

to mystery. But the more we learn about ourselves the braver we will have to be. Mystery is nothing finite. As we expand so it will. The edge will change location. It is not for everyone. If it is for you, bless yourself before you enter. I don't want you watching someone else's bliss. I want you overcoming your own dread for completion and yearning to have already become some kind of object or product—seek intimacy, deep intimacy with your own experience. Please.

The Image of Protest

Alec Recinos makes work.

STZLD

Enter a familiar *Study* scene: protest. The crowd takes the streets, saturated with a palpable sense of collectivity. Bystanders are drawn in, and as the demonstration grows in size, they march. At the brink of a rupture with the everyday, it seems like there's nothing but possibility. In their newfound freedom, the group dances in the street to a soundtrack played by the musicians in their midst. As we all know, however, in society there are limits and rules to be obeyed, enforced ultimately by the police. They block the path of the protest, and it's here that everything deviates from the script. Within the cops' kettling, the crowd remains utterly calm. Its leader, a supermodel, steps forward, stopping only momentarily to swipe a soda. She presents the Pepsi to the police. They accept it, smiling. The protestors cheer. All is well.

¶ This is, of course, the now-infamous commercial, *Live for Now Moments Anthem*. Eliding protest with Pepsi in under three minutes, the ad elicited immediate outrage after its release in 2017. It lived a brief, but momentous life: within one day, Pepsi pulled the campaign and issued apologies to both the public and Kendall Jenner, the campaign's star. Like all colossal failures, the ad begs the question: who let this happen? Despite what must have been a massive budget spread between multiple teams and agencies, seemingly no one stopped to consider the fact that seizing the momentum of the ubiquitous social

movements of *Alec Recinos* the 2010s might bring backlash.

¶ Embarking on such a postmortem, however, quickly complicates matters. A close reading of the clip skews more comical than controversial. From its opening shot—a cellist furiously playing an inaudible tune atop, for some inexplicable reason, the rooftop helipad of a skyscraper—to the all too conspicuous diversity of its casting—the type only seen in corporate stock images—the ad seems to veer towards camp. It's all a little hard to take seriously, and yet, there's no denying the public's palpable outrage. Just what is it about *Live for Now Moments Anthem* that is so deplorable?

¶ For most, it was all about appropriation: the ad is offensive because it diverts the politics of genuine social movements towards commercial ends. While this is no doubt true—the co-option of politics into palatable corporate posturing should always be denounced—it is not sufficient to explain the abhorrence of the ad, since in many instances, this exact type of recuperation is warmly received. Colin Kaepernick's 2018 advertisement with Nike, for example, capitalizes off of his refusal to stand during the National Anthem in order to protest racial injustice, and was met with praise and awards. Clearly, content alone cannot lead to condemnation.

¶ To resolve this seeming contradiction, turn to two of the most prominent and outspoken critics of *Live*

for Now Moments Study Anthem: Berenice
King (the daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr.) and
DeRay Mckesson (an activist who rose to promi-
nence as part of the Black Lives Matter movement).
In their commentary, both King and Mckesson
compare the ad's demonstration to their experi-
ences with the civil rights movement and Black
Lives Matter, respectively. They do so negatively,
of course, in such a way as to denounce the ad: "If
only Daddy would have known about the power of
#Pepsi," King tweeted alongside an image of her
father and other Black marchers being accosted by
white police, while Mckesson quipped "If I had car-
ried Pepsi I guess I never would've gotten arrested.
Who knew?" In so doing, they draw a fundamental
equivalence between the two. The ad and the con-
crete protests they've experienced are not funda-
mentally different—if so, it would be impossible to
compare them, much like the aphoristic apples and
oranges—but instead cut from the same cloth. They
acknowledge that the Pepsi demonstration is a pro-
test, just one that they dislike¹.

¶ In this sense, the ad coincides directly with real
life. It is not ersatz, but actual. Accordingly, the
roots of the outrage stem not from *what* it showed,
but instead from *how* it showed. In contrast to
the purported reasons for the critique, the problem
with the Pepsi commercial is not that it distorts
protest towards its own ends, but rather that it

portrays it all too Alec Recinos clearly. It is, in
short, pornographic.

¶ As the philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues in his 1989
article, "Looking Awry," the pornographic is not
necessarily tied to sexual, violent, or adult acts.
After all, there's nothing particularly sexual about
the Pepsi ad. Instead, Žižek draws on the work of
Lacan to describe pornography as rising from a spe-
cific relation between the viewer and image that
occurs on two intertwined registers: content and
form. On the level of content, the pornographic must
show all and reveal too much. By doing so, however,
there is no longer any room for what Lacan terms
objet petit a—the "object-cause of desire"—an ele-
ment of radical otherness, which allows the subject
to project desire onto the object and engage the sym-
bolic order. As a result, there is a "short circuit" of
the typically antinomic relationship between the eye
that views the object (stemming from the subject)
and the gaze, which lies on the side of the object.
Here, it enters the side of form. Without desire,
there is no "gazing back" from the object. There is
no "Other", and as a result, the gaze falls inward,
rendering the viewing subject in the position of the
object. In pornography, Žižek states, "the real sub-
jects are the actors on the screen," while the view-
ers "are reduced to a paralyzed object-gaze." It's an
unsettling, unpleasant effect, leaving the viewer with
only a sense of "depressing desublimation."

Žižek ascribes *Study* this relation to fully explain all pornography—a task to which it is not suited—but it nevertheless provides an apt way to understand the particular forms of disgust and anger that the commercial provokes. Through this lens, the outcry against the ad comes from the relation between subject and object, and the way it wrenches agency away from the viewer. In becoming pornographic, *Live for Now Moments Anthem* reveals too much by first stripping it all away.

The content of a demonstration—which is to say, a goal, a message, a clear demand—provides necessary legibility but simultaneously masks a general understanding of the tactic, as the critique of any given protest is always enclosed within the specificities of the event. In contrast, the ad campaign reduces protest down to pure form, an aseptic degree zero. We hear no chants to amplify the will of the participants, and the signs they carry steadfastly refuse to take a stand, opting instead for puerile platitudes and peace signs. There’s no meaning or moral; all that can be said is that it *is* a protest. By showing it as a bare image, the ad deprives the viewer of any sort of Other onto which they can displace their desires, and forces them to confront its nature, namely, that protest is picturesque.

Protest always orients itself as an image intended to circulate. The intention of a demonstration is almost never to directly enact change—this is what

separates the *Alec Recinos* tactic from direct action—but instead to send a message, the particular form of which tends to be an image, more memorable, mobile, and meaningful than language². Consider the social movements of the past 50 years; iconic photographs tend to linger far longer than even the most rousing speech. Though they might not consciously acknowledge it, participants themselves acknowledge the image-nature of protest. They recreate, time and time again, the signs, slogans, and symbols from movements past, hoping to imbue the current form with historical weight. More explicitly, they even invoke it in perhaps the most refrain of the past 20 years: “this is what democracy looks like!”

This revelation appears as confrontational in *Live for Now Moments Anthem* due to its pornographic nature, but to understand protest as picturesque is not to write it off. Instead, it’s a diagnosis, an attempt to clarify both the capabilities and limitations of the tactic. Images certainly have power, and the efficacy of a protest depends on the way that it signifies. Some, like that of the Pepsi ad, do so as symbols, denoting meaning only because they are understood to do so: nothing connects the sign to its object other than convention and the way it systematically relates to other symbols³.

To rely on symbolic representation is a losing strategy, however, for protest becomes picturesque

for the very purpose of circulation. Yet, as the image moves beyond its initial context, it flees the very framework that made it possible to be understood and becomes untethered from its intended meaning. All symbols, even those that seem so steadfast in their signification, become opaque outside of their original context.

¶ Protest need not limit itself to the symbolic, however. It can instead become an index—a type of sign that represents its object through a real connection—with method intrinsically yoked to its stated goal, means and ends as warp and weft. This is true regardless of the particular politics in question. Consider, on the one hand, the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Meaning making was beside the point. In taking to the streets in the fashion they did, the participants in the rally established the continued existence of white supremacy. On the other, marches like Take Back the Night can be seen to function similarly, by literally claiming public space—however briefly—as part of a struggle against sexual violence.

¶ As *Live for Now Moments Anthem* makes all too clear, the symbolic is no longer sufficient. Whether appearing as pornographic or sublime, it can only approach the edge. Action always eludes. With protest only growing in importance globally—to oppose inequality, the brutality of austerity, and climate change, to name just a few causes—it's essential to

understand how it can affect political transformations, instead of sublimating a genuine desire for change into a conservative, if not reactionary, form. Protest may always be picturesque, but it is not doomed to impotence. To enact its politics, however, it must become an index and move beyond the bare image.

- ① Perhaps *Study* the greatest objection to this statement is the fact that the “protestors” in the ad are simply paid actors, brought together not out of collective desire, but in self-interest. Given the prominence of astroturfing and paid protestors, not to mention the longstanding traditions of political machines and clientelism, this can hardly be said to be a disqualification.
- ② This claim is surely somewhat controversial, and never without complication, as Susan Sontag would surely attest. As deepfakes and digitally manipulated images become more widespread, the truth status of the image will surely become more tenuous, but for now, a picture is still worth a thousand words, as they say.
- ③ Here, and in the discussion that follows, the understanding of semiotics is drawn from the work of Charles Sanders Peirce.

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Virtual Roundtable

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