, of having as many images as possible to counter the propaganda of the news media, shot by shot, frame by frame. And it obviously suggests an idea of the struggle over images rather unlike the one proposed by Godard and Mieville in their work, and by Steyerl as well. Without disputing the realities of being and filming in the middle of a demonstration, perhaps we can say that the very decision to place the camera and one's own body between police and protesters constitutes not only a political, but also an aesthetic decision: filmmaker as reporter as much as artist as producer? The placement of the camera and filmmaker thus not only assumes a certain notion of the factual, but also produces it, and such filmmaking tactics always privilege certain events and produce certain sequences.

Within such a discourse and visual regime, the production of images is placed in a montage



Sergei Eisenstein, filmstill from *Bezhin Meadow*, 1937.

of elements that is temporal, not so much in terms of sequence (how one image follows another), but rather in terms of velocity, in terms of speed and politics. There is no time for slowing down the image, for recomposing it, but only for the belief in capturing the image in the moment and of the moment, which is why editing needs to be fast and even minimal, in order to distribute the message as quickly as possible, preferably live. While the newscast style of a film like *Showdown in Seattle* was meant as a counterpoint to mainstream news media, applying the same sequentiality to other, presumably more truthful images than are widely available, there are in this also implications that go beyond film and speak to the very composition of the political movement itself, articulated through a montage of signs, images, and texts. Montage here becomes the form that articulates not only a chain of equivalence in terms of struggles – in the sense given to the term by the principal political theorist of articulation, Ernesto Laclau – but also an equivalence with even the images meant to be counterattacked. The images produced in this particular war of information, then, are not contested, and thus no antagonism is produced. This is what Steyerl problematizes as a politics of the “and,” of accumulative montage:

Is this a simple case of the principle of unproblematic addition, a blind “and,” that presumes that if sufficient numbers of different interests are added up, at some point the sum will be the people?

A sobering question indeed.

In place of the flattening tendencies of addition and equivalence, Steyerl proposes exponentiation as another principle of montage. The example here is Godard and Mieville’s *Here and Elsewhere*, which was itself a reframing of an unfinished film about Palestine that Godard had shot with Gorin in 1970. But rather than use extra footage or narration to complete the film, Godard and Mieville chose to make a film about the unfinished film, questioning its basic features of composition and/or politics. The very notion of the “and” and its politics of addition was supplanted by an “or,” in which images and ideologies cancel each other out and stand in conflictual relation as much as they establish equivalences. The war of information is rendered as an image war, suggesting that images cannot merely exist side-by-side in the formation of political movements, but must also sometimes erase one another, creating derepresentations as well as representations.

What is most striking about Steyerl’s text, however, is not only how it deals with images and

the politics of image-making, but how it shows the importance of images in forming political identities. Whereas (political) theory is often employed in writings on art and culture for analytical or critical purposes, Steyerl turns this equation around and instead uses theory as a method taken from artistic production itself – from the use of montage – and turns it towards politics, not analyzing aesthetics using politics, but analyzing politics using aesthetics. Although speaking from a different position than, say, Deep Dish TV, Steyerl nonetheless speaks from the trenches, as well as from a practice – namely that of a filmmaker, who is thus engaged in a war of position with regard to images. In many ways, her essay can be seen as a companion piece to her contemporaneous film *November* – itself an essay on the montage-like relationship between images and politics. In this way, an ideological critique of images must pass through the production of images, with the critic as producer.

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Hito Steyerl, "The Articulation of Protest," *republicart* (September 2002), http://www.republicart.net/disc/mundial/steyerl02_en.htm .

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