

Twitter friendly radicals

On the representation of social struggles in the 21st century

A young woman - her almond shaped face framed by somewhat strange, yet no doubt fashionable, bangs - stares towards us. Cartoon-like black eyebrows peek from behind dark, anachronistically futuristic shades. A pin is neatly pinned to her gray dress, which itself is slightly tugged by what seems to be a rather heavy, vintage (of course), leather school bag. Completing her look are a pair of transparent ballerina shoes and a black plastic watch.

This photo is part of a series by Gilad Baram named *Chic Jarrah*. Each photo is an outdoor, frontal, eye level portrait of a single person, behind whom there seems to always be a crowd of people. Beside each photo rests a small caption; it informs us of the subject's name and profession, the date the photo was taken, and confusingly, the number of protestors arrested. The title may help clear it all up: *Chic Jarrah*, a play on the name of a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem called Sheikh Jarrah. For the local viewer, Israeli or Palestinian, these two words might suffice to de-code the crux of the series – portraiture of activists in a style reminiscent of fashion blogs.

The Journalistic gaze and its shortcomings

It is a fact that social struggles and protest movements are mostly rather uneventful daily affairs, filled with routine and repetition. A protest is never an end product but always a negotiation, ever in flux. What actually “happens” most of the time, for instance in the Occupy Wall Street movement, can be described as an endless set of confused conversations, debates and assemblies. New solidarities are formed, people are informed, distances are shortened, and differences are

negotiated. A social struggle is a constant tug-of-war, not with a specific opponent or goal, but between different incarnations of a single grievance. Yet protests, struggles, are seldom depicted in this way, and for good reasons too. How does one represent a debate, a budding relationship, a shifting balance of power or new found solidarity? How is something as mundane as an ideology represented? Not an easy task! And it won't sell newspapers either. Events, on the other hand, *do*. Clashes, revolutions depicted as violent outbursts, rallies of thousands, arrests, or theatrical performances are all easily representable. They deliver a message, briefly summarized and punctuated by a gleaming title – they are witty and digestible – so unlike our own contradictory political experience. Think of the popularity of the pepper spray incident in UC Davis, or of the image of a young man who taped his mouth with a dollar bill. Of course, these images do represent a part of the OWS protest movement, but is that part proportional to the coverage it received? Are the images rich enough to capture the extremely diverse appearance of the OWS, or, as in the case of any other protest movement, what do we lose when we capture a protest only in event form? This is not to say OWS should be criticized for its popular representation, quite the opposite. The movement has, from the start, attempted to distribute a very different image of itself by way of various alternative media - its own blog, including interviews and profiles of people affected by the financial crisis, videos of assemblies, manifestos, and live streaming videos of the various camps uploaded via SmartPhones. These are no doubt all partly responsible for what success the movement had, though they may be the source of so many other protests' shortcomings. It should not be deduced, however, that “the event” must at all costs be avoided, unrepresented, negated. Events do take place, and in many cases they play an important role – both as catalysts and as symbolic, if not mythological, benchmarks. Nonetheless, representing struggles solely in event form is like representing love as a series of honeymoons, neglecting the boring moments, the repetition and the familiarity, or more generally the daily labour of it all. Events are rejuvenating, but confusing rejuvenation with the thing itself is the fast track to Botox.

The people's stage – towards realism

As was already mentioned, the photos of the Chic Jarrah series seem at first glance to resemble street fashion blogs. This style has proliferated in the past couple of years with photographers such as Scott Schuman of *Thesartorialist.com* enthusiastically being adopted by the fashion industry. Consequently, it has been said, the balance of power in the fashion world has altered, presumably enabling trends to grow from below - *from* the streets, *by* the people. Yet surely we know street fashion blogs hardly function as emancipatory agents; they depict thousands of people more as coat hangers than as live, opinionated and potent subjects. The people serve as no more than a pretext for a coy display of commodities, or perhaps, in so far as live subjects *are* presented, it is only as a brand in themselves, “CEOs of Me Inc.” as management guru Tom Peters once called it, stripped of any characteristics, solely an empty display of cultural affiliation and status. But perhaps there is more to it, or more accurately, there *may* be more to it. Even if talk of “democratization” of the fashion world by way of street fashion photography *is* farfetched - confusing 21st century market strategies with political agency - there is a kernel of truth to this claim which, in my opinion, one can and should redeem. The influx of street fashion, judged from a formalistic point of view, seems to carry with it a latent grammar of realism to be rediscovered, and in part this is what this essay, along with Chic Jarrah, aims at doing. The claim is quite simple: this mode of photography has, somewhat unknowingly, reintroduced a long gone realist sensibility. Although street fashion photography has been neglected and considered reactionary by the critical community, it might serve as a stage for the people and help us capture the unique, fleeting appearance of the emerging global protest movement.

In an essay published in *E-flux Art Journal*, critic and curator Dieter Roelstrate describes the historical connection between realism and crisis, and claims (following recent events), that a new realism is needed and is now possible :

“Crises, it is well known, breed realisms: realism proper (that of the original nineteenth-century

variety), socialist realism, Walker Evans', Dorothea Lange's and Diego Rivera's realism(...), capitalist realism, critical realism, and photorealism, they all belong to defining moments of economic, political, social, and cultural crisis—with every crisis producing that 'fine hour for criticism' which may lead us to productively discuss what 'Art' is to be understood as..."

But what exactly is realism? It was "an endeavor to see things as they are", as Linda Nochlin once put it. Granted, "seeing things as they are" is not the best of definitions, yet it does describe a vector and a striving. It implies a system of belief quite uncommon in our current ideological climate – that there are things out there one should strive to see and show truthfully, that there is a kernel of truth to strive for.

In light of this call for realism, we can now re-approach Baram's decision to adopt street fashion photography strategies in his attempt to "bypass the dichotomous representation of "the protestor" usually depicted as either a 'lawbreaker' or a 'freedom fighter'," as he puts it.

A further example, which might help clarify the nature and context of such a peculiar type of realism would be August Sander. His eye level, frontal portraits of commoners, workers, or more generally, 'The People', constitute both a universality - a seemingly objective grand narrative, an amassing of subject or multitude – and at the same time are exemplary of an investment in the singularity of each subject, and display an avid sense of contemporaneity. How does one depict the current wave of protest movements around the world? One should look again at Sander's 1929 photo depicting three revolutionaries, his depiction of *Proletarian Intellectuals*, or his well known *Bricklayer*, and, while we're at it, even Courbet's *Stonebreakers*. All seem to possess a somewhat similar logic – a stage for the people as they are, in their uneventful, day to day lives, performing the understated theatrics of routine. Sander's revolutionaries are as far from the barricade as possible, they aren't photographed heroically from below, the only "radicality" is the mere fact of their presence, as is, and equal to all others and there to stay. The cause, the revolution, is not put to the test, isolated and exemplified by a single event as in Capa's *The Falling Soldier*, but is left to its own devices, evoking perhaps the less photogenic, more laborious, aspect of the revolutionary.

Furthermore, in his introduction to *Face of our Time*, Alfred Döblin reintroduces the medieval debate between Nominalists and Realists, only to show how Sander, one of the true “conscious followers of Realism” fabricates images which perceive universals as “effective and real”, and at the same time provide material for a cultural, class and economic history”. In other words, they present an image, historical in scope yet particular, one which presents structures without effacing nodes, or presents society without “leveling” out the different faces in which it consists.

How can we undermine the logic by which only arrests, violent clashes and media performances are worth representing? One, quite humble strategy would be this new mode of good old realism presented in the guise of street fashion scenes. The combination of particularity and universality, objectivity and an interest in the subjective can all be found in both Baram's and Sander's photos and at the core of the realist project.

When looking today at Baram's project – a documentation of a specific series of protests, which have since been eclipsed by the events in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria, and by OWS as well as the social protest in Greece, Spain and even Israel– one might doubt its continuing relevance. However, it is only in retrospect that we are able to note the similarities between the various activists. The nonchalant, urban, tweeter-friendly radical is definitely not the political guerrilla of yore. And since an archive of this new political animal is difficult to find, Baram's project offers us a chance to take a second look at these people.

Throughout the Chic Jarrah series, the political-historical context is revealed, but is not left to dominate the image. At the same time, the demonstrators are specified but are kept within a given systematic structure. In other words, a fine balance between structures, particular nodes, society and specific faces, or History with a capital H and its actors, is maintained. Baram avoids profiling the demonstrators as either “those who disrupt the order” or “heroes of social-justice”. He refrains from representing the already over-exposed event, choosing instead an eye-level perspective, which lends

itself to the banal criterion of “fashion”. This is one manifestation of a newly (re)discovered realist sensibility of which there are abundant examples. We may hope the realist will in this way join the above mentioned proliferation of self-representation, mastered by the tech-savvy protesters themselves. Perhaps then we will be able to help build, not merely witness, a timely people's stage.