

## BEHIND THE ICONOGRAPHY OF TERRORISM AND VIOLENCE IN VIDEO WORKS OF SAŠA TKAČENKO

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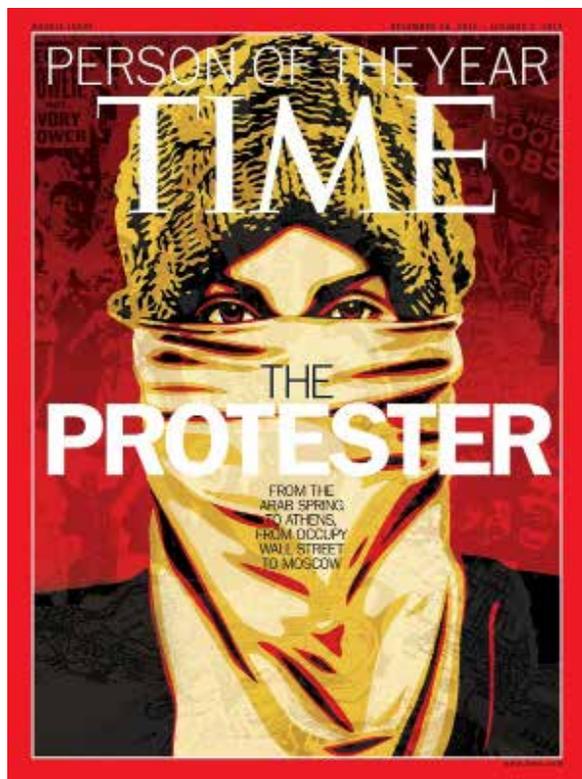
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The image of a protester, representing the person of the year, appeared December 26, 2011 on the cover of the American TIME Magazine. The choice of an anonymous individual for a symbol of anti-system and anti-regime oriented risings across the globe during the last year (Arab Spring, London riots, Occupy Wall Street movement, demonstrations in Athens and later in other European countries, anti-regime protests in Moscow) triggered a vivid discussion in the media. Admirations for the actions of individuals that rapidly transformed into effective global movement, optimism for the big changes ahead, uncertainty in anticipation of resolution on the world's trouble spots, as well as suspicions of the ideological and opportunistic backgrounds behind these seemingly optimistic occurrences, appeared as observations in the debate. What the image of the glorified protester communicates, on the other side, is quite simple – a woolen cap on the head and a scarf over the nose and the mouth cover the face of a young woman<sup>1</sup>, allowing us to see only her decisive and inquiring look. The other elements of her physiognomy are impossible to grasp – the individual characteristics of her face, and thus her personal identity are hidden so that the belonging to the collective, which determinedly acted in rejection of economical, political and social conditions strongly shaping their existence, is emphasized.

The choice of the disguised iconography to represent the protester reveals significant characteristics of his/her media constructed personality. The hero/heroine of today ignores personal interests for the sake of the community he/she lives in and goes out on the street to openly fight for the new social order, whilst the destruction of public space caused by his/her actions become justified by the goal smiling from the future. He/she disregards personal safety with the belief that the change is possible only through radical actions. Protester's face is concealed because he/she communicates through the actions as demonstrations of the idea he/she believes in. The placing of

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<sup>1</sup>Shortly after the publication of this TIME Magazine issue it turned out that Ted Soqui's photograph of a 25-year-old Sarah Mason, a protester at the Occupy LA demonstrations on November 17, 2011, directly inspired Shepard Fairey's illustration on the magazine cover.



THE COVER OF THE TIME MAGAZINE ON DECEMBER 26, 2011.  
ILLUSTRATION BY SHEPARD FAIREY.

the mask over the face thus marks the moment in which the success, as well as the responsibility for his/her action become ascribed to and justified by the ideology he/she admits to.

Produced almost a year before the protester was announced for the Time Magazine's person of the year, Saša Tkačenko's video *Handicraft* interrogates the process during which an individual is confronted with the decision to act in a radical manner, using the visual language today inseparable from the context of the protester as a media proclaimed icon of the contemporary society. Two-channel video installation shows two contrasting manual processes – one channel presents the manual process of knitting a woolen balaclava mask, whereas the other channel displays the ripping of the same mask while it covers the face of its creator.

*Balaclava*, sometimes referred to as a ski mask, was introduced for the first time in the middle of 19th century by the military as a head protection from the cold weather during the battle in the open field. For the same reason it was used by alpinists, skiers and motorcyclers, but later on it became a part of anti-terrorist police and military unit's equipment as a mask for hiding officers' identity during the combats with criminals. The most common and popular function this mask ironically established among criminal groups, terrorists and other offenders as an instrument for concealing their personal identity when performing illegal actions. Since 1970s this mask, as well as her numerous variations, became the main attribute in the representations of robbers, street protesters, anarchists and other felons. Its symbolical function balaclava acquired due to a photograph that was perceived by the greater world audience as a witness of the tragic Munich massacre at the Olympic games in 1972. The black and white photograph showing a member of the Palestinian terrorist group *Black September*, appearing on the balcony of the Munich Olympic village where the Israeli athletes were kept as hostage, decisively shaped the manner in which a terrorist was perceived in the visual social consciousness. The Munich massacre was, to make the matter even more noteworthy, the first terrorist attack that took place in front of international public and media, which directly followed and then broadcasted this terrible event.<sup>2</sup>



A MEMBER OF THE PALESTINIAN TERRORIST GROUP, WHO SEIZED MEMBERS OF THE ISRAELI OLYMPIC TEAM AT THEIR QUARTERS AT THE MUNICH OLYMPIC VILLAGE.

<sup>2</sup> About this photograph of the Palestinian terrorist and its impact on the contemporary perception of terrorism, see: Hoffmann, Felix (ed.), *Unheimlich vertraut: Bilder vom Terror*, Berlin: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011.

Since this incident onwards, up to the declaration of a protester for the person of 2011, the image of a male or a female wearing a mask over the face carried negative implications associated with terrorism, violence and violation of civil freedom, especially in the context of media manipulation of visual information. After the unfortunate event of the September 11 Al-Qaeda terrorist attack in New York in 2001, this iconography became more popular, inevitably introducing a number of social stereotypes and presumptions about the national origins or religious affiliations of the (pre-)supposed terrorist.

The newest global occurrences and the media reactions following them reversed the symbolism behind the masked face by awarding it with positive democratic connotations of freedom, civic responsibility and solidarity with the collective. Although the actions of street protesters in no way can be equivalent to the terrible effects of extreme terrorist actions, it interestingly appears that these extreme figures share the same iconographical, that is representational, scheme. It is exactly this question of distinguishable visual manifestations of today's heroes and villains that the video installation *Handicraft* examines. There is a fact that can't be overlooked here – even though it might sound politically incorrect, the above proclaimed contemporary heroes, as well as the vicious terrorist, shift their symbolical roles when observed from different ideological perspectives, which oppose the dominant democratic principles (in different political contexts the terrorist are heroes, whereas the street protesters carry negative associations).

A young woman as the figure chosen to perform the manual actions in the *Handicraft* video is a consequence of this relativism, which is a very important component of Tkačenko's approach to the phenomena of terrorism, violence, disobedience and their visual demonstrations. Departing from the belief that any person, regardless of his/her gender, ethnic, religious or other social affiliation, can opt for a radical act in public, the author analyses the process preceding this decision through the simulation of its infinite delay. The constant repetition of creation and destruction of the object, which summarizes the historical, social and media-constructed perception of terrorism, indicates the impact of the symbolic on the individual. The process of patient knitting and persistent tearing of the mask is, therefore, nothing but a constant interweaving of acceptance and rejections of both, roles and beliefs that are socially and politically imposed on the individual when dealing with the decision to radically act in public. Playing with the expectations and meanings associated with the figure of a well-known terrorist with the balaclava over the face, the *Handicraft* video installation transfers the uncertainty and doubt in relation to the decision process to the observer as well. Much like to young woman in the video is unable to perform her work to the end, so the spectator can't entirely justify the semantics behind the image represented to him/her.

The conducted destabilization of the popular iconography related to a terrorist, or in the current situation of the imagery of a contemporary protester, raises questions concerning the connotations and consequences of the broader phenomena within these individuals operate. Video *Handicraft* is set to terrorism in a manner that is very close to Baudrillard's hypothesis about this global phenomenon. Discussing the messages communicated by terrorist actions, as well as the main motives behind them, Baudrillard writes:

*"This is the sovereign hypothesis: terrorism ultimately has no meaning, no objective, and cannot be measured by its 'real' political and historical consequences. And it is, paradoxically, because it has no meaning that it constitutes an event in a world increasingly saturated with meaning and efficacy."*, and continues, *"Terrorism invents nothing, inaugurates nothing. It simply carries things to the extreme, to the point of paroxysm"*.<sup>3</sup>

By bringing the iconography of terrorism to its extremes Tkačenko actually demonstrates the absurdity of the ideological implementation of terrorism, which results only in a number of counter-actions. Every terrorist event caused nothing but a series of equally or even more extreme destructions, much like the civil demonstration in most cases eventually produced exactly what they insisted on objecting.

The analysis of a phenomenon through the elaboration of its iconography Tkačenko continues in the video piece *Skulls will be crushed*. This time he takes over a graffiti slogan, which appeared in Belgrade during the year 2010 – *Skulls will be crushed* is a message by football hooligan groups addressing their fellow-citizens and indicating the consequences of not respecting the rules on "their" territory. Tkačenko, trying to investigate a threat inserted in the public space, indirectly simulates its demonstration. The result is a video work displaying a metal rod constantly and forcefully beating a black rubber skull that reflexively bounces in space, thereby hitting the walls. After every solid impact the skull returns to the starting position, insisting on the impossibility of its "cracking". The entire simulation is followed by a popular *Eurodance* song, one of the unavoidable musical hits in the first half of 90s, which experienced a successful come-back in domestic and international club scene in the past couple of years.

As a medium of symbolic violence in public space, the graffiti of this type have a characteristic to bring their signs, or meanings, to the absurd. This ability links them to terrorist acts, as well as any act of violence that basically has no meaning, but to produce a spectacle and lead social circumstances to its extreme.<sup>5</sup> Another paradox related to language as a medium of violence is highlighted by Slavoj Žižek, who accurately concludes that the language, as an ability that separated humans from animals and provides them with the capability to resolve conflict through dialogue, in fact functions far more as a medium to create a conflict.<sup>6</sup> Taking in consideration the local context in which the hooligan groups increasingly manifest their destructive actions in public (which in turn is not exclusively tied to this environment, but is considered to be a global phenomenon), the sentence *Skulls will be crushed* becomes a symbol for a certain lifestyle where disputes and problems are being solved with violence. Acting from a power position such speech intends to have their "opponents" held in an atmosphere of permanent fear, constantly reminding them of the possible consequences.

Translating a given verbal threat into its literal visual demonstration in the video *Skulls will be crushed*, the author not only finds absurdity in its implementations. Much more, by combining the impacts of metal rod with the music, which promotes an easy-going and superficial individual attitude towards the environment as a result of commercialization of culture, he indicates the conditions under which these forms of symbolic social violence are being developed. Not only that – the music distraction from a brutal simulation of violent actions imposed on the viewer of the video mimics the current manipulation of the public through media that, promoting the ephemeral daily political and social events or scandals (one of which is the escalation of street violence), distracts the attention from more important causes of the problems in our society, such as far-reaching decisions and actions of the ruling political and economic regimes.

Saša Tkačenko exhibits both works, *Handicraft* and *Skulls will be crushed*, under the title of *Manual Work*. By such contextualization he treats both of the phenomena – extreme terrorism, street vandalism, as well as the recent global demonstrations – as the manual labor performed by individuals who, as in terms of production from which this term derives, are used by the employers, or in this case the political ideologies, in order to contribute to the development and implementation of their ideas.

<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, transl. Chris Turner, London and New York: Verso, 2003, p.57.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

<sup>5</sup> This characteristic of graffiti was elaborated by German philosopher Caroline Heinrich, as quoted in: Baudrillard, *Op. cit.*, p.74.

<sup>6</sup> Because language belongs to the sphere of Lacan's Symbolic, it strongly influences the inequality in verbal relation between the Subject and the Other, inevitably leading to conflicts. See: Žižek, Slavoj, *Violence*, London: Profile Books, 2009, p. 50-60.