

The Aesthetic Politics of Unfinished Media: New Media Activism in Brazil

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This article analyzes the role of key visual technologies in contemporary media activism in Brazil. Drawing on a range of media formats and sources, it examines how the aesthetic politics of activists in protests that took place in 2013 opened the way for wider sociopolitical change. The forms and practices of the media activists, it is argued, aimed explicitly at producing transformative politics. New media technologies were remediated as a kind of equipment that could generate new relationships and subjectivities, and thereby access to intentionally undetermined futures. [aesthetic politics, activism, Brazil, memes, new media, policing, social movements]

Introduction

On the evening of June 13, 2013, a journalist covering protests against fare increases on public transportation in São Paulo, Brazil, was detained by police.¹ He was accused of carrying vinegar, said to ease the effects of tear gas. Although released a few hours later, a meme had already begun to spread: the “V for Vinegar” movement, or alternatively, “the salad uprising.” Over the space of a couple of weeks, the size of the crowds and diversity of causes they advocated exploded simultaneously. Brazilians went to the streets in numbers not seen since demonstrations in 1984 demanding the end of the dictatorship and in 1992 for the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello.

Almost a year after the massive protests of 2013, Paulo Ito posted a picture to flickr of his latest painting, a boy crying with hunger in front of a soccer ball (Figure 1). Bright colors matched the mural’s location on a preschool wall, and in the incisive style of the artist, a toddler’s bobblehead topped a body that was small and mannish. This was not the boy’s first meager meal, his tears of frustration born of familiarity. With Brazil in the midst of preparations for the 2014 FIFA World Cup, the mural quickly became both “viral and iconic,” as journalist Dave Zirin wrote when he reposted it on Twitter.² Ito had deftly captured the sentiment of those discontented with the country’s massive mobilization of resources to host the Cup, in striking contrast to its deficient and unequal provision of basic public services. The caustic image was liked and shared tens of thou-

sands of times on social media, and within a week had hopped along transnational networks to become the subject of online articles and blog posts around the world.

Discontent had been running beneath the surface of the Brazilian political scene, occasionally erupting in marches and other demonstrations. Their escalation in 2013, like the later virality of Ito’s painting, came partly from an infectious zeal to express dissatisfaction and to participate in the moment. It also came from over a decade of activism, notably around public transportation, joined with a new generation of “media activists”: those engaged in “organized ‘grassroots’ efforts directed to creating or influencing media practices and strategies” (Carroll and Hackett 2006, 84). Their documentation of the 2013 protests and police repression was at the same time an exploration of the kind of journalism and sociopolitical change that might be brought about through new media.

This article analyzes the role of key visual technologies in media activism in Brazil. Drawing on a range of media formats and sources, it examines how activists enacted an “aesthetic politics” (Rancière 2010) during the 2013 protests, with a focus on the group Mídia NINJA as one significant case. The ninjas explicitly argued for a relationship between what they described as their aesthetic, developed through photos, videos, graphics, and social media, and their political activism. Using these media to give visibility to the events for an audience around the world, they were aiming, they said, to create forms and practices in the



FIGURE 1. "evento da pompéia 2014." Art and photo by Paulo Ito
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service of a transformative politics. The awakening and empowerment this facilitated among Brazilians were not inherently progressive. Mixed in with demands for transportation, education, and reform of the political process were calls for military intervention and even the return of the dictatorship. Yet this analysis suggests that the activists took up new media technologies as a kind of equipment that could generate new relationships and subjectivities, and thereby access to intentionally undetermined futures.

The Remediation of New Media

Perhaps the oldest act of artistic expression—painting on walls—was “remediated” when Paulo Ito put the photo of his work online and it went viral. Remediation has two facets. Most obviously, it entails a change of medium. But it also means to remedy, to act in order to make something better (Rabinow and Bennett 2012, 42). With Ito’s post, an existing medium was given new temporality and accessibility in digital form, and the problematic relation between national priorities and poverty was rendered coherent and available for reflection. As with the 2013 protests the year before, his mural became a virtual event, emerging through the participatory social-

ity and interactivity of “individuals aggregated through the viral flows of social media” (Juris 2012, 269).

The term “new media” always seems on the verge of obsolescence, but it is better seen as a moving label.³ When first used by Marshall McLuhan to refer to radio and the telephone (1953, 1960), its notable technical features were electronic speed and global reach, which are now completely ordinary (Peters 2009, 16). The term has moved through time to include technologies, their aesthetics, and their logics, as they appear (Manovich 2003). “New media” would be used in the 1980s for personal computers (Ingle 1986) and hypertext (Moulthrop 2003), then in the 2010s for augmented reality, as these technologies shifted from relatively small circles of early users to the commercial mainstream.

What this ongoing movement suggests is that new media (now and yet-to-be) should be distinguished not by their newness or as a set of commercial devices, but in terms of their technical capabilities, and social and subjectivizing characteristics. These features emerge in the interplay between devices and practices, activities, and social arrangements, such that new media are both “instrument and product of social shaping” (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2002, 7–8). The 2013 mobilizations relied in large part on smartphones with cameras and on social media, primarily Facebook. Combined, they played an important new role for both seasoned activists and fresh participants (and in erasing the line between the two, in keeping with the activists’ goals). The most pertinent technical capabilities were the exchange of information in real time and the ability to support user-generated content. These provided the characteristics of many-to-many communication—the possibility of reaching both specific people and far-flung masses—with the reciprocal and nonreciprocal intimacy each entails (Thompson 2005).

Cell phones are a technology of particular importance throughout Brazil. Landlines had been inaccessible to many, not only in remote regions but also in the favelas and peripheries of major cities. Mobile phones were therefore eagerly adopted, reaching “corners of the country, sometimes even before the local populations had at their disposal piped water or basic sanitation” (Dias and do Canto Silveira 2002, 9). By 2013, more smartphones than traditional cell phones were being sold (Bruno 2014), and over 50% of the population had access to the internet.⁴ The increasing ubiquity of smartphones, with their capabilities for creating and transmitting audio, images, and text, was key to the emergent aesthetic politics of the new media activists.

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“All action is stylized,” Paul Rabinow notes, “hence it is aesthetic, insofar as it is shaped and presented to others” (2003, 3). In Jacques Rancière’s terms, the aesthetics of *politics* reconfigures “the distribution of the common through political processes of subjectivation” (2010, 140). “Such re-configurations,” he writes, “are brought about by collectives of enunciation and demonstration (manifestation)” and consist “above all in the framing of a *we*, a subject, a collective demonstration whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of social parts” (Rancière 2010, 141–42). Drawing on these specifications, the “aesthetic politics” of the activists discussed in this article can be understood as the work of inventing “new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time,” and ultimately, “new subjects” (Rancière 2010, 139).

For Michel Foucault, subjectivation (*assujettissement*) refers to those ways subjects are brought and bring themselves into being (2000, 331), and this work of intentional self-formation as an ethical subject requires “equipment” (*paraskeuē*). For the Ancient Greeks, Foucault found, this was a toolkit of maxims and practice that take on material existence to become “embodied dimension of one’s existence” (Rabinow 2003, 10–11). “Defined abstractly,” Rabinow and Bennett elaborate, equipment is “a set of truth claims, affects, and ethical orientations designed and composed into a practice” (2012, 134), and it is in this sense that the activists, concerned with both individual and collective transfor-

mation, turned to new media. That is, at the heart of the Brazilian new media activism (*midialivrisimo*) in 2013 was the hope that the new technologies would provide tools for subjectivation and, in Foucault’s phrase, “the medium through which logos is transformed into ethos” (Rabinow 2003, 1).

When a video is live-streamed to viewers who share it through a transnational assemblage of social contacts, this changes its temporality and spatiality, but it is remediated as equipment when purposively employed in ethical practice. The activists’ documentation of the protests and police violence effectively pressured, first, the mainstream media into increasing coverage, and then the federal government to offer a series of concessions, but these were not their only goals. Their commentary laid out explicitly the rationale of their aesthetic idiom, through which they proposed a different political logic and fundamentally, a different relation between making and interacting with media. They were engaged in remediation, fashioning new practices and aesthetic forms as equipment for shaping new political subjects and collectives.

The Days of June, or, the Salad Uprising

The protests in June and July 2013 took many people by surprise for their size, their energy, and the fact that they happened at all (Figure 2). That they were not sponsored by a political party, the labor unions, or the church, as well as the way that the invitations to participate were



FIGURE 2. Protestors facing off against police. One carries a banner “There is no evolution without revolution,” and several are filming with their cell phones. Still frame, captured from *A Partir de Agora—As jornadas de junho no Brasil*. Carlos Pronzato CC BY 3.0 BR.

made mainly through Facebook, lent the impression of nearly spontaneous assembly. The reality was somewhat more complicated.

Demonstrations, small at first, emerged from activism around public transport that had antecedents in Brazil's post-dictatorship return to democracy. The idea of transportation as an essential public service that should be available to even the poorest gave rise to the free or "zero fare" project (*tarifa zero*; Pomar 2013). Free fare became an ongoing locus of activist efforts, particularly among students loosely in the orbit of an anarchist revival dating from the late 1980s and the antiglobalization movement of the 1990s (Liberato 2006, 219–38). In 2003, a "bus revolt" paralyzed the city of Salvador, in the state of Bahia, for ten days (Pronzato 2003). The following year saw a major free fare campaign in the city of Florianopolis (*Revolta da Catraca*) and in 2005 another at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. This momentum was consolidated as the Free Fare Movement (*Movimento Passe Livre*, or MPL). Over the next decade this horizontally structured, nonpartisan federation of groups undertook studies of their local transportation systems, wrote up analyses, and engaged in grassroots organizing.

While public transportation had thus been an arena of activism for quite a while, Teresa Caldeira (2013) points to its centrality in the 2013 protests as representing a generational shift in contemporary Brazil. Older aspirations to owning a house and appliances have turned into a newer globalization-inflected desire for mobility and portable goods, while commutes in major cities can stretch to hours. The Free Fare Movement's motto, "a city only exists for those who can move around it," underscores how an affordable, functional transportation system both signifies and materializes the "right to the city" (Lefebvre 1968; Harvey 2008). In the movement's words, the fight for free fare is not an end, but a means for constructing a different society.

Transportation, however, was only one significant arena of activist effort. The 2013 protests coincided with the FIFA Confederations Cup, itself a rehearsal for the 2014 World Cup. Popular committees had been organizing since 2007 against the depredation of vulnerable populations in the name of mega sporting events (Peruzzo 2013). Their acts at sites slated for destruction or evictions were photographed, written up, and circulated on social media. Some, such as the resistance in Rio de Janeiro to the demolition of the former Museum of the Indian to facilitate stadium access, made international news. The committees were, in turn, one of numerous energetic collectives (*coletivos*) mobilized "around thematic issues such as black identity, LGBT, poetry, graffiti, justice, and environment," which James Holston

has identified as the new form of the insurgent urban citizenship that remade Brazil between the 1970s and the early 2000s (2008; 2014, 896).

These collectives in fact had emerged as quickly as they could have. Salvador's bus revolt in 2003 only occurred when the left-wing Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, known by the initials PT) finally entered power after three failed bids. When Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva won the Brazilian presidential election, the opposition became the establishment, and organized labor and major social movements were tied in many ways to the new government.

Disillusion with the PT set in over the period that followed (Salaini and Toledo 2013). Although the party reduced hunger and extreme poverty through social programs that included around a quarter of the population (almost fifty million people), on issues that conflicted with powerful interests—land reform, environmental protection, urban development, corruption in its own ranks, and projects for the upcoming World Cup, including resettlements and police violence—it did little. The middle class felt squeezed and left out as public education, health care, and transportation infrastructure remained inadequate. Underscoring the growth in PT's ties to entrenched power interests and their distance from a base originally among the disenfranchised, the biggest corruption scandals in the history of Brazil broke during their administration. At the time of the protests, the most prominent of these was the *Mensalão*, a vote-buying scheme that had diverted public money to purchase support in congress.⁵ The payment of allowances and other bribes to lawmakers was not limited to the PT, and indeed there were those who noted favorably that it was only when the party finally came into power that these longstanding schemes came to light. This did not negate, however, the deep involvement of PT politicians.

The 2013 protests also emerged in the context of an economic slowdown that had begun the previous year. As government revenues decreased, cities around Brazil began compensatory measures. The federal government announced that public transportation would be exempt from two taxes in order to keep the prices from contributing to inflation. Nonetheless, the mayor of São Paulo ordered a 20-cent increase in transport fares, and the city's Free Fare Movement went into action.

Come to the Street

On June 6, 2013, the movement organized a protest against the fare increase that drew around two thousand people to some of São Paulo's busiest thorough-

fares. The police arrested fifteen participants, and another fifty were reported injured. The next day, the movement again organized a march and attendance doubled. The mainstream media coverage, however, was brief and negative. Television crews interviewed middle-class *Paulistanos* who were annoyed because the demonstrations had caused traffic jams. They disapproved of the vandalism presented on the news and approved of strong police action. But the transportation and media activists provided a counter story to that on TV with their own pictures and reports, which showed police aggression. Over the week, their accounts of the protests spread through social media. On June 11, ten thousand to twelve thousand people in São Paulo came to demonstrate in the streets.

On June 13, with similar numbers expected, the government deployed riot police, and a young female photojournalist for a major newspaper, *Folha de São Paulo*, was hit with a rubber bullet by a police officer at close range. Photos of Giuliana Vallone with a bruised and bleeding eye swept the Lusophone internet, producing the moment many came to remember as their introduction to the events. A team from her newspaper quickly produced a clip titled “Reporter tells how police brutality marked the latest protest.”⁶ Shown on television and posted on YouTube with captions in Portuguese, Spanish, and English, the video alternated chaotic footage of the police in action with the photojournalist being interviewed in her hospital room. Twitter and Facebook were full of these images and others, shared by people not yet directly involved but becoming increasingly politicized by the government’s oppression of the demonstrators.

That same evening in São Paulo, the journalist Piero Locatelli and around forty other protestors were detained for carrying vinegar (Locatelli 2013). Word of mouth and online forums had spread advice for breathing through vinegar-dampened cloths, although chemists criticized that this would only increase mucosal irritation. The police declared that vinegar could be used to make bombs, and also that they had no way of knowing what was really in protestors’ plastic bottles.⁷ In return, activists spread a new meme, “Make Salad, Not War,” mocking the police’s concerns (Figure 3). The phrase “V for Vinegar” referenced the graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, set in a dystopian future in which the UK is ruled by a totalitarian government. Others, more solemnly, referenced the French *journées de juin* of 1848, declaring that these were their June Days or the Journeys of June.

Designers, photographers, and other artists rapidly captioned photos and images, developing an aesthetic with references to other social movements, from Occupy to Gezi. Their Tumblrs offered meme-ready graph-



FIGURE 3. saladuprising.tumblr.com 2013 CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

ics, gifs, and slogans. Equally striking were the videos that appeared, ranging from grainy footage uploaded straight from cell phones to skilled work by independent cinematographers and documentary filmmakers. Each of these forms was, as Limor Shifman writes about memes, simultaneously “an idea, a practice, and an object” (2013, 373). “Created with awareness of each other,” they were “circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (Shifman 2013, 367). Events were grasped as events and mediated as such.

Around this time, with images of police violence and visual memes flooding the web, the number of people participating leapt upward by a factor of ten. On June 17, 280,000–300,000 Brazilians participated in protests in thirteen different cities. Unions and the long-established social movements of the democratic transition appeared, along with the newer leftist groups advocating diverse causes, and an increasingly organized, reactionary Right (Bringel and Pleyers 2015). The mainstream media also stopped describing protesters as rioters and began nonstop coverage. Police repression continued however, and the cameras, now even more numerous, could not help but capture what Amnesty International (2014) would later characterize as “a strategy of fear,” including the beating of students with batons, tear gas (at one point a canister was thrown into a hospital), rubber bullets fired at people who posed no threat, and indiscriminate detention (Figure 4).

Reporters on television scrambled to find an acceptable narrative for the displays of brutality. As Anelise dos Santos Gutterres observes, they turned to the familiar event of heavily armed police entering poor neighborhoods and borrowed the framing of those incursions as officer-heroes versus drug-trafficking villains (2014, 905). News cameras panned the marches, settling on



FIGURE 4. Police spray protestors with a lachrymatory agent. Still frame, captured from *A Partir de Agora—As jornadas de junho no Brasil*. Carlos Pronzato CC BY 3.0 BR.

small groups whose actions were used to justify the police use of force. Some were protestors enacting Black Bloc tactics of confrontation and property destruction, whereas others were belligerent, and these included undercover officers carrying out false flag operations (Gutterres 2014, 904–5).⁸

This coverage also depoliticized the participating masses, ironically, in light of the remarkable intensification of demands, and the aesthetic politics of the reporting itself. The protests were depicted in the visual language of carnival, a celebration familiar and a matter of pride to most Brazilians. In shots staged in helicopters, or atop tall buildings lining the avenues filled with throngs of protesters, reporters from *Rede Globo*, the country's largest media conglomerate, remarked on the "beautiful sight of the people in the streets." They could just as well have been describing the annual parades, in interviews that touched little on what people had come to protest, but instead commentated on how they were peacefully exercising their democratic rights.

The marches reached a peak on June 20, with at least 1.4 million people filling the streets of cities in every state. Brazil has long been described as Latin America's sleeping giant (Prada 2015), but as mainstream reporting and many protesters celebrated the people finally waking up, the description did not go uncontested. On placards held aloft, people from poorer neighborhoods pointed out that *they* had never been asleep and had long suffered the deficient public services and police violence that had galvanized the broader public. Indigent activists and land rights groups emphasized that

they too already lived both the mobilization and repression that others were seemingly just discovering (Pinheiro da Silva and Xerente 2013).

Many of the new participants wore the bright country colors of yellow and green, or painted the flag itself on their faces, caught up in an infectious "pro" Brazil affect that foreshadowed the rising popularity of nationalistic groups already scattered in parts of the demonstrations. While conservative commentators began to refer to "national discontentment with corruption, bureaucracy, and high taxes," or in prophetic words, a "patriotic movement with the potential for an impeachment push against the Workers' Party" (Baiocchi and Teixeira 2013), the government tried to respond to the protests in a few limited ways. President Dilma, for example, promised a five-point plan, later largely blocked by congress. The real legacy of the events, however, would lie outside the realm of government institutions and policies.

Low Resolution and High Fidelity

One group that came to public attention during the protests was *Mídia NINJA*, with "ninja" standing for "Independent Narratives, Journalism and Action" (Figure 5).⁹ Indeed, the viral emergence of the group became its own international news story, as the Free Fare Movement's ability to project its message began to suffer from the exponential growth of the protests, whereas the ninjas were recognized as not just observers or participants but catalyzers of the events.



FIGURE 5. Mídia NINJA's avatar 2013–2015. Mídia NINJA CC BY 3.0 BR.

They began the protests in São Paulo equipped with a supermarket cart that held “an old generator, two laptops, a sound and clip editing table, two video cameras, and speakers. Over all the paraphernalia, a precautionary tarp and umbrellas” (Torturra 2013). To stream or send material back to team members at a fixed base, they relied on 3G modems or open wifi signals. What they managed to send was published on Mídia NINJA’s Facebook page.

The night that they burst into mainstream awareness, though, they had been unable to get online. Bruno Torturra, one of the group’s founders, reported that finally one of the ninjas picked up enough of a signal to activate “TwitCasting,” a livestreaming application designed to work with even the faintest of signals. “Low resolution and high fidelity journalism went viral on Twitter,” he wrote. “In twenty minutes, we had two thousand viewers. In thirty minutes, we had 15 thousand. When NINJA became a trending topic, there were 30, 40 thousand simultaneous viewers” (Torturra 2013). The ninja’s handheld cell phone camera provided a confusing window onto the street, but it was accessible to people watching around the world, and for those in Brazil, offered a view more immediate and intimate than the news reports.

In the tiny, 400 pixel window of a Japanese site (the twitcasting server) more than 50 thousand people saw the final sequence: the burning of the [Cola-Cola] display, the arrival of the military police, [Felipe Peçana] mouthing off, and the officers without identifying tags. At the end of airtime, the

transmission had reached more than 100 thousand site visitors. (Torturra 2013)

Mídia NINJA itself grew quickly after that, as did criticism from journalists in both mainstream and alternative venues. The parent organization of the group is a concert production collective called *Casa Fora do Eixo*, literally “outside the axis” of the main cultural and economic axis of São Paulo and Rio. The collective is controversial for its successful capture of public funds to produce cultural events and for its reliance on young participants, who receive payment in the form of shared housing and an internal currency. Denying exploitation, *Fora do Eixo* calls itself a “laboratory,” in which one transforms oneself by experimenting with different ways of relating to others and the world.

Drawing on this ready network, Mídia NINJA could immediately describe itself as represented in two hundred cities across Brazil (Bressane 2013). It also had a knack for engaging those who were otherwise spectators. The group publicized the arrest of one 23-year-old, falsely accused of throwing a Molotov cocktail, by transmitting his request for someone to come forward with images that would prove his innocence. Cell phone footage was submitted showing that he had thrown nothing, that he hadn’t even had a backpack to hold bottles. He was released and the charges were dropped.

Their aesthetic was central to their work, as NINJA photographer and editor Rafael Vilela said in a video interview with the independent magazine *Amarello*:

Thinking about new forms: we’re not inventing anything new. Streaming already existed, photography in real time already existed, distribution through social networks already existed. What we did was make available a large number of people to do it, with total dedication, with a very clear focus on social questions. The innovation is in this sense, in having people ready and available, rather than necessarily a question of technological skill. Now, I also think we are productive in terms of language, streaming, the smart phone, loud with noises.... Some clips of images say, like few other things, “this is in the field.” The aesthetic is against everything that is the standard. The standard of Globo journalism is against everything that we do. But we manage to get the grouping of a lot of people, we get a different reading, also aesthetic, also political. (Amarello 2013)

As the protests were escalating, Pablo Capilé, one of the founders of both *Fora do Eixo* and Mídia NINJA, and NINJA co-founder Bruno Torturra went on the TV

journalism show *Roda Viva*.¹⁰ The interview, shown on television and reposted on YouTube, was subsequently interpreted in wildly divergent ways, with commentators claiming the ninjas had been shown up, whereas others opined that they had revealed the inadequacies and limits of the mainstream media's claim to journalistic integrity. More interesting than establishing a winner, however, was the forum that the clash provided for the two founders to express their own political vision.

"The problem that the mainstream media needs to understand," said Torturra, "is that the new objectivity comes from clear transparency, about what they think, and how their model is produced." Capilé added, "We assume our partiality," and this is because "within all of the multi-partialities, a mosaic of partialities is created." The impartiality of traditional media is dismissed not as a fallen ideal, but as a false one. At first glance, the appeal to transparent positionality still represents a familiar brand of activist journalism. But in the *Roda Viva* interview, Capilé goes on to remark:

People are going to remediate [*recombinar*]. Our objective is to lose control. When we said that one of our objectives was to make ourselves unnecessary, it's to manage to lose control ... something we say to people is: "so, anyone has the capacity to transform themselves into a ninja, or to construct their own collective."

This is what Graham Meikle calls "unfinished" media (2002, 31–32), "media which proposes a genuinely unfinished future that people have to make for themselves" (Wark 2002, ix).¹¹ In Torturra's words:

As consumers of mass media, readers aren't being treated as participants, but as consumers of information that's increasingly presented as product, commodity, "content"... readers are no longer passive spectators of reality—they can expose the media, pressure it and monitor it. But with that comes a greater responsibility. New communicators need to become more conscious about what they write and say. (Rigby 2013)

The ninjas' goal was not to "give" the people a voice, nor only to let many different voices be heard. More fundamentally, they aimed to engender a change in subjectivity. Capilé underscored the importance of new political subjects in the *Roda Viva* interview, stating, "I don't believe in the logic of movements without leadership. For me, movements have more and more leaders. The number of leaders has increased by degrees." Within the broader sweep of political action, their aim was not the

pursuit of possible solutions, but increasing the potential in the wider population for individuals and collectives to engage in their own, inevitably varied, efforts, along with the subjectivizing effects this would have.

Their goals place them in a lineage of movements that have understood this relationship between ethics and politics as fundamental. The most influential Brazilian examples include Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (2005 [1970]) and, relatedly, Augusto Boal's theater of the oppressed (2008 [1979]). The subjects the ninjas envisioned were not necessarily the oppressed, however, but spectator-consumers whom they sought to make the new narrators of their chosen causes. Within media activism, groups that aim at ethical transformation also have a significant history, one that traces to grassroots journalism such as Indymedia (Rigitano 2003), the "electronic civil disobedience" of early activism (Baigorri 2003, 2), and media cyber-activism (*midialivrisimo ciberativista*; Malini and Antoun 2013, 21).

Before the internet, the free radio movement, which gained force in the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and in the 1980s in Brazil, proposed that "news be told by its protagonists" (Primo and Träsel 2006, 42). In 1999, Indymedia was founded as an online space for reports by antiglobalization protesters in Seattle. Brazil's Indymedia offshoot, Centro de Mídia Independente (CMI), was launched in 2000. Years before Mídia NINJA, CMI declared that the population itself must become the media, while affirming that "the difference with respect to traditional vehicles is that the CMI openly states its bias—assembled by the site's own users—while the former are biased but claim otherwise."¹² The ninjas' desire to change not just journalism or even society, but also the subject, harkens back to forms of activism and the "existential aesthetic" of tactical media, which aimed at creating "temporary reversals in the flow of power" and then doing "everything in their power to amplify them" (Lovink and Garcia 1997). Fábio Malini and Henrique Antoun, researchers of and participants in Brazilian media activism, distinguish between approaches that develop popular, community forms of media against the hegemony of conglomerates, and a media cyber-activism that refuses "to be the mediator of anything or anyone, but rather to radicalize the principal of 'direct action' that characterizes the Internet. That is, each subjectivity ventures to produce its movement on the Web" (2013, 24).

Mídia NINJA emerged from these traditions to become part of the story of the 2013 protests. Their seemingly sudden success was not because their ideas about media activism were radically new or unique, but rather a matter of both timeliness and preparedness in enacting a distinctly contemporary aesthetic politics. The fruit of this and related efforts (by inde-

pendent media groups that appeared around the same time or splintered off) was, as Ivana Bentes observed at a roundtable debate on Mídia NINJA's position between journalism and activism, "a type of information which activates desire. People are at home, they start to watch, and they want to go to the protests, they want to participate" (Paiva and Rodrigues 2013). Unfinished media invites finishing.

Such efforts are not a panacea for the ills of political life or journalism. For instance, although real-time at-the-scene reporting has become part of the very events it mediates, and sometimes the story itself, this can lend the impression of a perspective more encompassing and even holistic than it is. Live-streaming compresses the place and the moment into a media event that must exclude—without even time to acknowledge—that which remains outside its frame. Journalists and scholars have also pointed out that there is nothing formalistically innovative or superior in handheld footage and its accompanying, unfulfillable promise of unfiltered presence (Moretzsohn 2014). While twitcasting offers a way to accompany events from afar, and to counter uncritical depictions of those in power by the mainstream media, watching it is something of an anti-event. As the camera moves from spot to spot, up and down, jerky with the limitations of bandwidth, the viewer is hard-pressed to follow along, accompanying but not necessarily apprehending.

Political participation as what the ninjas call a "multimedia citizen" is also only accessible to those empowered enough to be present, with access to a camera and computer or smartphone, and the ability to upload and download data. Furthermore, already-dominant interests in government and among powerful media conglomerates are at least as well positioned to harness the affective power of these technologies. Finally, there is the question of how online activism is affected by content filtering controlled by for-profit companies (Bittencourt 2015). With an algorithmic flick, in 2012, Facebook drastically reduced the number of people who would see a given post unless it was "promoted," a scheme based on a pricing system. Individuals could still seek out pages or groups of interest, and thus tweak their newsfeeds, but Facebook has ultimate control over the algorithms and is a strong shaper of what circulates on its social network. The fact that the company directs the flow of information strikes many as problematic, including Mídia NINJA. Their attempt to reduce their dependency by partnering with the venture capital-funded media platform Oximity in 2014, however, was denounced by other independent media groups and led to a bitter break from former (explicitly anticapitalist) collaborators such as Indymedia.¹³

The Aesthetic Politics of Unfinished Media

The 2013 protests would prove themselves a crucible, from which older social movements emerged reforged and new movements were sparked. People throughout the country gained experience with the tools and possibilities of political mobilization, equipping them to address the "crisis of representation" that had led them to participate in the first place (D'Andrea 2014, 935). As the nation became immersed in the multibillion-dollar saga of corruption brought to light by federal prosecutors' Operation Car Wash in 2014, it became clear that grassroots changes on both the left and the right had not only occurred, but were continuing.

New conservative activist movements appeared under the banner of anticorruption, gathering those infuriated by the scandal, the economic recession, and their inability to vote the PT out of power.¹⁴ Wielding new media tools and tactics, they pushed for the impeachment of President Rousseff and successfully organized protests in 2015 and 2016 that were as large as or larger than those of the June Days. Counter marches were organized by those who decried the impeachment charges as insubstantial (largely correctly, as auditors would later confirm),¹⁵ and condemned the process as a reactionary attempt to stop both the corruption investigations and the social programs that were supported under the Workers' Party.

Polls pointed to the relatively elite composition of demonstrators both for and against the impeachment (Gaspar 2016). But outside this power struggle, other campaigns were taking place. Secondary school students staged occupations in protest of inadequate infrastructure, rezoning, and outsourcing. Mobilization flowered around issues of racism, LGBT recognition and safety, and violence toward women, while older movements for rights such as housing, water, and sanitation credited the June 2013 effect with replenishing their bases. Political engagement had increased, and the range of participants expanded to create a far richer gamut of activism than before, although in this context, more extreme ideologies were also empowered.

Brian Massumi asks "whether there are ways of practicing a politics that takes stock of the affective way power operates now, but doesn't rely on violence and the hardening of divisions along identity lines that it usually brings" (Zournazi 2002, 235). Although unsure what that kind of politics would look like, "in some basic way it would be an aesthetic politics, because its aim would be to expand the range of affective potential" (Zournazi 2002, 235). The 2013 protests and their



FIGURE 6. Protestors gather atop the National Congress building in Brasilia. Mídia NINJA CC BY 3.0 BR.

aftermath demonstrated that new media technologies are part of the affective way that power operates now. The transformative potential of the protests, perceived by the ninjas, among others, and advanced through their aesthetic politics, effectively catalyzed new actors across the political spectrum. The new media technologies played as much a role in the polarization and ideological hardening of movements after 2013 as in their earlier buildup, however, with the filter bubble of Facebook and the messaging service WhatsApp (acquired by Facebook in 2014) facilitating a highly insular sociality.

Yet such a reality was not a contradiction of the goals laid out by the new media activists. Among the most evocative images of 2013 were those taken at the Congressional Palace in Brasilia, the federal capital (Figure 6). Demonstrators swarmed the marquee and roof, claiming the space of politics literally and theatrically, with their bodies. Exuberant gestures cast out-sized shadows on the sloping walls of the Chamber of Deputies, and for at least those moments, giants really were awake in Brazil. The scene was captured in photos taken from all angles by participants; their diversity, like the untidy outcomes of the June Days, of a piece with the aesthetic politics of unfinished media.

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Notes

¹ I began tracking the 2013 protests like most Brazilians, via posts from friends on Facebook, and I watched as these shifted from once- or twice-removed information to their own photos, videos, and commentary. The documentation I saved from that time, together with the wealth of first-person accounts, secondary literature and films produced in Brazil and abroad since then, provides the basis of the narrative developed here. Translations, unless otherwise referenced, are my own.

² Ito reported that he was inspired by the French graffitist GOIN's 2013 image on a building in Athens of a young boy, hands folded over his head, elbows jutting out, and a ball at his feet, with "Need Food Not Football" stenciled in red just under his prominent ribs. The Argentine cartoonist Pepe Angonoa independently drew another version for the twentieth anniversary of a humor magazine, in which a boy looks downward at the vaguely egg-like soccer ball on his plate.

³ For other significant terms that function as moving labels, including "tradition" and also "contemporary," see Paul Rabinow (2008, 2). Following Guattari (2012 [1990]), much of

what is discussed here as new media has also been taken up as “postmedia,” by which he referred to the possibilities he saw for a post–mass media. I prefer “new media” here for this sense of ongoing movement.

⁴ By 2016, the percentage of Internet users in Brazil was estimated at 66.4%. See <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/brazil/>, last updated July 1, 2016.

⁵ The Operation Car Wash (*Operação Lava Jato*) story broke in 2014, in which federal prosecutors inquiring into money laundering found a vast bribery scheme ongoing since 1997. Major construction companies had banded together to get exclusive rights to inflated building contracts with the energy giant Petrobrás, from which executives at the construction companies and Petrobrás as well as politicians received paybacks. Members of the PT and other parties were implicated. President Rousseff, who had been on the Petrobrás Board of Directors, did not attempt to shut down the investigation so that, for those still loyal, the powerful politicians who called for her impeachment actually wanted to put a halt to the corruption prosecutions. Recorded telephone conversations, leaked to the media, subsequently confirmed this view; see <https://theintercept.com/2016/05/23/new-political-earthquake-in-brazil-is-it-now-time-for-media-outlets-to-call-this-a-coup/>, accessed May 23, 2016.

⁶ See <https://youtu.be/W6QVLE8PQJ8>, last updated June 16, 2013.

⁷ See <http://www.redebrasilatual.com.br/cidadania/2013/06/vinagre-pode-virar-bomba-diz-coronel-que-comandou-acao-da-pm-contra-protesto-em-sao-paulo-3626.html>.

⁸ For further discussion of these tactics and their history, see *Black Bloc Rising* (2013, 2).

⁹ In Portuguese, *Narrativas Independentes, Jornalismo e Ação*.

¹⁰ See <https://youtu.be/t1AA-ZUdL7o>, accessed July 1, 2016.

¹¹ Meikle credits the phrase to Brian Eno in a 1995 interview in *Wired* magazine, in which Eno says that “interactive” is not quite right. Rather, “the right word is ‘unfinished.’ Think of cultural products, or art works, or the people who use them even, as being unfinished. Permanently unfinished.” <http://www.wired.com/1995/05/eno-2/>, accessed June 29, 2016.

¹² See http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Local/CmiBrasilOqueEh#Independ_ncia, available on archive.org since 2004.

¹³ See <http://www.midiaindependente.org/en/red/2013/08/523371.shtml>.

¹⁴ Most prominent among these were the “Free Brazil Movement” (*Movimento Brasil Livre*), “Come to the Street” (*Movimento Vem Pra Rua*), and the slightly older Revoltados Online, founded in 2010. While each had its own platform and attracted a different demographic, collectively they had support from a sizable percentage of the population, as well as international think tanks, a range of political parties, and businesses; see

Marina Amaral, available at <http://apublica.org/2015/06/anova-roupa-da-direita/>, last updated June 23, 2015.

¹⁵ For a representative article, see the Associated Press, “Auditors: No creative accounting by Brazil’s Rousseff” at <https://www.yahoo.com/news/auditors-no-creative-accounting-brazils-rousseff-173103901.html>, last updated June 27, 2016.

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