Political Gesture: from art to activism

On February 1, 1960, four African American college students sat down at a lunch counter at Woolworth’s in Greensboro, North Carolina; when refused service, they remained in their seats, thus initiating the dramatic Greensboro Sit-in. In Argentina in 1977, a group of mothers whose children had been "disappeared" by the military dictatorship began to march in front of the presidential palace, holding large pictures of their missing children; those marches continue to this day. In 2003, the Guatemalan artist Regina Galindo created a piece meant to remind the public of the genocidal killings in Guatemala’s internal civil war; in *Who Can Erase the Traces? (Quién puede borrar las huellas?)*, she walked barefoot through the streets of Guatemala City carrying a basin filled with human blood into which she periodically dipped her feet, leaving a trail of bloody footprints.

What do sitting, holding a picture, and walking in these examples have in common? Each functions as a political gesture — a codified way of using the body to interrupt everyday life and pose a public challenge, demand, or critique in relation to abuses of power. In a world where many people participate in political protest by signing online petitions, we consider the enduring and unique role played by physical actions in public space, whether these happen under the aegis of activism or art. Like dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster, we approach the body as “articulate matter” and ask how political gestures signify. How do they establish relationships with the public (at times an unwitting or unwilling public), and how do such gestures directly impact the social and physical context? We read the work of artists, activists, and philosophers, and consider cases drawn primarily from North and South America, from the 1960s to the present, allowing a broad comparative approach. Where possible we leave the classroom to visit relevant museums and archives.

Schedule of classes and readings

Readings/activities listed under a class date should be completed prior to that class. A short reading response focused on the readings/films/images assigned will be due by 5pm on the Monday prior to class.
September 4. First Class
Beautiful Trouble 1, handouts
Casses: 99% Bat Signal, Barbie Liberation Organization, The Salt March, Whose Tea Party?

September 11. Introduction

- Allan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” (1958) 1–9
- Susan Leigh Foster, “Choreographies of Protest,” *Theatre Journal* 55.3 (October 2003) 395-412

September 18. Silence=Death
Cases: ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), Die Ins, Funerals, Gran Fury.
- Film: *How to Survive a Plague* (2012) available on Hulu
- Douglas Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism” October 1987 (14 pages)

September 25
Case: David Wojnarowicz
- Selection from *David Wojnarowicz: Brush Fires in the Social Landscape*
- Audre Lorde, *Poetry is Not a Luxury*

During class - visit the Whitney Museum, “David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night” https://whitney.org/Exhibitions/DavidWojnarowicz

October 2 Experimental Exercise of Freedom
Case: Hélio Oiticica (Brazil)
- Hélio Oiticica and Neville D’Almeida, “Jardim Botânico, Whitechapel, Babylon: The supra-sensorial genealogy of the Cosmococas and their extended media
apparatus” in Block experiments in cosmococa, program in progress, Afterall Books (2013) 20–48


October 9 Archiving gesture
- José Estéban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia Chapter 4 “Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling. Approaching Kevin Aviance”

Visit to the Fales Archives: David Wojnarowicz, Gran Fury/Act UP

October 16 Beautiful Trouble 2
Case: The Yes Men, Jacques Servin
Class Visitor: Jacques Servin
- Film: The Yes Men are Revolting
- Beautiful Trouble: “Dow Chemical apologizes for Bhopal”; “Identity Correction”; “Put your target in a decision dilemma”; “Make the invisible visible”; “Play to the audience that isn’t there”

October 23
Rehearsing revolution
Case: Theatre of the Oppressed, Brazil
- Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed

October 30 Art as politics
Case: CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte); Dictatorship, Chile
- Heike Munder, “Resistance performed: aesthetic strategies under repressive regimes in Latin America”
- Nelly Richard, “Military violence, body, and repression in Chile: critical performativity in art”
- Sophie Halart, “Sabotage as Noise in Post-1960s Chilean and Argentine Art and Art History”

In class see videos: ¡Ay Sudamérica!, Para no morir del arte / To not die from art, No+, and more.

November 6 Geographies of protest
Case: Dictatorship, Argentina


**November 13 Geographies of memory**

Case: post-conflict Guatemala

- Diana Taylor, “Radical Exposure: Regina José Galindo’s Earth” in Theatre and Cartographies of Power

**November 20 Haunting**

Case: Narcowar, Mexico 2006–2016/present


**Nov 27**

Case: race/racism in art; Carlos Martiel (Cuba)

- Coco Fusco, “Racial Time, Racial Marks, Racial Metaphors” from Only Skin Deep
- Jill Lane, on Carlos Martiel

**December 4 Art and urgency**

Readings TBA.

**December 11 Presentations of Final Research I**

Scheduled Exam Time (TBA) Presentations of Final Research II
Assignments, Evaluation

15%  Participation, as per guidelines below
20%  Short essay, focused on Whitney Museum Visit (5 pages) due Friday September 28
10%  Presentation of final research project
30%  Final paper, based on original research (10 pages) due in class, based on Fales or other archive,
25%  Weekly response writing (1 page each) due each Monday by 5PM via NYU Classes.

Participation/Discussion Evaluation Rubric
(adapted from the Harkness method)
An outstanding seminar participant does the following:

Participation
Takes part on a regular basis in an appropriate way; does not dominate the conversation. Consistent, constructive participant.

Critical Thinking
Makes in-depth, focused connections to previous comments, classes, coursework, or other texts and events. Consistently exhibits attention to detail and mastery of the material.

Text References
Consistently cites text, giving page number and passage location.

Table Behavior
Listens very attentively. Addresses comments to peers, not just teacher. Uses names & eye contact, and body language reflects high level of engagement. Is always respectful of others’ opinions.
Reading
For this course, read for the following:

Propositions
- What is the central proposition of each text/film/artistic project? Note the page or place where the proposition is stated/described
- In what context/to whom is that proposition significant?
- How do the different proposals of each text relate to each other? Compare, contrast.

Keywords
- What keywords are used in the text (including films, artistic projects, etc)? Look at the title and subtitle of the work; at italicized, underlined, or repeated words. Circle the words, and note the page numbers
- How are these keywords used in the context of the work? Are they used in the same or a different way than a standard dictionary definition of the term?
- How does the keyword advance the proposal or argument of the work?
- Compare the keywords of each work.

Reading Responses
1 page/300–400 words, due by 5PM Monday before class

Each writing response will engage the readings assigned that week in response to a particular question posted on NYU Classes under “Assignments.” Your responses will cite ideas and concepts from the reading, including page numbers. An excellent response will answer the question and put the texts in dialogue with each other.