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.

Draft syllabus -

0. First Class
See clips from: Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present; Jackson Pollock 51

1. Introduction

   - Edouard Glissant “The Black Beach” from Poetics of Relation
2. Body and Museum
Case: Hélio Oiticica (Brazil)

- Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Regulier, “The Rhythmanalytical Project” (1985)

3. Gestures of power / Stillness
Cases: Black Power Salute; Black Power Salute at 1968 Olympics in Mexico City; Beyoncé’s “Formation”; her performance at Super Bowl 50
Civil Rights Protest: Lunch counter Sit ins (US, Mexico)


4. Silence
Cases: ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), Die Ins, Funerals. (NYC, US)
Visit to Fales Library Downtown Collection, focus on ACT UP
● Gere, David. “Monuments and Insurgencies” In How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004
● Film: How to Survive a Plague

5. On the body (photographs)
Case: the disappeared (Argentina, Mexico)
● Susan Sontag, “Melancholy Objects” in On Photography
● Violeta Luna, Requiem for a Lost Land, performance and essay http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e82-luna-presentation
● Siluetazo (Silhouette Action, 1983), Rodolfo Aguerreberry, Julio Flores, and Guillermo Kexel, Buenos Aires, Argentina

6. The body undone
Case: works that engage traces or remains of the body to discuss death, political assassination, loss. (Guatemala, Mexico, Cuba)
● Regina José Galindo (Guatemala) Looting (2010) and “¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?” (2003)
● Ana Mendieta, Esculturas Rupestres (Rustic Sculptures) 1981, Cuba
● Tania Bruguera, Huella de sangre (the first of the artist’s remakes of Ana Mendieta’s work) Fototeca de Cuba, Old Havana, Cuba, 1988

7. Crossings
Cases: crossing in and out of the place of an ‘other’. (US, Caribbean/Denmark)
● North South East West, Bruce Yonemoto
See images; read statement http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/yonemoto-intro
● Adrian Piper, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” (1992)
● Fred Moten “Resistance of the Object: Adrian Piper’s Theatricality”
8. The street
Case: Chicano Grupo ASCO, Walking Murals, 1972 (Los Angeles); No Movies (1973–1980)

- A Short Organum for the Theater in Brecht on Theatre, 179-205

9. Dérive
Case: movements, actions, interventions in urban space (US, Guatemala)
- Borges, Jorge Luis. “Garden of Forking Paths.”

10. Bodies in concert
Cases: bodies in relation; work, work in unison (US, Mexico, Peru)

- Nicolas Bourriaud, “Relational Aesthetics” In Participation 160–171
- Allan Kaprow, “Assemblages, Environments and Happenings”
- Francis Alÿs, A Story of Deception, selections including “When Faith Moves Mountains”
- Colectivo Sociedad Civil, “Lava la bandera (Wash the Flag)” Fridays, May 24–November 25 2000, Plaza Mayor, Lima, Perù
11. Tactics, Détournement
Cases: digital activism; political impersonation
- Jill Lane, “Digital Zapatistas” (TDR, 2003)
- The Yes Men, “Bhopal Disaster Dow Chemical Hoax,” 2004

12. Occupation
Case: Occupy Wall Street; Global Occupy
- #occupytriptych e-misférica 10.2 "Dissidence”
  - Tidal. Introduction
    Issue #1 December 2011 (24 pages)
    Issue #2 March 2012 (34 pages)
    Issue #3 September 2012 (32 pages)
  - Occupy Bull Action:

Assignments
1. Short essay, focused on Whitney Museum Visit, early in the semester
2. Oral report, based on research in the Fales Downtown Collection
3. Final paper, based on research in the Fales Downtown Collection (15 pages)
4. Presentation of actions (present on one of the cases explored in class, as an introduction to class discussion)
5. Weekly response writing, 1 page.