

Arts activism and the democratisation of the photographic image

Sharron Lea considers the impact of mass broadcast of images of police tactics at protests.

technology has enabled the democratisation of the photographic image; inexpensive digital cameras and mobile phones combined with web-based media outlets and mobile streaming technologies have facilitated the rise of the socially engaged citizen-reporter. The immediacy and intensity of image-based reporting has led to widespread exposure of police tactics at protests, whether these have been broadcast on Indymedia or YouTube, or, in the case of the attack against Ian Tomlinson captured by a New York hedge fund manager, on the Guardian's website.

Arts activism has always been concerned with exposing deception,

During the past three decades photographers and filmmakers have captured evidence of police aggression at various sites of resistance, from Greenham Common, the miner's strike, marches against the poll tax to May Day protests and from Stop the War protests, G8 world summit meeting mobilisations to Kingsnorth climate camp. Whilst mainstream press and television have appeared to take a hostile stance against demonstrators and disseminated prejudicial or skewed footage, such as the BBC's transposed sequence of events during the 1984 mass picket of Orgrave, the objective and accurate images taken from within the activities have rarely achieved mass broadcast.

Some participant observers, whether police or protestors, managed to capture reliable and unbiased footage which clearly indicated the strength of numbers and the attitude of the authorities. Arts activists documented activities, undertook stimulating creative interventions and produced useful archival material. On occasions, both activists and police provided evidence in securing acquittals. However, despite the importance of such photographic and video imagery, distribution appeared to have been restricted to a specialist audience and thus had limited impact or influence on the general public.

Photographic footage of protesters and bystanders being shoved with riot shields and struck with batons at the G20 demonstration, in April 2009, was nothing new. However,

the amount of images and their means of distribution had radically altered. Increasingly accessible



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

asking difficult questions and altering perceptions of mainstream discourse. Now, democratised photography, the phenomenon of the citizen-reporter and increased media coverage combine to reveal and reflect the reality of events for those involved. The issue is the need to consider both the consequences of action and the impact of its observation within the public domain.

Events at the G20 protests may have been the tipping point for public opinion. However, continued creative non-violent direct action tactics and subsequent police responses, undertaken within public participatory spectacles, simultaneously documented and disseminated, oblige those involved to be held to account for their actions. ■

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Figure 4