Scenographic glitch: reading interventional protests in present-day Russia

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Abstract:

The article analyses interventional protest in present-day Russia through the lens of scenography, treating it as a method for constructing and activating meaning and as a framework for understanding affective and spatial processes of resistance. It introduces the concept scenographic glitch: a temporal and spatial disruption that occurs during interventional protest and frames protest as a practice of disorientation in resistance to the narrative of the normal enforced by the political regime. Through close readings, the article demonstrates how a scenographic framework illuminates meaning-making, affective, and orienting properties of interventional protests. In doing so, it creates possibilities for understanding the act of protest as it unfolds, revealing its capacity to generate connections among individuals, ideas, values, and emotions to inspire a positive change.

Key words: scenographic glitch, interventional protest, disorientation, resistance, Russia

Introduction

Protest is a living, evolving organism–one that resists singular definition. It responds to the conditions that demand change to those who instigate it and to those who are addressed by it. This study approaches protest through the lens of scenography, treating it both as a method for constructing and activating meaning and as an approach to examining affective and spatial processes of resistance. With that, I introduce the concept of the *scenographic glitch*, a temporal and spatial disruption that occurs during an interventional protest. The glitch functions as both a process—activated during the event itself—and as an analytical device that magnifies the protest's form, context, and potential. Through it, I address the question: how can a scenographic framework help to understand meaning-making, affective, and orienting properties of interventional protests?

Through two case studies of interventional protest that took place in Russia in Spring 2022 after the start of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine—one responding to images from the liberated areas around Kyiv, and another organized by the Feminist Anti-War Resistance to draw attention to the ongoing devastation of Mariupol—I explore how scenographic thinking can illuminate the affective, spatial, and orienting dimensions of protest. In doing so, I propose an expanded notion of interventional protest that includes both human and non-human agents, revealing how disruptions of public spaces and temporality can produce new modes of meaning-making in resistance practice.

In this article, I use the term *interventional protest* to describe protest actions that do not merely symbolize dissent or stage visibility of the act, but actively intervene in the spatial, temporal, and affective organization of the everyday. While such protest shares features with performative and symbolic protest, it is distinguished by their processual quality: it unfolds through disruption and re-orientation, continues to act beyond the immediate moment of appearance, and mobilizes both human and non-human agents to interfere with the regime's enforced narrative of the normal.

In the wake of the invasion, a shockwave of mass and individual protests ran through the country. Such activity was quickly and brutally suppressed by the police and military forces. Even minimal acts—such as standing in public with a blank sheet of paper—were swiftly outlawed, becoming emblematic of the repressive character of the political regime.[i] Several laws were introduced legalizing severe punishment for any form of open protest, with penalties of up to fifteen years of imprisonment. The vague definitions within this legislation, such as the charge of "discreditation of the army", left a substantial freedom of interpretation to the authorities, enabling arrests, fines, and imprisonment on highly unconvincing grounds.[ii]

As of Autumn 2025, numerous activists, artists, writers, and publishers remain on trial for breaching laws enforced since 2022.[iii] These measures are not necessarily connected to the Special Military Operation—as the invasion is officially termed in Russia. For example, recent anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation is frequently used to persecute individuals holding anti-war positions, demonstrating the breadth of censorship and control exercised by the state.[iv]

Protest—mass or individual—is a complex convergence of different acts. It constitutes both a call to action and a refusal, combining the political agenda with a personal message. Protest asserts a claim that aspires to bring about change and directs itself towards audiences to provoke a reaction—ideally one of support and constructive development, though in many circumstances any reaction becomes meaningful. Protest also functions as part of a much broader mechanism of resistance composed of both large-scale and small-scale acts that articulate narratives of injustice and demand change. As Amber Massie-Blomfield (2024:120) notes, "resistance can be a means to build resilience and create network with others who share your outlook and will support you." This perspective is especially pertinent when examining interventional protest in non-democratic spaces, where the risks associated with speaking out are far more immediate than the prospect of positive results. In this study, I emphasize protest's capacity to create connections among individuals who find themselves in similar positions of uncertainty, enforced silence, and potential fear, and its strive to counter the established vision of "the normal" reinforced by the political regime.

"The normal," in this context, refers to the regime's control and its censorship of public narratives. During the period in which the protests examined here took place, the maintenance of an illusion of normality—business as usual—was a priority of state discourse. Significantly, the use of the word "war" to describe what was officially named the *Special Military Operation* was, for a long time, prohibited and could lead to years of imprisonment. Under such conditions, to resist is to "reaffirm your identity, particularly in the face of forces that seek to undermine it" (Massie-Blomfield, 2024:120) as identity closely connects to how one sees oneself as a member of society and determines one's values and knowledge.

The protests examined in this study were primarily documented by means of photography and anonymously distributed through Internet. Thus, my analytical method is loosely linked to positioning my own spatiality in relation to images. Although I was unable to witness any of these acts in real life, I am familiar with the places. For many years, they constituted my everyday environment and carry memories and meanings that extend far into the past. Bearing this in mind, I am aware of potential flaws in my personal emotional and affective reading of the protests, especially considering them being distributed through images.

However, the analytical framework and material discussed in the article illuminate the complexity of resistance practices in the contemporary world, where access to information increasingly occurs through screens and demands careful attunement to how knowledge is contextualized and by whom. Circulation of knowledge, engagement with others, and critical thinking are crucial for sustaining resistance practices. The first protest, staged in central Moscow, maps the geography of the city in which I grew up. It enables me to use my own body as an orientation vector—not only analyze the relations between the protester's body and the surrounding space, but also to reflect on the metaphorical power relations connected to this location. My embodied knowledge helps me to understand the atmosphere of the place in relation to its setting and the feeling of unease, intentional or unintentional, that the act conducted on this location could trigger. The second intervention is recognizable in my body through the familiarity of its environment. Even if I cannot identify the precise site as clearly as in the first case, small spatial details that once formed part of my everyday reality position me to read the atmosphere and to explore what forms of meaning-making and affective relations can be activated through the act of interventional protest.

The reliance on anonymously circulated photographic documentation raises important ethical and epistemological considerations. Images of protest actions, particularly in authoritarian contexts, carry the risk of misinterpretation or over-reading, as they are detached from the immediacy of the event and from the voices of those who enacted it. Moreover, analyzing such material entails an ethical tension: while critical attention may expose participants to additional risks, the absence of analysis risks rendering these acts invisible within broader discourses of resistance. In this study, circulation itself is therefore understood as part of the scenographic glitch—not merely as a mode of documentation, but as an extension of the protest's intervention, allowing affective and spatial disruptions to persist beyond the moment of action. Approaching these images with caution, reflexivity, and restraint is thus integral to the methodological framework adopted here.

Scenographic glitch and protest as a practice of disorientation

As Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer underline, scenography "can happen anywhere" (2017:1).

It is no longer confined to the demarcated space of a theatre building, nor even to the outline of the stage; it has moved beyond the expectations of dramatic text and into the domain of hybridity and "the blurring of boundaries between performance and audience" (McKinney, Palmer, 2017:1). Scenography is both an intervention and a mode of intervention, it is "a mode of encounter and exchange" (McKinney, Palmer, 2017:2) in which human and non-human agents participate.

As a discipline, scenography—as Rachel Hann (2021:xviii) notes—"is willing to open itself out to new ideas, methods and techniques that transgress the limiting frames placed upon it historically." Whether operating within theatre or beyond it, scenography frequently involves the creation of a new temporality that supports meaning-making and affective processes between the act being conducted and the perceiver of that act. I take scenography as an analytical tool for exploring interventional protests. Doing so opens possibilities for understanding the act of protest as it unfolds, revealing its capacity to create connections among individuals, ideas, values, and emotions to inspire a positive change.

The analysis of interventional protests in this study is grounded in Rachel Hann's reading of scenographics as an agent of place orientation. Hann emphasizes "the interventional and orientating traits of scenographics afford and sustain the temporal displacements that occur through acts of occupying powerful geographies (sites charged with power and authority)" (Hann, 2019:113). The scenographic implies a "potential for dramatic action" (Hann, 2019:28) and it accounts for the "multisensory and multimedia assemblages that promote, enact or reveal feeling of place" (Hann, 2021:xvii). In this sense, I understand the protests examined here as literally taking place and activating places through the processes of disruption, or in the terminology I propose, through the *glitching* of these places' role in maintaining the smooth operation of the everyday.

In its turn, glitch is inherently part of anything that unfolds in time or space. Legacy Russell points out that glitch is "an active word, one that implies movement and change from the outset; this movement triggers error" (2020:28-29). A scenographic glitch is not a fixed moment but a process. It does not establish a defined or static scene; rather, it triggers reaction, interaction, and the passage of affective and meaning-making processes that produce

a disruption in the correct functioning of a system. In this study, I understand the correct functioning as defined by those who hold political power, while the system refers to the regime's sanctioned narrative. Russell further elaborates that glitch "moves, but glitch also blocks," it simultaneously "incites movement" and "creates an obstacle" (Russell, 2020:30). A scenographic glitch sets an obstacle in motion—something to trip over, a point at which one may lose metaphorical balance or fracture a carefully crafted illusion of stability. Glitch provides the space for lasting consequences inherent to interventional qualities of the protest.

Looking at interventional protests through the lens of the scenographic glitch is to zoom in on the layered complexity of the protest act as a part of the functioning system of relations between people, knowledge, and the political regime. Within this order, the everyday itself becomes a scenographic setting. It consists of both physical and imaginary spaces shaped according to how they should be perceived and understood by an audience—namely, the citizens—who simultaneously become part of the scenographic action as they are required to follow, and often fail to follow, its rules. The law codifies these expectations by defining what can and cannot be named, how things should be called, which expressions are permitted in public, what bodies are allowed to be visible, and much more. The political regime's vision of the normal cannot simply exist on its own, for it would then become uncontrollable; it must therefore be continuously sustained through control.

Sara Ahmed writes that orientations "shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' and 'what' we direct our energy and attention towards" (Ahmed, 2006:3). The constructed illusion of stability as a scenographic setting disrupts everyday processes of orientation so that individuals conform to the political agenda of the state. Consequently, protest, as a deviation from the imposed order, becomes a facilitator of the glitch—one that can once again divert orientation, producing rupture and confusion within an otherwise well-functioning oppressive system. If the regime and its institutions enforce re-orientation in order to sustain their own ideological agenda, then the scenographic glitch activated by the interventional protest triggers disorientation by disruption of places, spaces, and bodies. The scenography of the normal is a scenography of re-orientation; the scenography of protest is a scenography of *dis*orientation. While the

scenographic glitch overlaps with established concepts such as disruption, performative intervention, affective disturbance, or counter-scenography, it is not reducible to any one of them. Rather than naming a singular rupture or oppositional act, the scenographic glitch describes a process that operates through orientation and disorientation, unfolds across time and circulation, and sustains its effects beyond the moment of appearance. What the concept enables analytically is attention to how protest interferes with the regime's scenography of normal by mobilizing spatial relations, bodies, objects, and affect as an interdependent system rather than as isolated gestures.

As Ahmed emphasizes disorientation, understood as "a bodily feeling of losing one's place" can be "a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence" (Ahmed, 2006: 160). In this study, I approach the scenographic glitch in the extremes of disorientation as a positive force—one capable of counteracting the re-orientation enforced by the political regime to tighten its control over one's knowledge, beliefs, and values. The protest's intervention into the dominant order is itself is a violent act, producing moments of disruption whose consequences extend beyond the immediate event. that creates a sense of temporary disorientation with lasting consequences. This order is sustained through carefully curated and violently implemented processes of reconfiguration, including semantic inversions in which "truth is lie and lie is truth," epitomized by George Orwell's famous quote: "War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength" (Orwell, 2018 (1949):5). Ahmed further stresses that "moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up or throw the body from its ground" (Ahmed, 2006:157). Thus, the scenographic glitch sustains protest as a practice that unsettles established bearings and positions it as a strategy of resistance against the enforced narrative of the normal.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives frame the scenographic glitch as a process through which protest intervenes in the regime's spatial, affective, and orientational control. In what follows, I apply this framework to two case studies to examine how interventional protest operates in practice under conditions of authoritarian repression.

Bringing the war home: glitching the everyday

The first case study examines how a solitary, anonymous performance protest mobilized the scenographic glitch to disrupt everyday spatial routines in central Moscow following the circulation of images from Bucha. While protest is often associated with collective occupation of streets and squares, articulated through "material, legal, and symbolic reasons" (Cademe-Roa, Puga, 2021:100), it can also operate through the actions of a single individual who intervenes directly in the spatial and affective organization of the everyday. In the case examined here, protest is not expressed as a demand but performed through intervention. The physicality and materiality of the act structured as much around the meaning it conveys as around the effect it produces—namely, the disorientation of the normal through the workings of the scenographic glitch.

In early April 2022, as images from liberated areas around the Ukrainian capital Kyiv circulated in the press, an anonymous activist staged a performance protest in four public locations in Moscow. The intervention recreated a widely circulated image from Bucha: a civilian lying face down on a destroyed street, hands bound behind the body. The visual documentation of these killings quickly went viral, exposing atrocities committed against civilians during the initial phase of the occupation. At the same time, these images were appropriated by Russian state propaganda and reframed as evidence of provocation, allegedly staged by the political regime in Kyiv. Through this inversion, the original visual record was transformed into an instrument of re-orientation, deployed to reverse its meaning and to reshape relations to truth to the point where distinguishing it from falsehood becomes increasingly difficult.

One of the protest's locations was on the Patriarshy Bridge across the Moscow River, directly in front of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior [Image 1]. Two additional protests were staged on the popular pedestrian streets—Nikolskaya Street and Old Arbat Street—both situated in the center of the capital and frequented by locals and tourists alike [Image 2 and 3]. The fourth protest took place in the Alexander Garden, located along the walls of Kremlin, a well-guarded and widely visited site in the heart of the capital. [Image 4].

The protest did not use any posters or signs explaining the action or calling for specific responses—and for good reason. Even in the early weeks following the start of the invasion,

words had already become dangerous. The word "war"—though freely used by pro-regime bloggers and journalists—was prohibited for ordinary citizens and could lead to administrative or criminal charges. Even now, instead of the word *war,* people often write or draw five stars to represent the five letters of *voina*, the Russian word for war. Rather than delivering a specific statement, the intervention sought to bring the war into the everyday lives of those who appeared unaware of its ongoing reality, while simultaneously returning it to those who bear significant responsibility for its unfolding.

The primary way in which the protest intended to create resonance, it appears, was through its circulation online as photographs. In this sense, it followed the same logic of dissemination as the original images. The documentation of the performance depicts the body from behind, dressed and positioned similarly to the victim in the Bucha image, with the hands bound behind the back. Yet despite its visual continuity, the location could not be more different. This dissonance produces a disturbing sense of photomontage, reminiscent of Martha Rosler's series *House Beautiful: Bring the War Home* (1976-80). Here, however, the performative act unfolds in a specific tangible environment, claiming that site as a scene of violence and thereby activating the force of the scenographic glitch.

While the performance protest has no physical violence itself, it carries traces of the original violence into the public location. It disrupts the structure and temporality of the place it occupies—both of which are spatially and temporally removed from the actual site of war. By presenting something as literally out of place, the act unsettles ordinary spatial routines and produces a moment of perceptual rupture. Recreating the photograph from Bucha on the bridge in front of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior not only disturbs the site's spatial and temporal order but also connects the intervention to an earlier transgression in the location that holds particular significance for the political regime and its self-image. The Cathedral itself was once a stage for one of the most well-known performance protests conducted by the punk group Pussy Riot in February 2012, when the group publicly denounced the Russian Orthodox Church's ties to Putin and his regime through their song "Punk Prayer: Mother of God Drive Putin Away.[v] Positioned on the bridge with the Cathedral in the background, the present intervention engages a complex layering of meanings. It interacts with the regime-aligned

Church by transgressing the established spatial orientation, effectively laying the conflict at the steps of an institution that should condemn violence but instead legitimizes the war.[vi] The body becomes a symbolic question about the sacred value of human life.

In its turn, the Alexander Garden is the site of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a war memorial dedicated to the Soviet soldiers killed in World War II. The history of World War II—or the Great Patriotic War, as it is referred to in Russia—constitutes one of the central pillars of contemporary political propaganda. It is regularly mobilized to reinforce nationalist narratives of a holy nation that suffered uniquely in the war, and to reassert the notion of victory at all costs (see: Bækken, 2023). The symbolism of the Great Patriotic War is appropriated by state officials and interwoven with representations of the Special Military Operation in order to shape public sentiment. It is often deployed in situations that require additional rhetorical force to keep the normal under control—for example, when explaining losses, financial burdens, or, by 2025, the length of the ongoing conflict. Accordingly, the location of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier serves as one of the cornerstones of the regime's claims over history and the narrative of the present-day normal. Furthermore, the Kremlin is a locus of concentrated political authority; although the head of state is seldom there, this authority nonetheless bears significant responsibility for the crimes of war. Bringing the metaphorical body to this site means not only bringing the war "home" but bringing its outcomes to the very center of the original decision to employ lethal force. While the glitch functions as a vector of disturbance within the imposed order, the body acts as a compass arrow that directs attention towards the perpetrators. In her work on resistance, Mona Lilja emphasized that embodies actions are "facilitated, hindered and/or informed by the very space where the resistance is happening" (2017:344). This process is reciprocal: just as spaces affect bodies, bodies also affect spaces. The act thus becomes scenographic through the interaction between human presence and the environments it occupies. The unsettling character of the figure lying on the steps is in its similarity to a random drunkard passed out in the park. It is the moment of interaction—the coming closer, the recognition of what this body represents—that glitches the perceived reality of the scene and produces a trigger through the engagement.

On the streets and on the bridge, unlike in the Garden, the photographs of the intervention depict passers-by moving around the recreated crime scene. The disturbing intensity of the glitch is heightened by the grotesque contrast between a seemingly unconscious or dead body and the routines of everyday life. People walk past as the street, illuminated by cheerful decorations, lies scattered with the remnants of snow gathered in dirty piles. This is the space of the idealized representation of the normal, where all participants move in unison with the everyday routine—a routine that must not betray what anyone is feeling and that is essential to sustaining the impression of insignificance of what is unfolding. Unintentional for the passers-by, their routine becomes the backdrop to the transgressive aesthetic of the interventional protest. The contrast between the crowd and the "victim" points towards another aspect of everyday accommodation to violence: the ways in which people distance themselves from the political situation in the country out of a need to stay sane. The grotesque juxtaposition of living and dead bodies enables the scenographic glitch to activate a form of disorientation that breaks through both the physical distance separating ordinary people from the war and the metaphorical distance through which many attempt to cope with it.

Lilja writes that "resistance could be considered as mainly productive – by creating new relations, activities or advancing subjugated knowledge, thereby (de)constructing certain claims of knowledge" (2017:343). Whether sacred space or everyday space, each carries narratives built around it—a knowledge of the most important kind; that everything is at it should be. Without articulating any specific claims, the interventional protest conducted in four locations in Moscow by the anonymous activist triggers the potential deconstruction of that knowledge through the scenographic glitch—the rupture in the normal that resists the political regime's enforced re-orientation of one's knowledge.

While this first case demonstrates how a human body can function as a vector of disorientation within highly charged symbolic locations, the following case shifts attention toward distributed protest practices and non-human agents. This transition allows for an examination of how the scenographic glitch operates not only through embodied performance, but also through objects, repetition, and circulation.

Siting the protest: scenographic glitch as trigger

By April 2022, any form of protest activity was being violently curbed, and activists and artists needed to find ways to continue their struggle against disinformation and against the population's acceptance of the political regime's vision of the normal. In that month, the grassroots group Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR), officially established the day after the start of the invasion, announced an action titled "Mariupol 5000."[vii] The action called attention to the ongoing siege and devastation of the coastal city of Mariupol during the first months of the invasion. FAR called on citizens to place crosses in locations of their everyday life—in courtyards of apartment blocks, parks, parking lots, playgrounds, and other public spaces. The goal was to place 5,000 crosses across the country to commemorate the official number of victims of the siege of Mariupol known at the time.

The crosses were often handmade, varied in size, and bore signs or were surrounded by toys and other objects commonly used to symbolize mourning and grief. FAR warned that even acts of mourning could be interpreted as illegal and that participants should be cautious and prepared for possible arrest. The call for action was accompanied by instructions of what to do in case of detention. Participants were then asked to photograph the crosses and send the images anonymously through FAR's Telegram bot. [Image 5-7]

The use of objects or symbols that carry specific coded meaning is often a part of resistance practices in non-democratic spaces. Building spontaneous monuments or wearing identifiable signs—such as a green ribbon for peace, the colors of Ukrainian flag, or the colors of the demilitarized Russian flag (white-blue-white instead of white-blue-red)—signals one's position. These gestures create connections among like-minded individuals, and, as in the case with the crosses, demonstrate awareness of what is happening. For those who are unaware, or who attempt to ignore events, such objects nonetheless force an encounter, as in the previous example.

The potential power of a non-human agent to act as a scenographic glitch had already become apparent in several protests. The most well-known case is the arrest of the artist and activist Aleksandra "Sasha" Skochilenko, who replaced price tags in a local grocery store with

similar tags containing information about the death toll, military spending, and other wartime statistics. These tags attracted the attention of an older woman, who claimed to be shocked and personally offended by what she perceived as false and subsequently reported Skochilenko to the police.[viii] The artist was sentenced to seven years in prison but was freed along with a group of political prisoners during an exchange between Russia, the US, and the EU.[ix]

Clear markers of protest are also relatively easy targets in the regime's effort to maintain its preferred reality. Prosecuting individuals for wearing or displaying signs associated with resistance allows the state to continue crafting its scenographed normality by removing such expressions from the public sphere or rendering them illegal and dangerous to display. A cross, however, is a more universal symbol—at least in the Western world—of mourning and commemoration. They mark places where anyone may come and process a tragedy without having to adhere to a specific political ideology. A cross becomes the orientation object for one's personal experience and emotions, directing attention both outward and inward.

The protest act called for by FAR, on the surface, utilizes the cross as a symbol of commemoration and mourning. It is a seemingly innocent symbol, and its handmade quality renders it even more so. Handmade crosses are often seen along major roads throughout Russia, marking the sites of fatal car accidents. They both attract attention through familiar associations and simultaneously sit at the periphery of one's perception due to that very familiarity. As Sara Ahmed notes in her phenomenological approach of background, familiarity renders something "unseen", and she calls on us to consider how "familiar takes shape by being unnoticed" (Ahmed, 2006:37). A cross in a cemetery raises no questions; a cross in any other public space remains familiar yet may draw more focused attention. A cross appearing among apartment buildings—sometimes on playgrounds for children or dogs, sometimes in snowdrifts around parking lots, sometimes in snow-covered flower beds—extends its symbolism beyond its original context, enhancing its potential to carry new meaning and act as a dramatic point of attention.

Thing-power of the object activates the space as a territory of curiosity but also of uncertainty. Jane Bennet describes this as a "creativity of agency" through which something "new [may] appear or occur" (2010:31). Crosses have the potential to draw attention, which

can be further manipulated to create a space for meaning-making processes. The acts proposed by FAR mobilized the object's orienting qualities to unsettle habitual perception and attract attention. To engage with the object—to become curious about it—is to become part of the scenography of resistance. Some crosses carried signs reading "Mariupol 5000" or statements condemning the war, calling for action, or demanding to end the killing of civilians. All this information could no longer be stated aloud without risking persecution. Yet the crosses' role as a scenographic glitch was to trigger an array of emotions rather than to convey a single specific message.

In her work on art and trauma, Jill Bennett builds on Deleuze's concept of the "encountered sign," which defines the sign "that is felt, rather than recognized or perceived through cognition" (Bennett, 2005:7). She emphasizes that, according to Deleuze, "affect and emotion is a more effective trigger for profound thought because of the way in which it grasps us, forcing us to engage involuntarily" (Bennett, 2005:7). Given the highly charged public atmosphere surrounding perceptions of the war—fueled or suppressed by propaganda—it is not difficult to imagine that such crosses would evoke varied reactions. They could elicit grief, anger, or solidarity, depending on the perceiver, but in each case they disrupted the apparent coherence of the everyday by forcing an encounter with loss. These responses work to destroy the illusion of coherence and control, of things being under control. The aim is not to trigger the "correct" emotion, but to trigger a reaction—to initiate the process of disorientation from the normal through the involuntary engagement that Bennett emphasizes.

Intention—the staging of the act of protest through instructions, rules, and warnings— is only the onset of the act itself. Crosses, as non-human agents, set in motion by the original intention, gain their own creative power. As Jane Bennet writes, "an intention is like a pebble thrown into a pond, or an electrical current sent through a wire or neural network: it vibrated and merges with other currents, to affect and be affected" (2010:32). The ability of non-human agents to sustain a scenographic glitch lies in their capacity to interact with everyone in their own way. While intention sets the scene, the object carries the work that creates a map of disorientation between itself and the perceiver.

The object also activates or reinvents the place anew. By disrupting a location's temporality and its everyday practical use, the crosses set the place in motion, leaving traces of this change even after the objects themselves have been being removed. A potent symbol such as the cross placed—however temporarily—in a location where it does not belong, leaves a mark and alters how the place is recognized. Just as a seemingly dead body lying on a busy street disrupts how the place is perceived, the cross disorients the everyday of the location.

It is impossible to say how long these crosses remained where they were placed. In the early months of the invasion, the mechanism for removing all traces of protest and resistance had not yet been fully established. Moreover, through their sacred connotations, crosses gain symbolic protection; they carry an aura of something holy, untouchable, which makes them more difficult to remove than flowers, placards, or even price tags. At present, even spontaneous memorials created after especially deadly attacks on Ukraine are removed in under fifteen minutes. Yet, the duration is not as important as the chain reaction of affects that the crosses trigger.

The two case studies examined here demonstrate different but interconnected ways in which interventional protest activates the scenographic glitch as a strategy of disorientation against the enforced narrative of the normal.

Conclusion

To activate is to glitch—that is, to engage, disturb, organize and reorganize, in some cases to even destroy. To allow something new to appear and for that new, different and disturbing, to render the place changed. Places can become sites of traumatic memory without any visible traces of the traumatic events. Terrorist attacks, for example, claim public spaces as sites of trauma, creating a rupture that persists even when all material evidence has been removed. The glitch of trauma is not a temporary malfunction; it is a disruption that is often preserved in memory. The immaterial traces left by such glitches are harder to control through human agency. They are connected to the ephemeral aspect of a place's atmosphere—textures, sounds, density of physical presence, temperature. A place once torn open by a traumatic or otherwise disruptive event will not remain the same.

Protest, especially those that are breaking violently into the flow of the everyday, generate a shift through their own temporality, leaving the glitch present even after the momentum has passed. Rachel Hann underlines that "scenographic activism (…) can enact speculative politics through the potential of place orientation to reorientate how bodies and materials, power and place, relate to one another" (2019:116). The potential to unsettle established bearings as a tool of resistance against the forced normal is therefore integral to reading protest through the lens of the scenographic glitch.

Since then, Russian legislation has produced an unprecedented number of laws and regulations that render even the slightest hint of protest or dissent regarding the war subject to administrative or criminal penalty. Symbols of peace, signs reading "no war", private conversations in restaurants, or even blue-yellow manicures and braids have become grounds for detention and fines. At the time of writing, almost four years after the start of the invasion, censorship and wartime legislation have tightened their grip on all forms of resistance and protest. Yet, many continue to enact disobedience to the sanctioned narrative through diverse forms of resistance. These acts may no longer be as explicit as lying on the ground in crowded public locations, but they persist in everyday life, utilizing spaces, places, materials, and affects to find loopholes through which to express disagreement. As Stephen Duncombe emphasizes is his analysis of protest scenography, "what carries political power is seizure of the space and its appropriation as a stage for protest" (2013: 201). The outcomes of such acts of defiance are unpredictable, but this unpredictability does not diminish their significance. Exploring the potential of interventional protests through the prism of the scenographic glitch offers a means of recognizing these acts and the traces they leave behind. None of this is too small when the subject is resistance to oppressive powers, the defense of human values and freedom of speech, and, ultimately, the protection of human life itself.

Acknowledgment

Image appendix

Image 1 Bucha protest, the Patriarshy Bridge, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Open source.
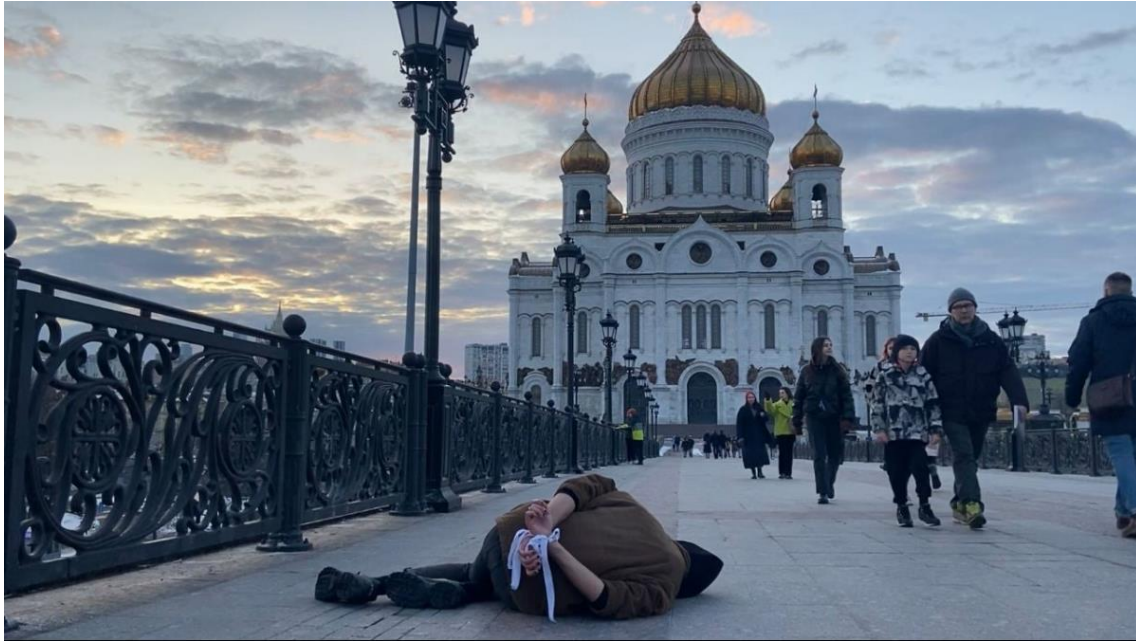

Image 2 Bucha protest, Nikolskaya Street. Open source.

Image 3: Bucha protest, Old Arbat Street. Open source.

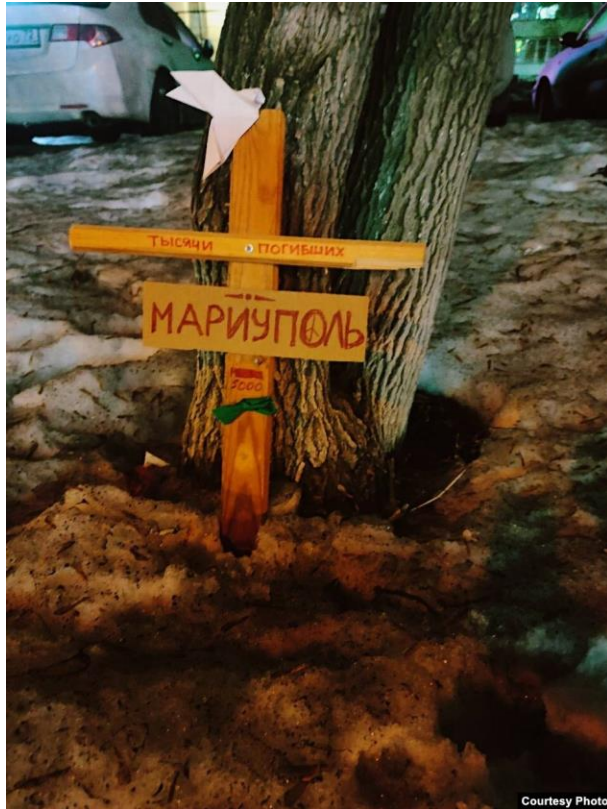
Image 4: Bucha protest, the Alexander Garden. Open source.

Image 5: "Mariupol 5000", FAR, open source

Image 6: "Mariupol 5000", FAR, open source

Image 7: "Mariupol 5000", FAR open source

Courtesy Photo

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