



VIRAL HALLUCINATIONS

**Vernetzte
Protestkulturen
und virale
Mobilisierung**

INHALTSVERZEICHNIS

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Essays

Die fotografische Arbeit »Speck in the Eye« des Künstlers Mykola Ridnyi setzt sich seit 2021 mit dem Erblinden von Demonstrant*innen durch Polizeigewalt auseinander. Maria/Rosario Montero beleuchtet die Ambivalenz von Sichtbarkeit und ihren Zusammenhang mit Macht und Kontrolle am Beispiel der Proteste in Chile im Oktober 2019. Simon Strick untersucht die politische Kommunikation auf Social Media am US-amerikanischen Beispiel. Sheung Yiu analysiert die Proteste in Hongkong 2019, bei denen Masken, Laser und Regenschirme gezielt eingesetzt wurden, um Überwachung zu umgehen.

Mykola Ridnyi

Mykola Ridnyi war Gründungsmitglied des in Char-kiw ansässigen Künstlerkollektivs SOSka und Mitbegründer der gleichnamigen, von Künstler*innen geführten Galerie. Er verbindet verschiedene künstlerische Aktivitäten; ist Künstler und Filmemacher, Kurator sowie Gastprofessor an der UdK Berlin und schreibt über Kunst und Politik.

Maria/Rosario Montero, PhD

Maria/Rosario Montero ist eine feministische Künstlerin und Wissenschaftlerin. Sie promovierte in Cultural Studies am Goldsmiths College (UK) und hat einen Master in Digital Anthropology (UCL, UK) sowie einen Master in Bildender Kunst (Universität Chile). In ihrer Arbeit untersucht sie, wie Machtstrukturen die Darstellung von Landschaft, Identität und Territorium prägen.

Dr. Simon Strick

Simon Strick ist ein Kultur- und Medienwissenschaftler und freier Autor. Seine Forschungsschwerpunkte sind Gender- und Rassismustheorien, Populäre Kulturen, Affect Studies sowie Medien- und Kulturanalyse. Er ist Dramaturg und Autor des Performancekollektivs Panzerkreuzer Rotkäppchen. Er lebt und arbeitet in Berlin.

Sheung Yiu

Sheung Yiu ist ein in Hongkong geborener, visueller Künstler und Forscher, der in Helsinki lebt. In seiner künstlerischen Arbeit untersucht er Bildpraktiken, die an der Schnittstelle von allgegenwärtiger Fotografie und groß angelegter Datenverarbeitung entstehen.

Algorithmic blindness and the foreclosure of the imaginary: The Chilean case

Maria/Rosario Montero

On the late afternoon of Friday, 25 October 2025, I left my office, and as planned, came across a group of people – wearing different outfits, carrying different signs – walking towards the city centre. I joined them with a friend, and we walked on, the low sun falling across our bodies in the crispness of spring. I walked with my camera, watching. Something undeniably beautiful happens during demonstrations: collective energy takes shape. A sense of urgency and conviction pushes bodies forward, raises voices, and, in my case, activates the need to document what is unfolding. Today, protests have new extensions and connections that go beyond the body. We record in real time, and our bits of presence become screen-glow in other latitudes; other bodies are affected through looking, through the small reach of fingertips that jump from one image to another. Images today are nodes within relational structures whose complex behaviours exceed the individuals who produce them. The networked images I made during those months remained there, in that so-called cloud, beyond my ability to imagine their reach.

In my photographic practice, I have never been fully comfortable with the role of the distant observer, the »third person« who studies a scene from the outside. I look with my body. My hands guide the camera, and I tense my body as I feel the need to capture moments that are hard to hold onto. I feel that, while I experience them, those moments are clear: we're not just in the streets but in all places of our daily lives. In the following lines, the moments lived during the 2019 social unrest in Chile, which continue to exist as memories, are translated as a way to share reflections – old and new – on how photographic practice changes as technologies evolve.

Building on this, the case study below asks a direct question: what happens when photography no longer circulates only as testimony, but also as data? When images can be extracted, searched and repurposed for surveillance, documentary work enters a new ethical and political terrain. In Chile, during the 2019 revolt, protesters and photographers quickly understood that visibility could be double-edged: images could denounce state violence, but they could also expose those who resisted identification and persecution. This tension shaped



Protest at Plaza Baquedano, Santiago de Chile, November 2019. Photograph by Maria/Rosario Montero.

the visual strategies that emerged on the ground, producing images designed to evade the machines that would otherwise process them.

Images as evidence: when photography becomes a tool of control

To understand why new strategies appeared, it is important to clarify what changed. In past decades, being photographed at a demonstration usually meant public visibility. A person might appear in a newspaper, in a documentary archive or in a historical record. Today, visibility is different. Images do not just circulate: they can be processed. Facial recognition systems can scan photographs and match faces with existing databases. Combined with social media profiles, GPS data and other forms of digital tracking, a single image can serve as a starting point for identification, arrest or intimidation. It has been argued that this is not only a technological shift. It changes the photograph's function. A picture is no longer only a representation or a record after the fact; it can act within infrastructures of verification, prediction and control (Flusser 2000).

During the revolt in Chile, police and other institutions were using images – especially close-up portraits – to identify protesters. So, cameras began to be seen not only as witnesses but also as potential threats. This becomes a point that makes photographers and protesters change their strategies when being in the streets.

Many authors have argued that these dynamics are part of the history of photography. As Ariella Aïsha Azoulay Chris Pinney and other authors have suggested, photography has often been used by states and colonial institutions to classify, control and govern populations. In colonial contexts, photographing bodies was part of constructing categories: race, class or criminality (Azoulay 2008, Pinney 1997). These images were not neutral documents; they were tools of power. Similarly, the new technologies of image processing (i.e., face recognition) have reinforced these power structures in new dynamics (Amaro 2019). The camera is a tool that can separate the »good citizen« from the »suspect body«. The result is a new visual battlefield. Thus, protesters found

ways to confront these new technological realities. In what follows, I trace three different strategies, reading them as situated responses to algorithmic blindness and to a networked visual economy that saturates perception while narrowing the space of the political imaginary. First, the camouflage practices adopted by protesters – make-up, masks and face coverings – to protect identity and turn anonymity into a collective gesture. Second, the decisions photographers make to step back and avoid close-up shots to shift attention from individual faces to shared atmospheres, gestures and bodies in motion. Third, the use of retouching and other forms of image intervention that disrupt facial recognition and make images less »readable« to surveillance systems. These practices show that the photographic apparatus is not fixed: it can be appropriated, altered and re-signified, becoming not only a tool of capture but also of resistance.

Strategy one: camouflage and the politics of the covered face

One of the most visible transformations in the 2019 protests in Chile was the widespread use of face coverings. People used masks, scarves, goggles, helmets, hoods and sometimes full costumes. Some used medical masks or gas masks. Others painted their faces, used glitter or created improvised disguises. At first glance, it may look like an aesthetic choice or a »protest style«. But it was primarily a protective strategy. The covered face was a way to avoid identification, especially in photographic images. This matters because documentary photography has traditionally relied on the face. Faces carry emotion, individuality and recognisability. Portraits produce empathy and create powerful narratives. But in a surveillance context, the face also becomes a vulnerability. It is the part of the body that is most easily extracted from an image and turned into data.

Covering the face interrupts that process. It breaks the link between visibility and identity. It also changes the relationship between the individual and the collective. When thousands of people cover their faces, protest becomes less about individual heroes and more about collective presence. A crowd of masked faces is harder to personalise, harder to simplify. Importantly, this strategy was not only about hiding. It was also about speaking through symbols. During the revolt, face coverings and costumes became a language. The mask could represent anger, humour, irony, fear, solidarity or political memory. For example, some protesters used symbols linked to popular culture, while others referenced historical struggles against dictatorship. Camouflage became both protection and expression.



Protest at Alameda, Santiago de Chile, March 2020. Photograph by Maria/Rosario Montero.



Protest at Alameda, Santiago de Chile, March 2020. Photograph by Maria/Rosario Montero.

There is a wider point here: in many protest contexts, anonymity is presented by governments as suspicious. The hidden face is often framed as criminal. But in Chile, the hidden face was, for many, a practical response to unequal power. When the state has the ability to punish, anonymity becomes a form of self-defence. The covered face also revealed something about the conditions of protest today: to appear in public is no longer simply to be seen, but to become readable by machines.

Strategy two: photographers step back – refusing the close-up

A second strategy emerged among photographers themselves. Many photographers began to change their visual approach, especially in portraiture. In classic documentary and press photography in Chile, the close-up has been a powerful tool of expression. It communicates intimacy and immediacy. It suggests truth: ›I was there, close enough to see.« It can also serve journalistic ideals of evidence and detail. But during the revolt, close-ups could expose protesters. Photographers faced an ethical tension: the closer they got, the more visually impactful the image might be – yet the more dangerous it could become for the people shown.



Protest at Alameda, Santiago de Chile, March 2020. Photograph by Maria/Rosario Montero.



Protest at Plaza Baquedano, Santiago de Chile, November 2019. Photograph by Maria/Rosario Montero.

As a result, many photographers began to step back. They photographed from further away, capturing bodies in motion, crowds, smoke, street textures, banners, the city's aftermath, hands and gestures rather than faces. This created a different aesthetic. The revolt appeared less as a series of individual portraits and more as an atmosphere: a collective force occupying space.

This shift was not only technical. It was political. It suggested that the main subject of the revolt was not a single recognisable person. The subject was the collective situation: a population responding to injustice. Stepping back also challenges what many audiences expect from documentary work. Viewers often want faces. Faces provide emotional access. But refusing the close-up can be a way to protect people and also to refuse the »consumption« of protest as spectacle. This strategy also complicates the role of documentary photography in a time of digital circulation. An image made for empathy can be repurposed for punishment. The photographer must now anticipate not only how an image will be read by audiences, but also how it might be used by institutions. To some extent, this changes what »responsible documentation« means. It is no longer only about representing reality accurately. It is also about reducing harm.

Strategy three: retouching and the deliberate sabotage of recognition

A third strategy was developed through editing and post-production. Some photographers began to retouch images before publishing them, specifically to prevent facial recognition. This might include blurring faces, removing identifiable marks such as tattoos, lowering resolution, creating digital noise or altering parts of the image that could be scanned. Retouching can be seen as controversial because it is often associated with manipulation, lack of truthfulness or aesthetic distortion. Journalistic ethics typically emphasise minimal editing. But in the Chilean revolt, retouching became a form of protection. It was not done to »beautify« images or create fiction. It was done to reduce the risk of identification.

This strategy highlights a key idea: the photograph is not fixed. It can be transformed. It can become something else. In this respect, Ángeles Donoso Macaya argues that photography has the capacity to shift beyond its original function: images can be altered, recontextualised and turned into new forms. In the protest context, this means that an image can become part of a protective



Protest at Alameda, Santiago de Chile, March 2020. Photograph by Maria/Rosario Montero.

practice rather than merely a descriptive one (Macaya 2020).

Retouching can be understood as a refusal: a refusal to provide the state with a clean, usable portrait. It is also a refusal of the assumption that »truth« equals maximum visibility. Here, truth might instead require partial opacity. Not everything must be shown. This is not a simple moral position. Editing images raises real dilemmas. Some may worry that it reduces evidentiary value or weakens claims of violence and abuse. But the opposite is also true: unedited images can enable persecution. Photographers had to find a balance between testimony and safety.

Rethinking visibility: the civil imagination and collective safety

These three strategies – camouflage, distancing and retouching – show that the revolt produced not only political demands, but also new visual knowledge. People learned how images function under conditions of surveillance. They adapted. They invented.

A useful concept here is Azoulay's idea of the »civil imagination«, in which she argues that photography is not just about images: it is a space where people can act together, negotiate rights and create new forms of relation (Azoulay 2008). In this view, the photograph is part of a »civil contract« between those who photograph, those who are photographed and those who view the image. During the Chilean revolt, this »contract« was unstable. The state was able to break it by using images against protesters. Platforms could break it by making images searchable and extractable. And so, protesters and photographers responded by redesigning the contract themselves.

Camouflage and editing can be seen as acts of civil imagination – collective strategies to preserve political agency. They allow people to remain present in public without becoming fully captured. This matters beyond Chile. Many societies are facing similar conditions: protests documented by thousands of cameras, images circulating instantly and surveillance systems growing in power. The Chilean case offers a clear example of how visual practices shift when the stakes of representation change.

Conclusions: Blindness to see and the foreclosure of the imaginary

Photography in protest is often celebrated as a tool for visibility: it exposes injustice, produces evidence and helps build international solidarity. This is true. But the Chilean revolt shows another side: photography can also support control and persecution, especially when combined with facial recognition and data infrastructures. The three strategies discussed here are forms of resistance to that condition. They do not reject photography. They transform it: camouflage protects bodies and turns anonymity into a collective statement. Stepping back refuses the close-up and shifts attention to the collective situation rather than individual identity. Retouching sabotages recognition and challenges the idea that documentary truth requires total visual clarity. Together, these strategies reveal a crucial point: in a time of algorithmic surveillance, representation is never only about what is seen. It is also about what can be extracted, processed and used. Documentary photography must now operate within this reality. The ethical task is not simply to show. It is to show without delivering bodies to systems of capture.

Looking back, the Chilean revolt also reminds us that the struggle over images does not end when the streets empty. In Chile, the events of October 2019 have since been repeatedly minimised, distorted or dismissed through the label *octubrismo*, a term often used to turn this complex social uprising into a caricature – an irrational episode, an exaggeration, an invented threat. This is not simply a debate about words; it is a battle over memory. In the current media landscape, where images circulate faster than contextual explanations, denial and disinformation become easier to amplify. Visual evidence can be reframed, detached from its origins and used to support conflicting narratives at once. Today, »fake news« is not only about false images, but also about how »the real« is portrayed. Images are re-edited, recaptioned and strategically redistributed. This is visible globally in the way political figures use images to manufacture spectacle, intensify polarisation and replace verification with affect. In that context, the question is no longer only whether photography can testify, but whether it can still hold ground as a shared material for truth-making. The strategies that emerged during the Chilean revolt – camouflage, distance and sabotage of recognition – can be read not only as tactics of survival under surveillance, but also as an urgent lesson: representation is always contested, and images are never innocent.

All photographs by the author, Santiago de Chile, 2019–2020.



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