Dear Sir or Madam,
Dear friends of Camera Austria,

The Militant Image Reader brings together eight diverse texts from theorists and artists from Europe and North America that speculate on the relationship of artistic representation and social change today. Has a new protest paradigm emerged out of the framing and circulation of social upheaval and a new terrain of political action? And is this paradigm multiple, shaped not only within the dominant media, grasped by political movements and reworked by artistic production? Under which conditions are contemporary images able to be effective and affective, and how do they unfold their meaning and create an impact? In which ways is this possible unfolding entangled simultaneously with the social and the political and the artistic?

This publication engages with the militant image rather than seeking to define it. The militant image is as multiple as theories of social change and the conditions that must come together in order for change to happen. The militant image—perhaps ephemeral, elusive, whispering, and circulating at the threshold of invisibility—proposes that a new condition of the image seeks to respond to the radically uneven conditions of the present, yet the militant image always aims for future.

Sincerely,
the Camera Austria-Team

Excerpt from:
Reinhard Braun and Urban Subjects, “Introducing What’s Already Going On”

This publication is part of an expanded exhibition and research project, entitled “The Militant Image. Picturing What Is Already Going On, Or The Poetics of the Militant Image”, by the Vienna- and Vancouver-based collective Urban Subjects (Sabine Bitter, Jeff Derksen, Helmut Weber) and Camera Austria, Graz. The project has its roots in research Urban Subjects realised at Leuphana University of Lüneburg, which culminated in the exhibition “Front, Field, Line, Plane: Researching the Militant Image” at Kunstraum of Leuphana University in the summer of 2013.

While doing research for the exhibition at the archive of Der Spiegel in Hamburg, the question of representing moments of protest arose from the work of the press photographer Günter Zint. Zint documented the protests in northern Germany against nuclear power from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, including the large protest at Brokdorf where the police tested new tactics of force and containment (such as “kettling”) on protesters. In the context of the media and artistic landscape of 2012, with images of Occupy, of the anti-austerity protests, and of what was optimistically called the “Arab Spring”, Zint’s photographs seemed to us to stand at a crossroads of the representation of political actions. This crossroads cannot exist in the photograph itself—as meaning never resides solely in the image itself—but is part of a history of the representation of protests and social movements that stretches back over the twentieth century, but perhaps exists most dominantly in our imaginations as images from the 1960s. Zint’s images, and the relationship of the police (and ultimately the army) and the very mixed group of protestors, were echoed in images we saw of the protests of the G20 in Toronto and on the streets of other cities. As powerfully direct as Zint’s photographs are in their picturing of the complex of relations shown by the events, they were pulled into a “protest paradigm” which frames the protestors as reckless and violent. Our opening speculation was: Has a new protest paradigm also emerged out of the framing of social upheaval and the new terrain of political action today? And was
this paradigm multiple, with not only a paradigm in the dominant media but also a set of competing frames deployed in artistic production? From there, we set out with Camera Austria to curate a show that gave both a historical and a present sense of how militancy has been approached by artistic practices that agitate the frame of representation, while also aiming to circulate, generate, and affectively energise militancy.

The relationship between photographic representation and the contours of the present, in which the militant image project is grounded, coincided with a series of exhibitions at Camera Austria that began in 2011: “Communitas: The Unrepresentable Community” (2011), “Art Is Concrete” (2012), “Unexpected Encounters” (2013), and “Once Documentary” (2014). These exhibitions at Camera Austria are based on contemporary documentary practices that reveal, or work within, a fundamental incongruence between what is seen and what is represented, between what is shown and what is known, between the visible and the visuality of the image—an incongruence which questions both representation and the visuality of the image itself. This interrogation questions the potential of the photographic image to articulate meaning in a direct way: to link that history with this view, that text with this identity, that memory with this object, that place with this history. Rather, this series of exhibitions foregrounded an imbalance of the visual and the speakable: “images falling into the midst of words, verbal flashes crisscrossing drawings … discourse cutting into the form of things”, and vice versa”, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, seems to take place, puzzling and shaking orders of production of meaning.2

But this is not a calculated ruin of any certainty about the real; rather it steps out of the proliferation of conditions of photographic images that link a certain visibility positively with a particular meaning, thus creating new paradigms while limiting the scope of other possible readings. Such a linking of certain kinds of “identities” of the images connects representation to identity production in general. Instead, this exhibition practice shows that any of these articulations, meanings, visualities, and certainties are necessarily contingently produced, claimed, and even imposed. The potential of a politics of non-identity builds on the work of theorists and activists who begin from the position of a non-unity of identity. Otherwise such a politics risks slipping into a “bad positivity”.3 In order to conceive of militancy and militant images today, a concept of non-identification (of subject, place, and image) can productively build on the struggles that generated critiques of the politics of identity.

It is not the identity of the image that defines (and controls) its territory of visualisation—and thus also understands the field of the image as defined, dominated, and under the control of the image—but the contingency of the image that deterritorialises its meaning and opens it up for other connections and encounters. According to this contingency, it would no longer be the telology of the image to represent “properly” alongside predetermined articulations, but to make contingency—and its materiality—itself visible. In stripping away any essentialistic means of representation, the photographic image is allowed to escape “the regime of identity” and to take “identities into consideration, the symbolic constitution of the social as an ensemble of defined and identifiable groups”.

This leads to the question that Urban Subjects and Camera Austria share: Under which conditions are contemporary images able to be effective and affective, to unfold their meaning and their impact? In which ways is this possible unfolding entangled with the social and the political? Or, as it is stated directly in the “Panhans Manifesto”, the working paper that Camera Austria and Urban Subjects developed early in the curatorial process: “What would the militant image look like today?”

1 The initial project “Filling the Weak Points” was part of an artist residency that Urban Subjects held at the Leuphana University of Lüneburg through the Leuphana Arts Program in 2012–13. The exhibition “The Militant Image. Picturing What Is Already Going On, Or The Poetics of the Militant Image” (September 28-November 11, 2014) at Camera Austria, Graz, was co-produced by the festival steirischer herbst along with the workshop “Researching the Militant Image” held by Urban Subjects at the herbst Academy 2014.
2 Gilles Deleuze, Foucault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 42 and 56.