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Art, activism and citizenship. Utopias and imagined futures



Silêncios visuais: Experiência Estética do olhar na Arte e Protesto Social na Art-Less e Take the Money and Run

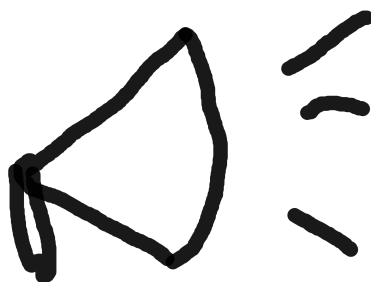
Visual Silences: Aesthetic Experience of the Gaze in Art and Social Protest in Art-Less and Take the Money and Run



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Resumo:

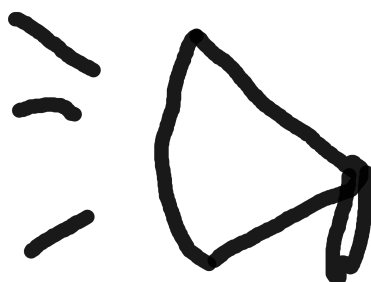
Este trabalho procura refletir as várias interpretações das formas de ver os espaços vazios na obra de arte, através de uma discussão teórica sobre percepção e cultura visual, a metodologia hermenêutica da imagem é implementada em fotografias de duas exposições onde os silêncios visuais se manifestam como uma experiência estética e política em protesto social: a iniciativa Art-Less e o trabalho Take the Money and Run. É importante reconhecer dentro da composição de uma obra de arte, a saturação do ruído que permite que os silêncios visuais sejam atos de insurreição, e consequentemente, contribuem com elementos que reflitam a compreensão dos processos e contextos onde os silêncios estéticos como ação política que se manifestam, quer nas ruas quer em espaços privados, como museus, onde indivíduos ou autores criativos têm a oportunidade de os recriar e, os espectadores, de os re-significar.

Palavras-chave: silêncios visuais, experiências estéticas, protesto social, ação política, imagem.

Abstract:

This paper seeks to reflect the various interpretations of the ways of seeing the empty spaces in the artwork, through a theoretical discussion on perception and visual culture, the hermeneutic methodology of the image is implemented in photographs of two exhibitions where visual silences are manifested as an aesthetic and political experience in social protest: the Art-Less initiative and the work Take the Money and Run. It is important to recognize within the composition of an artwork, the saturation of noise that allows visual silences to be acts of insurrection, and consequently, to contribute with elements that reflects of the understanding of the processes and contexts where aesthetic silences as a political action are manifested, whether in the streets or in private spaces, such as museums, where individuals or creative authors have the opportunity to re-create them and, the spectators, to re-signify them.

Keywords: visual silences, aesthetic experience, social protest, political action, image.



1. Introduction

In the field of visual art, talking about the composition of artworks, conformed by: colours, figures, shapes, textures, spaces, lines, vanishing points, technique, and even saturation, the noise and voids. A fundamental part of these elements is developed in contemplation through the gaze and what they transmit, as well as the interpretation of the spectator –independently of what the author has wanted to give it–, that is to say, that within an artwork, there is always a dispute over the meaning.

This paper seeks to reflect the different interpretations of the ways of seeing empty spaces in the artwork, in order to explore the construction of visual silence as an aesthetic and political experience. We start from the idea that silence is a social practice, which is not limited to a single interpretation, but is polysemic and will always have different forms, modalities and different meanings that will depend on the context. Some of silences are found in language, as well as in artistic expressions: music, plastic, scenic and audiovisual arts, cinema, painting, architecture, poetry, and also in social protest.

In a first approach, we recognize *aesthetic silences* as voluntary forms of inspiration to give meaning and artistic creation of different human expressions. *aesthetic silences* are carried out in full autonomy and rational freedom of the individual, from the affective, sensitivity and passions; that is, from silence we seek the significance of what each of the artists wants to communicate and transmit as a collective, open, plural, sensitive creative and disruptive political aesthetic experience.

That is why this paper reflects, through a theoretical discussion on perception and visual culture, the hermeneutic methodology of the image, on photographs of two exhibitions where *visual silences* are manifested as social protest: the Art- Lessinitiative at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College in Massachusetts in 2017; and the work *Take the Money and Run* by Jens Haaning at the Kunsten Museum of Contemporary Art in Aalborg in Denmark in 2021. Thus, it highlights the importance of visual silence in art, as “filled” forms of meaning within the material “voids” in the aesthetic and political practices of social protest.

It is important to recognize within the composition of an artwork the saturation of noise that allows *visual silences* to be acts of insurrection and, consequently, to contribute with elements to the reflection of the understanding of the processes and contexts where *aesthetic silences* as a political action are manifested, whether in the streets or in private spaces, such as museums, where individuals or creative authors have the opportunity to re-create them and, the spectators, to re-signify them.

2. Perceiving the image

The image is considered for Plato (1988), as the mimetic art far from the truth, that reality is portrayed deceiving the spectator, it is being and not being through the resemblance and appearance of producing and imitating what it already exists. For Aristotle (s/d), the image is visible to the eye, not because it exists through it, but in how it is looked at or observed; since the modification received in the eye is nothing more than a reflection phenomenon.

The image generates a common sensory affection, its absent continuity as an object, persists in memory through an image. According to Berger (2010), images were originally made to evoke the appearance of something absent. Simondon (2013) mentions that the term image, is generally understood as the designation of a mental content of which one can be aware, it is the symbol-memory resulting from an intense exchange between the subject and a situation or in this case, an artwork.

Durand (1968) indicates that consciousness has two ways of representing itself: directly, when the thing itself seems to present itself in perception or sensation; another indirectly, when the thing cannot present itself in flesh and blood to our sensibility, that is, when the absent object re-presents itself to us by means of an image. Likewise, the image is arbitrary, cultural and invented, its vision is immediate. Images are made to be seen, artworks are objects of seeing and looking (Aumont, 1992; Didi-Huberman, 1997).

Belting (2007) mentions that the image is the symbolic unit that manifests itself because of a personal or collective symbolization. Images are a means of knowledge and require a medium in which they can be embodied. Each image leads to another new image (Mitchell, 2009).

Thus, we are approaching one of the most interesting reflections on the social relations that are configured from the production and reception of images. The visual experience is perceived collectively. An image is conceived to be looked at by the other and this in turn, depending on the context, can have a specific political purpose that is carried out from production or its reproduction. Images are a space of struggle with a political meaning. Each image requires us to be seen, just as artworks are made to be seen (Didi-Huberman, 1997).

3. Aesthetic experience of the gaze

According to Guasch (2003), visual culture or visual studies are the change from traditional art history to visual culture, focusing on the image as projection. In this sense, the artwork becomes an image. Images are individual complexes that traverse and interpellate multiple identities. Visual studies is an academic discipline that renews the field of art history, different fields, different times and periods as a tactical-political strategy with a greater impact on cultural politics, that is, the intersection of visibility-social power.

For Mitchell (2009), visual culture should be recognized as an interdisciplinary field, a place of convergence and conversation. Visuality is a cultural practice of everyday life. "Descriptive strategies that are associated with vision and space play a dual role as symptoms of both lack and fullness, of the removal of time, memory and history and of direct access to sensory reality" (Mitchell, 2009, p. 165-166).

Mirzoeff (2003) refers to visual culture as that place where meanings are created and discussed, from the experience of the event of socially constituted structures of meaning that propose different networks of meanings and common interests for actors, spectators and particular collective phenomena.

Visual culture is a practice that has to do with ways of seeing, with the practices of looking, with the viewer's senses. The visible is the set of images that the eye wants to look at. So visual culture does not depend on the images themselves, but on the modern tendency to capture images or visualize existence (Berger, 2010; Mirzoeff, 2003). When speaking of the relationship between the spectator and the image of the artwork, Mitchell (2009) mentions that it includes an ethical-political relationship, that is, an intersubjective and dialogical encounter with an object that has been dialectically constructed.

Thus, it is important to study silences in visual aesthetics as political action, beyond sound, that is, to look at one's own experience of silence in another way. According to Mitchell (2009, p. 199), images "are to be seen or heard only as silent, frozen music". It is precisely from the theoretical perspectives presented that we understand the visual "as a place where meanings are created and discussed" (Mirzoeff, 2003, p. 24), from the social, collective, and aesthetic experience of the event.

Aesthetics is a mode of experience, of sensitivity –*sensorium*–. The fine arts define them as relationships between a way of doing –*poiesis*– and a way of being –*aisthesis*– and that is affected by it –*mimesis*– as a representative regime or ways of being sensitive (Rancière, 2011). Art forms the common world, the collective environment, and new modes of confrontation as well as participation. The political practice of art is the material and symbolic constitution of a certain space-time of common sensible experience.

Adorno (2004) mentions that the aesthetic experience is an experience of images. The artwork appears and stands out above the subject through the irruption of its collective essence, acquiring life at the moment they are looked at. Thus, the force of expression –always in tension– of artworks speaks with a wordless gesture.

4. Visual and aesthetic silences

Silence has different practices and social meanings: some of them serve to reflect, to concentrate, the remain expectant in a conversation, when one is indecisive, or introverted. Likewise, they can reflect annoyance or anger, openness, conclusion, complicity, interrogation, admiration, astonishment, dissidence, contempt, submission, sadness, etc.; which make silence obtain meaning depending on the context or, according to de la Fuente (2019: 481), from "a textural approach to social and cultural reality are most evident in cases where time or space, the materiality or medium of a given cultural or aesthetic form"^{101.)}, and its capacity to signify in a concrete situation. Silence as a visual event, or as an "interaction of the visual sign where the constituent parts are not defined by the medium, but by the interaction between the viewer and what he looks at or observes"^{102.)} (Mirzoeff, 2003, p. 34), is visualized and gives meaning to existence from collective experience. In this way, its meaning is not a linguistic sign, but a semiological sign that is related between signifier and signified, which is characterized by difference and repetition in a system of exclusions and relationships that create meaning in collectivity.

This type of practice and aesthetic images of *visual silences* seek to build meaning through their dispute and duration in time as well as in space, establishing a collective experience. In this way, *visual silences* as a political action (Sánchez, 2021), are carried out through antagonistic interactions of the symbolic order and in the dispute for meaning and the generation of senses, practicing the democratic use of the image.

Guillemard (2013), mentions with respect to *visual silences* that absolute black is a political gesture, which acts as a rejection of the classic rules of representation. It is a black against figuration, visual representation and the supremacy of images and what they imply.

We have observed that the importance of silence in different languages or systems of meaning is essential for its understanding, in the case of cinematographic language, it has the ability to transmit a feeling or emotion through the gaze, it could be said that cinema is "a poetry of acts" (Steiner, 2003, p. 123). It is important to clarify that *visual silences* are not only found in museums, as we will see later. Agamben (2019), mentions that silence in cinema is essential and that it has nothing to do with the presence or absence of sound track, but as the exposure of being-in language, that is, from gestures. In this sense, we must stop thinking that silence in cinema is only found in the silent format or genre, but that we can recognize it in the image itself.

^{101.)} A set of sensibilities are characteristic of a textural rather than a textual outlook. Texture derives from the "Latin *texere*, meaning 'to weave'; *texere* is also the Latin source of the word "context" (de la Fuente, 2019).

^{102.)} The italics are mine.

There are other acts of presence that are perceived through the gaze, and that are not necessarily material, tangible or textured form; in painting or architecture, Amorós mentions: "nudity, empty spaces, the absence of decoration, white or monochrome backgrounds are equivalent to acoustic silences" (Labraña, 2017, p. 30). That is why we can recognize acoustic or *visual silences* through an absence that becomes present with the absence itself; in other words, the sign demonstrates itself through itself.

According to Barthes (1993, p. 248-249), in *The paradox of nothingness* and the absurdity, there are objects that have the sense of having no sense, and there is no object that escapes meaning; the function of an object always becomes the sign of that same function. *The paradox of nothingness* and the absurd constantly appears in Barthes' analysis (1971, p. 77), "zero degree is not a *nothingness*, but an absence that signifies". Thus, *nothingness* itself is full of meaning from the moment it, once named or looked at, also signifies.

Other examples of *visual silences* are found in the correspondences with the literary interpretation of Block de Behar (1984, p. 24):

"Frank Stella's black canvases, Robert Ryman's Untitled, where access to an immaterial sensibility becomes clearer and the correspondence with silence more evident: the white canvas, blank, is not explained by Mallarmé's mystical horror but as a postponed exasperation, the pure expectation, which counts as a proposal or a provocation: the viewer faced with a suspended aesthetic experience."

Malevich's *White on White*, who sought to take art to the limits of its representation, demonstrated that art itself is limitless; and that the only limit in a work, they are only found with the work in its composition and in the dimensions of the canvas itself (Lampkin, 2017).

I called *aesthetic silences* (Sánchez, 2019; 2021; Albo & Sánchez, 2020) those that have been used as inspiration to give meaning and artistic creation to different human expressions in an autonomous and rational way— whether sound or visual—. These types of silences, from sound or image, build meanings that will depend on the experience and interpretation of the viewer. Susan Sontag (1967) referring to the aesthetics of silence, mentions that the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full emptiness, an enriching emptiness, a resonant or eloquent silence. In other words, *completely limitless* silences and voids of meaning.

5. Aesthetic experience of social protest

The capacity for symbolization and representation of social action develops in direct proportion to the social capacity to produce symbolic resources (Chihu & López, 2007). In this sense, social protest is a representation of the conflict within the logic of democracy, it is the way in which certain groups and collective identities struggle to make their demands, their repertoires and their aesthetics visible (Magrini, 2010). Thus, we understand these social protests as a struggle for the significance and meaning of social phenomena, and symbolic demands that involve a change of system and political regime through art.

Buck-Morss (2009), points out that the meaning of artistic work represents the artist's intention; the meaning of the image is the intentionality of the world. Interpreting consists of placing oneself in the creator's point of view (Eco, 1970). Therefore, what interests us is how the work is represented, and this, in turn, is resignified by the intervention of other actors. According to Bech (1995), images are also discourses, they occur in a specific historical and social context that defines specific conditions for their production, circulation, reception, and consumption; in addition to their reproduction, representation, reinterpretation and resignification.

5.1. Art-Less

The *Art-Less* initiative at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College in Massachusetts emerged in 2017 as a form of protest in the United States due to the anti-immigration measures of former President Donald Trump. For a few days, curators removed or covered with black canvases 120 pieces of art made by immigrant artists or donated by foreign collectors as a way of making visible the void that would remain in that country without them (Figure 1). In the places where the paintings were removed, labels reading "Given by an immigrant" (Figure 2), could be seen on the empty walls, with the aim of highlighting the impact of the government measure (MXCity, 2017; Expansión, 2017). It is worth highlighting that:

"Distant and prolonged migration not only alters the physiognomy of the places of destination, it also profoundly modifies the economy, sociality and culture of the towns of origin, with whom the exiles maintain close ties. And above all, it revolutionizes the community, which by splitting into remote branches becomes multispatial, discrete, binational" (Bartra, 2002, p. 20).



Figure 1

Source: Montserrat Valle, CNN, 2017

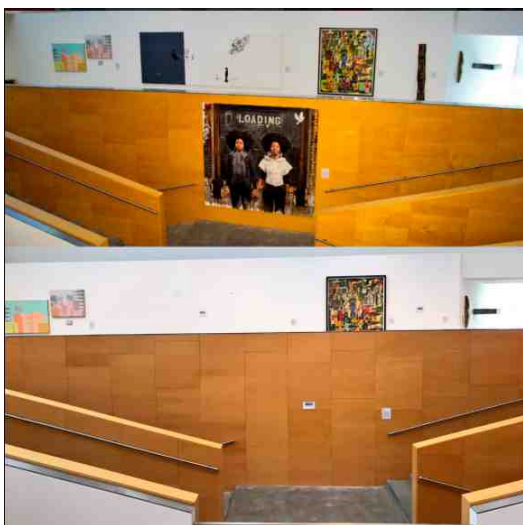


Figure 2

Source: Montserrat Valle, CNN, 2017

In an interview made by Expansión (2017), the curators mentioned in this regard: "We have removed or covered these works to symbolically demonstrate what the Davis Museum would look like without their contributions to our collections and to Wellesley College, and with this we seek to honour their many invaluable gifts." We can see how the artists' work is resignified by the curator's sensibility, that is to say, they acquire another meaning when they are covered, it is no longer the work itself, but what they represent when they are covered.

Regarding the works covered with black canvases (Figure 3), "perhaps we must recognize that there is no image that can be radically thought of except beyond the principle of visibility, that is, beyond the canonical opposition –spontaneous, unthinkable– of the visible and the invisible" (Didi-Huberman, 1997, p. 68). There is something hidden beneath them that is hidden and it is not only the materiality of the object, but an ideological and symbolic discourse that is discovered with the canvases themselves.





Figure 3

Source: Montserrat Valle, CNN, 2017

Garbuno (2014), on the other hand, remains with a limited reflection when talking about the *aesthetics of emptiness* that predominates in contemporary art, taking on the appearance of the real, its surface, where he mentions the disappearance of the symbol and all its dimension of depth of meaning and interpretation. In contrast to what Garbuno exposes; precisely the empty spaces of the works, the black canvases that cover them, show that the pieces were there and that they remain as memory-images and creative spontaneity (Simondon, 2013), as can be seen in Figure 4.



Figure 4

Source: Davis Museum at Wellesley College, 2017

5.2. Take the Money and Run

In a different context and culture, Jens Haaning's *Take the Money and Run* at the Kunsten Museum of Contemporary Art Aalborg in Denmark in 2021, emerges as a form of protest against low wages. Haanning is a conceptual artist who has had exhibitions since the 1990s. Among his best-known works, it is *Summer 1996 in Middelburg*, a work that consisted of moving a small sewing factory with migrant employees from Turkey, Bosnia and Iran, to the art museum of Middelburg in Holland. *Turkish jokes* was another of his well-known works, which consisted of a recording of a conversation between Turks telling jokes in their native language that was reproduced in a public space in Oslo in 1994.

The Kunsten Museum of Contemporary Art gallery in Aalborg asked the artist, known for his critical works on money, racism, power and marginalized groups, to recreate an earlier work of his consisting of two glass paintings filled with banknotes, one with 328,000 Danish kroner and another with 25,000 euros, reflecting the average annual salary in Denmark and Austria.

The works were to be part of an exhibition with pieces by 22 artists where the main theme was the role of the individual in today's labour market. Faced with this proposition, the Danish artist borrowed 550,000 Danish kroner, about US\$84,000, to include them in his paintings and then return them (Palumbo, 2021). The surprise came when the museum received the two empty white paintings under the title *Take the Money and Run* (Figure 5). Now, the museum claims the borrowed money. Thus, the spectacle is part of capital, to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image (Debord, 1995).



Figure 5

Source: Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg, 2021

Haaning, in an interview for radio dr.dk. mentioned "work is that I have taken their money [...] I encourage other people who have working conditions as miserable as mine to do the same" (BBC News Mundo, 2021). In this way, we find how the empty paintings resignify the work commissioned for the *Work It Out*, which precisely tries to show the relationship between work and money (Infobae, 2021). According to Baudrillard (1978), the image masks the absence of reality to a new era in which it maintains no relationship with any reality; it is its own pure simulacrum. The (intangible) work is an implosion, seen as a violent reaction against the saturation of the social, a retraction, a challenge to the hegemony of the social (Figure 6). It should be noted that there is no such thing as empty space. As long as the human eye looks, there will always be something to see (Sontag, 1967, Linking section IV, para. 5):

"To look at something 'empty' is to keep looking, to keep seeing something, even if it is only the ghost of one's own expectations. To perceive fullness, it is necessary to retain a keen sense of the emptiness that marks it; conversely, to perceive emptiness, one must apprehend other areas of the world as full."



Figure 6

Source: Henning Bagger/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock, 2021

Accordingly, emptiness and silence add power and authority to what was already broken (Sontag, 1967). Absence becomes the message of a past, of something that was there, that claims its permanence through a presence that was their own, and that reconfigures the present. Although Panofsky (2003, p. 37) refers to painting or to what is related to it, we consider it important to rescue his idea of representation as a closed internal space, conceived as an empty body that signifies:

"more than the simple consolidation of objects, a revolution in the formal assessment of the pictorial surface: this is no longer the wall or the board on which the forms of singular things or figures are represented, but it is once again, despite being limited on all sides, the plane through which seems to us to be seeing a transparent space."

Berger (2010), for example, mentions that the silence of images is more powerful than their shape or colour, since it requires an effort of recognition and interpretation on the part of the observer. Silence fills the very act of contemplation with light. "It is a necessary silence so that the *paintings speak* and the viewer can hear them and, in doing so hear himself" (Berger, 2010, p. 9, my italics). The viewer is confronted with his own reaction: surprise, bewilderment, recognition, cataloguing, awareness of a unique response to an emitted stimulus (Figure7).



Figure 7

Source: Niels Fabæk, Kunsten Museum of Modern Art Aalborg, 2021

According to Arnheim (1997), every artwork must express something. This means, in the first place, that the content of the work must go beyond the presentation of the individual objects that constitute it, in addition to the fact that the expression is inherent to the visual structure and that it manifests itself when it comes into contact with the perceptual forces of the observer who activates them, bringing the creative or productive force of that expression into contact with the contemplative and interpretative force of the observer.

"The 'stimulus' or influence produces a 'reaction', a response or, better, an accumulation, a chain of reactions that generate, consciously and unconsciously, in the observer, strategies of action that reveal the rich process of interpretation and production of meanings to which the image gave rise [...] To perceive this meaning, we need an associative action, namely: it is the capacity to relate visible forms with things and beings from our 'everyday practical experience' [...] The vast universe of meanings that are present in the specific culture within which both the observer and the creator of those images have been educated, formed and conditioned are brought into play" (Bech, 1995, p. 11).

In this way, the process of invention that Simondon (2013) speaks of is perfectly formalized when it produces a separable object or a work independent of the subject, transmissible, that can be put in common, constituting the support of a relationship of participation, cumulative, associative or collective participation and always in becoming.

In other words, silence as a political action presents the absent from the invention and creation of a new meaning, manifesting a change in the political from the collective. Silence as a neutral signifier constructs new ways of doing politics from another dimension. Therefore, silence in art can be interpreted as an act of the artist who tries to materialize it in his work. Likewise, we must not forget that, as Mitchell (2009) points out, if we want to understand the power of images, we need to look at their internal relations of domination and resistance, as well as their external relationship with viewers and the world. We must

"to learn to look at works of art anew: to look at sculpture, architecture, the painting and, through it, the world, not in the sense that the artwork represents nature, but in the sense that a certain way of understanding formal relations entails a new way of perceiving, understanding, finding pleasure in the configurations that in reality are offered to our perceptive organization" (Eco, 1970, p. 214-215).

In this way, the works presented function as a political tactic to reconfigure the relationship between public and private spaces, such as museums. In the sense of concretizing in silence (and its aesthetic/cultural possibilities), a space of political tension in contemporary times. Being political art, a lateral exploration of a first collective atmosphere of perceptible contingency, where the search for belonging remains a binding reason to preserve the normative habits of social reproduction and political optimism (Berlant, 2011).

As can be seen, in the case of Art Less, if the artists' works, before being removed or covered by the black canvases, had a specific political connotation –or not–, they create one or more political meanings from their intervention by the curators. Unlike in the case of *Take the Money and Run*, where Haaning, the artist who created the work, carries a specific political position.

By this we mean that, if these political actions are to be received as such by the spectators, first, the context in which they were exhibited must be recognized and, at another time, they must stop seeing individually; that is, learning and daring to look differently at what reality demands of us, through political practices constituted in aesthetic, sensitive, collective and necessary experiences for social protest.

6. Conclusions

Finally, the *visual silences* as part of the *aesthetic silences* are polysemic. They are not material *nothingness*, nor the absence of something, they are not empty pictures or images without colour saturation, but through silence, emptiness, collaborative action or in the case of the black canvases that, more than covering, reveal a problem that demands to be looked at and addressed, as is the case of labor precariousness or xenophobia and systemic racism against immigration, in addition to the multiple meanings and added interpretations that are generated by the collective spectator.

In this sense, the images, these particular *visual silences*, signify the search for an improvement in working conditions in the field of art on the one hand, and on the other, the importance of cultural exchange through migration, where the vast majority of times, displaced individuals, excluded, in constant transit, have been forced to seek dignified life opportunities that their own places of birth have not been able to offer them, either because of insecurity –in every sense–, or because of the multiple forms of violence emitted by contemporary capitalist practices or by the different coercive social structures.

The social stereotypes of the artist, the activist and the spectator involved in a common project converge and are diluted, transforming their own visual experience, as well as the predetermined collective imaginary. We find the characteristics of collectivity through the aesthetic experience and the creation of links in the re-presentation of artworks, where *aesthetic silences* are made visible and recognized as political action.

visual silences as a political action create meaning through interaction and association among the participants involved, and generate ways of seeing and practices of looking at the experience in another way; They seek affirmation, recognition, as well as listening to the other through images and social protest that they carry out in consensus and dispute.

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COMBAT

ARTE, ARTIVISMO E CIDADANIA. UTOPIAS E FUTUROS IMAGINADOS

ART, ARTIVISM AND CITIZENSHIP: UTOPIAS AND IMAGINED FUTURES

PAULA GUERRA (EDS)
RICARDO CAMPOS





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