

Eye-Popping Portraits for an Age of Protest

Aurore Valade's bright and busy photographs show that resistance can be messy, joyful and sometimes lonely.



"Je Suis un Enfant de l'Éducation Populaire" ("I Am a Child of a People's Education"), by Aurore Valade, on display at the Rencontres d'Arles photography festival in France. The text added to the images in this series, "Se Manifester," is drawn from interviews she conducted with the subjects. Aurore Valade

By Andrew Dickson

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ARLES, France — We [live in an age of anger](#), we are told. It might be more accurate to say that we live in an age of protest. Whether at the Women's March or defending Black Lives Matter, [the March for Our Lives](#) or the rallies in France against the policies of President Emmanuel Macron, a willingness to go into the streets and shout is a defining characteristic of our era.



Left: "L'Attention Meticuleuse Engendre la Beauté" ("Meticulous Attention Leads to Beauty"), from the series "Digo Yo." Right: "Tout a Commencé en Mai 68" ("It All Started in May '68"), from "Se Manifester." Aurore Valade

But what happens when the banners are rolled up and the placards put away? What does it mean to march not just every now and again, but to make protest the core of your being? These questions lie at the heart of one of the most intriguing shows at this year's Rencontres d'Arles photography festival. Titled "[Révoltes Intimes](#)" ("[Intimate Revolts](#)") and created by the French photographer Aurore Valade, 36, it shows portraits of full-time activists — people who live in a near-constant state of war, whether against climate change, the effects of alcohol or prejudice against transgender people.



In 2014, Ms. Valade photographed the cabaret singer Astrid Hadad, who has campaigned for sexual freedom and to end violence against women, in her apartment for the series "Intérieurs Mexicains" ("Mexican Interiors"). Aurore Valade

Ms. Valade had the idea while visiting Mexico City in 2014 [for a previous project](#), she said while walking around the Arles exhibition recently. She met a cabaret performer, Astrid Hadad, who campaigned for sexual freedom and to end violence against women. Ms. Valade decided to photograph Ms. Hadad in costume, standing resplendent in her cluttered, colorful apartment. Objects telling her story — a tote bag with the image of a woman burning in hellfire, a suggestively placed cucumber or two — are arrayed around her.

“There was anger here, but also a lot of beauty,” Ms. Valade said. “So I continued.”

Not long afterward, following the terrorist attacks in Paris of 2015, France declared a state of emergency that gave the authorities the right to ban public demonstrations. With that, Ms. Valade had found her theme. Over the next two years, she shuttled around Europe, combing through web discussion groups for names of people who had participated in the Spanish equivalent of the Occupy movement, and tracking down a family of zealous environmentalists to a remote dwelling in southern France. Where possible, she embedded herself with her subjects, winning their trust, debating their ideas and ideals.



“Il Faut un Sens à Sa Naissance” (“Meaning From One’s Birth Is Needed”). The artist takes great care at staging and lighting her subjects. Aurore Valade

Before taking her photographs, Ms. Valade dressed the space with exquisite care, posing her subjects and lighting the room as if it were a studio. Once the image was fixed, she made digital tweaks, layering extra artifacts or adding pieces of text that encapsulate each campaigner’s beliefs.

All of this was done with her subjects’ assistance, Ms. Valade said; she regards these works as “collaborations.” The purpose was to provide a portrait not just of them, but of their lives. “It’s not photojournalism,” she said. “You have to participate.”

“If photography isn’t a process, it’s not interesting to me,” she added.



"Orang-Outan (Homme de la Forêt)" ("Orangutan [Man of the Forest]"). All of the subjects in this series lived in the Pyrenees region of southern France. Aurore Valade

The resulting images, which [won an award at Arles last year](#), are carnivalesque and exuberant, though often touched by the loneliness that comes from dedicating a life to a cause. One photograph depicts an anarchist in a cluttered cabin, surrounded by books and scraps of paper covered with angry notes decrying the urban rat race.

In another, anti-austerity protesters in Spain are all but hidden behind a rampart of signs in Spanish and French: "The Markets Don't Decide My Future," "We Are Not Against the System, The System Is Against Us." Some of these portraits are almost anti-portraits. It can seem as if these people's identities have been erased, subsumed by their fight.





our Qu'on N'oublie Pas" ("So We Don't Forget") from "Digo Yo," in which Ms. Valade worked with members of the Spanish equivalent of the Occupy movement. Aurore Valade

Despite those twinges of sadness, "Intimate Revolts" does feel like a celebration. Surrounded by the emblems of their struggle, the people look almost like medieval saints, trailing banners and imagery heavy with



"Défais-Toi de Tout et Viens à la Campagne" ("Get Rid of Everything and Come to the Countryside"), photographed in Madrid in 2016. Aurore Valade

Asked if she had sympathy for what her subjects were trying to do, she frowned and thought for a moment, before reaching for a line by Albert Camus, often cited during the 1968 protests: ["I revolt, therefore we are."](#)

"I am with Camus, definitely," she said.

