

The Routledge Companion to Global Photographies



Edited by Lucy Soutter and Duncan Wooldridge

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO GLOBAL PHOTOGRAPHIES

In response to widespread demand for more knowledge and insight about contemporary photographs beyond Western centers of production and dissemination, this volume provides a transnational discussion, grounded in dialogue between authors and editors from diverse locations and contexts.

Ecological and decolonial discourses around photography reveal the medium's global entanglements: images produced on one side of the globe are the result of labors which span its full surface. At the same time, the multiplicity of approaches and understandings of the photograph reveal that, even though it might seem like a universal language, we utilize its tools to radically different ends. The volume explores issues surrounding cultural translation, photography's response to climate change, decolonial practices, network formation, new materialities, identities and the role of photobooks. It also provides in-depth surveys and case studies of global practices and theories, alongside interviews and roundtable discussions with key figures whose perspectives illuminate the contemporary field.

This groundbreaking collection is an essential resource for academics and students working in or with photography, contextual studies, history, and theory, but also media and cultural studies more broadly.

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xxii</i>
1 Introduction: Global Photographies and Questions of Cultural Translation <i>Lucy Soutter</i>	1
PART I	
Photography in the Anthropocene: Climate Change and Environment <i>Edited by Jean Brundrit and Svea Josephy</i>	13
2 The View from the South <i>Anna Stielau</i>	15
3 Decolonizing Detritus: (Re)cycles of Extraction and (e-)Waste in the Photographs of Jean Claude Nsabimana <i>Svea Josephy, Jane Alexander and Jean Claude Nsabimana</i>	27
4 The Politics of Water: Social Justice and Photography in the Anthropocene in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa <i>Annabelle Wienand and Thobani K</i>	37
5 Antarctica, Ice, and Photography <i>Jean Brundrit</i>	48
6 A Dialogic View from the North <i>Helen Glanville, Richard Hodgkins, Marsha Meskimmon and Paul Wood</i>	57

PART II	
Decolonial Practices: Speaking Back to the Canon	65
<i>Edited by Nina Mangalanayagam and Emese Mucsi</i>	
7 Can We Use Photography Against Photography?: An Interview with Rolando Vázquez Melken	67
<i>Nina Mangalanayagam, Emese Mucsi, and Rolando Vázquez Melken</i>	
8 Decolonial Strategies and the Southasian Imagination: Auto-narrative, Archival Responses and Counter-narratives	78
<i>Tanvi Mishra</i>	
9 What's Class Got to Do With It?: Decoloniality, Spatiality, Class Struggle in the Photographs of <i>The Evaton Peoples' Archive</i>	93
<i>Nomusa Makhubu</i>	
10 Tongue in Cheek: Julie Edel Hardenberg's Visual Language	106
<i>Louise Wolthers</i>	
11 Localising Identity and Understanding Legacy: A New Generation of Hungarian Photographers Searches for the 'Locus of Enunciation'	118
<i>Ágnes Báthly</i>	
12 Archive <i>In Situ</i> : Emese Mucsi and Nina Mangalanayagam in conversation with Jennifer Bajorek	131
<i>Jennifer Bajorek, Nina Mangalanayagam and Emese Mucsi</i>	
PART III	
Gender and Queer Theory in Photography Today: Identities and Histories	143
<i>Edited by Alejandra Niedermaier</i>	
13 Visual Constellations: Narratives for Emancipated Subjectivities	145
<i>Alejandra Niedermaier</i>	
14 Expanded Sexual and Gender Identities in Contemporary Photography	157
<i>Flora Dunster</i>	
15 Visual Disruptions of Global Landscapes: Women Photographers Reframe Patriarchy	170
<i>Selfa A. Chew-Melendez</i>	

Contents

16	Gender in Curation and Exhibition Design <i>Sandra Nagel and Jonathan Lalloz</i>	179
17	Dissident Artists as Protagonists of Visibility Processes <i>Josefina Goñi Bacigalupi</i>	188
18	Poetic, Critical and Political Resonance: Report From a Roundtable Between Selfa A. Chew-Melendez, Flora Dunster, Josefina Goñi Bacigalupi, Sandra Nagel, Alejandra Niedermaier and Jonathan Lalloz <i>Moderated and introduced by Alejandra Niedermaier</i>	197
PART IV		
	New Materialities: Expanded Practices in Contemporary Art Photography <i>Edited by Duncan Wooldridge and Rashi Rajguru</i>	203
19	An Engine, Not a Camera: Curating Environmental Histories of Photography and Extraction <i>Boaz Levin</i>	205
20	Cut and Paste: Performing History, Materiality, and the Family Album in the Work of Lebohang Kganye <i>Svea Josephy and Lebohang Kganye</i>	217
21	Public Arrivals, Private Departure: The Life of Images at Chobi Mela and Photo Kathmandu <i>Veeranganakumari Solanki</i>	227
22	The Physical Lives of Images, Their Matter, Appearances and Disappearances in the Context of Beirut <i>Gregory Buchakjian</i>	238
23	The Stickiness of Images: Materiality and Attention in Contemporary European Photographies <i>Duncan Wooldridge</i>	249
24	The Archive of Unnamed Workers: Examining the Legacy of Colonial- Era Photography in AI <i>Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert and Alexia Achilleos</i>	261

Contents

25	Cai Dongdong's Artistic Trajectory: From Conceptual Image Making to Photographic Installation <i>He Yining and Cai Dongdong</i>	273
PART V		
	Forming Communities: Networks, Platforms and Institutions <i>Edited by Camilo Páez Vanegas</i>	285
26	A Mapping of Photo Communities in Southeast Asia <i>Zhuang Wubin</i>	287
27	Photography and Trans-Africanism: A Story of Journeys <i>Emeka Okereke</i>	298
28	Collection and Educational Dissemination: A Case Study in Bogotá, Colombia <i>Camilo Páez Vanegas</i>	307
29	Towards A New Arts Ecosystem: PhotoIreland's Strategy in Converging Communities Around Photography <i>Ángel Luis González Fernández</i>	319
30	Towards an Artisanal Intelligence: Reflections From the Academic Periphery in Latin America <i>Camilo Páez Vanegas, Anamaria Briede Westermeyer, Ana Casas Broda, Alexander Fattal and Gisela Volá</i>	329
PART VI		
	Global Approaches to Photobooks: From Production to Distribution <i>Edited by Yinhua Chu and Zhuang Wubin</i>	343
31	The Expansion of the Photobook: From Traditional to Post-Digital <i>Yinhua Chu</i>	345
32	The Photobook as Shape Shifter in the Expanded Realm of Contemporary Photography: Examples from South Korea <i>Sunyoung Kim</i>	353
33	Transforming Perspectives: A Conversation with Yanyou Yuan Di, Pioneer of Chinese Contemporary Photographic Publishing <i>He Yining and Yanyou Yuan Di</i>	364

Contents

34	Toward a Publishing Model to Come: Japanese Photography and Its Histories <i>Ivan Vartanian</i>	375
35	Foto Féminas: Shaping the Narrative of Female Photographers from Latin America and the Caribbean <i>Verónica Sanchis Bencomo</i>	383
36	Curating Photobooks in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong: A Roundtable <i>Zhuang Wubin, Hà Đào, Kalen Wing Ki Lee, Jeffrey J C Lim and Kurniadi Widodo</i>	394
	<i>Index</i>	405

FIGURES

2.1	<i>The Blue Marble</i> , ‘View of the Earth as seen by the Apollo 17 crew traveling toward the Moon,’ 7 December 1972	16
2.2	Jean Claude Nsabimana, <i>Shaba (Revisit)</i> . 2022. From Iyarara Project, Cape Town	24
3.1	Jean Claude Nsabimana, <i>Ifoto y’umuryango (The Family Portrait)</i> , 2022. Iyarara Project, Cape Town	30
3.2	Jean Claude Nsabimana, <i>Nshuti Yanjye (My Dear Friend) Shaba & Pox</i> , 2022. Iyarara Project, Cape Town	33
4.1	Thobani K, <i>Child Labour</i> , Eskebheni, Inanda, Durban, 2018	38
4.2	Thobani K, <i>Bleaching Time</i> , 2019	40
4.3	Thobani K, <i>Storage Size</i> , 2018	45
5.1	Megan Jenkinson, ‘New South Greenland’. From the series <i>Certain Islands</i> , 2007	51
5.2	Jean Brundrit, ‘Untitled 15’, from the series <i>Over the Horizon</i> . 2019–20	52
5.3	Andrea Juan, ‘New Species XVI’, from <i>Antarctica Project</i> , 2011	55
7.1	Patricia Kaersenhout and Rolando Vázquez Melken, ‘Our Light Will Outlast Their Flags’ (installation view I), 2023	71
7.2	Patricia Kaersenhout and Rolando Vázquez Melken, ‘Our Light Will Outlast Their Flags’ (installation view II), 2023	71
8.1	Vishal Kumaraswamy, <i>མཐུང་མཐུང་མཐུང་མཐུང་མཐུང་</i> Marana (Demise), 2022	81
8.2	Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad, <i>Paths Through Air</i> , 2015, from the series ‘Fields of Sight’, 2013–ongoing	83
8.3	Munem Wasif, <i>Seeds Shall Set Us Free</i> , 2017–2023	87
8.4	Bimala Maskey, Omi Shrestha, Shashikala Sharma, and other Nepali women attend The Fifth World Congress of Women in Moscow, Soviet Union, organized by Women’s International Democratic Federation, the biggest global women’s organization at the time, 1963	88

Figures

8.5	Shwe Wutt Hmon, from the series <i>Forever Young</i> (2021–2022)	90
9.1	Teachers educated at the Wilberforce Institute, Evaton, circa 1950s	96
9.2	Bonner Hall, Wilberforce Institute, Evaton, 2021	97
9.3	Executive Committee of the Home Makers Club, Evaton. circa 1950s	100
10.1	Julie Edel Hardenberg, <i>Untitled</i> , 2004	113
10.2	Julie Edel Hardenberg, <i>69W 77N, Evening 25 May, 2004</i> , 2004	114
11.1	Viola Fátyol, <i>If you have a heart ... / Singing portrait of a choir member (Zudor Sándorné)</i> , 2015	126
11.2	Marcell Piti, <i>One's Own Master/No 17</i> , 2020	127
11.3	Dorottya Vékony, <i>Venus of Potato</i> (triptych), 2023	128
13.1	Sarah Pabst, <i>Cecilia</i> , 2016	148
13.2	Nobukho Nqaba, 'Untitled 10', from the series <i>Umaskhenkethe Likahaya lam</i>	150
13.3	Sarah Pabst, <i>Greeting the Sun</i> , 2020	153
14.1	Llyr Evans, <i>Dafydd</i> , 2022	158
14.2	Mohamad Abdouni, double-page extract from the book <i>Treat Me Like Your Mother: Trans* Histories from Beirut's Forgotten Past</i> , 2022	162
14.3	Anya Gorkova, <i>Photographic Object 67</i> , 2022	166
15.1	Eleonora Ghioldi, from the series <i>Guerreras</i> , 2022	175
15.2	Eleonora Ghioldi, from the series <i>Guerreras</i> , 2022	176
17.1	Josefina Goñi Bacigalupi, <i>Vesta</i> , 2022–ongoing	194
19.1	Hermann Biow, Daguerreotype of Alexander von Humboldt, 1847	206
19.2	Ignacio Acosta, <i>Hygia Watches Over Us</i> , 2022	214
19.3	Installation Shot, <i>Mining Photography</i> , 2023	214
20.1	Lebohang Kganye, 'Habo Patience ka bokhathe II,' 2013 from the series <i>Her Story</i>	221
20.2	Lebohang Kganye, <i>Pied Piper</i> , from the series <i>Heir Story</i> 2013	224
21.1	Ronny Sen, <i>Portrait of Protest</i> , 2019. Installation View: '[Off] Limits', curated by Asm Rezaur Rahman, Sarker Protick and Tanzim Wahab	230
21.2	Sumit Dayal, <i>Wish You Live Long</i> , 2013. Installation View: '[Off] Limits', curated by Asm Rezaur Rahman, Sarker Protick and Tanzim Wahab	231
21.3	Esha Munshi, <i>Feather Library</i> . Installation at Chyusal, Photo Kathmandu, March 2023	232
21.4	Rickshaw Van Mobile Exhibition, 2013. Installation view: Fragility: Chobi Mela VII 2013	234
21.5	Installation View: Nepal Picture Library, 'Intimacy', Ruplal House, Old Dhaka, Chobi Mela VIII, 2015	235
21.6	Amrit Bahadur Chitrakar/Nepal Picture Library, <i>Skin of Chitwan</i> . Installation at Manga Hiti, Patan Durbar Square, Photo Kathmandu, March 2023	236

Figures

22.1	Caroline Tabet, <i>Vies Interieurs – Anterieurs</i> (<i>Interior Lives – Previous Lives</i>), 2020, No 5, 2020, 24 x 30 cm	245
22.2	Lara Tabet, <i>The River</i> , 2018. Bacteria on celluloid, digitized and printed on fabric 60 x 747 cm. Installation view: 'At the Edge of the World Lies The Ebb and Flow of Promise', Jumièges Abbey, 2022	246
23.1	Daido Moriyama, <i>A Tale of II Cities 4</i> , Paris, 1989. Installation at Images Vevey 2018	257
23.2	Daido Moriyama, <i>Platform</i> , 1977. Installation at Images Vevey 2018	258
23.3	Daido Moriyama, <i>Platform</i> , 1977. Installation at Images Vevey 2018	258
23.4	Renate Buser, <i>Rue d'Italie</i> , 2010. Installation at Images Vevey 2010	259
24.1	Images generated by DALL·E 2 from text prompts given by Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert and Alexia Achilleos on 1 May 2023	265
24.2	Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert and Alexia Achilleos, "The Archive of Unnamed Workers", 2022. GAN-generated images on 35mm glass photographic slides (reversal film)	268
24.3	Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert and Alexia Achilleos. "The Archive of Unnamed Workers", 2022. GAN-generated images on 35mm glass photographic slides (reversal film). Views from the exhibition 'In the Sea of the Setting Sun' at the State Gallery of Contemporary Art - SPEL, Nicosia, Cyprus. Exhibition curated by Elena Stylianou, November 2022–April 2023	269
25.1	Cai Dongdong, <i>Miss the Target</i> , 2016, silver gelatin print, arrow, 54 x 54 x 80 cm	278
25.2	Cai Dongdong, <i>Queue training</i> , 2023. silver gelatin print, rope, stone, 90 x 113 cm	278
25.3	Cai Dongdong, <i>Tug-of-war</i> , 2022, silver gelatin print, watercolor, rope, 126 x 63 cm. (framed)	281
25.4	Cai Dongdong, <i>A Monument to the Dying</i> , silver gelatin print, watercolor, rope, 126 x 63 cm	282
26.1	Documentation image of the WACANA workshop of Arkademy Project, Yogyakarta, December 2018. Participants of Arkademy Project's WACANA workshop (writing and analyzing photos) are seen presenting their analysis of an assigned photograph using photographic and sociocultural frameworks	292
26.2	(From left to right) Khin Kyi Htet, Shwe War Phoo, Shwe Wutt Hmon, Khin Rita, Yu Yu Myint Than, and Tin Htet Paing are seen at the launch event of "Bridging the Naf," a six-part photography dialogue between female photographers from Myanmar and Bangladesh, on June 22, 2019. The collection of zines was the result of a cultural and artistic exchange of ideas between Thuma Collective from Myanmar and Kaali Collective in Bangladesh	295

Figures

27.1	Emeka Okereke/Invisible Borders Trans-African Organisation, <i>Participants at Lugard's Rest House</i> . Lokoja, Nigeria. IB Borders Within Trans-Nigerian Road Trip, 2016	301
27.2	Emeka Okereke/Invisible Borders Trans-African Organisation, <i>Wishful Thinking</i> . Lagos-Benin Expressway, IB Trans-African Road Trip, Lagos-Libreville, 2012	303
27.3	Emeka Okereke/Invisible Borders Trans-African Organisation, <i>Participants in the Invisible Borders Trans-Bangladeshi Road Trip</i> , Bangladesh, 2020	304
28.1	<i>Un Supuesto Fotográfico: The Family of Man en Bogotá</i> exhibition, 2023	311
28.2	<i>Un Supuesto Fotográfico: The Family of Man en Bogotá</i> exhibition, 2023	312
28.3	<i>Sergio, la Cámara y Yo</i> exhibition, 2023	314
29.1	PhotoIreland, <i>PhotoIreland's Support Framework</i> , 2022	320
30.1	Gisela Volá, <i>Workshop Image I</i> , 2018–2019, Buenos Aires. SubPlataforma Educativa space	333
30.2	Gisela Volá, <i>Workshop Image II</i> , 2018–2019, Buenos Aires. SubPlataforma Educativa space	334
30.3	Anamaría Briede Westermeyer, Extracted image from REVISTA IMAGEN SALVAJE, a special edition about five years of working with learning communities in Chile, Latin America, and Europe (December 2021, FIFV EDICIONES)	336
30.4	Anamaría Briede Westermeyer, Extracted image from REVISTA IMAGEN SALVAJE, a special edition about five years of working with learning communities in Chile, Latin America, and Europe (December 2021, FIFV EDICIONES)	337
30.5	Alex Fattal, <i>Backward self-portrait</i> , photographer unknown	339
30.6	Alex Fattal, <i>Street Apparition</i> , photograph by Jefferson. Pinhole portrait, 2004	341
32.1	Dongkyun Vak, <i>Diffusion-distribution model for the Generic Images</i>	356
32.2	Shinwook Kim, Inner page shot of book <i>In Search for Nessie</i>	359
32.3	Willem van Zoetendaal, Cover page image of Kyungwoo Chun's <i>The Weight</i> , 2022	361
33.1	Yanyou Yuan Di, <i>Selected publications by Jiazazhi Press</i>	365
33.2	Yanyou Yuan Di, <i>The book corner of SeP</i>	370
35.1	Verónica Sanchis Bencomo, Risograph posters made for Foto Féminas events in Taipei, Hong Kong, and Lima, 2017–2018	387

Figures

35.2	Verónica Sanchis Bencomo at Art Book Fair Taipei displaying the Foto Féminas library in October 2017	388
36.1	Dwianto Wibowo, <i>An image of the Indonesian photobook exhibition hosted by PannaFoto in 2014</i>	396
36.2	Kalen Wing Ki Lee, <i>Installation view of the exhibition 'Unfolding Hong Kong'</i>	399

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INTRODUCTION

Global Photographies and Questions of Cultural Translation

Lucy Soutter

How would it change our perspective of contemporary photography to encounter it first from the viewpoint of Bogotá or Beirut, Taipei or Cape Town? It would be uncontroversial to state that historically, the global discussion around photography has been dominated by the countries surrounding the North Atlantic, frequently referred to in shorthand as ‘the West’. Too often works from beyond these self-appointed centers of photography culture have been given exposure to the degree that they conform to pre-established conventions or diverge from them in ways that might be regarded as desirably exotic within established photographic markets. Dramatic changes have unfolded since the start of the twenty-first century; an increasingly world-facing and inclusive system of photography institutions is opening rapidly to international photographers and the ideas that frame their work. The last decade has seen an explosion of books and exhibitions about photography from around the world, in many cases produced by figures rooted in the sites of production. Examples include La Maison Européenne de Photographie in Paris teaming up with the Arab World Institute to launch the Photography Biennial of the Contemporary Arab World (2016–17); The Monash Gallery of Art in Melbourne mounting the survey *Visions of India: From the Colonial to the Contemporary* (2022), London’s Tate Modern presenting the exhibition, *A World in Common: Contemporary African Photography* (Bonsu 2023); or the New York Museum of Modern Art’s deciding to dedicate its *New Photography* show (2023) to works made by photographers with a connection to Lagos, Nigeria. Photographic work now travels from all directions to international photography festivals in Dhaka, São Paulo, Sharjah, Seoul, etc. (FotoRoom 2024). These contemporary activities are underpinned by emerging scholarship around the photography of the past. New histories of photography are being written that bring forward images and makers from previously underrepresented parts of the world (e.g. Diack et. al. 2020; Fernández 2011; Hung 2016). Collective and personal photographic archives are being gathered that make it possible for the specificities of lived experience to be acknowledged, studied, and shared across cultures.

Yet we cannot assume that the boom in attention to previously overlooked photographic activity has delivered an international shared fluency in photography ideas, that we necessarily see or mean the same things. Just because photographs and their associated texts travel does not mean that the project of photographic world building is the same in differ-

ent cultural contexts. Established approaches to scholarship need to be reconsidered for a broader range of perspectives to come into focus. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith has argued in her pioneering work on decolonizing education, the structures of Western research claim a power to classify, represent, compare, and evaluate any non-Western materials that they encounter, but rest on assumptions that may actively prevent the realities of marginalized subjects from being expressed or understood (Smith 1999). In this context, it is hardly surprising that much of the pioneering work opening contemporary photography scholarship to a broader range of world views has come from the Global South and Asia. A more extensive array of voices has increased what it is possible to say, in the same way that a wider set of photographic perspectives has expanded the images it is possible to make. This is a very exciting moment for photography.

Although there is an increasing recognition of the ways that we are interconnected across the boundaries of nations, there are very few texts that meaningfully describe the entanglement of our difference and sameness, a cultural problem described by theorists such as Sarah Nutall (2009) following on from studies of entanglement within posthuman philosophies and science (Barad 2007). In her work about the literature of post-apartheid South Africa, Nutall uses the figure of entanglement to reflect on the inadequacy of dualisms such as center/periphery, colonizer/colonized, and self/other, or the certainties underlying existing global debates about race, identity, or power. New knowledge can emerge if we are willing to enter the fray and risk exploring our complicated involvements with each other. An acknowledgment of entanglement requires us to keep our eye on detail as well as the big picture, to attend to the complex particularities of the matter at hand, without neglecting subject positions including our own.

Photography, Photographies

This volume challenges received ideas about photography from many different standpoints. It is a complex task to build a shared conversation while maintaining the specificities of language and experience that emerge from distinct contexts. In many cases, we needed to interrogate the most basic terms to make sure that the weight that they carry in different contexts is acknowledged and to propose a shared platform from which to explore different positions and positionalities.

In an age of camera phones and AI-assisted computer imaging, it may seem anachronistic to discuss ‘photography’ – rather than a more diffuse image culture – at all. As we hope the following chapters will confirm, for our contributors around the world, the term photography (in its various languages) remains both meaningful and a point of interconnection. Photography continues to have relevance as a set of technologies, image-making practices, conventions, and traditions, as a field of study, as a set of material images appearing on various substrates, and as a meeting point for communities of makers and audiences. Photography is not defined merely by lens-based image making – film-based, digital, augmented and even computer-generated – but also by the possibilities it produces for communication, expression, illumination, and transformation. As a visual medium, photography can in some ways circumvent language barriers, offering shared experience, yet our understanding of photographs may require many words, particularly in translation from one culture to another.

As this is an academic book, we acknowledge from the start that the texts within it are rooted in educational systems that theorize photography as an important cultural and

artistic form, though these vary a great deal from country to country. As touched upon in several chapters, some parts of the world have taught photography practice, history, and theory from within art schools and universities since the mid-20th century boom in photographic education, in many cases bearing the imprint of colonial histories. The term ‘art’ might be undesirable in some contexts, carrying baggage of colonial elitism or nationalist pretension (Zhuang 2016), while elsewhere the notion of art offers a welcome space outside of photography’s everyday functionalities, positively associated with agency, expression, and resistance (Soutter 2018). Art is an assumed touchstone for photographers who have received academic training, and worked within international contemporary art networks of galleries, museums, and fairs. Art is not necessarily a reference point for photographers working outside or alongside these frameworks. In this book we see networks of production and dissemination developing across local and regional contexts in a way that promises to offer an antidote to an artificial historical polarity between photography and art.

Photography is booming around the world, notably in the ‘Majority World’ – the term formulated in the 1990s by Bangladeshi photographer and activist Shahidul Alam to describe the countries where most of the world’s populations reside (Alam 2008). Coined to underline the fact that a small number of developed economies have held outsized influence over world affairs, Alam’s term offers a shift in mindset, encouraging us to look more seriously at the photography of and from underrepresented cultures. Photography is emergent as an ambitious cultural form, including in places where no formal academic study of the medium is available. As our contributors elaborate, photographers can develop their skills and understanding independently outside of educational institutions: through a growing number of photography centers, such as PannaFoto Institute in Indonesia, Hydra + Fotografía in Mexico City, the Contemporary Image Collective (CIC) in Cairo, or in workshops run by international foundations like World Press Photo and Magnum (both with roots in photojournalism and press photography). Mobile phones and the internet allow amateur photographers to develop their knowledge and understanding of the field without formal training. In the 21st century, new courses have opened in countries that previously did not support the academic study of photography. Examples include the Photography Degree at Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano in Colombia, the Bachelor of Social Science in Photography at Pathshala in Dhaka, Bangladesh, or the two-year course at The Photography Training Center (CFP) in Bamako, Mali (Photo Tool 2016).

Photographic values vary wildly from place to place. From Hanoi to Mumbai to London, different kinds of imagery are considered appropriate or forbidden to regard, in accordance with the movement of local laws and customs. This is not simply a matter of freedom of expression, as Western perspectives might suggest, but rather frameworks of limitations and collective trajectories emerging from specific times and locations. For example, scenes of partially clothed children were a mainstay of Anglo-American art photography in the late nineteenth century but have evoked censure and moral panic on both sides of the Atlantic in recent decades as bordering on child pornography (Higonnet 1998). In some cases, images that cannot be exhibited on one country can be freely viewed elsewhere. Perhaps more instructive than the forms of censorship at play in specific contexts are the ingenious ways that photographers negotiate their practices to make the images they consider necessary within complex political and legal parameters (Đào and Phạm 2022). Photographers and curators in various contexts may also work constructively at the limits of the permissible, as discussed in Hong Kong scholar Wing Ki Lee’s writing (2021) on ‘disobedient photobooks’.

As well as experiencing different values and moral standards, photographers in various contexts may experience different relationships to history. North American and European students have traditionally been taught a teleological history of the medium, in which early technical experiments and exploration photography led to pictorialism, followed by the documentary and avant-garde branches of modernism, then postmodernism, leading up to a twenty-first century boom in digital activities and post-internet eclecticism. In the UK, at least, this history is gradually being phased out of curricula in favor of more emphasis on contemporary practices. In parts of Southeast Asia only a state-approved history of national photography may be taught – or no national narrative at all in favor of a version of Western photographic history. For photographers emerging in China, and other locations where the history of Western photography became available in a compressed way at the end of the twentieth century, such photographic movements might all be seen as equally remote and/or available, even as unfolding in the present. Photographers in different countries may choose to orient themselves towards fine art rather than photography specifically to embrace the notion of contemporaneity and reject the past (Hacking 2015).

The very word or characters for ‘photography’ with different etymologies, connotations, and denotations in various languages and places. In this volume, we have chosen to use ‘photographies’ to indicate the heterogeneity of photographic practices to be encountered. The term encompasses the plurality of practices that may include artistic forms intended for gallery display alongside photographs made for a variety of other contexts from selfies, family snapshots, and travel photography to photojournalism, fashion, advertising, activism, etc. While our approach to photographs may be inclusive, we generally privilege works that are carefully considered and shaped, with an engagement that may be any combination of aesthetic, conceptual, critical, political, personal, or ethical. These engagements are characteristic of, but not exclusive to, the domain of contemporary art.

A few generalizations can be made about contemporary photographs that apply to the diverse practices described in this volume. Photographers tend to work in series or extended projects, as long-form platforms to explore their ideas. Text, whether in the form of titles, words in the actual image, or associated artist’s statements, may be important components to support the work’s meaning. While contemporary photographers are deeply invested in the visual aspects of their work, most are also engaged with concepts, thematics, narratives, and/or research. Perhaps more controversially, the documentary transparency or objectivity of photography can no longer be taken for granted. This trend may represent a reaction against an outdated model of Western photojournalism, in which a privileged outsider traveled across the world to photograph people and places and speak for them to a Western audience (a practice now largely replaced with the commissioning of local photographers). As Christopher Pinney has written, the penetrative assertions of a Western-influenced ‘transparent’ documentary photography give way to practices which mix representation and an encounter with surface and material (Pinney, 2003). Photographers all over the world may choose to bear witness or convey important personal or social truths using the conventions of documentary photography and the seemingly unmanipulated ‘straight’ photograph, but on the other hand, they may use elements such as staging, fiction, montage, or digital manipulation (Bogre, 2020). We could view this as a turn away from the humanist realism established in Western art and literature in the nineteenth century in favor of more diverse models for exploring human experience (Tormey, 2013). In its place, we find a growing interest in self-representation and in presenting identities in a multiplicity of different modes.

Makers and viewers encounter photographs in a range of material forms, including on the page, wall, and screen. While photographers in Europe and the United States have access to a wealth of digital and analog processes and can make physical prints and exhibition displays at prices that are relatively affordable in relation to incomes, those in much of the Majority World are more likely to work digitally and disseminate their images primarily on screens. Access to digital resources is uneven; the internet may be unreliable, and expensive imaging software may only be accessible in pirated versions. In part as a reaction against the dematerialized quality of on-screen images, photographers internationally are employing an ever-broader range of material forms for their work. With digital publishing becoming more affordable, photobooks – whether modestly or lavishly produced – are an increasingly popular format to experiment with the physical and temporal experience of a photographic project, and to disseminate it. At the same time, photography is taking increasingly ambitious material forms in exhibitions around the world, including three-dimensional installations of prints and screens that may include elements such as sound, moving image, or live performance within structures of wood, glass, or textile. Even the Magnum Foundation, exemplary of the post-WW2 faith in photographic reportage as a factual corrective to war and other political abuses, supports emerging photographers such as Sabiha Çimen from Turkey or Soumya Sankar Bose from India to work in mixed-medium gallery displays and site-specific installations as well as traditional prints. It is ironic that, as the contemporary photography world becomes increasingly interested in sustainability and environmentalism, the staging of exhibitions becomes increasingly elaborate, with bulky, disposable elements. Even the lifecycle of seemingly disembodied digital forms such as NFTs has a considerable environmental impact in terms of computer equipment and energy use (Pratt 2023).

The Globe, Global, Globalization

The term ‘global’ has never been more commonly used, or more fraught. It is worth sifting through some of its various connotations, as several are in play in the current volume as we explore photography and ideas around the world. Firstly, we will highlight the idea of the ‘global’ inclusively as referring to our shared planet and ecosystem, and a desire to reassert the figure of the globe as an alternative to two-dimensional mappings that distort power relationships among nations. A three-dimensional representation of the planet with its land and seas at their correct sizes, the model of the globe offers an alternative to the most common Western projections of the world map which famously distort the proportions of land masses, most frequently to privilege the Northern hemisphere and the countries around the North Atlantic.

As with the drawing of maps, the history and theory of photography have been primarily written in the West, centering on the West. Other points of view are possible and desirable. In an Asian context, for example, a variety of regional framings has become useful to consider as an alternative to the East/West colonial polarity. For example, we might group the nations surrounding the Indian Ocean for consideration, or explore an Africa/Asia axis, or single out particular Asian photographic cultures so that they might be looked at in comparison to each other as Zhuang Wubin does in his book *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (2016). Our use of the term ‘global’ is first and foremost to support this broader focus, and a desire to redistribute emphasis of study more evenly across the world, rather than merely drawing on top of colonialist maps passed down from previous generations.

The term globalization refers to the network of economic and political interconnections between one country and another, along lines that are in some cases as old as human travel and trade. Since its inception, photography has been both a product and driver of globalization, spreading across the world with colonizers and representing parts of the world to each other, in many cases as a tool of nationalism (Landau and Kaspin, 2002). Photography has played a part in the socioeconomic formation of globalization, sharing both its advantages of development, growth, mobility and ease of communication, and at the same time the inequalities and environmental degradation that have emerged from it (Levin, 2022).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, when the Western ideology of globalism as a positive geopolitical force was at its peak, there was a flurry of art world exhibitions and publications using the term ‘Global Contemporary’. Formulated by curators and scholars such as Hans Belting (2013) and Jonathan Harris (2017) in relation to rapidly proliferating international fairs and biennials, this term implies that, to be truly contemporary, an artist or photographer must make work intended for global platforms and demonstrating an awareness of its global context; it suggests that to be contemporary is to be global and vice versa. Like the term ‘World Music’, derided by many musicians (Byrne 1999), the notion of a global contemporary could imply a kind of mashup of difference, a medley of everywhere, giving disproportionate power to the gatekeepers doing the choosing, and ultimately reinforcing the hegemony of Western cultural production. Globalization is not an art movement or market label; it is a condition in which we are all implicated. For this reason, we avoid using the term ‘global’ let alone ‘global contemporary’ to refer to specific photographers or their practices but continue to use the term in relation to our overlapping interconnectedness.

International photography fairs have tremendous power both to disseminate and to distort the interpretation of photographic projects. The largest of these events, Paris Photo, provides an instructive case study. Held annually in one of the city’s huge pavilions of glass and steel, the fair echoes the international trade expositions that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna to promote Western industrial progress and strengthen the web of international trade (Jones 2016). When it first opened in 1997, Paris Photo served primarily as a showcase for European and American works, by photographers featured in canonical exhibitions and history texts, and by contemporary photographers with formal and institutional relationships to those traditions.

Over the past 25 years the fair has become more globalized in terms of galleries exhibiting and photographers represented. In 2023, out of 154 dealers represented, ten were from Asia, six from South America, with galleries from South Africa, Turkey, and Mexico, as well as various other countries that arguably lie outside the mainstream of contemporary photography markets. Strikingly, the European and North American galleries also included more work from the Majority World than ever before, especially projects focusing on identity. Pockets of activity within the fair allow for extended, meaningful encounters with selected projects; the publishers’ section offers photobooks that might be read from cover to cover, the talks program allows photographers to discuss the making of their work. However, the structure of the main fair, flattening artworks-in-transit from around the world onto the same brightly lit walls, risks reducing them to consumable tokens of the cultures that produced them (Charlesworth 2014).

The other 200-or-so photography fairs and festivals that pepper the globe – demonstrate that more varied photography now circulates, and a larger number of international figures travel with it: photographers, gallerists, curators, scholars, publishers, and critics who may have

experience studying, living, and working in a variety of countries. These figures are important cultural translators who cross the boundaries of nations and languages sharing their knowledge and experience. Cultural capital is being concentrated in a new way; a small number of prominent international figures receive a significant proportion of high-profile exhibitions, prizes, publications, and sales. It is important that we not allow such stimulating concentrations of photographic activity to overshadow the richness of encounters that can happen in more diffuse and dispersed contexts, and that we also turn our attention to the practices and networks that exist or are waiting to emerge outside the spotlight of the global market.

It is not only Western academics or Western art markets that have sought to articulate the relationship between the cultural production of different countries as characteristic of the contemporary. As art historian Reiko Tomii has observed, the origins in 1960s Japan of the terms *gendai bijutsu* and *kokusaiteki dōjisei* – which translate as contemporary art and international contemporaneity – suggest the possibility, before the globalization of Western art in the 1980s–2000s, of a concern for ‘a “shared perception” informed by a given locale’s interface with the outside world’ (Tomii; 2009). Today the term ‘international’, has fallen somewhat out of favor, perhaps due to a sense that 20th century Western entities frequently used it to gloss over the institutional promotion of their own interests. Despite some of the negative associations of the term ‘global’ enumerated above, we use it in this study to convey the kind of transnational audience-facing shared perception Tomii describes.

Questions of Cultural Translation

In speaking of literature, and the experience of readers, Jean-Paul Sartre describes the kind of shorthand that is available to writers addressing an audience in their own context (in his case France in the late 1940s, traumatized by Nazi Occupation):

...people of the same period and community, who have lived through the same events, who have raised or avoided the same questions, have the same taste in their mouth; they have the same complicity, and there are the same corpses among them. That is why it is not necessary to write so much; there are key-words.

(1986, p. 50)

The contributors to this book share a moment in time, a community of dialogue, and, crucially, a commitment to photography as a valuable cultural form. At the same time, each brings intersectional differences, of which nationality is but one. We have discovered that indeed it may be necessary to use many words to understand one another, as photographic images are not always what they seem at first glance, seemingly shared keywords may bear different meanings in various contexts, and our histories may give us separate frames of reference.

We also want to acknowledge the problematics of evoking locality at all in an era characterized by mass migration. As Arjun Appadurai has argued: ‘The many displaced, deterritorialized, and transient populations that constitute today’s ethnoscapings are engaged in the construction of locality, as a structure of feeling, often in the face of erosion, dispersal, and implosion of neighbourhoods as coherent social formations’ (1996, p. 199). Identities are hybrid, and disparate localities may be linked in the lives and experience of individuals and groups. Many of the writers and photographers contained in this volume have multiple languages, dual nationalities, come from diasporic communities, and/or have traveled themselves to live or study – as of course will many of our readers. Stuart Hall describes people

belonging to cultures of hybridity as themselves ‘irrevocably *translated*’, constantly bridging and negotiating languages and identities (Hall 1992, p. 310).

Translators are individuals with multiple fluencies who take responsibility for attempting to bridge gaps in language, knowledge, and understanding – despite the difficulties involved. Translators of photography books can be key interpretive figures in their local scenes. Tehran-based photographer Mohsen Bayramnejad has translated seven English-language photography books and approximately 100 articles into Farsi, describing Western photographic culture as like a puzzle whose big picture can only be understood by gathering enough pieces and drawing them together. Bayramnejad describes his mission as translating photographic ideas into Farsi ‘to build bridges among thinking people in this complicated time for our planet’ (Bayramnejad 2020). His task is made even more complicated by the fact that Iran does not participate in international copyright law, so all his translations are unauthorized. Cultural differences create constant challenges for translators and scholars working across languages. How, for example, is a translator like DongHoon Kim to address the fact that the words ‘document’ and ‘documentary’ would all translate into ‘record’ in Korean, losing the associations that they carry in English (Kim 2023), or a photography doctoral candidate like Yue Li to negotiate the chasm between Eastern and Western understandings of allegory in order to write an English-language thesis about how the tradition of *shan shui* landscape painting persists in contemporary Chinese photography? Close attention to such gaps can turn moments of confusion into opportunities for new understanding.

There are limits to how fully we can understand each other’s distinct worlds. Every generation contributes intellectual tools to undertake the challenge. The relatively recent academic disciplines of translation studies and cultural translation have evolved to meet the need for complex ways to describe and share experience across boundaries of nations and languages (Maitland 2017). To address issues of cultural exchange, they draw on academic disciplines including linguistics, philosophy, cultural studies, social anthropology, and post-colonial studies. Many of the contributions to this book employ such hybrid methods, concerned not only with conveying information, but with framing it in ways that will open new doors for international audiences. Readers of this book are invited to take on the role of cultural translators themselves, bringing their own experience to the table and cross-referencing what they read with what they know.

How to Use This Book

The book and its thematic sections emerged from the Global Photographies Network and its programme of talks, discussions and workshops. Global Photographies was founded in 2020 in response to the global pandemic, the desire for a decolonization of photographic education and discourse, and the collaborative possibilities which arose from working online. The network assembles a partnership of photographic specialists and educators across continents, beginning in Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, the UK, Sweden, Hungary, South Africa, Taiwan and Singapore, who each give their time, knowledge and diverse resources as suits them best, and this has continued into the book in its final form, where sections are structured, commissioned and edited by partners from the network aligned to their research and expertise. The specificities of the positions figured by our editors, further expanded by those of the contributors, shape the book’s contents and produce a polyphonic chorus of topics each addressed from distinct linguistic, geographical and critical starting points, in different styles and with different frames of reference and modes of address.

Introduction

We intend that whatever their experiences and level of study, each reader can encounter a mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar. The book's sections balance historical and academic writing with accounts from practitioners and from individuals who have initiated or catalyzed projects, with a combination of broader survey essays, focused case studies and more conversational interviews and roundtables around spotlighted topics. Despite their heterogeneities, different styles of writing and shifts in emphases, the sections share key characteristics for orienting a reader: each begins with an essay that takes a broad sweep or establishing view, providing tools and contextual perspectives, and each closes with a conversational or summative text which roots the reader as an active participant or possible contributor. A key focus of the book has been its emphasis on global or planetary photographic discourse today, and the book's contents lean towards the possibilities and potentials for photography as it is currently being shaped.

We hope that the book will have practical uses, offering a wealth of recent practices and ideas; a set of role models of photographers and scholars who have built diverse career paths; and a set of case studies that might even function as "how to" lessons for ambitious, pioneering photographic enterprises, including international festivals, online platforms, traveling libraries, magazines and publishing companies. Many of the practices described in the book are overtly political and social, offering productive examples of photographic eco-activism, the formation of radical collectives, the subversive use of existing imagery against the grain of its original production, etc. Readers will also be able to use the book as a traditional textbook, to learn about a range of contemporary practices, both established and emerging, and about the relevant areas of contemporary cultural theory with which they intersect. The book sets out to foreground a truly broad range of perspectives to be found in different parts of the world. It represents a project and approach that is ongoing, to widen horizons and modify the histories of photography that we tell.

In Part One, *Photography in the Anthropocene: Climate Change and Environment*, editors Svea Josephy and Jean Brundrit lead a discussion of photography and the environment from the perspective of the Southern Hemisphere. To address the man-made issues associated with the Anthropocene—including rapid climate change, the possibility of mass extinction, environmental apocalypse, water scarcity, reduction of habitat, the dumping of trash, and unfair distribution of resources—Brundrit and Josephy imagined a set of dialogues "talking back" to empire through photography. At stake is the notion that The South is not a reflection of the North or a mirror of the center but has its own concerns, problems, and contexts. Several of the contributions argue that the issues we face collectively in the Anthropocene are a legacy of colonialism's history of extraction—particularly in Africa. The section includes several examples of co-writing in which people bring different skills, in which the artist is not a subject but a co-author, and in which art historians and theorists write with scientists.

Part Two, *Decolonial Practices: Speaking Back to the Canon*, edited by Nina Mangalanayagam and Emese Mucsi, reflects the variety and complexity of postcolonial legacies, with a set of contributions that frame photography's potential to be used within decolonial practices in contexts as diverse as South Asia, Greenland, Hungary, West Africa and Peru. Starting with a recognition that Europe itself has a series of distinct local, colonial and decolonial contexts, conversations with theorists bring key terminology and concepts into focus around particular projects. Case studies unpack the ways contemporary photographic projects speak back to colonial pasts through processes including the strategic reframing of archival materials, engagement with indigenous practices, and the construction of auto-narratives.

Part Three, *Gender and Queer Theory in Photography Today: Identities and Histories*, explores ways that gender, as a socio-cultural construction, operates as a system of representation that both carries and assigns meanings to individuals. Editor Alejandra Niedermaier has gathered contributors who are attentive to the ways that the revolution of thought brought by feminism has intersected with postmodernism, queer theory and postcolonial theory. Radiating outwards from Argentina and South America, the section explores how photography as a form of aesthetic production, especially as seen through a feminist perspective, can be an instrument to reflect on gendered experience, and to challenge and test conditions of visibility, representation, self-representation and new forms of experience. The chapters give account of leading and emerging female, non-binary and LGBTQ+ photographers and their visual journeys, as well as exploring feminist approaches to the past through research and the process of curation. The lens of identity – in this case focused on gender and sexuality – allows new insights and new forms of experience to be articulated that may be political, dissident, liberatory, performative, and empowering.

Part Four, *New Materialities: Expanded Practices in Contemporary Art and Photography*, edited by Duncan Wooldridge and Rashi Rajguru, tracks how mineral and material concerns in recent critical thinking are reflected in new forms and observations around the photographic image. Beginning with Europe's gradual recognition of the material effects of extractive capitalism and labor, colliding with material encounters and practices in Africa, the Middle East, and South East and Central Asia, the section reveals how both subtle and emphatic materialities provide not only critiques of digital culture, but find in haptic and physical practices forms of access to often-displaced encounters, sensitivities and agencies. The section explores how photography might, in its open-ended and expanded field of practices, develop highly specific experiences and the beginnings of planetary and ecological thinking.

The contributions in Part Five, *Forming Communities: Networks, Platforms and Institutions*, edited by Camilo Páez Vanegas, explore the development of photographic groups and networks, collaborative and participatory modes and activities. From a survey of Southeast Asian photographic communities and a roundtable of alternative educational platforms in Latin America to discrete case studies in Colombia, Ireland and Central and Southern Africa, the contributions examine how collaborative and communitarian activities emerge in dialogue with their contexts, to build new infrastructures and ecologies. With a focus on project initiation and structuring, the section emphasizes methodologies and the steps taken in the development of supportive ecologies: how can we build an organization or network? How are we to negotiate state political infrastructures and economic structures? How might we begin to conceptualize projects in relation to national, regional, and international frameworks, keeping plugged into local contexts whilst developing international support networks?

In Part Six, *From Production to Distribution: Global Approaches to Photobooks*, editors Yinhua Chu and Zhuang Wubin provide an overview of contemporary photobook practices, with an emphasis on publishing in Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, The People's Republic of China, South Korea, Japan and Latin America, drawing upon perspectives offered by significant practitioners operating in the field. The section examines the wide variety of different photobook cultures, from the handmade to the technologically advanced, in which audience, encounter and the book's capacity and restrictions to travel are continuously negotiated. Through advances in the availability of digital technology the photobook takes prominence as a portable form ideally suited for global distribution through new networks. With critical overviews, accounts from publishers, and a roundtable discussing photobook

collecting, displays and activist practices, the section highlights a wealth of recent activities in this area and emphasizes new possibilities for publishing and audiences to come.

As would be expected in a book this large that aims for a cross-section of the global photography ecosystem, there are various overlaps between the sections, and several of the contributions might have appeared in a different part in the book. Numerous topics that could have been included as section themes were not, but appear in the book in various forms, including race, the intersection of photography with new technologies, the politics of representation and censorship, photographic education, questions around futurity, etc. Readers may choose to read a single chapter, according to the subject matter or author. They might prefer to read one of the sections in its entirety—each could be considered as a freestanding volume providing a well-rounded set of perspectives on its theme. Some may read the book in its entirety. Above all, we want the *Companion* to open spaces of possibility, in which readers wherever they are may learn more about contemporary photography and imagine new ways to make and share their work and to connect with others. We hope that it will have ripple effects that exceed what we can imagine in the present.

The *Companion's* selection of authors, case studies and themes does not pretend to be complete or representative of the full range of contemporary photography and scholarship but is offered as a productive starting point. We are telling parts of a story that could—and we hope will in the future—be told in many other ways. The book provides a cross-section of contemporary practices and approaches. It also offers a model for how we might continue to work together to develop shared understandings. We are not interested in creating a homogenous global photography culture, but rather in deepening conversation around shared concerns, foregrounding diverse approaches, providing a platform for underrepresented voices and opening new debates. We hope that this volume will provide new photographic encounters and insights for readers wherever they may be.

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PART I

Photography in the Anthropocene
Climate Change and Environment

Edited by Jean Brundrit and Svea Josephy



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2

THE VIEW FROM THE SOUTH

Anna Stielau

Few people today know that modern environmentalism was transformed by a single photograph. On 17 December 1972, the crew of the last human lunar mission, Apollo 17, turned their cameras back toward the Earth to capture an astonishing image. Now known as *The Blue Marble* (Figure 2.1), this hand-held Hasselblad photograph was the first time our planet would be visible in its entirety. It shows the Earth suspended in the vast darkness of space, a luminous blue-and-green orb wreathed in clouds. From a distance of around 28,000 miles, it looks at once breathtakingly beautiful and very small. In interviews after the fact, each of Apollo's three astronauts would describe the sight in much the same way, detailing feelings of overwhelming awe and ego-transcendence as their home was cast into cosmic perspective. The philosopher Frank White coined a term for this experience in 1987. He calls it the "Overview Effect," a seismic internal transformation born of seeing the Earth from outer space. Although only a handful of people have since felt the effect during spaceflight, its representations are everywhere, with *The Blue Marble* regularly reproduced on T-shirts, posters, and textbook covers. Building on foundations laid by other space race photographs like 1968's *Earthrise*, the widespread dissemination of this image would soon trigger a massive shift in public consciousness and a surge of US-led environmental activism. By the time *The Blue Marble* was prominently featured in astronomer Carl Sagan's 1980 television series *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, it was synonymous with a sense of interconnection and an emerging planetary unity. "The cosmos is within us," Sagan marvels in an episode entitled, "Who Speaks for Earth?". "We are made of star stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself." Humanity had finally come to perceive our world as a "global totality" (Parks 2005: 2), which inevitably meant assuming collective responsibilities for its protection.

Understandably, when one of the world's richest men began evangelizing about the Overview Effect after a vanity spaceflight, he was resoundingly mocked. In 2021 billionaire Jeff Bezos flew to the edge of Earth's atmosphere on the first crewed mission launched by his new company, Blue Origin. During a press conference following the launch, Bezos reflected on the trip's impact on his worldview. "Every astronaut, everybody who's been up into space, they say that it changes them," he explained (in Woodward 2021: np). "And they're kind of amazed and awestruck by the Earth and its beauty, but also by its fragil-



Figure 2.1 *The Blue Marble*, ‘View of the Earth as seen by the Apollo 17 crew traveling toward the Moon,’ 7 December 1972.

ity [...] I can vouch for that.” What received the most derision, though, was the conclusion Bezos drew from his experience. “We need to take all heavy industry, all polluting industry, and move it into space and keep Earth as this beautiful gem of a planet that it is,” he told anyone who would listen. “That’s going to take decades to achieve, but you have to start. And big things start with small steps.” Horrified journalists immediately insisted that this was in fact a big step *backward*, the ultimate expression of unchecked and unsustainable consumption (Calma 2021: np). By way of evidence, some pointed to the irony that Bezos’s own spaceflight emitted a staggering 75 tons of carbon per passenger, more than most people produce in a lifetime (Schultz 2021: np). However, the bulk of the instinctual revulsion at his proposal was directed not at this hypocrisy, but at Bezos’s use of the Overview Effect to serve his agenda. For a billionaire, the fragility of the Earth as visualized by *The Blue Marble* is just another lever in the machinery of capitalism. Preserving life on this planet means outsourcing harm further and further into the universe.

In the essay that follows, I want to push back against this reflexive response to offer a different argument. What if, instead of balking at Bezos, we were to understand the Overview Effect as a condition of possibility for his extractive vision? What if an extraterrestrial sacrifice zone is only imaginable from a certain vantage point vis-à-vis the planet, or in a cultural milieu where representations of – and from – that vantage point overshadow all others? Are there angles on our climate predicament that do not start in the silent darkness of space, gazing back at an Earth that could be cradled in the palm of a hand? How might

environmentalism itself be differently patterned or propelled if it did not originate from a distant outside, looking in?

By centering photography in their pursuit of answers to such questions, certain writers and artists from the Global South have begun to open up alternative angles on climate catastrophe. They know that when used strategically, images have the potential to reframe and reimagine the crisis of future life on Earth. For many, this project begins by marking how the sweeping heuristic of the Anthropocene, an era defined by humanity's impact upon the planet, falls short of contending with the shifting scales, temporalities, and lived experiences of extraction at ground level, flattening significant differences between regions and populations. The zoomed-out perspective of that broad descriptor makes it all too easy to overlook contests over the meaning of humanness (the "anthro" in Anthropocene), variegated responsibilities for environmental destruction, or unanswered questions about whose future – as well as whose Earth, exactly – we are being urged to defend. It can be equally easy to forget that there is nothing truly new about the end of the world, or at least, that old worlds have been ending from the moment New Worlds were discovered. As the geographer Kathryn Yussoff (2018: xiii) points out, "[I]mperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence." Hence, any big picture of environmental transformation is incomplete without more granular attention to the question of *who* is guzzling up the planet's resources, from where, for how long, and with what allocation of effects and opportunities.

What unites these kinds of investigations is their sensitivity to an enduring blind spot in scholarly and popular accounts of *The Blue Marble* and its political afterlives. Call it the unseen of the Anthropocene. For decades, audiences have turned to *The Blue Marble* photograph to see the whole Earth, a perfect shining globe. But this image does not depict the whole Earth. It never did. Because 7 December is just shy of the summer solstice in the southern hemisphere, what the photograph actually shows is an illuminated portion of the Earth's surface. We are looking southward, from the Arabian Peninsula across the continent of Africa to the great white mass of Antarctica, where eddies in the clouds indicate that a storm is brewing. *The Blue Marble* has always been a view of the Global South as seen through the eyes of a god. It invites us to look at Africa, ruling out the possibility of seeing from it.

Verticality's Violence

Though its godlike perspective was hailed as unique, *The Blue Marble's* overview belongs to a much older Western genealogy of visualizing the world. This thing we call a world is not a given, as categories like World Music or World Literature seem to suggest (although even there, "world" is code for parts of the planet not afforded the distinction of genre, telling us a lot about where the power to classify resides). Rather, our world has been shunted through a funnel of representations that make narrow sense of time and space for us, defying the inherent messiness of nature. For centuries people have produced images of the planet that arrange ground, sky, and living matter in line with racial capitalist interests, a practice that critics of colonialism have identified as foundational in understanding the Earth as a possession (Moten and Harney 2021). Representations are how the world is settled – not just colonized, that is, but resolved.

Our representations have enormous power. Think of a single line, the most basic component of any chart, graph, or map. "Define, on the two-dimensional surface of the earth, lines

across which motion is to be prevented, and you have one of the key themes of history,” writes the historian Reviel Netz (2012: xi).

With a closed line (i.e., a curve enclosing a figure), and the prevention of motion from outside the line to its inside, you derive the idea of property. With the same line, and the prevention of motion from inside to outside, you derive the idea of prison. With an open line (i.e., a curve that does not enclose a figure), and the prevention of motion in either direction, you derive the idea of border.

The first compositional convention that photography students learn, the rule of thirds, imposes similar linear constraints. Equal parts formal and ideological conceit, this principle divides a picture plane along vertical and horizontal axes, reducing the complexity of a scene in order to achieve a more pleasing harmony. It hinges on the horizon: how straight it is, how level, how clean the cut. There is a reason that the art historian Rosalind Krauss (1985) claims the grid as the emblem of Western modernism, after all. “Insofar as its order is that of pure relationship, the grid is a way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order particular to themselves,” Krauss declares (1985: 1). All that exists must learn to live with and within these representational structures, arranging desires and expectations accordingly. Even representing the Anthropocene, a great unsettling of the world, means plotting linear arcs and engineering selective epistemic breaks. Scientists must develop models capable of computing huge volumes of data that can never be directly experienced or perceived (Morton 2013; Tsing et al 2019). Like Earth, climate change is too big and too heterogenous to digest without some visual help. Models work to create the world on our behalf, which is to say, they *world* our world. In the process, representations necessarily restrict the fullness of that world to a finite set of parameters and variables, and, often, a singular vantage point.

Nowhere is the normative force of representations more apparent than in the figure of the globe, a familiar educational tool in contemporary classrooms. These idealized spheres show landmasses and water bodies, elevations and depressions, as if from the perspective of an external observer located somewhere far above the landscape. As instruments of understanding, globes form part of the West’s “aesthetics of knowledge,” the Zambian-South African artist Nolan Oswald Dennis’s (2021: np) wonderful phrase for the modes of perception that produce the common sense of modernity. In his 2021 Johannesburg exhibition *conditions*, Dennis focused on denaturalizing the globe, revealing how provincial its underlying cosmology has always been. To read a globe, he points out, the viewer is forced to adopt a fixed, disembodied position, from which the Earth appears to be a self-contained, seamless, and comprehensible unity. That position makes the planet not only knowable but *ownable*, a thing to be grasped. Tellingly, the oldest surviving terrestrial globe, the *Erdapfel*, was designed by the German polymath Martin Behaim in 1492, the same year a man named Christopher Columbus set sail across the Atlantic on an expedition of discovery. By the 1800s, small pocket globes made of papier mâché were status symbols for wealthy white gentlemen as well as popular toys for European children (Taylor 2009: np). To this day a globe suspended between two cupped hands is the universal symbol of environmentalism. In theory this image denotes care for the planet through a gesture of gentle holding, but it can galvanize this care only by granting people godlike proportions or making the Earth man-sized, retaining a human frame of reference either way.

“[W]e should not take the presentation of the world for granted because, at the very least, it is given to us by the imagination,” cautions literature scholar Pheng Cheah (2016: 3). And it is a very specific imagination, at that. Overviews are distinctly racialized and gendered viewpoints. Historically a god’s eye view was reserved for the white, the male, and the rich, with power often derived from the act of seeing alone. Numerous scholars have explored how remote viewing affords the viewer an ability to classify, separate, and aestheticize everything that enters a field of vision, a set of techniques essential for segregation of various kinds (Foucault 1995; Mirzoeff 2011). The more far-reaching the view, the more complete the authority. “The place of visualization has literally and metaphorically continued to distance itself from the subject being viewed, intensifying first to that of aerial photography and more recently to that of satellites, a practical means of domination and surveillance,” Nicholas Mirzoeff observes in *The Right to Look* (2011: 17). Contemporary anxieties about state and private sector surveillance bear this out. At its etymological root, the word “surveillance,” from the Latin *vigilare* (“to watch”) and the French *surveiller* (“to watch over”), suggests a floating eye unmoored from any one individual, for which everything is transformed into an object. As if to underscore this point, the international intelligence alliance of Western superpowers – comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States – is called “Five Eyes.”

More than any other medium, photography has consolidated the authority of the overview. A camera is, at base, a technology of both remote viewing and strategic distancing. Its closing shutter divides the world into seers and seen, past and future, here and over-there, the historically relevant and the entirely forgettable. Acting as “petty sovereigns,” photographs frame what is seen for the purposes of exhibition and possession, making these images well suited for the imaginative needs of imperialism (Azoulay 2019: 2–4). Naturally, the dream of shooting from the air dates back to the earliest moments of the medium, which coincide with the heyday of colonization. Aerial photography was first employed by the French balloonist Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, known by the pseudonym Nadar, in 1858. From a height of about 360 meters, Nadar captured 360-degree views of the city streets of Paris for the first time. Later innovations in aerial imagery were the result of the rolling wars that defined the twentieth century. Much more needed to be seen, and with greater immediacy. Although the god’s eye view is old, this connection to military technology means that overviews are also quintessentially modern. “Now for the first time is there any such thing as the ‘position’ of man,” the philosopher Martin Heidegger announced in his influential 1938 lecture, *The Age of the World Picture* (1977: 83), as around him, Nazi Germany was gathering its forces to wage a World War. Heidegger attributed this new position to humanity’s proliferating representations, which turn the world into a still image spread out before and for us (81–83) Perhaps he was right. To know the world is to know your place within it, and to know your place is to know the world.

This historical background can help us to see that the Apollo Mission’s “blue marble” is not as far removed from Jeff Bezos’s Blue Origin as it may appear. The Cold War realities of the space race informed the perspective of NASA’s astronauts, dictating what kind of world they – and we – are positioned to see. Their perspective is, in key respects, an imperial one, adopted in the context of growing nationalistic fervor in the North and intensifying struggles for decolonization in the Global South. Indeed, space travel has long trafficked in colonizing rhetoric. We are accustomed to the grandiose language of the final frontier, but there is something profoundly weird about interpreting our expanding universe as a border in the first place. Is it really that surprising that Bezos updated this dream for the age of the

space mining start-up? In fact, *The Blue Marble* and Blue Origin share a confident combination of seeing and knowing that environmental historian Thomas Lekan (2014: 185) identifies as *the airman's epistemology*, “at once romantic and mastering, sublime and surveilling, holistic and violent.” Viewed from an angle that is unrelentingly vertical, the beautiful vistas of the planet absorb anything granular. From 28,000 miles away, differences dissolve and frictions disappear, eliminating the need for any reckoning with the causes of environmental degradation or its unevenly distributed effects.

Among the many things rendered invisible by an external vantage point is an episode playing out around the time *The Blue Marble* was shot, right at the center of the photograph. On 16 December 1972, members of the Portuguese 6th Company of Mozambique Commandos massacred 385 inhabitants of the rural village of Wiriyamu in central Mozambique, accused of harboring FRELIMO guerillas. Founded in 1962, FRELIMO (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*) is Mozambique's nationalist movement and anti-colonial liberation party. By 1972, the country's war of independence from Portuguese rule was at its ugly apex, and soldiers had received orders to kill every last man, woman, and child in town, leaving no witnesses. All the victims were civilians (Dhada 2020). In the aftermath, documents from the military commission of inquiry into the massacre would go missing, making for a thin archive of material evidence and no photographic evidence whatsoever. There is a cruel irony at work in the idea of an eye in the sky overlooking a war crime without witnesses. The Wiriyamu massacre was a ground-level crime, a crime of context, which took advantage of existing blind spots to manufacture further blindness. Today the ruins of Wiriyamu are sandwiched between the Benga coal mine, owned by International Coal Ventures Limited (ICVL), and a multibillion-dollar natural gas project managed by the French energy giant, Total. *The devil is in the details*, as the saying goes. When I think about Apollo 17's astronauts peering out into that cosmic darkness at a distant Earth where blood is still soaking into the soil of a small town, I cannot help but wonder: What epistemology, what image, could contain both realities? One would need an ultra-wide angle, a hemisphere where once there was a horizon.

Reorientations

Imagine an enormous lens with a depth of field receding into infinity. Miraculously, everything in view is sharp. Because everything is equally sharp, it is impossible to focus on any one thing. You can see to the horizon and beyond, much farther than the range of an ordinary human eye. You can see every star. Now, imagine adjusting this lens. As the focal length changes, so does your field of vision. The stars fall away. What once seemed stable and still begins to fracture into a mosaic of sensuous activity. Gradually, as the area of focus narrows, there are no longer wholes to be found, only holes. As dimensions ripple, you find your gaze stretched beyond its habituated scope. By the time we reach ground level, the macro has not ceased to exist, but the ecological and ethical ramifications of the Anthropocene certainly look different.

Verticality, as the airman's epistemology reveals, is a prerequisite for extraction. Because seeing from the sky allows us to inhabit the position of a corporation or a state, an overview is always liable to be an extractive view, if only because it privileges abstraction (Gomez-Barris 2017). Yet, as James C. Scott argues in his book *Seeing Like a State*, what truly defines this prescribed field of vision is everything that lies outside it – the details. From far enough away, it is possible to see that planting trees in straight rows is the most efficient

way to make a forest, without regard for ecological diversity. But missing from this well-organized commercial forest are “all those trees, bushes, and plants holding little or no potential for state revenue,” and “all those parts of trees, even revenue-bearing trees, which might have been useful to the population but whose value could not be converted into fiscal receipts” (Scott 2020: 12). In other words, Scott establishes the overview as a position from which nature becomes indistinguishable from natural resources, and humanity from manpower. A panoptic gaze confirms the mastery of man over his environment by limiting what “man,” “mastery,” and even “environment” might mean.

Rejecting the overview, the feminist decolonial scholar Macarena Gomez-Barris (2017) proposes an alternative vantage point. At ground level, she argues, it is possible to notice all that resists or exceeds possession by separation, classification, or measurement. For Gomez-Barris, one possible opening to this view can be found in the work of Columbian-American artist Carolina Caycedo. Caycedo’s 38-minute video piece, *YUMA, or the Land of Friends* (2014), subverts the imperial gaze that has historically been directed at the Magdalena (Yuma) River in southwestern-central Columbia, formerly a site of Spanish conquest and now the home of a vast hydroelectric power facility. The artist’s video begins with a close-up of a man’s hand on which an insect has alighted. “I don’t have a romantic idea about the past,” Caycedo’s interviewee says in Spanish, his face beyond the reach of the camera. The insect adjusts its delicate wings. “The land has not been used in the best way,” the man explains. “But that is no reason or logic to drown a territory.”

I want to quote Gomez-Barris’s (2017: 103) description of a scene from Caycedo’s film in full. In the sequence preceding it, the camera cuts from a standard landscape shot of the river to a closer study of a waterfall, and then:

[W]e are taken under the falls, into the beige then blue-gray space of moving water. We wait, holding our breath, acclimating, and we begin to see both clear spaces and those that are more opaque. We move with the ribbons of currents and the circling movements of oxygen below the water. We accept the fact that our sight is obstructed by the cloudy water, with pieces of leaves blocking the view, fleeting away, as small and then larger bubbles force us to try to find something familiar in the visual muck [...] The effect is remarkable: I felt as if I were seeing what a fish sees, perhaps itself an anthropocentric viewpoint. By dipping into the muck, Caycedo produced a fish-eye epistemology that changes how we might relate to Yuma as a sentient being, rather than as an extractible commodity. Coincidentally, the term “fish-eye” also refers to an extreme wide-angle lens shot in which the edges of the frame are distorted to a near circle, with the center of the image forming a pregnant bubble. Both meanings work for the kind of material and philosophical shift in perspective or “fish-eye episteme”: an underwater perspective that sees into the muck of what has usually been rendered in linear and transparent visualities.

Down in the river mud things start to look different. Rather than an airman’s epistemology, the viewer is shown a fish-eye episteme, an angle from which the world does not so much sprawl out sublimely as stretch and distort. There are no clear boundary lines to be drawn in the silt, a challenge to both figuration and imagination. Water and sediment combine as the camera’s gaze drifts on the current. This, too, is a valuable vantage point, and a place from which one might learn to see a world. As Gomez-Barris (2017: 100) points out, fish-eye epistemes tap into relationships “outside the range of the human eye and its capture,”

putting the lens of a camera to errant use that may sometimes be at odds with a viewer's preexisting desires or identifications. These uses defy the impulse to draw back from the world, or to abstract it. Without fanfare, they offer an opportunity to read the river from within.

It is always “from *here* that the world unfolds,” the philosopher Sara Ahmed writes in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006: 28). Ahmed means that it matters a great deal where we stand, because no object can truly be said to stand apart from perception. Because everything that exists is an expression of this relationship, at once more and less than representation, our bodies allow us to do surprising things when they are reoriented and/or disoriented. When this happens, Ahmed says, “Who knows where we might turn?” It is this turning without end that best sums up a generation of artists committed to interrogating the Anthropocene from the zero point of their own unstable position. Each pushes us to do more than see a damaged world anew. Instead, they probe what happens to the world if we shift the time, space, and instruments through which we see. Maybe other worlds are already here, if you only know where and how to look.

Seeing from the South

So, what exactly is the view of the Anthropocene from the South? There are as many answers to this question as there are kaleidoscopic angles on catastrophe. Outside urban centers in the United States and in Europe, the engines of history definitely feel different. For instance, it is revealingly difficult for those in former colonies to embrace dominant narratives about late capitalism or resurgent fascism that otherwise shape popular conceptions of global warming. As the philosophers Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2021: 121–2) have pointed out before me,

If fascism is back, as the common sense in Europe and the United States seems to insist, when did it go away? In the 50s with Apartheid and Jim Crow? In the 60s and 70s? – not for Latin Americans. In the 80s? – not for Indonesians or the Congolese. In the 90s? – the decade of intensified carceral state violence against black people in the United States?

When indeed. Blaming a burning planet on powerful climate change denialists might be cathartic, but it can also be a way to shield other violent fantasies – among them, the nation-state, modernity, and ethical consumption – from much-needed critical scrutiny. It is becoming more and more difficult to overlook how disparate corners of the globe do not meaningfully share the same epoch, let alone the same political or economic interests. To say our strong narratives about global warming do not stick to every surface is not to deny their descriptive utility. It is simply to recognize that a mega-category like “Anthropocene” demands new discourses, methodologies, and ways of seeing, attuned to the countless spatialities and temporalities at stake in planetary change (see, among others, Hecht 2018; da Silva 2018; Haraway 2019).

One of these ways of seeing is activated by *Seeds of Change* (1999–), an ongoing project by Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves. For Alves, planetary history must be imagined from the earth up, not the sky down. *Seeds* is a multi-sited, multi-decade investigation into ballast flora, which are plants grown from seeds transported in the hulls of ships over centuries of maritime trade. Ballast is an extractive product in its own right, scraped from the land

by slavers and merchants only to be dumped on distant shores when it is no longer useful (Casid 2019: 34). By focusing on what endures of the colonial past, not what is discarded or overcome, Alvez's seeds tell a new story that has been there all along: of resilience and invasion, of what it takes to put down roots and what it costs to thrive, of displacements felt by the landscape and memories secreted away in the soil. Combining photographs, drawings, and organic installations, the project manifests as a garden and its documentation, but it is so much more than that. *Seeds* dares us to keep multiple temporal and spatial scales in view, marking the entanglements of human behavior and non-human life. "[C]olonization is built into the very soil..." the artist (2017: np) explains, so "a process of decolonization must begin on the ground."

With feet planted in South Africa's soil, whether that be the hydrophobic sands of Cape Town or the red clay of Johannesburg, it is possible to see that progress has long danced with imminent collapse in the Global South. For much of the world, capitalism has always meant the wearing out of populations; slow deaths from famine, pestilence, and drought, and forever wars fought over scarce resources. The South has likewise been privy to the *longue durée* of climate disruption, adding new wounds to old scars. Arguably nothing illustrates this as effectively as one marker: so many Indigenous people were butchered during the colonization of the Americas that carbon dioxide levels in Earth's atmosphere measurably plummeted, ushering in a Little Ice Age. Now, hurricanes follow the paths of transatlantic slave ships from Africa to the East Coast of the United States, destroying everything in their path (Shepherd 2023: np). The hurt is coming home at last; the rot is returning to sender. But this long history of harm means that Indigenous peoples and communities in the Global South possess a singular angle on climate catastrophe, having lived its consequences for centuries. On its face, attending to the specificities of their situated resilience could seem like an exercise in substitution or inversion, wherein a form of tunnel vision is substituted for the overview, the details for the so-called big picture. Most apparent in evolutionary narratives that position Africa as the canary in the global coal mine, these logics of substitution lead us to conclusions that change little, because holding the local alone and containerized is never enough. By definition, the local exists in relation, as indeed does the very idea of "the South."

The artist Jean Claude Nsabimana, whose photograph *Shaba (Revisit)* (2022) concludes this essay (Figure 2.2), works to bring this relationality to the fore, conveying its full critical and ethical force. The images that make up his *Iyarara* series depict jungles of electronic waste, much of which is manufactured for a Western market. This detritus can contain anything from USB cables to automobile circuit boards, testifying to an increasing demand for electronic equipment of all kinds. As Nsabimana knows, Africa is on both ends of the e-waste supply chain. Deposits of the metallic ore coltan, a conductor that powers smartphones, can be found throughout the Democratic Republic of Congo, where mining has led to labor abuses, environmental destruction, and a steep decline in flora and fauna. So, too, are deposits of cobalt, an indispensable component of lithium batteries. With limited regulation and little government oversight, panning for these minerals is brutal work, undertaken by children as young as four years old (Aleem 2017: np). Yet, from the teeth of exploitation, Nsabimana pulls great beauty, fabricating an elaborate costume from discarded electrical wiring that makes him a creature at home in this ever-changing toxic environment. Like an Angel of History for the 21st century, his firm stance and upright posture communicate a vitality forged from the wreckage of capitalism: a future assembled from found parts. In one hand, the artist holds a staff topped with a blue-and-green globe. Its smallness is in



Figure 2.2 Jean Claude Nsabimana, *Shaba (Revisit)*. 2022. From Iyarara Project, Cape Town. Courtesy of the artist.

stark contrast with the mountains of waste matter around him, but the wires descending from the object imply an ability to plug it back into the circuit of his body, his environment, and even the soil somewhere beneath his feet. An electrician might call this practice *grounding*, the returning of excess power to the earth.

Perhaps the view from the South begins by taking seriously how the place from which we perceive transforms the grounds of sensibility itself. In some cases, this might mean exploring less anthropocentric ways of ordering reality, leaving behind the fatal confusion of nature/culture or subject/object divides for a fish-eye episteme. In others, it could mean accounting for different temporalities and spatial arrangements. Imagine lingering with ice-time, for example, those rhythms ruling the white continent at the bottom of *The Blue Marble*. Deep in the Antarctic ice are histories infinitely older than the human, and sedimented with them is the potential to include non-humans in our collective time-reckoning. Consider waste-time, the terrifying half-life of radiation and the threatening permanence of microplastics. A world clocked to waste time would be guided by an ethical imperative other than the new, with its drive to expand without limit into the cosmos. Think of the radical porosity of Sagan's star stuff but also of Gomez-Barris's mud stuff, that earthly matter that creeps into everything as the cosmos crept into us.

After relinquishing the overview and its tendency for abstraction, what else is there to see? Released from an imperial aesthetics of knowledge and the certainties it has promised, it becomes possible to perceive the world as a complex whole without order, in which many angles are valuable and must remain in view. Such multi-scalar perceptions – Thomas Lekan (2014) terms them “fractal poetics” – lay the imaginative foundations for jagged, ragged connections, uneasy attachments and sharedness, and generative dis/unities. In turn, they ask from us forms of creativity and care that are not immediately legible to the machinery of global capital, even as they aim to jam its gears. In the time of the Anthropocene, perhaps photography is one of those forms.

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3

DECOLONIZING DETRITUS

(Re)cycles of Extraction and (e-)Waste in the Photographs of Jean Claude Nsabimana

Svea Josephy, Jane Alexander and Jean Claude Nsabimana

Making a Killing

We are currently in a planetary crisis. The international liberal media (Bega 2021; Carrington 2016; Jeong and Kaplan 2023) document this daily, showing examples of rapid climate change, the possibility of mass extinction and environmental apocalypse, mismanagement, water scarcity, reduction of habitat, conservation failures, the detrimental impact of humanity on the environment, and the unfair distribution of “resources.” According to Donna Haraway (2015: 159):

It’s more than climate change; it’s also extraordinary burdens of toxic chemistry, mining, depletion of lakes and rivers under and above ground, ecosystem simplification, vast genocides of people and other critters, etc., etc., in systemically linked patterns that threaten major system collapse after major system collapse after major system collapse.

The term Anthropocene is a contested, “unofficial” term that has superseded the Holocene, the geologic epoch that spans the past 11,700 years (Demos 2017: 9), although Demos (after Haraway 2015) argues that “Capitalocene” might be a more accurate reflection of the current age.

In this chapter, “Anthropocene” is used in the context of Meg Samuelson’s “Thinking the Anthropocene South” (2020) to refer to an era determined by the impact of human activity on the Earth’s climate and ecosystems. Samuelson (2020: 537) writes that “grafting humanity into the geological time scale” has “shock value” that is “presumably meant to move ‘us’ into more sustainable ways of living. But it fails to register the markedly different ways in which the ‘we’ that it evokes are situated in relation to the imperiled planet and to one another.” The Anthropocene is often presented as something that affects the whole world, but it is not monolithic: it affects us differently in different contexts.

In positioning our thinking from the South, we “write back” to empire referencing *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. In taking this position, we point to frameworks, histories, and politics that inform the experience of the Anthropocene from Africa

and show us that not all contexts are the same or equal. This foregrounds what Samuelson calls “the blind spots which would obscure the totality that the Anthropocene is meant to represent” (2020: 538). We hope to disturb the dominance of voices from what economist Kate Raworth calls the “Northropocene” (2014). In relation to the representation of waste in photography, attention can be drawn to where the extraction occurs, where the waste is from, and where it ends up.

The recent history of Africa has been one of extraction—particularly in the Great Lakes region and including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, and Uganda (Kanyangara 2016). This extraction, initially enacted through colonial systems and later through the “development” of Africa through colonialism and the evolution of capitalism, has included the taking of human bodies, hard woods, minerals, rubber, and ivory, often in return for glass beads, rum, arms, and, more recently, “aid”. As Peša (2022: 389) writes, “Capitalism is intimately tied to colonialism, through its patterns of global expansion and domination. By extracting resources from an oftentimes colonial periphery, global capitalism benefited an imperial core.”

Photography has played its part in extraction, from the mining of silver in the analogue past and copper, aluminum, and cadmium in the digital present (Levin et al 2022, Jean 2020). The chemicals needed for manufacturing film and light-sensitive paper, the chemicals needed for processing film and paper, the branches of photography such as reprography, X-rays, infrared photography, and GIS (Geographic Information Systems), have all caused their share of damage in Africa and globally.

Equally, the digital era in photography has caused Africa harm—through the mining of metals that are fast conductors or essential in phone and laptop batteries (such as cobalt, coltan, and copper), harmful chemicals needed for inks and digital printing papers, wasteful consumption, and the dumping of obsolete devices in the form of e-waste (Frankel 2016).

A dominant theme in visualizing environmental catastrophe in contemporary photography has been the seam of waste that runs through it. Trash somehow illustrates the current environmental crisis in ways that are more visible and obvious than the melting ice caps or images of flooding, wildfire, and drought that are represented by conservative media as occurrences that happen irregularly and are positioned as outside of the norm. In recent years, contemporary photography has imaged rubbish dumps, microplastics, and great whorls of garbage in the Pacific Ocean and plastic in the grasslands or sedimented between rocks in a real demonstration of the Anthropocene. While rapid climate change can seem (ironically) to move slowly, air pollution levels come and go, and glaciers melt imperceptibly, rubbish calls humanity out and forces us to take notice. When it piles up in great heaps, it calls us to attention. That said, waste has long featured in documentary photographic representations of African poverty and abjection, in imagery of refugees and rag pickers trawling through trash to find a living—reusing, recycling, and repurposing someone else’s discarded objects.

A number of artists and photographers in Africa have used waste materials to highlight issues in relation to the environment, the legacy of colonialism, and the neocolonial landscape of Africa. As an artist working in Africa, the photographer Jean Claude Nsabimana has been influenced by artists such as Fabrice Monteiro (Senegal/Belgium), El Anatsui (Ghana/Nigeria), Maurice Mbikayi (DRC), Francois Knoetze (South Africa), The Nest Collective (Kenya), Moffat Takadiwa (Zimbabwe), Falonne Mambu (DRC), and Pieter Hugo (South Africa).

Pieter Hugo's *Permanent Error* (2011) documents the subject of trash, specifically e-waste. Rubbish, often too expensive or environmentally detrimental to be recycled in the "developed" world, is often "recycled" in Africa. Hugo's exhibition and photobook show local people on the Agbogbloshie waste dump in Accra, Ghana, burning e-waste (and plastic housings) to separate and extract the expensive and precious metal contained within and sell them back into the systems of manufacture. They highlight the "developed" world's practice of "donating" e-waste to Africa, causing incalculable human and environmental damage. Images of this burning, carcinogenic, post-apocalyptic landscape, where human beings scratch for a living on a dump, are a severe indictment of the (re)cycles of electronic goods. Jacob Badcock (2022: 5) describes "waste colonialism" as the practice that "sees developed nations indiscriminately dump their e-waste in developing nations for profit. Photography reveals the 'dirty little secret' of the electronics industry." Badcock is critical of current environmentalist approaches and photographers, including Hugo, Nyaba Leon Ouedraogo (2008), Muntaka Chasant (2019), and Edward Burzynsky (2017), whom he believes fail to understand the complexity of the situation and exaggerate certain aspects, such as the scale of Agbogbloshie, for dramatic effect.

Jean Claude Nsabimana makes use of dramatic effect and theatricality in his work about cycles of waste. However, what distinguishes his work from Hugo's is that he has personally experienced displacement caused by the forces and conflict connected to extraction near his homeland, and he has lived on the periphery of society as a refugee. In his most recent work, his position is not only of advocacy, but of a personal narrative told through the medium of photography, in which the e-waste cycle is implicated.

Wasting Away

Jean Claude Nsabimana currently lives in South Africa, but he was born in Burundi, central Africa, in 1984. His artwork focuses on the environmental and political impact of waste on the African continent. While his environmental interests are not unique in Africa or in contemporary art, his work speaks to a broader interest in photography in the age of the Anthropocene. His work raises questions around the following topics: environmental and political awareness around issues of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene from a southern perspective; tracing some of these issues to a colonial past, which is to some extent continuous with a neocolonial and neoliberal present; the use of materiality and performance in his photographs and sculptural installations; and connecting environmental, political, and historical issues back to a personal narrative.

Nsabimana has produced two major environmental projects. The first, *Detritus Heroes* (2019), deals with plastic pollution from an African perspective by depicting fictional anti-pollution superhero warriors against the backdrop of illegal dumping sites. The second, *Iyarara: Loss and Found* (2022, Figure 3.1), is a response to ongoing conflict in Africa and its relationship to valuable mineral resources in the Great Lakes region from the position of his lived experience of displacement by the Rwandan genocide of 1994. In *Iyarara: Loss and Found*, he addresses the exploitative mining practices and associated conflicts inherent in the export of minerals such as coltan for the manufacture of electronic and digital devices. In response to the cycle of supply and return of e-waste from economically developed countries to often illegal, uncontrolled, environmentally threatening dump sites and landfills in Africa, he uses e-waste as the primary material of his sculpted artworks, installations, and photography to comment on the impact on human life and the environment



Figure 3.1 Jean Claude Nsabimana, *Ifoto y'umuryango (The Family Portrait)*, 2022. Iyarara Project, Cape Town. Courtesy of the artist.

that are a consequence of extraction. Not only does e-waste landfill contaminate the environment, but the sites he refers to are informally managed by people in dire financial need who—with significant threat to human, animal, and plant life—burn e-waste to retrieve metals of economic value, such as gold, silver, copper, nickel, and palladium. Nsabimana (2022: 16) writes:

As a result of the high levels of unemployment and high demand for these minerals, the poor people in these communities burn and extract the coltan and copper so it can be resold to economically empowered countries to manufacture more electrical and electronic equipment. Electronic devices are burned as part of this informal e-waste recycling, releasing toxins very harmful to human health and the environment.

Iyarara: Loss and Found foregrounds the invisible points on the map that connect contemporary cycles of trade to historical cycles of extraction. Nsabimana (2022: 7) suggests:

The current cycle of trade and waste and the colonial cycle of trade have an analogical relationship. In the triangular trade route of the 17th century, slaves were extracted from Africa and taken to America to produce sugar and cotton, which were taken to Europe to be turned into rum and textiles and then sold back to Africa to buy more slaves, allowing colonial powers to amass ever-increasing wealth.

Looking to the present, mirrored triangular routes exist in which the rare earth minerals extracted in central Africa are sold to Asia, Europe, and North America for manufacture into electronic goods. They are later returned to Africa as dumped or “donated” goods, where they have a huge environmental impact (Vidal 2013).

In *A Place Called Away*, environmental activist Jim Puckett (2011) reminds the reader that when something is thrown away it seems to disappear from our lives for good—out of sight, out of mind. But as Puckett asserts, “away” is, in fact, a place—where people, animals, and the environment bear the consequence. And “away” is often in Africa. Central to Nsabimana’s project are questions of where the materials for e-waste come from, what conflicts are sponsored by their extraction, where the goods are manufactured and used, why they are returned to Africa at the end of their useful life cycle, and what the cost of this is to Africa. According to Nsabimana, “valuable minerals such as coltan, cobalt, gold, diamonds, and copper have fuelled African armed conflict. This is not a new phenomenon, with origins in the colonial mining of minerals and other resources”. He writes (2022: 6):

While African nations are now considered independent, the underlying extraction and exploitation persists, notably in the Great Lakes region. In *The Curse of Coltan*, Noury (2010) posits that the trade of coltan and other minerals (including gold, cassiterite and diamonds) has destabilised eastern Congo and caused over five million deaths since 1996.

Patrick Kanyangara (2016) proposes that the drivers of these conflicts are multi-factorial and complex, with ethnic divisions, inequitable access to land and natural resources, unfair access to political power, and a rapid increase in small, armed groups being among the causes of the conflicts in the Great Lakes region, all with their roots in colonial and Cold War divisions. Foreign-owned corporations and companies from China, South Africa, and Switzerland (Berman et al. 2017) are shown to have sponsored conflict to destabilize the region and make extraction simpler or cheaper.

As a child, Nsabimana survived the Rwanda/Burundi genocide of 1994 and became a refugee, moving from Burundi through Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and Mozambique to finally settle in South Africa. He uses found objects, largely e-waste, to speak to object stories of “extraction, movement, manufacture, distribution, use and how they were eventually discarded. They bear the traces of their use” (Nsabimana 2022: 8). Of his own experience of displacement, he writes (Nsabimana 2022: 8):

My life, while once privileged, changed irrevocably in 1994. In my time as a refugee in Kenya and Tanzania I learned about survival and resourcefulness. While these are lessons I would much rather not have learned, they enable me to see materials in a new light and to be imaginative, creative and innovative with them. When I come across a new material, I can immediately imagine it being used in new and unexpected contexts.

Nsabimana is interested in the extraction of materials from the region of his birth to their integration into the conduits of information and communication they are sourced for. The residue he collects is from constantly evolving commodities of desire, efficiency, and status—symbols of contemporaneity, made obsolete by technological and economic advancement at whatever cost to those engaged in the sourcing, construction, and disposal of their components.

These materials carry the memory of their origin, purpose, and trajectory—as manufactured commodities, to waste, through to their final role as artworks, reimagined and repurposed in the aftermath of what is generally considered progress, with its concomitant economic benefits, costs, and casualties.

Harbingers and Heroes

Photography is an important part of Nsabimana’s creative production and is often the final medium of presentation for his multimedia artworks. His rich color, locations, models, and—most importantly—wearable sculptures created from e-waste work together as embodied harbingers of the ecological apocalypse that is underway. For his photographs, he creates elaborate sculpted garments out of cables, electronic components, keyboards, helmets, rubber, screens, virtual reality headsets, and a range of other found materials. He repurposes these objects in the form of what he sees as “heroic” figures from his lived experience and activates them to highlight political, social, and environmental concerns. This foregrounds the legacies of extraction that displaced him, his family, and other people of the Great Lakes region, particularly in DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi through the sponsored conflicts that benefit capital-controlled former colonial powers, neocolonial powers, and big corporations.

Figures often stand on or against massive piles of e-waste in Nsabimana’s images, foregrounding Anthropocene notions of waste, but also the built-in obsolescence, aesthetic upgrades, operating systems that cannot be updated, and other wasteful products of the Capitalocene. Achille Mbembe and Corcoran (2022: 11) propose that “Computing devices, which now feature in the daily experience of millions of human beings, are not only forms of surveillance and capture. They advent a new form of power. Let us call it mutant power.” Nsabimana’s spilled, uncontained electronic forms are both literally monstrous as technological mutants and also hold authority in their “mutant power”.

Wire Entanglement

In Nsabimana’s photographs, mutant electronic android figures emerge from piles of trash, at once part of and struggling to walk through the detritus in which they are entangled. This entanglement reads on multiple levels, but here we refer to Sarah Nuttal’s (2009: 1) sense of the term:

Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined; involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it is resisted, or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness.

There is an entanglement in Nsabimana’s work between colonialism, neo-colonialism, and the Capitalocene; between colonialism, liberation, neocolonialism, and economic re-enslavement; between the grand narratives of African history and his own intimate and personal narratives. The work foregrounds how grand narratives brush up against the lives of ordinary people and families.

In *Ifoto y’umuryango* from the *Iyarara: Loss and Found* series (Figure 3.1), Nsabimana presents a family portrait: his father, sister, brother, and a younger version of himself. The family in the portrait all wear garments fabricated from cables that are part of an entangled



Figure 3.2 Jean Claude Nsabimana, *Nshuti Yanjye (My Dear Friend) Shaba & Pox*, 2022. Iyarara Project, Cape Town. Courtesy of the artist.

landscape of obsolete screens, keyboards, cameras, televisions, printers, projectors, and studio lights. The cables act not only as patterned cloth in the clothing but as the undergrowth, vines, and branches of the forests through which the family fled in 1994. Nsabimana explains that “It also speaks to the entanglement that underlay the politics, economics and environmental issues of the Rwandan genocide in 1994.” Here his father’s headpiece is made of a crash helmet, a camera, and computer parts, with the camera attached to a flash unit. Nsabimana (2022: 60) elaborates:

As a family leader and protector, my father holds a sceptre and my hand, while my sister and my brother carry luggage as we flee through the jungle in the middle of the night. Because we were being followed, we could not use a continuous light source such as a torch to navigate the jungle, so my father improvised, using a camera flash to light the way for a split second.

Nsabimana’s work speaks directly to the environment, but also specifically to photography through his use of flash units, studio lighting, digital printers, enlarger parts, and other photographic detritus, implicating photography as a contributor to the problem, not a savior. Similarly, the monitors in the piles of trash play found media footage of the 1994 genocide.

The flash unit that lights the way is embedded in a motorbike crash helmet, an object Nsabimana (2022: 48) uses in several photographs: “Crash helmets are protective, they protect the head, the centre of identity. A few crash helmets I use have been through an accident and are broken. They carry with them some sort of trauma from the previous users.” He is concerned with the past lives of the objects and waste he uses, noting: “Working with these objects, I am exposed to their materiality, their own sense of time, their use and meaning, past and present narratives and layers of interbeing and interconnections” (Nsabimana 2022: 47).

He continues:

Communication plays an integral role in life to keep people and places connected to one another. The cables once transmitted information or power, pulses associated with communication, connections and exchange between people and places. This is appropriate given the disruption of contact and communication that is a consequence of the displacement and loss of loved ones that is a result of genocide and war. Other objects utilised in my work also refer to communication, reception and warning – aerials and siren speakers. Computer motherboards act as a point of connection and communication between computer components, people, and places.

(Nsabimana 2022: 47).

Photography plays a key role in this cycle of communication. There is evidence of this in the defunct photographic devices that form part of these images. But photography is also an effective medium for the transmission of Nsabimana’s projects. This family portrait connects to other works in the series, some of which were shot in the darkened photographic studio and others set in waste dumps, container ports, and ports of human entry, such as Customs House in Cape Town, where he himself was “processed” as a refugee.

The Lookout, Mbenga shows a figure sitting on a beach in front of the sea, on a mat woven from electrical cables. The mat in this image refers to the *umusambi*, a mat made from *imigwegwe* (*Agave sisalana*) and specific to his cultural heritage. Nsabimana says that these woven mats are being replaced by plastic mats imported from China. In *The Lookout, Mbenga*, the figure looks over the ocean to see what will arrive or be taken next. Nsabimana (2022: 55) explains that:

Burundi and Rwanda are landlocked countries far from the sea, but minerals, and plastic commodities arrive. Guns and machetes also arrive via the sea, causing havoc in people’s lives. *Mbenga* sits on the beach on his plasticised *umusambi* and wonders about what has been lost through slavery, colonialism, globalisation, and war.

Nsabimana’s work conveys a form of message-system through performance, found materials such as e-waste, and photography. He uses the power of photography to bring environmental issues into visibility. Photography allows Nsabimana to build his personal narrative into a larger one about e-waste. Through his work, he raises awareness and foregrounds the consequences to Africa of excessive consumption. He highlights past grand and personal narratives, the current ecological catastrophe, and the complex networks of exploitative mining, conflict, displacement, and e-waste that underlie these in Africa. His aim is not simply to tell us that dumping e-waste in Africa is bad. His message is made more compelling

by weaving his own stories of being witness to conflict, of his escape, and of being a refugee as a result of extraction. In completing the circuit of the (re)cycles of electronic goods, he foregrounds their effects on the people of the South.

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4

THE POLITICS OF WATER

Social Justice and Photography in the Anthropocene in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Annabelle Wienand and Thobani K

Introduction

Crises are not easily understood in real time. The Anthropocene is defined not simply as a period in which humanity has shaped the Earth's biosphere but is an environmental tipping point in which human activity threatens to destroy life on the planet (Lewis & Maslin 2015). Photography has contributed to raising awareness by fulfilling its long-standing evidentiary role and as a call to action. Images of polar bears afloat on blocks of ice, sea-birds killed by ingested plastic, and other ecological disasters have served as evidence of the negative impact of humans on the planet. Photographic series such as Gideon Mendel's ongoing investigations in *Drowning World* and *Burning World* have provided a global perspective on flooding and wildfires attributed to climate change. Photographs of the impact of the Anthropocene on the Global South also reveal that the challenges of climate change and pollution often further deepen existing inequality. Many have argued that it is not simply humanity at large but capitalism in particular that is responsible for the current crisis (Moore 2016).

This chapter engages with the impact of the Anthropocene through the lens of the Global South and aims to demonstrate the intersections between the environmental crisis and social and political injustice in the South African context. To put it baldly, there is no environmental politics in South Africa without social politics. Environmental justice and social justice must be understood in tandem to ensure that in foregrounding environmental crises we do not suppress the very real social crises.

Rapid climate change is evident in both drought and increased flooding. The 2022 floods in the KwaZulu-Natal province resulted in the declaration of a State of Disaster and came after significant social unrest and widespread rioting and looting in July 2021. During the unrest hundreds of shops, factories, and businesses were destroyed, and thousands of people lost their jobs as a consequence. With more than 300 people killed, it was the worst violence experienced by the country since 1994 (Harding 2022). This context underscores the need to be cognizant that challenges related to climate change in South Africa are faced alongside extreme social stress that includes widespread poverty, unemployment, and violence.



Figure 4.1 Thobani K, *Child Labour*, Eskebheni, Inanda, Durban, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Thobani Khumalo, professionally known as Thobani K, addresses the politics of water provision in the community of Eskebheni in KwaZulu-Natal. By drawing on his lived experience, Thobani K uses two different approaches to respond to the crisis of inadequate water supply in his community. One approach follows a traditional photojournalistic and documentary approach to photography, while the other explores more experimental image-making and the potential of the visual language of fashion editorial to tell the story.

With images such as *Child Labour* (Figure 4.1), Thobani K is intent on revealing the lived experience of a poor, peri-urban community in South Africa who live without piped water and sanitation. Building on these images, this chapter contends that the water crisis in Eskebheni is a result of neoliberal systems that manage and deliver water, and not simply the result of a shortage of water. In short, the capitalist-driven management and delivery of water resources means that poor communities are not supplied water because these areas are not profitable or cannot fully pay for services.

Photographic Legacies in the South African Context

When considered in the South African context, photography stands at the nexus of the history of colonialism and apartheid (Garb 2011; Geary 1991, 2003; Godby 2001, 2010; Haney 2010; Thomas 2021). Notably, the era of anti-apartheid struggle photography

and the employment of the camera as a tool to bear witness and bring political change shaped understandings of what photography can hope to achieve, as well as of its limitations (Badsha 1986; Enwezor & Bester 2013; Newbury 2009; Odendaal 1989). Interest in South African photography increased at international art exhibitions in the post-apartheid moment (Enwezor 2006; Garb 2011). Contemporary photographers such as Thobani K are aware of these shifts but also negotiate their practice in relation to the global image economy and new technologies including social media.

In her curatorial essay to accompany the exhibition *Figures and Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography*, Tamar Garb (2011) draws attention to the intersection between the photographic histories specific to South Africa and contemporary practices. She argues that:

These filters of figuration—ethnography, documentary and portraiture—continue to haunt contemporary practices. No ambitious contemporary figural photographer in South Africa works without taking cognisance of one or other of their legacies, whether to honor, refute or mimic them ... To depict people in this place is to participate in this pictorial history—in fact it may even be a way of writing that history—so that the fictions and fantasies of the present ... are always in dialogue with the residues of these traditions.

(Garb 2011: 12)

This remains valid a decade later in the context of Thobani K and both his documentary series and fashion-inspired work. I am particularly interested in the framing of photography as a medium that produces history. Much of what we know of the past we know through photographs and the vivid ways in which images are able to depict the moment. This is true of documentary images, which provide a record of events, such as *Child Labour*. But it is equally true of approaches that engage with more constructed and performative visual languages seen in *Bleaching Time* (Figure 4.2). In the work of Thobani K, the narrative underpinning his fashion images is factual and addresses a socio-political reality.

It may be useful to consider new ways in which photographers are blurring the lines between discrete categories. Soutter (2018:17) writes that “In our current era of eclecticism, many photographers now employ hybrid forms of recognizable genres, working against the grain of their original purpose and meaning.” Soutter describes the relationship between photographer and viewer in relation to the use of genres. Like Garb, she links genres to history:

Artists have returned to familiar genres again and again, both to satisfy the expectations of viewers and also to smash them. In either case, the very notion of genre implies a relationship of complicity between the viewer and artist or reader and writer. Genres are also a way of entering into dialogue with history: the artist does not make them up but borrows them from the prevailing culture and from the history of their art form. Combining two or more genres into a hybrid form is an immediate way to introduce complexity to the work, inviting the viewer to connect the work to other ideas in the culture.

(Soutter 2018: 18)



Figure 4.2 Thobani K, *Bleaching Time*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Of particular interest in the context of Thobani K's work is how different modes of image-making encourage the viewer to make connections to other ideas and diverse influences in visual culture. It has become a cliché to state that we live in a world saturated with images, but it is worth considering the relationship between images and information. According to Sonneson (1999: 2), "Our society of information is a society of pictures. But it is probable that this combination of two clichés becomes more illuminating if we invert it: the society of pictures is for the first time in history, a society of information." Mitchell (2002: 170) is similarly of a mind that "we do not live in a uniquely visual era."

The Historical Context of Inanda Dam and Water Politics

Inanda Dam is an artificial dam constructed in 1986, during apartheid, to provide water to the city of Pietermaritzburg, the capital city of KwaZulu-Natal. The areas of KwaNgcolosi, Emaphetheni, and EmaQadindi (Eskebheni) were flooded for the dam, and residents were forcibly removed and relocated (Walsh-Vorster 2021). Thobani K's family was among those who were removed and suffered serious financial loss. Thobani K's grandmother, Nomusa Khumalo, owned a successful trading store and offered a paddleboat service to assist people across the river. The Umngeni Drift Store became known as "Eskebheni," which translates as "at the boat" (Walsh-Vorster 2021). This place name affirms the impor-

tance of the boat service and is still used by residents despite their relocation to a different piece of land.

Through personal interviews with the photographer, I learned that his family's story of dispossession extends beyond a loss of land and the uprooting of a community. Thobani K described his desire to uncover the history of the removals and his conversations with elders in the community as "ghost work." By seeking to understand the realities of these rural communities before the dam was built, he also uncovered its ongoing impact on the people who were displaced. It is not uncommon for him to be told about dreams in which people who have since passed on appear to the living. The continued appearance of previous generations in the dreams of the living is understood by residents of Eskebheni as a clear indication that the spirits of the deceased are not at peace. These dreams emphasize community concerns that the gravesites in their original settlement were disturbed and moved to an undisclosed location (Khumalo 2023). Ancestors form an integral part of traditional Zulu cosmology and are regarded as intermediaries between the living and spirit world, so moving human remains has given rise to ongoing concerns about the bonds between the ancestors and their living descendants. Even Christianized Zulu people still often believe that ancestors play a role in social well-being and individual physical health (Ashforth 2005; Ngubane 1977). The observance of burial rites is vital to ensuring peace with ancestral powers.

During the forced removals, residents were moved in cattle trucks with their household possessions and livestock. This dehumanizing process reveals a complete disregard for the residents by the apartheid state. Thobani K explained that the state supplied corrugated iron shacks to the relocated communities and that his mother gave birth to him in one before his family constructed a house of their own (Khumalo 2022). The area they were moved to had no sanitary or water services, and the inhabitants had to walk to the dam to collect water for their daily needs. The water in this dam was the same water piped to nearby Pietermaritzburg. In short, a black community was dispossessed of their land to build a dam that served a white town. This took place in the final years of apartheid's officially segregated provision of services.

The Eskebheni community has no piped water to this day, as the current government delivers water via tankers. Residents queue, often hundreds of meters from their homes, to fill up pots, basins, buckets, and the like. Thobani K says that the community falls outside of the "sanitary belt," the sanitation service delivery extending from the city of Durban (Khumalo, 2022). The current government's failure to provide sanitation and water to peri-urban communities is the continuation of an unequal service delivery system that is referred to as "water apartheid" by scholars and the press (Jegede & Shikwambane 2021; Martel & Mama 2022; Bond 2020).

The provision of water and sanitation services has a complex and contested history in South Africa. Like many postcolonial cities in the Global South, South African urban infrastructure was built in the colonial era to service a settler population (Lawhon et al. 2022). South Africa's first democratically elected government promised to provide housing and services to all, with service provision framed as redress. Section 27 of the South African Constitution even states that access to sufficient water is a human right.

This is the context that frames Thobani K's practice and creative decisions. His decision to document the trucked delivery of water by tankers serves a more didactic and evidentiary purpose, while the fashion-styled images reference a visual language more aligned with glamour than social justice. Thobani K's testing of the limits of narrative and blur-

ring fact and fantasy speaks to the hybrid aesthetics of contemporary photography, and as Soutter contends, the mixing of genres brings immediate complexity to the image (Soutter 2018:18). It also shows how Thobani K has wrestled with his purpose as a photographer and the at-times competing demands of activism and creative vision.

Water Apartheid: A Documentary Approach

Thobani K's extended photo essay documenting the delivery of water to his community by water tankers was produced over a two-year period, as the photographer questioned the kinds of photographs he wanted to produce. At the time, he was inspired by the work of Tim Walker, Steven Klein, Nick Knight, and other conceptually inclined fashion photographers. He was interested in exploring fashion photography that reflected not only his creative sensibilities but his lived reality. In particular, he noticed the impact of the erratic and inefficient delivery of water on his life and the lives of his neighbors.

A parallel inspiration came from watching a documentary about hip-hop artist Nipsey Hussle opening a store in his own neighborhood, Crenshaw, and the call to "start at home." Thobani K accordingly turned his lens homewards to document those closest to him (Khumalo 2023). He had also earlier seen a series of posts on Instagram by photographer Niamh Walsh-Vorster featuring township tuckshops, causing him to question why he was not making photographs of this environment when someone from outside of the township context clearly saw value in its documentation. This was the start of the series and saw the photographer visit his grandfather and take photographs of him. On evaluating his images, he realized that there was not only value in his subject matter but also visual impact in documenting his immediate surroundings.

Following his initial photoshoot, he decided to document water delivery. This decision was fueled by anger at the injustice of the service-delivery failure and by a desire to instigate change in how things were done (Khumalo 2022). Thobani K said, "I have two intentions. I feel obligated to tell the story of my family. I like people telling their own stories...[South African] black communities need to tell their stories...It is easier to find stuff on Malcolm X than South African political leaders" (Khumalo 2022). He situates his practice firmly within a desire to contribute to knowledge production about his own surroundings. One of his lecturers, Associate Professor Mvuselelo Ngcoya, challenged his students to look at their surroundings and intellectualize their lived experience to find gaps in the existing research. This provocation also relates to the idea of photographic practices "writing that history" (Garb 2011: 12).

The photographer also framed his practice in activist terms:

Inanda [the greater area surrounding Eskebheni] is neglected. I want to stir the status quo. How do you raise your voice or get heard? I don't like politics or politicians, but sometimes I have these crazy thoughts. I want to speak to engineers and get from them the cost of piped water in Inanda. I want evidence. I want to make people look. There are people living like this. How can this be? I want to expose the injustices. I want to create a disturbance.

(Khumalo 2022)

Like many classic documentary and photojournalistic projects, the photo essay aims to reveal the reality of people who are overlooked. The images show tankers delivering water and people queuing at the roadside to collect it in containers for their cooking and cleaning.

This series documents residents queuing and scrambling to fill containers before the water tanker moves on. In *Child Labour* (Figure 4.1), several women and children are gathered around the water tanker. Two of the women have repurposed 25-liter plastic paint buckets with which to collect and transport water. Another woman stands next to a large, plastic oil drum. A young boy holds up a thick water hose so that someone outside of the frame can fill a container. In another image, two children struggle to carry a baby bath filled with water back to their home. As the local area is hilly and studded with multiple homesteads, people leave the large drums at the roadside or fill numerous small containers that must be carried up or down the slope.

Thobani K also made sound recordings of the process, so his archive offers a multisensory record, and given the chance he intends to exhibit the images as an immersive experience. While photographing, he became interested in how the sounds of people collecting water revealed their panic to secure the limited supply. As a result of his commitment to documenting the realities of the situation, he was invited to present his images to academics and local government as part of an online seminar hosted by the Water Institute of Southern Africa (wisa.org.za). Here he realized that the political will to change is compromised by other factors, including the awarding of tenders to the companies that deliver the water (Khumalo 2022). The larger context of state corruption and the outsourcing of government services undermines citizens' ability to hold local government accountable. Despite these challenges, Thobani K pursues his inquiry and continues to lobby local authorities, using his images to raise awareness about the trucked water in his area.

While Thobani K initiated the project on his own accord with no prospect of payment, he later received support from the Contemporary Archive Project (CAP), founded by Niamh Walsh-Vorster and Paulo Menezes in 2020. Since then he has exhibited his work at Msinsi, Inanda Dam, as part of the *[Re]present* exhibition where CAP members showed work in outdoor, public pop-up exhibitions. CAP is an experimental collective of photographers in KwaZulu-Natal that has a strong commitment to traditional documentary photography, as well as to research and new media. They “embrace image making as a conscientized and ethical practice” and firmly support the notion that images are made and not taken. This ethos underscores the relationship between photographer and subject and is shaped by the founders, who were mentored by veteran anti-apartheid photographer Peter McKenzie. The Contemporary Archive Project is a clear descendant of the history of documentary photography in South Africa and its emphasis on reporting political and social justice in the belief that photography can bring about social and political change.

Despite its fêted history in South Africa, the current appetite for documentary photography is sporadic and constrained by the decline in print media and the outlets that traditionally published documentary images. The genre sits somewhat uncomfortably between the social realism of photojournalism and the spectacle of the fine art market. With South Africa's transition to democracy came a simultaneous opening of its creative borders. Local and international commercial galleries celebrated the likes of veteran documentary photographers David Goldblatt and Santu Mofokeng, while also developing a market for a younger generation, who turned their lenses on the continent more broadly. Large international exhibitions such as *Snap Judgements: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, curated by Okwui Enwezor (2006), and *Figures and Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography*, curated by Tamar Garb (2011), cemented the art careers of several South African photographers and blurred the lines between the aesthetics of spectacle and the older philosophy of bearing witness to social and political injustice.

The growth in mobile phone technology, rise of citizen journalism, and exponential reach of social media have further affected documentary photography practices. The role of photography has shifted significantly from the 1980s to the present but, as evidenced by Thobani K's photographs reaching local government and academics, it still has an undeniable narrative and reportage function. While the ethical imperative of these projects is clear, financial support is precarious. If we consider the historical role of, for example, the Guggenheim and Getty grants that funded famous documentary projects, this may always have been the case. The Contemporary Archive Project is supported by Art for Humanity, the South African National Arts Council, and Substance Point, and its values are underpinned by critical thinking and the production of new work. This demonstrates the important role that grants play in enabling projects of this nature.

Experiments with Fashion Narratives: An Alternative Approach

Whilst still documenting water delivery in Eskebheni, Thobani K also produced a number of independent photographic series using the visual language of fashion photography. This section considers how these images reveal an alternative aspect of Thobani K's practice that has broader implications for how young artists use photography in their creative work and how they view the medium.

In interviews, Thobani K provided some important insights into his thinking about aesthetics and beauty, saying:

I want to reach influential spaces ... audiences in power ... be that in politics, institutions or educational spaces. Visual language can draw attention to topics that may be discussed in communities, in parliament, or in the news. I want it to be beautiful, so people want to know more.

(Khumalo 2022)

The beauty and visual intrigue of the fashion series exploring the politics of water provision in the Umngeni area do indeed draw in the viewer. In a black-and-white series entitled *Storage Size: The Scramble for Water*, a female model stands behind a plastic drum used to collect water. As if to protect the contents, the drum is covered with an item of clothing. The large body of water in the background is the Inanda Dam. The drums are too heavy to move when full, so they remain in place and people come to collect water from them in smaller buckets. The most striking aspect of the model's outfit is a large veil, which is draped over a large sun hat. The veil-like fabric covering the woman is typically used to keep flies off food in the domestic context and is also used by women to cover the storage drums. She stands with her legs apart, her boots appearing on either side of the drum. A white skirt and corset over a knitted jersey completes the look. On the surface, the image appears like a fashion editorial.

The photographer describes his monochrome work as "beautiful death" and his saturated color work as representing life. The veil worn by the model evokes a reference to grieving and speaks to the dam in the background, which killed the livelihoods of those who were relocated. The themes of death and grieving also reference the displaced graves of the removed communities and the unknown location of the buried remains. In another image from the series, a model stands in a seemingly remote mountainous area, her face hidden by a broad-brimmed hat (Figure 4.3). Her hands are tucked into a pale trench coat and a large water drum stands at her side. A clear plastic bag of water hangs from her front



Figure 4.3 Thobani K, *Storage Size*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

pocket. The thinness of the plastic bag, typically used when buying loose vegetables in a store, suggests that the water it contains is not secure. These bags are easy to puncture and tear, emphasizing the fragility of the water supply and hinting at the absurdity of water that is not piped but is trucked in and then collected in smaller containers.

A more theatrical approach is evident in the color series *Bleaching Water* (2023), in which the photographer chose the color blue to symbolize water. One image, *Bleaching Time* (Figure 4.2), produced in collaboration with the musical duo Pattern Nation, is a full-length portrait of a standing woman in a long blue and green dress, her arms crossed. She holds a spoon in one hand and a plastic container of household bleach in the other. The graphic patterns of the dress' fabric are similar to the painted designs on the 20-liter water container at her feet. The container is painted in shades of blue with white and black, depicting water drops and wave motifs. Two large clocks, ten minutes apart, are mounted on a wall behind the woman. There had been a cholera outbreak in the community, making the water in the dam not safe to drink. A non-government organization had come to the area and promoted the use of one tablespoon of bleach in every 25-liter container of water to kill harmful bacteria. People were told to leave the water for a minimum of ten minutes before drinking.

The juxtaposition of social realities with the language of fashion editorial is jarring and thought-provoking. The dense narrative implicit in the images is intriguing and demonstrates

the ability of less didactic images to capture the attention. While trying to decode the semiotics of the different elements in the images, the viewer must actively seek out the narrative and spend time with the image. Soutter (2018:17) suggests that “Contemporary art discourse thrives on works which are to some extent illogical, uncertain and riddled with elements of contradiction, fiction and fantasy.” In a media-saturated climate with competing demands, images that address the challenges of the Anthropocene must consider how to capture viewer attention. The visual appeal and ambiguity of these theatrical images reveal the potential of alternative visual approaches to comment on social injustice by drawing the viewer in.

Conclusion

The discussion of two different strategies responding to the crisis of water provision to the Eskebhenzi community in KwaZulu-Natal has highlighted the potential for new photographic approaches to represent not only the challenges of the just distribution of water resources, but also the impact of the Anthropocene more generally. Work produced in the language of fashion was not produced as a documentary project, but has as its central theme water apartheid and the lived realities of people living in areas serviced by water trucks. The use of a fashion aesthetic engages audiences who otherwise would not be drawn to documentary-style images or social justice issues. The continued focus on African and South African contemporary art, diminishing commercial appetite and funding opportunities for documentary images, and the collapse of print media (where such stories were generally published) may require new strategies to raise awareness of social inequality.

Berger (1972) long ago noted the disturbing effect of viewing images of human tragedy alongside images of western advertising. Where in the past this occurred in print media, it can now be experienced when scrolling through Instagram or consuming other media online. Our simultaneous exposure to commercial images and photographs of natural and human-made disasters across the world has already accustomed us to consuming images with vastly different content and intention. In an image-saturated world, photographers need to consider strategies that capture attention. Perhaps the blending of social justice and the language of fashion photography can offer an alternative visual language with which to engage the challenges of the Anthropocene.

Thobani K’s exploration of different strategies to expose the impact of water apartheid on the Eskebhenzi community in KwaZulu-Natal highlights the challenges of raising the profile of such stories in a world already saturated with commercial images linked to commodities and news reporting. Despite these very real struggles, this chapter is ultimately a celebration of photographic projects that wrestle with these challenges. As noted at the start, crises are rarely understood by the society in which they unfold; by attempting to represent the challenges of water shortages and the right to water provision, these images are evidence of the enduring role of photography as a mode of probing the conflicts of our time.

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5

ANTARCTICA, ICE, AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Jean Brundrit

The Seventh Continent

For most of human existence, Antarctica has been an unknown continent, protected from human interference by its geographic remoteness. Buffered by a zone of hostile conditions for seafarers, it remained unvisited. It is protected by its distance from habitable lands and by treacherous conditions—freezing temperatures, continuous winter darkness, a seasonal blockade of impassable sea ice, severe weather, and rough seas. While Antarctica has been devoid of humans, its ecosystem has supported an abundance of diverse life adapted to polar environments. Indeed, the Southern Ocean teems with creatures and oxygen-producing phytoplankton, making the equatorial seas comparatively desolate (Fretwell 2020: 102).

The continent plays a vital role in the planet's health. The mass of ice covering the land—extending beyond its coastline—as well as seasonal sea ice, influence global circulatory systems such as the weather and sea currents. Globally, oceans are a carbon sink, absorbing greenhouse gases and carbon dioxide, produced in large volumes through human activity. The Southern Ocean is an efficient carbon reducer, as its turbulent character helps dissolve carbon dioxide, and this heavier water is driven kilometers down to the sea floor, trapping it for millennia. The ocean has absorbed more than 90% of the world's excess heat and, since the 1980s, between 20% and 30% of carbon emissions (IPCC in Meredith 2022). Without Antarctica's sea, the Southern Ocean, global temperatures would have risen fourfold more than they have (Fretwell 2020: 105). The Antarctic system is critical to the well-being of the planet.

While the Southern Ocean is a buffer, protecting the Earth from the effects of climate change, it too has been destabilized by global warming. Meltwater is increasing on Antarctic land, its glaciers are moving faster, and icebergs are carving off the ice shelf at increasing rates. There is less sea ice in the summer than there was in the recorded past (Doddridge 2023). As the Antarctic land ice melts, sea levels will rise, with potentially devastating consequences for life on the planet.

Science and Photography

Antarctica is governed by a multi-signatory political agreement, the Antarctic Treaty (Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty n.d.), which designates the primary activity on the continent as scientific investigation. It is therefore unsurprising that photography in Antarctica is more often than not linked to the dominant paradigm of scientific enterprise. I mention this to provide context for the type of photography that is generally practiced there and to signal the different purpose of contemporary artmaking.

Cameras were soon added to the expedition toolbox of the early recording modes of drawing, painting, writing, and oral accounts. British explorers Robert Falcon Scott and Ernest Shackleton both included photographers as part of their Antarctic expeditions, understanding that photography could function as an evidential, scientific tool and could communicate with a wider public audience. In addition to documenting various aspects of life on the ice, photographer Herbert Ponting tutored Scott and other expedition members in the intricacies of camera use, ensuring that a competent photographic record would exist even in the absence of the photographer (Ponting 1923). Examples of such images are the photographs taken by the team selected for the push to the South Pole (Scott Polar Research Institute n.d.).

Another example of the high value placed on photographs is Shackleton's decision that a selection of glass-plate negatives by photographer Frank Hurley be retained even after their ship was crushed and sank below the ice. The photographs vied for precious packing space with food and other essentials of survival in the lifeboats (Hurley 1925: 197). The traditions of photographing for expeditions—science and adventure—have persisted to this day, with the predominant representation of Antarctica taking the aesthetic form of travel photography as typified by *National Geographic*.

A common feature of almost all photography made in Antarctica is its descriptive visual characteristic. This could be argued to be a defining aspect of the medium, where the image captured in the photograph has a mimetic relationship with the scene in front of the lens at the moment the photograph is taken. In much of the photography of Antarctica, photography's descriptive quality is aligned to its purpose—to document what is observed—recording images to view, for people not present to share in the experience. Antarctica remains inaccessible—apart from those directly linked to national scientific programs, visitors are limited to tourist cruises or restricted “adventure” sites, so this level of description is generally appropriate.

While photography as an explanatory practice has value, visual art extends the conversation into new spaces. In this time of climate crisis and its implications for the future, expanding visual and conceptual approaches—exploring different positions—enriches discourse and brings novel ways of engaging with this topic. Art's value lies in its open-endedness, the capacity to inquire, ask questions, or be utilized as part of an experimental toolkit that might offer new ways of seeing and thinking.

Contemporary Art Photography in Antarctica

A number of artists have traveled to Antarctica to make artworks. Having an immersive experience in the Antarctic environment—feeling, sensing, observing, gathering input from the surrounding world—allows for reflection and response from an insightful position. Although visiting Antarctica is not a prerequisite for making art about the continent, it allows for a nuanced and layered understanding.

Artists mostly access Antarctica through national programs that are part of established scientific research enterprises. Such programs make use of existing scientific infrastructure and logistics, including planned expeditions, accommodation at bases, survival training, and access to experts in the field. Artists work and live alongside scientists. They encounter each other in their daily routines and social gatherings, inevitably conversing about their research and exchanging ideas. This scientific context offers a space for insights into another field of study, possibly igniting a train of thought or impacting existing ideas and influencing art-making processes.

The following section looks at photographs made by three artists: Megan Jenkinson, Andrea Juan, and myself, Jean Brundrit, all living in or originating from Antarctic gateway countries—New Zealand, Argentina, and South Africa—that together circle the Antarctic. All three artists visited Antarctica and engaged to some extent with science programs, research, and scientists in their travels.

Megan Jenkinson's Shifting Positions

Megan Jenkinson traveled to Antarctica as part of New Zealand's national Antarctic Artist Fellows program in 2005. From this experience, she made a number of series exploring different ideas, sparked in part by reading commentaries from early visitors to the continent. These included descriptions of atmospheric phenomena and their sometimes perplexing optical manifestations, such as mirages and the Southern Lights, also called the *Aurora Australis* (TheRealArtRoadshow 2011).

Jenkinson's work is concerned with vision and perception. She considers looking and understanding what is observed as two distinct but related activities. Her interest in atmospheric phenomena is explored in the series *Certain Islands*. The image *New South Greenland* (Figure 5.1, 2007) appears to be photographed from sea level as if from an approaching ship. Viewed from directly in front of the print, a low-lying, ice-covered island rises above the steely gray sea that occupies the lower half of the photograph. The island hovers above a band of reflected light that disintegrates the precise division between sea and land or sky. It is overcast, but light infiltrating soft clouds casts the central part of the island into sharp relief, revealing steep, formidable terrain. Pictured from afar, the entire island is visible, solid and immovable.

However, shifting the viewing position very slightly to either side causes the island to disappear. The artist has made each photograph from *Certain Islands* as a lenticular image (Jenkinson 2021). This technology, the application of a ridged lenticular lens over a specially prepared print, flips from an image with the island to a second image without it. To appreciate the full effect, the viewer must literally shift their viewing position.

Certain Islands arose from the peculiar discovery that early seafarers had charted a number of islands that, on subsequent visits to the location, did not appear to exist (Jenkinson 2021). Jenkinson was interested in atmospheric phenomena—mirages—as an explanation for this mistaken mapping (Jenkinson 2023). Mirages occur from light bending as it passes through layers of air at different temperatures, creating illusionary visuals in the distance. Conditions in polar regions, with cold air adjacent to the cold sea and a layer of warmer air above, are ideal for refracting light and creating such optical occurrences. Mirages can appear convincingly real unless their artifice is broken by implausible or unbelievably strange shapes or closer investigation, such as by approaching the island. It is therefore easy to imagine seafarers diligently but mistakenly plotting islands from a distance.



Figure 5.1 Megan Jenkinson, ‘New South Greenland’. From the series *Certain Islands*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

In my reading of *Certain Islands*, a connection exists between the seafarers’ original evidence-based observations and the evidence provided by photography’s detailed descriptive powers. The island was seen and therefore was real. The photograph, too, shows visual proof of the island’s existence—and, equally convincingly, of its non-existence. By offering both possibilities, Jenkinson destabilizes the notion of veracity based on “observational evidence” and questions the idea of believing what is seen. This fiction is continued in the artist’s process of digitally constructing the islands from Antarctic geographic features and inserting them into seascapes (Jonathan Smart Gallery 2007).

In relation to increasing global warming, another interpretation of the work surfaces: an allusion to sea level rise. Although this was not her original intention for this series, the artist recognizes that this interpretation is now inevitable (Jenkinson 2023). In this reading, the islands are submerged without a trace, the sea simply engulfing the land. This is perhaps a more sinister understanding, as the devastation of sea level rise remains undescribed, creating a site for the viewer’s imagination. The lenticular technology is used to layer the passing of time—but instead of looking to the past, it looks to the future.

Jean Brundrit’s Melting Images

My own work speaks directly to global warming and such sea level rises. In my project *Over the Horizon* (2019–20, Figure 5.2), I photographed Antarctica with a lens made of ice, exploring ice both as the material used to create the image and as its subject matter. Photography is often tied to describing the world in front of the lens, making it challeng-

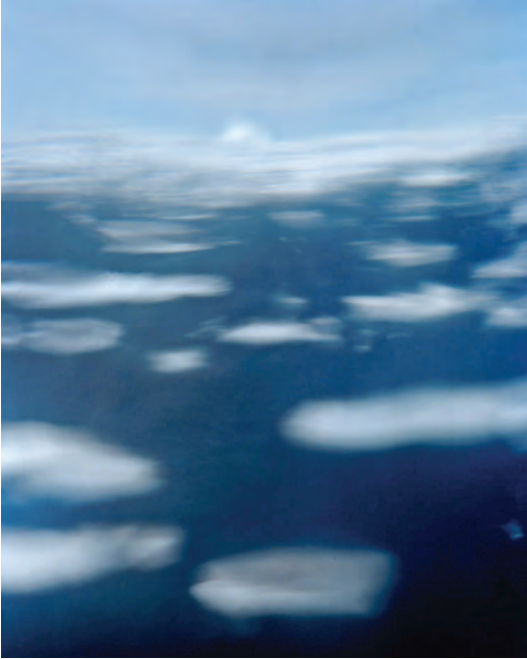


Figure 5.2 Jean Brundrit, 'Untitled 15', from the series *Over the Horizon*. 2019–20. Courtesy of the artist.

ing to photograph a subject that is elusive or abstract, such as the climate crisis. By focusing on the materiality of the image-making technology, the vulnerable and unstable ice lens, I introduced notions of precariousness into the very act of recording. A connection between precariousness and the climate crisis was made apparent through the subject matter—Antarctica—which I visited on board a South African research vessel, the *SA Agulhas II*, in 2019.

My journey to photographing Antarctica with an ice lens started some years before, when I wondered: If ice could see, what would it see? Would ice have its own specific vision? Could ice act as an active contributor to the image-making process? To test this, I hand-cut clear ice into a lens to replace the conventional glass elements in the lens barrel. A silicone barrier prevented meltwater from entering the camera, thereby keeping all other functions of the camera usable (such as the aperture and shutter). The lens I manufactured was not of a high-specification with any optical accuracy; it was not the lens of a scientist. The lens literally melted away during photographing. Even in freezing polar conditions, the ice melted, affected by wind and snow (Brundrit 2022).

Unsurprisingly, the instability of the ice lens distorted visual information. The photographs taken are predominantly soft focus, suggesting the impression of a scene with color and tone flowing across the surface of the image. They seem compositionally unstable and barely contained within a frame's edges. Writing about this series, Anna Stielau observes:

If it has long been desirable to obtain a clearer picture of the ends of the earth, then the photographs that make up *Over the Horizon* are at first disconcertingly out of focus. Without knowing Brundrit's methods, these pictures resist interpretation in a standard photographic vocabulary of figures, grounds, subjects, and objects.

(Stielau 2022: 7)

Further to this the difference in visual language between the ice lens and that of mobile phone photography is noted:

Beyond finding subtle shifts in tone at the borders of forms, though, the impulse to extract data comes up short. As Annabelle Weinand (2021: n.p.) observes of Brundrit's elusive work, this soft opacity is particularly unsettling to 'contemporary eyes used to the straightforward record taking of mobile phones and the sharpness of the commercial photograph'. Our image-saturated society means that '[w]e are accustomed to recording with great ease and achieving instant results.

(Stielau 2022: 7)

Images that don't conform to these formal qualities resist a straightforward reading and understanding. Although forms are mostly blurred, moments of clarity provide areas of detail that aid comprehension. While some images are more obvious in their references and easier to interpret, others from this series are abstracted beyond recognizable certainty—ice becomes cloud, cloud becomes sea.

The seascape 'Untitled 15' from the series *Over the Horizon* (Figure 5.2) depicts ice floes floating on the sea surface and an iceberg protruding above the horizon. The boundary between sea and sky is disorderly, an undulating, fractured division instead of a conventional, level horizon. Compositionally, this portrait-format photograph frames a tightly cropped section of the vista, visually decreasing the viewer's distance from the scene. The sense of being drawn into the space is reinforced by the positioning of the horizon in the top fifth of the picture, above the viewer's eyeline.

A curious visual anomaly occurs when viewing this image. The shape and positioning of one of the ice floes, which extends horizontally halfway across the middle ground from the right-hand side of the image, creates an unexpected failure of aerial perspective. Instead of the anticipated illusion of receding space, the foreground appears to be tilting vertically towards the viewer. This composition destabilizes a conventional representation of space, visually distorting the relationship between elements and moving towards abstraction. The abstraction is the very opposite of the descriptive images produced for science in Antarctica. These images ask the viewer to feel as well as to see; to feel the ice as it disappears and melts.

Andrea Juan's Actions and Performances

Andrea Juan works with a variety of media, including photography, video, and installation. She has made an extensive body of artwork centered on Antarctica, through material produced during annual visits over a ten-year period. Her projects were facilitated by the national Argentinian Antarctic Bureau, affording her equal status to the scientists and granting her access to a number of Argentinian bases and a means to travel about the con-

continent (Building Bridges Art Exchange 2021). This access is in sharp contrast with historical restrictions that banned women from Antarctica until the 1960s. In *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics*, Lisa E. Bloom observes that ‘the human history of the Antarctic has largely been narrated through the lens of white male heroic polar and oceanic exploration’ (Bloom 2022:26). Although this legacy might still be felt at times, shifts in policy and full access, such as that afforded Juan, have facilitated artwork production in line with contemporary art from the rest of the planet.

As well as producing her own artworks, Juan (with the support of the Antarctic Bureau) developed an international artists’ program, Sur Polar, in 2008 that was active in Antarctica for a number of years.

Juan’s relationship with and support from the national program allowed her to develop projects and responses to the environment—its possibilities and constraints—refining her artistic vision over time. Juan talks about making work in response to scientific discovery (Loaiza 2020). Her unique position in the Argentinian scientific community gave her the opportunity to converse with researchers in several fields. She says:

That is how I got a hold of scientific research and began inquiring in glaciology, biochemistry, biology and other various areas in order to comprehend their work. They shared their projects and research, openly; it was a new world for me, to have such direct access to this information. These scientific papers are usually written in technical terms that are usually more complicated for people in general, they are written for other scientists and academics. So, I also had the opportunity to ask about the language that was being used and clear out all my queries.

(Loaiza 2020: np)

Through her engagement with scientific researchers, Juan learned about the discovery of previously unrecorded life forms in the depths of the Weddell Sea. These were found when the collapse and disintegration of the Larsen Ice Shelf exposed the previously ice-covered sea. This research was the genesis for her photographic series *New Species* in 2011. Juan brought her own creative interpretation to what was found, so that *New Species* is not a description of the newly discovered life forms species but an entirely new, imagined creation.

In this series Juan made temporary interventions into the landscape—formal sculptural elements and installation are carefully constructed, and then dismantled and removed, once the desired resulting image has been produced. In terms of the Antarctic Treaty, all material taken to the continent must be removed so that nothing is left behind.

In *New Species XVI* (Figure 5.3), numerous spiral and spherical forms in bright colors—purple, green, red, yellow, pink, orange, black—stand upright in a chaotic formation, suggesting a crowd on the move. The sculptural objects are crafted from felt and wool and have metal stands. They seem to occupy the land with their luminous colors, separated from the icy background by their intensity and the reflected light. The icefield on which the objects are installed slopes towards the lower left of the image. In the background, an incline recedes into the distance, together giving the overall effect of movement across slanting ground. The “species” of Juan’s imagination, and the ice they stand on, appear precarious, as if the ice is about to slide into the ocean. The sense of instability connects back to the origins of this artwork—the fragility of the Larsen Ice Shelf, vulnerable to the temperature rise that resulted in its destruction.



Figure 5.3 Andrea Juan, 'New Species XVI', from *Antarctica Project*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

Juan is concerned with making artwork that reflects a respectful caring for the environment. In *New Species* she sought a way to contemplate and connect with newly found species through artmaking. In visualizing her new species, there is no attempt to blend in or create a believable fiction. The formal considerations instead point to a celebratory moment that is temporary and fleeting.

Conclusion

While Antarctic science programs are used to facilitate valuable research in Antarctica, the recognition that art can contribute in a different way has led to artists increasingly being folded into the science programs to help understand the mysteries of this extraordinary continent. The artworks described here engage a poetic, interpretive lens to reflect on this contemporary moment—that of global warming and climate change, specifically pointing to its impact in the polar regions. Jenkinson, Brundrit, and Juan, through their artistic engagement with Antarctica, undo or critically redo not only the narrative of Antarctica as the last wilderness, but the cliché inherent in the majority of visual representations. Antarctica is reframed and reimagined through photography as an imaginative act, rather than a document. Brundrit does this by unfocusing the landscape till it melts away, Jenkinson by shifting perspective to reveal parallel visions which appear and disappear, and Juan by surfacing the disappeared and reappeared.

Art can be used to communicate scientific endeavors to a wider audience, can express Antarctica's fragility and problems in a more nuanced way, and can complicate the debates

that science sometimes flattens. Visual art responses contribute to the discourse that encourages people who will never visit the seventh continent to register its presence, to recognize its vulnerability, and to acknowledge the effects that actions thousands of miles away have on this extraordinary place.

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6

A DIALOGIC VIEW FROM THE NORTH

*Helen Glanville, Richard Hodgkins,
Marsha Meskimmon and Paul Wood*

Editorial Introduction: A Note to Readers

Marsha Meskimmon with Paul Wood, Helen Glanville, and Richard Hodgkins

The following collaborative text was generated through a number of invitations to dialogue that crossed times, spaces, and disciplines. We offer these introductory remarks to reveal, rather than conceal, the practical thought and discussion underpinning our collective, polyvocal, and heterogeneous response to the topic of photography and the Anthropocene.

In light of my current work on contemporary art, decolonial feminisms, and ecocritical aesthetics, I was interested in creating dialogue between my perspectives as an art historian/theorist based in the Global North and those of the other three chapter authors, each of whom take as their focal point photographic explorations of anthropogenic climate change and species extinction from the Global South. This opened further generative dialogue—between theories and practices, texts and images, times and spaces—much of which begged the question of writing a singular, monolithic “response from the North” after seeing and hearing the myriad and multifaceted “views from the South.”

In the open spirit of this project I wanted to include multidimensional responses from the North(s), in particular, to move outside the frame of the visual arts to explore a dialogue with climate, earth, and environmental scientists on the broad topic of photography and the Anthropocene. I approached three of my colleagues in physical geography, whose expertise in river science, soil and waste, and Arctic/polar environments mapped well to the extant chapters in the section. But much more than this, I knew from other conversations that Paul, Helen, and Richard were innovative, cross-disciplinary scholars, interested in creative approaches to climate, earth, and environmental science. From my perspective, they typified Isabelle Stengers’ idea that “another science is possible” (Stengers 2018).

But, critically, this text is not written solely *from my perspective*; Paul Wood’s research and teaching includes collaborations with local stakeholders, government agencies, scientists, engineers, and artists, and he is particularly interested in how societies balance their requirements for water with the needs of the natural environment, and how these values and perceptions vary spatially and temporally. Helen Glanville was keen to be involved

with this collection because she finds storytelling and imagery to be very useful tools with which to engage students, especially on topics that are often not initially seen as interesting. And after exposure to the cryonecropolis that is the Svalbard archipelago, Richard Hodgkins felt it a very natural decision to contribute to this chapter, as it had become clear to him that the lens through which all environmental enquiry should be focused is the bewildering transformation of the Anthropocene.

Our collaborative working method continued dialogically—meeting, discussing the “views from the South” animating the chapters and images compiled across this section, but also encountering our disciplinary conventions, limits, strengths, and idiosyncrasies. It was an engaged and iterative process, and my colleagues each commented on the creative and open space that this response enabled. We took it as an imperative to foreground our different voices and perspectives, rather than merge them, as if seamless or objective, through a disembodied overview. This included taking one another’s challenges to our individual narratives—most noticeably, perhaps, my own initial contribution transformed into “bookends” in response to the active reading of my co-authors.

Our collaborative text is responsive—it speaks to the other chapters in this section—but can equally be read on its own terms as a dialogue between the arts and sciences and an experiment in the environmental humanities. It is also responsible; a form of *attentive listening* to perspectives beyond our own, and a statement of commitment to thinking differently about human knowledge and planetary destruction. And so, as our reader, you encounter the grain of this text not as polish, but as further grist for the mill.

Photography and the Anthropocene, Part 1: Deadly Oversight

Marsha Meskimmon

Photography and the Anthropocene enjoy an intimacy born of complicity and control, of capturing the world, the better to master it. But mastery is a fragile power at best, and photographs, as contingent and mutable technologies of vision, are as likely to unravel controlling fictions as create them.

Whether or not the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) finally recognizes the Anthropocene as the latest addition to the Geological Time Scale, the concept has already entered scholarly and popular debate as shorthand for anthropogenic climate change, species extinction and the devastating, disproportionate impact of humans on planet Earth. As a blanket term, the Anthropocene is as blunt as it is captivating. Clearly, anthropogenic environmental damage has not been wrought uniformly—some humans leave heavy carbon footprints across the globe, whilst others struggle to survive, trampled underfoot. There is no monolithic Anthropocene (Raworth 2014; Yusoff 2018). Whichever “golden spike” is used to provide the temporal line in the sand, a closer look does not reveal a seamless global universe but a profoundly interconnected and dynamic pluriverse, a world of many worlds, marked by vast differentials of geopolitical power and privilege, legacies left by centuries of European imperial expansion, extraction, conquest, and control.

Emerging in the early 19th century, photography’s ability to capture and fix a “picture” of the world reinforced a Western-centric logic of discovery and domination. Technically produced topographic overviews created the fiction of *terra nullius*, whilst providing practical surveys of geographical features, from flora and fauna to watercourses and mineral stores, documenting the navigable, habitable, arable, and extractable wealth of “new”

worlds. Where tales of *terra nullius* could not be sustained, ethnographic photographs recorded and categorized human beings as yet another facet of the terrain to be measured and mastered through an objectifying lens. These viewpoints reduce vital worlds to inert possessions, valuable solely as exploitable resources. Such a logic binds photography to the Anthropocene through a mutually reinforcing necro-scopophilic regime.

Against this logic, are other views possible from the Global North?

Reflected Northern Views from the South

Paul Wood

It is poignant that the first analogue photograph taken by an astronaut from space captured “The Blue Marble” and in that moment captured the eastern South Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Southern Ocean, and the continent of Africa. In that instant, the global superpowers did not even appear on the image of the Earth; and knowingly or unknowingly, the image provided a focus on the Southern hemisphere, an area that was, to the vast majority of the population in the Global North, largely unfamiliar, despite the then-recent advent of satellite imagery. Whilst photographs, maps, and aerial images have been full of (geo)political, cultural, and social meaning for centuries, this image both provided the foundations for new perspectives on the planet we all collectively inhabit and also forced the “North” to realize there were perspectives and views of the Earth that did not necessarily include them (or need to).

“The View from the South” focuses on themes of global significance—detritus and particularly (e)waste (Josephy et al., *this volume*), the provision of water (Wienand and Thobani K, *this volume*), and Antarctica (Brundrit, *this volume*)—which resonate with stakeholders internationally but have a distinct Southern hemisphere perspective that challenges established (Northern) norms. Recycling and attaining local and regional targets became a source of pride in many developed economies following the launch of the United Nations Agenda 21 in 1992 (UN 1992). The idea that in some way we were reducing waste, reusing/repurposing old belongings, and recycling resources was reassuring for those in a position to upgrade their mobile phones, tablet devices, and other technological goods (among the many different forms of waste). However, this initial self-congratulation and these feelings of contentment have increasingly been replaced by a feeling of confusion and unease as the impact of our detritus (e-waste, clothing, white goods) being exported to “other places” has quite rightly been brought to our attention. What was once out of sight and out of mind (once it left the drive of a suburban inhabitant’s home) has come back to revisit us with the recognition that the detritus of the rich has in many cases been exported to the “corners of the globe,” where Jean Claude Nsabimana’s *Iyarara: Loss and Found* (2022) reconnects us in a spectacularly colorful but uncomfortable realization of the reality of this global “trade” and the increasing resistance to it.

Thobani K’s photographs provide a reminder of societies’ dependency on water while bringing into sharp focus the different challenges communities face. Water is a global issue, and in many parts of the Global North people are encouraged to reduce the amount of water used to wash cars or irrigate lawns and golf courses during summer months or periods of drought. The photographs in KwaZulu-Natal illustrate the relative complacency of many in the North compared to the basic challenge(s) of obtaining water in arid lands and for people displaced by dam construction (Sinthumule 2021). This challenge is compounded by the difficulties of storing this water in various forms of plastic detritus (large

covered and uncovered recycled barrels, buckets, bottles, and bags) alongside the challenge of not knowing if the water is even safe to drink. The beauty and style of the images captured belies the reality of treating your own drinking water with domestic bleach to ensure it is “safe” to consume.

Antarctica remains one of the last wildernesses on the planet; the combined effects of extreme remoteness and hostile environmental conditions (wind, temperature, and polar winter) have thus far curtailed human habitation, with the exception of the scientific community and a small number of elite world travelers. The ice-covered landscape is both beautiful, mysterious, and challenging to visualize (as exemplified by Megan Jenkinson, Jean Brundrit, and Andrea Juan). At the same time, Antarctica remains potentially deadly to anthropic life—being difficult to navigate due to melting and contracting bodies of ice on the continental margin and the resulting icebergs in the Southern Ocean. It is ironic that the discovery of new Antarctic species (Barnes et al. 2021) and even the recent (re)discovery of the wreck of Ernest Shackleton’s ship, *Endurance*, is in part the result of the increasingly worrying rate of ice retreat and increased duration of open water conditions on the Weddell Sea caused by anthropic climate change.

Size Matters: A Scaled Perspective from a Soil and Water Biogeochemist

Helen Glanville

First reactions: A fantastic set of powerful images evoking lots of thoughts around the scale at which humanity is impacting the natural world.

The over-arching themes are perspectives and narratives around waste and water resources, taken initially from a global view (“The View from the South”), covering human-focused pieces (“Decolonizing Detritus” and “The Politics of Water”) through to “Antarctica, Ice, and Photography,” exploring how views can be changed and distorted, depending upon the lens through which they are viewed. This distorted view is something which is often identified when looking at climate and anthropogenic perturbations on the natural world (Fleming et al. 2021). There is a view that it will not happen within our lifetime, that it is someone else’s problem, that I, as an individual, cannot possibly make a difference (McCaffrey and Buhr 2013). The images taken in 2020 by Thobani K, documenting the community of Eskebheni in KwaZulu-Natal, highlight how individuals can make a difference, from a child holding a hose providing drinking water, through to the pair helping each other carry a sink full of water—the small things do matter. “Decolonizing Detritus” presents a very powerful statement on waste; within the UK (and elsewhere) there is a large research focus on microplastics and their environmental impacts within the natural environment and whether they directly or indirectly, via their chemical derivatives, accumulate within living biology in these systems. The images of large rubbish dumps highlight the scaled and distorted views we have of the issues, with people often ignorant and/or blind to the vast swathes of land being used as landfills, or shipping off non-recyclable trash for some other country to deal with. Waste is a natural by-product of humanity and in a disposal-, plastic-dominated world, greater attention is needed on how to be far less wasteful.

Whilst many of the images depict a negative perspective looking at the damage humanity is causing our planet, for me the most striking images are the *New Species* series produced in Antarctica in 2011 by Andrea Juan, highlighting that whatever we throw at nature, nature will find a way to survive. The stark contrasts with the bleak white backdrop of

Antarctica and the colored bacterial representations instill hope (or maybe that is my eternal optimism coming through) that it is not too late for humanity. As a scientist who studies largely invisible microbial processes to understand how changes at the smallest scale can have a significant impact on larger-scale ecosystem functions, scale is a big part of this story for me (Glanville et al. 2012; Graham et al. 2016). Things we cannot see are often overlooked because they are hard to study and need unique and novel ways to detect and understand them. However, that does not mean they have less value, as we see evidence of their presence all around us supporting life. Sometimes we need to view life through different lenses, as presented in the *Certain Islands* series (2005) by Megan Jenkinson, not only to appreciate what we have in front of us, but to help us find new solutions to existing and emerging problems.

Stranger Than We *Can* Think?

Richard Hodgkins

Antarctica is a remote and strange place. With no indigenous population, no permanent residents, plus tourist and scientist numbers strictly constrained by high costs and challenging logistics, the only way the overwhelming majority of people in the world will experience Antarctica is in photos and video. Hardly anyone has a visual reference point for the Antarctic in the Anthropocene: while almost all of the world's mountain ranges are replete with vanishing glaciers, many of which are well-documented in photographs and even in some cases accompanied by physical markers of historical retreat (*Travel Guide: All About Switzerland* 2005), the Antarctic continent keeps evidence of change much better hidden. Rarely, abrupt change occurs, such as the disintegration of the 3,000 km² Larsen B Ice Shelf in only a month in 2002 (NASA Earth Observatory n.d.). But this exception only serves to emphasize the rule that, so far, capturing imagery of Antarctic change remains in the realm of space- or ship- or even underwater-autonomous-vehicle-based remote-sensing techniques (Barker et al. 2020).

These Antarctic images are distinct from some others in this section in that they are characterized by items consciously introduced, instead of items carelessly abandoned. These introductions can be artificial aurora or synthetic creatures within the frame; they can be the lens through which the image itself is created; or they can be the introduction of a perspective device which appears to make a subject as substantial as an iceberg disappear. The essential emptiness of the almost monochrome continent almost demands some form of intervention to create visual stimulation. Indeed, the most memorable of Herbert Ponting's classic photographs chronicling R.F. Scott's 1910–13 *Terra Nova* expedition are less the dramatic icescapes and more the quotidian activities—Oates tending his ponies, Scott writing his diary—taking place in an alien environment.

If good art involves something of the strange to intrigue, provoke, or otherwise challenge the viewer, then the avoidance of cliché is surely imperative. Yet popular climate change and sustainability imagery tends to be very prone to cliché: the polar bear clinging to an ice floe, hybrid leaf-lightbulbs, “a globe suspended between two cupped hands” (Stielau, *this volume*). The UK-based charity *Climate Outreach* has drawn attention to the role imagery plays in affecting the feelings, understanding, and consequent actions of the viewer, and how action on sustainability has often been ill-served by clichéd imagery of smokestacks, sizzling beach tourists, or cartoons of a half-Eden, half-hellscape Earth (Smith et al. 2021).

Among the evidence-based recommendations *Climate Outreach* has for effective imagery are to use images to tell positive, identifiable stories; to create authentic representation, not tokenism; to depict diverse activities in diverse landscapes; to connect people to the wonderful diversity of natural places; to include more real people in images; and to diversify who is behind the camera and the message.

The photographic explorations in this volume collectively address these recommendations (the Antarctic images do not feature any people at all, although for a continent with a permanent population of zero, this is perfectly representative). Altogether, the congruence between the content of *The View from the South* and the advice of *Climate Outreach* shows that the role of art shaping not only what we think but what we *can* think (Heisenberg, 1974), and therefore what we dare to do, is as great as ever.

Photography and the Anthropocene, Part 2: Other Norths Are Possible

Marsha Meskimmon

Photographies in other hands can visualize worlds otherwise. In the hands of artists and scholars from the Global South, photographs create a different visual nexus between planetarity and globality, a peripheric view of myriad Anthropocenes, not pictured from afar or above, but from within.

The cross-genre work of Thobani K documents embodied experiences of living with water shortages in sub-Saharan Africa. While the impact of climate change on people's lives is visibly rendered in the works, they do not represent objectified *others* to be consumed, pitied, or saved by empowered viewers from the metropole. Their mode of address is internal, relational, and intimate—water connects bodies, communities, lives, and localities on a quotidian scale that is also, always, already planetary. In the polar photography of Jean Brundrit, water is transformed into ice, a lens that materializes not *what* can be seen, but *how*. Seeing with and through melting ice, the locational agency of photography emerges not as an objective tool, but as a contingent and poetic nexus of bodies, spaces, and light.

In the hands of artists such as Andrea Juan and Jean Claude Nsabimana, photographs participate in glorious performances of creative survival and flourishing, conjuring hum-animal constellations from the unseen and overlooked. Microbial biomes scale up, forming carnivalesque structures on the ice-screen of Antarctica; detritus is mined from consumer cultures bent on infinite growth, endless disposability, and unfathomable waste to fashion a vision of migratory resilience and imaginative possibility for futures and subjects as yet unknown. Wondrous monster-beauties rise Phoenix-like from the remains of a time when humanity seemingly knew the price of everything and the value of nothing; they are the South's Fantastic, Cassandras for a world in crisis.

Amitov Ghosh (2016) wrote of climate change as unthinkable, but perhaps it is more apt to argue that it is unimaginable within the limits of a Eurocentric universal episteme. Peripheries always know the center better than it knows itself. Attending to peripheric photographs addressing the blindspots of myriad Anthropocenes might provide much-needed clues for knowing, imagining, and inhabiting many worlds differently (Meskimmon 2020). Such Souths speak to the North, not as a singular hegemonic power, but as a polyphonic planetary partner. Indeed, they may even suggest, against the weight of history, that other Norths are possible.

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PART II

Decolonial Practices
Speaking Back to the Canon

Edited by Nina Mangalanayagam and Emese Mucsi



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CAN WE USE PHOTOGRAPHY AGAINST PHOTOGRAPHY?

An Interview with Rolando Vázquez Melken

*Nina Mangalanayagam, Emese Mucsi,
and Rolando Vázquez Melken*

In recent years there has been a shift in photographic practices and education in western photographic institutions. Questions that were once discussed in the margins of the field have been given space within the mainstream in photographic discourse. Students and artists have been on the forefront of demanding institutional change. Artists have returned to photographic archives to critically reflect on photography's entanglement with scientific research and racism that have informed European western societies. As examples, Katarina Pirak Sikku (Axelsson and Pirak Sikku 2023) carefully worked with and against the state-funded photographic racial biology archive in Sweden, that mainly objectified Sami people in the north of Sweden, Sápmi. Sasha Huber (Sealy and Verna 2022) critically intervened in the infamous images of enslaved people commissioned by celebrated Swiss scientist Louis Agassiz in a larger project of demounting his legacy by exposing and creating awareness of his 'scientific racism'. These examples can be considered *decolonial* photographic practices as they work to undo a certain type of modernist knowledge formation and bring this history into the present. To reflect on what decolonial photography means around the globe today, Nina Mangalanayagam and Emese Mucsi were in dialogue with Rolando Vázquez Melken, one of the founders of the Decolonial Summer School in the Netherlands and the author of *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary* (2020).

Nina Mangalanayagam and Emese Mucsi (NM and EM): We thought we'd start off by defining the terms. We know that you've done this in other interviews and texts, but it would be interesting to hear you speak about what the decolonial is today.

Rolando Vázquez Melken (RVM): I often encounter a confusion between coloniality and colonialism, between decoloniality and decolonization. Sometimes these terms are used as if they mean the same thing. But they do not. Decolonization refers to the independence of countries from the colonial regime of western imperialism, it is the liberation from colonialism as a political system of domination. Whereas decoloniality refers to the movement of overcoming coloniality, that is the general condition of oppression and erasure that underlies the modern social order. We could say that colonialism marks the onset of coloniality, but that the ending of colonialism does not mark the end of coloniality.

Colonialism is a complex and varied historical process that has happened in different historical times across the global South. In the large countries of Latin America, what we call *Abya Yala*, most struggles for independence happened around 1810. Whereas if you speak of colonialism in Africa and Southeast Asia, the independence struggles and the process of decolonization politically happened in the middle of the twentieth century. These are very different historical periods and experiences of colonization; it is important to be aware of the different historical periods and contexts of colonialism.

Decoloniality cannot be reduced to decolonization. If decolonization is the political process of becoming independent, decoloniality is broader. We know that after decolonization, coloniality continues. We can say that ‘colonization’ has ended in many places as a historical political regime, although there are peoples and places that are under colonial regimes today. Still after independence coloniality continues. Decoloniality addresses that coloniality that continues.

Furthermore, we can speak of coloniality within the west. We cannot say that Sweden or the Netherlands or France are under colonialism, but we can say that they are places where coloniality continues to operate: for example, through structures of racism within the countries. Coloniality as a condition of possibility of the modern social order continues, hence the need of decolonizing modern institutions. In brief it is important to distinguish but also understand the relation between coloniality from colonialism and between decoloniality from decolonization. These are, for sure, related terms but they name different processes.

NM and EM: Could you explain this tradition of thought, and how it has influenced your way of thinking?

RVM: In what we may loosely call the decolonial school of thought, with its major figures being María Lugones, Catherine Walsh, Zulma Palermo, Walter Dignolo, Anibal Quijano and Enrique Dussel, we share some basic premises. However, there is no one author that is the final authority or is the ‘owner’ of what decoloniality is about. One of the basic premises is that there is no modernity without coloniality. This comes from the work of Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano who played an important role in the development of dependency theory in Latin America. Quijano realizes that we cannot understand how the world functions from our global South perspective using only the terms of modernity. If so, the South is just defined as the other of modernity, or as lacking modernity. Quijano shows us how the construction of modernity cannot be separated from coloniality. This partly comes from dependency theory in that it realizes that the wealth of the center of the global economy is constructed through a dependency on the global South economies and the extraction of wealth. Center and periphery were key categories in dependency theory in the 1970s.

Anibal Quijano transforms this later in his life to say there is no modernity without coloniality. This means that there is no history of western progress and civilization without the history of slavery, deprivation, exploitation and extraction of other people’s worlds and territories. Thus, coloniality begins to be fundamental for understanding the world in which we live not just

for the global South, but also for the global North. Importantly, by doing this Quijano is performing a shift in the geopolitics of reason and also an epistemic shift, meaning that he is changing the location from which we are thinking and also shifting the terms of the conversation.¹ While colonialism is a western term – a thought from the west, coloniality is a global south term – a thought from the south.

Decoloniality signals an epistemic and also an aesthetic shift that calls into question knowledge structures, methodologies and practices that have been enframed by eurocentric modernity. This of course includes photography which begins as a way of enacting the western gaze, a gaze that belongs to an epistemology and an aesthetics located in the west but with universalizing validity claims (Habermas 1990).

When we ask the question of coloniality and the decolonial, we begin to see an entirely different set of problems and a different picture of the world. It is the question of what has been erased, what has been destroyed, what has been denigrated, what has been silenced. Whereas the question of modernity is a question of what has become dominant, present, established.

Photography is obviously a technology that controls representation. It exercises the power to determine from which perspective we see the world. We will return to this a bit later. Photography and its strong relation to visuality as presence often misses coloniality: what has been silenced, what is under erasure, what is not visible anymore. One of my articles, *Translation as erasure: thoughts on modernity's epistemic violence* (Vázquez 2011) is about translational erasure, and I think we can speak of photography as erasure as well. When we picture in one way, we erase other histories, other realities.

What we have is this premise that there is no modernity without coloniality, that there is no logic of progress and civilization without oppression. A very tangible example that I use in my classroom is that you cannot have a chocolate in the supermarket for €1 or €2 without the suffering of others on the other side of the planet, and without the devastation of the rainforest. We practice coloniality every day in the supermarket, so the west also needs decoloniality to decolonize the senses. Not because it is under colonialism, but to decolonize in the sense that it is under coloniality. It keeps on reproducing coloniality. Our universities, our museums, our shops keep on reproducing coloniality.

Let us return briefly to the distinction between decoloniality and decolonization, between the decolonial response and the postcolonial response to French and English colonialism. To be sure the postcolonial is also about decolonization, but oftentimes, it is about claiming a place in modernity: 'we are also modern'. Decoloniality is not against this but takes a different strategy.

The postcolonial, generally speaking, tends to open modernity towards pluralizing it. Towards saying that everybody has their own modernities and everybody has a place in modernity. Whereas the decolonial says no to modernity and its universal validity claim. Because there is no modernity without coloniality, we don't want modernity. We don't want to become modern. We want a way, a delinking that is moving towards decoloniality as a response. Decoloniality is not to pluralize modernities, but to move towards a pluriversality outside the dominant logic of modernity.

NM and EM: In this volume we have contributions discussing photography in Greenland, Eastern Europe and South Asia, South Africa and West Africa. Is it possible to use the decolonial for all these contexts? How do we speak about the decolonial for them all, since it's not the same modernity in several places.

RVM: The point of decoloniality is that it doesn't give a single answer. It provides an analytics of modernity/coloniality that has been used for understanding Eastern Europe, Central Asia and other places such as Greenland as well. There are also growing conversations on the decolonial on the African continent.

How coloniality was experienced is always situated, always contextual. The experience of coloniality in Eastern Europe or in the Caucasus or in South Africa is very different from the experience of coloniality in Chiapas or Oaxaca or other places in Abya Yala. And also the responses to the logic of oppression are contextual, multiple and plural, which is why we say we move towards the pluriversal.

The framework of the decolonial provides a vocabulary, a space of conversation for people from the Maya areas of Yucatan in Mexico to speak with people from South Africa and to speak with people from Uzbekistan. We can speak together because we share a history of oppression under the western project of civilization. But we have diverse responses to the condition of being under erasure, for example by protecting languages, territories, cultures, ways of being in the world that are diverse. In that sense, the decolonial does not provide a single answer, or horizon of liberation, it rather allows for mutual intelligibility and for the formation of coalitions in diversity.

NM and EM: In *Vistas of Modernity*, you make an argument that postcards, a particular photographic practice, inform our gaze, our vistas and our landscapes, but the contemporary artistic practices that you discuss in the book are not photography specific. Do you have photographic examples that you think follow a decolonial path, that you think are good practice?

RVM: Yes, in *Vistas of Modernity*, the postcards and photography are central to the work. These postcards are mostly from world exhibitions from the beginning until the middle of the twentieth century. People were exhibited in human zoos and you could buy the postcard to take as a souvenir to send to somebody you knew. For me that's quite powerful because it's not only about researching the archive to find violent images of colonialism that many important authors have done, but through the postcards we attain access to the question of everyday racism (Essed, 1991) and the pleasure of racism (Martina, 2013). How does a visual object, like the postcard, produce that enjoyment of the consumption of the other? How do we undo dominant aesthetics, which has led us to enjoy the consumption of the life of others and the life of Earth? How can we move to other forms of *aesthesis* (Mignolo et al 2013) that are not built on the suffering of others? That is, I think what the postcards allow us to see. We use the term *aesthesis* to distinguish the ways of sensing and experiencing the world that are not regulated by the modern/colonial order of aesthetics.

Recently the extraordinary Dutch artist Patricia Kaersenhout invited me to produce a collaboration with her called 'Our Light Will Outlast Their Flags' (2023, Figure 7.1 and 7.2). It is a textile-based performance work where we printed some portraits from the human zoo postcards interwoven with colonial flags, so that



Figure 7.1 Patricia Kaersenhout and Rolando Vázquez Melken, 'Our Light Will Outlast Their Flags' (installation view I), 2023. Bonnefanten Museum. Photograph by Peter Cox. Courtesy of the artists.



Figure 7.2 Patricia Kaersenhout and Rolando Vázquez Melken, 'Our Light Will Outlast Their Flags' (installation view II), 2023. Bonnefanten Museum. Photograph by Peter Cox. Courtesy of the artists.

the colonial flags that were used to conquer were woven together with the photos of the people that were exhibited. It is a performance piece where the audience are invited to tear-down the flags, so at the end of the work, the colonial flags are shredded. The photographs are portraits of those who were exhibited and in this work they are brought back to dignity from under the colonial flags. It is a work of healing from that colonial gaze. I think that is one of the big challenges now – how we reverse the gaze that consumes and erases, how can we dignify, heal and struggle against erasure. Today I see that many artists are assuming this challenge.

We can use photography as a medium of remembrance of mourning, of healing, and to undo the dominance of the sovereign gaze that consumes the other in order to produce its power and identity.

NM and EM: Jennifer Bajorek works with owners of photographic archives such as local photography studios in Nigeria. Some owners ask her about if she can make their relatives famous by arranging to sell parts of or the whole archive to a western institution. She was asking herself what would be best practice in this context and decided that it would be better to leave the archival material in its original context. What is your opinion about using and working with certain archives without repeating coloniality?

RVM: That is a very difficult question and I would particularly like to highlight one aspect of this. Of course, archives are very important sites to question colonialism and for example, the work of Tina Campt is important in this respect in photography (Campt, 2017). But I think you're pointing at how things get transformed when they are exhibited. That is an open question in museums and in ways of teaching. When reproducing these images even if you may want to reproduce them for decolonial reasons or with a decolonial ethics, it can happen that the colonial way in which they are received, consumed, doesn't change. So, for example, you can make an exhibition of ethnographic photography to criticize the western gaze and show how violent it is, but the publics of the museum might nonetheless practise the habituated white gaze and consume these images for the pleasure of consuming the image of the other being objectified and classified.

This discussion was had when I was advising the Wereld Museum in Amsterdam, formerly called the Tropen Museum, for their path-breaking exhibition 'Our Colonial Inheritance' (Wereldmuseum, 2023). The curatorial team had planned to exhibit colonial images of racial forms of classification. I was particularly opposed to racializing images being exhibited again and thus reproducing the violence, reproducing the pain. However, for the museum it was very important to show them, in order to show the violence of these visual regimes. They tried to solve it in an interesting way, by putting them in a more or less closed space, with a trigger warning at the entrance saying that one was about to see violent images and you enter out of your own choice. They contextualized the images in this way.

But again I think one of the points we haven't solved is the question of reception. It is one thing what the artist, creator or curator wants to explain and do in their work and another thing is how people will consume it. When you have a society that has been socialized under the western gaze, they will come to such an exhibition with their western eyes and they will see these images in a racist way, even though the exhibition may be framed in an anti-racist way. The same applies to photography. So, how do we transform the gaze because the gaze is a

verb, it's a practice. It is not just what we exhibit. How do we change the way in which we see? Not just change the object and how we exhibit, but also how we see? The history of photography has been complicit in producing ways of seeing: The premise of mechanically capturing, appropriating and reproducing the single perspective. The camera is not just something that came out into the world and then people began developing the medium once the machine was there, rather it is technology of seeing that expresses the single point perspective that became dominant since the Renaissance and throughout the history of Modern aesthetics. There's not a natural way of seeing.

To go a bit deeper into how I see photography being connected to the history of western aesthetics and any possibility for decolonization, we need to undo what photography has been doing. Here I would like to bring in Fred Moten's black radical thought when he, using the black experience in the US, sees the possibility of using dominant technologies in ways in which they were not designed to be used (Moten 2017). Thus, decolonizing photography has to do with disobeying the reasons why photography came to existence or the way it has been practiced. Can we use photography against photography?

NM and EM: You mentioned the example in the Wereld Museum in Amsterdam as an example of trying to change the way we see. Do you have any other good examples of practices intended to change visitors' perception and way of seeing?

RVM: Yes, there are many examples. The Danish-Trinidadian artist Jeannette Ehlers did a performance in Berlin where the curtain was a mirror so the audience would see themselves reflected and become conscious of the act of seeing (Ehlers 2018). It was a play where most of the actors were from migrant and refugee backgrounds and some were undocumented. At one moment in the play, the actors fix their gaze on members of the public, returning the gaze. And then they say '*we are here because you were there*', an important statement coming from migrant and refugee movements in Europe. It was a very powerful moment of returning the gaze on the public that are normally in an anonymous situation. It is one of the big problems of reception, that publics are not situated, assumed to be non-persons, people who are nowhere and everywhere with the enormous privilege of not being positioned, of seeing and not being seen. So one of the possible responses is to position the audience to know who they are and to return the gaze.

In an exhibition that I participated in as part of the curatorial team at the Central Museum in Utrecht, we made postcards asking people 'what are you seeing, who is seeing, who is being seen?' This is once again to position the audience. There are other efforts like this in photography. For example, Marcelo Brodsky, the Argentinian photographer, intervened in some of the archival photos of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide that the Germans committed in Namibia. He reproduced the images of violence. But he intervened in the images with text, adding strong statements that acknowledge the violence committed. People that came to see the photographs could read in every image texts like: "We invaded you", "We concentrated you in camps" etc. The text stops the pleasure and the distance from the place where the violence took place. I think one of the big struggles with an audience who assume to be neutral is to show to them that they are implicated in this history; that we are all implicated in these histories and their violence.

This is a big problem in the arts in Europe in general. People go to these wonderful critical exhibitions, but they don't get transformed. There are great works happening at the moment that are questioning the colonial wound, the colonial difference, but the effect in society is limited.

NM and EM: Teaching photography in Western Europe, students often say that they cannot make work about colonial pasts because they argue that they are far removed from this colonial space. They do not see the very space that they are located in as colonial space. We have worked with this in different ways by focusing on objects, landscapes and images in the everyday to consider which gaze we reproduce. In your teaching, how do you work with these questions to make students understand that they are not neutral? Do you have specific pedagogies that you have worked with?

RVM: This is the final part of *Vistas of Modernity*, but we've worked with that in many places. One of the key places is the diversity report we wrote for the University of Amsterdam with Professor Gloria Wekker. It's called *Let's Do Diversity* (Wekker et al. 2016). I was in charge of the pedagogical chapter arguing that we need to decolonize pedagogies. It is not just about changing the knowledge. We had examples of people teaching black literature in racist ways, thus changing the content of the curriculum while still reproducing the violence.

We have to change the canon, *the what*. But we also need to change *the who*. Who is teaching? We need more diverse people teaching. Universities in Europe reproduce the colonial stratification of society, where people tending to security and cleaning and the kitchen are from the global South or from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and directors and professors are mainly from the normative and privileged sector of society: the white males or in some cases white females. Then we get to your question. We need to change *the how*, the methodologies, the ways of doing.

We developed a pedagogical proposal that is inspired by a lot of other work, which we call pedagogies of positionality, the pedagogies of relationality and the pedagogies of transition. The pedagogies of positionality are precisely about positioning the text, the authors, the classroom, the students and the teachers.

We ask the question: who is speaking, from which perspective? So, it is not about stopping to teach Michel Foucault, because Foucault is very important to understand power for example, but we need to position Foucault. We need to say this is a man from this time from this period and that he never had the question of coloniality and was not concerned with the colonial wound. He is very good, but insufficient for understanding many of the problems we are facing today. The same goes for Marx and for whoever else. Positioning the authors is an essential tool.

In photography, the questions I find important, particularly in relation to representation, are on who is seeing and who is being seen? I think those very basic questions are fundamental as a starting point. Then we can move one step further towards decolonial aesthesis and ask: through whose eyes are we seeing?

Donna Haraway gives us a very important phrase: "*with whose blood have my eyes been made?*" (Haraway 1998: 585) She is not speaking of the colonial wound, but for me, this is a question central to understanding the colonial gaze. To recognize that the way we see is constructed through violence and through the suffering of others. Those questions are fundamental and they begin to undo the non-positioned 'neutral' individual, working from an assumed objective position

as if they are outside the world. These questions as pedagogical practice begin to position students into their place, their location, and to recognize how we are all implicated.

There is a violence when we exercise the power of seeing while not being seen. This is the epistemic privilege of the west: classifying but not being classified. And so the epistemic struggle and the aesthetic struggle is to undo that. We need to see the person that sees. And we need to acknowledge from which perspective we are seeing. Whose gaze are we practicing? That is not the gaze that comes from our communal or ancestral histories. It is the gaze that has been taught to us from kindergarten through video games, through social media, et cetera. More fundamentally, I think that there is a need to move from an education centered on representation, to an education that is focused on the capacity of reception.

The capacity of receiving, the capacity of listening. How can we practice a photography that listens? I would like to give priority to reception and listening that is common in many cultures that were oppressed by western colonialism. For example, in many of the First Nation or indigenous cultures of Abya Yala, listening is fundamental and a sign of wisdom. In the west the gaze is central in its relation to the power of representation, the power of the self to see and to represent.

Focusing on listening, you focus on, not yourself, but ourselves, the communal and the logic of reception, of caring, of healing, of mourning, of remembering. All those things that are not taught in our systems of education. This movement follows the pedagogies of positionality with pedagogies of reception and relation. Rather than dominating the other as in, let's say for example, those pedagogical exercises of role playing to see who can debate better, we put in practice relationality, reception, commonality. Receiving each other demands acknowledging difference, enjoying difference. It has to do with joy. The joy of difference, the joy that we can only enjoy with others. That moves us out of the pain of being an individual and of remaining indifferent to the world or to the suffering of others and the suffering of earth. We move from indifference to a celebration of difference.

What do we do in the world once we are positioned, and we are in relation? How can we create the transition from what we call the regime of modern/colonial aesthetics, towards decolonial aesthesis?

NM and EM: You have been running and initiating a summer school for a number of years. It would be interesting to know how this compares to what we can do in the university, and to think about the shifts that have happened during your time running the summer school.

RVM: The María Lugones Decolonial Summer School that Walter Mignolo and I co-founded and co-direct since 2010 has become a very meaningful space. It allows us to do things that the university will not allow us to do. We change *what* we teach. We read things that are not in the curriculums of the universities. We change the *who*, the teachers. We do things that rarely happen in university, for example, our intergenerational faculty has everything from a 30-year-old dancer and indigenous / First Nations activist to an 80-year-old academic. We have a mix of professors to people that are not in academia, such as artists. It is an intergenerational and transdisciplinary gathering of students and teachers. Thus, the summer school produces something that the university very rarely gives form to, which is a collective. We become a group and get together each year with lots of joy, in contrast with university that

many of us experience as a lonesome and individualizing space. We made a transversal connection between people coming from many different disciplines, geographies, and with very different life trajectories. We meet through the decolonial. It is a space where, for example, the sociologist and history Professor Jean Casimir from Haiti can be in conversation with the Danish-Trinidadian artist Jeannette Ehlers. We have a common concern which is how to undo coloniality to struggle for justice.

15 years ago, when we arrived in the Netherlands, we never thought that these ideas would take root so strongly in society and that we would see institutional change. It's far from perfect, but we have seen major ethnographic museums and some of the important contemporary art museums, historical museums, engaging with the question of decoloniality in good ways, but also in failed ways, sometimes appropriating the term. I think the summer school played a key role to sustain this debate in the Netherlands.

NM and EM: You mentioned that the decolonial as a term has been misused and appropriated in contexts that could be seen as colonial. Is there a problem still using this term; is it becoming watered down when many people use it without doing the decolonial work?

RVM: Yes, this is happening because now the term is in fashion. If you are doing a project, at least in the Netherlands in the arts, it is likely that you will have to engage with the decolonial question. So, of course, people are appropriating it, just as a concept, and using it naively.

I say that decolonial is not just a system of knowledge that you can use, like deconstruction or post structuralism or instrumental rationality. Decoloniality is an ethical and political project. If you are not engaging with the colonial wound, and not moving towards healing the colonial wound, toward justice, then, in my view, you are not doing anything decolonial no matter if you use the term or not. If you're undoing coloniality, undoing the modern/colonial order you are undoing a system that is premised on the erasure of the Earth-worlds of others and the destruction of Earth. But on the other hand, I think it's important to note that this wave that is happening now is allowing the conversation to reach more people than it would otherwise. I get invited to places because decoloniality is a trend. Nonetheless, in every place, I meet students, artists or practitioners that are truly concerned with coloniality.

In the global North, we don't live in societies where people meet in the square and can talk. People are in the shopping mall or behind their screens, and they are not engaging with each other. So, it is the institutions of culture and education, where we still have some spaces to meet each other and to listen to things we haven't heard before. As Fred Moten (2017) says: We can use those dominant spaces for doing decolonial work.

NM and EM: Why do you think it is in fashion now and do you think the trend will end? What does this kind of wave look like in time?

RVM: Well, I think it is in fashion because students in universities began asking their teachers, why are we reading all this western white literature? There is a generation that is aware of the diversity and complexity of the world, and that sees the university or the museum as insufficient. I think that there is no way back from this broader consciousness. It's not that the fashion will go away and then we will go back to the previous canon. The fact that we are changing what we are read-

ing and changing curriculums and questioning what is acceptable for a museum to reproduce changes institutions and societies. For me it is a qualitative change, no matter if the terms stop being used. There are movements against it, and it will not be perfect. The struggle has been very harsh as well, but it has not been in vain. We can see some change happening.

Note

- 1 To read more about shifting the geopolitics of reason and the terms of the conversation, see Walter Mignolo, 'Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: on (de)coloniality, border thinking, and epistemic disobedience', in: *Postcolonial Studies* 14:3 (2011), pp. 273-283.

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Exhibitions/performances

- Our Colonial Inheritance* (2023) Wereldmuseum, Amsterdam.
- What is left unseen* Exhibition Launch (2019) Central Museum, Utrecht.
- Ehlers, Jeannette (2018), INTO THE DARK, Performance, Maxim Gorki Theatre, for BEBOP2018, Berlin.

8

DECOLONIAL STRATEGIES AND THE SOUTHASIAN IMAGINATION

Auto-narrative, Archival Responses and Counter-narratives

Tanvi Mishra

Photography and the wielding of the camera have roots in the imperial history of the world. Its arrival in South Asia in the mid-19th century was linked to its use as a tool of survey—both architectural and ethnographic—of the colony. While the moment of independence, which entailed the transfer of power from colonial regimes to postcolonial nation-states, can be seen as an inflection point in history, political decolonisation did not necessarily align with the arrival or formation of a decolonial praxis. Owing to the impact of imperialism in the region, resulting in a globally skewed distribution of resources, countries in South Asia came to be extensively documented by Westerners. Photography, which was first deployed to aid the process of establishing colonial control, via surveys, was later, through a kind of neocolonialism, used to maintain the image of the ‘East’ for Western publications and media. The photograph continues, even today, to serve imperialist hegemony.

In this context, this chapter explores practices that do not stem from the impulse to serve a Western demand, but instead fulfil artistic desires, address local or regional audiences or provide counter perspectives for issues that have been historically addressed from the outside looking in. However, provenance—particularly nationality or regionality—may not always serve as a defining marker of decoloniality. By rejecting the hyper-nationalistic agenda of nation-states, and nationally bound identities, decolonial praxis privileges micro-histories, and an intellectual solidarity across borders and political systems. The historiographies that emerge have roots, not in Western art history, but in local art and allied practices or sociological contexts.

Kanak Mani Dixit, the founder of the publication *Himal Southasian*, proposed an ontological shift away from the term “South Asia,” a definition hinged on the geographical region bound by political borders. In its place, he suggested moving towards an identity foregrounded by the single-word “Southasian” connoting a “vast penumbra of intermingling cultures and identities” beyond “our certitudes as citizens of modern-day nation-states” (Singh and Sarwar 2022). This framing of South Asia as “more a sensibility than a geographical region” offers a method for tracing various artistic practices, and their interconnectedness. In our work at PIX—a publication and exhibition practice—where we have been building an archive of contemporary photography in the region, we term this effort as the “Southasian imaginary.” By rejecting the locational specificity imposed by borders,

such a decolonial lens can offer ways to observe not just image practices emerging from the region, but the definition of the region itself.

Auto-Narrative as Political Method

While most nations in South Asia attained national sovereignty by the 1950s, the post-colonial nation state was (and continues to be) fraught with internal political friction. These tensions, which often run across religious, ethnic or caste lines, have led to numerous internal conflicts between the citizens and the State. For many, the colonizer has not left but only changed hands. The newly formed nation-states adopted similar tactics of oppression, this time, however, weaponizing them against its own people.

In India, for instance, while the independence movement against the British was modelled on a Gandhian philosophy of non-violent resistance, the nation's post-independence expression embodied internal violence, discounting the scores of micro-histories that ran counter to its nationalist agenda. In the bid to fashion an identity distinct from that under Western colonisation, India in its post-colonial avatar adopted a position of hegemony—not just in the region, amid its South Asian counterparts, but also towards its own citizens. Enacting forms of internal colonisation—including suppressing the demand for self-determination in Kashmir, maintaining apathy towards the pervasiveness of caste-based atrocities or violence against Muslims and other minorities as well as the muzzling of dissent that called out its sharp turn towards a Hindu-majoritarian entity—the post-colonial nation-state does not necessarily offer an example of decolonial ideology. This can also be seen in other countries in South Asia. In Pakistan, Nepal or Bangladesh, parliamentary democracy has been intermittently suspended due to authoritarian leaderships such as military rule, monarchy setup or single-party governance. Or in Sri Lanka, where thirty years of civil war led to large scale human-rights violations that are yet to be addressed and have left communities vulnerable along ethnic and religious lines. The continued marginalization of previously colonised people in the nation-state exposes the internal hierarchies embedded within these societies.

The decolonial, then, can be framed as the imagination of post-colonial freedoms that position themselves separate from the singular or 'official' national narrative. Lens-based artists use the image to expose their continued subjugation, deploy visibility as a form of justice or envision an emancipatory position, which offers the possibility to transcend everyday oppressions not just in the future, but also the present. Articulated through the language of rights and resistance, decolonial strategies can, then, make space for a multiplicity of freedoms.

However, the medium has been entrenched in the same hierarchies that exist within society, and authorship has historically been dominated by those coming from relatively privileged positions. The White Western photographer has not been the only 'outsider' looking into communities other than his own; often this has also been done by individuals from locally, ethnically or regionally dominant communities that have had access to documenting those that are marginalised.

Under growing pressure on institutions to acknowledge skewed representation, the gradual democratization of the medium as well as of modes of image circulation, South Asia has seen a surge of image-makers using lived experience as a form of autoethnography. Informed by personal history, memory and identity, these practices stemming from a personal impulse offer an expanded outlook of society.

The photobook *Witness Kashmir: 1986–2016/Nine Photographers*, edited by filmmaker Sanjay Kak (2017) is one example of the assimilation of auto-narratives, in contrast to the narrative of the nation-state. Featuring the works of nine Kashmiri photographers, it is a multi-decade record of the enmeshment of violence in the daily reality of Kashmir, a place often described as the “most militarised zone in the world” (2019, SBS News). Kashmir’s tenuous position in South Asian geopolitics has its roots in the partition of India and Pakistan, one of the British Empire’s final orchestrations before departing from the region. A promised referendum, distilling the will of the people, was to decide the fate of Kashmir. However, the vote never took place, leaving the status of the region in limbo. Ever since, it has been beset with conflict, owing to a new form of colonial power exercised by the Indian nation-state over the people of Kashmir. Photography has been used as a tool to carve an image of Kashmir, either continuing the legacy of pictorial colonial imagery depicting it as a coveted paradise, or its immediate corollary, a troubled conflict region needing protection. Whether through Indian cinema or photojournalism, this image was often crafted by those from outside the region, further exaggerating this binary.

With a timeline beginning just before the period of armed resistance in 1989, *Witness* presents a long view of thirty years in Kashmir and the prolonged struggle for self-determination. It is assembled not as visual history of the period, but more as a repository of practices through the lens of lived experience. It reveals the role and position of the photographer in documenting a contested landscape through the testimony of his own experiences. Anecdotal accounts evinced through interviews of each of the photographers gesture to his dual role as both narrator and subject. In bringing to light the daily oppressions under a military occupation, these perspectives help in viewing colonisation not as a historical but as an ongoing force. Kak terms the book as a “a marker, a flag planted on contested ground” (2017, *Witness*, n.p.). For areas such as Kashmir, where long-standing conflicts are fortified by the State’s narratives of control, a book like *Witness* moves against the normalisation of violence and the claims laid upon the Kashmiri story.

Scholar and critic Gayatri Spivak speaks extensively of the marginalised, defining the subaltern as those who “do not give orders, but receive orders” (Paulson 2016). In speaking of the disenfranchisement of such individuals, she concludes that the subaltern cannot speak, because the subaltern does not have a voice (Spivak 1988). While Spivak’s theory emerges from the dual lens of class and gender, in South Asia it cannot be seen without interrogating the role of caste. Challenges posed to Spivak, particularly from oppressed-caste communities, reformulate her commentary, stating that the subaltern does in fact speak, but is not necessarily heard (Dhaktode 2023).

The caste system is a discriminatory sociocultural hierarchy that emerges from within the Hindu fold, advocating for a Brahminical supremacy that has led to historical oppression of Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi communities. While more prominently visible in countries like India, where Hinduism is practiced by the majority, caste has implications for most of the South Asian population. The resonances of this system can be seen within the South Asian photography landscape, where dominant-caste individuals monopolize representation. Within the realm of the auto-narrative, recent years have seen a gradual increase of photographic practices by individuals who self-identify as Dalit and address the question of caste from their own positionalities. This can be seen as within a decolonised cultural imagination that enables historically underrepresented voices to represent or speak from their own realities, rather than others supposedly ‘giving them a voice’.

With crimes against Dalits being waged every 18 minutes by dominant caste groups (Krishnan 2021), there is an inevitable focus on atrocity and death in caste-based visual reportage. In relying on visibility as a path towards justice, M Palani Kumar documents family members of those who have died due to manual scavenging. Since the caste system consigns certain professions to specific castes, the lowest of the caste order—once deemed as ‘untouchables’—are relegated to perform tasks considered menial by others in society. The public’s collective anesthetisation to the dehumanisation of certain communities can be encapsulated in scholar Shahram Khosravi’s comment on the acknowledgment of their personhood only at the moment of death. Referencing examples like George Floyd and Alan Kurdi, he points to the tragedy of how their elevation in public imagination—from a generic group like Black or migrant to a specific individual—is rooted in the spectacle of death. The nameless breathing body is afforded a ‘face’, only once it is deprived of its ability to breathe (Khosravi 2023).

In this context, Kumar’s practice functions as a form of record-keeping of the breathless—reinvigorating public memory and archive. It reiterates anti-caste leader BR Ambedkar’s statement that caste not only divides individuals on the basis of labour, but in turn leads to the segregation of labourers in society (Ambedkar 1936).

Commenting on the larger institutionalized violence of the caste system, Vishal Kumaraswamy in his series *Marana [Demise]* (2022, Figure 8.1) explores how grief moves through the body, as the body moves through public space (Mishra 2023). Using experimental technology of photogrammetry and 3D scanning, Kumaraswamy works in collaboration with two contemporary dancers to animate gestures related to death and grieving in the community. However, unlike Kumar, Kumaraswamy’s practice is distinct from representation, drawing instead from the movements of a funeral procession within his community and how the collective body negotiates public space that is otherwise controlled by those of a higher caste order. He chooses to move away from the documentary image, and creates generative moving images as propositions to expand how Dalit bodies are imagined. In an



Figure 8.1 Vishal Kumaraswamy, ಮರಣ Marana (Demise), 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

effort towards archiving communal practices, he interprets the movements of the body in the procession as “akin to heirlooms inherited as tools of joy, celebration, assertion and resistance” (Deb 2023). Referencing community rituals surrounding death and mourning, Kumaraswamy relies on that which is familiar to him, claiming his choice of articulation to be a “resistant space” that is “easily accessed by members of the community, while placing conditions of access on the Savarna.” By depicting the Dalit body in the digital realm, and placing the emphasis on the performance of the funeral procession in defiance of the discriminatory caste order that governs its movements in everyday reality, the work furthers an alternate imagination—one where individuals can be seen with agency and autonomy, rather than within the restricted confines of an existence defined by oppression.

The decolonial turn can then be seen to be an active negotiation—how an individual or community has historically been represented and how they wish to be defined. Jaisingh Nageswaran in his ongoing series *I Feel like a Fish* compares the isolation imposed during the pandemic to the lifelong discrimination he has felt as a person from a lower caste. In a series of autobiographical texts Nageswaran articulates the stigma and trauma associated with being Dalit in Indian society, as well as the process of gradual reappropriation of his own identity. The bold typography overlaid on the images is at once confrontational and imposing—emphasizing the burden of caste on the everyday lived experience. As alluded to in the title of the image-text work, Nageswaran compares himself to a fish in a fishbowl—watching the outside world but unable to transcend the invisible wall that surrounds him. He describes this condition as “the caste system creates many such fishbowls. And the lower your caste, the smaller your bowl” (Nageswaran 2023).

In reclaiming the script of their own narrative, these artists shift the emphasis away from victimhood when speaking about their own conditions, marking their version as distinct from their historical depictions by dominant communities. The photograph has long served the purpose of fixing our imaginations about peoples and places within its confines. Just like the visual representation of the colony was carefully calibrated by the colonizer to serve his goals of occupying and ‘civilising’ those whom he deemed as barbaric or backward, in contemporary times, how certain communities are seen is also a by-product of modern-day imperialism. The vilification of Muslims after the US government launched its ‘global war on terror’ has been one of the largest exercises of manufacturing a public image that has been undertaken on a global scale in the 21st century. It has impacted not just Muslims living in America but fostered Islamophobia worldwide.

Spurred by its impact on his community in Sri Lanka, Abdul Halik Azeez gravitates towards excavating Muslim histories through a personal lens, and their entanglements with the larger ambit of globalization, progress, and modernity. In *Desert Dreaming* (2019–ongoing), he builds a narrative through his father’s recollections of his travels to West Asia and Europe in search of work. The work comments on the politics of labour migration in the wake of neoliberalisation in Sri Lanka in the 1980s and the impact that political events—both global like 9/11 and local such as the Sri Lankan civil war from 1983–2009—may have on individuals. Prompted by the othering faced by his community in the aftermath of these realities, Halik’s work becomes a prism to examine his own ‘Muslimness’. By focusing on micro-histories and personal memory, he rejects official or linear histories as singular archives of knowledge about communities, and their lives, evolution, and movement in the world. While the work is critical of racist narratives about Muslims, it is also self-critical in its tracing of the move towards religious puritanism amongst Muslims as one response to outside threat. As in Halik’s case, the telling of stories about one’s own reality

offers a possibility to build complex narratives, distinct from the unidimensional or monolithic views that further repetitive tropes—either as victims or as savages—about colonized nations and peoples.

In the search for the multiplicity of narratives, photography alone as a medium can be limiting. Gauri Gill, a photographer based in New Delhi, confronts this in the work *Fields of Sight* (2013–ongoing, Figure 8.2) which she co-authors with Rajesh Vangad, an artist from Dahanu, a coastal village in the state of Maharashtra. Vangad is from the Warli community, an Adivasi or indigenous group that specializes in Warli painting—a folk style embedded in symbolic narrativism that traditionally uses rice flour to paint on mud walls. In their collaboration, Gill’s photographs of Vangad’s village are overlaid with his paintings, filling the gap between what the photographs shows and all that it excludes pertaining to community knowledge, memory and personal history. The sites of Gill’s photographs were significant to Vangad and his recollections about his homeland. As he shared stories with Gill—of the struggle for land rights, political events, ecological destruction, autobiographical history as well as folklore passed through generations—she asked him to narrate these using his specific artform on to the images. Here, Vangad is both narrator and protagonist, a

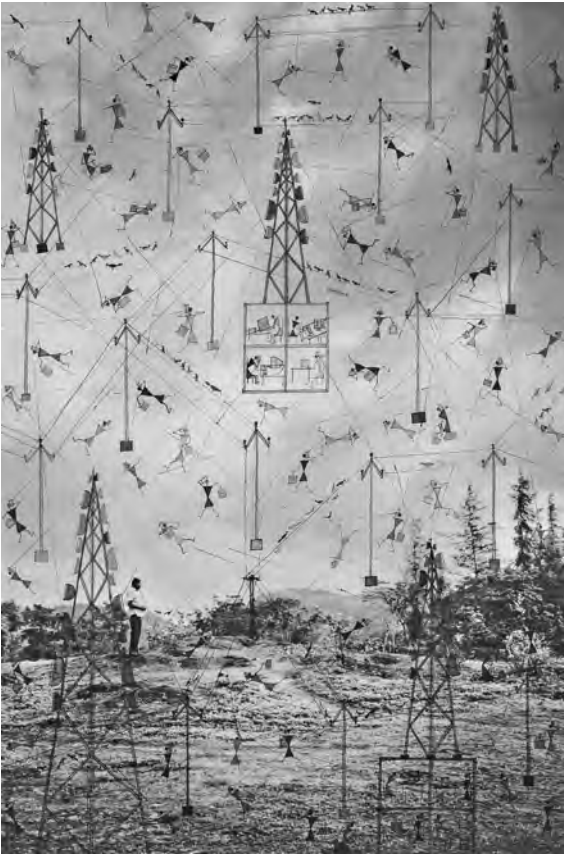


Figure 8.2 Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad, *Paths Through Air*, 2015, from the series ‘Fields of Sight’, 2013–ongoing. Copyright Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad. Courtesy of the artists.

solitary figure in each of Gill's landscape images. Culminating in a new aesthetic, which Gill calls the "commingling of different languages," their collaboration foregrounds Vangad's lived experience—both as artist and as inhabitant of the land. She describes the process as Vangad charting a map of his experiences from place to place and Gill formally constructing it through her images, referring to herself as much a cartographer as a photographer (Gill 2017) in this case.

The choice of aesthetics for works dealing with specific issues can also be seen to have a colonial history. One of the themes in Gill and Vangad's work is ecological destruction, the visual representation of which has predominantly been framed within the language of calamity or loss. This destruction is often the result of the project of development and modernization—imperative to the goal of progress as defined by the nation-state. The image that serves to bring these issues to light is caught in the past—steeped either in the nostalgia of that which is lost or in the violence of its disappearance and decimation. By focusing on absence, they serve to reiterate imperialist claims that indigenous populations and knowledge systems are a reality of a time that has passed. Neither pristine nor passive (Grewal 2016), Vangad's inscriptions on Gill's images bring them alive, rooting them in the contemporary moment teeming with voices of the community and their ancestors. The drawings inhabit the entire frame, populating it with narratives depicting their cosmovision through a complex tapestry of memory, reality and myth. This unique collaboration expands not just conceptions about the medium of photography and its capacities, but also that of the agency of communities native to the land to speak towards their own condition.

Gill and Vangad's collaboration creates a hybrid object difficult to neatly place within the lineage of Western art or photographic history. This amalgamation is a reflection of a global network, one that the camera is inextricably linked to, given its colonial origins (Gaskell and Gujral 2018). It is this globalised view that artist Amber Hammad explores in her series *Glocal*. Observing the influence of Western art history—taught to her during her time in art school in Lahore—on her own art practice, she comments on the fusion of our native regional histories with the realities of growing up in postcolonial nations. Reappropriating iconic images from Western paintings—including Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*, Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or Marc Chagall's *Birthday*—Hammad uses photography to create new articulations with local cultural references. Using digital collage and the self as protagonist, she refers to her compositions as "embedded with ironical twists and aesthetic inversions" (Hammad 2015). The artist's *Mona Lisa* ashes a cigarette into a bottle of Coca Cola and the pitchfork in Hammad's rendition of Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic* is replaced by the Quran. Hammad's mediated image raises questions about the moulding of identity in a globalised world, as well as whether the decolonial image continues to bear traces of the Western art canon, albeit fused with the imprints of local histories.

Archives as Sites of Response

The imperial project constituted an archive in which the mode of definition and categorisation was constructed by the colonizer. Contemporary discourse is slowly acknowledging that there have been deliberate omissions, both within the authorship as well as the deployment of the institutional archive, to serve the colonial desire to document and control. Scholar Ariella Azoulay rejects the limitation of the archive to only a physical object, referring to it as a "technology of violence" to produce documents

which she terms as “weapons” that “force people and objects to embody a large repertoire of imperially crafted categories – ‘slave’, ‘refugee’, ‘infiltrator’, ‘undocumented’, ‘work of art’ or ‘citizen’” (Azoulay 2021: 26). The eight-volume *People of India* album (Watson and Kaye 1868–1875) is an example of this kind of visual taxonomy that classified the native population of India by its ethnic, caste and occupation order.

While the colonizer’s aim was to identify the ‘other’, the postcolonial nation-state has an agenda to define itself and establish its sovereignty through the delineation of political boundaries. The institutional archives of such sovereign states would, then, also fall within Azoulay’s proposition, separating populations through categorisation, rather than serving the decolonial aim of an imagined frame of solidarity within the region.

As a counter-response to the institutional archive, in recent years, artists have been working with family and collected archives that can alternately describe the region through publicly sourced knowledge. In 2010, photographer Anusha Yadav initiated *The Indian Memory Project* (2010–ongoing), inviting submissions of personal histories from the sub-continent. With its anecdotal, snapshot aesthetic, this archive reveals an effort towards building a public history through people’s recollections. As a negotiation between memory and document, it moves through political flashpoints and important historical events as much as milestones in familial trajectories. In rejecting the traditional methods of archival cataloguing, and by gathering through submissions, the project proposes a methodology with which to challenge the hegemony of the official archive.

While valuable as crowd-sourced assimilation, the regionally driven archive displays representational disparities revealing the role of caste and class in determining the availability of photographic archives as family heirlooms. In this context, the work of artist Rajyashri Goody is crucial, in the insertion of her family archive within the larger framework of South Asian photographic records. In *Eat with Great Delight* (2018), as with her larger practice, which also includes performance and sculpture, Goody attempts to “decode and make visible instances of everyday power and resistance within Dalit communities in India”. While acknowledging the importance of images that show the oppression of Dalit people by dominant-caste groups, Goody constantly returns to the need to reinstate “positive” imagery about her community. The collection of images from her family archive centre around food, as records of both special occasions and rituals of daily life. In her accompanying work *Writing Recipes* (2016–ongoing), Goody extracts portions of text from Dalit autobiographies—texts that she feels were essential to her understanding of her own heritage—that speak about food and its various resonances, including themes of hunger, satiety, shame, trauma and joy. Both these works together present a confrontation—humanising the community in opposition to its depiction seen across official records and archives. For Goody, it is to “reveal to the reader just how deep the roots of caste go, such that even the simplest activity of drinking a glass of water or eating a plate of food is coloured by it” (Goody 2022).

Unlike Goody, artist-curator Sajan Mani responds to the pre-existing colonial archive in his project *Wake Up Call for My Ancestors*, based on a collection of photographs related to South India in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Hailing from a family of rubber tappers in Kerala, Mani chanced upon the collection by accident, in which he found depictions of his ancestors and homeland. Registering the predominant colonial gaze, he also encountered markers of caste oppression revealed in the images. This incidental, yet unequivocal, revelation of dominant-caste culpability is made visible through Mani’s decolonial framework—identifying and interrogating the oppressor from a relative position—via the docu-

mentation made available through the archive of the colonial project. Mani initiated the project to activate the “silent voices of Dalit and other archived subaltern subjects, appropriated, exhibited, made accessible, edited, and disseminated as mere photographs.” As a part of the ongoing work, he invites other artists, including Goody, to provide a “conscious counterpoint to the accuracy of colonial photography” (Ragesh 2022).

Responding to the ethnographic intents of the colonial image, artists Pushpamala N and Clare Arni collaborate in their work *Native Women of South India: Manner and Customs* (2000–04). In its ‘ethnographic series’, Pushpamala re-enacts the role of the indigenous subject previously photographed by the colonizer. Referencing photographs and anthropological processes—instrumentalized to record physical attributes as supposed markers of racial difference, which are now widely considered racist and dehumanizing—she casts herself as the native in the frame. Functioning between confrontation and satire, her images aim to evoke a sense of discomfort on the part of the viewer, gesturing to the role of photography in objectifying and essentializing colonized populations. Pushpamala’s intervention also emphasises the anachronistic nature of photographs as a means of determining history (Neef 2020). In adopting an aesthetic that may not accurately reveal the photograph’s contemporary provenance, the artist does to the image what the colonizer did to the subject—removes it from its original context and distorts its meaning. In doing so, the decolonial lens wrestles to return agency back to who was once the ‘other,’ while exposing photography’s tenuous relationship with the archive.

While Western historical records may provide sites of critique, it is also imperative to simultaneously acknowledge local pedagogy and indigenous systems as relevant research locations. Azoulay speaks about dismantling the methods used by historians that define the past as we know it. In one of her propositions, she advocates that they “go on strike,” which she defines as “no more archival work for a while, at least until existing histories are repaired” (2019). While calling for a shift away from these “official records,” Azoulay states:

Historians should withdraw from being the judges (or angels) of history and instead support and endorse community-sourced knowledge. They should go on strike whenever they are asked, by their discipline and peers, to affirm what the latter should know by now, that history is and always was a form of violence.

Embodying the philosophy of learning from local institutions and expertise Munem Wasif in his series titled *Seeds Shall Set Us Free* (2017–2023, Figure 8.3) relies on the knowledge of a community grain bank (part of the *Nayakrishi Andolan*, or New Farmers movement, working with over 300,000 farmers against the corporatisation of agriculture) in Bangladesh. The work addresses the impact of colonial extractivism on ecology and the disruption of agricultural ecosystems by capitalism’s emphasis on practices such as plantation farming and cash-crop cultivation. During British rule, local rice production in Bangladesh was substituted for economically profitable crops, such as jute or indigo. In present-day Bangladesh, despite rice accounting for 78 percent of agrarian production, the local supply still falls short because it is exported on a large scale. The current food scarcity has echoes of the Bengal Famine of 1943, which was a man-made calamity precipitated by the hoarding of grain by British troops. This cyclical repetition of history points towards the adoption of colonial strategies by the nation-state.



Figure 8.3 Munem Wasif, *Seeds Shall Set Us Free*, 2017–2023. Courtesy of the artist.

To evoke the issue, Wasif produces a series of cyanotypes with rice grain. The patterns of arrangement in each piece reference *Alpona*—the Bengali practice of ritual floor painting made with rice flour—as well as seed-drawings made by farmers that depict agricultural implements and musical tools, while simultaneously identifying the types, provenance and other characteristics of the rice. Wasif’s choice of medium embodies a dual purpose—referencing architectural blueprints to gesture towards the notion of land while simultaneously alluding to the Indigo revolt of 1859 in Bengal where farmers resisted by refusing to grow indigo to protest the harm inflicted on the land by the policies of the colonizing forces. Engaging with the plurality of knowledge systems, the work seeks to emphasise the cultural heritage of seeds in a bid to “reimagine an indigenous ‘ecosophical’ mode of agriculture” (Wahab 2017). Grains have names and are identified with deities and spirits. Here, the consequences of the loss of biodiversity, due to practices like monoculture, reach far beyond the predictable impact on food production.

The recording of knowledge in local or indigenous structures may not subscribe to Western methodologies of cataloguing but can be passed on through oral, visual or other community practices. A seed drawing made by the local farmers that was hung as decoration at the grain bank served as Wasif’s initial inspiration and shaped the language of the work. In its second iteration, he interspersed his own photographic explorations with images and documents from the bank’s archive. The seamless presentation can then be seen

as collective knowledge and an attempt to dismantle the visible hierarchies of authorship. Within decolonial ideology, can indigenous knowledge be regarded as expertise, alongside scientific research? And if so, extending this to the image, can indigenous archives be considered at par with those created by artists trained within the photographic canon?

Nepal Picture Library (NPL), is one such archive that works with vernacular imagery, and shifts the discourse of decolonisation from the production to the circulation of the image. Using the photograph as a source for public pedagogy and active public engagement, they see their exhibitions and publications as vehicles “through which Nepali people can deepen meaningful connections with the past” (Nepal Picture Library no date). In building sources of knowledge beyond the Euro-American framework—whose “default universalisation” and resulting intellectual deprivation has been an outcome of colonial legacies (Raqs Media Collective 2018)—initiatives like the NPL offer a path for decentring our research, not just in photography, but also within areas that the archive actively addresses, including caste, labour, or feminism.

The Public Life of Women – A Feminist Memory Project, one of the manifestations from the collection, is an attempt to build a visual archive of a feminist history in Nepal. While tracing the past through these images, the archivists contend with the different contexts



Figure 8.4 Bimala Maskey, Omi Shrestha, Shashikala Sharma, and other Nepali women attend The Fifth World Congress of Women in Moscow, Soviet Union, organized by Women’s International Democratic Federation, the biggest global women’s organization at the time, 1963. Shashikala Sharma Collection. Courtesy Nepal Picture Library.

that generations of Nepali feminists have navigated. In recounting their learnings from the archive, curators Nayantara Gurung Kakshapati and Diwas Raja KC speak about “coming to terms with these differences” and the archive serving as a space of “respite” as well as one in which to “think and act on building stronger and more inclusive feminist futures, by providing context and understanding of the past” (Kakshapati 2023: 520–22). In these articulations, the archive is seen as one that lives and breathes, engaging with the politics of today, rather than a static account of the past. This dynamism occurs also within the archive itself; Raja KC refers to how women who have occupied different political and social locations “meet” each other in the archive. In this assembly, there is a moment where these multiple histories collide with one another. Women who inhabit these images recognise not just themselves, but also their positions within a larger movement, enabling the forging of solidarity across time and space. In the same publication, Raja KC refers to the photograph as “a common currency for feminist identity” (2023: 534). This notion of “commons” can become central to a decolonial practice, and for archives, as Raja KC proposes, to “exist outside the stipulations of authoritative evidence and precious heritage—that is, outside appraisal and custodianship” (2023: 536).

Contemporary Politics and Countering the Narrative

With a rise in right-wing politics, nation-states like India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka have fuelled an ethno-nationalistic agenda in which majoritarian religious identities are leveraged and minorities are persecuted. In this pursuit, the ruling regime in India has weaponized the language of decoloniality to advocate a return of the land to the ‘original inhabitants’, which in their claims are all of Hindu faith, disregarding India’s diverse history and population. However, scholar Priyamvada Gopal refers to this ideology as a “recycled imperial understanding of India” which enacts colonial modes of civilisational superiority (Gopal 2014).

Artist Bani Abidi’s practice comments on these regimes of power, touching upon themes of nationalism and the construct of borders, through the realm of visual culture. Her work *The Reassuring Hand Gestures of Big Men, Small Men, All Men* is an observational study of the body language of powerful men—heads of states, political leaders, authoritarians. Abidi focusses on their performance and the repetition of gestures—the wave, the handshake, the pointed finger—and pokes at the veil upholding the masculinity of these public figures. With tightly cropped visuals from news media arranged in clusters, the collection displays the ubiquity of rhetoric deployed—irrespective of time, geography, or political ideologies. This universality makes it less about the critique of a particular political system and more about the hollow nature of political theatre. Abidi’s work, though informed from the South Asian political landscape, expands beyond its borders, critiquing global systems of power and patriarchy that have transnational reverberations.

Turning the lens away from political leaders towards the people, artists in Myanmar have been responding to the country’s fractured political system and the citizens’ resistance against various military coups. After achieving independence from the British in 1948, Myanmar fell into military rule only a decade later, leading to 50 years of a struggle to attain democracy. Shwe Wutt Hmon was one of many artists who took part in the 2021 citizens’ uprising to protest the coup d’état that took place in February that year, when the democratic government was overthrown by the military junta. As a response to the political ferment, she composed a twin-series of portraits titled *Forever Young* (2021–2022, Figure 8.5). Focusing



Figure 8.5 Shwe Wutt Hmon, from the series *Forever Young* (2021–2022). © Shwe Wutt Hmon. Courtesy of the artist.

on Gen-Z, Hmon portrays the intergenerational aspect of public rage through youth protestors. Simultaneously a record of resistance and censorship, she uses collage to obscure their identities and shield them against backlash by authorities. The youth is a recurring symbol in the political and cultural imagination of the country, owing to its sustained history of repression. Mayco Naing, in her work *Freedom from Fear*, made underwater portraits of young people that were born around the 8888 Uprising—a student-led movement in 1988 opposing the single-party rule which ended in a bloody coup. Reflecting upon the repeated cycles of control enacted through the totalitarian regime, Naing says, “what we have in common with the previous generation, like our parents, is that we still feel like survivors of a brutal history” (Oo 2017). Though made in 2014, her work has resonances in Myanmar’s history as well as the Spring Revolution of 2021, the backdrop for Hmon’s portraits.

One of the outcomes of Myanmar’s Buddhist ethno-nationalism is the brutal persecution of Rohingya Muslims that fled in high numbers to Bangladesh. In a region rife with geopolitical tensions, transnational solidarity amongst artists can be seen as an anti-colonial exercise which strives to push against the limiting delineation of populations by nationalistic, ethnic, or religious identities. In 2019, Thuma collective in Myanmar collaborated with Kaali collective in Bangladesh on a box of artist books titled *Bridging the Naf*, naming it after the river which countless Rohingyas crossed in their journey to safety. While planning their artistic exchange, their own movements were restricted as all Thuma members were denied visas for travel to Bangladesh. Their eventual collaboration, which took place in Yangon, offers an example of forging a praxis of community, running counter to the nationalistic rhetoric propagated by their countries against each other.

While Thuma and Kaali have focused on gender as a unifying force, the collective *The Packet* is a cohort of cultural workers in Sri Lanka, that experiment with aesthetics and positionalities, challenging the notions of art production and forms of output expected by the institutionalised art world, particularly from artists in the Global South. Their prac-

tice emerges through informal modes of play, intimacy, and “speaking from” community, and places focus on “hyperlocality, collaboration and conversation” (The Packet no date). Abdul Halik Azeez, one of the members of The Packet, questions the notion of regionalism in art, asking if a work becomes “regional just because one is situated in the region, and [you] are talking from the reality or knowledge of that region, or if there is something else that makes a work regional” (PIX 2019). In this inquiry lies a potential decolonial framework—for artists to not be constrained by the identities imposed upon them, but instead to be afforded the freedoms to imagine their own positionality and the choice to work within or outside of predefined categories of nationality, ethnicity, gender, caste, and other social markers.

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9

WHAT'S CLASS GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Decoloniality, Spatiality, Class Struggle in the Photographs of *The Evaton Peoples' Archive*

Nomusa Makhubu

The photography exhibition titled *Zilande: The Evaton Peoples' Archive* opened on the 12th of May 2022, following months of research and engagement with families who for decades have lived in Evaton – a freehold area that lies south of Johannesburg, South Africa. Having curated the exhibition working alongside Evaton locals, I positioned it as a key part of a methodology centred on epistemic justice, situating photographs as catalysts for dialogue to bring to the surface narratives that are otherwise neglected in dominant liberation histories. The black-and-white collections of 20th-century portrait photographs belonging to Black families, some of which were taken by prominent photographers such as R.E.D. Sereme (ca. 1950s), remain in family albums, in private archives, yet reveal intricate narratives about how Africans negotiated settler colonialism and its enforcement through apartheid.¹ Depicting Black cosmopolitan school teachers, nurses, doctors, politicians, church groups and organisations, neatly seated in rows and dressed in uniforms, these photographs show a kind of “golden era” for a cosmopolitan, educated, Black, landowning petit-bourgeoisie in the 20th century who founded educational, political and religious institutions in Evaton. The aim is that these photographs – as windows through which the Evaton story could be seen and consequently be told – would re-conscientise younger generations who are stuck in the humiliation and nihilism of Black township life.

Evaton was part of the Wildebeesfontein farm, which was appropriated by Dutch Voortrekkers who formed the Zuid Afrikaanse Republic through the displacement of the BaSotho, BaTswana and abeNguni in the 1800s (Zondo and Makhubu 2023: np). Towards the end of the South African War in 1902, which the British imperial army won, ownership of the area had shifted from Afrikaner to British ownership under Thomas Adams and Charles John Easton. Adams and Easton sold freehold land titles to Africans and Europeans. This set the scene for the rapid emergence of a landowning Black middle class, before the prohibition of Black land ownership under the 1913 Land Act. Different “races” lived side by side in Evaton until the 1950s when, under the notorious Group Areas Act, White residents were moved from Evaton to Residensia and later to Meyerton (Radebe, 2022).² The apartheid regime then systematically expropriated land from Black freehold landowners, turning them into tenants by setting up a permit system and forcing them into debt and into the inevitable sub-division of their original plots. In the democratic era, Evaton residents

have, in different ways, fought to reclaim their freehold titles but have been caught in a protracted and costly land claim process as well as divisive class conflicts between landowners and tenants, which have contributed to social disintegration. The photographic collections paint a picture of a place fallen from grace, with infrastructural, social and political problems stemming from recurrent dispossession.

As a once-flourishing historic place, Evaton nourished liberation movements and was home to Black transnational pan-African institutions. As Human Rights lawyer George Bizos puts it, Evaton is where “the liberation revolution began in earnest” (cited in Noonan 2003: 13). These photographs, therefore, arguably represent a place where defiant Black political and anti-colonial middle-class life was not only possible under the colonial and apartheid regimes but was networked within the broader decolonial shifts across the continent and globally. The 20th century – a time of political transition and decolonisation across the African continent – is characterised by the upsurge of the Black educated middle-class across the continent. Jennifer Bajorek (2020: 5), in her analysis of photography and decolonial imagination in West Africa, defines the 20th century as “a time of radical social and political change” that was marked by the “rise in new nationalisms” and “participation in global liberation movements,” providing fertile grounds for the democratisation of social and expressive media such as photography.

Most of the Evaton family collections are vast, suggesting that photography was valuable to the 20th century Evaton petit-bourgeoisie as a way of inscribing Black public civic engagement. They indicate a sense of community and solidarity between the Black middle and working class. The uniforms, badges, sashes and gestures depicted in group photographs reveal histories of dense civic and political networks. Considering the denial of the right to civic engagement and the continuous systematic obliteration of the “public” in Black areas through colonial land dispossession and racial oppression by colonial and apartheid regimes, it can be argued that photography was a mode of recording and mobilising Black civil life. These photographs signal what Hannah Arendt refers to as the “space of appearance” (Arendt: 1958: 199). This is, as Arendt defines it, “the space where I appear to others as others appear to me where [people] exist not like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly” (Arendt 1958: 198–9). Appearance and visibility bear the potential for dignity, which in oppressive conditions is crucial in sustaining collective action and inscribing it for generations to come. A space of appearance is the:

creation of a common world of seeing and being seen by others [which] transcends our life-span into past and future alike; one which was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us.

(Arendt 1958: 55).

Drawing from Arendt, Ariella Azoulay makes a case for “civil imagination” as a “tool for reading the possible within the concrete” (Azoulay 2012: 234). Photography, Azoulay argues, is an event, presenting an “infinite series of encounters” which potentiates civic engagement across existing class divides. It is that potential for civic participation, the cultivating spaces of appearance and anti-colonial social solidarity, that seems to be surfaced in the Evaton portrait photographs.

Building on this, the exhibition concept of *Zilande* is based on the word *ukuzilanda*, which translates to fetching oneself through enunciating genealogies or recalling one's histories. It is a way of introducing one to others, making oneself *present* to others, through naming their forebears, tracing relationships linked through events and places. *Zilande* connotes the writing of the self into time, akin to "racial time", as Mark Sealy (2019: 3) suggests, to "signify a different but essential colonial temporality at work within a photograph." It is a way of "decolonising the camera" which must "disallow photography's colonial past and its cultural legacies in the present to lie unchallenged and un-agitated" (Sealy 2019: 2). In isiZulu, *ukulanda* is to fetch, while *umlando* means "history" (the isiZulu word that defines a practice, a call to action, a condition of doing). *Zilande* evokes how Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh define decoloniality as "prospectively relational in that it looks, thinks, and acts with the present-future-past" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 100). As a method, the concept is drawn from Athambile Masola who sees it as "resisting erasure" through recuperating suppressed historical accounts (Masola 2018: np). It also reminiscent of how Zaza Hlaethwa describes the work of the photographer Lunga Ntila as "the visual act of collecting discarded parts of herself and imagining the various forms that they can take on" (Hlaethwa 2019: np). Masola's take on it, however, draws attention to "the danger" that, in attending to histories, and in this case to photographs, in our woundedness, "we tend to only want to remember the positive part of our histories" (Masola 2018: np). As the practice of fetching narratives into the present, *ukuzilanda* through photography, can also be a temporal mode through which to see historical contradictions and the production of social difference.

Evaton Against Colonial Logics

Zilande juxtaposed 20th-century studio photographs drawn from family albums with contemporary photographs documenting specific sites in Evaton such as the Wilberforce Institute, ruins in Residensia and buildings of African Independent Churches. In curating the exhibition, we intentionally chose the township community hall Mafatsane – a site where there is public interface with local government. This is where the Black unemployed wait in long queues to collect social grants from the South African Social Security Agency and where the offices for civic and immigration services (Department of Home Affairs) are located, among other government service offices. Shifting from typical gallery spaces, which in South Africa are often in cities or near suburbs and therefore generally inaccessible to working class Black communities, we located the exhibition in Evaton to transgress the unchanging racialised and class-differentiated spatial order in South Africa and, in general, what Frantz Fanon (1963: 38) referred to as a "system of compartments" in the ordering of "the colonial world," which in examining this ordering and "geographical layout" would "allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonised society will be reorganised."

Rather than extracting the visual history of Evaton for the consumption of the usual middle- to upper-class gallery goers, we positioned the exhibition to spark debates about Evaton's histories of dispossession and liberation movements, to find ways to "see" how spatial ordering shapes class solidarity. The photographs, maps and other paraphernalia kept by Evaton families signal the possibility to prompt a turning point, to appeal to what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as the inner struggle that is "played out in outer terrains" where "nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (Anzaldúa 1987: 87). In *Zilande*, residents could identify personalities depicted in the photographs, including politicians, activists and educationalists, as well as those who played a key role in institutions based in Evaton.



Figure 9.1 Teachers educated at the Wilberforce Institute, Evaton, circa 1950s. Image from the collection of the Lakaje Family.

From the collection belonging to the Lakaje family is a photograph of teachers (Figure 9.1) who were educated at the Wilberforce Institute, dressed in uniform. Teachers during the 20th century formed part of the Black middle class, which broadly included local businessmen, teachers, doctors, nurses and lawyers as opposed to factory, domestic and mine workers. Although a portrait, this photograph is also about place. The uniform represents the Wilberforce Institute – a Black-led educational institution founded in 1905 by the American African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church. Initially known as the Lillian Derrick Institute, named after the teacher and spouse of the African-American cleric Bishop William Benjamin Derrick, Wilberforce is known to have resisted missionary education and was run independently of European missionaries (Booyse 2010: 130). It has a reputation as a major institution that produced a class of educated Black professionals in teaching, nursing and agriculture. Also included in the exhibition is a photograph of Bonner Hall, which is an iconic building located in a part of the Wilberforce campus that is no longer used. As a site, Wilberforce is representative of the trans-Atlantic networks that contributed to the making of Evaton, drawing African elites from different parts of the country who taught or were educated there. Currently, the older buildings are dilapidated, appearing like ruins and echo what Laura Ann Stoler (2013) refers to as the “ongoing nature of the imperial process” (Figure 9.2).

Evaton portrait photographs, however, register the civic life that is now made invisible though the infrastructural decay resulting from state neglect. They suggest a counternarrative to White missionaries, drawing attention transnational networks of Black missionaries and independent institution building. Located in the industrial city of Johannesburg, Evaton reflects the taxonomising nature of coloniality – its partitioning, stratification, fragmentation and segmentation of the world which fuelled the imperialist phases of capitalism and continues to sow disunity. The class divide, seen as the ferment of individual social mobility aspirations, fragments collectiveness and solidarity.



Figure 9.2 Bonner Hall, Wilberforce Institute, Evaton, 2021. Photograph: Nomusa Makhubu.

Imaging the Black Middle Class in the 20th Century

The photographic representation of the 20th-century Black middle class is not without predicament. Some scholars see the African elite as a product of colonial Christian missionaries who sought to “civilise” Africans by educating them (Cobley 1990, Southall 2016, Khunou et al. 2020). Joseph Gibson (2020) argues that Africans were mis-educated into Western lifestyles. The sociologist Roger Southall (2016: 25) points out that literacy and land were key in establishing the Black middle class, arguing that “many missionary societies granted individual title to parcels of land to their most loyal converts, or assisted their adherents to acquire land, believing that this would help entrench solid Christian values and ways of life.” Perceived as a colonial import, 20th century Black middle-class life was criticised in a newspaper clipping in the collection compiled by the photographer Ernest Cole titled “African Middle Class,” which describes “an all-pervading dullness,” and a “dreadful respectability” of the African middle classes (Cole and Staff Reporter 1963: 9). It states that:

many of these teachers, clerks, businessmen and nurses would like nothing better than to be invited to the homes of those Whites for whom opportunity has provided a better education and a degree of culture and gracious living. In these White homes are all the things they long for and try hard to emulate, all that they admire in Western civilisation [...] I have never encountered among these people the slightest hint of hostility to Whites as a race. They are pathetically eager to be accepted as friends and intellectual equals – and many are, of course intellectually on a par with ‘middle-class’ Whites. [...] Who is going to invite these people to their homes? Only a handful of

liberal-minded Whites and churchmen who have rejected social apartheid and who don't mind what the neighbours think. [...] Nationalists may rant and rave about negritude and forging an African personality, but it is my personal belief after years of rubbing shoulders with Africans that those who have escaped the industrial colour bar and risen to a few 'white-collar' jobs open to them desire above all else to be accepted by the Whites, and particularly by English-speaking Whites.

Described as a hopelessly apolitical class, the Black middle class is seen as beholden to not much else but fraternising with and being like the White English middle class. They are perceived as a class of educated nationalists who, rather than annihilate coloniality, sought to gain control of the same systems of power designed to reproduce it, further deepening the wedge between classes, between the educated and uneducated, diffusing the struggle and leading further into the current socio-economic demise.

These tensions can also be traced in similar projects that re-surface 19th and 20th century photographs from Black middle-class family albums. Axiomatic is Santu Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album*, which, as he puts it, collates photographs that "portray Africans in a very different manner" but "run the risk of being dismissed or ignored as evidence of pathologies of bourgeois delusions" (Mofokeng 1996: 56). Mofokeng referred to 19th and 20th century Black portrait photography as "evocative of artifices of Victorian photography" portraying "integrationists" who "owned property or had acquired Christian mission education, and they considered themselves to be 'civilized'," and who, "taking their model from colonial officials and settlers, especially the English, lived life in manner and dress very similar to those of European immigrants" (1996: 54, 56). James T. Campbell refers to the photographs as indicating a "historical catastrophe" in which "victims of 'mental colonisation'," following a "colonial script," were yet to be subjected to the reality of racism (Campbell cited in Krouse 2013: n.p.).

Interestingly, Thomas Allen Harris (2014) characterises Black portrait photography of the middle class in the USA as a "battleground". In his documentary film, *Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People* (Harris 2014), Harris asks: "how was, is, the photograph used in the battle between two legacies: self-affirmation and negation?" He then argues that "our salvation as a people, as a culture, depends on solving the wounds of this war – a war of images" (Harris 2014). Inspired by Deborah Willis' book *Reflections in Black* (Harris 2014), Harris' film reveals the double capacity for images to wound (through photographs of slaves) and to heal or humanise (through images of Black landowning families). This is what Willis considers to be significant in how 20th century photographs show "what it meant to have a political, artistic and social history of photography" of people "building themselves" in a world where "freedom is inextricably tied to the power to create one's self-image" (Harris 2014). In the film, the photographer Carrie Mae Weems points out that "there had been really something wrong with the way in which the Black subject had been imaged" (Weems cited in Harris: 2014). Black portraiture provides a terrain for contestation and, as Harris frames it, gives a glimpse into "a world of people who dressed fabulously, who led interesting lives and who were represented in family albums in a celebratory way" (Harris 2014). Social ascent, in the film, is also linked to ways of circumscribing otherwise denied national belonging for the African diaspora.

Reflections upon its contestations position the photograph as a negotiation for the denied fundamental right to life in the prospect of being able to move in and out of place and time, to escape being arrested in the colonial pictorial regimes and to claim a public sphere. This

negotiation is akin to what Stuart Hall (cited in Sealy 2019: 222) refers to as “a wager,” arguing that “Black self-portraiture, in this historical moment, has broken many of its links with the dominant ‘western’ humanist celebration of self and has become more the staking of a claim, a wager. Here, the Black self-image is, in a double sense, an exposure, a coming out. The self is caught emerging.” Hall’s positioning of Black portraiture as a wager alludes to the spaces of encounter that unsettle the colonial frame in the photograph. Wagers, however, come with risk. In retrieving what is celebrated globally as the counter-archive of restorative, dignifying and affirming images signifying agency and progress, against the primitivising imagery of Black people as an unintelligible “servant race” whose labour is exploited, one is still left with a glaring tension between Black labourers and landowners. The self is not only caught emerging but also resisting on frame or another.

An informative example is the Demas collection, included in *Zilande*, which I encountered in the research for the exhibition and visit to the Demas family house in August 2021. Laid out on a table, in the Demas’ home in Evaton, were large brown envelopes, albums and plastic bags full of photographs and newspaper clippings – a family archive of photographs taken in the 20th century. There were photographs of Charles Demas who was born in 1901 in Worcester, and came to Evaton to study at Wilberforce Institute, where his father was an elder. He studied at the University of Fort Hare and returned to Wilberforce to teach, and later as a principal was on its board of trustees in the 1940s. In the photographs, Demas poses among other teachers at Wilberforce, and among family members.

Ella Demas, the daughter of Charles Demas, also pointed out several photographs of her mother, Mary Demas, who was the president of the Evaton Homemakers Club, a member of the Girl Wayfarers Association Transvaal, on the Crogman Community Clinic board and the Standing Committee for Child Welfare Work of the National Council of African Women of South Africa (NCAW). In these photographs, women pose elegantly in wayfarer and church uniforms. The group photographs of uniformed home makers, wayfarers, pathfinders and church societies show the agency and leadership of Black middle-class women who rallied, through what could be retrospectively considered decolonial feminist work, in the interests of the social welfare of Black communities (Figure 9.3). When asked what being a wayfarer or pathfinder involved, Ella Demas in an interview (2021) explained that “they were like scouts” and sought to teach each other skills.

A photograph shows Mary Demas seated, hands and legs crossed, among the formally dressed executive committee members of the Home Makers Club such as Winifred Nhlapo, Eunice Opperman, Mariam Nhlapo and Tryphina Zulu. While Wayfarers and Home Makers clubs were social organisations led by women teachers and nurses aimed at enculturating Black middle-class life, they also created spaces of public engagement and solidarity. Meeting minutes of wayfarer organisations, particularly the Homemakers Club, of which Mary Demas was president, show that activities were focused on domestic skills that primed women for middle-class life such as hosting tea parties, demonstrating patchwork, knitting pullovers, smocking and beadwork. It would be erroneous, however, to simply see these organisations as merely concerned with domestic undertakings. Some of the women in the wayfarer organisations were also part of the National Council of African Women of South Africa (NCAW), such as was the case with Mary Demas who was on the Standing Committee for Child Welfare. NCAW, allied with the National Council of Women, which was a South African chapter of the International Council of Women, was founded in 1933 by women such as Minah Tembeka Soga and Charlotte Maxeke (who also taught at Wilberforce Institute). It was established “in direct oppo-



Figure 9.3 Executive Committee of the Home Makers Club, Evaton. circa 1950s. Image from the collection of the Demas Family.

sition to the oppressive ‘Hertzog Bills’ [particularly the Representation of Natives Act and the Native Trust and Land Act] that were being discussed in the white parliament at the time” and were aimed at extending legislation that hindered possession of land by Black people, allocating 87% of the land to Whites (Botha 2003: 108). NCAW carried out upliftment programmes addressing several social and political predicaments faced by Black people. In this way, portrait photographs document women’s civic, political and intellectual contributions.

These organisations placed an emphasis on education, which differentiated the Black middle class from the working class. Seen as a tool for social ascent, education represented the battle over the mind of the colonised and, simultaneously, the tool through which to decolonise. As Gayatri Spivak puts it: “Colonialism was committed to the education of a certain class. It was interested in the seemingly permanent operation of an altered normality” (Spivak 2004: 524). Education in the context of decolonisation and independence across the African continent was mired in debates arising from, on the one hand, the presence of missionary schools, and on the other, the rise of a nationalist, liberal Black middle-class and institutions shaping education that “was believed to breed, in the colonized subjects, critical thinkers and ‘troublemakers’ who constituted a formidable, even mortal threat to the entire colonial system” (Okeke-Agulu 2015: 22). Women’s organisations in Evaton took shape in this broader context.

Elaborating on the role of education at a NCAW conference in 1965, then-president Abegail Mapanzela argues that social change is geared towards developing “a classless society” and states that “sociologists agree that generally the direction of the development of any society has been towards the elimination of class barriers that have kept people rigidly confined to one group or another” (Mapanzela 1965: np). She also notes that “the collective social rising of the worker in industry, the vertical mobility of the men and women in technical and administrative occupations, also the upward trend in the status of some of the professions have collectively caused the emergence of a large middle-class” which she considers to be “the backbone of our modern societies.” To Mapanzela, the emergence of “a wealthy literate and articulate African” most of whom “know little or care less about the traditional way of life of the African societies in the Reserves” is an equaliser where one need not be born in a royal family to participate in “the ordering of lives of the people.” However, she also argues that “the principle of participation in the material and cultural comforts of civilisation has become the basic trend of middle-class life” and “the average African man and woman today wishes to avail himself/herself of the materials and benefits that money can buy or bartering can procure plus the facility for education and cultural upliftment.” “In fact,” she argues, “to be a worthy member of her society, the African woman must be educated and cultured.” Social ascent would lead to “the protection of the individual and family.” In contrast to criticism against the middle class, Mapanzela situates the educated middle class as the key to social and political change (Mapanzela 1965: np).

Considering this, a point can be made that the Black middle class in 20th-century Evaton portrayed in the photographs did not always aspire to crass accumulation and wealth but also arguably strove for community respectability, education and Pan Africanism – they represented a specific type of public intellectual invested in the upliftment of those under oppression what Mapanzela called a classless society.

Class Solidarity and the Decolonial Paradox

While conducting this study in Evaton, it was hard to ignore the pervasive narratives of class resentment that continue to brew mistrust, weakening the historical cross-class solidarity that can be traced in some of the photographs. Yet, the organisations depicted in the photographs and archived documents suggest a productive relationship between the Black *petit-bourgeoisie* and the proletariat. This also shows that when speaking of a Black middle class, one should not assume one stable meaning across time. Rather, it is “a shifting target” and a “precarious position” (Khunou et al. 2020: 1, 17). In contemporary South Africa, the conditions of segregation impact on class solidarity. Evaton was a place where people who are now categorised in different “races” and classes were once integrated.

Racial segregation in the latter half of the 20th century, and subsequent displacement and dispossession, meant that the Black middle and working classes lived under the same circumstances of oppression, recurrent dispossession and continued harassment by the apartheid state, in places such as Evaton. It was only in post-1994 South Africa that the Black middle class moved into former White areas and traversed between townships and suburbs. In a sense, they are seen to occupy an in-between space in their proximity to colonial institutions and involvement in anti-colonial struggles. This has not only further fragmented class solidarity but has also contributed to the tendency to glorify the working class as the mainstay of liberation politics while vilifying the middle class as “sell-outs” and vice versa (undermining and ignoring the working class while servicing the middle class

who have some access to the purchase of basic rights to education, health, food, etc.). Class, especially as projected in these photographs, is understood as a volatile condition in the context of racial inequality.

The question of class remains central even in the post-1994 revival of decolonial thought through Fallism – the decolonial movements such as RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall that erupted in 2015 when university students in South Africa called for decolonised institutional cultures and fee-free Africa-centred decolonial education. Key to Fallist decolonial movements was the solidarity between a burgeoning but precarious Black middle-class and a majority working class. Fallist decolonial movements involved middle-class students in former White universities protesting in solidarity with working-class students and staff (cleaners and security guards employed by private companies providing outsourced labour to the university). It was cynically termed a “coconut struggle” of Black middle-class youth who are “whitened” by their middle-class status but were soon to discover that class does not trump race and that access to White privileges does not change racism, Rekgotsotse Chikane, who is sometimes called “the resident coconut” that “advocate[s] for socio-economic equality and the practical realisation of decoloniality,” cautions against the notion of a “coconut struggle” to avoid characterising the Black petit bourgeoisie as a saviour class to the working class but maintains that the role of “coconuts” is not to be underestimated (Chikane: 2018: np).

The Fallist journalist and novelist Panashe Chigumadzi (2015: np), who has focused her research on “why some coconuts, despite their privileges, are joining their working-class comrades in black anti-racist struggles,” captures these predicaments. Chigumadzi (2015) points out that the Black middle class, or in this case “coconuts”, are “privileged socio-economically by this very proximity to whiteness” but “it is those experiences of whiteness as a system” that “forces coconuts to become conscious.” She characterises the middle class as mediatory but exilic: not quite belonging with the majority Black working class or with the White middle class” (Chigumadzi 2015). Drawing a link between contemporary “coconuts” and 20th century “native elites” such as WEB Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, SEK Mqhayi, Rolihlahla Mandela, Mangaliso Sobukwe, Bantu Biko and others, Chigumadzi argues that they did not completely assimilate and were not “unthinking dupes of whiteness” but were “a Trojan horse of sorts” – challenging what they were taught and had “no interest in reproducing [it] and wanted to “dismantle it entirely” (Chigumadzi: 2015: np).

It may be useful to consider a set of photographs included in *Zilande* from a family album of the Wilberforce Institute alumnus, Morake Petrus “Smash” Mokoena, a nickname he acquired as goalkeeper in a soccer team called the Black Angels (Mokoena, 2022). Although Mokoena was a businessman, he was also politically involved, eventually becoming a Delmas Treason trialist. These photographs depict the Mokoena family in their lounge, patio and garden. Some are photographs of Mokoena with friends and comrades, and there is also a widely reproduced framed photograph of Mokoena among the Delmas Treason Trialists.³ The large Mokoena family house with white columns was built by the self-taught architect and photographer R.E.D. Sereme. Mokoena’s son, Teboho, explains that the apartheid government, agitated by his father’s status and political involvement, constantly harassed his family. In an interview, he states: “when my father built the house, the whites, the Boers came and said he can’t build a house that big” (Mokoena, 2022).

His middle-class status represented a threat to the apartheid regime. Teboho explained that the family came to Evaton from the Free State. His grandparents lived on a farm where they had witnessed violence against Black people. Specifically, his grandmother saw a White man kicking a Black child on the back and said in Sesotho: “ha ke na ngoana a tla rahioa ke legoa tshena (no child of mine will be kicked by a White man like this)” (Mokoena, 2022). That is when they decided to buy land in Small Farms, Evaton. Mokoena became the secretary of the Evaton Ratepayers Association (ERA), known for helping people from rural areas get permits and resources like blankets and food and was implicated in supporting the UDF’s Million Signature Campaign in 1984 aimed at rallying political groups against the Tricameral parliament and Black Local Authorities.⁴ On the 26th of April 1984, ERA, led by Mokoena, held a meeting “to discuss leasehold rights to the land that had been acquired” (Noonan 2003: 56). At that meeting, a work stayaway against rent increases was planned for the 3rd of September 1984 and a resolution to force councillors to resign by boycotting their businesses and to block buses and taxis from operating was reached. (Noonan 2003: 56) His involvement in defending landownership – crucial to the reinforcement of the Black middle class in Evaton – led him to be part of the Vaal Uprisings against apartheid policies impacting on all Black people, a role for which he was charged with treason. Alongside activists from the Vaal such as Gcina Malindi, Oupa Hlomuka and Bavumile Vilakazi, Mokoena was arrested under Section 29 of the Internal Security Act.

Pointing to one of the photographs – depicting a child in the family lounge holding up a poster of the Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW) – Teboho also recalls the important role played by his mother, Molobi, who was born in Evaton. There were several FEDTRAW posters in the photographs. Some were hung on the lounge walls – indicating his mother’s fearless activism. FEDTRAW was formed in December 1984 and was aimed at bringing “women together around such practical issues as rent increases, high cost of food, and problems in the education system” (Hassim 2006: 62). These photographs, it can be argued, show the potential for civil imagination and to re-imagine class solidarity, despite current hostilities.

Portrait photography kindles nostalgic, optimistic yet bitter-sweet conversations about the meaningful and dignified Black life that was and could be. Class, however, shows up the contradictions of the 20th century. Positioning photographs as *ukuzilanda* (to retrieve genealogies through enunciation) provides clues about how anti-colonial social solidarity and spaces of appearance were forged. It points to perspectives about land ownership, not as part of capitalist accumulation, but to reclaim land that was dispossessed to re-build the independent communities that flourished.

Notes

- 1 ‘Black’, in this chapter, is used as an inclusive term encompassing racial categories such as ‘Black’, ‘Coloured’ and ‘Indian’, which were constructed by the South African apartheid regime to distinguish Whiteness. Evaton landowners would have been classified under different racial categories during the apartheid period. Drawn from Bantu Biko, the term ‘Black’ is not used as a racial classification to essentialise Blackness but rather as a political identity. In the South African Students’ Organisation, of which Biko was president, defined ‘Blacks’ as “those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations” (SASO Policy Manifesto cited in Badat 1999: 377-378). Biko argued that being Black “is not a matter of pigmentation” but “an attitude of mind” (Badat 1999: 377-378).

- 2 The Group Areas Act of 1950 segregated races. Through this legislation, racially mixed areas were razed down, and people were forcibly removed to racial zones.
- 3 The Delmas Treason Trial, which lasted 3 years, is considered as “one of the longest-running political trials in South African legal history” where 22 activists who were part of the Vaal Civic Association (VCA) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) were accused of activating the Vaal Uprisings in the 1980s (Rueedi 2021: 4). They were represented by lawyers George Bizos, Ismail Tayob and Arthur Chaskalson.
- 4 The Tricameral parliament, legislated in 1984, enabled “Coloureds” and Indians in South Africa to participate politically alongside Whites, while the African population was left out to be represented by authorities in their ethnic homelands.

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10

TONGUE IN CHEEK

Julie Edel Hardenberg's Visual Language

Louise Wolthers

In the diverse field of art revolving around questions of decoloniality, artistic strategies diverge: some practices primarily focus on decolonizing archives, for instance by reappropriating historical imagery and documents belonging to the colonial era, while others create new visualities that tap directly into a postcolonial present and potential futures. The work of Greenlandic artist Julie Edel Hardenberg (b. 1971) is closest to the latter approach. She uses a matter-of-fact visual grammar, where photography plays a vital role as a part of contemporary communication rather than as a historical document. This chapter discusses her decolonial methodology in the groundbreaking photobook *The Quiet Diversity* from 2005, a work which resonates with more recent parts of Edel Hardenberg's oeuvre. Rather than approaching photography as a record of the past, she uses the medium to formulate new collective and affective spaces. A central issue in Edel Hardenberg's decolonial methodology is addressing mechanisms of silencing as well as access to language, and here photography is key as an accessible means of visual expression.

In the context of post- and decoloniality, Greenland (or in Greenlandic: Kalaallit Nunaat) and its relationship to the former colonial power Denmark make an interesting case. Combining integration and independence in "creative ways," as political science scholar Ulrik Pram Gad writes, "in effect slowing down full formal decolonization" (Gad 2017: 9), The colonial history can be traced back to 1721 when the missionary Hans Egede established a trading company and Lutheran mission on the Greenlandic Westcoast, which led to the Danish government claiming total trade monopoly in 1796. During the 1800s, Denmark profited from Greenland's natural resources, not least through mining, and in 1921 – after Denmark had sold the Virgin Island colonies (1917) to the USA and held no further colonial possessions in Africa or India – it declared sovereignty over the entire Greenlandic territory.¹ This manifested in a 200-year colonial rule with substantial social and economic inequalities between the two populations. Greenlanders experienced severe restrictions such as not being able to travel abroad without permission, and the Danish language functioned as a gateway to educational or welfare progress. But the beginning of World War II and Germany's occupation of Denmark marked a rupture in the Danish monopoly and thus economic dependency of Greenland: The USA established military bases in Greenland, thus representing the potential for new, global trading and defense

partners. After the war, the wider Danish population became increasingly aware of the disproportionate poverty in Greenland, not least due to the exposure of the Greenlanders' harsh living conditions in major Danish newspapers. But when the UN demanded that colonial powers give up their possessions, Denmark in effect played the Greenlandic negotiators by only giving them a choice between integration and total self-reliance, even though the UN had proposed other possibilities (see Gad 2017 and Jensen 2012). So, while in 1953 the new Danish constitution was celebrated for incorporating Greenland into Denmark by granting equal citizen rights with representation in the parliament etc., Denmark was still acting as a colonial ruler needing to govern the politically "immature" Greenland (see Gad 2017 and Rud 2021).

Formally, Greenland became an equal part of Denmark, which however still exercised colonial power in several cases, including forced migrations. One example is the controversial case in 1953 when Danish authorities demanded the population of the small settlement of Uummannaq to move and relocate 150 km further north due to the expansion of the American Thule Air Base. In the historical contextualization of Julie Edel Hardenberg's scrutiny of the Greenland–Danish relations, it is important to mention the growing Greenlandic civil rights protests from 1970 and forward, in which one of the many discriminatory issues was the dominance of the Danish language. Changing attitudes led to an increased embrace of Inuit culture and language in, for instance, rock music. And finally, the Greenlandic Home Rule Government was implemented in 1979, which signaled independence to some extent. But in fact, Denmark continues to hold political and cultural influence, through as Gad phrases it: "peculiar games played by Denmark to maintain its sovereignty over Greenland" (Gad 2017: 11). Greenland transferred to self-government in 2009 but is still part of the Danish kingdom together with the Faroe Islands.

The continuous negotiations of governmentality and integrity have over the years spurred heavy debates in Greenland about protecting national identity. One culmination of these discussions was in 2004 when the Home Rule Government launched a cultural policy report that aimed to strengthen the 'authentic' and 'original' Greenlandic identity by supporting the traditional arts and crafts of Inuit cultural heritage (Salto 2008: 22). It was in this context, the following year, that Julie Edel Hardenberg's photobook *The Quiet Diversity / Nīpaatsumik assiginnngisitaarneq / Den stille Mangfoldighed*, a trilingual publication by the small Greenlandic publisher Milik, appeared as a powerful statement against fixed and conservative concepts of identity. It quickly made a considerable impact, had a wide distribution, has received much critical acclaim and is currently in its third (Hardenberg 2008) edition.

Hybrid Identities

The Quiet Diversity is an innovative, multifaceted statement of the diversity in contemporary Greenlandic identities and cultures, which is reflected in both the population's many ethnicities and in the foundation of daily life: homes, clothes, food, work, nature, and leisure. This is visualized in a combination of photographic approaches from the documentary to the conceptual. Several portrait series mimic traditional ethnographic categorizations but disturb a potentially racializing gaze by playing with stereotypes and expectations of what an Inuit, a Greenlander, and consequently a non-Greenlander looks like. In some of these series, props like fur coats, flags, and jewelry are used to deconstruct ethnic stereotypes and thus point to the performativity of cultural identification (Hardenberg 2008: 29, 38–39,

54–55). In others, factual subtitles such as “One of us is Canadian” or “Our mother is from China and our father is from Australia” may seem surprising to a viewer without knowledge of the plurality of cultural identities in Greenland (Hardenberg 2008: 58). Other series of photographs are zooming in on traces of cultural influences from abroad in home décor, architecture, menus at restaurants. Not surprisingly, the Danish influence is dominating (for example, porcelain figurines of the Royal Copenhagen brand, pictures of Denmark’s royal family, and conventional Danish dishes), but the photographs also testify to both Asian and American influences and inspirations in Greenlandic everyday and popular culture.

Thus, the overall theme and strategy of the book is indeed the subversion of stereotypical thinking while nuancing ideas about Greenlandic identity, which has also been the main focus in the critical, academic reception of the book. For instance, in an article for the anthology *Globalizing Art. Negotiating Place, Identity and Nation in Contemporary Nordic Art*, Lil-Ann Körber discusses *The Quiet Diversity* in relation to questions of identity and hybridity as conceptualized by Homi Bhabha. Her analysis shows how Hardenberg uses the subversive potential of “figurations of the hybrid as manifestations of diversity” (Körber 2011: 183) not least through unexpected de- and recontextualizations. Bhabha’s theory of hybridity is notably unfolded in *The Location of Culture* where he not only discusses the stereotype and the critical practice of mimicry but also conceptualizes the notion of Third Space, an ambivalent in-between space of hybridity, which becomes concrete and evident in Edel Hardenberg’s book and other works.

Similarly, photography scholar Mette Sandbye, in an article about three contemporary photobooks from Greenland, analyses Hardenberg’s critical play with stereotypes in *The Quiet Diversity* and states how she “punctures and deflates the idea of an authentic Greenland and the Greenlander as someone with a fixed and shared culture, identity, and history. Her Greenlander is instead someone with a hybrid and constantly fluctuating identity” (Sandbye 2016: 81–82). The people portrayed in the book, Sandbye states, “do indeed represent a quiet diversity, but at the same time the book blasts and questions all sorts of colonial and folkloristic representations and in so doing also represents a suggestion of what a new ‘ethno-aesthetics’ might be” (Sandbye: 82). The term ethno-aesthetics was coined by artist Pia Arke (1958–2007), and it signifies appropriations of imposed ethnic identities to form aesthetic critiques of the formation of the same stereotypes. Arke was a pioneer in the critical engagement with Greenlandic-Danish colonial history through combined methods of ethnography, art theory, and an artistic practice spanning performance, photography, drawings and more. In a manifesto-like article, Arke wrote how the new ethno-aesthetics of contemporary Greenlandic artists work with clever imitations (Arke 2010(1995): 21). This is similar to the mimicry described by Bhabha – as well as Hardenberg’s methodology. *The Quiet Diversity* was not only a powerful counter-statement to the above-mentioned Home Rule’s cultural policy report, but also to the often reductive views on Greenland and Greenlanders in Denmark: As a mystical place of fantastic nature with a noble indigenous population or as a country of underdeveloped small towns full of alcoholics, which is also a consistent stigmatizing stereotype of Greenlanders living in Denmark. The constellation of photographs of people, places, and objects offers a multifaceted picture of everyday heterogeneity, like in the series of living rooms filled with artefacts and images uniting Inuit, Danish, and international cultures (Hardenberg 2008: 82–107). In other photographs, clothing, pets, and public architecture challenge essentialist ideas about what is ‘typical’ or ‘natural’ Greenland.

Pia Arke whose mother was Greenlandic and father Danish, re-appropriated what is considered a derogatory term (“mongrel”) to describe her mixed background, thus deliberately positioning herself outside the norm (Bertelsen, 2010:8). Julie Edel Hardenberg also embodies hybridity in several ways. She was born in the capital Nuuk to a Greenlandic mother and a Danish father, whose lineage goes back to Berthel Laersen, a Dane who was brought to Greenland in 1739 to become a missionary in the footsteps of Hans Egede (Hardenberg 2023). Since childhood, Hardenberg has experienced abuses of power by representatives of the Danish administration in Greenland. One example is an early episode of a Danish school master telling her off in primary school, and she recounts the strong feeling of injustice making her get up and leave. (Hardenberg 2023). The push towards rightful independence made her discover art as a space of freedom, experimentation, and expression. This drive has also informed her artistic development into unconventional hybrid aesthetics and methodologies. She studied art in Finland, Norway, and Denmark, embracing influences significantly different from both traditional Greenlandic art practices, and from the Danish cultural canon, with its limited and often exotifying visualizations of Greenland.

It is Hardenberg’s own explorations across Greenland that form the basis for *The Quiet Diversity*. After her initial studies in Finland and Norway (where she also continuously encountered prejudice towards Greenland) Hardenberg decided to return and travel “like an explorer in her own country,” which she had not done previously because long-distance journeys are both difficult and costly. She says: “I discovered how little I knew – and that Greenland consists of several different cultures” (Hardenberg 2023). She even experienced being perceived as a foreigner herself on the Greenlandic East coast, which is more tightly related to Inuit culture than Nuuk with its connections to Denmark and the Nordic countries. These experiences can be seen as driving her to scrutinize the mechanisms of cultural preconceptions while also finding a common language to play with and eventually subvert them.

Shortly after publishing *The Quiet Diversity*, Julie Edel Hardenberg participated in the seminal, comprehensive international exhibition *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition in Five Acts* (Kuratorisk Aktion 2004) with a selection of 27 photographs from the book. She also showed the work *Made in* (1995), a series of passport photos of the artist wearing various exotified and stereotypical ‘ethnic’ attributes (these are also included in the introduction to *The Quiet Diversity*) as well as an installation consisting of the Nordic flags connected to blood bags. The play with the affective symbolism of props and flags as markers of (national) identity has been consistent throughout Hardenberg’s oeuvre.

Today, some 20 years later, she states how “both the Inuit and Scandinavian is imbedded in our bodies” (Hardenberg 2023) and argues that Greenlanders subsequently are more open to accepting difference and ethnic diversity than the conventionally more homogenous and closed-off (if not xenophobic) Danes. But this does not mean that Edel Hardenberg idolizes or romanticizes contemporary Greenland. Rather, she identifies a complex reluctance in Greenlandic society to criticize Denmark, to talk back; a reluctance that she sees as internalized colonialism and whitewashing (Jakobsen 2021). Subsequently, she often assumes a critical, killjoy position towards both the Greenlandic and Danish official policies. This is a position that unites the artist and the activist, as she states: “I don’t know whether I’m doing art or activism.... It is about not being silenced!” (Hardenberg 2023)

The very first photograph in *The Quiet Diversity* points to this hybrid intertwining of the personal, artistic, activist, and political in Hardenberg's practice: The camera is looking down at a set of hands with open palms placed together so that what is known as the heart lines are connected. The title is Danish: *Mønsterbryder* (directly translated: *Pattern breaker*) and is a wordplay that signifies someone deliberately taking a different path in life than the one being laid out by familial expectations or societal conventions. As an artist using photography, Hardenberg breaks the 'patterns', i.e. the visual, exotifying, or typologizing conventions of the Western gaze, for instance embodied by the Danish colonial scientists and explorer-photographers (a type of photographer that is still prevalent today). The image and its title not only apply to the artist herself but also to general subversions of cultural standards and expected norms according to nationality and other identity markers. Thus, the image reads as an homage to the people portrayed in the book. Finally, the hands also allude to gesturing, touch, and tactility as semiotic leitmotifs in *The Quiet Diversity*, which I will return to after a closer look at the photobook format.

The Decolonial Potential of the Photobook

The Quiet Diversity is inviting, unpretentious, and funny. The unrestricted mix of documentary and conceptual approaches to photography open up for the unpredictable de- and recontextualizations that Körber points to. The result is a heterogeneous mosaic of quotidian life in Greenland. In the above-mentioned article Mette Sandbye sees *The Quiet Diversity* as part of a process that is "blasting the language of colonialism". And here photography is particularly important, "precisely because this is the medium most used to represent Greenland and thus the medium that formulated the hitherto highly conventional colonial image of Greenland" (Sandbye: 68). Sandbye alludes to the historical representations created by Danish explorers, scientists, or officials. Another term photographic practices supporting the colonial overview and possession could be "visualizations," in Nicholas Mirzoeff's terminology, where the complex of visuality encompasses Western surveillance, mapping, and registration (Mirzoeff 2011). Based on analyses of Hardenberg's book along with Pia Arke's *Scoresbysundhistorier* and Jacob Aue Sobol's *Sabine*, Sandbye states how these artists "simultaneously relate to colonialism, appropriate and deconstruct its language (photography), and point towards new and critical positions" (Sandbye: 71). These photographic positions could be thought of as claiming "the right to look," not only looking back at the colonial regime but also looking differently than the colonial gaze, by finding a new visual language. Here the photobook format with its possibilities of sequencing, seriality, and duration holds potentials for counter-colonial mimicry and complexity.

The photobook offers a means of stitching together elements that are otherwise rarely viewed in dialogue with each other. In *Scoresbysundhistorier*, Pia Arke intertwines family history and colonial history based on archival photographs. Sharing Arke's decolonial artistic criticality, Edel Hardenberg has a different approach in *The Quiet Diversity*, which can be seen as a patchwork of the wider community that makes up contemporary Greenland. The artist's mode of working has been collaborative and based on meetings and conversations, as she remarks in the foreword: "Texts and titles in the book are listed in the language in which they were stated" (Hardenberg 2008: 11). This decision not only reflects the globalized multilingual Greenlandic population. Her statement also indicates that the people

whose faces, houses, and belongings have been photographed have articulated how they wanted to be identified. In the foreword, Hardenberg mentions which camera she has used but explicitly states that technology in itself has not been a priority – rather “she has reacted on impulse,” prioritizing the meeting without letting technical concerns get in the way (Hardenberg 2008: 11). This is not unlike the ubiquitous mobile and digital photographic community building that is employed today where photographs are means of sharing, connecting, and communicating.

With its reach, mobility, and accessibility, the photobook format has the potential to facilitate an agency that other artistic platforms or public institutions might not offer. Books allow for mass distribution radically different from the exclusive art gallery and museum world. In this context, Indian artist and photographer Dayanita Singh should be mentioned as a pioneer experimenting with expanding the photobook format and even subverting the conventional hierarchy between publications and exhibitions, approaching the latter as platforms to display her books. As Kajri Jain explains, Singh “intermeshes heterogeneous forms and economies of images-objects-actions-spaces in a manner consistent with the postcolonial condition. This logic extends to Singh’s techniques, which do not pit the authentic and handmade against the mass-produced, but work across the spectrum between them” (Jain 2022).

Regarding the photobook as collaboration, *The Quiet Diversity* could be compared to projects by, for instance, the Danish photographer, graphic designer, and publisher Tina Enghoff, who has worked in different marginalized communities in Greenland for a considerable number of years. One of her projects (*Siunissaq*) has resulted in various cookbooks made by young people and illustrated with their own photographs (Molbech 2016; Berliner and Enghoff 2019). Her more recent photobook, *Displaced*, is made in collaboration with the Greenlander David Samuel Josef Naeman Kristoffersen, whose story of being moved to Denmark as a child and losing his native language is told in a mosaic of images and words (Enghoff 2020). Another artist who is recognized for her collaborative photobooks is American photographer Wendy Ewald, who, like Enghoff and Hardenberg, combines the documentary and the conceptual. One example is the staged photographs as visual alphabets of Spanish, African-American, Arabic – and “white girls” – that she created with students in *American Alphabets* 2005. In the afterword, Ewald writes: “These alphabet primers prove how fluid and creative letters and language can be. The alphabet we learn as law is, in fact, an ongoing act of the imagination” (Ewald 2005: 166). *American Alphabets* is relevant in this context because sections in *The Quiet Diversity* also allude to elements from illustrated children’s books and primers, where a basic vocabulary is taught through images, such as, for example, *Illut* (‘houses’) (Hardenberg 2008: 169). One page is even filled with the onomatopoeic words for animal sounds (132), while other spreads compile various traffic signs, street names (in both Danish and Greenlandic), and other symbols of navigation and communication (128–129).

Children and what might be considered childishness are prevalent in *The Quiet Diversity*, for instance through notions of games and play such as the series “Playing Ethnic” (Hardenberg 2008: 54–55) and “One of us is Canadian. Guess who” (57). Hardenberg also employs games and play in other works, such as in the early *Make a guess* (1999) which consists of a set of dice with photographs of faces. Could the artist be mimicking children’s books and toys in order to point to colonial Denmark’s infantilizing view of Greenland as a child expected to show gratitude to and respect for Denmark as

the motherland? Cultural scholar and researcher in Greenlandic postcoloniality Kirsten Thisted (2018) has shown how this family metaphor, which underpins the narrative of Danish reason and beneficence versus Greenlandic affect and submissiveness, often still clings to the relationship of Danes and Greenlanders. Similarly, Hardenberg recounts how, throughout her life, she and people around her have been expected to fit into an inferior position of feeling and showing gratitude towards Denmark and its representatives (Hardenberg 2023). But at the same time, she finds hope in the historical justice in the fact that “young descendants of the colonizers are today working for independence and de-colonization” (Hardenberg 2023). And this, I think, points to another and more pragmatic reason for including kids and young people in *The Quiet Diversity*: They are the future of postcolonial Greenland, and the book speaks to them as much as to adult readers from the art context. The format of the photobook thus offers multiple potentials of decolonial mimicry, anti-institutional agency, and dissemination into the public, democratic discourse.

The process of learning a language and the meaning of names and signs point to issues of power, performativity, and agency, and, ultimately, the importance of formulating an anti-colonial vocabulary. With reference to the more established post- and decolonial discourses in the English-, French-, Spanish-, and Dutch-speaking cultures, Hardenberg today states: “we lack our own decolonial language.” Questions of silencing, speech, and being heard have been key in postcolonial studies, particularly since Spivak’s landmark text “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988). Pia Arke once explained that her images “are about the silence that envelops the ties between Greenland and Denmark” (Jonsson 2021; 11). Hardenberg continues the quest of breaking that silence. As artist, writer, activist, and researcher in decoloniality, Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld states in her recent tribute to *The Quiet Diversity*: “The quiet is never silent” (Dirckinck-Holmfeld 2023: 30). She references Tina Campt’s method of listening to images, to the “lower frequencies” that are often overshadowed by stereotypical representations and biases in the public debate. Dirckinck-Holmfeld sees the quotidian practice of resistance, its sound, in its plurality of frequencies in Hardenberg’s book.

Mother-Tongue and Mixed Materialities

Language and accessibility have continued to be central to Hardenberg’s art and activism. In a recent essay “Like an Immigrant,” she describes growing up in a school system divided into Greenlandic- and Danish-speaking classes, which created a deep inequality, since the Danish-speaking kids would have major advantages in seeking higher education, studies abroad, and other international possibilities (Hardenberg 2022: 252–253). Today classes are integrated, but the Danish language is still given priority. Paradoxically, even though the Greenlandic society seeks to educate children with respect to their culture and language, citizens are expected to adapt to a system based on Danish language and culture, “which only results in a sense of exclusion, seclusion and inadequacy” (253). Furthermore, even though society is based on a standard of Greenlandic-Danish bilingualism, this is only expected of the Greenlandic-speaking population – not of the privileged Danish-speaking population, who can easily manage without the Greenlandic language. As a protest against this systemic discrimination, Hardenberg launched the project *Ikiqatigiilluta (ved at hjælpes ad)* 2008–2009 “with the aim of examining the linguistic, sociocultural, and cognitive effects of



Figure 10.1 Julie Edel Hardenberg, *Untitled*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

using my first language in my own country,” asking “What would happen if I tried to manage in Greenland/Nuuk using only my mother tongue?” (254). In other words, she simply only spoke Greenlandic for a year. She recounts various reactions of surprise to this, which only confirms that the colonial history still has active traces in contemporary Greenlandic society. Some of these traces – linguistic as well as material – are visualized in *The Quiet Diversity*.

The presence of text and multiple languages in the book disturbs the conventional idea of photography as something purely visual by insisting, as Tina Campt does, on the acoustic aspects of what we are looking at. For Campt, listening to images “is an ensemble of seeing, feeling, being affected, contacted, and moved beyond the distance of sight and observer” (Campt 2017: 42). Anthropologist and photography historian Elizabeth Edwards also embraces the sensory experiences of the photographic beyond the visual, when her analysis let the photographs shift from being “the objectifying tendencies of vision, to the connectedness of sound and touch” (Edwards 2008: 46). Similarly, *The Quiet Diversity*, itself a physical 200-page softcover object to be handled, leafed through, and passed around, is full of sound, taste, and touch.

One strand of motives in the book that is seldom mentioned in its academic reception is subjects belonging to nature: landscape, animals, plants. The first photograph following Iben Salto’s introduction shows the backside of what appears to be a naked body holding up two sets of black feathers as ‘tail feathers’ (Hardenberg 2008: 25, Figure 10.1). This ‘hybrid creature’ signals a connection with nature, but the viewer has no way of telling whether the moment is part of a dance/performance or the pose is playfully staged for the camera. With Julie Edel Hardenberg’s tongue-in-cheek methodology in mind, the image – a body turning its back and showing its ‘tail feathers’ – could also be seen as a potential mockery of any readings of the image as something from a ‘traditional’ ritual. The feathers



Figure 10.2 Julie Edel Hardenberg, *69W 77N, Evening 25 May, 2004*, 2004. From the series *Point of View*. Courtesy of the artist.

and the image thus point to the book's hybridity theme and its refusal of binary categorizations and dichotomies: Greenlanders versus others, nature versus culture, play versus politics and protest.

'Nature' presents a diversity parallel to that among people, homes, and artefacts. This is manifested in the grid of colorful flowers titled 'Arctic garden', which is juxtaposed with the grid of portraits in 'Arctic mix' (Hardenberg 2008: 62-63). The plants and animals throughout the book – potatoes, mushrooms, cats, horses, geese, and dogs – are of mixed origin and prompt questions of what is 'authentically' Inuit or 'naturally' belonging to Greenland. This strand of photographs can be seen as a critical commentary on a stereotypical conception of indigeneness of something linked to nature. As Thisted notes of the term 'indigenous', it is ambiguous "because, on the one hand [it] recognizes Inuit's close relationship with nature and support their land claims, but on the other hand they lock them securely in this relationship, making them one with nature they live in, in the same way as the seals, polar bears, and walrus are considered to be part of the Arctic environment" (Thisted 2012: 280). Parallel to other decolonizing processes, for instance in Sapmi, *The Quiet Diversity* deliberately breaks tendencies to fix Inuit and Greenlanders in concepts of authentic, static nature as opposed to a progressive modernity. The book thus illustrates the complex and dynamic relationality – in effect, the ecology – between people, plants, animals, and their material surroundings.

A series of landscape photographs with the overall title *Point of View* (Hardenberg 2008: 118–121) plays with notions of fixing and unfixing through photography: The first image, called *69W 77N, Evening 25 May, 2004* (Figure 10.2) is anchored in time and place: a

sunny May evening in the most northern part of Greenland. Framed by a football goal standing on the snow-covered ice, a group of kids are seen standing near a boat resting on the icy shore. This painterly scene is split in the following images, where the artist has moved, first to photograph the boat together with a small iceberg and then, from a different angle, to capture the moment right after a boy has kicked the ball, now hanging in the air at the center of the image, almost resembling a moon in the sky. This series not only testifies to the physical embodiment and movement of the artist as she chooses various framings and cropping with her camera. It can also be said to mimic basic instructions in photography (zoom, angle, point, shoot etc.) and thus again play with the idea of a primer or a manual of learning a (visual) language – and the performative power of describing, of *pointing to* the world.

Julie Edel Hardenberg's use of photography and the photobook format opens up connections between the visual, language, sound, and affect which in turn challenge colonial silencing. With its unconventional heterogeneity of crossing genres, expressions, and expectations encompassing the quotidian, play, and mimicry, *The Quiet Diversity* points to a different, sensory way of seeing, in effect a counter-visibility.

As already mentioned, Julie Edel Hardenberg's practice is not limited to photography. She moves freely between media and is well-known for her striking objects and installations. One such early iconic work (from 2005) holds a nod to Pia Arke in its title: *Etnoæstetisk Spændetroje (Ethno-aesthetic straitjacket)*. It is a red and white straitjacket sewn together of fabric with the pattern of the Danish flag on one side and the Greenlandic flag on the other. The straitjacket is emblematic of her methods of appropriation, montage, collage, and stitching together in a practice, where tactility plays a major role. Not only does she consistently work with various kinds of fabric, but hair is also a recurrent material, for instance in the series *White washed* (2020), where bundles of long black and blonde hair are attached to various kinds of dish and paint brushes. Where coloniality exerts power through displacements of people, archives, knowledge, and administration (Seiding 2019), Hardenberg's decolonial artistic and activist work can be described as play with deliberate misplacements. Just like her consistent use of the red and white colors of the Danish and Greenlandic flags, the employment of black and blond hair allows her to work with symbolism, humor, and satire that is recognizable and comprehensible to a wide audience across ages and places.

Julie Edel Hardenberg's works are often seen as provocative in both Greenland and Denmark, which only attests to their efficacy as active disruptions of the normative 'white-washed' discourses in both countries. Her objects, installations and photographs are both direct and tongue-in-cheek statements; tricksters that reverse aesthetic hierarchies and ultimately claim space. And it is within this decolonial practice that *The Quiet Diversity* makes use of the communicative, democratic, and anti-institutional potentials of photography and the photobook. Some 20 years after its appearance it is still circulated, viewed, read – and highly relevant.

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Note

- 1 Up until recently, there has been little critical awareness of Denmark's role in the slave trade with colonial interventions on the East coast of Africa (Denmark established a fort in Ghana on 'The Gold coast') and the US Virgin Islands, which were then called the Danish West Indies. St. John, St Thomas and St. Croix were Danish colonies between the 1700s and 1917 when Denmark sold the islands to the United States of America. While Danish plantation owners profited for centuries, especially from the sugar farmed by enslaved people from Eastern Africa, an idealized narrative of Denmark as a humanistic colonizer has prevailed (Odumuso 618 ff.). Apart from Greenland, the former Danish North-Atlantic colonies comprise the Faroe Islands and Iceland.

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11

LOCALISING IDENTITY AND UNDERSTANDING LEGACY

A New Generation of Hungarian Photographers Searches for the ‘Locus of Enunciation’

Ágnes Báthly

In this chapter, my aim is to provide a framework to interpret the latest artistic productions of Hungarian contemporary photography in their relation to decoloniality and the critique of modernity. For this purpose, I will establish a wider perspective – Eastern Europe – and place these artworks in the flow of the region’s contemporary history. I dare to take this step because the region called Eastern Europe has a long and deeply interconnected and intertwined “common” history, which goes back for hundreds of years well beyond the modern nation-state and the Socialist Eastern Bloc. I will outline and reconstruct Eastern European discourses which appeared after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. The most ambitious challenge of this intellectual flow is an experiment to apply decoloniality to the social and political theory of the region, and this aspiration influences the local domain of both history and the theory of contemporary art. This challenge is a core issue which I attempt to briefly outline later in this chapter through connecting social history and theory with art theory and history.

Identifying the key arguments, I intend to highlight some Eastern European contributors within these discourses and summarize their standpoints, which are fundamental in understanding the complexity of the cultural and political transformations of the region in the recent past. I would like to emphasize that this selection focuses on Eastern European intellectuals who are related to this subject. Giving a voice to this perspective – here the Eastern-European positionality – allows a specific decolonial discourse to take shape.

In the second part of this chapter, I introduce a few representatives of a new generation of contemporary photographers and provide insight into their works. In my view, these projects can be interpreted as reflections of cultural and political transformation and have a significant connection to the discourses mentioned above. It is important to note that these projects are considered as artistic products of instinctive but thoughtful attention towards contemporary local society and its changes, rather than as a result of a conscious application of theoretical frameworks.

Eastern Europe

In order to interrogate ‘Eastern Europe’ as a term, one must handle both parts with equal importance. In this use, ‘Europe’ stands for the West and as the center of social theory which

is based on the history of modernity. Meanwhile, ‘Eastern’ signifies a slightly off-Western experience. However, as József Böröcz, a Hungarian-American sociologist points out “here the East is fundamentally West” (Bodnár 2014:259, referring to Böröcz 2001a). We have to add another layer to this notion, and this is the postwar history of the region in which the state socialist political establishment introduced a different system of organization in economic and social relations. Thus these societies were simultaneously state socialist while being East European. This is why in the term ‘post-socialism’ – which is often applied to the historical era after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc – different features and problems are converging. As Bodnár formulates, based on Todorova:

Post-socialism as a term technically obscures this overlap of different historical legacies of Eastern Europe and socialism

(Bodnár 2014:258, referring to Todorova 2009)

Then she adds another important comment considering the Western gaze on the region: “the fact that socialism happened in Eastern Europe generated some uneasiness among socialist-minded intellectuals in the ‘West’ in the evaluation of ‘existing socialism’.”(Bodnár 2014:258). In this sense, Eastern Europe is a political rather than a geographical concept and legacy as with many of the historical consequence of the geopolitical inclusions and exclusions by the entity which can be called “the West” (Todorova 2009).

To elaborate on this statement, it is edifying to take a closer look at the notion of the Balkans and ‘Balkanization’ which provides significant insight as it illuminates the symbolic order of the Eastern European region and Europe as such (Zizek 2000). As Maria Todorova emphasizes, the geopolitical content and derogative connotations of the recent idea of “the Balkans” originated in the 1960s and became widespread at the end of the Cold War. This had a close connection to the transforming political alliances in the divided and then “reunited” Europe, which included the decline of the strategic importance of Greece in the region (which was a Western ally situated in the socialist Balkans). Meanwhile, those Eastern European countries that were geographically closer to Western Europe began to compete for inclusion in Western economic and security alliances (e.g., NATO). This was the moment when “Central Europe” as a geographical and geopolitical concept emerged as a result of the successful political lobbying of Czech, Polish and Hungarian intellectuals in the Soviet empire’s period of decline (Todorova 2005).

Modernity

Modernity as a concept and as a driving force of progression is key to understanding the differentiations, hierarchy and power relations inside Europe. The theory of self-colonization that is the main argument of Aleksander Kiossev, the Bulgarian cultural theorist, was a widely discussed and criticized concept which centers on the notion of modernity. From Kiossev’s perspective, the economic and technological dimensions of modernity are complemented by a less visible but very important cultural and symbolic dimension which is the source of more subtle, but definitely political, power. According to Kiossev the mode of operation of modernity is that:

Being neutral, rational and universal, the economy of money and markets can not achieve boundaries of its own and in itself, it is not able to become precisely a national economy. It needs to be doubled by a second one – the economy of symbols and models of identity, regulating the relationship of nations and groups to themselves as well as their relationship to the Others.

(Kiossev 1999:114).

If the political dimensions of the modern concept of ‘Otherness’ outside Europe can be explained by colonization (Wallerstein 1997, Chakrabarty 2000), close geographical proximity generated different kinds of strategies of othering, in which Western intellectuals played an active role. American historian Larry Wolff elaborated the historical perspective about the process of ‘Inventing Eastern Europe’ which would lead us back to the correspondence of philosophers of the Enlightenment with Catherine the Great. Catherine was from Prussia (a German state before the unification of Germany), and after she came to Russia she experienced something we would call now a ‘cultural shock’ and shared her impressions and experiences with Voltaire, Diderot and d’Alambert about the “backwardness” of the region and its inhabitants (Wolff 1994). Kiossev focuses on the other side of the story, the function and activity of the Eastern European intellectuals, who were the main forgers of the self-colonizing narratives. From the perspective of the modern globalization of the world, some cultures were geographically close to the central “Great Nations” but were “insufficiently alien, insufficiently distant and insufficiently backwards, in contrast to the African tribes” so that they were European but not to a real extent, “stuck on the periphery of Civilisation” (Kiossev 1999:114).

This discussion of Great Nations converges with the argument of Norbert Elias for whom the key to understanding the origin of this symbolic and hierarchical system inside Europe is the differentiation between the “Civilisation” (Zivilisation) of Great Nations and the “Culture” (Kultur) of other nations. This distinction originated from Germany as a way to define its relation to Eastern European nation-formations in the region, which according to this perspective were lacking stable boundaries and institutions of civil society (Elias 1978). This geopolitical situation and cultural condition determined a special identity formation and an alternative modernization as well. As Kiossev argues, in these cultures which appear to reside on the periphery, the social and symbolic order of Modernity is not carried out through violence and forceful colonization as in the native cultures of America or Africa which were conquered and destroyed by Europeans. Although this order is neither the result of traditionally designated economic nor social factors, Kiossev’s pivotal argument is that the birth of these nations on the periphery of Europe is permeated by a very peculiar symbolic economy, where they import alien values and civilizational models by themselves so that “they colonise their own authenticity through these foreign models” (Kiossev 1999).

It is important to emphasize the fact that the key categories of ‘modernity’ originated from the Western European experience, and although modernity has become global, the ‘West’ is the home of such concepts and phenomena as freedom, citizenship, public space, urbanization and social class (Chakrabarty 2000, Bodnár 2014). This has multiple significant implications for our perception of the World outside of the ‘West’. Igor Zabel, the influential Slovenian art theorist, illuminated the problem of authenticity versus modernity, the question of representation of cultures (of ethnic groups and nations) which are influenced by modernity to varying degrees. His text “We and the Others” (Zabel 1998) is an anecdote about Western curators in Africa who attempted to select authentic artefacts

for an exhibition, but this collection was heavily criticized by the local elites because they deplored the objects as “kitschy” and bad imitations of folk art which in addition do not represent the development and modernization of “the real” Africa. The moral of the story is edifying and disturbing. The models provided by the Western world are interiorized as ideals almost everywhere through different social processes. Zabel pointed out that, unfortunately, good intentions are not enough and even with a careful approach we still can develop a misleading “colonial” gaze (through which we can perceive our own culture as well); and this unintentionally implies culturally false prejudices and choices (Zabel 1998).

Modernization and industrialization were, of course, part of the 19th- and 20th-century history of Eastern Europe, yet the postwar era introduced a different kind of political establishment, namely state socialism. The socialist hypothesis was based on the notion of progress, which manifested in forced modernization and industrialization (as in the ‘West’, but more accelerated). Consequently, an alternative modernity emerged in the region. The critique of this kind of modernization and the concept of ‘modernity’ connected to it thus can be traced back to a political narrative as a criticism or opposition to the forced modernization programs of local socialist regimes in the Eastern European region. This was also a narrative against environmental destruction and in defense of traditional ways of life (e.g., non-industrial and non-centralized forms such as rural farming or fishing). It is therefore rooted in the political opposition of the former communist system and the related counter-culture. After the regime change, in these independent democracies, new challenges emerged but the political discourse centered around the ideas of belatedness and progression again. This new independence engendered new dependencies on Western models, expectations and resources (Buden 2010). The “Eastern Enlargement” of the EU and its promising “catching up with the West” narrative did not seem to fulfill these high hopes but verified many skeptical predictions (Böröcz 2001b). The re-evaluative criticism of modernity can be summarized as Judit Bodnár, a Hungarian sociologist, formulated:

Modernity is an incomplete project, and perhaps bound to be so. This should be taken seriously. One way to do so is to apply this recognition to all parts of the world and simultaneously destabilize the conceptual staples of modernity from “within” and “without,” from the “centre” and the “border,” and in-between, from the perspective of all kinds of “lesser” modernities. [...] A reversed and more inclusive comparative strategy can, and perhaps should, be quite unsettling, but only in this way will current theories of global modernity not be a mere projection of classical theory on the global scale.

(Bodnár 2014:265.)

‘Post’ and ‘De’

Postmodernism, post-socialism, postcolonialism, decolonization, decommunization: these terms have much in common, yet have many differences as well. ‘Post’ denotes an attitude to time, mainly towards the past but also its consequences to the future. However, the ‘post’ in the postmodern and the ‘post’ in the postcolonial or the ‘post’ in postcommunist are not the same ‘posts’ (Appiah 1991, Bodnár 2014). This is why, after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, it was a real challenge to apply decoloniality and postcoloniality in the social sciences just as in the art history and theory of Eastern Europe. Decolonial theories as intellectual and political trends were present in Eastern Europe during the socialist era,

but in that period, they were subtly or explicitly incorporated and instrumentalized by the official political discourse as a means of forming political alliances with former colonial countries. However, they fulfilled a completely different function in the turbulent decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall or, for example, in the alter-globalization movements worldwide. Cultural identity gathered new higher stakes not just in politics, but also in the highly politicized, newly emerging concept of contemporary art. Okwui Enwezor himself – one of the most important art theorists of this era – was skeptical towards the emancipatory potential of the “postcolonial turn” (Enwezor 2008). He argued that the critique of postmodernism against the “grand” universal historical narratives, supplemented by the false consciousness of identity-based discourses, was not enough in itself to decentralize the global cultural order, and although culture itself was decentralized, the same cannot be said about the power working in it. Enwezor’s main achievement was that he unveiled the geopolitical dimension of art history and theory as well as the structures and practices resulting from it. From his perspective, such problems originated from the imperial roots of modern art, and postcolonial theory entered this discourse and attempted to exert influence and make change. The issue of cultural identity is critical in this undertaking because representation is not just a matter of practice but also political self-awareness in the field of representation. The decolonization of representation, therefore, means the creation of new relations to cultures and histories, to rationalization and transformation, which includes cultural transformation, assimilation, new practices, processes and exchanges. The way an artist relates to historical and cultural traditions gathered political stakes; at the same time political community and cultural community will become synonymous. However, post-colonialism brought the critique of modernity from postmodernism, and with it the suspicion of the concept of “progress”, and this is the point where post-colonialism can be distinguished from discourses related to nationalism: the (political) identity of the modern artist was clearly based on the framework of the modern nation-state, and this is true also for the successors of this tradition. Decolonization, like post-colonialism, transforms the subject of cultural discourse, while the nation-state “reinvents” the identity of the artist and changes the order of tradition for posterity. Finally, Enwezor pointed out that the weakness of the identity-based discourse lies in the self-contradictory urge to merge the universal with the partial, the self with the “other”, and the social side of artistic production, which is still an unresolved problem in globalized contemporary art (Enwezor 2008).

Passing Beyond the Symbolic System of the Cold War

The post-socialist society inherited the symbolic system of the Cold War, which the culture also set in motion (Burawoy & Verder 1999). Just as post-colonial analysis includes the representation of the “self and the other(s)”, this seems obvious in the case of post-socialism as well. But these representations are quite different in the socialist and capitalist worlds which also have used (and instrumentalized politically) this symbolic system in popular culture, art, media and propaganda. Many elements in this representation originated from and have been influenced by politics in the intervening period (Fox et al. 2012). Edit András, a Hungarian art historian, argues that during the socialist era and shortly after regime change (following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc) marketable identities for Eastern European artists became a matter of high stakes. According to her, positions and practices were rooted in and depended on the reproduction and maintenance of the representation of the “other”

of the Cold War. This other was the hypothetical subject which represented a surface upon which the West could project its stereotypes and characterizations of Socialism. This kind of construction lost its legitimacy with the regime change (András 2009, 2016). Yet, based on her argument, we can also conclude that the preference for the “identity market” changed and, after the “homogenous grey mass” of the socialist bloc, the Eastern European region developed a colorful landscape, which as a result, created a more colorful selection of identities. However, this colorful landscape shared a common feature of “belatedness”. This relationship to the past is described by Croatian philosopher Boris Buden in his provocative text “Children of Postcommunism” (2010). He criticizes the widespread narrative which branded the communist past as morally “bad” and/or a path in “the wrong direction”, because consequently citizens of this region would be deprived of this past – of their accumulated experiential knowledge – which would in turn limit their agency. Buden uses a “child status” metaphor which suggests that depriving the population of its historical identity “absolves” these societies of their “sin” (that of their communist past). This necessitates placing them under guardianship, which can be nothing else but the paternalistic protection by “mature” Western societies (Buden 2010). Transitology was the name of the study which supposedly supported the change from one political regime to another, namely from socialism to capitalism, but it was not as objective as it was branded. Its discursive power and ideology, which Buden analyzed, had many more or less tragic consequences in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, not least the deliberate application of destructive economic shock therapy. For example, it took decades for Eastern Europeans to accept and rediscover their socialist modernist architectural heritage, and the vast majority of these buildings still have not acquired any legal cultural protection.

The influential Polish art historian and theorist Piotr Piotrowski referred to the Cold War as an important reference without which we cannot understand Eastern European art. He argues that the Cold War had a cultural and symbolic dimension, in which the struggle between the USA and the Soviet empire was a competition between “two universalism myths”, that of liberalism and that of socialism. This included two styles claiming universality in art: (Western) modernism and socialist realism. He emphasizes that the stakes in this competition included global cultural influence over the territories then called the Third World (Piotrowski 2015). Although Piotrowski considers post-colonial theories to be a useful framework, he also identifies the limits of their applicability to the post-socialist Eastern European region. A problem, according to him, is that fine art is a different discipline from political and economic history or literary studies, and we need to review the tools that can be used for Eastern European art history writing. Additionally, we have to examine postcolonial theory and focus on the problem of Eurocentrism since this will lead us to critiques of globalism. Piotrowski refers to the fact that the researchers of post-colonial theory see Europe as a negative figure and form their concepts against those of Europe, homogenizing its culture. This latter mostly only means the culture of Western Europe, since for them colonization within Europe is incomprehensible. Despite his criticism of post-colonial generality, he emphasizes that the global history of Eastern European art leads through Europe and is not defined against it. He agrees with those scholars who propose an approach in which Europe’s role in these projects should be repositioned and redefined as non-dominant, but not entirely refused (Piotrowski 2014). He refers to Gerardo Mosquera, who argues that the goal should not be cultural isolationism, some kind of return to the hypothetical “purity” before colonialism, but the synthesis of modern and postmodern culture, the symbiosis of European culture and local influences (Mosquera 1992).

It is important to mention Piotrowski's concept of agorophilia in the context of the post-socialist art of Eastern Europe. After the collapse of the state socialist system that limited political self-organization and freedom of speech, these concepts emerged as real social demands. Artists turned to public space, and they attempted to turn the public itself into an artwork, which they wanted to shape in a special sense. (Piotrowski 2014). Without disputing the legitimacy of this argument I would like to add that beyond pure artistic and "good intentions", it is necessary to identify other factors that shaped the discourses of art that turned towards society, social memory and politics after the regime change. Art historian Anthony Gardner convincingly identifies some important aspects that he refers to as "the aesthetics of democratization" when he examines discourses that have dominated Western European art since the mid-nineties. Critics and curators such as Nicolas Bourriaud, Paul Ardenne, Joëlle Zask and Claire Bishop, with their aesthetic programs, can be classified into one group guided by the same goal: the democratizing potential of the audience's inter-subjective encounters catalyzed by the artwork (Gardner 2015). Through the globalized infrastructure of biennials and networks, these practices of contemporary art became at least part of if not instruments of cultural diplomacy and politics and had a considerable effect on Eastern European art (Gardner 2015, Galliera 2017).

A New Generation

In my view art is a very specific type of knowledge production, an understanding informed by Mignolo (2000) and Grosfoguel (2002), who question the recent hierarchy in the system of global knowledge production. In my own scholarship, I focus specifically on and consider the problematic localization of "the locus of enunciation" in the case of Eastern Europe. This is the core concept in postcolonial and decolonial theory which gives a definitive emphasis to the geopolitical and body-political location of the subject that speaks. However Eastern Europe does not perfectly fit into the classical division of the World as Global South and Global North. This is a problem which Judit Bodnár formulates as follows:

from an extra-European perspective, Eastern Europe is a site of critique from within. This is, however, exactly where this particular place of enunciation disappears, unlike the duly recognized postmodern critique of Derrida, Foucault, or others whom Mignolo mentions.

(Bodnár 2014, 263).

According to Bodnár, "reflexive modernity" seems to be the privilege of the West. The importation of Western models and concepts, just like reflexive critiques, displays the same geopolitical design as theory production in general. These problems are structural and political as well, and relate closely to Enwezor's critique of the global art world which I mentioned above (Enwezor 2008).

The geopolitical changes of the last 30 years and the marginalization of the above-mentioned discourses may affect the complex problem of identification and localization. Unfortunately, at present the majority of Eastern European contemporary artists are not aware of these problems and therefore don't reflect on them at all. The new generation of artists born around the years of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc are too young to have experienced the state socialist system. Their life and worldviews were shaped by the last

three decades of the capitalist system, and many are citizens of the European Union, though this identity is still not, and probably never will be, Western. Moreover, their knowledge and experiences are specific and different from those of their parents who were socialized during the socialist era, among many who carry historical trauma. These kinds of ruptures must be taken seriously. In Hungary, for example, memory politics has very high stakes and provides the background for everyday political discourse; it is simultaneously the cause and instrument of political division. Therefore, discourse around national identity, national culture and tradition must be approached very sensitively by a contemporary artist.

In the framework of the Bulgarian historian Marina Todorova (2009), both the critique of modernity, and postcolonial and decolonial theory propose the re-evaluation of traditional knowledge and subaltern voices. The concept of “legacy”, which she defines as a neutral category and distinguishes from the concept of “tradition”, is key to understanding contemporary artists who dare to touch this sensitive issue. The widespread interpretation of the concept of tradition includes an active attitude, conscious selection, evaluation and highlighting of elements, which is developed during the accumulative process of transmission. The concept of “heritage” is very similar to this, both denoting practices and artefacts and the act of transmission as such. Nevertheless, tradition presupposes conscious selection handed down from the past; while legacy includes everything chosen or unselected that has been passed on from the past. Legacy is, therefore, neutral as an abstract signifier: it does not reveal the past, but it does not subject it to active intervention, and it is independent of whether the heirs denigrate or exalt it.

We can see this careful logic thoughtfully and sensitively applied in the works of Eszter Biró, Viola Fátyol and János Brückner. They take different paths led by different questions examining the identity of the Eastern European subject and its relation to modernity, history, community, tradition and ‘the West’ which are all key issues in the theoretical approach of this study. Eszter Biró focuses on the historical embeddedness of this many-faceted subject, using an artistic methodology which includes and uses archives (family albums, recipe books etc.), especially photographs. Viola Fátyol’s working method also involves an interest in artefacts and belongings with cultural significance. In her approach, identity is interpreted in the context of the local community and tradition. János Brückner’s project functions as a mirror for Western audiences by confronting them with their presumptions (and prejudices) while unveiling their misunderstandings and lack of knowledge about Eastern Europe and its inhabitants. His artistic invention is to bring into play different notions of identity, ethnicity and race to liberate and create a more valid perspective on the subject.

Eszter Biró (b. 1985) is a Hungarian artist and researcher based in Scotland who builds her artistic praxis around the problems of memory politics and transgenerational trauma in postwar Hungary. In her experimental artistic research praxis, she integrates art theory, social and feminist theory and ethnographic methodologies. In her series *Fragments* (2013), *RecipeBook* (2015) and *Beyond The Photograph* (2015–2019) she gives insight into the specific and recent social implications of the Eastern European historical legacy of the Holocaust and state socialism in Hungary.

Viola Fátyol’s (b. 1983) project *If You Have a Heart* (2013–2017, Figure 11.1) is based on artistic research and applied quasi-ethnographic methods, focusing on a female-only traditional folk choir in Vámospércs, a rural town close to the eastern border of Hungary. According to the artist, “The town is struggling with the problems of being on the periphery geographically, economically and culturally.” (Fátyol, n.d.) These kinds of choirs appeared in the Hungarian countryside in the 1960s, during the state socialist era, and



Figure 11.1 Viola Fátyol, *If you have a heart ... / Singing portrait of a choir member* (Zudor Sándorné), 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

survived probably because they had an important function in these communities. Fátyol spent many years with the subjects of her images and developed a close relationship with old women who turned to their community to cope with loneliness and depression after they retired and were widowed. Through her lens, we get access to the life story of these old women complete with personal and intimate documents and fragments of interviews. A feminist perspective emerges with an emphasis on the importance of women's communities.

Brückner János (b. 1984) is a Hungarian multimedia artist based in Berlin. For many years, Brückner has been living in Germany or “the West” as an Eastern European emigrant artist and experienced some misunderstandings around his “dirty whiteness” in everyday life. Brückner created some photographs and video projects (*Sometimes It's Hard To Be A White Man, It's Easy For You – Learning Whiteness*, 2020) about this position to illuminate the concept of “Eurowhiteness” (Böröcz 2021), which is more complicated than something judged by visual perception of other people with fair skin color. The discourse about the complexity of ‘Europeanness’ which I already elaborated on above is suppressed or distorted in public (both in the Western and the Eastern parts of Europe) but defines transpersonal, economic and political relations, for example in the labor market of the EU (Böröcz and Sarkar 2017, Böröcz 2021). The critical approach of Brückner has grown out of personal experiences.

Projects by Emőke Kerekes and Marcell Piti focus on small-scale rural farming, a type of agriculture that is still relevant in Eastern Europe. The well-known Indian scholar and environmentalist Vandana Shiva (2015, 2022) regularly highlights the importance of smallholder farms and farmers in the transformation of global agriculture to make it truly sustainable and equitable. The subject provides a good opportunity to present a genuine need for more personal, respectful and emotionally fulfilling forms of connection between humans and nature. In these projects, they demonstrate real choices which implicitly show an alternative and a counterpoint to the alienated and environmentally damaging sphere of modern corporate industrial farming. In this sense, both projects can be interpreted as a depiction of a vernacular and pragmatic form of critique of modernity.

Emőke Kerekes (b. 1980) is a Hungarian-Romanian artist based in Transylvania. In her latest project *My Land* (2023), she applied a documentary approach to present the perspective of a former city-dweller, who started a new life in a rural agricultural part of Transylvania. Kerekes illuminates the aesthetic dimension of manual labor and the landscape, which is formed by this work. She presents the dignity and social importance of agricultural work and presents an organic (or traditional) mode of human connection with nature.

In Marcell Piti's (b. 1990) series *Maga Ura* (One's own master, 2021, Figure 11.2), his goal is to present alternative ways of life defined by nature. The subjects of this project are people who chose farm life over the city. The photographer's interest focuses on environmentally conscious families or smallholder farms owned and run by people who rarely came from multigenerational farming families, consciously choosing to live a rural lifestyle, becoming independent and close to nature. This is not a documentary series but consists of staged or semi-staged photographs based on conversations between the artist and their subjects, giving them agency in the mode of representation.



Figure 11.2 Marcell Piti, *One's Own Master/No 17*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11.3 Dorottya Vékony, *Venus of Potato* (triptych), 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

Recent series by Dorottya Vékony and Dániel Szalai focus on the problematic relationship between nature and culture from a different and critical perspective. These works examine contemporary phenomena which are essentially biopolitical projects. These bodies of works illuminate the darker side of modernity concerning power structures of control that affect living organisms like women and animals.

Dorottya Vékony (b. 1985) was originally trained as a photographer; however, she uses various media (photography, installation, video) in her works. Recently *Without Violence* (2019), *Fertility* (2020) and *Rites of Letting Go* (2023), focus on female body politics, reproduction and fertility. Her framework includes anthropological methodologies and draws from feminist, decolonial and biopolitical theories. In her works, she presents the confrontation of the modernist ‘mechanical’ models of the female body with suppressed knowledges: traditional and ritual practices and approaches.

Dániel Szalai (b. 1991) is a photographer based in Budapest who develops a critical approach towards the role of modern technology in farming and industry. His works focus on the changing relationship of humans to animals defined by instrumental rationality: the control, objectification and commodification of living beings. Szalai attempts to present the operation of those parts of the industry which are hidden and unknown by the vast majority of people as consumers. In his series *Unleash Your Herd’s Potential* (2019–2022) and *Novogen* (2017–2018), he expressively explores how genetic manipulation, surveillance systems, and different technologies of production-optimization became integral parts of modern industry and what kind of ethical and moral problems and dilemmas these involve. I consider these projects to be remarkable approaches which can be interpreted as critiquing the project of modernity.

These four female and three male Hungarian artists provide good examples of the sensitive use of the registers of visual arts, and their work can be interpreted as relevant knowledge production which can help us to understand identity, social relations and the changing notions of humanity. These are rare, experimental and in many cases interdisciplinary projects determined to articulate complexity or at least attempt to grasp it. The subject of the Eastern European artist, as well as expectations towards him/her, have changed through the decades since regime change. We can say this is a dynamic position, but this position is attached also to a definitive locality. It's the "new locality" of the globalized world as Stuart Hall defined it (Hall 1992). Meanwhile, locality implies a standpoint that needs reflection whether we define it as "border thinking" or as a "cognitive chance", the latter a concept from Anna Wessely (Wessely 1996). Border thinking in decolonial theory is built on the position of the outsider who is using alternative knowledge and traditions, and alternative languages of expression. We can call this an epistemology of exteriority (Mignolo & Tlostanova 2006). This definition is partly true for Eastern Europe and maybe can be completed by the concept of "cognitive chance", which Anna Wessely, the Hungarian sociologist of culture, has outlined and offered for the social sciences, but can be also useful for contemporary art. She frames this as a kind of legacy of cultural mediation and translation that emerges in the multiethnic region, "[a] language of mediation between conceptual frameworks and lived experience as well as between structurally different types of social experience" (Wessely 1996:17). As the closing gesture of this chapter, I would like to follow Bodnár (2014) in underlining the importance of Eastern European understanding of the flexibility of the borders of European modernity, the instability of its main categories and concepts as well as the perceptively shifting symbolic geography of East and West.

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12

ARCHIVE IN SITU

Emese Mucsi and Nina Mangalanayagam in conversation with Jennifer Bajorek

Jennifer Bajorek, Nina Mangalanayagam and Emese Mucsi

Emese Mucsi (EM) & Nina Mangalanayagam (NM): What was the most influential or initial moment that drove you to focus your research on West African photography?

Jennifer Bajorek (JB): I am asked this question a lot. I have already told this story in the preface to my book, *UNFIXED: Photography and Decolonial Imagination in West Africa* (Bajorek 2020). I was in Paris working on my doctoral dissertation in 1999, when I saw some photographs by Seydou Keïta in an art gallery. As I say in the book, I was struck by the images and also by the discourse that surrounded them. I wanted to interrogate both. I don't think this experience is unusual. I think many people coming to African photography histories from a Western or Euro-American location or formation have essentially had the same experience. I just spent a lot of time following up.

NM & EM: How do you see these early years and motivations from today's perspective?

JB: I'm in Paris now, working on a new project, and it feels like I have come full circle. I mean, I first approached the material through French colonial history and French intellectual history and French self-mythologizing about colonialism and its aftermaths, and that was always the door through which I entered. My training in comparative literature, specifically in French literature and Continental philosophy played a huge role in this. Today, younger scholars are able to come to the material from a much broader range of disciplines and geographic and cultural locations. But at that time this was the only door. Once I started my research, I could only find one book published by a West African scholar on West African photography history, Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo (2002). There were many West African curators and scholars working locally without publishing their research: Franck Komlan Ogou in Benin, El Hadj Adama Sylla, Bouna Medoune Seye, and, more recently, Ibrahima Thiam in Senegal, Ananías Léki Dago in Côte d'Ivoire, Nii Obodai in Ghana. These are artist-scholars or scholar-activists working with collections or with photographers on the ground, whose work was not making it

to Western or Northern audiences. And that's still the case, that there is brilliant research going on in Africa that has not been published in Western or Northern contexts. Reaching these audiences is not necessarily the goal.

NM & EM: Who helped you to find this 'door' to enter into your research area?

JB: I did my PhD research on 19th-century French literature and philosophy at the University of California, Irvine. I was trained in what was sometimes called *deconstruction*. I worked with the French philosophers teaching there (Jacques Derrida and Étienne Balibar). So my formation was really literary and textual. It was about being in the bowels of the library and working over canonical texts that supposedly hold no surprises or secrets for anyone. When you're writing about Baudelaire, there's no poem or line that has not already been written about. There is this massive archive of scholarship. Part of the work is reading that scholarship and trying to orient yourself in relationship to it. When I went to Senegal and started poking around in people's photography collections, that was part of what fed and nourished the research: realizing that there were these beautiful corpuses and questions and archives that really had not been written about, by anyone at all. It was a different experience of research.

To be clear, I am not describing some kind of *tabula rasa* space, but it's a space where people are not publishing a lot of scholarship. People are holding and sharing the knowledge in other ways. I discovered that, if I wanted to learn more about these photographs, I needed to apprentice myself to a much wider range of methodologies than those I had been trained in, and this was super-interesting. The way photography has been taught and published about in art history or in visual studies, certainly in the Anglophone world, is analogous with literature. It is basically reduced to a documentary protocol. I became really interested in decentering or destabilizing that a little, through a West African lens. I hope it is still possible to see my research as helpfully challenging a set of epistemologies and of methodologies that I was pushing against in terms of both my literary formation, but also in terms of dominant histories of photography and how they've been codified. Africanists working on objects other than photography will also recognize these moves.

NM: It is very interesting to hear you speak about the blind spots in French Continental philosophy. Postcolonial theory is often critiqued for having its base in Continental philosophy. I often lean my own research on postcolonial theory, so I am grappling with this. What problems have you had coming from this tradition, with its blind spots, and then using it in your research?

JB: I'm not engaged in those debates about postcolonial theory and its inherited limitations and so on, in terms of whatever the theory is we're doing now. So it is probably best that I do not speak to this. But there are some really simple things I have learned. This idea that there is always something out there, written by someone, that answers your question, that you can find – I try to teach my students to let go of this idea. I'm not saying don't look at the prior literature, but you have to be prepared to go beyond this and to work and think in other ways, too. You have to learn to enter into unexpected spaces of knowledge production, to experiment methodologically, to collaborate in ways that will (and should) feel uncomfortable, and to try to stabilize the questions in new ways.

I sometimes present my research in spaces where someone is a French colonial historian, and they'll say things like: "Well, if we look at the documentary record [in the colonial archives], we see...[this law about ID card photography]." But the experience in West Africa of people who lived through French colonialism rarely reflects the chronology, or content, of these colonial policies that the French colonial historian will privilege. So there are these ideas about how history is written and about how it becomes accessible. Who has access? The modalities of access to knowledge still remain almost totally unquestioned in most of Western academic training.

NM: What does the term "decolonial" mean to your research on West African photography?

JB: When I invoked the term "decolonial" in my book, I was trying to get at what I think are actually two distinct moments or ideas. First, I was using the term to refer to the practice of the photographers in West Africa whose work I was looking at, and to try to reframe, call attention to or underscore certain elements of that practice. So, it was really a term, a lens that I was using to look at and interrogate their work. But I was also using it to refer to elements of my own practice as a scholar and to the collective practices of knowledge production or generation that we engage in as scholars. These may be linked, but they are not the same thing.

I do not think everyone gets this, but a number of the photographers I worked with were literally working for the colonial administration. They're actually linked to colonial, bureaucratic or administrative apparatuses. Not always in direct ways, but still in ways that are really important for their practice, their experience, their worldview. So I was interested in the fact that many (not all) of these photographers were working in conditions essentially linked to the colonial administrative presence, the colonial bureaucracy, but that did not always conform to the intention of that bureaucracy or that administrative apparatus. There is not just this colonial vision of the world that's being unreflexively circulated and recycled and manufactured. There may be complicity with that colonial administrative vision. But there's also friction, and tension. I was looking for a word that would allow me to think about that kind of movement against the grain. I'm not sure I found it.

As you know, my book is essentially broken into two halves: one on studio portraiture and one on political photography. In the case of studio portraiture, there are just so many scenes that emerged, or that preceded or surrounded the scenes that we see in the studio, which were not bound by colonial projects and colonial gazes: the vodun priestess group portrait in Benin; the campaigns of local political parties that are referenced in the name of a dress or in a way of tying a headscarf in Senegal; ideas about feeling "cherished," which Liam Buckley writes about in his research on Gambian studios (Buckley 2006). Those scenes impact the relevant conceptions of photography. So many of those scenes are embedded in or they're nourished by experiences and values that are associated with African aesthetics, with micro-local aesthetics, specific to a particular ethnicity or urban scene, a particular urban and creolized culture, or notions of beauty or spiritual beliefs, or political struggles. Decoloniality, perhaps, makes space for us to see, and attend to, these scenes.

Let me add that the institutions we work in are literally colonial. In West Africa, many of the buildings that are formal institutions that hold photographic collections, as well as exhibition spaces even for contemporary photography or for contemporary art, they are colonial buildings. The art and museum worlds literally exist within colonial infrastructure in so much of the world. When I'm in the States, I have to explain to my students that, for example, MoMA is a colonial institution, and sometimes this takes some explaining. But in Senegal or when I'm in Paris, we're in the buildings that were built by colonial powers as part of an extensive apparatus of knowledge production and extraction vis-à-vis African people and places, and that were designed for a very particular kind of capture of cultural resources and cultural knowledge. How do I do my research in a way that the research outputs or the knowledge that I'm (co-)producing is not just continuing in that tradition, and is not just captured by those same institutions? No matter what we call it, I think many of us would like to be working against that kind of institutional capture, and amplify the friction with colonial and capitalist forms of wealth accumulation that, in art history and the museum world, can be directly mapped onto collecting practices.

EM & NM: Could you please mention your most important references in this field of research?

JB: On decoloniality, Walter D. Mignolo remains an important reference for me. He taught us to understand that decoloniality is not a thematic, that it's really a grammar or way of proceeding *vis-à-vis* what it is possible to know (Mignolo 2007). On photography, Tina Campt's work has been important for me in terms of its implications for thinking about time and memory – in ways that are, absolutely, connected with photography but that also decenter visuality and preoccupations with the fixed image (Campt 2012; 2017). She is, of course, working on questions of diasporic memory and diasporic positions of refusal that don't have a lot of overlap with my material – it's really important to make that distinction, and I think she's really actively decentering notions of photography that are not just Eurocentric, but anti-Black. This is a point of significant difference with the photographic archives that I've focused on in West Africa, which are much less engaged than many diasporic archives with questions of race. Ariella Azoulay's work on photography remains important in terms of its implications for how we think about non-sovereign expressions of or non-sovereign claims to political belonging (Azoulay 2008; 2012). She teaches us that these claims are not incidentally, but essentially, connected with photography.

Other work that has been very important to me: Fred Moten's work in *Black and Blur* (Moten 2017). Moten is a master of mistrusting the disciplines. Christina Sharpe's work does something similarly unruly (Sharpe 2016). Sondra Perry and Deana Lawson as artists have also done this work, primarily in a US-focused context (Perry 2013; 2018; Lawson 2012–2014). So I just want to give shout-outs to this work going on in contemporary art and in this transdisciplinary Black Studies space which is still somewhat US-centric, but which also looks elsewhere. Honestly, the place where there is, I think, the most innovative scholarship for almost anyone working on photography is in Black Studies today.

EM: When you are presenting your research, what form does it take? Is it as an exhibition or is it more like a lecture?

JB: I have curated exhibitions, but I have very deliberately made the decision never to exhibit in a gallery any of the photographs that I've written about. I have never put West African studio portraits on a wall. That's just not something I have wanted to do. More often, I go into art world spaces to talk about my photography research, although this is not always a comfortable relationship either. I have a particularly uncomfortable relationship with collectors. My complicity as a scholar within the collecting machine is something that I have consistently tried to query, and also to make explicit and, to the extent possible, disrupt, at least in terms of presenting alternatives or trying to support the alternatives that are being developed by local actors. That, to me, is part of what the term coloniality or decoloniality could mean, or should mean, in terms of our research methodologies.

EM: In another interview you said that the owners of these archives sometimes ask you to put them in contact with collectors, that making the archives world-famous then increased the price of the images. How are you balancing between these two contexts or desires?

JB: When I tell those stories, the point is not to focus attention on me, or my power to mediate, or the decisions that I have made. I want people to understand what the impact of international museum and art world collecting in West African communities has been. I think all of the decisions I can make in a situation where I am asked to mediate are bad. I don't think there is any balancing. By the time I arrived in Senegal, in 2007, and started actively doing research, many collections had already been picked over by European and American collectors. It's totally possible to find whole collections that have been exported, but it's much more common to find those that have been carefully culled. I can't remember if I put this in the book, but you can look at a studio photographer's sample album, and you can see the pages that photographs have been removed from to be sold to collectors. In many studios, there were these beautiful sample albums that the photographers had, with all the different poses, papers, dimensions, *cartes de visite*, postcards, for the client to choose from. If you look at those albums today, you can see the "shadow" (the unfaded rectangle of paper) indicating where a photograph was. Other scholars told me about this before I actually saw it, and I didn't really believe them, until I saw it. In the places where I've been working, it's been mostly (but not only) French curators and collectors who have come and just picked the best photographs from the sample album, leaving like 30% behind.

When I started my research, some of the photographers I was in conversation with could show me the business cards of like six curators, some of them representing museums in the US, who had been there before me, buying things for their collections. In Benin, in 2009, I met several people in Cotonou who had a rather well-known collector's mobile phone number memorized. They said he was the first person in the country ever to have a mobile number, and that everyone had learned it (and then they would recite it back to me).

So when someone said to me (in the interview you reference), “Oh, can you make my father famous,” they were just responding to what was unfolding around them. Once a high-profile curator or publishing house has come in and made one photographer in a given city or even neighborhood famous – doing a big exhibition, with a beautiful catalog, and so forth – it is going to have an impact on the entire community. The descendants of other photographers are naturally just asking if someone else can reproduce that outcome for them. People are responding to a very specific set of conditions that arose in the very late 90s and in the 2000s in the region.

There have been many outcomes that I had hoped for in my research that have not materialized. There have also been photographers I’ve worked closely with who, even though I refused to mediate and did not participate in helping them sell their collections to a European or an American museum, they or their descendants have sold their collections to a European or an American museum subsequently. It isn’t my decision to make. I try to highlight the conditions that people are responding to, and I also try to make more explicit for Western readers their own complicity in these processes.

EM: In Hungary, we have an open-source online archive called Fortepan. Images like vernacular photography and even a full archive of photographers who are no longer with us were uploaded, and people are able to download them for free. On the one hand, the platform decreases the price of the actual photographs, for they can be downloaded, but on the other hand, it also preserves the whole archive in the online sphere, allowing it to stay in one place. Of course, these are not the originals, but somehow this can be something between buying the archive from a West African owner or just making it available for a wider audience. Or for other purposes like research.

JB: It’s difficult to generalize about digital infrastructure on the African continent, but I can say that Francophone West Africa has some of the shakiest digital infrastructure of anywhere on the continent. By almost any metric, in eastern and southern Africa, it’s like night and day, compared to Francophone West Africa. Most Anglophone countries in West Africa have better digital infrastructure, too. So one of the things I’ve seen in more activist projects with museum professionals or curators working in Francophone West Africa is that digitization, in almost any form, just feels like more dispossession. It increases access for people outside of the region, but almost never for people in it.

That is not meant to be a criticism of the project you’ve described. I’m just underscoring why that sort of project has not, to me, seemed possible or even interesting in the places where I’ve done my research. We have seen super-interesting and ambitious digitization projects taking place in other parts of Africa, even West Africa. For example, there’s now the *Nigerian Nostalgia Project* on Facebook, *History in Progress Uganda* which I believe also started on Facebook, although they have an independent platform now. Those opening up collections on Facebook in an earlier moment, like 15 years ago, and crowd-sourcing research on those collections, have had success in some places, but to me it’s telling that there has been no Francophone West African project like that. It’s not only about the infrastructure, but also about the postcolonial cultural funding landscape, the linguistic landscape, who funds these things. There is a big digitization project in Mali that is being led by, and is administra-

tively housed at, a US university ('The Archive of Malian Photography', led by the art historian Candace Keller at the University of Michigan), and I am pretty sure the initial funding for this project came from the British Library. It is telling that these are Anglophone (British and American) funders. I do not believe there are French funders working in this area in the region. In North Africa, in the Maghreb, we've seen interesting things happen with grants and charitable foundation support, but unfortunately, and I do think this is something to think about for future decolonial practice, the conditions for that kind of massive digitization, which often also requires funding, in the Francophone West African space, they're just not there. We can't just digitize everything without attending to this unevenness.

NM: And do you know if photography is still treated like that? In some photography festivals in South Asia it's the opposite. They don't have access to printing, and so lots of contemporary photography is shown on screens, and exhibitions are projections that could be mobile exhibitions. Is physicality still important in the area of West Africa, or is that shifting?

JB: Most people in the world are not printing anymore! But in the cities in West Africa where I've been most recently (Dakar, Accra, Kumasi), I have seen very little projection or viewing on big screens, even in art world contexts. It's a phone. It's all phones. Again, it's very difficult to generalize regionally, and I am just making loose observations. I haven't done research on digital practice specifically in West Africa. I have really focused on a much older generation, one that was not ever engaged in digital practice. It is their grandchildren who are engaged in the digital.

Obviously, viewing photographs that were born digital on a phone is very different from viewing a scan of a mid-century print. The studio infrastructure still supports major life events and commissions around photography across the region, but in digital form. Most of the wedding photographs that professional studio photographers produce in Dakar or in Cotonou are not printed. It is common to see CDs and DVDs of wedding or baptism photographs. (Which is not a really durable support in a tropical or subtropical climate, or really any.) These are viewed on a television or a computer in someone's living room. I do think these questions about the materiality of the image, including its digital materiality, are really important for our methodologies, and they are questions we should be trying to answer. You mention festival display in the art world, but it is worth noting that these questions about digital display range across "fine art" photography and commercial studio practice, where they take different forms.

EM: Readers can learn a lot from your book, but what do you hope readers will unlearn? In other words, is there a particular ideology you are hoping to dismantle or that people can unlearn from the book or rewrite their interpretation of certain phenomena or maybe the meaning of certain words?

When I teach, it's always unlearning. It was almost 25 years ago that I was starting to ask the questions, and imagine this framework within which I wrote *Unfixed*. At that time, there was really an understanding of photography, within art and photography history, as following a very linear development. I think things are very different now, but that we are still, somehow, unlearning this. This

technophilic, hyper-rationalist, progressive post-Enlightenment narrative around the evolution of photography, it's false. Maybe what this question of comparative global photography history really gives us traction on is more ways to unlearn that narrative.

I also think that our daily practices completely contradict that narrative now, and there's more of an intuitive, embodied grasp of the plurality of photography, its not being one medium. It's more intuitively clear, to more people, that we should be learning all the histories. If I were just beginning my research now, I wouldn't be framing the ideological battle in quite the same way, and I wouldn't be bumping up against quite the same things.

EM: What would you be looking at now?

JB: I think there are really interesting questions about gender and photography in West Africa that I was not able to explore in my research. Because all of the photographers, with very few exceptions, were men. I talked about this with West African scholars and colleagues all the time. If it's a studio photographer, someone who's really in full-time commercial practice, there's an urgency in terms of handing down the business to the younger generation. It is usually handed down to a son, but not always. I worked with the collection of a photographer, Édouard Mèhomey, in Porto-Novo who, out of 22 children, had four sons and one daughter who became photographers. In addition to one of the sons (Baudelaire Mèhomè), I knew the daughter (Ida Mèhomey), and I worked quite closely with her until she moved far away and we lost touch [note that members of the family use different spellings of their surname]. There have to have been other daughters, nieces, wives of mid-century studio photographers who were trained, and there are other scholars working on women photographers in the region, specifically in Ghana. I make an effort to mention the names of all the women that I came across in my research, such as Ndèye Teinde Dieng, the wife of Doudou Diop, in Saint-Louis, who served as his darkroom assistant and printer. There were women who actually had their name on studios and were the front name, including in Ghana, perhaps (and Renée Mussai has done extensive research on this, which remains unpublished) as early as the 40s and 50s. But it has been really, really difficult to research those histories and get access those archives. Language is also an issue. Many older women don't speak the colonial language, as they have had less access to formal education, so this research must be done in African languages – really strengthening the case for why we need local scholars to do this work.

It's not just about, 'let's diversify the archive'. Many people have said to me that there are things that women would *not* have been able to do in commercial practice, but also things that they would have been able to do, or do better or *right*, that men could not. I have heard this from women photographers. I heard this from Ida Mèhomey in Porto-Novo, and I also heard this from women photographers in Mali, especially from Amsatou Diallo, a member of the *Association des femmes photographes du Mali* (Association of Women Photographers of Mali), with whom I spoke during the Bamako photography biennial in 2009. This is also part of the unlearning: I would love it if we could imagine, together, how we could train a new generation of scholars equipped to

do research on women photographers and to tease out these differences in their practice. This is not a simple question of identity and expanding the canon. It is a question of how gender impacts the practice and challenges our assumptions about its boundaries.

NM: Are there new problems because the field has moved?

JB: I think the one thing that looks a little new is that there are a lot of people with colonial collections who are now adding to their collections so-called indigenous or vernacular African photography. To dilute the colonial gaze or dilute the colonial violence centered in their collections, or just to expand the range of what they have. These are people with institutional authority, and, on the one hand, it is really great that they've done the homework. In this sense, the field has evolved. Yet this work, once it enters their collection, will change fundamentally the nature of that collection. There is also the glaring fact that, when they acquire those images, they are exporting them to the West and North. Photography is famously thought of as a medium of multiples, whose export should not pose ethical or legal problems, in terms of the traffic in cultural heritage. But we can't let this idea eclipse the reality that, in many parts of the world, photographs are unique objects, even if we are just talking about a print on paper. So we're back at dispossession again. We really need to think differently about collecting.

There are all these conversations about restitution and repatriation of all the sculptures, all the musical instruments, all the thrones, all the masks. We're in this moment where it's like, you're in this museum and it's "We're sending 70 things back." And they're so proud, and I personally think that this is unequivocally a good thing, and then they say, a second later, "We're buying all of these indigenous photographers' studio collections." And they don't see the contradiction! Even as we're repatriating, we're looting, or close enough. I feel there's quite a lot more work for us to do as scholars here.

NM: When these images are taken into European and North American collections, are they misread through that gaze and through that dominant photography regime, rather than seen from an unfixed, more speculative imaginary framework?

JB: I'm not interested in making arguments privileging one over another type of reading. I'm keenly aware of the limitations of my own perspective, and I don't even live in a world where one reading (African versus European or non-African, local versus foreign) is going to be "the right one." I think it is always more interesting to have multiple readings. In my book, the speculative framework that I offer (or cite, really from my interviews with photographers, as they are the ones who advanced this framework in our discussions) is not meant just to be a corrective to or to replace other frameworks. It co-exists with them. This is more interesting.

What resonates with me in your question is the way it goes back to the materiality of photographs as they live *in situ*. I've seen really interesting collections in West Africa that have mold and mildew on the negatives. The prints are torn, frayed, discolored, have rust or, again, mold on them. And then a custodian of the collection gets access to some resources, and the first thing they do is use those resources to clean the negatives or doctor them in Photoshop and make new prints that conform more clearly to the aesthetics

of a European or American museum. Rather than asking about a misreading or a particular gaze, I am more interested in asking “Why are we imposing this standard on the photographic print?” I mean, even if we say this is just an aesthetic preference, this is not neutral. And then, what happens when we impose a universal standard? What is hidden, lost? Scratches are erased that were perhaps always there, from the beginning, that are not posing a problem for audiences or for the client or patron. It’s just an imposition of an idea of what a photograph should look like, especially a photograph that has value. So, why are these the protocols that ensure, or create, value – and not others? I think these are some of the things we should be asking as photographs move around the world.

Anything that is collected is torn out of its lifeworld. This is the point of collecting. Walter Benjamin wrote about this, in *The Arcades Project*, among other places (Benjamin 2002). This is not specific to photographic collections and it is not specific to colonial collecting – although I think it takes a very specific form when you are looking at collecting in a colonial relation or in the aftermath of a colonial relation.

I see artists engaging with and presenting photographs in ways that are much richer and much more interesting in terms of the potential of the photographic image to be a bearer of multiple aesthetics. But still, a framed and glazed print that’s not handled or not frayed or not touched by its interlocutors – why is this our default? During interviews in the context of my research, I have often seen people run their fingers across the surface of a print. It can be pleasurable, and extremely powerful, to touch a photograph. Even the hottest contemporary photo exhibitions that I have seen lately seem all still to crave, and to want to create, this distance between the viewer and the photograph. I would love to see a much broader range of practices embraced.

EM: Do you have maybe one example of a project working with these kinds of archival materials which you consider as a good practice in contemporary art?

JB: Yeah, there are a lot, so it is hard to give just one. But I think immediately of Dutch artist Andrea Stultiens’ practice. (She also played an instrumental role in ‘History in Progress Uganda.’) She has produced photobooks focused on particular archives in Uganda – for example, in *The Kaddu Wasswa Archive* book project, which is a brilliant example (Stultiens et al. 2010). It’s a photobook that gives a really lush treatment to, really honors, the aesthetics of that archive *in situ*. I could also refer to Karl Ohiri’s work, from *The Archive of Becoming* (2015–), a selection of which was recently on view at MoMA, in New York, as part of the ‘New Photography 2023’ exhibition, brilliantly curated by Oluremi Onabanjo. Ohiri is working on this project collaboratively with others, revisiting studio archives in and from Nigeria (Ohiri and Kassinen 2015). The images are decayed or not stable, and he’s exploiting their instability aesthetically as part of his own practice. Many artists have allowed the decay of the image to be part of the work. But in this case the question is how that process is being mapped onto power relations, history, and memory, in and from a place.

The ‘New Photography 2023’ exhibition really showed audiences what African photography histories could offer to a global photography history. This show was not marked regionally or in terms of race, it wasn’t marked in terms of a national, sovereign, territorial boundary. (It was not ‘The Nigerian Photographers’ Show’, though some people called it that.) Rather, it was oriented by the work of photographers with ties to a particular city (Lagos) and therefore to photography histories and other histories in that city. The whole point of a global photography history is not just to pluralize or diversify a history. It is actually to see, know, learn, or touch something about the history of the world in and from a place.

We also saw this in another 2023 show, ‘A World in Common: Contemporary African Photography,’ curated by Osei Bonsu at Tate. I was thrilled to see how many of the diasporic artists were engaging with African photographic traditions in ways that are not nostalgic, and, rather, really allow for the dynamism and the more speculative dimensions of the archives to be animated. It is exciting to see what is happening in terms of how mid-century and even older archival photographs are entering into these broader relays and exchanges around Black beauty, around spirituality, around embodiment, but also around histories of colonialism and resistance and liberation.

EM & NM: You were right, it really feels like there’s a circle from the research to what’s happening now.

JB: The contemporary practice is incredibly exciting and inspiring. It is really not one set of concerns that’s being brought into contact with these archives. These are archives that, the artists are teaching us, are of renewed significance for younger generations, and that have lessons for us all. African photography history is global photography history (not just part of it), and this is clearly reflected in the attitude of so many of these younger artists.

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PART III

Gender and Queer Theory in
Photography Today

Identities and Histories

Edited by Alejandra Niedermaier



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13

VISUAL CONSTELLATIONS

Narratives for Emancipated Subjectivities

Alejandra Niedermaier

With the understanding that existence illuminates and is the *raison d'être* of visual language which in turn enriches existence through successive glances in time, we can establish that, since their definition, different gender identities have generated productive actions that have become visual archives of resistance allowing for emancipated subjectivities. Aesthetic production, through a feminist perspective, is an instrument for reflection on gendered experience and is a powerful tool of analysis to find, through dialectical methods, conditions of visibility, representation, self-representation and the existential anguish felt by different individualities.

The visual arts have made it possible for women and those of other marginalized gender identities to be the subject of semiosis, that is, to be producers of meaning. The power of self-determination that we can observe appeared from an attitude of initial courage, to begin to look at desires, vocations and the need to put their lives on the side of action. Photographers who focus on gender identity fulfil the path of the potency that, according to Sigmund Freud, is related to the vital force of each human being. Experience sweeps away the borders that differentiate classic oppositions such as body and intellect, the private and the public, everyday life and politics and the inner and the outer.

Aesthetic productions make up a universe that works on the real and the imaginary, through the symbolic. They contribute to the construction of an open space in permanent dispute. By understanding the concept of gender as a social and subjective manifestation and the result of a continuous construction that stems from institutionalized discourses, social epistemologies and technologies, it can be seen that visual devices, as technologies, have a direct impact on this construction. Julia Kristeva proposes the existence of a generation of feminism in which women construct a contract with the symbolic that aims to reveal their place in the world and at the same time transform it, through an association with the imaginary, using art and literature as its main tools (Kristeva, 1974).

The construction of gender is at the same time the product and the process of its representations; it is precisely in the process that visual devices such as photography contribute to give an account of the personal and social vision of subjectivity, the conditions of visibility and to reveal multiple intersections. Thus, the famous phrase “The personal is political”, popularized by Carol Hanisch in 1969, is absolutely pertinent, since there is no experience

that is not subject to rules, obstacles and forces that are of the order of the public. Apropos of this, Hannah Arendt considered that active life, as a political and sensitive experience, demands visibility (Arendt, 2005). In the same sense, Kate Millett's starting point is to review the contradictions of patriarchy itself, based precisely on the aforementioned dictum: "The personal is political" (Millett, 2017). Moreover, the American anthropologist Sherry Ortner in the book *Anthropology and Feminism* has found that women have been symbolically associated with nature, while men have been identified with culture (Ortner, 1979). The strong bond that was instituted between photography and women underlines its association with cultural construction and not its roots with nature.

Feminist emergence has been significant in giving meaning to contemporary art. The political revolution in the field of representation gave rise to contemporary art, even more so if we consider images as signifying surfaces. Both share a kind of defiant attitude by linking representation with presentation. We can add that a complex affective process is involved in visual perception. All this makes up a poetic gesture: the imprint of the producer is imbued in the image thanks to the technological mediation of the camera. Under such considerations, contemporary enunciations arise in which it can be noticed, among other aspects, that generations of visual producers deliberately reflect on the experience of being female or queer and that their aesthetic productions became an instrument for reflection on the experience of gender. Affect and being affected is what weaves their visual practices and is the core of the construction of a shared history, of the development of the excitement of seeing through a camera. In this mediated form, experience contains an epistemic commitment through which we can gain access to the knowledge of the world.

The writer Virginia Woolf, in the introduction to an album of photographs by her aunt, the pictorialist photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879), published in 1926, said: "The women of the art world in the nineteenth century laid the cultural foundations on which the women of today built and continue to build" (Niedermaier, 2016: 23). The reference made by Sandra Nagel and Jonathan Lalloz in their essay "Gender in Curation and Exhibition Design" to historic female photographers, might remind us of Judy Chicago (b. 1939, USA), an artist and feminist thinker who uses the term *herstory* to vindicate women's history. The analysis of Nagel and Lalloz reminds us that for several years, queer studies have been an integral part of critical rehearsals around the world, disseminating a number of perspectives in curatorial practices and various viewpoints on the representation of desire and social-political relations of power within sexuality.

Body Matters

The signifier "women" that inaugurates feminism as a movement and as a cause has shifted towards the significant "body". As Judith Butler argues that language shapes the materiality of bodies (Butler, 2007), we can assume that visual language (whatever the device) has an equally great influence on how bodies are configured. In turn, Luce Irigaray reasons that women's bodies have, since time immemorial, from the position of phallogocentrism, been pointed to as the "Other". The origin of this thinking comes from Simone de Beauvoir's idea that the woman has always been conceived as the "Other". This concept does not imply an ontological category but a cultural one, and is therefore modifiable (in Femenías, 2000). This "Other body" becomes a contested site and is subjected to an eternal uncertainty. In this sense, Barbara Kruger (b. 1945, USA) enunciates through her photo-posters direct declarative statements such as *Your body is a battleground* designed

for a campaign for abortion rights. She combines powerfully written and visual gestures displaying image and text used together, as enunciation tools, to show how the body is perceived and shaped.

The body, which receives and experiences the mechanisms of power that Michel Foucault described in his studies of disciplinary structures, explores, disarticulates and recomposes itself. This is why Butler speaks of a performative theory of gender (Butler, 2007). Moreover, identity closely related to the economic-social conditions of each person articulates nuances of power and desire and which the philosopher Étienne Balibar conceives as the bearer of both symbolic and real violence (Balibar, 2005). He determines that *patriarchal order* continues to have an impact on the control of women's bodies and gives rise to inequality, violence and discrimination against women. Patriarchy is understood as the notion coined by Kate Millett in the late 1960s to account for the organizational structure of societies. Millett understands patriarchy as a system of domination of the collective of men, as a whole, over the collective of women (crossing psychological, social, economic and political structures) with the possibility of doing, deciding and instituting on the basis of a naturalized tacit obedience (Millett, 2017). Women photographers such as Martha Rosler (b. USA, 1943), in her series *House beautiful, bringing the war home* (ca 1967–72), for instance, have used photography to make a critical discourse on this matter. Revisiting the series in 2004 and 2008, Rosler joined fashion shots with images from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, connecting objectification, consumption and sexism with an increasing violence.

From this same system of patriarchal domination over the stereotypes of body beauty that society has been imposing for many years, a clear example of response is the *Cuadernos de dieta/Diet notebooks* (1986–1992), by Ana Casas Broda (b. 1965, México), in which she leaves a meticulous textual and photographic record of her eating disorder as if her body were an external object of study to herself. She presents this project on her website stating: “For eight years I wrote down absolutely everything I ate. I also took pictures of myself regularly. These photos were the result of an intimate closed process. I took them guided by the need to look at myself, to check the minimal changes I achieved with the diets, to explore my naked body from angles that the mirror did not give me (...) The deep need to build an image of myself.” Her combined artwork (visual and textual) shows a reality that is repeated. In these studies one's own identity undergoes a process of estrangement. De Beauvoir has also developed the concept of *situation*, which implies that the world presents itself in a different form according to whether it is apprehended from a man's body or from a woman's body (in Femenías, 2000).

For centuries hetero-sexist normativity has conceived women's bodies as objects of desire and not as desiring singularities. This can be seen in the ten films of Jane Hilton (England) called *Love for Sale* in which she shows the everyday life of two brothels and their members in Nevada, the only US state where prostitution is legal. These documentaries, made across 2000, challenge prejudices associated with prostitution. Jane stayed at the brothels for two years filming and getting inside the lives of the girls, madams and their clients. The work of Sarah Pabst (b. 1984, Argentina) in the project *Transformadoras* (2016, Figure 13.1) tells the story of Cintia and Cecilia, both transsexuals who work on the streets of Mar del Plata, a city known for its summer tourism. Prostitution is often the only chance for women and transsexuals to make an income. These two projects show that class and gender cannot be separated according to hierarchies. They are historically simultaneous and mutually modulated.



Figure 13.1 Sarah Pabst, *Cecilia*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

It is interesting to note Luce Irigaray's claim of the body as an experience and as a natural truth shaped by the masculine symbolic register (in Femenías, 2000). In this sense, Catherine Opie (b. 1961, USA) at the Barbican Art Centre in London participated, in 2020, in the exhibition called *Masculinities: Liberation through Photography*, curated by Alona Pardo, where she presented photographs from *Being and Having* (1991). This series shows some of her close friends from the LGBTQ+ community wearing "stereotypically masculine" accessories such as fake moustaches and tattoos. The name of this series plays upon the thoughts of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan about having a phallus. To subvert what it means to "be" and to "have" (in Lacanian terms), is a central aim of Opie's work. Related to this same subject we can find two other photographic works: In *The penis as a work instrument. To get rid of the macho in Freud* (1982), made by Maris Bustamante (b. 1949, México), she criticizes, in a kind of action for the camera, the "phallocracy" prevailing in different areas. The image shows the artist in a position reminiscent to the Gioconda, wearing a plastic accessory: glasses with an integrated penis instead of a nose. Another connected picture is from Sarah Lucas (b. 1962, England). In 1994 she made a grid of four pictures called *Get off your horse and drink your milk*. In this work, she enacts a received sexual imaginary with a bottle of milk and two biscuits standing in for a phallus. Her practice is diverse across sculpture, installation and photography. She often breaks boundaries by daring to show these topics with humour.

These images display visually what has been debated theoretically through the different waves of feminism. For all that has been examined up to this point and returning to Butler, we can observe that she defines gender as a contemporary mode of organizing past and future norms. She finally postulates gender as an active style of living one's body in the world. (Butler, 2007). We might consider that visual language has a great influence on this constitution. In this sense, the chapter 'Expanded Sexual and Gender Identities' by Flora Dunster proposes to set out the historic claims to self-determination made through visual art. Her exploration of queering and queerness emphasises the mobility of identities, breaks with normativities and proposes to leave the imposed hegemonic discourse. In this

respect the project *Modern Lovers* by the photographer Bettina Rheims (b. 1952, France) is very pertinent. She has portrayed the gender non-determination of several young people, revealing in this project that visual devices are capable of representing and reconstructing individual and collective imaginaries and perceptions of the world.

Narratives

For Roland Barthes,

narrative has been present in all times, in all places, in all societies; narration begins with the history of humanity itself; there is not and never has been anywhere a folk without narrative. Thus, it is equivalent to life itself, narrations are there, like life.

(Barthes, 1977:2)

Following this, we can establish a relationship between experience and visual storytelling. What is called experience is of the heuristic order and is recorded by the body. Its sense is shared, transmitted and communicated. Regarding the visual transmission of experience, Walter Benjamin has pointed out that only through visual language is it possible to perceive the optical unconscious in the same way that, thanks to psychoanalysis, we are able to perceive the “pulsional or optical unconscious” (Benjamin, 2007: 187). Visual devices agitate the symbolic ability of perception. Thus, photography instructs the gaze by instituting new relationships and modifying knowledge.

On the basis of her own narrative gesture, Valie Export (b. 1940, Austria) through action photography creates her *poesies* by deliberately reflecting the experience of being a woman. She uses her body as a working material. In *Glass plate with shot* (1972) she shows portraits of herself with a sheet of glass shot through with a bullet and held in different positions so that the hole encircles different parts of her body. A grid called *Action pants: Genitalpanik* (1968) shows her sitting on a bench, with her hair wild and legs open, wearing crotchless trousers while holding a machine-gun at chest level. She directs her gaze to the viewer, as if she were ready to aim toward them. Her posture emphasises her self-image as an activist, playing with the proposition that it is both a personal issue and a collective one. In both described projects we can find a performative gesture that brings into account the concept of the theorist François Soulages of “ça été joué” or “this has been staged” (Soulages, 2005: 72) in order to form a grammar, a commitment to an individual as well as a group identity.

Laia Abril (b. 1986, Spain) is a multidisciplinary artist who works with photography, text, video and sound in large-scale research projects. She organizes her umbrella artwork *History of Misogyny* in chapters. She narrates complex issues such as abortion, rape, menstruation myths and eating disorders bringing forward for analysis events of female experience under abuses of patriarchal power. In her images it can be seen that it is no longer just a matter of showing the Real, but rather of stating what underlies each phenomenon. Abril supposes a capacity for photography to link the representation of things with subjectivity, with what they essentially awaken. This describes the current displacement of photographic genres: movements form part of an aesthetic which gives an account of a dense warp, friction, thickness and complexity that, with different degrees of presence, is insinuated in each image. Humanistic photography began when photographers felt the need to document different aspects of society and between others with subjects that, as Bertolt Brecht established, are “at the disorder of the world” (in Didi Huberman, 2008: 24). Fatemeh Behboudi

(b. 1985, Iran) shows in her project *Mothers of patience* the effects of the Iran-Iraq War during the years 1980–1988. This project recounts the grief of the mothers of missing soldiers who live in hope of finally seeing their sons again, or at least, holding a body to bury. The condition of possibility of visualisation is, then, related to the political subjectivation that redefines what is visible and decipherable. Producers who make visible situations that involve the human being in different conflictive issues illuminate where other spheres fail and open up political options of the gaze. Examining migration, Nobukho Nqaba (b. 1992, South Africa) uses big plastic mesh bags to show that they have become a global symbols of migration. She performs in staged image works linking the terms home, struggle and survival through these bags (Figure 13.2). During the 20th and 21st centuries, migration has acquired an acceleration that de-territorialises nation-states. In her images it can be seen that the movement of global diaspora involve hope and its binary counterpart, disappointment and despair. Nqaba's purpose is to produce a public and sensitive resonance to such situations.



Figure 13.2 Nobukho Nqaba, 'Untitled 10', from the series *Umaskhenkethe Likahaya lam*. Courtesy of the artist.

Technological identities are deployed through Lais Pontes (b. 1981, Brasil) and Tomoko Sawada (b. 1977, Japan). Pontes in her series *Born nowhere* investigates the construction of identities on Facebook and Instagram, its treatment or flow in those networks. She invents identities, their past and present histories, nationalities and their everyday narratives. She interacts on social networks with other people, with whom she delineates the personality and choices of each character. Pontes starts from Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, constructing liquid identities (Bauman, 2003). She draws upon the fact that in virtual spaces the fictitious construction of an identity is very common. In related constructions, Tomoko Sawada works on the tensions between gender and object, mask, face and stereotypes. Sawada deals with hybridization between youth culture, Japanese traditions, and ideas of western beauty. Through her images, Sawada attempts to confront identity while problematizing outside and inside, using her own body as a stage. Both photographers work within current fictional and performative canons which connect more to contemporary cultural systems where presentation is prioritised over representation. This facilitates possible identifications by the receiver. The images of Nancy Burson (b. 1948, USA) are a photographic precedent for this kind of work. A pioneer in the use of computer technology, her photographs have been a starting point to reflect the cultural construction of identity, race and gender.

As has been said, gender – in its socio-cultural construction – is a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation that carries and, at the same time, assigns meaning to individuals in society. In turn, the image, as a sign, facilitates systems of representation, since the semantic contents that are displayed directly relate to ways of seeing and feeling the world. Therefore, the worldwide problem of femicides and human trafficking is problematized through visual registers. Rehab Eldahlil (b. 1969, Egypt) in her series *Women of the south* documents the life of women after escaping from human trafficking. These images illustrate not only the resilience and strength of the women portrayed but also their vulnerable moments. In her *Essay on identity – The act of missing*, Mayra Martell (b. 1979, México) shows the spaces and personal belongings of missing women from the Mexican border city, Ciudad Juárez. Her personal statement gives us a panorama of the infinite horror and pain that the relatives of the missing women feel. At the end, she adds: “And I no longer think of the word death because I have learned that missing, when you love, is much more eternal than dying”. From their photos, it can be inferred that the image has the possibility of bringing together in a lightning flash the symptom, the critical point of a situation. This symptom is the expression of a discomfort, of that which does not function in accordance with a temporally and spatially determined discourse. Images, as providers of meaning, give an account of the symptom and always collaborate with its hermeneutics.

The aesthetic and social practices that Selfa A. Chew in her chapter “Visual disruptions of global landscapes” and Josefina Goñi in her chapter “Dissident artists as protagonists of visibility processes” present, turn the images of the named visual artists in signifying and resonant surfaces. Jacques Rancière considers that art is political by the kind of times and spaces it institutes and by the way it cuts out this time and populates this space (Rancière, 2010). Thus, the political has a close relationship with the authorial gesture that chooses to make visible and configures a new distribution of the sensible and the intelligible. The aesthetic productions that they name must be analysed from the perspective of colonialism and post-colonialism where questions of gender inequality appear through their intricately linked socio-economic and cultural conditions. Some feminist approaches deconstruct and rewrite previous artistic discourses. Such reenactments repurpose discursive possibilities to

show desire, courage and many functions within a society that remain structurally patriarchal. The projects which take archival material as a script to be re-performed and rehearsed facilitate a path of thinking between images, where an archive, due to its outdated nature, requires new meanings to be constructed. This coincides with Catherine Grant's consideration of the anachronism of feminism itself (Grant, 2022). These anachronisms bring to life female and LGBTQ+ artistic journeys.

Cindy Sherman (b. 1954, USA) in her *Untitled film stills* (1977–1980) unveiled through eighty-four images of gender topics by using a cinematic aesthetic in order to decipher different codes of female roles. She works across different types of films – noir, thriller and drama – to draw attention to the female behaviour predetermined by costume, pose, make-up and role. The title *stills* refers to the still photographs of a film but also to the stasis of the female figure in much cinematic narrative. Through Sherman's performativity the whole series is shattered into different time-spaces to play out a state of waiting for the man who will rescue her from filmic uncertainty. We can clearly appreciate the presence of a scopic regime that ensures the pairing of the woman as the object and the man as the holder of the gaze as has been analysed in the writings of Laura Mulvey (2007). Lili Almog (b. 1962, Israel/USA) reenacts the veiling practices of an extremist Jewish religious sect in her fourth and most recent photobook *Betweenness*, recreating dissimilar kind of backgrounds (indoor and outdoor) and using different fabrics with specific patterns in order to complete the intertextual reference. Almog's photographs often include art-historical references, creating a more complex visual narrative. Known for her intimate spiritual portraits of women's cultural identities around the world, she shows how religions cut across the feminine gender. For the series *The space within* she chose to work with models dressed in chador-like garments, resembling those she had seen on the women in Jerusalem. By employing models, Almog wanted to remove any specific cultural or religious identity. She conveys socially and culturally negotiated expressions of meaning. For a decade, the interventions of Sasha Huber (b. 1975, Switzerland/Haiti) have challenged the memorialization of the Swiss racist glaciologist Louis Agassiz by reenacting aesthetic actions. With the name *Tailoring Freedom*, she used the original slave daguerreotypes of Renty Taylor and his daughter, Delia (one of the enslaved Africans photographed by Joseph. T. Zealey for Agassiz in 1850), both unclothed and dehumanized in the daguerreotypes. Through an appropriation of the original images, Huber reproduced and printed the photographs on wood and dressed both subjects in traditional Congolese clothing with a stapling method that is a characteristic element of her practice, as a way “of stitching the colonial wounds together to heal the wounds”. About this method she has said: “For me the phenomenology of using the staple gun, pulling the trigger and holding this kind of weapon felt like a way to react to those histories and each staple represents a lost life for me” (Huber, 2023).

New ways of approaching motherhood

Already in the 1960s, Simone de Beauvoir and several followers recognized the dialectic of the sexes where there is a privilege of sex ruled by power and the logic of domination and aggression, rather than that of care and cooperation (in Femenías, 2000). But there are several visual producers that work from their own life experience as mothers dedicated to childcare. All of them are based on the feminist principle that motherhood will be desired, or it will not be at all. In the works of visual producers who make images linked to the tasks of childcare, it can be perceived that they escape the circular patriarchal oppression on the



Figure 13.3 Sarah Pabst, *Greeting the Sun*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

role of mother to show, from an activist point of view, how women negotiate and transform assigned patterns. They show pictures committed to the object of their love and, in a way, perform this becoming. It is also a form of showing how topological the deep-rooted dichotomy between the public and the private is: from the stereotyped place of the woman who is invisible to the woman who dares to express through images her sensations and experiences. Australian photographer Lisa Sorgini (b. 1980) specializes in portraying mothers and their children throughout Australia. In order to continue with her work during the Covid-19 pandemic she began the series *Behind Glass*. It is a body of work motivated by a need to make visible the unseen role of parenting during the lockdown period. All the aesthetic formulations connect the receiver to an intimate atmosphere through the colour, light and the atmosphere of the images.

The Spanish feminist writer Victoria Sau has critiqued the legend of the stork as a vehicle of sexual repression to make the mother invisible and deny her human dimension (Sau, 1995). The productions of Argentinian photographers Sarah Pabst (b. 1984) and Lilia Pereira (b. 1979) involve the decision to understand – in an autonomous and singular way – the desire of being a mother, enjoying it in opposition to socially forced motherhood. Their images are closely linked to experiencing and celebrating both bodies (mother and child) giving an account of the rituals

of intimacy and a desire to care consciously. Both projects are long-term explorations centred not only on the relationship between mother and child; they include family, community and investigating society's expectations about motherhood. They are deeply interested in the way familial relationships, particularly the role of mothers, look and change over time. The images of Pabst and Pereira show that affections maintain a dimension associated with corporal experience, and their discourse is built around emotions that impact their experiences of motherhood as an event. Both often produce self-portraits: a manifesto of an identity that shows the "here and now" of each instance and reveals that the correspondence between photography and identity is nomadic, floating because identity is never understood as a permanent construction, unfinished and always subject to temporalities and contingencies (Figure 13.3).

Hannah Arendt's differentiation between labour and work in *The Human Condition* understands the former as the fulfilment of an assignment while the latter refers to an active attitude (Arendt, 2005). Maternal care was paradigmatically considered as labour: Pabst and Pereira consider care as work, that is, they place it on the active side. In their images, we find situated gestures that invoke an intelligible and sensitive vibration in order to clothe the bodies with meanings, challenge our imaginary and modulate desires and perceptions within the human experience.

A Sort of Sisterhood: Collaborative Working

The installation *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973–75* made by Margaret Harrison (b. 1940), Mary Kelly (b. 1941) and Kay Hunt (1933–2001) showed black-and-white photographs, audiotapes, charts, films and text panels sutured together. Their artistic project of highlighting the pay and work gap of over 150 working women in a metal box factory makes visible the life experiences of women workers, their marginalisation and suffering. The system of representation was conceived from a feminist consciousness, where a decision was made not to take iconic images in favour of women but to comprehend the system from an ideological point of view, i.e. not as a reflection or representation but as an active process that provides meaning. Gauri Gill (b. 1970, India) is a thoughtful photographer with a human concern around survival. In her project *Balika Mela* (Girl's fair), in Rajasthan, young girls from neighbouring villages have been portrayed with a deeply sensitive approach. In 2010, Gill was the curator of the exhibition *Transportraits. Women and mobility in the city*. The initial question for this exposition, that brought together artists from different disciplines as well as collectives, was "When do you start being afraid of a man?"

Gill emphasises her interest in collaborative work. The project *Fields of sight* (2013–ongoing) made together with the Warli painter Rajesh Vangad (b. 1975, India) speaks about the destruction of the environment (which became a current feminist concern). Each image, intervened by graphics, rewrites a concept of landscape. Photography captures Vangad in his own surroundings. He, in turn, works onto Gill's photography, populating the landscape with stories of loss, power, ethics and a politics of the land that stem from the history of his language (Warli) by inscribing between image and text the particularity of the place and the cosmology of his community unified by the non-demarcation between earth and sky. Gill has said: "We started in 2013. It's such a close collaboration. I've never worked so closely with someone. It's completely equal. We're both artists of two very different art forms. So we had to find a way to merge them in a way that neither undermines the other." The power of this aesthetic production lies precisely in the writing and the rewriting of visual

narratives capable of synchronising and re-evaluating different temporalities in creating an imaginary geography, the productive tension between tradition and contemporaneity also appears as a strategy to address a global concern.

The extreme situations experienced by women and those with non-conforming identities lastly bring us to a special photobook called *Y un día el fuego* (*And one day the fire*) produced through a collaborative work between Argentinian photographers Belén Grosso y Sebastián Pani. Related to femicide and the phenomenon of women burnt by their attackers (often carried out by partners or close friends and relatives), this photobook interrogates the tensions and relations of real violence and, at the same time, develops a symbolic language. The image, in its capacity to expand and develop a particular matter, escapes the documentary (without eliminating it) by linking it almost indissolubly to the symbolic. It is no longer just a question of showing the Real but also of enunciating what underlies each phenomenon. This implies a capacity to link the representation of things with subjectivity, with what they essentially awaken, and at the same time uncovers the private and the forbidden in each case surveyed. The work of Grosso and Pani indicates the assumed feeling of possession that some men have over women. The scholar Rita Segato argues that femicide is a mimetic event (that encourages imitation), trying to explain the growth that this form of murder has seen. She then emphasizes that these acts are legitimized by being addressed to a broader range of recipients: the message is directed not only to the victim but communicates to the offender's peer group and to masculine identity (*fratritia*) in general, with the aim of preserving the patriarchal regime insofar as it seeks to set a limit for women with the pretension of restoring a lost natural order (Segato, 2013). Photography possesses the possibility of approaching subjects where the non-representable and the unimaginable, in situations of high social traumatic intensity, find their limit and the margins of the human/inhuman appear. For this reason, and through a certain timelessness, the photographic image has contributed – and continues to contribute – to a profound reflection and a possibility of elaboration. Segato considers that women's bodies have become a strategic target of new forms of warfare (Segato, 2013). Thus, it has become clear that it is not only important to make the invisible visible but to explore new methods of representation and construct new collective imaginaries. As we have seen, the public and private spheres are topologically related. In this kind of aesthetic approach, we find producers who, in Apollinaire's words, have looked at *the inhumanity of art* (Apollinaire, 1994) as an action to attract our gaze to the ineffable.

From all that has been presented so far, it can be assumed that visual texts play with the meaning of their subject matter, meaning as sensuality (in terms of its palpable vividness and seductiveness) and meaning as signification. The gesture of the visual producer, understood as the enactment of its intention, transforms the aesthetic message into an event, an experience, a sense that impacts on the intelligible and the sensible.

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14

EXPANDED SEXUAL AND GENDER IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Flora Dunster

The sum of “queer photography” is impossible to pinpoint, its component parts each notoriously mutable and changing. What we mean by ‘queer’ is contextual; as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, “anyone’s use of ‘queer’ about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else” (Sedgwick 1994, p. 9). Defining the term in 1993, she proposed that queer—reclaimed from its use as a derogatory slur—is “an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 1994, p. 4). Definitions of photography have shifted with changes in technology, art-historical debates, the seal of curatorial approval, and the endorsement of art markets. Taken together, these two words, ‘queer’ and ‘photography,’ can be used to describe practices across every category and genre of photographic history.

Photography has been asserted as a crucial medium for exploring queer subjectivity and desire, in collections like Deborah Bright’s *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire* (1998), and Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser’s *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs* (1991). But its networked nature has also facilitated the proliferation of nominally ‘queer’ imagery, foreclosing the term’s possible uses by fixing it to distinct looks and styles, often serving to render it synonymous with cisgender, gay, white men. This evacuation of queer’s radical charge served as a prompt for David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, who in a 2005 special issue of *Social Text* ask “what’s queer about queer studies now?”. They propose that

the contemporary mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identity—as a mass-mediated consumer lifestyle and embattled legal category—demands a renewed queer studies ever vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference, and calibrated to a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent.

(Eng et al., 2005, p. 1)

Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz argue that ‘queer’ must remain contingent and available to critique, open to the continuous re-inventions which evade normalization. In conversation

with the photographic connotations of ‘metaphor’ and ‘referent,’ I follow them to ask: what’s queer about queer *photography* now?

In the thirty years since ‘queer’ was reclaimed, the labels which fall under its auspices have proliferated. Queer is employed to communicate sexual preferences, relationship formations, and gender identities, as well as different ways of navigating through, and deviating from, heteronormative conventions. In the work of American photographer Talia Chetrit, these expansive possibilities needle into the representation of domesticity. Photographs of Chetrit’s partner, a cisgender man, show him garbed in frothy dresses, or a patent leather harness. Posed on their porch he lifts up the edges of a tulle gown, splaying its canary yellow layers across the frame. Their baby sits at his feet, tying the making of the photograph and its female gaze to a performance of family. Chetrit disturbs an idea of how the nuclear family ‘should’ appear, undermining a heteronormative ideal of parenting and the maintenance of heterosexuality through the binary trappings of gender. Welsh photographer Llyr Evans takes his father as his subject, who in *Dafydd I* (2022) is pictured standing surrounded by the tattered plastic sheets which line his greenhouse (Figure 14.1). Wearing a skirt made from traditional Welsh tapestry and a pair of heeled, golden boots, Dafydd buckles an expectation of how Welsh masculinity might appear. By posing his father in the clothes and accessories which signify his own identity, one which he has described “filtering” in the context of his hometown (Collins, 2023), Evans opens the space of the family portrait to allow himself in. Chetrit’s and Evans’s work visual-



Figure 14.1 Llyr Evans, *Dafydd I*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

izes the dispersal of queerness, which is pictured not in terms of sexual object choice, but as a more diffuse “resistance to regimes of the normal” (Warner, 1993, cited in Eng et al., 2005, p. 3). Queer is seen to work relationally, passing between and across bodies through love, kinship, and solidarity, as well as desire.

This chapter considers contemporary practices, like Chetrit’s and Evans’s, which are exploring, challenging, and re-figuring the representation of sexual and gender identity. Arranged around a handful of the discursive sites where ‘queer’ and ‘photography’ meet, namely translation, archives, visibility and materiality, I assess how ‘queer photography’ appears, both vexing and maintaining queer’s promise to work as, in Sedgwick’s terms, an open mesh of possibility. If ‘queer’ is a metaphor, a word used to evoke a changing and unstable referent, how can a photograph’s singularity chance to mirror it? Is it the collapse of this indexical promise, and the subsequent disclosure of photography’s own manipulability, that stands it as a productive site for queer expression? Or does the idea of an ‘unfixed referent’ chime with what Amelia Jones might call photography’s ‘queer effects’ (Jones, 2021, p. xvi), which is to say, not photographs made by and of queer-identified subjects, but photographs which activate the bodies implicated across their creation and circulation in various queer ways? In asking what’s queer about ‘queer photography’ now, this chapter acknowledges that when these two words are hung together, the answer might be nothing at all. By assessing the sites where ‘queer’ and ‘photography’ come together, and the ‘modes of difference’ through which ideas of authentic identity calcify, I offer that when asked differently, the question might instead point to the generous possibilities that the medium still has to offer in visualizing sexual and gender identities. What’s queer about photographic practices now?

Translation

‘Queer’ has largely been articulated in Euro-American contexts, and anthropologist María-Amelia Viteri has explored how as an identity category it can “re-signify the experiences and practices” of subjects in other locations (for her purposes, Mexico and Central America), for whom gender and sexuality are produced and lived differently (Viteri, 2014, p. xxiv). She describes how the projection of ‘queer’ can contribute to ongoing, colonial processes of assimilation that silence the use of more resonant words. Viteri thinks through ‘translation’ as a means of attending to how language can be utilized in ways that call up—rather than resolve—cultural specificity. To put queer in relation to ‘*loca*’ – which in the context of El Salvador means something akin to ‘bisexual’ – is not to subsume *loca* to queer, and *loca* is used differently in other contexts to mean something else altogether (see: González, 2014). By showing that *loca* *cannot* be reduced, Viteri demonstrates how “a process of translating and interpreting culture involves a relocation, a reterritorialization of hegemonic ways of representing the world,” and “that there are different systems of sexuality that are not necessarily ‘translatable’ in a straight line across cultures” (Viteri, 2014, p. 37–38). For instance, *fa’afafine* (Polynesia), *muxe* (Mexico), and *sekrata* (Madagascar) pre-exist queer theory’s formulation, and expose how the rhetorical move of ‘queering’ a subject or field of study is predicated on not having recognized it as dissident in the first place, sometimes willfully.

Artist Alexis Ruiseco Lombera, who emigrated from Cuba to the United States as a child, describes working between the two countries, and that “I have to be careful not to conflate the trans and queer politic that has flourished here [in New York] with the one developing on the island” (Ettachfni, 2019). Their series *Añoranza* (2016–18), made with Rafael Suri-Gonzalez, pictures queer and trans subjects in the Cuban provinces of Villa Clara and Mayabeque. The

photographs navigate a legacy of state-sanctioned rhetoric, through which prejudice towards queerly non-normative bodies advanced by post-Revolution ideology continues to be replicated. This has resulted in a lack of language, and a “lack of public narrative to frame the knowledge of institutionalized trans and homophobia” (Ettachfni, 2019). Accounting for these erasures, *Añoranza* pictures the forms of sexual and gender dissidence which have nonetheless continued to be lived and shared. The series alternates between portraits and self-portraits, where the shutter-release snakes through the frame to suture Ruiseco Lombera, positioned behind the camera, to the photograph’s subject, who is also the author of their own image. Ruiseco Lombera has described feeling that they “fail and fall within Cubanidad for being both non-binary and Cuban” (Ruiseco Lombera, 2018). *Añoranza*, which means something like homesickness or nostalgia, negotiates this displacement. Rather than projecting ‘queer’ onto Cubanidad, the shutter-release acts as a material assertion of self-identification, reciprocating Ruiseco Lombera’s gaze and interpellating them as part of “the futurity of the Cuban queer body” (Ruiseco Lombera, no date), both on the island and through its diaspora.

Hala Kamal, a scholar whose work considers translation relative to the construction and lived experience of gender, writes that it “is not merely an act of transferring information, but a process of knowledge production” (Kamal, 2008, p. 254). Translators decide what to trans- pose from one text to another, which is then re-constituted on the terms of a different language and culture. In *Kothis, Hijras, Giriyaas, and Others* (2013–) Charan Singh photographs India’s “queer underclass, feminine and transgendered persons” (Singh, 2021), employing local dialect to account for the specificity of their positioning in relation to each other, and to India’s class/caste system. *Kothi* is a “self-selected identity” which registers forms of male effeminacy, within which different regions of India use additional words to denote “cultural practices, origin stories, and mythological connections” (Singh, 2021). *Hijra* can include (but is not reduced to) trans and intersex, though Britain’s imposition of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 conflated ‘hijra’ with ‘eunuch.’ As Singh notes, “while language has made it possible to express desire, love, and identity, it has also resulted in erasures” (2021), a colonial legacy further complicated by HIV/AIDS NGOs whose reach and efficacy have been limited by their failure to employ specific terminology in addressing Indian subjects. Singh’s portraits are set against the unifying background of a rust-colored cloth, each sitter offering a different pose, expression, and style of dress. Neither ‘queer,’ nor ‘trans’ adequately holds them, and Singh writes that “to impose a global norm is to perpetuate colonial practices, which impose unsuitable categories on people who end up caught in the net of language” (Singh, 2021).

At the same time, Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba argues that translation can trigger a “linguistic process where meaning is put into crisis” (Domínguez Ruvalcaba, 2016, p. 12), as the movement of a word productively reveals its limits and assumptions. In Evan Benally Atwood’s work ‘queer’ is held alongside the photographer’s Diné/Anglo ancestry and their identification as *nádleehi*. While queer and third-gender identities in First Nations and Indigenous cultures are often referred to as ‘two spirit,’ this term (like queer) came into use in the early 1990s, as a pan-Indigenous descriptor within which there are “tribally specific understandings of gender and sexuality” (Driskill, 2010, p. 69). The Diné are the native people of America’s Southwest (anglicized as Navajo), for whom *nádleehi* means a male-bodied person with a feminine self-expression, or “one who constantly transforms” (Matsuda, 2021). In a photograph from their series *As the Water Flows* (2020), Benally Atwood sits atop a stump of wood settled upright in a river, their long hair twisted into a *tsiyééł*, a traditional Diné hairstyle. Their *shimá* (mother) stands behind them. The photographer stages queer/*nádleehi* subjectivity as a progression of matrilineage, bound up with

the natural world which nourishes all life. Here, ‘queer’ works adjectivally, held open and in conversation by nádleehi through a practice that generates what Wanda Nanibush describes as “visual sovereignty” (Nanibush, 2019, p. 77).

Even within a Euro-American context, ‘queer’ comes up against words like ‘butch,’ which became popular in the 1950s along with its counterpart, ‘femme,’ both rooted in the American working class culture depicted in Leslie Feinberg’s urgent novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). ‘Stud’ specifies butch identity in relation to Black and Latinx lesbians, for whom the visibility of gender non-conformance is re-doubled by that of race. Roman Manfredi’s series *We/Us* pictures working class butches and studs in “very British environments” (Wilkinson, 2023), including council estates, terraced houses, and iconic locations like Margate’s Dreamland funfair. Her subjects wear blue-collar uniforms, football kit, suits, and an Indian kurta. Translation is doubly at play, in the way that Manfredi’s subjects parse the appearance of ‘queer’ (and dyke/lesbian) through their assertion of butch/stud identity, and in her effort to displace London as the singular backdrop of queer British life. Melissa M. González proposes that translation must mediate between “respect[ing] the untranslatability of some dimensions of local difference” and acknowledging that “translations can not only aid cross-cultural understanding but also help us perceive some commonalities in gender and sexuality enabled by globalised capitalism” (González, 2014, p. 123). The circulation of photographs performs this tension. Photographs are translated as they enter into language through a viewer’s perception, and again through description and captioning. But a photograph can also complicate this process by bending away from the visual vocabulary which attends an idea or subject. The act of translation becomes self-conscious as the viewer is exposed to the limits of their interpretative position, or enters into a space of mutual recognition that generates, as Domínguez Ruvalcaba proposes, a “poetics of normalcy disruption” (Domínguez Ruvalcaba, 2016, p. 7).

Archives

Laura Doan describes how queer history and queer memory, formations which are twinned but often held apart by methodological approaches to writing and conceiving history, can be brought together in “practices that continually rub one against the other” (Doan, 2017, p. 116). Photographs remain widely understood as objective and are easily entered into archives as historical documents. But they can also be amassed and re-imagined through the work of queer memory, which merges feelings with facts.

Archival exclusions dramatize the homophobia, transphobia, racism and misogyny on which institutions of knowledge are built, what Robb Hernández describes as “the inadequacies of empiricist archive methodologies predicated on authorial objects, salient chains of custody, and authenticated whole documents arranged in self-evident record bodies” (Hernández, 2015, p. 71). Discussing the dearth of information pertaining to queer Arab and Middle Eastern histories, Mohamad Abdouni explains that they “have not been well documented and preserved, nor do we have access to much information about our past as queer communities” (Dugan, 2020). Abdouni publishes the magazine *Cold Cuts*, and in 2022 released a special issue titled ‘Treat Me Like Your Mother.’ Abdouni interviewed ten *tanteit* living in Beirut, a word which means ‘aunts’ or ‘ladies,’ and which was preferred by his subjects to ‘trans.’ Interspersed between their oral histories are the glamorous studio portraits which Abdouni made of each collaborator, some of whom also contributed their personal photographs to the publication (Figure 14.2). He notes his surprise in encountering these archives, having



Figure 14.2 Mohamad Abdouni, double-page extract from the book *Treat Me Like Your Mother: Trans* Histories from Beirut's Forgotten Past*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

“never seen images of gender non-conforming people in public spaces [in Lebanon] before the 2010s” (Abdouni, 2022). Each subject’s testimony runs in a vertical column across the publication, alternating between Arabic and its English translation. This allows for the reader to follow each history as a through-line, or to proceed page-by-page and access the intersecting voices of all ten tanteit, “a horizontal reading in which the worlds of these women collide, just like they have always done in the space of the city” (Abdouni, 2022). Its availability as an open-access download resonates with American artist Juliana Huxtable’s suggestion that “social media is expanding the possibilities for both archiving the present and finding ways of revisiting and rereading the past so that we can try to form something that we could perhaps analyse and use to approximate a “tradition”” (Gossett and Huxtable, 2017, p. 40). Abdouni enters a new archive into circulation, sidestepping the authentication demanded by ‘empiricist methodologies,’ and constituting what Ann Cvetkovich calls a queer counterarchive, formed from “a creative approach to archiving, an openness to unusual objects and collections, and an acknowledgement of that which escapes the archive” (Cvetkovich, 2011, p. 32).

Laura Guy describes how the institutionalization of absence renders “reading a form of detective work, a kind of searching that seeks to uncover, or recover, either by looking for clues, [or] engaging methods of over-interpretation” (Guy, 2019, p. 324). This can also look like a practice of archivally situated invention, a strategy that has been deployed in projects like British photographer Tessa Boffin’s 1991 series *The Knight’s Move*. Boffin’s work mines the lack of lesbian representation across historical records and cites the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who asks whether, given the erasures wrought by colonialism, practices should seek to ‘unearth’ what has been hidden, or instead gear themselves towards “not the

rediscovery but the *production* of an identity...the act of imaginative rediscovery” (Hall, 1998, p. 224). This recuperative archive-building has continued in contemporary practices. In her series *ANTI-ICON*, American/Mayan artist Martine Gutierrez poses as mythological and historical figures including Aphrodite, Mulan, and Cleopatra. Commissioned by Public Art Fund and installed on the sides of bus shelters in New York, Chicago, and Boston, Gutierrez’s self-portraits replace the advertisements which usually occupy these spaces, echoing the activist group Gran Fury’s use of bus advertising for its infamous 1989 *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* campaign, which depicted a diversity of kissing couples in a bid to counter misinformation about HIV/AIDS. By unfixing ‘icons’ and heroines from representational conventions, Gutierrez “make[s] the pedestal bigger” (Gutierrez, 2021), re-figuring their stories through her Indigenous, trans, femme body. The photographs attend to the imaginative potential of re-working where and how trans identity appears, illustrating Boffin’s claim that “we [can] go beyond our impoverished archives to create new icons” (1991, p. 49).

Returning to translation, we might consider how the phrase ‘reading’ a photograph positions the medium as being intrinsically bound up with language. Archives often fail to register queer life, which reverberates across photographs and documents in ways that are felt, but which might not announce themselves as queer to the passing eye. Queer’s instability sits uneasily within such sites, which are organized through naming. This poses a challenge for artists and researchers. But it can also open space for imagination, interpretation, and identification. The act of reading a photograph becomes one of reading between the lines, or, as Tina Campt puts it, of “listening to images” in order to “challenge the equation of vision with knowledge” (Campt, 2017, p. 6). Campt’s careful attention to photography through “other affective frequencies” (2017, p. 9) models an approach that sidesteps archival demands for the kinds of visibility which facilitate classification, and which attach ‘queer’ to particular looks, styles, and assumptions.

Visibility

The poet Joelle Taylor describes being photographed on London’s Old Compton Street, once a hub for gay nightlife and now a queer afterthought in Soho’s commercialized geography. She writes: “the small bang/when my picture is taken/where is it taken to?/who will it become?” (Taylor, 2021, p. 25). Taylor betrays the extent to which representation can surpass affirmative visibility. Allan Sekula’s canonical 1986 essay “The Body and the Archive” charts how, from its inception in the late 1800s, photography became bound into the procedures of modern policing, which utilized it to classify and typologize ‘deviant’ subjects and submit them to intensified surveillance (Sekula, 1986). The subsequent development of photography alongside systems of networked communication underscores the importance of Sekula’s point. CCTV, facial recognition, biometrics, algorithms and data harvesting have contributed to the fraught meaning of ‘visibility.’ American artist Lorenzo Triburgo’s series *Policing Gender* (2014–) ‘depicts’ incarcerated queer subjects, with whom they corresponded for over three years. Concerned that figurative representation “might make their pen pals vulnerable to outside perceptions, or associate their sexual identity with criminality” (Triburgo, no date), Triburgo instead pictures deeply lit swathes of draped fabric, evocative of Renaissance portraiture. These are paired with aerial photographs of the landscapes around—but not including—the prisons in America’s Pacific Northwest to which Triburgo’s letters were directed. Installed with these alternating modes of photography are audio recordings. Through their strategy of ‘representational refusal,’ Triburgo lit-

eralises Camp's suggestion that we listen to images, compelling the 'viewer' to hear rather than see their subjects, and summoning a powerful reminder of their absence from the unincarcerated queer community (Triburgo and Van Dyck, 2022).

The visibility which has been achieved through the entangled industries of film, television, fashion and advertising has become synonymous with queer, and increasingly trans, inclusion. This conflation of visual representation with rights-based liberation is what philosopher Luce deLire terms "representational justice," which stakes 'being seen' as a political end, when what it engenders is "merely nominal, not material emancipation" (deLire, 2023). As scholar Che Gossett clarifies, "one of the traps of trans visibility is that it is premised on invisibility: to bring a select few into view, others must disappear into the background" (Gossett, 2017, p. 183). Increased media representation has at best "present[ed] trans identity as a viable alternative" (deLire, 2023), and at worst exposed it to attack, often with fatal consequences for trans women of color and gender-nonconforming people, whose visibility fails to align with the binary image of trans identity that has been neutralized by celebrity figureheads.

The question of whether visibility leads to violence and criminalization or to awareness and empathy dovetails with the discourse of what were, in the 1980s and '90s, referred to as 'positive images.' Amidst the AIDS epidemic, some lesbians and gay men sought to disseminate imagery depicting queer subjects in a positive light, which "frequently meant sanitized, desexualized, normative, whitened, lightened, or otherwise well-behaved folks accommodating to a liberal embrace" (Villarejo, 2007, p. 390). Activists, artists, and theorists conversely argued for a 'politics of representation,' and for work that might intervene in the conditions which simultaneously require and exploit images of queer subjects. The opposition between a 'politics of representation' and the 'representation of politics' allows us to ask how photography can be moved away from attempts to picture identity and instead contribute to the material work of eradicating dispossession and violence. Canadian performance and visual artist Cassils utilizes photography's materiality to interrogate how the demand for visibility is projected onto trans bodies. In their 2021–22 performance *Human Measure*, Cassils worked with choreographer Jasmine Albuquerque and a group of trans and non-binary dancers. Employing movements inspired by self-defense and de-escalation techniques, and evoking the range of emotions experienced by trans subjects finding ways to live in hostile environments, the dancers proceed across a piece of chemically treated muslin lit by the red glow of a darkroom. Exposed by the intermittent flash of a light box, they create a large-scale cyanotype that indexes their sweaty outlines. Questioning the capacity of documentary photography to adequately 'capture' the depth of lived experience, *Human Measure* allows its subjects to "wield the double-edged sword of representation in a collective process of empowered labour" (Cassils, no date).

Ongoing arguments against the 'representation of politics' have made documentary photography an uneasy strawman, especially given, as Nat Raha offers, that "in an ongoing context of anti-trans political backlash from the far right and transphobic feminists, the stakes of transfeminist herstory and stories remain significant" (Raha, 2022, p. 202). Describing the archives of trans lesbian life in the UK during the 1970s, Raha suggests that "documentary fragments and traces...are a means to hold up and affirm what was experienced, lived and what might have become" (Raha, 2022, p. 202–3). While Raha is not explicitly referring to photography, her point can be extrapolated to position documentary-based work beyond the demand for 'representational justice,' positive images, or an exploitative, pseudo-anthropological gaze, and to understand it as contributing to

the creation of collective memory that resists the material precarity of both trans life and archives. *Aperture's* 2017 "Future Gender" issue, guest edited by artist Zackary Drucker, includes "as many photographic approaches...as there are gender expressions" (Drucker, 2017, p. 23), from work which is documentary, like Josué Azor's photographs of queer Haitian nightlife, to that which is deliberately constructed, like Nelson Morales's posed and stylized portraits of *muxes*, a third-gender expression in Mexican Zapotec culture. Also included are images from Kike Arnal's book *Revealing Selves: Transgender Portraits from Argentina* (2018), which registers the collective trans joy precipitated when Argentina passed its Gender Identity Law in 2012, legalizing gender self-determination.

The exuberance of Arnal's photographs can be held alongside documentation of the UK-based activist group Pissed Off Trannies (POT). Together, these examples illustrate Susan Stryker's contention that "whatever future gender's transformation might hold for new modes of life that can expand our agency and extend our creative potential, that future is ours precisely because of the resistance offered, the lives surrendered, and the strategies explored by those who came before us" (Stryker, 2017, p. 35). In September 2022, the POT assembled outside the offices of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in London, where masked members deposited clear plastic bottles filled with urine. Earlier that year, a leaked report by the EHRC proposed that trans people in the UK would be barred from single-sex spaces, including bathrooms, unless they were in possession of a gender-recognition certificate, which entails a lengthy and invasive vetting process. The protestors are photographed pouring these bottles onto the ground and themselves, and the yellow liquid is caught mid-air by the camera's shutter. The piss speaks back—if you deny us bathroom access, where do we go?—while tapping into prejudiced readings of the queer body as abject and connoting the erotic charge of piss play. For Stryker, these are the kinds of images which, in their resistance, anticipate 'future gender.' The affective distance between Arnal's euphoric subjects and the fury of the POT indexes two ends of the same struggle. These photographs, which are documentary but not 'positive,' and oriented in their respective elation and rage towards a future where gender self-determination is safe and attainable, underscore queer's political frontline. While certain rights have been attained, in certain places, for some subjects in the 'queer community,' for others they remain distant, or immaterial given the continued experience of subjugation and abuse. These images work to illustrate the chasm between the lip service paid to visibility through the rhetoric of 'representational justice,' and a politics of representation that understands the *burden* of representation as the ongoing task of asserting what is lived and what might yet become possible.

Materialities

In 1988, Boffin wrote that her photographs aimed to create "utopias of multiple differences, of subject positions *not* determined by gender" (Boffin, 1988, p. 159). Her desire for multiplicity, to live and lust through her identifications, rather than from a singular identity, has been mirrored in recent fiction such as Andrea Lawlor's 2017 novel *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*, and auto-theory like McKenzie Wark's 2020 memoir *Reverse Cowgirl*. In these texts, the stability that visibility presupposes is undone by the mutability of their narrator. Or, put another way by writer Maggie Nelson, "you can lose a lot of fluidity in the effort to make certain things visible" (Nelson, 2017, p. 110). The language of photography demonstrates its complicity with the processes of containment that representation can facilitate: photographs 'record' the presence of a body in time, or, more nefariously,



Figure 14.3 Anya Gorkova, *Photographic Object 67*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

‘capture’ it. This begs the question of how a medium which claims to still motion can address protean states of being. Anya Gorkova works with the *stuff* of photography, such as darkroom chemicals, exposed film and paper, and objects like developing trays and drying hooks (Figure 14.3). With these materials, Gorkova makes sculptural, camera-less objects that privilege the processes of photography rather than the outcome of a final image, with an attention to durationality that is co-extensive with their own non-binary identification. Experimenting with different chemicals, they achieve new colors and tones apart from the prescribed black and white, effecting a non-representational move towards the utopia that Boffin anticipated.

Describing the photogram, made when an object is placed atop light-sensitive paper and exposed, Geoffrey Batchen offers that here “photography is freed from its traditional subservient role as a realist mode of representation and allowed instead to become a searing index of its own operations, to become an art of the real” (Batchen, 2016, p. 5). American artist Joy Episalla has adapted this process to make ‘foldtograms,’ submerging exposed photographic paper in “the wrong order” of developing and fixing chemicals (Tang, 2022), and then crumpling, scrunching, bending and folding it while both wet and dry. The foldtograms exceed flatness and framing, their pliability pulling the viewer’s experience towards feeling the artist’s active, physical maneuvers. Episalla’s work vexes staid conceptualizations of darkroom photography, resulting in objects that are continuously re-configured throughout the process of their creation and with each installation of the work, such that they “end up bearing traces of their previous iterations. They contain their histories and pull their

histories forward into the future” (Soboleva, 2022). The ‘real’ contained within Episalla’s foldtograms is something akin to the time of queerness, which, like queer subjects, exceeds the meaning offered by a singular, controllable referent. In Episalla’s work, this excess *is* the referent, albeit one which refuses to be pictured and demands instead to be felt, as the “sensation of asynchrony” (Freeman, 2007, p. 159), through forms of relationality, or as the refusal be marshalled by the reproductive time of capitalism and the nuclear family.

Conclusion

Writing in 1992, around the time of queer’s defiant reclamation as a countercultural politics, British art historian and AIDS activist Simon Watney explained that

the main conflict is not simply between older ‘gay’ assimilationists ... and ‘queers’ asserting their ‘queerness’. Rather it is between those who think of the politics of sexuality as a matter of securing minority rights and those who are contesting the overall validity and authenticity of the epistemology of sexuality itself.

(Smyth, 1991, p. 20)

While there may be no such easily definable thing as ‘queer photography,’ Watney’s claim remains relevant to how we study and understand queer *uses* of photography, and their effects.

Beginning with the question, ‘what’s queer about queer photography now?’, or more precisely, ‘what’s queer about photographic practices now?’ this chapter has assessed some of the ways that contemporary photographers continue to employ the premise and promises of ‘queer,’ and to challenge the mainstream visibility which divests queerness of its disruptive, worldmaking potential. By remaining formally and representationally mobile, and facilitating modes of engagement which exceed the expectation of an uncomplicated visual encounter, recent photographic work has both attended to and expanded conceptions of gender and sexual identity.

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15

VISUAL DISRUPTIONS OF GLOBAL LANDSCAPES

Women Photographers Reframe Patriarchy

Selfa A. Chew-Melendez

Rineke Dijkstra, Xyza Cruz Bacani, Margaret Ngigi, Nicole Ngai, Sara Waiswa, Danielle Villasana, Ingrid Leyva, and Eleonora Ghioldi are only some of the women photographers whose aesthetics reframe gender violence and patriarchy. Their photographs, distinct and powerful individualities, visit the worlds of warriors resisting colonial logics and capitalist orders. Although produced from distant geographies, these women photographers have shared a powerful medium that allows for collaborative moments of political disruptive intervention into globally articulated systems of oppression. This chapter will examine the sociopolitical landscapes surrounding repeated themes in their careers, with biographical sketches explaining their insertion in scattered, yet linked, gestures of resistance to patriarchal capitalism. Although none of the photographers examined here claim a space in critical transnational gender studies, this is an interdisciplinary field they intervene in and enrich through the selection of their subjects and the issues addressed in their images. The multiple dimensions of transmigrant identities are certainly reflected in their photographs, in which documentation, art, and analysis converge to potentiate alternative readings of the social relations the images portray.

At a macro level, some concepts laid out by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in ‘Under Western Eyes’ (Mohanty, 1984) help us understand the complexity of the relation land/body in images that are grounded in cultural environments. In her groundbreaking text, Mohanty states that the “connection between women as historical subjects and the re-presentation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity, or a relation of correspondence or simple implication. It is an arbitrary relation set up by particular cultures.” (Mohanty, 1984). *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Practices* reminds us of the material conditions in which particular gender relations take place and which result in diverse experiences and forms of resistance to oppression (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994). For her part, Linda Tuhiwai Smith critiques the Western extraction of indigenous knowledge (and aesthetics) that ultimately advances neoliberal agendas (Smith, 1999). Smith’s proposal to decolonize scholarly spaces reflects native artistic responses to Western imperialism, both in and outside of its gaze.

While Mohanty and the artists and scholars anthologized in *Scattered Hegemonies* invite women to reflect on their own participation in the othering of women inhabiting colonized

spaces, and the complicity in their exploitation, Smith encourages indigenous peoples to control their own representations. There is no doubt that scholarly efforts by anti-colonial feminists affect but are also informed by the art of women in different parts of the world. Globalization entails hegemonic processes, yet these have never been fully completed. Furthermore, globalization and its continuous shape-shifting places dissenters in contact; it allows the erasure of borders among academic disciplines, between art and research; it meets resistance in bodies shaped by a land in constant transformation. Globalization births sojourners, transmigrants who humanize their new spaces in new combinations of cultural and material existence; photographers in transit as agents of hegemonic destabilization.

Given her Western origin and formation as a photographer, Rineke Dijkstra's work develops in its viewer sensitivities that disrupt stereotypical representations in all realms. The realism of her images is knotted to intimate landscapes, places, and situations that are usually reserved for the individual or collective self, but which she manages to display for our reflection in several of her series. Regardless of the setting, whether a park, the beach, or the naked interior of a house, Dijkstra captures momentary suspensions of barriers between the people she photographs and her gaze. Born in the Netherlands in 1959, Dijkstra works in her own country but also travels across continents taking pictures of people outside of her community. In examining her photographs, artist statements, and interviews, *The New Mothers* series (1994) emerges as an impactful triad. Recognizing that her subjects were in a state of shock, she reports their consent to the photographic sessions as the result of the accountability that personal relations build. Of this relationship with her subjects, she states: "It's important how I relate to the person being photographed, and later how the viewer relates to them. There is something happening between those people and me; I can't really describe it" (Dijkstra, 2014).

Dijkstra staged the portraits of a friend, and of friends of a friend, right after giving birth. Their vulnerability is patent, as is the deconstruction of motherhood, the absence of the veils that mystify pregnancy and birth to justify a patriarchal state. In *Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29 1994*, a room without furniture shows a young woman carrying a naked newborn baby. Julie is wearing large transparent underwear over an enlarged belly. Certain traces of a victorious gesture in Julie's face, sanitary pad, blood, pain, tension in her body offer the details of a battle, hidden in centuries of (mainly) Western art romanticizing labor, birth, and motherhood.

Almerisa is a complementary longitudinal study of a girl's transmigrant journey in the Netherlands. The first photograph was taken at an Asylum Seekers' Center for children of Bosnian refugees in 1994. Dijkstra has registered Almerisa's transformation through an extended photographic series, which, allows the viewers to see Almerisa as an adult, with her child. Except for the chair where Almerisa sits, Dijkstra avoids any other piece of furniture in these portraits. Almerisa's stature, shape, posture and clothing may reveal different stages in her life, and social roles in the asylum-granting country; however, her direct gaze into the camera, and the absence of a smile in most of the images, is unsettlingly unchanged. The study of Dijkstra's images is not complete with an examination of the portraits: the artist's statement and surrounding information are crucial in our reading of Dijkstra's subjects, for their relevance is contextual, grounded in the land or its displacement, and, as stated before, the body. "For me, the importance of photography is that you can point to something, that you can let other people see things. Ultimately, it is a matter of the specialness of the ordinary," states Dijkstra; such specialness is built, in great part, through globally arranged socioeconomic processes creating patterns of transmigration. Our reading of the

portraits depends on our awareness of them (Dijkstra, 2014). Beyond the documentation of different stages of life, the series of works which constitute *Almerisa* bring about reflections on the effects of war, displacement, cultural hybridism, family, resilience, and how these affect women.

With a more frontal approach, Xyza Cruz Bacani's photographs immediately add race and class to the examination of transmigrant women's experience. Bacani (b. 1987) is a Filipina journalist and photographer who elects to include contextual cues to the images she creates. She focuses on transmigrant communities, already racialized and impoverished through imperialist projects that throw women into systems of labor separating them from their family. In *We Are Like Air* (2018), she assembles a visual narrative of her mother's life as a Filipina domestic worker in Hong Kong, and of her own life as Cruz Bacani follows her mother's path. Her experience as a Filipina migrant and domestic worker has prompted an extraordinary documentation of the cost of working seven days a week in spaces in which laborers are invisible and highly vulnerable to all types of exploitation. According to the International Labour Organization in 2013, "[p]aid domestic workers [were] estimated to make up a population of at least 67 million across the world, the majority of whom (80 per cent) [were] women (ILO, 2013), while around 11.2 million are international migrants" (Marchetti et al., 2021). It is easy to forget that most domestic employees are subjected to their employer's needs and desires by the power endowed to their employees through neoliberal global processes. Codes of silence are embedded in a type of labor that demands total submission of transnational gendered work sectors. Differences of class, language, race, religion, and gender in hostile environments outside of their place of employment build lives of isolation that contribute to an intentional forgetting of their experiences. Cruz Bacani's photographs restore individuality and complexity by providing impactful representations of public and intimate moments in the lives of working-class immigrants across the world, including her own family. While she registers a wide range of situations and emotions, from physical traces of abuse to moments of restfulness and care, her work prompts reflections on the relationship between the photographer and the photographed:

It's forced me to be vulnerable...when a photographer becomes vulnerable; they become more sensitive to the other person they are photographing... If I am photographing it means I have the power...and that power can be used to exploit them...or empower them... Because I am photographing my own.... my family... that power [is] taken away from me.

(Bacani, 2019)

Power is also a recurrent theme in the work of Kenyan photographer Margaret Njeri Ngigi: "My initial fascination with beauty eventually turned into the deep need to address the pressing issues of society that directly involved me. It was exciting. I felt empowered" (Ngigi, 2023). Ngigi explains her relationship to the women in her portraits as reflexive: "By photographing women I make an image of myself." Indeed, her portraits, with a surrealist quality, elicit questions on "issues affecting women in the limelight" (Ngigi, 2021). In interviews and artist statements, Ngigi alludes to her specific focus on women in her community; here, the European colonization of Africa makes her work a point of departure to discuss African heteropatriarchal systems. According to Bertolt (2018), the oppressions of African women stem from "a process that dates back to the fifteenth century" and start with the European enslavement of Black men and women. The adoption of European hierarchical structures in

the colonies would “disrupt traditional societies” that allowed for more participatory roles in the organization of African communities. The racialization and sexualization of Black African bodies resulted in hierarchical gendered social organizations whose coloniality/colonialism survived independence from European powers and transferred the control of African women over to Black men (Bertolt, 2018). Recognizing that African female experiences have not been homogeneous or passive, Ngigi’s individual and collective portraits destabilize fixed notions of gendered control. They are also reminders of the subjugation of women under the tenets of modernity. Thus, Ngigi’s feminist approach to the condition of women of Kenya does not come with a seal of approval of Western social systems as liberation. An example of this critique to modernity is an untitled black-and-white portrait of a woman with a barcode, a signifier of systems of merchandise control, projected on her face (Ngigi, n/d.). By contrast, issues of class are not readily apparent in Ngigi’s work.

In the same vein, staying away from overt negative appraisals of contemporary systems of exploitation, and thus, of class, Nicole Ngai’s photographs propose alternatives to modern or traditional forms of femininity. Born in Singapore and based in London, Ngai has a large degree of geographical mobility that allows her to travel between Asia and Europe, a privilege denied to many working-class immigrant women: she calls London home. Her birth date is not disclosed in any of the websites featuring her photographs. With training in fashion, she describes her photographs as countering a white-male methodology by developing close relationships with the women she photographs, who are mainly Asian: “I work with my friends and try to establish a good relationship with my subjects. My subjects are people that I always go back to. They’re all really important to me, and they’re mostly my friends” (Mahal, 2020). Whilst the objectification of the female body has been a constant in fashion photography, where additional dehumanization takes place through the photographer’s emotional distance from the model once the work is done, Ngai develops a closeness to the people she photographs beyond any modeling session or professional agreement. Ngai left Singapore due to her antagonistic relationship with a conservative society that places her and other young people at the social margins due to their fashion preferences and other departures from tradition. Although the state city has developed ambivalent spaces in which LGBTQ communities have created cultural spaces or adapted them for their purposes, Singapore continues to ban same-sex marriage (Reuters, 2022; Yue & Leung, 2017). Ngai’s self-exile allows her to create aesthetic landscapes of sexual freedom in interstices created by the same society that hypersexualizes and reifies Asian bodies and experiences. Ngai’s photographs are intimate and project a sensuality that is linked quite often to the gender ambiguity of her subjects: “A lot of my work focuses on the blurring of boundaries and the juxtaposition of hardness and softness, masculinity and femininity, power and vulnerability” (Ngai, 2019). Like Nicole Ngai, Sara Waiswa creates a body of work that is based on the recognition of the right of the subjects to make decisions on how they want their portraits to look. She states “I’m much more interested in collaboration – working with the people who I’m photographing and making sure that I’m not projecting myself on them, but that we are trying to create something together” (Waiswa, 2020).

Waiswa was born in Uganda, during Idi Amin’s dictatorship. Although a precise date of birth is missing from her biographical data, Amin’s regime situates her birthdate in the 1970s. Her family immigrated to Kenya where she grew up. As a transmigrant photographer, she is well aware of the effect of representation on the wellbeing of a community, but also of the individual who is being photographed. Waiswa earned a Bachelor’s degree in Sociology; and a Master in Science in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, both

in the United States (Waiswa, n/d). Noting her class and education privileges, Waiswa is conscious of how the camera has served as a tool of colonialism, for which she is “much focused on how the continent and its inhabitants portray themselves and are portrayed by the rest of the world” (Waiswa, 2020). Echoing Linda T. Smith’s decolonizing methodologies, Waiswa describes the white man’s photographing as a “kind of an expedition.” To her, “the question is, did the people in the images have agency? Did they want to be photographed?” Coloniality will continue to guide the work of outsiders, placed in higher echelons of global racial hierarchies, invested with colonial power, and lacking genuine empathy, states Waiswa: “Even in the descriptions, they really are just being described as though they are sights seen on a safari – ‘Oh, here’s a native,’ or whatever. It’s not really like this is a person, this is So-and-So, and this person has a family. It’s just the explorer saying ‘Look at all these great things I’ve seen.’ It’s not really about what’s being seen, it’s about the person doing the seeing” (Waiswa, n/d).

Waiswa’s respect for the other’s autonomy is evident in the dignifying portraits she produces for and with the persons that attract her attention. *Stranger in a familiar land* is a series of photographs that explores the discrimination endured by persons born with albinism in Africa. Florence Kisombe appears in Waiswa’s images in different environments, all of which are parts of her daily life, with clothes of her own choice and accessories that emphasize an aesthetic presence with a strong personality. The series demonstrates the importance of a collaborative relationship between photographers and photographed, a mutual recognition of affinities as well as of intentions. Waiswa’s intentional sharing of decisions decolonizes the artistic processes. “There truly is power in Africans telling our own stories and presenting Africa in a non-stereotypical way,” claims Waiswa (Waiswa, n/d). While identarian groups are constantly created and recreated, and otherness often reconstituted through gender, class, and gender differences, affinity is perceived in the self-confidence expressed by Kisombe in every photograph taken by Waiswa.

Waiswa’s anticolonial stance includes a feminist praxis. She co-founded the African Women in Photography network, which is “an organization/community dedicated to elevating and celebrating the work of women and non binary photographers from Africa” (Rainforest Journalism Fund, n/d). This organization fosters mentorship, offers educational programs, and has become a vehicle for “funding and employment opportunities, to publish and exhibit their work by connecting them to editors and curators and finally to provide a platform for collaboration and community building” (“African Women in Photography,” n/d). Sharing Waiswa’s interest in collaboration with the photographed subjects, as well as showcasing the work of other women and non-conforming photographers is Danielle Villasana. Villasana graduated from UT Austin in 2013. She defines her professional activities as centered on “human rights, gender, displacement, and health” (Villasana, n/d). Her book *A Light Inside* documents the complex lives of transgender sexual workers in Peru: from intimate moments with friends, partners, and family to recreational scenes in shared or public spaces. The photojournalist states that “being transgender adds to another layer of vulnerability and violence against them.” Race, class, and gender, in a post-colonial state under neoliberal socioeconomic pressures, converge to make of Latin America the region with the “highest number of transgender homicides” (Villasana, 2018). A state of coloniality allows Catholic institutions in Latin America to effectively create a hostile environment for the LGBTQ communities in post-colonial societies, in contrast to pre-Colombian indigenous societies which accepted gender expressions and identities that extended beyond Western binary notions of gender and sexuality (Brousset, 2021; Eger et al., 2022; Ramirez & Munar, 2022).

Ingrid Leyva (b. 1987) is a Mexican photographer living in El Paso, Texas, and studying filmmaking at New Mexico State University-Las Cruces, who defines herself as a transborder photographer. Her documentation of transnational life through the series “Mexican shoppers” takes the viewer to an activity that is both intimate and public for the mostly working-class residents of the border who shop within a few blocks from the international US/Mexico divide. Leyva approaches them at the moment of crossing the border from El Paso, Texas, towards Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, in a North to South direction, asking them if they would allow her to photograph them. The shopping area on the United States side is called the “Golden horseshoe district” due to the intense commerce that takes place in mainly family-owned businesses and the amounts of money that large numbers of Mexican visitors who are usually working in labor-intensive jobs leave in the United States.

As in the case of Rineke Dijkstra’s work, the sojourners in Leyva’s portraits look directly into the camera without heightened emotion. The angle from which Leyva takes their portraits makes visible the fences, a reminder of the limited mobility that non-wealthy border crossers have when in this US-controlled zone. The shoppers, each one with a unique story but always with dignified stances, demonstrate ingenuity and individuality in the way they



Heather, 36, Grandfather
It happened at least once, maybe more than once. I felt dirty and different from them and it changed the course of my life. I still suffer from low self-esteem. The gift that came from this experience has enabled me to understand and help others like me to heal. S

Figure 15.1 Eleonora Ghioldi, from the series *Guerreras*, 2022. © Eleonora Ghioldi / GUERRERAS.

carry and bundle their items as well as their willingness to help others complete their journey. Young mothers and fathers with children in their arms carrying at the same time large bags; elderly people; women close to their young daughters in a protective gesture, their hands still grabbing their belongings; people negotiating their existence between the Global North and the Global South (Chew, 2021; Leyva, 2019). *Mexican Shoppers* is a visual inventory of how immigrant lives are reconstituted in a post-modern world that produces particular manifestations of lethal relations of power in the borderlands. The tension Leyva registers in her images emanates in part from the knowledge that the people she portrays depart and return to Ciudad Juarez. The city is notorious for its transnational manufacturing plants employing large numbers of mostly migrant women, with some of the highest levels of gender violence ever recorded.

Eleonora Ghioldi's production naturally enters an aesthetic space that reveals the effects of patriarchal systems of power on the lives of women and non-binary people. She underscores resilience, and individual and collective struggles defiantly eroding hegemonies of terror. Born in Argentina in 1972, Ghioldi received her formal education as a photographer in California where she resided for twenty five years. By the time of her return to Buenos



Ustedes conocen a Delfino?
Mujer, de 25 años, argentina, trabajadora
de la industria textil, en Ciudad Juárez. Su vida
se divide entre el trabajo y el cuidado de sus
hijos. En este momento está buscando trabajo
y quiere volver a su país. ¿Ustedes
podrían ayudarla? ¿Cómo? ¿Dónde?
¡Díganle a Delfino!

Figure 15.2 Eleonora Ghioldi, from the series *Guerreras*, 2022. © Eleonora Ghioldi / GUERRERAS.

Aires, she had already completed *Guerreras* (2022), a series of portraits of victims of rape, and inserted herself in the reproductive rights movement of her country of birth, the successful *Marea Verde*.

The variation in socioeconomic background, age, and racial identity of the photographed women in *Guerreras* emphasizes local stratifications of violence in global patriarchal arrangements. Yet Ghioldi's work does not propose to ignore class, race, and other particulars of local socioeconomic dynamics when addressing sexual violence. Aware of the feminist production in the Global South, Ghioldi intends to use photography as a vehicle to understand our individual and collective experiences, to "begin to provide a way of understanding the oppression of women who have been subalternized through the combined processes of racialization, colonization, capitalist exploitation, and heterosexism" (Lugones, 2010). Hence, Ghioldi's photographs are presented as part of an installation, alongside screens playing interviews with researchers of sexual violence from different disciplines and a showcase with rape kits and material explaining the process of forensic medical examinations. The social treatment of sexual violence is a refined torture that keeps hurting women according to their place in history.

In line with the careful relationship developed between photographer and photographed, expressed by the women photographers already examined in this chapter, Ghioldi establishes a connection with the women and transwomen she photographs. In *Guerreras*, the collaboration in her portraits is based on a *testimonio* tradition, which entails first-person narratives of victims of genocide in Latin America, and which often includes descriptions of rape. Although *testimonios* may not result in a sentence of the perpetrators, they contribute to Truth and Reconciliation commissions in attempts to initiate healing processes. Victims of rape, relatives of victims of femicide, and transgender participants of Ghioldi's photographic projects are testifying on their own behalf, but they are also carving spaces to destabilize dehumanizing colonial structures affecting women and queer persons. Reconciliation in the context of sexual violence is not a mere accountability act between rapist and raped, or men and women. It requires profound transformations across class, gender, sexual orientation, racial relations of power, and destabilization of globalized capitalist heteropatriarchal structures. That is an effort that the work of every photographer in this chapter is contributing to on their own terms, with their own aesthetics and their own visual disruptions of global landscapes.

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16

GENDER IN CURATION AND EXHIBITION DESIGN

Sandra Nagel and Jonathan Laloz

“Who’s afraid of women photographers?” was the title of a two-part exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay and the Orangerie in Paris in 2015 (Robert et al. 2015), reassessing women’s extraordinary contributions to photography from 1839 to 1945, and prominently showing photographers such as Claude Cahun who would today likely describe herself as ‘non-binary’. The title of the show can easily be reformulated to “Is anyone still afraid of photographers broadening mainstream perspectives?”. The answer is both yes and no. “No”, thankfully, for the vast majority of curators and visitors. Yes, unfortunately, for a minority prompted or facilitated by contemporary culture wars. As a case in point, the French press reported in February 2023 that several billboard posters advertising the photography exhibition of South African non-binary photographer Zanele Muholi at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie had been vandalized with an obvious message of queerphobia (www.komitid.fr, Martet 2023), which demonstrates the resistance that curators and artists can meet in their mission to include, to educate, to overcome barriers and advance the causes of gender equality and the acceptance of diverse identities.

On the whole however, this is an exciting time for artists and curators alike. This is a moment not only of entering new territories but also of “catching up”, giving forgotten artists recognition they would have deserved during their lifetime. It is a time of bringing new views and angles into the mainstream by adjusting the looking glass. It is finally the accepted view, for example, that Lee Miller was not Man Ray’s ‘muse’ but that she was an artist in her own right (Haworth-Booth 2007). It is a huge shame for so many artists who were overlooked during their lifetime that they are not with us anymore for the rediscovery of their work. Vivian Maier’s work, widely fêted today, was rediscovered by accident, and is today being chiefly promoted by the several men who bought her work at an auction but who are also criticized by photography historians such as Pamela Bannon for shaping Maier’s story in such a way that they, the initial curators, become the heroes of the story (Bannon 2017).

As curators, we were ourselves confronted with a gender-related dilemma when mounting exhibitions of photographer Jeanne Mandello. Born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1907, Mandello belonged to a generation of German, often German-Jewish, women for whom the trade of photography was appealing and, during the Weimar Republic, as accessible as

the traditional *Haushaltsschule* (prep school for domestic skills) (Eskildsen, 2017). She was trained at the Berlin Lette-Verein, where, among others, Marianne Breslauer also learned photography.

Mandello died in 2001, when interest in her work was just starting to resurface. She was ‘forgotten’ for a number of reasons, the main being her multiple forced exiles: first from Nazi Germany to France, then from France, after a spell at the notorious Gurs internment camp, to Uruguay. On leaving France, she had to leave all her material and all her work behind and start over, together with her husband Arno, in South America. Arno Grünbaum was not a photographer by training, and Jeanne taught him the basics of photography. The two then worked together as a team under the label “Mandello”, following a similar career strategy to their contemporaries Gerda Taro and Endre Friedmann working together under the name “Robert Capa”. When researching in Uruguay, eliciting accounts of people who had known them or whose parents had been acquainted, the task division became clear: Jeanne was the artist, the photographer; Arno, the businessman, was responsible for the commercial side. He brought in contacts and jobs, whilst undoubtedly trying his hand at photography also. They even co-signed several photographs. Yet in contemporary newspaper and magazine articles, written by male critics, they are described as “los Mandello” or even “the artist Mandello and his wife” (Freund 1953).

Strikingly, Jeanne seems to have played a role in her own obliteration: downplaying her own skills and vision in interviews and gushing about Arno’s contribution (Knöner and Mandello 1994); she let him keep her photographic material and the trade name “Mandello” when they separated. This could be a case of ingrained, generational, unconscious and exaggerated modesty, as well as internalized sexism: it was not uncommon to let the man take the limelight whilst doing the work in the background. In my role as curator of her work (S Nagel), it seemed to me that my job was to unpick the threads of the story and to find a more objective account. Archival research revealed that, objectively, Jeanne was the main driving creative force but that, under her guidance, Arno took photographs also, both alone and together with Jeanne. The balance to be found is to establish the truth about Jeanne being the professional photographer in the couple without denying Arno his contribution. He nevertheless completely erased Jeanne Mandello from his CV when writing about his artistic projects in 1978. He writes entirely in the first person: “I escaped to Uruguay [...] I had major exhibitions in Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro”, never mentioning once that Mandello was not legally his name (Mandello 1978).

Today it is Jeanne who is remembered. She was contacted for curator Ute Eskildsen’s groundbreaking exhibition “Fotografieren hieß teilnehmen: Fotografinnen der Weimarer Republik” at the Folkwang Museum in Essen in 1994. At the time, having lost most of her work from the 1920s, she could not contribute any photographs. Nonetheless, she was invited to Essen and interviewed for the Folkwang’s collections. From that point on, work that had been published or which people had purchased, or that old friends had kept, has been resurfacing. Mercedes Valdivieso curated an exhibition of her work in Barcelona in 1997 (Valdivieso 1997). Jeanne Mandello died in 2001, whereupon interest picked up again in Uruguay, starting with an exhibition I curated in Montevideo’s Alliance Française in 2012 (Nagel and Porro 2012). Her work was shown in 2016/17 at the tellingly named “Verborgenes Museum” (The Hidden Museum) in Berlin (Bauer and Nagel 2016).

The Verborgenes Museum was run by Marion Beckers and Elisabeth Moortgat. Since the 1980s, their mission was to show the works of women artists, in a ‘hidden’ corner of Berlin. Of course the name also refers to all the exhibited artists who have been rendered

invisible and were brought back to light by the patient and painstaking work of Beckers and Moortgat. The Verborgenes Museum closed in 2022, but this closure can be seen as a positive step: their entire archives and collection are now integrated into the Berlinische Galerie (Meyer 2022), a step closer to forgotten artists rejoining the “mainstream” and to further exhibition and research projects being financed. For Mandello, each new showing of her work was a stepping stone for the next exhibition, until several of her photographs were shown in 2021 in the exhibition “The New Woman behind the Camera” at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Throughout the work I and others undertook over the years, half-forgotten knowledge of Jeanne Mandello was reawakened, and her reputation re-established. Today, a photography award in Uruguay for young photographers is called “Premio Jeanne Mandello”, something she would certainly have been proud of.

An interesting example of how classic canons of work can be broadened and enriched by artists and by their curators is the 2023 exhibition “Julia Pirotte, photographe et résistante” at the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris (from 9 March to 30 August 2023). Julia Pirotte, a Jewish woman originally from Poland, born Golda Perla Diament (1907), fled her home country in 1934 after a four-year prison sentence for communist activism. She trained as a photographer in Belgium and then joined her sister Mindla Diament in France shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. The exhibition showed Pirotte’s life and work and was curated by Bruna Lo Biundo, an independent curator and researcher, and Caroline François of the Mémorial de la Shoah’s exhibition department. Lo Biundo explained that “this project is part of a programme on women in the Second World War, initiated a few years ago by Caroline François at the Mémorial de la Shoah” (Lo Biundo 2023). The opening of the exhibition took place on 8 March 2023, i.e. on the occasion of International Women’s Rights Day, thereby underlining Pirotte’s status as a woman artist who had to fight in order to be recognized.

Pirotte and her sister Mindla were each involved in the French Resistance, an aspect it was important to explore in a show at the Holocaust Museum and Archive in Paris. But the curators also wanted to pay homage to the paths and struggles of Pirotte and her sister as immigrant and refugee women in France. Despite or because of the hardships Pirotte had to endure, her empathy with easily overlooked population groups shines through in her photographs, in particular the shots of women and children, and ‘colonial’ French soldiers, i.e. men who were forcibly recruited by France for their military units. For her, politics and photography were always inextricably entwined. She saw her camera as a political tool, as a weapon. When she joined the resistance in Marseille in the early 1940s, the photos she produced were clearly acts of resistance and brutally honest journalistic documents of the precarity of life and the dangers of Nazi persecution. Working for different newspapers, she, as a woman, could get into the notorious Bompard hotel in Marseille, an internment site for Jewish women and children. Often, internees were family members of the German Jewish men being held at the Camp des Milles nearby. Without wanting to downplay in any way the sufferings of the male internees, it is necessary to state that these latter fates are much more documented and known to the general public than the destinies of (their) women and children, many of whom also died in the Nazi extermination camps. Pirotte, however, did document their situation, and her work therefore contributes to enlarging, complexifying and broadening the historiography of the Holocaust by shining a light on hitherto less visible aspects. Around the same time, Pirotte photographed young men in the ‘maquis’ (an underground resistance group) during a

sabotage action, which shows that she likely could move more fluidly between different groups than men might have been able to. As an active liaison agent of resistance group FTP-MOI, Pirotte used her photographic skills in order to produce photographs for fake identity papers. In August 1944, she participated in and photographed the insurrection/liberation of Marseille, choosing to illustrate the moment of liberation by focusing on a woman leading a march with her arm triumphantly raised, documenting the important role played by women in active resistance movements. She clearly wanted her photographs to be testimonies.

An important focus in the exhibition was placed on the three women who shaped Pirotte's life and career, whom the curators wanted to honor. Firstly, there was her sister Mindla, later executed by the Nazis for her resistance activities and who encouraged Julia to also join the resistance: here too, it was important to not only show Mindla as the subject of her sister's portraits but also as a courageous woman with an active political role and to remedy the fact that "the place and participation of women in the Resistance, with commanding roles such as Mindla Diament's, is still little present in the historiographic narrative" (Lo Biundo 2023). Another important influence was Belgian resistance fighter Suzanne Spaak, also executed in 1944, who had offered Pirotte her first-ever camera in Belgium and had encouraged her to study photography. A prominent role was also given to Jeanne Vercheval-Vervoort, who was specifically interviewed by the curators and her filmed testimony included in the exhibition. Vercheval-Vervoort was a lifelong friend of Julia to whom she entrusted part of her archives. A pacifist and feminist, she worked tirelessly to make Pirotte's work known before and after the photographer's death in Warsaw in 2000. We can see that "the theme of 'sisterhood' and solidarity between women was another angle chosen by the curators" (Lo Biundo 2023). It was an exhibition space full of strong-headed and strong-willed women, uncovering links of female solidarity and agency.

Did Pirotte consider herself a feminist? The curators believe that "Julia Pirotte was animated by the ideals of communism (to the extent that her main worry about the Polish *Solidarnosc* movement was that it could undermine women's rights); her photographic work is part of the movement of great humanist photography. Of course, she takes a sympathetic look at women and their condition. But she has never called herself a feminist. Her interest in the condition of women is in line with her interest in the conditions of the most vulnerable categories in society" (Lo Biundo 2023). The curators themselves, however, did want to convey a feminist message:

Our work wants to be part of women's history, it is a small contribution to the question that Michelle Perrot posed in the historiographic debate when, in 1973, she launched her first course in women's history at the Paris University of Jussieu: 'Do women have a history?'

(Lo Biundo 2023)

After the war, Pirotte returned to Poland, where, in 1946, she was one of the few photographers documenting the immediate aftermath of the antisemitic pogrom in Kielce. Here, too, she not only watched as a witness of important events but also took pictures so that these images could become valuable sources for the study of these historical events. She founded a photography agency and continued to document social, political and cultural events in Poland and also in Israel.

A major difference between Julia Pirotte and Jeanne Mandello is that it was always important for Pirotte to be recognized, especially for her photography. She did not shy away from self-promotion, and this term is used here in an entirely positive light. She was interviewed extensively, and her photographs were exhibited throughout her lifetime in New York, Stockholm, Charleroi and Warsaw. In 1980, her work was presented at the Rencontres d'Arles photo festival. In 1982, back in Arles, she saw that photographer Willy Ronis had a larger space than she had been given, and only half-jokingly complained about it to her friend and publisher, Jeanne Vercheval, who passed the anecdote on to the curators in order to illustrate Pirotte's strong desire for recognition (Lo Biundo 2023).

Pirotte's work has been regularly published, but it was not until the 2023 exhibition in Paris that all facets of her work and life were considered on an equal footing. According to Lo Biundo, the curators explicitly intended to redress an injustice in the way she was remembered:

The work of Julia Pirotte is mainly known because of her reportages on the resistance fighters in the South of France. But she is not only an 'occasional' photojournalist, she is an artist. Her photographic work is rich and her aesthetic choices recognizable. There is a real 'Julia Pirotte style', especially when she makes portraits. In our exhibition, we tried to make the artist known.

(Lo Biundo 2023)

And who better to explain her decisions than the artist herself? The two curators, Bruna Lo Biundo and Caroline François, put Julia herself in the foreground. The exhibition was dotted with several screens, featuring interviews in which Pirotte herself speaks and explains. This was of course a conscious decision of the curators: explaining why she documented the political and social events she witnessed, Pirotte says, "Je devais profiter du fait d'être photographe" (*I had to make good use of the fact that I'm a photographer*), and "Si la photo agit, c'est une bonne photo!" (*If the photo produces an effect, then it's a good one!*). One could argue that this is not gender-specific curation but nevertheless the mission was to show that Pirotte "was a courageous woman and her life commitments are the choices of an emancipated woman for her time" (Lo Biundo 2023). The curators had found out that numerous interviews with Pirotte existed. In the 1980s and 1990s, she repeatedly agreed to filmed testimonies, in Poland, in the United States and in France. She was seemingly very conscious of the importance of passing her legacy on, and she loved to tell her story, especially to young audiences. The curators also chose to punctuate the exhibition with Jean-Pierre Krief's documentary *Julia of Warsaw* (1989) which shows Pirotte in her modest Polish home, talking about her life and explaining her artistic approach. There is another extract from the documentary *Liberation of Marseille* (1994) by Grégoire-Georges Picot who was a close friend of Julia Pirotte and a keeper of the memory of the Marat resistance unit within the F.T.P. (Franc-tireurs et partisans) – a unit which Pirotte photographed 'in action'.

Before the 2023 exhibition, the last retrospective of Pirotte's work had been in 1995. The curators considered that it was time to make her work known to new generations and to show this work from new angles and with a new prism. That is why it can be deemed so important to periodically show art repeatedly, since new facets can always be explored. Websites and social media have contributed to a democratization of curatorship and to more inclusivity in the choices of artists being shown. Professional critics will of course

always play a role in bringing visitors to an exhibition, but the visitors themselves can now spread the word too. In the case of Julia Pirotte, as in most other exhibitions today, a special hashtag was created, #expojuliapirrotte, although it appears that visitors used just #juliapirrotte more often. Published comments on Instagram ranged from “super cool” to postings by accounts such as “donesquefanhistoria” (*women who made history*), “graines-dephotographe”, and the account of *Polka* magazine. Several visitors detailed why a particular photograph touched them most, an interesting insight into the way visitors interact with art shows.

Alongside the operations of curators and public institutions, organizations like AWARE Women Artists state their “primary ambition is to rewrite the history of art on an equal footing. Placing women on the same level as their male counterparts and making their works known is long overdue.” AWARE aims to make women artists of the 19th and 20th centuries visible by producing and posting free content about their work on their website and on their social media, in particular on Instagram, where they have more than 25,000 followers. Even more effective, in an age of ‘influencers’ (for better or worse), are publication or posting choices made by individuals who have discovered an artist they like whose discovery they want to share. Publications by the artists themselves no longer have to vie for museums’, galleries’ or curators’ attention but can ‘self-promote’, not waiting until they are given attention but proactively attracting attention for themselves. This will not replace the curators’ work, since curatorship means external validation and analysis, but it can help to make the artists’ voices heard, a digital version of earlier graffiti in public spaces.

Another case study in curators’ changing approach to diverse content is the Zanele Munoli exhibition shown in Paris in 2023. Gradually shifting away from assuming a ‘male gaze’, that is to say, a male-led understanding of the world as the universal standard, curators now explore different approaches to work by women and historically marginalized practitioners. In photography especially, the ‘male gaze’ has led to the objectification of women, seeing them as subjects of sexual desire, and the incapacity to explore different facets of gender and sexuality. But a new wave of contemporary artists is trying to expand beyond this one-dimensional way of seeing the world, seeing bodies differently, seeing gender in a different light, with the different experiences these artists have had with the world. Zanele Muholi, born in 1972, is a South-African photographer. Muholi identifies as non-binary and treats their work as ‘visual activism’. Having lived through apartheid from the point of view of the Black LGBTQIA+ community, they have developed a very powerful, nuanced depiction of the oppression still persisting today against Black queer bodies. Muholi’s work has been shown around the world. In spring 2023 it was exhibited at la Maison Européenne de la Photographie (MEP) in Paris, curated by Laurie Hurwitz and Victoria Aresheva. A deep sensation of injustice which arises from their collection of photographs is accompanied also by a strong sense of pride and celebration. Between activism and celebration, in what ways does Zanele Muholi’s art and the exhibition of their work translate as a political expression of gender and oppressed identities?

It is interesting first to ask ourselves why Muholi uses photography if they describe themselves as an activist. The first answer we can give to this question is the inherently archival nature of the medium. Photography also uses reality as a subject. What emerges from this is the way reality is being portrayed to us, the viewer. Already in their early days, Muholi had identified a mission in mind of giving voice back to oppressed communities. They wanted to center their artistic expression through the vision of those whose voices we never hear, whose pain and strengths are never shown, whose faces we never see. “Faces and Phases”

is a collection of portraits that the artist started in 2006 and continues to develop. It is proposed as a living archive of the Black LGBTQIA+ community. The power of this work emerges in the multitude of faces that confronts the viewer. So many untold stories, traumas, wounds and deaths, yet great perseverance. All of this is conveyed through the eyes and the facial constructions and expressions of the sitters. It is a breathing testimony to their place within the world and to Muholi's attention to the individual.

"Queering Public Space" (2006–ongoing) puts this preoccupation at the heart of the photographs. Queer subjects are shown in context, in public, in the spaces where they live. This creates awareness of the material reality of oppression. They seem, perhaps, not to fit in, yet they continue to live, and their existence becomes political. If this is not political in and of itself, it becomes political in the context in which it is being shown, in the eye of one who isn't accustomed to these representations. For example, in the photographs showing queer or trans people on Durban beach, this everyday setting asserts that this is their space also. We can thereby enquire as to the political nature of exhibiting such artistic work. Is it political in and of itself, or does it become political when brought into confrontation with the status quo? A second facet of the photographer's work is its challenge to our assumptions and the lack of accurate representations of queer experience. The series "Only half the picture" (2002–2006) documents survivors of hate crimes and the effects such traumas have on their bodies. Yet its goal is to go beyond victimhood. Muholi shows resilience with a compassionate eye. While members of this community might be reduced to their scars or pain, the artist creates a much more complete picture, showing moments of intimacy and love. The subjects are treated as humans with complex identities and the respect owed to them. We are confronted with our tendencies to essentialize humans with whom we can't identify and are offered a much more complex and accurate representation of their lives.

"Brave Beauties" (2014–ongoing) expresses the courage and resistance that exists within queer beauty pageants. Claiming power and confronting the status quo, the subjects are shown as beautiful as they are. We are positively challenged in our conceptions of conventional beauty and the way we see the gendered body. Through drag queens and drag kings, we are confronted with the variety of ways in which the male and the female body can be represented. Gender is at the center of questioning here, and we start to see the emergence of new voices and new approaches. The last aspect of the photographer's activism is the creation of new, unforeseen imagery. Zanele Muholi goes beyond the political: They express humanity, with its complexity, fluidity, and nuances. A new vision is shown to us and reinvents the status quo. "Somnyama Ngonyama" (*Hail the Dark Lioness* in isiZulu, 2012–ongoing) reclaims Blackness from the way it has previously been portrayed. The series uses items traditionally associated with Black existence in the context of segregation and magnifies them in artistic ways. Muholi shows Blackness through the eyes of Black individuality, without denying the very real historical conditions that Black bodies have endured. They use archetypes of Black women to their advantage and don't hesitate to rework the contrast of their pictures to accentuate Black skin.

The activist nature of Zanele Muholi's work is clear. Exhibiting these pictures becomes important to give a more nuanced, more complex voice to gender-based minorities who have been oppressed. An exhibition like that at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie is in alignment with this struggle, and its curatorial treatment corresponds to this activism. In the first panels introducing Muholi's exhibition, the curators directly address the visitors. They explain that the artist uses they/them pronouns in English, and they will respect that throughout the exhibition texts. French is a very gendered language, and recently a new

way of writing French has been developed called 'inclusive writing'. This avoids defaulting to the masculine when talking about groups of multiple genders, and addresses other forms of grammatical inequalities. The panels respect and use this language ('he/she' thus becomes, in French, 'iel'). A new generation of curators are expanding the scope of what is being shown and the way it is being shown and discussed. Giving visibility and accurate representation to queerness is a political act because it humanizes the profound trauma that is being perpetrated throughout history and still to this day.

Art has always been political or at least had political components, and the same is true for curatorship. In regard to gender, identity, queerness, many curators today are entering new territories: They give space to artists who would have been overlooked/marginalized/excluded in the past. By the choices they make, they can contribute to artists and subjects claiming/reclaiming/appropriating identities, to play an active role in the advent of more diversity. And maybe, one day, we will no longer label artists as 'women artists', 'women photographers', 'trans photographers'. Whether male, female, non-binary or any other identity, what matters is the quality of the art. Artists, curators and visitors alike only need to broaden their focus, zoom out to a wider angle and thus enrich our human experience. Now that is a utopia worth aspiring to.

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Gender in Curation and Exhibition Design

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17

DISSIDENT ARTISTS AS PROTAGONISTS OF VISIBILITY PROCESSES

Josefina Goñi Bacigalupi

Visible Processes of Contemporary Colonialism

This chapter proposes to identify and reflect upon a corpus of works by dissident artists that make the processes of contemporary colonialism visible. A series of selected works will be explored: *Bombril*, by Priscila Rezende (b. 1985, Brazil) a performance; *Aparición* by Regina Jose Galindo (b. 1974, Spain – Guatemala), a group of photographs; *Container of Feminisms* by Carme Nogueira (b. 1970, Spain), Anxela Caramés (b. 1977, Spain) and Uqui Permui (b. 1964, Spain), an installation in public space; and *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* by Wura-Natasha Ogunji (b. 1970, Nigeria – USA), a performance that takes place in the center of a city on the street. With each example, this chapter will carry out a comparative analysis with an emphasis on their discursivities, in order to identify common points and thus understand where and when messages of exclusion and exploitation are reinforced. On the other hand, the analysis will make use of a combination of languages (verbal, sound, visual, and corporeal) to recover the construction processes of the works. Lastly, I will present my own work *Vesta* as an example to indicate how this type of work is built, with its intensities and enunciations continuous with the philosophical proposition of becoming. These reflections will then identify and recognize the works of artists who use the history of subjugation and show what continues to happen in a systematic and naturalized way within the structure of contemporary colonialist patriarchal societies.

Presentation of the Work of Dissident Artists

The works presented are by a selection of artists from different geographies, each revealing the processes of contemporary colonialism in their own way. These works are manifest through brief glimpses of the here and now, understanding glimpses as a cut or slice of the aura, described by Walter Benjamin, in which “metaphysical objectivity replaces the physical objectivity of the work” (Benjamin, 2003: 15). According to Benjamin, essayist and one of the first analysts of photography, the aura of a work brings with it an effect of estrangement, which awakens in those who contemplate it a metaphysical objectivity that superimposes or replaces the merely physical objectivity of its material presence at the same time

so that “the aura of a human work consists in the unrepeatable and perennial character of its uniqueness or singularity.” Art today responds to a new type of massification in a post-aesthetic freedom which can be placed in dialogue with Ticio Escobar, Paraguayan curator, professor, and art critic, who proposes to understand works immersed in their contexts in which the aura is located and seeks to “make one’s way through the infinite images that flood the space of the visible in order to detect a quick glimpse against the light or a sign that is moving backwards” (Escobar, 2021: 40).

In the performative work *Bombril* by Priscila Rezende, in which the artist cleans metal pots sitting on the floor with her hair used as a washing sponge, elements expose the exploitation and domination of the colonial white man. Rezende exposes her body as a carrier of meanings, displaying activities reserved for women alongside historical records displaying their perpetuity. Her performance is a form of political action and resistance, which questions and challenges existing norms and power structures, her body functioning as a privileged site for the construction and resistance of gender identities. Gendered performance challenges established norms and opens spaces for exploration and the subversion of gender roles and expectations. As Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor proposes:

Performance practices change as much as the purpose, sometimes artistic, sometimes political, sometimes ritual. The important thing is to highlight that performance emerges from various artistic practices but transcends their limits; it combines many elements to create something unexpected, shocking, striking.

(Taylor, 2011: 11)

Regina Jose Galindo’s *Aparición* (Madrid, 2021), consists of forty-three photographs of women completely covered with fabric. Echoing the number of women murdered in Madrid during 2021, she exposes and makes visible the systematic and invisible violence generated against women. This practice, that transmits a political message, is also a way of mobilizing communities, seeking to make changes in existing power structures. With its performative action, the artist and the group that she represents expresses dissidence, creates awareness, and seeks social justice, making use of Diana Taylor’s concept that performativity in art opens spaces for reflection and political resistance: “the performance, anti-institutional, anti-elitist, anti-consumerist, comes to constitute a provocation and a political act” (Taylor, 2011: 8).

Container of Feminisms by Carme Nogueira, Anxela Caramés, and Uqui Permui consists of a portable archive (with two doors that open to reveal a space) located on the street, containing clippings, books, and photos denouncing the violence exerted on women in the Galician community. Commenting on the binary between the public and the private, it proposes an intermediate space between the personal and the collective. A device to question all the messages of the feminist struggles, this action, made of memory and archive, evokes Ticio Escobar’s assessment that “the course of memory does not end in the past, but leads to the ethical imperative of what must happen and opens up to political responsibility: to a space-time of remembrance, social construction and collective desire” (Escobar, 2021: 130).

Wura-Natasha Ogunji in *Will I still carry water when I’m a dead woman?* features a group of women carrying barrels of water through the streets in a work that is carried out in public space. The audience is the passers-by of the city, companions who preserve the route and uses of the road. Recorded on video as an archive of their work, Ogunji’s work

traces public space, power, and politics. Though the piece raises questions about women's work, it also tells us about the necessary politics of change. How much is enough? What is the tipping point in a society where people struggle to meet basic needs? In this work, bodily practice challenges and subverts traditional conceptions of gender. As Diana Taylor states "the body of the performance artist makes us rethink the body and sexual gender as a social construction" (Taylor, 2011: 11). The bodies of the performers become political actants, and function as points of resistance from which to rethink gender and what is historically constructed.

Comparative Analysis of Discursivities

The following analysis aims to share some categories, finding common points of reflection in the future of discursivity.

Subject Matter

Bombril works by stating the historical exploitation, dating from the colony to the present, of women and their bodies. This is similar to the case of *Aparición*, where the physical violence and death suffered by women, who are systematically made invisible, is exposed. In *Container of Feminisms*, we can observe the visibility and historical silence to which infinite generations of women have been subjected. The work seeks to recover, document, and make visible the stories of women, feminisms, and the struggles for sexual liberation of the last thirty years in Galicia. *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* explicitly exposes the abuse suffered by communities in Africa with women as the epicenter of systematic subjugation. We can find at the center of their discourses that the works state the problems of processes of colonialism, violence, exploitation, and inequality on the group of women that each represents. They are each an updating of a past time which reverberates, drawing us in to the temporal depth of the wounds that they expose. Each works with events that occurred in the past as a subject matter, yet, by bringing them up and pointing them out, they show us a sinister trajectory of the inflicted wounds acting forwards.

Each of the artists identifies with minority positions, and it is interesting to identify their singularities as agents of resistance. Considering the works as carriers of marginal voices, and their resistance of subaltern experiences, it becomes possible to see how each participates in challenging homogeneity and dominant forms of representation, manifesting not from the logic of positivist denunciation, but from rhizomatic appearances, which state the problem and at the same time coexist and underline it. As Deleuze and Guattari point out: "Evolution schemes would no longer obey only models of arborescent descent that go from the least differentiated to the most differentiated, but also a rhizome that acts immediately in the heterogeneous and that jumps from one line already differentiated from another" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 16).

Use of the Body

In each of the projects under discussion, a body is figured, either the body of the artist or of a performer, operating in the first person. As Diana Taylor suggests, "performance offers a way to generate and transmit knowledge, through the body, action and social behavior" (Taylor, 2015: 31). These bodies turn out to be the exponents and transporters of discourses

of violence and inequality, systematically exercised, as Josefina Alcázar proposes in her discussion of Latin American performance art. She writes that “the artists present themselves, it is the action in real time; they convert their body into meaning and signifier, into an object and subject of the action” (Alcázar 2008: 333). Her body is then a symbolic body that expresses problems related to identity, gender, and politics. That is why “the performer’s body is the support of the work; her body becomes the raw material with which she experiments, explores, questions and transforms. The body is both a tool and a product; they are creators and artistic creation simultaneously. By taking elements of everyday life as material, they explore their personal, political, economic and social problems” (Alcázar 2008: 333). As bodies are the central node in all of the works, they are where different signifiers converge. We might say that, in their multitude, they are the support from which messages of exclusion are amplified. Without them, and the explicit willingness of artists to each use them as supports, denunciation loses its power. It is important to recognize how in this type of work – of resistance, of gender, of politics – the use of the body and the use of the body in the first person is fundamental.

Relationship with the Spectator

The works we have explored consciously use public space. Re-appropriating and redefining it as a symbolic element to expose the actuality of bodily wounds, spaces amplify them and establish a link with the viewer. Taken through estrangement and discomfort, they seek the generation of new forms of relationship between people. Nicolas Bourriaud in his *Relational Aesthetics* affirms that “social utopias and revolutionary hope gave way to micro-utopias of the everyday and mimetic strategies” (Bourriaud, 2008: 35). Instead of focusing just on aesthetic contemplation, contemporary art creates experiences that challenge social norms and promote the active participation of viewers by constructing situations where the work is conceived as a space for interaction in which the links between people acquire importance, reconfiguring their signifiers. Art can evoke intense emotions, sensations, and experiences that defy established logic and generate an emotional impact on the viewers. Through the production of affects and intensities, art can involve and mobilize, awakening consciousness and promoting resistance.

In all of the examples discussed, it can be seen that the “deployment of public mourning allies with a militant opposition to injustice” (Butler, 2020: 1). The artists propose with this gesture the need for public recognition of silenced situations. Just as Judith Butler proposes to us, “there is a need for public recognition of these losses that continue to be counted and not mourned” (Butler, 2020: 1), and so the artists do not reserve their activities for closed places. They show a reality that should not be hidden, which at the same time occurs in all cases in broad daylight. Their location, in public space, articulates a direct, clear, and uncomfortable dialogue with passers-by, proposing to confront reality in order to displace the positions of passers-by and question crystallized prerogatives.

Territory, Intensity, and Meaning

The use of public space is re-appropriated as a disruptive symbolic element in everyday life. This works alongside the updating of a past that reverberates, returning us to the temporal depth of the wounds that the works expose. In the case of *Bombril*, the performance takes place on public roads and takes place in real time – the present. Its space is presented as a

platform that allows the discourse of the work to be amplified, and its course condenses the message which becomes stronger as it progresses. The past tense is used as a permanent reminiscence. In the case of *Aparición*, the series of photographs uses spaces of public order to show what happened to the 43 murdered women, presented as a reverberation of the violence suffered in a past time. The work traces a trajectory: hidden – covered – made invisible. In *Container of Feminisms*, the container functions as a device that invades public space to expose the messages of the struggles of the women of Galicia, using the past tense as a constructor of statements and the present tense as an update of its symbolic components. Finally, in *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* the painful walk carried out by women in the streets of the city until they are fed up is exposed: invading public space, they appropriate it. In its display, the performance uses the present tense, real time, as well as the repeated act, the dragging of water containers that is still carried out today by women.

It is interesting at this point to recall the ideas of territory, intensity, and meaning that Deleuze and Guattari develop in their philosophy. Intensities are the materials that circulate through the city, to which the territories give transit. But also force their collapse. Deleuze and Guattari ally themselves with what is institutionalized (the state, the school, the family, gender, what is correct, what is moral, etc.) to defamiliarize it, to make it visible, at the same time as they offer support for bodies in inhospitable territories. Based on these ideas of “deterritorialization”, the works presented reconfigure the territory through a process in which they challenge established systems and create new forms of thought and action, creating new spaces and possibilities. Through deterritorialization, the works generate ruptures and open the way for resistance and social transformation.

Territory and public space are used as platforms for the elaboration of subjectivity, both individual and collective. These spaces become passable, habitable, transformable, and transitory, but also epochal. The works make physical and symbolic the encounter with space as a way of feeling, traveling, connoting, and signifying a present, inhabited in turn by history, memory, as well as possible and projected futures.

Crossing artistic languages as a process for examining visibility and the problem of exclusion

An analysis methodology based on the crossing of languages (visual, verbal, sound, and body language) aims to identify common points in the development and intensity of the discourses. The present approach hopes to find cracks that “allow us to understand the artistic not only as a field but as a system of forces that, shot in different directions, cross other fields diagonally and even intersect or collide with other forces” (Escobar, 2021: 88).

I will identify, first, the visual elements in the case of *Bombrial*, with direct references to the colony, clothing, and pots and pans. With this selection, the artist exposes a depth of the wound, and the perverse, patriarchal, and dominant heritage of this group. The case of *Aparición* is different, using the covered body as the most relevant signifier of the murders committed against women. In *Container of Feminisms*, we can observe the phrases, words, and objects dissolved in the container as direct references to the struggles waged by the women of Galicia, and the use of the color black emphasizing the sinister nature of concealment. In *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* the dragging of water containers and women with covered faces are presented as the most obvious signifiers of exploitation carried out.

In two of the four cases presented, *Bombril* and *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* the living body, with its gestures, is used to enable direct references to the colonial era (washing, sitting on the floor, etc.) and to activities carried out by women (walking, dragging water). In the case of *Aparición*, the body is ‘covered’ at the time of exposure. In *Container of feminisms*, the body is absent but leaves its mark in the writings and statements of the container.

Similar to this is the case of the sound recordings, where they can only be perceived in *Bombril* where there is the presence of sound recordings, of the pots that the artist washes, and in *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* where the only sound is that of water containers dragging on the floor. Last but not least, there is almost no presence of verbal language, except in the case of *Container of feminisms*, where the words and phrases are written on its aforementioned container.

In each of the works, there are instances of languages crossing. Making use of verbal, body, visual, and sound language to display discursiveness, we can understand these crossings as compositions where languages are “weaving without hierarchies between the corporeal, the verbal, the visual and the sound, problematizing, even, the very category of art. This projects work onto disciplinary edges, elasticizing and sometimes violating them” (Rosenbaum, 2017: 1185). The particular choice of these languages in each instance reinforces meaning, exposing feminist struggles, dissidence, social borders, and exploitation. Across the examples, there is a primary and strong presence of visual language, making use of the hegemonic codes of the art system.

There is a constant use of the body as a platform for representation. In all cases this is a lacerated body, politicized; a bearer of denunciations. Its speech is used as a complaint mechanism analogous to marching posters and claims. Sound, by contrast, is brought in as a subtle enunciator: although it may be linked powerfully and directly to practices of power or submission, it also asks questions: how does patriarchy sound? What are its sonorous registers? We can observe, thinking through their use of languages, works that are built in a powerful and conscious way, forming a constellation of concepts and perceptions which pursue purposes of enunciation in place of moves or gestures in the figures of art. Understanding “art as politics that crosses diverse fields diagonally and in different directions, its many intersections form constellations; they plot meshes that connect points of diverse locations.” (Escobar, 2021: 96). If Ticio Escobar’s concept of “committed art” is considered, in which he describes an art that “seeks that its forms exemplify, disseminate or accompany transformative processes”, we can recognize these works of art in the key of commitment to ailments that they enunciate and the transformations that they demand. As Escobar goes on to say: “critical works continue to be defined by their commitment to disturb the regime of representation, spur social sensitivity, imagine different ethical models and cast doubt on the certainties that sustain the established order” (Escobar, 2021: 108).

Vesta

Vesta is a work from my own practice that seeks to question the condition of women in a patriarchal universe. The work is made up of a series of photographs of a woman (the artist) dressed in different canvas skirts modified to include words collected from marches, visual pieces and feminist statements, printed in different reds with carved wooden stamps. Produced in the different geographies of Argentina, performed in public spaces to amplify



Figure 17.1 Josefina Goñi Bacigalupi, *Vesta*, 2022–ongoing. Courtesy of the artist.

the discourse of the work, which declares “VIOLENCE IS EVERYWHERE”, the body becomes a medium through which identities and political struggles are communicated and expressed. The name of the work is a reference to the Roman goddess Vesta, one of the most important goddesses in Roman mythology. In that tradition, Vesta was the goddess of the hearth, family, and sacred fire. She was considered one of the virgin goddesses, and her cult was associated with the protection of the home and the maintenance of perpetual fire in the temple, known as the House of the Vestals, in which the ‘Vestal virgins’ lived, recruited at the age of ten years to keep burning the flame of the temple dedicated to the goddess. One of the best-known stories is the rape of Vesta by the god Mars. According to the myth, Mars fell in love with Vesta and tried to seduce her. Vesta was a virgin goddess and had taken a vow of chastity, so she refused Mars’ proposals. In desperation, Mars tried to force her, but

Vesta managed to escape and ran to Mount Olympus, where she asked Jupiter, the king of the gods, for help. Jupiter protected her and punished Mars for the attempted rape.

In this work, similar procedures can be identified to link to the earlier analyses in this chapter. Firstly, the photographs are taken in public spaces, using this procedure as a signaling mechanism and causing estrangement in the audience, which recognizes the spaces. Beyond this dimension of recognition, similar scales of enunciation are made evident: the body is used, in the first person, as the epicenter of the problem, making it flesh; visual signifiers are used in dialogue with the past, again, to amplify the temporal perception of the wound or ailment. White patterned skirts are used as a fundamental piece of the work: this white refers to the patriarchal ‘purity’ demanded of women that, in coexistence with the red of the words, reinforces the idea of danger to which we are subjected. Visualizing the condition in which the woman is immersed to shake the viewer’s gaze, “violating the whiteness” of the dress and the heterogeneous geographies, *Vesta*, like the aforementioned works, sets out to open a space of resistance where norms and systems of oppression are questioned and challenged, allowing the expression of marginalized voices and the construction of alternative narratives. These practices, linked to performance and performance studies, as Diana Taylor mentions, “allow us to expand our notion of knowledge” (Taylor, 2017: 165) and act as tools for cultural, social, and political resistance, empowering communities and challenging dominant power structures. Practices born in the heart of each of the communities of which the artists are part, and from which they, with their works, present themselves as nodes of significance, amplify the message of problems that are directly linked to patriarchal and therefore dominant power structures.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to identify and recognize the works of women artists who reflect on the histories of the submission of the groups they represent, making works that confront the ongoing oppressive conditions in patriarchal societies. It has examined how these works are inscribed in dialogue with the concepts of art and politics, and has understood from Ticio Escobar that “[p]olitical art mobilizes works that are disobedient to the single course imposed by the market, questions the regime of aesthetic representation and the very institutionality that sustains its practices.” (Escobar, 2021: 28). They seek to disarm imposed regimes through the denunciation of exploitative practices, observing, after Escobar again, that “these are expressions that mobilize images in their poetic, expressive and/or aesthetic aspects to meet different objectives: social demands, political protests” (Escobar, 2021: 52).

As Maria Lugones observes “[r]ace is neither more mythical nor more fictitious than gender, and both are powerful fictions” (Lugones, 2008: 94). These works expose the immense scale of exclusion built towards different communities, and show how, as influential Argentinian anthropologist Rita Segato has argued, “the defeats of recent history are showing us that without focusing and giving centrality to the dismantling of the masculinity mandate and the disarticulation of the patriarchal political order, it will not be possible to reorient history towards a world capable of bringing more well-being to more people” (Segato, 2010: 10). Each of these works, and others, open a path for us to build other types of practices that allow us to build a more reflective and inclusive future. Following the words of Judith Butler, we agree that “we must critically question the way in which we reproduce in our language forms of power to which we are opposed, and we must strive to

use language in a new way that opens up a possibility of hope for the world” (Butler, 2020: 1). After novelist Julio Cortázar’s words, cited by Butler, we believe that “we must be aware of the language we use when describing the world, since it is full of unconscious meanings, social histories, a legacy of struggle and submission” (Butler, 2020: 1).

Art can function as a mode of resistance by challenging established power structures and systems, through creation, deterritorialization, the emphasis on singularities and minorities, as well as different contexts and their intensities. Art can open spaces for experimentation, transformation, and subversion. This type of work is “questioning both its place in that circuit in its own status as a work, as well as the very conception of what art is” (Rosenbaum, 2017: 1185–1186). And so I conclude with the idea of celebrating these practices and embracing them as paths of openness and inclusion for many more, highlighting the importance of artistic practices as forms of resistance and social transformation.

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18

POETIC, CRITICAL AND POLITICAL RESONANCE

Report From a Roundtable Between Selfa
A. Chew-Melendez, Flora Dunster, Josefina
Goñi Bacigalupi, Sandra Nagel, Alejandra
Niedermaier and Jonathan Lalloz

Moderated and introduced by Alejandra Niedermaier

I

Although we do not believe in final conclusions, the richness of each chapter deserves some reflections – never definitive – but with a strong commitment to the future. Flora Dunster, Selfa Chew, Josefina Goñi, Sandra Nagel, Jonathan Lalloz and I all aimed to provide an extensive overview of visual contemporary works related to gender. In each of the chapters, we have also tried to show the broad umbrella of the different gender issues that surround us. There is no stillness in becoming, just as there is no stillness in history. Visuality as a form of plural experience gives an account of its potency and its capacity for agency around gender and its concerns. Therefore, it can be assumed that photography establishes a bond between history and the committed gaze and forges an image, mirrored, that evidences the tension between the way of seeing and being seen. It can also be realised how *infinite singularities* (Kristeva, 2016) allow the possibility of stepping out of a kind of *inner colonisation* (Millett, 2017), i.e. of internalised behaviours and ways of being, in order to manage the discontent of not being considered a desiring person and a subject of enunciation. Thus, we contemplate images and discourses that construct the possibility of different notions of female and queer genders, and that allow those marginalised by society to be made visible as desiring subjects.

All the examinations of this section are dialogical, relational and epochal. This is why we must understand, following the line of thought opened up by Simone de Beauvoir, that no situation is natural, and rather obeys a modifiable cultural construction (in Femenías, 2000). Remaining within binary logics is the basis for the confinement of the vital force in all domains of human activity. That is why visual language possesses the tools and vitality to enable bodies considered of less value in the social imaginary – such as the body of the poor, the precarious worker, the refugee, the Black, the indigenous, the woman, the homosexual, the transsexual, the transgender, et cetera – to find their singular aesthetic expression, which can make possible effective transmutations

of individual and collective reality. The historical weight of sexuality and sex/gender identity in an individual's social boundaries has led a large group of artists to the need to deconstruct, to make performative, and to create from the patriarchal canon a review of roles and sexualities. This is ongoing: the invention of responses reflects the needs for change, derived precisely from the acceptance of the alterity of the bodies that make up the social tissue.

Visual artists who work in the context of feminism address the image as a symptom of the struggles that inhabiting this world provokes. Visual devices such as photography constitute a system of mediation with the capacity to act with power. Mediation is thus understood as a political agent that affects cultural mechanisms and therefore the world of visual communication. Images are intimately linked to cultural policies, and both form social mechanisms that have effects on the individual and collective imaginary. As has been said, visual language and the photographic device are means of mediation to construct subjectivities.

To talk about equality/inequality is insufficient. Today we must speak of domination in all of its forms as a consequence of the concentration of the economic resources, of the concentrated wealth that result in a great accumulation of power over life and death. Theory, identity and experience are so conceptually intertwined that certain theoretical adoptions of the social promote certain theories of identity and certain theories of experience. Feminist studies merge genealogical and academic principles with the life stories that the protagonists developed as an external critique when narrating their experiences. This fusion tends to elaborate collective action strategies both for the present and for the future. In this sense, Hannah Arendt argued that the most common transformations take place in "the telling of stories and usually in the artistic transposition of individual experiences" (Arendt, 2005: 59). This is why we can also speak of the polysemic concept of visual interruption: by means of the issues addressed, the image interrupts the passing of time and enables a stopping of the gaze. The gaze becomes image, and in being made visible can mark the emergence of a political subject willing to engage in different actions. The image creates the conditions of possibility to interrupt the given, the hegemonic, the traditional. Interruption breaks with alienating administrative procedures of repetition and, therefore, of the abolition of sensibility. Visual devices (as protagonists of our visual culture, tools of contemporary art and givers of thoughtfulness) can surprise, disconcert and above all interrogate. In these cases, there is not a great distinction to be found between documentary, authorial or narrative photography. As visual production integrates the field of subjectivation it belongs to a discursive regime that swings between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. This is why the image often takes charge of the political and social concerns and can at the same time interrogate both, working from the art's site.

II

The above-mentioned enquiry explores what feminism means at the current moment, in its turns and perspectives, in its becoming. Thus this chapter includes responses to a survey completed by each of the contributors to this section. The first question was: In order to make visible women's and dissidents' production, do you think that it is necessary to deconstruct constantly the historically established discourses of visual art? All contributors replied in the affirmative. All agreed with Selfa Chew's description when she stated that:

I think that it is inevitable to look for venues of resistance to heteropatriarchal systems, and the visual arts are a perfect media for dissident production. Practices also need to be deconstructed within the visual arts. Empowerment should take place through the showcasing of counterhegemonic bodies of work.

In the same vein, Flora Dunster added:

I think that this is necessary not only to make it [the work of women and dissidents] visible, but to facilitate its future possibility. Deconstructing the established discourses of visual art – like those of any other field of study – helps us to unravel the ideological investments that have guided us towards valuing particular historical narratives, mediums, and subjects of representation. This is valuable not just for feminist and queer work, but for the field of representation more broadly. Asking why our visual histories have been collected and framed in particular ways opens us to thinking about how they could yet look.

The second question asked whether there are alternatives to the hegemonic traditions in art where women and gender dissidents have created and create other poetics? Their answers were equal or at least comparable: that there has always been counter-culture, subversive culture and art. Josefina Goñi added that there are valid poetic alternatives inciting new transformations. For instance, artistic practices that incorporate performance give the body a presence in public space, thereby weaving politics with aesthetics.

The discussion turned to participants' personal experience, taking into account that some of us are from the generation of third-wave feminism that emerged in the 1990s, with absolute knowledge of all the waves before, but without the strong feeling of community that we can see nowadays.

Faced with this, Sandra Nagel explained:

Feminism was always a given to me. But I noticed early on the sometimes stark discrepancies between what I considered “normal” – i.e. equality in all areas – very much nourished by ideas I absorbed through literature and art; and “everyday life” where I notice that even today's young women and girls are partly still caught in old society models and ways of thinking. Therefore it is absolutely vital to pursue education relentlessly and to continue challenging male-centric perspectives. I think that the key is to just go on and never let up the effort. I remember that the use of the pronoun “they”, when I first encountered it, seemed artificial and superfluous to me. By repetition, I got used to it and have changed my mind.

And Goñi replied:

My experience is coming from a period where several generations ago and, in different ways, spaces for women and dissidents were won. My sensation is of a strong awareness and presence of feminism, with a greater capacity to demonstrate without censorship (in my case), in public and private space. Simultaneously, in many cases I feel that there is greater resentment of the established order and some groups of women and dissidents have to experience the worst scenarios. That is why there are many struggles and I feel the responsibility to continue collaborating by not allow-

ing violence to continue to undermine wounds. I have trust that there is a scenario much more permeable to change and the exchange of ideas to achieve processes of transformation.

For her part, Chew recounted:

My political education came from my mother who, as a *maquiladora* (factory worker), was a union leader at a time when activists were kidnapped, tortured and murdered by paramilitary forces. As a family, we experienced state violence and that mode kind of made class appear salient, but race and gender an afterthought. Immigration to the US placed me in contact with different critical stances from all over the world, but also with an opportunity to theorize intersectional relations of power that affected my existence: race, gender and class. Without doubt, a formal education in the visual arts, creative writing, history and pedagogy has allowed me to grow intellectually, but the key point in this path has always been the study of radical Black feminism.

Lastly, Dunster expressed:

My ways of relating to the world are informed by a feminist politics, which speaks both to the environment in which I was raised and to the formalisation of my thinking through the Institute for Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies at McGill University, where I did my undergraduate degree. I don't lack in community, but I do feel that the work of thinking through feminism, and grappling with what that means, tends to take place more amongst my academic circles than in my day-to-day ones, where feminism can sometimes feel so assumed as to be taken for granted.

The four writers responded affirmatively to the question: Do you think that art's performativities stress the boundaries between art and activism? Dunster elaborated:

Art can be an effective way of exposing ideological formations, bringing attention to political events and undermining assumed hierarchies. In this way, art is an incredible tool, and one with the potential to help us see and think differently. At the same time, when art is responding to events *as* activism, those events oftentimes demand interventions that aren't bound to the language of art, and which can operate on their own terms without the baggage that art brings with it. Sometimes a protest can – and should – just be a protest.

The last enquiry asked if feminism will help us in ethical questioning about a more equal society, considering feminism as a critical revolution that can confront domination in its widest terms? Can it be thought of as an intelligible device which can open the gaze, and ways of thinking and acting?

The answers were once more affirmative. Goñi stated that thinking in a feminist way makes us rethink the ways in which we inhabit and build society: "I believe that the established order must be denaturalized and allow us to build a new, more inclusive and respectful order, and feminism today proposes other ways of building society". Moreover, Dunster

pointed out: “Rather than re-thinking the wheel, we would do well to return to our own history and take it up as a means of moving forward”.

III

Because feminist struggles and issues present a continuously emergent role, some historical references remain important in order to direct and orient future efforts. In this sense, visual language has played and endured a key role, especially for its constructive anachronism which straddles the past with the present. Jean-Luc Godard expressed that cinema (and we might extend this to all visual arts) is *a form that thinks* (Godard, 2011: 130). Perhaps the tasks of future feminism will be to respond to various dimensions of a crisis, marked by falling living standards, the alert of ecological issues, devastating wars and the growth of dispossessions, caravans of mass migrations, the strengthening of racism and xenophobia, and the reversal of social and political rights that had been only just won.

Many of the artists mentioned in this section explore the notion of ‘identity’ as representative of experiences of marginalisation, discrimination and violence, as they respond to the diverse demands of the third-world, post-colonial, feminist and queer political movements, among others. If the different aesthetic producers could find their singular expression, effective transmutations of individual and collective realities will also result. That is why we agree with the theorist Teresa de Lauretis when she says: “we may be encouraged in the hope that feminism will continue to develop a radical theory and a practice of sociocultural transformation” (De Lauretis, 1987: 11). The gesture of the visual producer, understood as bringing intention into action, attempts in different ways to transform the aesthetic message into an event. Visual art is both a transversal and multiple tool that makes it possible to question both the here and the elsewhere, the past and the present, being and becoming, object and subject. In other words, and as has already been stated, it can be argued that visual devices, photography amongst them, become tools for thinking. The image unfolds and expands thinking in each moment of struggle in its metonymic dimension (considering metonymy as a cognitive phenomenon – not only as a figure of speech – that provides mental access to another conceptual entity by tapping the potential of the image in its relationship with the system of representation). That is opening up their meaning and showing all the possible gaps in the frame of representation. This prevents the closure of understanding on both the intelligible and the sensible level.

The visual gesture will therefore tend toward a gaze without assumptions in order to take into account what Elizabeth Grosz describes:

not so much in being as in becomings, how identities change, how forces transform themselves, how stabilities, when examined very closely, hide a myriad of small transformations or reorganizations that make identities both more fragile and more resilient than they seem at first.

(Grosz, 2021:148)

That is why the characteristics of mediation, symptom and interruption of visual devices are ideal for understanding the expression of a discontent, of what does not function in accordance with a temporally and spatially determined discourse. The image in consequence operates as a break, as a hiatus that invites us to problematise the work in a visual

reflexive exercise. It is precisely the reason why the fragment captures us is its invitation to question from the aesthetic experience.

Artistic production maintains a very peculiar characteristic: it shares with the receiver a relationship of affect, a sense of touching, disturbing and stimulating sensations. The image nests not only the past and the present but also the future. Benjamin in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” quotes André Breton when he states that: “The work of art only has value when it trembles with reflections of the future” (Benjamin, 2007: 175). Art triggers the questions that hold meaning. Visual art embraces the sensitive, intelligible, appreciative and normative components of its time. Therefore we can say that several challenges remain open and that give us the opportunity to develop and maintain our utopias.

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PART IV

New Materialities

Expanded Practices in Contemporary
Art Photography

Edited by Duncan Wooldridge and Rashi Rajguru



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19

AN ENGINE, NOT A CAMERA

Curating Environmental Histories of Photography and Extraction

Boaz Levin

A History Refracted

Item PD1913.82 of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg's collection (Figure 19.1) shows a man who seems to be staring intently at the viewer, hands clasped before him, his disheveled white hair brushed aside to reveal a high and lightly furrowed forehead. Or at least that is what one can see when looking at reproductions of this daguerreotype. When observing the actual silver-coated copper plate image in real life, the man's gaze is only revealed fleetingly—eclipsed, from other angles, by the shimmering reflections of the polished metallic surface on which it is embedded. The item, a daguerreotype dated to 1847, is one of the earliest photographic images in the museum's collection. It was taken by Hermann Biow (1804–1850), a photographic pioneer who made a name for himself in Germany as a portraitist of well-known public figures. Taken in Hamburg, the man depicted in this image is the renowned polymath Alexander von Humboldt: writer, explorer, naturalist, geographer, mining officer, and early photo-enthusiast.

Biow's image served as the starting point for the first of five sections of *Mining Photography: The Ecological Footprint of Image Production*, an exhibition I co-curated with Esther Ruelfs, at Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg (Levin et al. 2022). Combining contemporary artworks with historical artifacts, the exhibition addressed the material history of key resources used for image production, exploring the social and political context of their extraction and waste, and its relation to climate change.

In seeming to oscillate between what the image represents and what it is made out of—what could be referred to as its pictorial meaning, and its objecthood—Biow's daguerreotype serves as the perfect starting point for an environmental and material history of photography. As I will show in what follows, such a history must similarly question the separations between material and motif, between pictorial representation and its physical substrate. By extension, and most importantly, such a history must question the underlying distinction at the basis of such dualisms: the perception of Nature and Culture as separate domains, abstracted from one another. This sort of environmental history of photography, in other words, being a materialist history, tends to all that is normally left outside the proverbial frame when we look at and interpret a photographic image: the labor, resources, and energy its making and circulation require, and the waste it leaves



Figure 19.1 Hermann Biow, Daguerreotype of Alexander von Humboldt, 1847. Collection of Museum für Kunst & Gewerbe Hamburg.

behind. Such aspects must be considered not as the art-historical equivalent of what economists describe as a negative “externality,”—an unintended “cost” or effect perceived as the by-product of an activity (Helbling 2010)—but, rather, as part and parcel of what constitutes an image’s meaning. This is an “unfettered” history of the photographic image, to paraphrase Michelle Henning’s inspiring work, one which is dedicated to the movement and processes that are integral to these image-objects—their traffic, as Allan Sekula would describe it—but also to the metabolic cycle of life and decay, of change and exchange, that images necessitate and are inevitably part of (Henning 2018; Sekula 1981).

Such a history is based on a rather simple conceit: that we might learn more about our world through photography, not by (only) observing what it has shown, but by (also) attending to what it has often obscured. The way photography’s social relations and materiality have been either ignored or perceived as external and separate from its meaning—the way its ecology in the widest sense has been severed from our understanding of its images—is emblematic of the entrenched and violently abstract dualism that cuts through our capitalist world-ecology, positing Nature and Culture as separate and independent from one another.

Photographic and Ecological Beginnings

Mining Photography sought to tell a history of how photography and climate change have been intertwined from the beginning, tracing the ecological historical context of their emergence through a combination of contemporary artworks, historical artifacts, and interviews with specialists from a variety of disciplines, including a chemist, a metallurgist, an activist, biologists, and an art-historian. The exhibition offered an environmental history of photography, rather than a history of environmental photography, to paraphrase French philosopher Pierre Charbonnier (Charbonnier 2021). Once observed through this lens—not merely through attending to what its images depict but through their material conditions—many parallels and connections between the emergence of photography and of climate change quickly become evident. In the simplest terms, the medium’s birth at the height of industrialization coincided with the first measurable effects of climate change and was closely intertwined with them.

Remarkably, several of the medium’s key protagonists at its inception—such as Nicéphore Niépce and William Henry Fox Talbot—had also worked for years on developing internal-combustion engines, patenting numerous important technological innovations for the technology. Although it is seldom mentioned within the history of photography, the Niépce brothers’ internal-combustion engine is widely considered a direct predecessor of the engines powering modern-day automobiles, and was one of the first of its kind. Called the *Pyréolophore*, Greek for “fire, carried by wind,” the white-petroleum-fueled engine successfully powered a boat upstream along the Saône river, not far from where Nicéphore would several years later immortalize a rooftop view. Materially, both inventions—the one Nicéphore called *heliography*, or writing with sunshine, and the combustion engine—were dependent on the availability of and a familiarity with the same key ingredient: petroleum. As with the brother’s engine, the breakthrough that allowed Nicéphore to fix a photographic image for the first time was his use of what he called *Bitumen de Judea*, a naturally occurring raw petroleum sourced from the Dead Sea region, which—having discovered it became insoluble when exposed to light—he used to coat a pewter plate. In other words, the first photographic image was quite literally etched with fossil fuel (Levin et al. 2022: 15–16; Hunter 2020: 171–178.).

Seen this way, philosopher Patrick Maynard’s suggestion that photography should be considered a “machine of visualization”—a device that changes and produces our environment, rather than merely a tool which registers its likeness—gains a new profound meaning (Maynard 2000: 66–67). By re-examining photography’s origin through an environmental lens, we can suggest that even a camera—to paraphrase Donald MacKenzie (himself paraphrasing Milton Friedman)—is in fact “an engine, not a camera” (MacKenzie 2006). The involvement of these two photographic pioneers in the development of automotive power might seem coincidental, but the relation between image production and fossil capitalism more generally runs like a thread through the medium’s history.

To give but a few examples: in Germany the first photographic corporation, AGFA, was founded in the late nineteenth century as an aniline manufacturer, Aktiengesellschaft für Anilinfabrikation, producing artificial dyes in a range of colors from coal tar: a viscous black carcinogenic byproduct of the creation of coke and coal gas from coal. And more generally, the production of photographic images was contingent from the start on a vast global network of material and—often marginalized and precarious—labor: daguerreotypes employed copper produced at the new center of global production in Wales (only

made possible by the abundance of local coal), which, by the late nineteenth century, was increasingly smelting ore sourced from colonial frontiers across the globe (Schumacher 2022); paper was produced at first from cotton and flax—the former having been grown in the US, which came to dominate the world cotton market through its reliance first on slave labor and later on the share-cropping system—which, in turn, were spun into rags (*lumpen*, in German), which, once worn, were then collected by ragpickers, mostly children and women, who became the quintessential figures of the new urban poor and gave Marx's *Lumpenproletariat* its name (Levin et al. 2022; Mintie 2020; Beckert 2014). Once cotton rag became expensive, production shifted to wood pulp, sourced by rampant deforestation; the same method used to separate cellulose fibers to produce wood pulp then led to the invention of celluloid for film: the first ever thermoplastic!; gelatin, in which the light-sensitive silver particles are embedded, comes from cows—as late as 1999, Kodak was processing 30 million kilos of cow skeletons every year—in quantities only enabled by the concomitant emergence of industrial farming and slaughter (Henning 2018: 97–98); and, finally, silver, sourced together with copper from the far-distant frontiers of colonial extraction—using unregulated labor in the treacherous mines of Potosi in today's Bolivia, Mexico, or Chile—a material of which, by the end of the twentieth century, the photographic industry would become the largest consumer (Levin and Schönegg 2023; Levin et al. 2022).

It might be tempting to explain away such conjunctures as merely indicating that photography was part of industrialization. Yet such explanations tell us very little about photography or climate change. Indeed, when over twenty years ago Nobel-winning geologist P. J. Crutzen and limnologist E. F. Stoermer first proposed to designate the current age as a new geological epoch which they called the “Anthropocene”—described as an era in which humans have become the most important determining variable on the planet's environment—scientists traced its origins back to the first decades of the nineteenth century, which, they noted, coincided with the invention of the modern steam engine and the advent of industrialization (Crutzen 2002). However, in recent years, while acknowledging the importance of their popularization of the discourse around climate change, a growing group of scholars have criticized their choice of name, periodization, and historical narrative (Ruccio 2011; Malm and Hornborg 2014; Haraway 2016; Moore 2016a). It has become increasingly clear that, rather than attributing climate change to a technological development, such as the steam engine—thus implying the possibility of a purely technological solution to it—the origins of our current climate crisis are best understood as the result of specific social and political relations. As ecologist Andreas Malm has convincingly shown, the adoption of coal-powered steam in the 19th century was in no way inevitable and cannot be reduced to its sheer availability, or the steady march of technological ‘progress’. Rather, as Malm shows, the production of electricity from hydraulic energy was in fact often cheaper at the time. The main advantage offered by coal over other available sources of energy was its combination of mobility and reliability: unlike hydraulic energy which was immobile—tethered to geographic attributes—and subject to changing weather patterns, coal was regularly available and could be used in cities where a “reserve army of labor” was abundant (Malm 2013; Barak 2020). Coal's mobility increased capitalists' bargaining power over labor and thus its ability to extract surplus value from it. At the same time, its reliability as an energy source was a crucial factor at a time in which weavers were struggling to limit working hours (culminating in the Ten Hours Work Day Act of 1847): the fluctuating availability of waterpower meant that when the river was high, workers were expected to stay at the mills beyond the mandatory twelve-hour work day. Indeed, it

was in the cotton industry that a decisive shift to steam first took place in the 1820s and 30s, just as the “engine of visualization” was being invented.

All of which leads to a second important point of criticism of the Anthropocene and industrialization narratives. Describing this epoch as the “age of man”—in effect blaming the entire human species, as the term “Anthropocene” (literally, the age of man) implies—risks absolving those most responsible for our current crisis, ‘naturalizing’ its emergence and obscuring its historical context. For the Anthropocene narrative to make sense, the fact that for the vast majority of our time on earth as a species humans have *not* burned obscene amounts of fossil fuels, has to be all but ignored. The responsibility for climate change has been radically unequal from the start. Emerging within the context of class conflict and colonial relations, climate change should be seen as the end result of a search for profit and an ideology that lays claim to, and supremacy and over, an abstract ‘Nature.’ Perceived as an external, disposable resource, up for grabs, this notion of Nature has encompassed at different historical moments native populations, specific racial and social categories, frontier territories, and commons. The inequality of responsibility for carbon emissions persists to this day. Currently, the wealthiest ten percent of the global population is responsible for fifty percent of global carbon emissions, while the poorest fifty percent is responsible for less than ten percent (or even more jarringly: the combined emissions of the richest one percent, remarkably, are larger than the combined emissions of the poorest fifty percent) (UN Emissions Gap Report 2020). Meanwhile, those least responsible for climate change are often the first and worst affected. Acknowledging this allows us to recognize that there can be no solution to climate change that doesn’t take into account climate justice. The Anthropocene, on the other hand, seems to imply we are all somehow equally responsible as individuals and that change can occur through consumer choice. From there the way to the notion of a “carbon footprint” as well as carbon pricing and trading—more capitalism, rather than less—is short. Through this lens, it is easy to understand many fossil fuel company’s support of the notion of a carbon footprint as a way of framing the crisis as a question of individual habits (Supran and Oreskes 2021). Ironically, the Anthropocene argument, which was meant at least in part to prompt a rethinking of fixed categories such as ‘nature’ and ‘culture,’ ended up naturalizing climate change, lending it a sense of technological—if not biological—inevitability, which obscures the historical and ideological forces responsible for its emergence.

For all these reasons, scholars and activists have in recent years advocated describing this geological era as the *Capitalocene*: an age wrought by capital. Capitalism’s emergence during the ‘long sixteenth century’ as a world-ecology marks the beginning of this era, sowing the seeds—and setting in motion the logic—for the waves of privatization and industrialization that followed. Its advent was marked by the start of the processes described by environmental historian Alfred Crosby as the “Columbian exchange”—whereby Old-World diseases, animals, and crops flowed into the Americas, and New World crops flowed back into the Old World (quoted in Moore 2016a: 109)—as well as by what historical geographer Jason W. Moore described as the emergence of a pair of violent abstractions, “Nature and Society,” that began to be perceived as two separate domains (Moore 2015: 76; Levin 2023).

Photography’s emergence was contingent on both developments: materially dependent on the extraction of resources (chiefly silver and copper, and, later, cotton) from the ‘New World,’ and ideologically yoked to—and emblematic of—the Nature/Culture dualism and its corresponding civilizational project. Epistemologically, photography built on earlier visual technologies of what Sekula has described as “instrumental realism”: Cartesian perspec-

tivalism, globes (the earliest extant globe dates back, remarkably, to 1492), modern land surveys, and various scientific recording techniques which became characteristic of what Donna Haraway has described as the “god trick”: a “view from above, from nowhere” which claims universal applicability (Haraway 1988; Moore 2023; Levin 2023; Sekula 1983). As historians Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston have shown, photography’s emergence in the 19th century coincided, and was intertwined with, the rise of a moralized sense of “noninterventionist objectivity” whose watchword was “[l]et nature speak for itself” (Daston and Galison 1992: 81). Indeed, throughout its history, photography has been often described as a (capital n) Natural phenomenon: an automatic device whose images were attributed to various non-human forces, and whose authority derived from the semblance that it was free of the taint of the laboring artist. Yet this was only true inasmuch as photography, as a project, managed to successfully hide its materiality, its artifice: the labor, energy, processes, and relations its making requires, its objecthood and its decay. In this, it exemplified the dualism Moore speaks of. Photography, we can now see, could indeed be described as “the pencil of Nature,” to paraphrase the title of Talbot’s seminal publication, if we think of Nature as precisely the violently abstracted “free gift”—“a resource pool or a rubbish bin”—that is at the heart of the Capitalocene (Moore and Patel 2017: 23).

The same year that Talbot’s *Pencil* was first published, in 1844, Karl Marx described a very different understanding of our relationship to the environment, not as something separate and external, but as indistinguishable from humanity: “Man *lives* from nature, i.e., nature is his *body*, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.” (Marx 1975: 276; emphasis in the original).

Marx described the labor process as constituting a “social metabolism”: mediating between humanity and “the universal metabolism of nature” of which humans are part. Yet, he noted, capitalist production in its pursuit of profit and growth inevitably brings about what could be described as a “rift” in this “metabolism” (Marx 1981: 949–950). Soil is depleted of its nutrients; materials are mined to exhaustion and the excess of production results in pollution. Marx’s key example for this rift was the soil exhaustion crisis of his time (Foster 2000: 151). Starting in the 1840s, to support the nutrient-depleted earth of English farmers, massive amounts of guano were being imported from Peru to use as fertilizer, wreaking havoc on the local ecosystem. From this perspective, Capitalism can be understood as essentially an ecological project, a way of organizing nature, which, when extracted to exhaustion, is currently reaching its own limit. To compensate for this exhaustion, Marx shows, earth and other ‘resources’ are plundered elsewhere. The rift thus travels and expands, becoming a driving force of capital’s movement, of colonial violence: nutrients are imported from the market’s frontiers, while trash is externalized or exported, and so on and so forth.

As a project, photography has played an important role in the emergence of the Capitalocene and its key dualism. Yet it is precisely for that reason that its history can be ‘mined’ to give us a better understanding of our current crisis, its origins, and, possibly, also alternative future trajectories.

The Invention of Nature

What does an environmental and materialist history of photography look like? In essence, it is an attempt to read and see photography anew, looking at images not as end-products, but

as processes, as “an ecology,” part of a metabolism with our environment—a metabolism, it is important to emphasize, that is not only “natural” but always also “social,” or eco-social. This is another way of reading photography *against the grain*—to paraphrase Walter Benjamin and later Sekula—yet this time we are asked to pay close attention to what this grain is actually made out of, how it got here, and what traces its trafficking has left behind. It is time, then, to return to the shimmering surface of Biow’s daguerreotype and have a closer look, with the hope of unpacking some of the histories its shine refracts.

Today, Alexander Von Humboldt is perhaps best known as one of the first scientists to have suggested humans were causing detrimental changes to their natural environments. Writing in his publication *Central-Asien. Untersuchungen über die Gebirgsketten und die vergleichende Klimatologie* in 1844, he raised the question of how humans were influencing the climate “[t]hrough the destructions of forests, through the distribution of water, and through the production of great masses of steam and gas at the industrial centres” (Humboldt 1844: 214). He is also often noted as an early critic of Spain’s colonization of the Americas, and a friend and supporter of Simon Bolivar, the political leader of South American independence; the latter would go so far as to pay homage to “Baron Humboldt” as “a great man who with his eyes pulled America out of her ignorance and with his pen painted her as beautiful as her own nature” (Pratt 2003: 112).

Yet Von Humboldt’s role in the history of colonization, resource extraction, and climate change was highly ambivalent. As historian Mary Louise Pratt has written, his encyclopedic accounts of the Americas, “engaged the energies and imaginations” of intellectuals and broad reading publics in Europe “with the prospects of vast expansionist possibilities for European capital, technology, commodities, and systems of knowledge”, reimagining America as a sublime and overwhelming “Nature” (Pratt 2003: 112). More concretely, his discoveries—which often relied heavily on local and indigenous knowledge—contributed directly to the acceleration and expansion of neo-imperialist resource extraction, and with it the dramatic expansion of the “metabolic rift”. In fact, it was on his visit to the coast of Peru in 1802 that Von Humboldt noted the local use of guano in fertilizing the desert landscape. Wasting little time, the explorer brought back samples to Europe, which he arranged to be analyzed by leading chemists (Cushman 2014: 26). As historian Gregory T. Cushman has written in his global ecological history, it was this moment that “marked the beginning of the world’s guano age,” inaugurating what he describes as the opening of the “Pacific world.” It was the extraction of “ancient accumulations of guano, then coprolites, nitrates, rock phosphate, potassium-rich kainite, and other strata,” he writes, that allowed “industrial civilization to escape the limitations imposed by nutrient recycling” (2014: 40). This guano boom and bust would have detrimental effects on local social communities and ecosystems—precisely the sort of effects Von Humboldt so vehemently criticized—and eventually led to a series of wars in the region. It also brought about massive displacement of populations. Between 1847—the year Von Humboldt’s portrait was taken—and 1874, more than 92,000 Chinese laborers were contracted from South China by Peruvian entrepreneurs; ten percent are estimated to have died on their voyage across the Pacific. Those who survived went either to coastal plantations or to labor on the Guano Islands working as “virtual slaves” (2014: 55).

Humboldt was no doubt critical of colonialism and what he described as “European barbarity” (Wulf 2015: 153). A staunch abolitionist for much of his life, he noted how the cultivation of cash crops exploited the soil “like a mine,” and saw a clear connection between environmental destruction and the ills of colonization (2015: 104). Yet,

Humboldt was also caught up in the same dynamics he so presciently criticized. In 1803, he wrote of conceiving the “idea of representing entire countries as one would a mine” (Anthony: 2018). In the following decades, he charted out mineral deposits wherever he visited and brought back samples with him—now kept in museums across Europe—assaying every piece of earth he set foot on through the lens of a trained mining engineer. As Patrick Anthony has argued, his scientific writing was imbued with a vertical gaze honed during his time as a young mining official “zealously devoted [...] to resource extraction and practiced science in the name of his Prussian ‘fatherland’.” (2018). His mineralogical interests culminated in his 1838 “Essay on the Fluctuations in the Supplies of Gold, with the Relation to Problems of Political Economy,” which sketches a sweeping history of the metals’ circulation and supply from antiquity to his own time (Päßler 2017). In its description, the essay naturalizes the world economy, providing a template for a general equilibrium theory of sorts and thus for much classical economic thought: “The flow of precious metals from Asia and America to our smaller continent, and from it partially back again to the parent source, follows, like fluids, the laws of equilibrium.” It also repeats the widely held assumption that the influx of silver from the Americas caused commodity price increases in Europe during the 16th century, an assumption at the heart of quantitative monetary theory which has since come under heavy criticism (Graeber 2019). Nowhere does the essay discuss either the social conditions of mining or its detrimental ecological consequences, of which by then he was no doubt well aware. Yet, what is even more important than the much-debated question of whether Humboldt was an agent of European expansion or at the vanguard of a cosmopolitan liberal enlightenment is the fact that his life and work demonstrated so well that these were not so much polar opposites but rather two sides of the same coin.

Or perhaps, two sides of the same silver-coated copper plate. Humboldt’s ambivalent role as both miner and proto-ecologist, egalitarian and classical economist, was on our mind when we decided to dedicate the first section of the exhibition *Mining Photography* to copper and to use this image as our starting point. The polished silver surface of this image could be aptly accompanied, we then realized, by two pieces of coarse ore: items 2000_6730 and 2000_6792, small pieces of copper taken from Catorce, San Luis Potosi, and silver combined with tetrahedrite, from San Pedro de Batopilas, both in Mexico, which are part of Von Humboldt’s vast collection of mineral samples housed at Berlin’s *Museum für Naturkunde*. Which led us to ask, could silver and copper from the same deposits have found their way to Biow’s daguerreotype? And what might we learn about photography and about our world-ecology by tracing the provenance of the metals used to produce this mid-19th century image?

Daguerreotypes were commonly produced using the ‘Sheffield plate’ technique, a layered combination of silver and copper developed in the late 18th century and commonly used to produce household articles at a relatively lower cost than sterling silver. However, provenancing the metals that were used to produce this specific plate proved challenging. Few of the producers of copper-plates still exist today, many were smaller local companies who existed only for short periods of time and whose records are now lost. Still, contemporary accounts indicate that significant amounts of plates were being produced, requiring extraction and manufacturing on an industrial scale. As early as 1851, it was estimated that as many as a million daguerreotype plates were manufactured in Paris alone—which had become a center of production—requiring around 100 tons of copper (DuVernay 1852, quoted in Schumacher 2022).

The production of such amounts only became possible due to the recent introduction of coal, which resulted in a large increase in productivity. The new dependency on coal—three to four tons were required per ton of ore—shifted the geography of the metal’s production (Evans and Miskell 2020 quoted in Schumacher 2022). It now became cheaper to ship ore from across the world to coal-rich regions. Due to its abundance of coal, Swansea, Wales, quickly came to dominate the global production and trade in copper (Barger 1982). By the 1840s, ore from the colonial frontiers, including Cuba, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Peru and even Australia and New Zealand, was being shipped en masse to be smelted in the local works, which are said to have been responsible for the production of over a third of the copper traded worldwide. In 1846—a year before Von Humboldt’s portrait was taken—a similarly globally ambitious enterprise was founded in Hamburg: the Elbekupferwerk, founded, among others, by the well-known maritime trader (and collector of ethnographic, zoological, and botanical material) Johan Cesar Godeffroy. Two decades later his company merged with the newly founded Norddeutsche Affinerie AG, renamed in 2009 as Aurubis AG, a company that is today considered one of the world’s largest copper producers (Schumacher 2022).

Could Biow’s copper plate have come from the mines in Mexico visited by Humboldt, via Hamburg or Swansea? When our attempts at provenancing the metals based on information about its producers using visual hallmarks reached a dead end, we found an alternative method in archaeometallurgy. Using the metal’s lead isotope signature, it would be possible to estimate where the metal might have come from. Since lead isotope analysis requires an invasive sampling of material, metal was sampled from a damaged plate from the museum’s collection, dated from the same years and context, as a proxy. We were fortunate to find Dr Katrin Westner from the University of Lyon, who agreed to perform the analysis, whose findings partially confirmed some hypotheses. Though the results proved our metal was unlikely to have originated in the Mexican mines, which Humboldt had visited, Cornwall was one likely origin indicated by the metal’s lead isotope signature, showing that, even at that early stage, photography was already dependent on a vast network of trade in raw materials and a burgeoning industry powered by fossil fuels.

Juxtaposing historical artefacts and research with contemporary artworks was key to *Mining Photography’s* approach, and the history of Norddeutsche Affinerie and the global trade in copper served as the starting point for a site-specific work by Chilean London-based artist Ignacio Acosta produced for the exhibition. Building on his expansive long-term research project *Geographies of Copper*, Acosta produced a work titled *Hygieia Watches Over Us* for the exhibition that connects the history of environmental activism in Hamburg with that of resource extraction and labor struggles (Figures 19.2 and 19.3). The work consists of a large grid of photographs and a video interview with Dr Klaus Baumgart, an environmental activist and founder of “Rettet die Elbe”, founded in 1978 with the mission to rehabilitate the Elbe from heavy contamination caused by industrialization. The work is centered on a famous bronze fountain sculpture built outside the city’s chamber of commerce depicting the Greek goddess of health to commemorate the end of the cholera pandemic in the city at the beginning of the 20th century, which Acosta relates to the hazards of copper production, used to produce its bronze alloy. A grid of forty photographs creates a sequence that proceeds from the Aurubis AG smokestacks, to close-ups of the oxidized fountain, to rubber suits worn by workers to protect themselves from sulfuric acid in copper production—amalgamating into a portrait of the fraught history of the metals production in the city, and its extraction beyond.



Figure 19.2 Ignacio Acosta, *Hygieia Watches Over Us*, 2022.



Figure 19.3 Installation Shot, *Mining Photography*, 2023. Museum für Kunst & Gewerbe Hamburg. Photo: Henning Rogge.

Biow's portrait of Alexander Von Humboldt demonstrates the sort of historical narratives that can be unpacked when looked at through an environmental, materialist, lens. Von Humboldt's role in the Guano boom as a paradigmatic example of a "metabolic rift", his reinventing of America in the European imagination, his *vertical gaze*, as well as his naturalizing historical narrative of the global circulation of precious metals—these are paralleled in histories of the material substrate carrying his image: ore likely mined in Cornwall using precarious labor in treacherous conditions, smelted with the help of fossil fuel in Swansea; trafficked across seas to Hamburg, yet another city that would soon itself become a center of the same metals' remote smelting. Such an environmental history, as briefly sketched out here, demonstrates the need to think of photography through its eco-social metabolism. As the exhibition shows, such studies have increasingly been at the center of many contempo-

rary photographic approaches to the climate crisis. Such artworks perceive photography to be “an amazingly succinct visualization of the geological component of industrial culture”, in the words of film scholar Nadia Bozak (2012: 30–31). Employing an environmental-materialist approach, a camera is revealed to be *an engine, not a camera*, its history, as a project, inextricable from that of resource extraction, changing our world, one picture at a time.

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20

CUT AND PASTE

Performing History, Materiality, and the Family Album in the Work of Lebohang Kganye

Svea Josephy and Lebohang Kganye

This chapter looks at how performance, materiality, and the family album have been activated in contemporary South African art, with specific reference to the work of Lebohang Kganye. Kganye's photographs draw on her family stories and her mother's photograph albums. Her work "Ke lefa laka" is comprised of two parts: digitally manipulated photographs of the artist and her mother, called *Her Story*, and photographs that include life-size cut-outs of photos enlarged from family albums, called *Heir Story*. These photographs collate images from different periods in South Africa's history to tell Kganye's family stories through performance, with an emphasis on materiality. This connects them to the broad context of history, politics, and economics through stories of resettlement and migrancy, and issues around identity and representation.

In 2015, John Fleetwood, Jo Ractliffe, and Svea Josephy curated *Against Time*, an exhibition of photographs by emerging South African photographers, at the *Bamako Encounters (Rencontres de Bamako)* biennale in Mali. While works for the show were being selected, we were struck by how history played so prominent a role in the present:

Following two decades of democracy in South Africa, there are questions about how the past keeps moving into the present and persists to be part of the future. These lingering pasts and desired futures have created spaces for new identities and new ways of seeing.

(Fleetwood, Josephy, & Ractliffe, 2015)

South African artist Lebohang Kganye works with identity and stories, particularly those handed down to her from her family. Her work is rooted in a past that reverberates through her practice into the present. Kganye says of her work, which was included in *Against Time*, that "The project is about being at the same place at different times and not meeting" (Kganye, 2013). Kganye's statement points to a phenomenon in post-apartheid photography in which the past is revisited with a self-conscious knowledge of the present. It is both *against time* and emphasizes time in innovative ways. Emerging South African artists are revisiting the past – and, often, the archive – to make sense of their position in the complicated post-apartheid present. There is no nostalgia for the dreadful past but instead a

self-conscious examination of that past in relation to a present that is not everything that was imagined.

Kganye's family's past was, like that of all black South African families, cruelly shaped by apartheid. In her work, she narrates stories of racial classification, migrations from rural to urban areas, dispossession, relocation, and fractured families, all molded by a brutal sociopolitical system. Kganye is concerned with how this past continues to inform the present:

The work refers to apartheid, an era that's behind us. But also it speaks to the present that is very impacted by apartheid. Everything that is now, the economy, the black families living in townships, white people in suburban areas, is a result of the past.

(Kganye in Braat, 2014)

Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times

Kganye was born in 1990 in Katlehong, a township 35 kilometers east of Johannesburg. Katlehong was one of the most fraught places to live in the politically unstable interregnum between the release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of political organizations in 1990 and democratic elections in 1994. Kganye's original intention was to follow her love of stories through a career in journalism or photojournalism, but her focus changed during her studies in photography. She turned away from the shocking towards the ordinary moments, saying, "I consciously chose to step away from photojournalism and deal with issues that are personal to me. What I make is not the typical imagery of black Africans you often see in the media, Africa is beyond that" (Kganye in Braat 2014).

During apartheid, many artists and photographers felt a moral impetus to make work about the struggle against apartheid, focusing on newsworthy and politically and socially relevant issues of the period. Towards the end of apartheid, there was a call to rediscover the ordinary (see Ndebele, 1986; Sachs, 1991). Photographers such as Santu Mofokeng were "less interested in the unrest than in the ordinary life in the townships" (Mofokeng in Hayes, 2009: 41). Mofokeng continued:

In terms of the idiosyncrasies of life in the eighties whereby we want to show that apartheid is bad, I'm making pictures of ordinary life. Football, shebeen [pub], daily life...When the world becomes tired of seeing sjamboks [whips] or whatever, they come to you they start to ask, what is daily life like?

(Mofokeng in Hayes, 2009: 41)

Against the background of brutal late-apartheid violence, Kganye's mother and her young family were leading what Mofokeng calls "ordinary lives" in extraordinary times, while Kganye's mother, Dimakatso Kganye, lovingly kept photo albums of everyday moments in her own daily life, depicting youth and young adulthood.

To differentiate between Lebohang Kganye and her mother, we use "Kganye" to discuss the artist Lebohang Kganye and "Dimakatso" to address her mother, Elsie Dimakatso Kganye.

(Re)membering

In Kganye's work, the act of cut and paste is not simply to make up a collage or a stage set. The physicality of the scale of the family members, some deceased, reproduced as cut-outs suggests a reconstituting of the physical body in order to re-member family members and to re-animate them.

Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.

(Bhabha, 1994: 63)

To re-member, Kganye returns time after time to her mother's photo albums. Kganye says she is not sure when the albums were made, "but it must have been during her [Dimakatso's] teenage years and early twenties, which was in the late 1970s and 80s" (Kganye, 2015). The albums contain no pictures of Kganye herself, which confirms that they were made before the artist's birth. Mofokeng has remarked that few people had cameras in the townships, but Dimakatso clearly had access to photography, compiling several decorated albums (Mofokeng in Hayes, 2009: 38). She probably did not have her own camera, but Kganye assumes a friend had one or that the images are the work of a local street photographer.

Born in 1961, Dimakatso was fifteen at the time of the 1976 student riots that began in Soweto, when schoolchildren protested against the introduction of Afrikaans as a language of instruction. There is a similarity between the photographs of schoolchildren in Dimakatso's album and the children in photojournalists' or "struggle" images of the 1976 protests. They are pictured in their uniforms, with white shirts and black pinafores, against the same dry Highveld landscape. However, in Dimakatso's albums we see that, parallel to and intertwined with the stories of violence and horror, are the stories of ordinary lives being lived in extreme times. The images in these albums show the friendships, romance, love, domestic moments, achievements, birthdays, dances, babies, and families. In referencing the notion of "ordinary" black lives, Kganye alludes to something more complex than mere document, saying:

The reality was that my mother did factory work her whole life, and there isn't a single photograph of her in a factory worker's uniform. So I think that the albums function as the idea of the everyday, but it's also beyond the everyday, because there is an element of a wishfulness, also aspiration and getting yourself out of your factory uniform and being something else.

(Kganye, 2023)

The images in these albums bear the usual marks and materials of amateur photography, including flares, light leaks, shooting on the diagonal, and out-of-focus and underexposed images. Aspect ratios show the provenance of the amateur point-and-shoot 110 and 126 film and cameras. The snapshots are in color, sometimes faded, the format often square with rounded edges. They mostly have a glossy or pearl surface, typical of the time.

Dimakatso's photographs are not housed in the ubiquitous shoe box described by Siona O'Connell (2012: 76, 154) as common in the homes of townships, or in the "battered trunks and plastic bags stuffed in closets and beneath beds in unlikely, unlovely places"

(Campbell, 2013: unpaginated). Instead, the photographs have been lovingly placed in photograph albums. Such ring-bound albums were widely available in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, the covers often bearing clichéd scenes of sunsets, an island paradise, or a silhouetted white couple. Inside, one would peel back reflective plastic to place a photograph on the sticky page, then smooth the plastic back over it – speaking not only to the material but to the haptic. Dimakatso placed photographs in these albums and embellished them with cut-and-paste images, collage, and text, exploring and expressing her self-image, sensibilities, thoughts, and perhaps even aspirations. In these pictures, Dimakatso is smiling and laughing, youthfully sophisticated and reinventing herself in every frame.

In her montages, Dimakatso used what was available, such as images and words from women’s magazines. There is a strange juxtaposition between the language of the ordinary snapshots and the over-saturated production values of commercial studio photography. On one page, an advertisement for a beauty product featuring a white woman is combined in a collage with Dimakatso’s photographs, so that the romanticized image of the white woman is sandwiched between the harsh realities of township life. Dimakatso has also inserted herself sitting on the bonnet of a gold Ford, the TJ number plate locating it in Johannesburg. Behind the car is the government-built social housing of a township. Dimakatso poses in a black dress with a white collar, wearing high-heeled shoes, her long legs arranged on the bonnet.

“Ke lefa laka”: *Her Story*

Dimakatso Kganye passed away in 2010, but she appears very much alive in these pictures. She is memorialized and even immortalized through the photographs. Kganye says:

As I was working on the series the word “ghost” kept coming up. Initially it was about the (deceased) family members being ghosts, but later I realized I was the ghost, because I am the one who was forcing myself into their history, into a place and an era that I’ve not been a part of. I put myself in a story that I don’t belong in and that I can’t claim, but I’m conscious of my presence there anyway.

(Kganye in Braat, 2014)

Relative to the paucity of photographs in the homes of many black families, Kganye had many photographs. The albums were freely accessible in her childhood, and she often flipped through them (Kganye, 2023). These albums are part of her inheritance, passed down from mother to daughter. She only started to think about them differently after her mother had passed away:

I then started to notice everything that was in these photographs, which I think before I had taken lightly, because until then I didn’t really look at them beyond looking at my mom, so young and pretty. But with her passing away I was looking for more, so it became a space that’s answering certain questions. And it becomes that space that allows you to hold on to this person.

(Kganye, 2023)

Kganye references photographer Rosy Martin’s observation that “It seems that in most families mothers are the archivists and guardians of family history, selecting what shall be

remembered, what forgotten; constructing a mythology which validates their own ‘good mothering’” (in Spence and Holland, 1991: 1). The responsibilities of holding the family archive were inherited by Kganye, along with stories passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter, along with genes and culture. Kganye also inherited her mother’s material objects, including some of the clothing and jewelry which Dimakatso wears in the photographs. But Kganye perhaps received something more abstract from her mother – her sense of materiality, which can be seen in Dimakatso’s albums and in Kganye’s own work. She (Kganye, 2023) reflects that:

I’d never really encountered photography outside of the family album or family photos, so when I eventually then studied photography, I think naturally I started to work with the album, because that was my only real encounter with photographs. I ended up working with family photo albums and the materiality of the source material of these photo albums.

In *Her Story*, Kganye digitally inserts herself into family photographs, following and emulating her mother (Figure 20.1). The artworks are blown up to a larger scale than the original images but remain small enough to retain a sense of intimacy. In these re-stagings, Kganye re-members, re-materializes, and re-animates her mother. She takes a photograph



Figure 20.1 Lebohang Kganye, ‘Habo Patience ka bokhathe II,’ 2013 from the series *Her Story*. © Lebohang Kganye. Courtesy of the artist.

of herself in the same clothes and environment as her mother, then creates a transparent layer, which she adds to a scan of the borrowed photograph. Several of the images look like a double exposure at first glance, because of the similarities in age, dress, pose, gesture, appearance, and clothing. The lines blur between mother and daughter, between original and copy, and between then and now, the image traversing several temporalities. The lack of clarity and the layering become visual equivalents for how memory functions. For Kganye, there is also an emotional aspect of being reunited with her mother, a mirroring and coming together through the process and material of photography.

Beyond the matter of the albums is the material of Dimakatso's clothing, which Kganye now wears. "The sense of touch was a huge part of my process, in thinking about memory as material and thinking about photography as material" (Kganye 2023). The haptic way of perceiving the world through touch is very much present in Kganye's work and draws upon and modifies the "material turn" in contemporary global photographs. Kganye's process is a digital cut-and-paste of the analog cut-and-paste her mother practiced in her albums.

Kganye made these pictures out of a desire to reconnect with her family history after her mother died: "My mother was my main link to my family, when she passed away, I felt I lost the connection. So by working on this project, I found my place in the family somehow" (Kganye in Braat, 2014). According to Emma Lewis (2023: 16):

Kganye's cutting out, enlarging, and constant rearranging of the same photographs emphasizes the subjectivity of familial narratives. The family album is treated as a space of fantasy, oral tradition, and a mode of performative self-authorship, and the repeating of the narrative back to oneself—and to others—as an integral part of identity building.

In addition to reconnecting and reconstructing, Kganye also engages in a rewriting of history, surfacing everyday life. In doing so, she reveals what Lewis (2023: 9) calls "a personal narrative or account that has been omitted from or overlooked in the official record." She thus moves "between global and intimate concerns by attending precisely to the intimate details, the connective tissues and membranes that animate each case" (Hirsch, 2012: 206).

"Ke lefa laka": *Heir Story*

A second body of work under the "Ke lefa laka" umbrella is *Heir Story*, which plots stories about Kganye's grandfather told to her by her grandmother and other relatives. The series outlines family stories of migrancy between rural homes and Johannesburg.

The images were made in a photographic studio with an infinity curve and large, photocopied cut-out images reproduced from family albums, magazines, and newspapers, clustered in groups or couples against various backdrops of the city, township, low-cost housing, or domestic environments. Between these cut-outs, Kganye performed the part of her grandfather, wearing an oversized suit and shoes. In stepping into his shoes, Kganye described the role of provider she took on:

As a young woman enacting a patriarchal figure in a family, I address the shift in my role as a woman—having to be a provider and protector of the family since my mother's death—by assuming the role of a man, that most of the women in my family have had to take on because of the absent father figures. So we have had to learn to

become these roles, and by taking on the persona of my grandfather, I also perform a degree of masculinity associated with certain provisional roles.

(Kganye 2013)

These images have a tragi-comic feel to them — their overblown, exaggerated, overt performance — points to the melodrama of family life and its stories. In Kganye’s performance, one is at all times aware that she is really acting, and this (along with the makeshift set) alerts us to the ongoing construction of identity in relation to family. Kganye says, “At the time of working on ‘Ke lefa laka’ I was working on television productions, so I was on set almost every day for about three years, and so that becomes the reason that I started working with the idea of world building.” (Kganye, 2023). Kganye’s sets relate to the staging of television – and theater, which she participated in while at school (Kganye, 2023). The time Kganye spent working on television connects to the photography that she produces through the use of construction, fiction, and fantasy. The notion of world building is an idea that has been central to a number of recent African photographers’ practice as is evidenced in the 2023 Tate Modern exhibition, *A World in Common: Contemporary African Photography*.

The main character on Kganye’s photographic set is Kganye’s grandfather and, simultaneously, Kganye herself. Here, as in *Her Story*, Kganye becomes the doppelganger of a relative. But unlike that project, she is not a ghost in the images, but the only living person amongst the tableaux of cut-out people, stage flats, and props with which she interacts.

Contrasts become multiple: the figures are frozen in a diorama whereas Kganye is animated and lively. The images are shot in color, but the black-and-white photocopies make them seem largely monochromatic. The cut-outs occupy space and stand resolutely as Kganye becomes present simultaneously. The cut-outs are large enough to create a scaled relationship with the artist and the cut-out family member. The artist uses her own body as a materially embodied performer in the works.

A significant work in the *Heir Story* series is *Pied Piper* (Kganye, 2013, Figure 20.2), referencing the fairy-tale status her grandfather inhabits in family stories, but also how he led a family migration to the “promised land” of Johannesburg. (The photograph *Pied Piper* should not be confused with Kganye’s 2014 video work *Pied Piper’s Voyage*.)

Cut-outs of people and Johannesburg buildings are visible in *Pied Piper*, lit from below to cast looming shadows. A large road sign on the left of the image reads “N1 Orange Free State” and “N3 Transvaal,” with arrows pointing in opposite directions. In front of the buildings is a queue of people. Kganye is at the front of the queue, playing a cut-out accordion, with two suitcases at her feet. Above her head is a speech bubble which reads, “Follow me to the land of milk and honey...” – a wry comment on the realities of life in Johannesburg. The other people in the queue are members of Kganye’s family, rephotographed and reprinted from photo albums. These are the members of Kganye’s family that migrated to Johannesburg, all passing through her grandfather’s house on their way to a life in the city. Some have been enlarged to human scale, but they get smaller as they recede and are joined by images from magazines.

The materiality in *Heir Story* is increasingly theatrical and overblown. Marietta Kesting identifies a trend emerging from the 1990s towards obsolete media and “retro cultures,” positing that this is “a symptom of the not-so-recent ‘material turn’” (Kesting 2017: 24). In *Heir Story*, the black-and-white image from the analog album does not constitute nostalgia



Figure 20.2 Lebohang Kganye, *Pied Piper*, from the series *Heir Story* 2013. © Lebohang Kganye. Courtesy of the artist.

but foregrounds the overt materiality of the work to make meaning around the larger-than-life character of her grandfather, his supporting cast, and the construction of the story.

In 2013, Kganye was working provisionally with photocopies pasted onto cardboard and cut by hand. In a recent interview (2023), she said:

I started working with the cardboard cutouts, going to supermarkets and getting their boxes that they were about to throw out. I noticed how fragile those boxes were, which spoke to the fragility of memory and how it's also fluid.

The narratives are based on stories that family members had shared with me. I would be in the studio building the set, moving the different figures and building to the left or to the right and sometimes one move would make the whole set collapse. It spoke so true of memory.

The fragility and provisional nature of the materiality links precisely to the fragmentary nature and instability of memory. It also shows how Kganye brings the archive to light in its fragile, evolving fragments rather than as a whole that is both complete and monolithic.

The final image in the series, *The Suit*, is a cut-out from a family album of her grandfather. He is wearing a suit, shirt, V-neck jersey, and a dapper Homberg hat and is holding a baby, who is reaching up to touch the hat. His cut-out stands against a studio infinity curve, held up by a light stand. Here, the construction of the set and the myth are exposed. This is the only time in the series that Kganye's grandfather appears as himself, while it is also

the only image in which Kganye does not appear. His/her empty shoes lie abandoned in the foreground of the image, as if she is unable to truly fill his shoes.

(Re)writing histories

Kganye's use of different materialities is a key part of the experience of her work and of the histories and memories she is evoking. These include using the actual materials and clothes and jewelry from a previous generation, the facsimile of the analogue technique of double exposure, her use of photocopied cut-outs and reenactment. In using this matter and photographic techniques which evoke the past, Kganye reclaims history, memory, and subjectivity through the central role of materiality.

Images such as Kganye's go some way to destabilizing apartheid narratives, rewriting histories, and foregrounding stories yet untold. Where apartheid suppressed the stories of ordinary black South Africans, the family photograph album presents very human stories. In this work, the black photo album is (re-)membered. James Campbell (Kganye, 2013: unpaginated) might have had Kganye in mind when he identified a new generation of photographers, one which has "found in photographs an alternative archive for illuminating aspects of African life inaccessible through conventional documentary sources."

Santu Mofokeng foregrounds "the invisible of everyday life," noting that "There is no real vocabulary for the non-photographed of apartheid" (Mofokeng in Hayes 2009: 42). Albums such as Dimakatso's go some small way to filling this gap, as do the artistic interventions by her daughter. Dimakatso's albums are set against the backdrop of apartheid South Africa. From these photographs she calls to her daughter, who answers across history, from the perspective of one raised in the post-apartheid era. This is another exemplar of how post-apartheid photography in South Africa speaks back to apartheid-era photography, and of how the family album is an archive of previously invisible, ordinary moments. Kganye (British Council Connect ZA, 2014) herself reflects: "I got to find out all the things my family had gone through... there are a lot of untold stories." The interventions made by Kganye and other black South African artists such as Mofokeng help fill in the gaps of an "archive in ruins" (Kesting 2020: 24), in which the black body was either absent or figured in an overtly political context.

Kganye includes traces of oral histories, artefacts, and family albums in her work to represent the everyday histories that were not recorded. These albums, stories, and objects may not be housed in a repository of public records but, in the absence of public documentation of ordinary black families in South Africa under apartheid, archives such as those described here – and the project of recovering and constructing histories through them – are important and facilitate an understanding of the images "as part of an emerging and expansive post-apartheid photographic archive" (Kesting, 2020: 209).

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21

PUBLIC ARRIVALS, PRIVATE DEPARTURE

The Life of Images at Chobi Mela and Photo Kathmandu

Veeranganakumari Solanki

To describe an image involves reimagining an event, a place or a being. To create an image involves the work of memory, myth, representation and time. In the introduction to ‘Towards a Philosophy of Photography’, Vilém Flusser (2000) describes images as “significant surfaces” with the ability to abstract details out of time and space and project them back into the same environment in the form of “imagination”. These imagined images are encrypted and resolved by the reading of their symbols. He describes a two-fold significance and intention of the image: the first as the manifestation of the image itself and the second as an encounter belonging to the observer. It is at this latter point that the image from the public realm enters into the private space of the mind. An external or public space of the image continues to exist as is, but its association transforms with each individual. Flusser then details the struggle of writing about or against the image, for example when text becomes descriptive of the image and images in turn illustrate a text, a repetitive cycle unless one arrives at a concept that cuts away from the linearity of time. We move into the magical realm of rediscovering new dimensions of an image.

Looking at photography and the image in South Asia, we must note a densely populated region consumed by mass-media images which exist in the public realm on television screens, street posters, magazines and cinema. Within the atmospherics of a consumer-driven popular culture, the image or photograph is explosive: the reception of images in the public space prompts a determined ability on the part of viewers to decipher meanings that are influenced by their beliefs, rituals and cultural backgrounds. The image is very easily absorbed into a private space, the mind, which takes ownership of the meaning that may derive from an encountered visual artefact. Images become a part of a shared memory archive which exists beyond sight alone and brings with it the act of listening to the peripheral voices and local beliefs of myths and narratives. With the awareness that the life of an image moves beyond the control of its creator, the photograph demonstrates its multiple points of departure. At photo festivals such as Chobi Mela in Bangladesh, Photo Kathmandu in Nepal, the Chennai Photo Biennale in India and past festivals such as FOCUS in Mumbai, the Delhi Photo Festival and the Goa Photo Festival, the photograph has existed in familiar exhibition formats but has also been shown in public spaces, to a large audience that absorbs meaning from and projects meaning onto everything they see.

It is at this point that the image moves from streets and exhibition spaces into private space, and, here, histories that images carry with them layer into folds of personal histories and memories. The image takes on a new life, existing beyond megapixels and data. It becomes a seed source of the start of another memory, another work, another image. Amongst the transitions of human thinking and the (then) contemporary readings of politics, ethics and cultural sensitivity, the history of an image is always in constant transition. Decades after its creation, the image continues to be a central focus from which new conversations, exhibitions and forms continue to emerge and depart.

Flusser's idea of a passage of conceptual disruption is perhaps what Joan Copjec refers to as *lumen* over *lux*: "While *lumen* reveals itself at the point of encounter with another dimension, *lux* is thought to be solely at the disposal of rational man, who reveals the truth by its means" (Copjec 2017). The three layers that exist with the image in its public realm are divided between the artist, the image itself and the audience. In the transference of meaning that takes place between the three the original image transforms with each step and the unique associations made with it.

The artist's ideas and outcomes are driven by an already existing understanding and reading of the world that is navigated by socio-cultural, political and symbolic narratives and myths. So long as it is placed in the context of which it was created, the image may still carry with it meaning that is closest to the intent. However, on moving to other territories, the image absorbs new connotations and takes on a semiotic role of association. This is the case of photo festivals or exhibitions that exhibit works by artists from different countries and localities. These new ways of reading the image are where the third layer of the audience comes to the fore, and is also the stage at which the image departs from the public realm into the private. It is during this stage of internalising the image that it also returns to the first stage, of creation or content making, when there is an output again in space and time.

The integration of photography into South Asian cultural history goes back to the early nineteenth century and the Calcutta-based firm Thacker and Company advertising the sale of the daguerreotype camera in the newspaper *Friend of India*. From the 1850s onwards, the camera and photograph evolved in a colonial setting, eventually becoming a tool for translating and influencing freedom movements into action. Christopher Pinney (2022), when referring to photography history and perspectives between the East and the West, refers to the unshakeable "local" specificity of images. This is particularly true even today in the context of photo festivals as will be observed further in this chapter. As the image enters a public realm, it takes on a myth-making quality, whereby it constructs associations that relate to the presence and absence of its details, in relation to the space or place it inhabits. As the photograph begins to inhabit a place, its narrative moves beyond the subject matter of the camera, and the image is effectively recreated. Pinney also describes a "power" of the image to create new meanings and sometimes even social standings. To stand in front of the lens at one moment meant "posing" and "idolizing". For instance, in photo studios, certain props or backgrounds indicated professions or fantasies of reality that one could convert into an image that acted as a validation for a truth or a constructed reality. Today, one sees this with selfie-culture, where being in the frame creates a certain kind of ownership of space and time. In each instance, the focus recurrently shifts back, describing a departure from a public situatedness towards a private site or terrain. It is through this form of ownership that the image takes on the role of portrayal and moves into what Sudhir Mahadevan (in Allana 2022) refers to as the imitation, mass production and distribution of images used

in establishing nationalism and resistance in the Indian subcontinent at the time of freedom movements and political partitions.

Before delving into the current reading of images in photo festivals, the mention of a historic exhibition that determined the future of photography exhibitions in India is necessary. *The Family of Man*, described as the greatest photographic exhibition of all time, had 503 pictures from 68 countries. It was curated by Edward Steichen for the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where it ran from 24 January to 8 May 1955 and then travelled to several cities across India in 1956–57. The exhibition presented works by international photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Ernst Haas and Robert Capa amongst many others, whose works at the time would have been distributed and seen in close circuits of photo clubs, societies and private salons but would not have been seen so often by larger public audiences.

In an essay on the exhibition, Sukanya Baskar writes:

Parallel to this burgeoning photo-club culture was an equally robust culture of exhibition-making, existent in India since the mid-1800s. The first photographic exhibition was held in Bombay on 2 February 1856, just three years after the world's first photographic exhibition - the Exhibition of Recent Specimens of Photography, held at the House of the Society of Arts, London from 22 December 1852 to 29 January 1853. In 1935 the Camera Pictorialists organized the first International Salon of Photographic Art in Bombay, initiating a sustained culture of photographic display and an international dialogue on photography. The task of procurement and installation was complicated by hefty customs charges as well as heavy taxes levied on photographic material imported from other countries. But timely assistance from individuals such as Ratnagar, then Secretary of the Camera Pictorialists of Bombay, enabled the club to make these and other strides in the advancement of Indian photography.

By the 1940s, almost 140 large and small photo clubs had emerged in urban centres, and there was a greater shift towards inclusion and dismantling the hierarchies set by some of the older photo clubs. This encouraged the development of a “postal portfolio” movement that enabled a continuing dialogue between the members of an expanding network of photo clubs connecting every corner of the country, and common trajectories evolving into All-India Photo Salons. By the mid-twentieth century photography culture in India was long-established, dynamic and innovative. The impact of the Family of Man, therefore, was not due to novelty but due to its imaginative design and its unequivocal assertion that documentary photography was an artistic asset and a valid exhibition subject.

(Baskar 2022: 326–327)

The logistics and costs of an exhibition of this scale and value were tremendous, yet due to dedicated and multiple photo clubs run by enthusiasts who were passionate about photography, the exhibition was made possible.

The tour of *The Family of Man* changed the way photography, exhibition displays and photo festivals are viewed. The scale of images moved from traditional formats to large panels; photographs moved from depictions of beauty to documentary images that established a certain acceptance of the image beyond constructed imagination and into a realm of reality and emotion. The image was and remains established as a universally accepted



Figure 21.1 Ronny Sen, *Portrait of Protest*, 2019. Installation View: '[Off] Limits', curated by Asm Rezaur Rahman, Sarker Protick and Tanzim Wahab. Chobi Mela Shunno 2021. Photo courtesy of Chobi Mela.

language. As a result, its distribution and translation, in even the hardest of situations, becomes acceptable and adaptable in newspapers, billboards, flyers, magazines and even social media. An image is what makes people stop to listen, to process, and then to create outcomes both internal and external.

Photography festivals in Bangladesh, India and Nepal have created ways of what may be looked at as sustainable forms of display, due to various factors such as limited funding and budgets for international transport and printing, the nature and availability of spaces – that range from galleries and art spaces to outdoor venues that include streets, parking lots, markets and mobile rickshaws – and the large number of curious audiences whose members range in age and profession. In this context, what has become an acceptable norm in the distribution of the image is the 'exhibition-specific print'. This format involves printing locally on non-archival paper and on materials and scales that are beyond traditional formats of photo paper. The original file is shared by the artist for printing, and the soft copy of the image is subsequently deleted from the festival folders. Alongside these protocols, however, the life of images in the public spaces live well beyond the festivals. The posters and vinyl transfers of the first edition of Photo Kathmandu in 2015 and the most recent edition in 2023 remain as residual layers in the streets of Patan. Installed but not removed, the images move from stages of curiosity, to ownership and acceptance, to old backgrounds on walls on top of which new posters find their way. When the temporary life cycle of festivals is over, the cities immediately move back into the temporarily inhabited spaces and unknown visitors, unaware of the signifi-



Figure 21.2 Sumit Dayal, *Wish You Live Long*, 2013. Installation View: ‘[Off] Limits’, curated by Asm Rezaur Rahman, Sarker Protick and Tanzim Wahab. Chobi Mela Shunno 2021. Photo courtesy of Chobi Mela.

cance of the festival leftovers, begin looking for meaning and direction in the images that remain in the street, seeking to uncover something missed or perhaps something to come, perhaps even a build up to the next festival. In the 2023 edition of Photo Kathmandu, when the installation of bird calls *Feather Library* by Esha Munshi was taken down from the square what remained as a residue were the large image transfers of birds against purple and blue circles on street corners with the hashtag #PhotoKTM5. In an influx of such images that are thrown at us in the course of our daily errands and world, photography integrates itself as a function and responsibility of cultural and contemporary history in time and space.

The shift of the image, once constructed in colonial photo studios, and now transferred to the street, the access to analogue cameras to digital mobile phones, and viewership from private galleries to public festivals, has exposed the consumption and ownership of the image. In these instances, the precision of an image’s context is transferred from and through its form and mediums of distribution, which allows viewers to consume the image with a choice of association that converts it from a public to a private image (hence ownership). The preciousness an image may have framed on a wall loses the uniqueness of selected ownership value when it is transferred into a newspaper or magazine print which may sometimes be repurposed into a samosa packet! A similar such samosa packet inspired artist Sofia Karim’s *Free Shahidul* campaign for her uncle, photographer Shahidul Alam, when he was jailed in 2018, and subsequent protest projects such as *Turbine Bagh* (2020) and *Where is Kajol* (2020). While in Bangladesh in February 2018, Karim bought a samosa packet in



Figure 21.3 Esha Munshi, *Feather Library*. Installation at Chyasal, Photo Kathmandu, March 2023. Image courtesy Shikhar Bhattarai/Photo Kathmandu.

Dhaka outside the DRIK Picture Agency, founded by Alam. The packet which she saved had court listings on it and this waste print resurfaced as a memory when her uncle was jailed. She started making ‘Free Shahidul’ samosa packets, and the movement, especially within the photographers’ community, spread across the world in solidarity with Shahidul.

Karim describes this as a free distribution of images:

In 2019, when I was planning Turbine Bagh at Tate Modern, I read an article describing the importance of food at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi. I instantly knew that samosa packets as “protest art” were the answer here. They were familiar to anyone at Shaheen Bagh, yet they carried messages of local resistance and international solidarity. The images were gathered through an Instagram open call to which artists, writers, poets and thinkers responded with images, drawings and texts. I had no budget, so I used old papers from home and my mother’s ink-jet printer to make the packets. The artists shared their works with incredible generosity and not one of them complained about the way their images were used. Each artist was credited for their work and when the work was installed at the Victoria and Albert Museum, all the artists and contributors’ names—including mine as the initiator—have been listed alongside the ninety samosa packets. This is the spirit of activism. Working quickly, efficiently, generously and in good faith. Our work is a means to an end.

(Karim 2022: 175)

In his essay, 'The Gallery Versus the Street: An Exercise in Engagement', Shahidul Alam talks about the emergence of documentary photography and the distribution of the image in Bangladesh. Referring to the Bangladesh Photographic Society (BPS), founded in 1976, Alam says, "BPS was more than just a camera club. It was home to many of us and in a society that looked down upon photography as a profession, it was the one place where our work was valued" (Alam, 2022: 444). Photo clubs and societies in India and Bangladesh were strong, sometimes disruptive undercurrents that existed just under the smooth fabric of various socio-political scenarios. The close bond that these photographers shared as a community led to the emergence of organisations such as DRIK (1989), a photo agency, to highlight the importance of text and the significance of social documentary in a professional sphere. As documentary and storytelling began to pick up in the mid-1980s in Bangladesh, photography also saw a movement with young photographers embracing image-making as a profession, which then led to the setting up of MAP, a cooperative of young photographers who created work of social significance. Alam noticed a need for a more formal way of teaching, which he had initially anticipated with DRIK. Having seen this take on a more informal space for photographers and photojournalism, he set up the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute in Dhaka (1998), which has impacted and continues to inform a wide range of image-based practitioners in South Asia. Pathshala began with ways of moving image-making into the public realm through workshops and activities, promoting women photographers and giving cameras to working-class children to experiment with. To push photography further into the public realm, DRIK and Alam set up South Asia's first outdoor photography festival, Chobi Mela, in 2000. For Alam, the seeds of Chobi Mela were planted in Arles in 1994 when he exhibited his work there for the first time. Recognising the need to bring in new voices and leadership, Alam has allowed for transitions and handovers of leadership and management by younger photographers and alumni for both Chobi Mela and Pathshala, allowing for new and continued forms of engagement.

With reference to Chobi Mela and its distribution of images, Alam says:

the most significant sites of public response to Chobi Mela are not the prestige events where celebrities pose for the media, but the places reached by the mobile exhibits - the back streets and alleys of Dhaka, the football fields, the school playgrounds, the bazaars, the 200... A miniature festival in rickshaw vans has gone out to a curious public hungry for images but daunted by the glitzy aura and privileged access of museums and galleries. An audience of five to ten thousand that would be the envy of any gallery is an everyday occurrence at these mobile exhibits, and an engaged public talk about the images long after the exhibition has moved on. The rickshaw vans ply the streets of Dhaka, are ferried across the river by boats, journey along the flood embankments.

Taking the gallery to the public is central to Drik's activist beliefs and an important part of the ongoing photography revolution. The brass band that plays in the streets at the opening, the dancing in the streets, the procession of photographers demanding their rights, etc., are all part of a culture of street engagement that is foreign to conventional art practice here, which has tried to emulate the insipid environment of cold gallery walls that dominates in the West.

(452, 454)



Figure 21.4 Rickshaw Van Mobile Exhibition, 2013. Installation view: Fragility: Chobi Mela VII 2013. Photo Courtesy: Chobi Mela.

Further to Alam's efforts to establish Chobi Mela as an extremely accessible festival, artist Sarker Protick, who is now co-curator at Chobi Mela and runs Pathshala, is working on how to strategically understand the relationship of artist's works with the engagement of audiences at the scale of a festival. Protick says that the team treats all artists equally, where the print and quality of paper is the same without any hierarchy (Solanki 2023b). The artists and venues are then also decided based on the conversation the work will have with the space. The works are printed locally and the outcome of the material depends on whether the works are indoors, outdoors, or a part of the mobile exhibition and if they will travel to future exhibitions. The budgets are extended to also bring international artists to the festival to encourage engagements with local communities. However, given geographical challenges and the reality of border politics, Protick also recognises that Chobi Mela was established as a festival to move away from Western thinking and facilitate local and more engaged practices but yet, as Alam had envisioned, it is also to bring international photography practices to Bangladesh, which many artists would otherwise never have access to see. Chobi Mela is an experience not just for a large local audience but also a learning ground for local practitioners and students who come to engage and exchange. Protick then recognises the role play of various international cultural institutes and high commissions and embassies to facilitate these exchanges, which are sparse in Bangladesh. Despite this there is a significant effort that is put into fundraising to create platforms that provide for large audiences. A similar context applies for Photo Kathmandu also, where supporting partnerships play a crucial role in facilitating exhibitions and artistic exchange. In the case of Photo Kathmandu however, their close association with Photo Circle and Nepal Picture



Figure 21.5 Installation View: Nepal Picture Library, 'Intimacy', Ruplal House, Old Dhaka, Chobi Mela VIII, 2015. Photo Courtesy: Chobi Mela.

Library have been instrumental in fundraising for the festival on a scale that has allowed exhibitions to expand not necessarily in size but in quality. The three organisations share a small team who dedicate their work to social change, visual narratives, public engagement and learning.

Photo Kathmandu's first edition took place shortly after Nepal's major earthquake in 2015. In an interview with its founding director, Nayantara Gurung Kakshapati, she described the importance of the life of images in the public realm as something that exists very deeply on the streets of Kathmandu: one is hit by information, billboards and advertisements in every direction (Solanki 2023a). To counter this visual narrative, Photo Kathmandu proposes specific stories that inspire or inform people with different methods in an age of competing attention spans. The festival aims to create nooks that make people pause, ponder and reflect on their encounters, which may include bird songs at the busy crossroads of a temple and market place, Bunu Dhungana's *Confrontations*, a work about being a woman in Nepal's patriarchal society in the courtyard of a residential community, or images from the Nepal Picture Library archives of *The Public Life of Women: A Feminist Memory Project* on a long pole that also substitutes as the wickets for a group of young boys' makeshift cricket pitch. This desire to create exhibitions in public spaces such as markets, streets and residential courtyards which are a part of people's everyday lives prompts compelling forms of design and display that enable what Nayantara refers to as "manufactured encounters". This has led the Photo Kathmandu team to think of images beyond the disciplinary limits of photography and to conceive of them rather as image-making practices. The effort to consider very specific audiences and forms of engagement attracts young



Figure 21.6 Amrit Bahadur Chitrakar/Nepal Picture Library, *Skin of Chitwan*. Installation at Manga Hiti, Patan Durbar Square, Photo Kathmandu, March 2023. Image courtesy of Shikhar Bhattarai/Photo Kathmandu.

educators and people who may otherwise never enter these spaces. The festival pushes itself not just to a daily audience who engage with spaces but attempts to attract new audiences to parts of the city and spaces they may otherwise never visit. Understanding the public as fluid, it is through the various forms of image distribution that the festival seeps into various layers of the city.

Thinking through the circulation of images and the afterlife of the festival, Nayantara approaches images as a currency that builds knowledge in diverse locations including classrooms and archives. It is here though that the ownership of the image is also challenged. Photo Kathmandu relies on shop fronts and peoples' homes to showcase exhibitions and images. Their approval of the image and belief in the idea of what it is about influences whether they are willing to become temporary owners and custodians of it for the duration of the festival and be represented by it, as something they can endorse. The image immediately becomes an outcome of local layering and distribution, with all of its politics and participants. When the exhibition moves into the streets, a major venue for Photo Kathmandu, the way one experiences an image is transformed: viewing an exhibition in the bustle of a bylane, navigating through narrow alleys to arrive at a courtyard of children playing cricket, or watching speeding motorbikes while meaningfully looking at a wall of images over a row of parked bikes is layered by the experience of viewing an exhibition in the close proximity of strangers, some of whom are there to view the exhibition, some to buy their daily groceries. Similar to Chobi Mela, who are close allies of the team at Photo Kathmandu, the festival too relies on low-cost printing material and prioritises the location

and relational meaning of images in spaces of engagement with communities. Over the years, Photo Kathmandu has found a home in Patan, a quaint corner of Kathmandu, where the local neighbourhoods have accepted the festival as their own. This sense of recognition and ownership has allowed the Photo Kathmandu team to build core values that integrate a local community of younger artists who engage with images and build a life for the festival that breathes outside of its momentary appearance every alternate year.

Both Chobi Mela and Photo Kathmandu are examples of how a festival exists in the streets, departs and returns again to exist with the people. They describe the way spaces change and people become accustomed to images. The storylines that emerge from these images take on meanings that move into the personal lives of people, existing not just as forms of memory but as part of their future arrivals and departures, as new images and incidents that they will encounter and also produce. The photograph, which crosses boundaries through its distributions and different ownerships, goes beyond traditional and colonial forms of documentation in the region. It has taken on a haptic form where the meanings and associations are touched by the viewer rather than only the creator/maker. In this space where control is ephemeral, archives and academia take to the streets. They grow into a presence that performs for a lens, captures and distributes time and space through prisms of culture, layers of memory, and creates new arrival and departure lines for incidental audiences.

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THE PHYSICAL LIVES OF IMAGES, THEIR MATTER, APPEARANCES AND DISAPPEARANCES IN THE CONTEXT OF BEIRUT

Gregory Buchakjian

Collecting and Sharing Archives as Means of Retracing a Shattered History

On the 13th of April 2015, Georges Boustany shared on Facebook extracts from the newspaper *L'Orient-Le Jour* of a day 40 years before. On that Sunday of 1975, Christian right-wing fighters attacked a bus carrying Palestinians, killing 27. This massacre is considered as the starting point of the civil war that ravaged Lebanon for 15 years. Though the conflict's beginning and interruption possess no consensus, April 13 became an unofficial date for commemoration. As 2015 marked its 40th anniversary, Boustany's post was one among thousands. Nevertheless, he kept publishing on a daily basis and created a page called "La guerre du Liban au jour le jour" (*The Lebanese War Day by Day*), a living archive of articles and photographs that follows a chronology at a 40-year distance from the original publication. Boustany, whose professional activity doesn't have anything to do with history, media or photography, didn't receive any commission or support. However, as a result of this publishing initiative, he became a contributor to *L'Orient-Le Jour*, where he shared his image-based activity. From 2015 to 2023, he would pick from his collection a photograph taken in Lebanon between the 19th century and the 1980s and reconstruct the story behind it. Boustany acquired thousands of prints coming from families and studios that were sold or thrown away. He is far from being the only compulsive collector of this kind. An even more extravagant example is Alfred Tarazi who has been amassing an immeasurable number of documents with a focus on newspapers and magazines. In 2022, he exhibited hundreds of publications from the nineteen-thirties to the eighties in *Memory of a Paper City*. This overwhelming display was concurrently a temporary public library and an artistic intervention that fits within a history of archive-based installations like Jayce Salloum's *Kan Ya Ma Kan – There Was and There Was Not, Redux/Fragments* (1988–1998) and Lamia Joreige's *Beirut Autopsy of a City* (2010).

In 2018, Georges Boustany was among the scholars, writers, artists, photographers and collectors who contributed to *On Photography in Lebanon. Essays and Stories*. The book is arranged according to six reading grids: "Operator/The Photographer's Gaze", "Apparatus/Mechanics of Photographic Practices", "Referent/Subject of Representation", "Object/Body of the Image", "Transmission/Life of the Image" and "Viewer/The Image as Memory,

The Image as Narrative”. Its release coincided with the end of a period of three decades that started in 1991 with the interruption of the civil war and would be followed by breakdown and explosions.

At the beginning of that era, in the 1990s, Lebanon was recovering from fifteen years of violence. Under the auspices of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, the nation’s policy was based on reconstruction operations targeting a utopian future and disregarding both past and present. As a response to this path of blindness and amnesia, artists, writers and researchers envisioned strategies to recollect the pieces of a shattered history through practices involving archaeology, testimonials and archives. Within this context, three events that were apparently isolated from each other took place in the last years of the decade. The first event happened in 1997, when artists Akram Zaatari, Fouad Elkoury and Samer Mohdad set up the Arab Image Foundation (AIF), an association whose aim is to collect, preserve, study and share visual documents from the Arab World and its diaspora. Since then, the AIF has gathered a collection of more than 500,000 objects, originating mainly from professional studios and family collections, and produced a number of publications, exhibitions and collaborations across the world as a result.

The second event was in 1998, as the month of July had been proclaimed “Mois de la photo au Liban” (*Month of Photography in Lebanon*). The first and last edition of the festival showcased 40 exhibitions across the territory involving international and local photographers. In the “Lebanese Photographers” category, Galerie Janine Rubeiz hosted *Beyrouth, fiction urbaine* (Beirut, Urban Fiction) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige:

Based on research about the representation of Beirut, the photographic installations of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige intervene on postcards from pre-war Lebanon, still on the market today, and on more personal memories (...) The burnings provoked by an incandescent light, fire and blaze are applied on the negative. Through the alteration of these images, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige resume the metaphor of war and, overall, try to inscribe photography in a fiction, a new scenario that learns to conjugate the present tense.

(*Chapier and Monterosso 1998: 168*)

In subsequent years, the name of the series changed to *The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer*, and it became Part I of a larger project known as *Wonder Beirut* with a fictional photographer.

Between 1968 and 1969, Abdallah Farah was commissioned by the Lebanese State to take pictures to be edited as post cards. They represented the Beirut Central District and mainly the Lebanese Riviera and its luxury hotels, which contributed to form an idealized picture of Lebanon in the sixties and seventies. (...) As of the Autumn of 1975, Abdallah systematically burned the negatives of the postcards, in accordance with the damages caused to the sites by the shelling and street fights. Abdallah used to photograph the image after each new burn he inflicted on it, producing a series of evolving images, which are called the “process”.

(*Dirié and Thériault 2013: 150*)

Wonder Beirut includes *Latent Images*, which represents:

part of the rolls of films shot but not developed yet. Since the war years, when he was often short of products, fixatives and most of all paper, Abdallah Farah stopped developing his films, being content with taking the pictures. The rolls piled up; he felt no need to reveal them.

After the “Mois de la Photo” Hadjithomas and Joreige released their first feature film, *Around the Pink House*. It tells the story of two families who found refuge in a house during the war and were requested to leave by the new landlord. One of the characters, Mounir, is obsessed by a woman. Every day he sticks on the wall a photograph depicting her: another fictional photographer creates an installation of identical photographs in a film set in a ruined building. Interestingly, the actor interpreting Mounir is Rabih Mroué, a prominent playwright and artist who blurs the margins between the different media and tackles uncomfortable historical issues. Still and moving media images have a considerable importance in his work. In 2016, Mroué published *Diary of a Leap Year*, a 366-page artist book populated with figures, armed vehicles, ruins and various objects, all cut from newspapers.

Our third event happened in 1999, during the colloquium “Building City and Nation: Space, History, Memory and Identity” that sociologist Samir Khalaf organized at the Order of Engineers and Architects of Lebanon. One of the speakers, Walid Raad, presented The Atlas Group, an organization aiming to collect and produce documents shedding light on the contemporary history of Lebanon. Facing a distraught audience, Raad displayed collections of images nobody had ever seen before. The most troubling part of his presentation was *Secrets in the Open Sea*.

Secrets in the open sea consists of twenty-nine photographic prints that were found buried under the rubble during the 1993 demolition of Beirut’s war-ravaged commercial districts. The prints were different shades of blue and each measured 111 x 173 cm. In 1994, the prints were entrusted to The Atlas Group for preservation and analysis. The Atlas Group sent six of the prints to laboratories in France and the UK for chemical and digital analysis. Remarkably, the laboratories recovered small black-and-white latent images from the blue prints. The small images represented group portraits of men and women. The Atlas Group was able to identify all the individuals represented in the small black-and-white images, and it turned out that they were all individuals who drowned, died or were found dead in the Mediterranean between 1975 and 1991.

(Respini 2015: 70)

Raad continued to exhibit such works in venues such as Musée d’Orsay in Paris. Almost nobody understood that these were manipulated. Years later, Raad – like Hadjithomas-Joreige – arose as a prominent contemporary artist and The Atlas Group’s status shifted from being perceived as an institution to being understood as a fictional entity whose only member was Raad: in other words, to being an artistic project.

Ruined Images instead of Images of Ruins?

What do these stories tell us? First, that post-war Lebanon witnessed an “archival impulse” (Hal Foster) or an “archive fever” (Jacques Derrida). This dynamic was triggered by stake-

holders from various backgrounds including individuals and groups, most of them untrained as professional researchers or archivists. These initiatives largely address vernacular photographs including images taken by the artists themselves during their youth. Both Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari exploited photographs they shot as teenagers during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon in *We decided to let them say 'We are convinced' twice* and *Mini Album / Summer 1982*. For the latter, 31 prints Zaatari gathered in an album were reproduced to form a photographic installation. Some views of the series depicting the bombing of a Palestinian Camp were assembled into a photomontage for a large panorama, *Saida, June 6, 1982*.

Regarding this work, there are both paradigms and attitudes. The first paradigm is narrative with fiction or what is termed as “parafiction” (Buchakjian 2017: 32). In *Wonder Beirut*, the (real) postcards were attributed to a fictitious photographer who committed a fictional deed. In *The Atlas Group*, each body of photographs is attributed to a contributor, Raad himself or an imaginary character such as a recurrent “Dr Fadl Fakhoury”. This fictionalization was questioned and eventually criticized. Opponents to Raad alleged he might have served a plot orchestrated by the CIA or Rafic Hariri in order to dismantle any historical discourse. It is more coherent to perceive fictionalization as a critique of the official discourse that was disconnected from reality and the “corporate attempt to spectacularize history” with the slogan “Beirut – An Ancient City for the Future” (Makdisi 1997: 25)

The second paradigm is physical condition. Any collection aims to provide the most suitable conservation conditions. The Arab Image Foundation ensured that temperature and humidity regulated its storage facilities. Nevertheless, this question was challenged at some point by Akram Zaatari himself. Speaking about the history of the AIF:

We always insisted that we were interested only in originals, because our interest lies in photographic preservation. I don't believe in this anymore, because I don't see the preservation of photographs as preservation of material only. It would be interesting to determine what exactly is essential to preserve. If emotions can be preserved with pictures, then maybe returning a picture to the album from which it was taken, to the bedroom where it was found, to the configuration it once belonged to, would constitute an act of preservation in its most radical form.

(Westmoreland (2013: 63)

The ruined image is recurrent in contemporary practices. Part of the Atlas Group's *We Decided to Let Them Say 'We Are Convinced' Twice* displays people watching the bombings as a spectacle, Israeli warplanes in the sky, and bombings over the city and its suburbs. Photographs are, to various degrees, scratched. During our correspondence of 2017, I asked Raad to explain this damage:

As a classically trained photographer, I take very good care of my negatives and prints. My negatives are intact. They did not decay with the passage of time. The scratches are not on my prints and negatives but in my images. This brings to mind two instances in Jalal's [Toufic] writings. The first in his (*Vampires*), where he writes: 'How many more bombs will it take to produce in Lebanon not just holes in buildings, but a hole, however small, in reality, a tear in reality itself, so that it would no longer be seamless and so that there would be a crack in it à la that in Bergman's *Persona*?'

(Buchakjian and Raad 2017)

In 2012, I was investigating abandoned buildings of Beirut. With writer, playwright and artist Valérie Cachard, I entered an apartment shelled in the 1980s that had never been repaired. The items we collected included a set of postcards from the Hermitage Museum in what was then called Leningrad, in the USSR. Each postcard reproduced a painting presenting one of the museum's galleries. All were covered with a layer of dirt that made them resemble miniature works of Anselm Kiefer. In 2013, at the invitation of François Sargologo, I created the installation *Leningrad* in which I reproduced the postcards and typed out a text in which I attempt, based on documents found in situ, to reconstruct the apartment's history. In the exhibition, *Pellicula*, at Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Sargologo presented "Au delà de la mer" (*Beyond the Sea*), a collection of photographs taken from 1980 to 1984, that were lost and ultimately found. In a review, thinker and critic Arie Akkermans wrote:

Both of them [Buchakjian and Sargologo], dealing with their hometown Beirut, choose to acquire a lens that permits to see right through the terrifying breath of the Lebanese wars of the 20th century, precisely by means of bypassing the aesthetic code of war photography and turning towards more intimate spaces, where the decomposing body of Beirut – as an extended organic whole – becomes blurry, incomprehensible and contradictory.

(Akkermans 2013)

In the following years, Sargologo "cooked" images he shot and others from the family archive, using an array of printmaking techniques and more unusual materials such as coffee. The result was *Beyrouth Empire* (2018), an ensemble of tondos revealing a dream-like universe of disembodied creatures and places. At the same period, Ali Cherri initiated *Trembling Landscapes* (2014–16), a set of aerial views of Algiers, Beirut, Damascus, Erbil, Makkah, and Tehran, with an emphasis on seismic fault lines. Introducing a parallel between earthquakes and political conflicts, Cherri altered the images giving them the appearance of cities destroyed during World War II. Once again, one would confuse the ruined image with the image of the ruin.

In 2016, Fouad Elkoury proposed that we collaborate with curator Manal Khader on an exploration of the photographs he shot in Lebanon. In the 1970s and 80s, Elkoury covered the war from the side of the civilians and their daily life rather than warriors and battlefields. In 1991, he was the only Lebanese to be part of the photographic mission *Beirut City Centre* initiated by writer Dominique Eddé in the ruined historical core of the city before its demolition and reconstruction. After reviewing and questioning 50,000 images we concluded the teamwork that generated the book *Passing Time* over a specific case study: In 1980, Elkoury accompanied the shooting of *Circle of Deceit*, a movie Volker Schlöndorff produced in war-torn Beirut. The negatives were developed in volatile conditions, and some were scratched. The photographer kept these aside as failures. In 2009, he produced a diptych for *The Road to Peace*, an exhibition dedicated to the arts during the war, curated by art dealer Saleh Barakat at the newly opened Beirut Art Center. The diptych that showed real explosions in a ruined city during the footage of a fiction film was itself ruined.

One afternoon, Fouad Elkoury and I opened up Pandora's box by looking at the films themselves. The first thing we realized was that some images which seemed entirely obliterated on the contact sheets could be brought back to life. We also started to

reconstitute the sequence in which the photographs were taken, in order to restore the complete films to their proper order—an order that was lost when they were cut up in the laboratory, thirty-six years earlier. As most of the numbers had been erased we studied the exact shapes and irregularities of the cutting lines, as though absorbed in completing a very subtle—almost imperceptible—jigsaw puzzle. When we had finished, Fouad Elkoury said to me: “That was almost archaeology!” “It was archaeology,” I answered.

(Buchakjian, Elkoury and Khader 2017: 245)

When *Passing Time* was published, Akram Zaatari presented *Against Photography. An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation* at Barcelona’s MACBA. The exhibition and the volume that accompanied it address two decades of collecting within the AIF. Zaatari’s project generates an infinity of ways of reading with a great emphasis on materiality. It involves the territory where photographs are preserved: “When you live in an unstable political system, when you have experienced war not so long ago and are still surrounded by it, the fear is concrete” (Zaatari 2018: 103). It also engages the accidents, mishandlings, errors, manipulation and storage: “Sometimes negatives continue to change when kept in acid-free sleeves in a controlled environment” (Zaatari 2018: 102). During the same period there emerged the stock of negatives of a photo studio that was ravaged during the war. Vartan Avakian retrieved and photographed particles that were lost from the negatives. Revealing traces from the former images, *Suspended Silver* is paradoxically an unreadable if not abstract work. Its decontextualized crystals served for the cover of *On Photography in Lebanon*.

Recovering the City

These episodes overlapping in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s indicate the point at which everything is entangled: timelines of events, processes of research and notions of destruction and preservation, disappearance and re-emergence. In November 2018, a year after *Passing Time* and *Against Photography* and a few weeks after the launch of *On Photography in Lebanon*, I unveiled the book *Abandoned Dwellings. A History of Beirut*, based on my doctoral research and the exhibition *Abandoned Dwellings. Display of Systems* at Sursock Museum. The exhibition poster featured a filmic sequence in which gloved hands manipulate an album of black-and-white photographs. In the middle, a frame reveals people gathered on a picnic. The album was one of the hundreds of items Valerie Cachard and I safeguarded from deserted houses, including the *Leningrad* postcards. During the conception of the project with curator Karina El Helou, there was a debate on how to present this archive. The documents were taken without anybody’s permission and revealed the private lives of their previous possessors. It was out of the question to expose them as they were. In October 2017, Cachard and I transported these objects to a studio and arranged them on the floor. The one-day action was filmed by Malek Hosni. During the following months, we edited hours of rushes into the ten-minute video *Abandoned Dwellings. Archive*. Thus the exhibition was conceived as an attempt to recover the city and its narratives. The installation *Abandoned Dwellings. Inventory* consists of a cabinet holding the data sheets of 750 buildings. The apparatus was made in such a way that visitors could manipulate the prints and eventually steal them. Some took cards away, photographed their trophies in front of the edifices and shared these on social media. These gestures remind us of what was

perhaps the most significant urban photographic installation in Lebanon. Within the AIF, Akram Zaatari developed with studio photographer Hashem El Madani a long-term, multi-layered and multi-disciplinary collaboration. In November 2007, Zaatari placed 40 prints by Madani in the locations where they were shot, shops and other places in the old city of Saida in South Lebanon (both Madani and Zaatari are from Saida). Many shopkeepers were the heirs of those portrayed by El Madani so that Zaatari's trail established spatial and temporal correspondences. The two projects separated by a decade involved a performative aspect, participation and appropriation of the public and a physical and ontological relation with the territory.

Generating and Disclosing Images after the “End of the World”

On the 17th of October 2019, in the wake of an unprecedented economic and social downfall, the population took to the streets demanding the end of the ruling regime. For three months, the revolutionary movement gathered unparalleled crowds but, in the winter, the Covid pandemic confinement put the protests on hold. What followed was a collapse with record-breaking inflation and power shortages plunging the country into darkness. Within this bleak atmosphere, on the 4th of August 2020, a double blast in the Port of Beirut devastated the city, killing hundreds and ruining hundreds of thousands of buildings and infrastructural facilities including Sursock Museum, the Arab Image Foundation and most art galleries, artists' studios, schools and institutions. In a collector's house, a print from *We Decided to Let Them Say “We Are Convinced” Twice* was standing in the midst of the rubble. A closer look allowed us to see that it was smashed. “I remember talking about the scratches being in the world. Here we are now”, Walid Raad wrote to me. It is as if the works produced in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s were not only questioning the past but were also premonitory. The 2023 Syria-Turkey Earthquake similarly echoes Ali Cherri's *Trembling Landscapes*.

In April 2021, curator Annie Vartivarian organized *Everyone Is the Creator of One's Own Faith* in a building damaged by the blast. The exhibition took its title from the last social media post of Gaïa Fodoulian, Vartivarian's daughter, before being killed on that day. Caroline Tabet was showcased with a series entitled *Vies Intérieures, Antérieures* (Inner Lives/Previous Lives, 2020, Figure 22.1). From March to July 2020, the confined artist photographed on polaroid the view from her balcony that consisted of red-tiled houses and jacaranda trees. She dipped the pictures in hot water and vinegar. The emulsion became like a skin and the effect of the liquid altered images that were progressively fading. Tabet was at the same time staring at the landscape and making it disappear as if it was a presentiment of the disaster to come. In the seconds that followed the blast, she filmed in her apartment blurry images of dust, debris and lament never shared publicly. The artist wrote:

An opening within a frame.
A window into a tear.
Skin that wrinkles ahead of a tree that is there no longer.
Thick yellow smoke that covers everything, and the asphyxiation that follows.
Specks of dust so fickle that they infiltrate every gap.
The outside world mirrors the fragmented self.
A landscape is rocked.
A moving image.

(Vartivarian 2021: 79)



Figure 22.1 Caroline Tabet, *Vies Intérieures – Antérieures (Interior Lives – Previous Lives)*, 2020, No 5, 2020, 24 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In 2022, *Vies Intérieures, Antérieures* was included in *At the Edge of the World Lies the Ebb and Flow of Promise* at Jumièges Abbey, in France. Curated by Laure d’Hauteville and Clémence Cottard-Hachem, co-editor of *On Photography in Lebanon*, the exhibition focused on Lebanese image-based practices in a time of collapse. The first section, “Fluid Geographies”, which included *Vies Intérieures, Antérieures*, established a liquid genealogy of photography. For instance, *A Review of Grief* by Joana Andraos is based on her practice as a psychoanalyst. Presented as a journal of therapy sessions, its “pièce de résistance” is a triptych of tears. The images represent tear-soaked tissues of patients Andraos preserved. *The River* by Lara Tabet (2018, Figure 22.2), the first piece from this section was also based on a multi-disciplinary practice. Photographer and medical biologist Lara Tabet considers herself a *hydrofeminist*. She envisions the perspective of moving the human scale towards other agencies, including non-human organisms like fluids:

Tabet uses color photography film (120 mm format) as a medium and incubator where microorganisms collected in the water from the river bed are cultivated. The water samples have been isolated on a growing medium for bacteria, then reintroduced into the layers of gelatin silver and cellulose that make up the film. The result



Figure 22.2 Lara Tabet, *The River*, 2018. Bacteria on celluloid, digitized and printed on fabric 60 x 747 cm. Installation view: 'At the Edge of the World Lies The Ebb and Flow of Promise', Jumièges Abbey, 2022. Photograph: Gregory Buchakjian.

is an alteration of the photosensitive emulsions that react with the chemical and bacteriological composites present in the water. The photographic film becomes both an oneiric chemigram and a bacteriological sample that measures and marks the level and scale of contamination of the river.

(Cottard-Hachem and d'Hauteville 2022: 32)

For *In Eleven Fragmented Seas*, she extracted from the Lebanese coastline one sample of water every 20 kilometers and inoculated it onto large format film. Besides the fact that her work intervenes with the landscape from a microscopic point of view and addresses environmental issues such as the alarming levels of pollution, Tabet uses these scientific processes as an autobiographical line. Since 2020, she and her partner, Randa Mirza, who lost their home in Beirut, live as nomads moving from one residency to the other. *La Saone* and *Marseille Overflow* are not French equivalents for *The River* but testimonies of migrations in times of crises. While these are somehow imprints of the fluid territory, Lamia Joreige's *One Night of Sleep* back in 2013 were imprints of the artist's body. For a period of three months, twice a week Joreige slept on photographic paper placed on a wooden board, under a ceiling light, which was programmed with various times of exposure depending on

the day. Once a week, she would go to the photographic studio to reveal the prints. The 14 photographs that came out of this process are reminiscent of Yves Klein's *Anthropometries* (Joreige 2017: 285). They were produced at the same period of pinhole photographs depicting the view of Beirut's National Museum Square, part of the project *Under-Writing Beirut—Mathaf* that examined a location that was the demarcation line during the war and happens to be the artist's neighborhood in the present. The two parallel projects remind the intricate relation between intimacy and history.

In the meantime, İeva Saudargaitė Douaihi challenges the photographic object on the other side of the process: its outcome. *Last Years' Snow (While We Wait)* is an ongoing project that started in 2015. Every year, at the end of the winter, Saudargaitė rides to the mountains and photographs the melting snow – what was, as the artist says, “once white, pure and hopeful is now sitting sullied in dirt and rubbish awaiting its inevitable disappearance”. Tackling another side of the environmental subject, *Last Years' Snow* images are produced with a flatbed UV printer on powder, which makes them look even more polluted and ephemeral. Alternatively, Saudargaitė uses networks and social media as creative instruments. Her most radical intervention is perhaps *Murrsansfin*, an Instagram page with 9999 almost identical posts, each consisting of a window of Murr Tower. Built in 1975, this unfinished skyscraper is a reminder of Lebanon's tragedies as it served as a fortified outpost, a sniper's position and a detention and torture center. Murr Tower is also one of Nasri Sayegh's obsessions, alongside Pigeon's Grotto, Mount Hermon, and diva singers Asmahan and Fayruz. In the mid-2010s, Sayegh, a writer and actor, shared images of these iconic buildings, landscapes and characters on social media. During that period, he took with his phone, while driving at night, around 12,000 views of Murr Tower. “What mattered was not the image itself but what it hides”, says Sayegh. The practice that emerged like a fancy Instagram game ended up as a consistent artistic practice. Sayegh, who also launched the online radio station “Radio Karantina” during the Covid confinement, told me that:

In the absence of words that I cannot formulate, I go through the image. Facing a form of concern, a deficiency, something invisible, I attempt to exhaust the cliché. I cut, I embroider, I use scissors, like the crafts we used to do when we were children.

Nasri Sayegh emphasized the fact that everything he does comes from an urgency. Almost every cultural worker in this city might have said the same, using perhaps other words. The urgency was – and still is – at each period and for each generation of artists, to counter catastrophes, menaces, fallacious political discourses and self-deception. It led artists to consider alternative strategies in terms of narration and form. These schemes led, among other things, to the array of practices exposed in this piece. As the writing of this chapter was coming to an end, Karina El Helou, who became director of Surssock Museum and accomplished its reopening in 2023 with five exhibitions in which appeared Tabet's *The River* and Zaatari's *Mini Album/Summer 1982*, suggested I conclude with *Agenda 1979*. This video Valerie Cachard and I created in 2021 is based on a diary that served as a “Military War Manual” that a Palestinian warrior wrote during an instructional journey in the Soviet Union, its pages filled with chemical formulas for the fabrication of explosives and battlefield protocols. “Why *Agenda 1979*?” I asked. “It is not about photographs.” “This is the point”, Helou replied. “You transformed the diary into an image, a specter that keeps haunting us.” This perhaps is what reunites the works discussed there – and many others – and the people behind. Living in uncertainty, trying to recover a disputed past, to navigate

in a troubled present and apprehend an obscure future, art practitioners in and around this city – and more broadly all the inhabitants – are somehow like Walter Benjamin’s “Angel of History”, suspended beings in a fragile and temporary state of existence.

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23

THE STICKINESS OF IMAGES

Materiality and Attention in Contemporary European Photographies

Duncan Wooldridge

Image Arrays

A display strategy familiar to viewers of contemporary photography in Europe might be described as follows: an artist affixes a large-scale photographic print in vinyl onto a gallery wall, and on top of that places framed images. The frames are positioned in a constellation that is loose or intuitive rather than systematic. The vinyl is often large, at least two to three meters wide and two to three meters tall, the size of a Dusseldorf School photograph by Andreas Gursky or Candida Höfer, a scale that also refers to History Painting and large format canvases of the modern era, without their framing or objecthood. The accompanying framed images are smaller in proportion to the vinyl, and modest by comparison. Size is significant and enables specific effects: the installation occupies space and proposes to speak to architecture and to the body, whilst the frames at their smaller scale address themselves primarily to the eye. An interplay of overview and detail is suggested: the large vinyl is used to set a scene or provide a context, from which the smaller images can be viewed in juxtaposition. If this background image does not cover the expanse of the wall in its entirety, often one or two of the framed prints will depart across the vinyl's edge, onto the bare wall, teasingly describing a slippage beyond the rectangle in a way that is just a little self-conscious or mannered. If the frames are few, the smaller images will be placed in a presentational contrapposto, half on top of the vinyl and half off, gesturing away but tethered.

The popularity of this strategy and its use of materials, visible across exhibitions of emerging photography and international photo festivals, and progressively in the holdings of major collections and museums, raise a series of questions that this chapter will seek to explore and expand upon: how do the new materialities of photography, especially the emergence and use of vinyl and adhesive or surface-covering printing techniques, extend or contest our contemporary conditions of attention and criticality? Broadly put, what are the conditions for contemporary photography in emerging practices? More concretely, how does the image negotiate and synthesize its many functions across pensive images and fast-moving or quickly transmitted practices with their different experiences of time? And more specifically still, how does the image and its new forms find itself implicated between rapid and protracted claims to our attention? All of which is to say: how does the image and its

capacity to affix itself to a multitude of surfaces – what I will call the stickiness of photography – find itself a critical agency in an economy of attention? How might stickiness reveal dynamics of critical and uncritical presentation and examination?

In the trending display of vinyl prints and framed image arrangements, the vinyl image and its accompanying group of smaller works possess different functions and are intended to be contrasting, covering a multitude of approaches. The background image's role is mostly atmospheric: it may be abstracted or describe a general view and operates like an establishing shot in a narrative sequence, ready to be overwritten as a point of departure. From here a series of enigmatic elements or clues are set out, as the framed images emphasize details or observations which are isolated and given close attention. Contemporary photographic clichés are usually visible: a hand outstretched, reaching or holding an object of significance; a portrait from a three-quarter view, from the front or from behind, hair or neck in shallow focus; a place or object of mysterious use or provenance is shown, set against a simple background giving away no clue. The installation is in fact a compulsive evasion of selection: general and particular at the same time, descriptive and allusive, objective and subjective, keeping us entertained, perhaps, but also seeming to continue to give relatively little away. This could reveal one of the format's capacities: emphasis on affect, complexity over resolution or facticity, combined to suggest a literally and figuratively layered assemblage of experiences. And yet the majority of the projects which adopt just such a method claim documentary purposes, practices of expanded reportage, the key information of which is visible not in the work itself, but in surrounding contextual materials. It might be useful and revealing to identify the lineages and relationships to the media from which it stems.

The vinyl-and-framed-photograph combination derives some of its logic from an exploded view of the book and book page. Indeed, many of the vinyl and frame installation adoptees have developed photobooks or have produced multiple page spreads for magazine articles, such as those which feature prominently in the Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam's (FOAM's) agenda-setting *Talent* issue and accompanying exhibition, where the sliding of images across the gutter or into combinations floating in white space has been a favorite strategy. Johan Rosenmunthe's *Tectonic* (2015), for example, emerges from a book produced by the artist, but was also included as part of an iteration of *Talent* that included in its London exhibition two overlapping vinyl prints overlaid with six framed prints both on and off the vinyl. The central image was a mysteriously blue tinted valley – a medium distance view, whilst overlaid images showed details, a rock, a grid template, some mysterious patterns. This installation is like a fragment of the book, a taster or continuity of the page which does not seek to explain the succession of frames, on this occasion arranged in an orderly if irregularly spaced line. In keeping with its mannered installation, this suite of work speaks abstractly of stones and their alchemical properties, drawn from, the project blurb proclaims, a lifetime's investigation. Today it has become customary to situate most of the context away from the images, in explanatory texts or elaborate captions, which in books and wall arrays is removed entirely or placed at the edges of encounter.

That the succession of materials presented in such installations resists easy narration or comprehension can also be understood in another echo invoked by the display strategy, that of computer screens with multiple windows open at the very same time. The early 2010s marked the intersection of a frenzied market for collectable photobooks as well as a cluster of exhibitions exploring digital transmission and the significance of digital culture and the screen, including 2016's *Information Superhighway* at The Whitechapel Gallery in

London. *Information Superhighway* featured the first exhibition in the UK of artist Camille Henrot's film *Grosse Fatigue* (2013) after its Silver Lion winning presentation at the Venice Biennale. The film collates a series of studio-shot vignettes of objects and artefacts from the Smithsonian Museum archives, handled and studied, presented on overlapping computer screen windows, with a voiceover and soundtrack problematizing the museum's attempt to capture the world's knowledge. Henrot's staggering of windows is timely, positioning the screen as a portal which echoed the shift in practice, described by David Joselit in his book *After Art* as the turn towards an 'epistemology of search', browsing the thresholds of the knowable world as accessed through online networks and digital databases and acts of seeking (Joselit 2012). After the critique of discrete parcels of knowledge and disciplinary boundaries, a lurch to the other extreme has sometimes resulted in loosely connected fragments linked together as yet-to-be synthesized or implausible fragments left for the receiver to interpret – and here Joselit's characterization describes equally the tendencies in the digital arts and the world of the tactile photobook, both of which favor collecting quantities of information without ventured conclusions or positions of complexity or synthesis.

If the structures of vinyl image installations appear to offer ready scope to explore the space of display, testing scale and perception, the activation of space and the relationships between image and bodily experience, and the conveyance of multi-layered passages of information, the experience of the vinyl and framed-image combination has instead revealed relatively little. The method has become a template, affording a multiplicity of images in a limited space, but it has less to say about the potential complexity of images, their varying materialities, uses or possibilities, than it does about a concern to keep the viewer entertained. For now, the vinyl-and-frame trope participates within an unspoken and sometimes unconscious echo of digital culture, containing a glimpse of the discourse around photography's materialities, which are always already inscribed into economies of attention and circulation, which they might either reflect or contest.

Stickiness

In the development of social media applications, a term used to describe the repeated, compulsive, or addictive engagement encouraged by platforms is *stickiness*. An application will be *sticky* if we return to it with a high frequency, develop dependent habits, or use it for long continuous durations. As Nir Eyal writes in his conscience- and irony-free user manual for developing successful applications, *Hooked*, the entry point to *stickiness* in software applications is frictionless ease of encounter (Eyal 2014). Practical barriers to sign up are removed or transformed: what was once a long process of registration is replaced by a simplified building-up of personal information, which runs alongside a program of notifications and email reminders offering encouragement whilst alluding to the benefits of immersion (be part of a community!).

Digital stickiness requires intensive maintenance: it is catalyzed by simplified access but built upon regular incentives to return and repeat, and new content (ideally refreshed minute by minute) integrates the application into everyday life, deploying its quantity in small frames which we might think of as little packets or windows. Within social media apps, claims to belonging and calls to contribute also serve programmatic functions, as does spectacle: users are served up prompts to react strongly, which can in turn be used to further the engagement or reactions of others. Stickiness is then multi-layered. Photographs are effective in their very presence – they provide one component of a variety of content – but

they equally demonstrate and serve the programmatic needs of the platform to construct artificial intensities: bold demonstrations of creativity and virtuosity, sociability, personal achievement, and the statement of virtuous or controversial political positions constitute a majority of the image content across digital platforms. As these images and texts function as events or moments which prompt and goad forms of reaction, they reveal a simple strategy to draw out our engagement: images are a resource endlessly required and used en masse to generate prolonged encounters. In this regard, they are very much the same as the bloating of the photographic exhibition or installation to include as many images as possible, of quantity over choice. The demands of stickiness are indicative of the economies of attention in which we are continuously situated as participants.

Peter Szendy, writing in his book *The Supermarket of the Visible: Toward A General Economy of Images*, describes this construction of desire through three embedded cultural values which reside in western ideological superstructures of the image (Szendy 2019). Image, money, and visibility comprise what Szendy describes as the tri-part base for image consciousness, upon which an economy of images functions and thrives. We might say that we believe through images today in the goal of success – self-optimization articulated through appearances, even if it is a fabrication (Han 2017; Tolentino 2020). Szendy proposes Iconomics as a tool for its analysis. Iconomics is a neologism connecting eikon, or the image, and oikonomia, or economy, which originally referred to the sound management of exchange: it proposes the study of image economies, a drawing of attention to the processes of exchange, use, transformation, and movement that an image encounters – which is to say the circulations and wider consequences and lives that images possess. Iconomics provides us with a useful sharpening of our focus: it might, in particular, facilitate in showing that constellations of images, platforms, and formats exert strong short-term claims on our attention, whilst others propose experiences of longer duration, with complex but more transparent ends.

An exhibition that Szendy curated for Jeu de Paume in Paris in 2020, ‘The Supermarket of Images’, gives a key place to a photomontage by Martha Rosler, *Untitled – Cargo Cult* (from the series ‘Body beautiful’ a.k.a. ‘Beauty knows no Pain’ c.1967–72 (Figure 23.2), which depicts the faces of a series of white western female models, seemingly affixed onto shipping containers being loaded or unloaded onto a ship. Direct in its intent and simple in its cutting out and assembly, the work is nevertheless complexifying, presenting familiar and quickly read images of beauty to describe the western export of its standards of beauty and ideology of race inextricably attached to its culture of consumption in which the presentation of the self is also figured as labor. Our eyes quickly read the montage, which we might describe as its passage, but we must also follow the image to its destination, to its consequence: we are hooked onto the image, so that we can be directed to recognize the industry and production of beauty, and the production of western beauty as its ideological and aspirational peak, the highest labor of its colonial superstructure.

Drawing upon the physical and yet largely invisible industry of logistics to describe the images use as an ideological container, Rosler’s assemblage also functions as a premonition of a very different structural sort. Its political or social commentary, ever more relevant, draws our attention to the construction and cultural shipping out of white, western and capitalist images of desire, but the work also describes the images invasive spread across all surfaces: in particular, it seems to imagine or perhaps already critique a further move towards supersized photographs which graft themselves onto the surfaces of ever larger pieces of infrastructure, a trajectory emerging from display graphics and advertising. A wall

of images, Rosler's montage of bodies on containers parodies the pinball effect of the eye as it moves across the advertising surface whilst appearing to describe the scale of what we can think of only as a giant screen or wall surface of an architectural scale. Photography has begun to operate at the intersections of immense physical encounters, which trace further meeting points between the image and the screen. It is no wonder then that the wall-sized vinyl-and-frame montage possesses an entertaining and yet largely consequence-less effect: not only is its scale dwarfed by the contemporary image which has grown much larger, but the strategy of loose connection and array also has parallels in advertising's carefully controlled hold on our attention. Rosler's *Cargo Cult* describes the scale of the challenge which must be contested: the production of images which have also become backdrops and imposing monuments (Crow 1998). How these images can be addressed will form the last stage of this chapter.

Popular in commercial photography today is what we might think of as the image wrap, a covering or affixing of a scaled print to an everyday surface to consume a volume in its entirety. Many familiar examples are architectural, where large plain walls and scaffolding offer immersive surfaces to be encountered at scale. Whilst printed tarpaulin is often used for scaffolding, vinyl printing has the widest diffusion, crossing indoor and outdoor spaces, walls, floors, and ceilings. In public spaces, especially non-places like airports, the conquest is almost total: at Gatwick Airport, it is possible to view images of Royal Palaces and flag-waving pomp and circumstance wrapped around waste bins. Vinyl covers the inside of gangways and is plastered across the winding paths through duty-free shopping. Panoramic landscape images act as backdrops at the gates and lounges, premonitions of destinations to come, and, in some airports, such as Charles de Gaulle, toilets are transformed into forests, in another magical performance. Although transitory sites are popular arenas for these image displays – the lifts at Cardiff Central train station transport you to an elevated viewpoint atop a castle and to a view of a Turkish resort, as though you were paragliding – these images are also visible across the cityscape, providing prospective views of new property developments and offices, acting as covers for building maintenance work, and covering buses and any other flat or plain surface that might suffer from an anxiety at being too plain. These images are often diversionary, taking us away from reality and keeping us on the path of consumption, but the effects of their immersion seem to be implicitly recognized in the quantity of immersive photographs: the image wrap provides a new optical encounter which permits significant changes to our spatial perceptions.

Large-scale photographic images rest upon a proliferation of affordable large-scale digital printing processes, and in their variety of substrates and diffusion into artists' practices illustrate a shift from photography's traditional home on paper to its transfer across series of new materials which incorporate adhesion into their fabric. These strategies possess histories in the well-funded domain of advertising – where these first emerged decades ago – yet their scaling, and variety, that is to say, their massification, has developed to a new phase where they have become commonplace in the toolkit of artistic strategies, so much so that they have configured themselves into occasional defaults like the image array. The digitization of printing technologies, especially affordable inkjet onto pasteable blue-back papers or adhesive-backed vinyl sheets, as well as Ultraviolet (UV) or 'direct to media' print which fuses the image to a variety of substrates, has had a profound effect on the sites of encounter with photography. If it can be argued, as Nathan Jurgenson has suggested (2018), that the embedding of network connectivity in digital photography devices changes how we might think about the photographic image, then the capacity for those same transmitted

images to be outputted and grafted onto any surface must equally constitute a shift in how we can think about images and our encounter with their role in our everyday experience. Writing about the artist Wade Guyton, Scott Rothkopf observed how the access of printers in the home brought about radical transformations in ideas of printing and production that seeped into artistic strategies, where printers became sites of personal publishing in advance of Web 2.0 and became experimental tools in artists' studios, where the means of production could be harnessed and reprogrammed (Rothkopf 2012). Soon, the home printers' evolution to work across a mix of materials will perhaps lead us towards a world in which each and every surface is covered and semi-customized with high-speed images.

Festivals and Interventions in Urban Spaces

As artists have begun to adopt the possibilities of printing at scale, key to the exploration of this approach has been the stretching and modification of images as they are outputted at scale and installed in situ. Louise Lawler's *Adjusted to Fit* works and ensuing variations adapt her pre-existing photographs so that they are distorted and transformed according to the galleries' architectural dimensions. Images become long or tall in ways that move between subtle and uncanny transformation and exaggerated abstraction. A precursor, Urs Fischer and Gavin Brown's *Who's Afraid of Jasper Johns?* at Tony Shafrazi Gallery in 2008, rephotographed the gallery's previous exhibition and used it as a backdrop for a new show, placed on top of and in playful dialogue with the high-resolution vinyl print. Both methods suggest emergent possibilities for photography and its relationships to architecture, and the photograph's capacity to be both subject to architecture and to overwrite its functions.

These enquiries have found a point of intersection in the parallel emergence of a series of festivals where scale is used and put to work, where photography has attached itself to urban spaces. The regular editions of Breda Photo (The Netherlands), Cortona on the Move (Italy), Getxo Foto (Basque Country, Spain), Images Vevey (Switzerland), and Gibellina Photoroad (Italy) have featured specially commissioned outdoor exhibits alongside indoor presentations, becoming key components of the festival's identities and public faces. These of course have global parallels: The Public Art Fund and High Line commissions in New York in the US have included works by Lawler, whilst festivals in Latin America, such as FIFV in Valparaiso, Chile, and Photo Kathmandu in Nepal routinely install their works in public space. It is the intensity and widespread adoption of this strategy in Europe, as well as its routine address to architectural scale, that makes it worthy of some extended and concentrated observation. In these festivals, photographs are pasted onto boards the size of advertising hoardings, printed as tarpaulins held taut by metal frames to the outer dimensions of building faces, and printed on vinyl which can be affixed, depending upon its custom qualities, to floors and walls, wrapping around vertical and horizontal surfaces. Usually taking place for two to three months, most festivals bring a selection of art- and photography-world audiences to their locations and function as a catalyst for waves of cultural tourism. At the same time, these events seek to participate in contemporary art and photographic discourse, working with established, fashionable, and emerging practitioners, producing publications, and aspiring to become part of a regular circuit of global programming.

Images Vevey and Gibellina Photo Road are particularly interesting examples, each establishing their identities through a series of audacious outdoor interventions which provide a central focus within their respective programs. Images Vevey, in the small Swiss town of Vevey on Lac Léman (Lake Geneva), home to the multinational Nestlé, has run regular

editions since 1995 (although its largest displays are a more recent feature of its director since 2008, Stefano Stoll), with a highly funded public-private program facilitating spectacular outdoor installations where building facades are routinely covered in the works of international contemporary artists and photographers. Gibellina Photoroad, with a focus on young and emerging artists and photographers, has so far run four editions of the festival since its founding in 2016. Held in Gibellina Nuova, a small town in a basin in Sicily in Italy that was established after an earthquake destroyed the hillside Gibellina Vecchia in 1968, Photoroad builds upon the unfinished utopian project of the new town and its founding mayor Ludovico Corrao, who established a sequence of experimental civic architectures amongst utilitarian homes flanked by an unprecedented range of public sculpture. Both festivals take place during the European summer, during which Sicily especially receives little rain.

At both events, artists are expected to produce new or customized iterations of their projects, which are installed around the towns as large-scale but contained rectangles, occupying public walls, or surfaces in squares and stations and other civic sites, alongside a smaller number of highly customized installations which are often received through competition proposals and commission invitations extended to artists and photographers. In the former, the images have a function that aligns to both claims to meaningful intervention and to spectacle: they might respond to or address some of the specificities of their site of display or participate in public discourse, addressing the widest possible audience. But equally, they might provide momentary awe, being made or strategically positioned so that they are spectacular and eminently re-photographable, which is also to say that they actively engineer or provide social-media friendly 'content'. Some of these images exert only a momentary hold on our attention: Images Vevey places works on enormous surfaces, and also encourages artists to create works which seem made for their retelling. Guido Mocafo's 2016 skilled yet banal photographs of glass models of marine invertebrates, situated underwater to be viewed by snorkelling, seemed to gain little from their installation. Indeed the work's availability on a path at the festival and in a parallel Virtual Reality form seemed only to confirm that the gesture was not-so-specific at all.

Certainly both festivals feature entanglements in populist and audience-driven conditions of funding, leading towards gestures and decisions in which some uses of the image mirror their deployment in high-intensity, attention-seeking domains such as social media and advertising, driven by a desire for clicks and photographs rather than critical encounters. Yet the experimentation apparent in Vevey and Gibellina also results in displays that in their spatial and temporal specificities and critical uses open possibilities for how we think of the image and its capacities to act and perform. Extended durations of installation, and short but memorable interruptions modify our experiences of place through images which stick around, literally or figuratively, at their site. Beyond the short run of Images Vevey over approximately three weeks, space has also been established where outdoor works can be kept on display until a new iteration two years later. A profound testing of the image – its capacity to hold our attention, but also to weather the conditions and changes in the town, plays out. In Gibellina, permanent works have begun to be commissioned to reside alongside the town's celebrated public sculpture. Accessible to a greater variety of audiences who are not chasing a calendar of art events, they also gesture towards different modes of attention and a long-term commitment to encounter, which provide a necessary respite and alternative to photography's fast-moving and often quickly redundant cycle of appearance and disappearance.

We might examine interventions which modify how we think of the image and its position in the city, utilizing the photograph's qualities of stickiness to activate their relationships to the site and to activate our viewership equally. If longer-term installations encounter a sustained period of judgment and evaluation, sticking around to be seen over long periods of time, images produced with an acute specificity or sensitivity to their site (Kwon 2002), which are coupled with what can sometimes be 24-hour and free public access, offer the possibility of modifying the site and how it is perceived. Whilst remaining (in the scale of most artworks) short term, their impact on the site has the capacity to stay in the social and artistic imaginary. In the 2019 iteration of Gibellina Photoroad, Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs rephotographed a theater and performing arts building in the center of Gibellina, a towering cloud-like concrete structure designed by the significant local sculptor and architect Pietro Consagra that has been left unfinished after decades of funding collapses and false starts. Photographing the structure from all sides and reproducing its form on a wooden frame that was built onto a midsize car, they produced a photographic reproduction, a vehicle-sized representation that was also functional and could be driven around Gibellina. The work spoke to a question from local citizens: would the building ever be finished, or would local planners and residents give up the ghost with the building once and for all? Filming their scale *döppelgänger* moving through the town, in a series of shots with ambiguous perspectival framings – in many of the images it appears as though the building itself were getting up and leaving – also sporadically moving the photograph-vehicle and parking it in different places around the town during the festival, the artists emphasized the building's condition of instability and flux, as radiating echoes of its unrealized condition. Taking the reality-effect of the photograph to be like or to resemble the world but to set it into motion, Onorato and Krebs made it possible for the building and its audience to imagine its disappearance, bringing about a condition where the photograph was not simply evidence of a condition that had long been, but of decisions that were yet to be. For a short intervention, the work was rupturing and unforgettable: a sticky photograph which draws in the viewer to a web of social, political and art histories, and speculative gossip. During the period of its display, the car was the talk of residents and visitors alike, setting into motion debates about what was to be done, dramatizing its urgency, and making available the compelling local history of Gibellina and its current conditions in a way that none of the other installations sought to approach. Its multiple forms, as a photographic object, as a performance, as film documentation, and as a work of debate and gossip, rendered it a defining and ever-present image of something that might be possible with photography: the act of thinking the world as though it could be different.

Vevey's installations at their best describe similar sites of possibility. Whilst the Images festival is made up of many installations and interventions which can often be reduced to iconic singular viewpoints, even when a project is serial or contains multiple installations, a friction between the site as a surface upon which the photograph can be placed, and a site transformed by the presence of photographs continually comes into view. In the 2018 edition, Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama was a celebrated participant who featured with two displays: the first, proposed as the welcome image to the festival and its thematic *Extravaganza: Out of the Ordinary*, showed a single Moriyama image of a giant inflatable whale afloat in the city of Paris, affixed to the large façade of a hydro-turbine company's offices (Figure 23.1). This image of Moriyama's installation was used for the festival's press: whilst the image is indeed extraordinary, so is its loca-

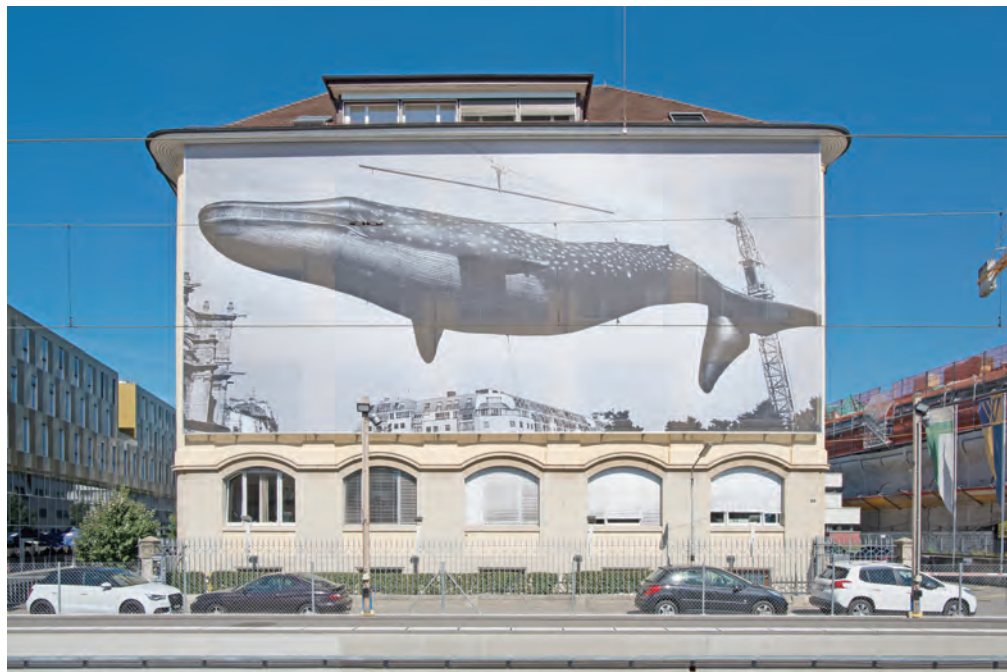


Figure 23.1 Daido Moriyama, *A Tale of II Cities 4*, Paris, 1989. Installation at Images Vevey 2018. Courtesy of Images Vevey. Photograph: Mathilda Olmi.

tion: the same site has been used in different editions of the festival, hosting images by Alex Prager and Berndnaut Smilde. It is the very site of spectacle, capable almost by itself of rendering the ordinary extraordinary. But in the same edition of the festival, a series from Moriyama's studies of commuters back and forth between the commuter town of Zushi and Tokyo, called *Platform*, was also installed at the nearby train station (Figures 23.2 and 23.3). Installed at a 1:1 scale, the images used the lengths of walls along the station platforms to appear to push through the walls of the station, revealing lines of Japanese commuters standing waiting for the next train to arrive. With a photographic portal, Moriyama had greeted visitors to the festival: he had playfully inverted the relationship to his work's arrival in Switzerland by sending viewers to the rush-hour platforms of Japanese train stations, in a gesture that is powerful and sufficiently subtle to assume that perhaps only a small proportion of arrivals might have stepped out from the world of continual distraction to notice.

One Moriyama installation is pure spectacle, whilst the second encourages a closer and dynamic scrutiny, in turn shifting our perception of the terrain. The latter's gesture of embedding the image in the architectures of the town echoes the strategies of one of the most regularly exhibited artists at Vevey, Renate Buser, who has exhibited in editions in 2008, 2010, and 2016. Although many of her installations examine and modify illusionistic continuations and trompe l'oeil effects, Buser's installations in Vevey have also proposed the photograph as the possibility of a rupture: *Rue du Panorama 4* (2008), also recognized as the first monumental installation produced for the festival, shows the inside of the prison on its outer walls, and shifts our perspective from the horizontal to the vertical, acting less



Figure 23.2 Daido Moriyama, *Platform*, 1977. Installation at Images Vevey 2018. Courtesy of Images Vevey. Photograph: Julien Gremaud.



Figure 23.3 Daido Moriyama, *Platform*, 1977. Installation at Images Vevey 2018. Courtesy of Images Vevey. Photograph: Julien Gremaud.

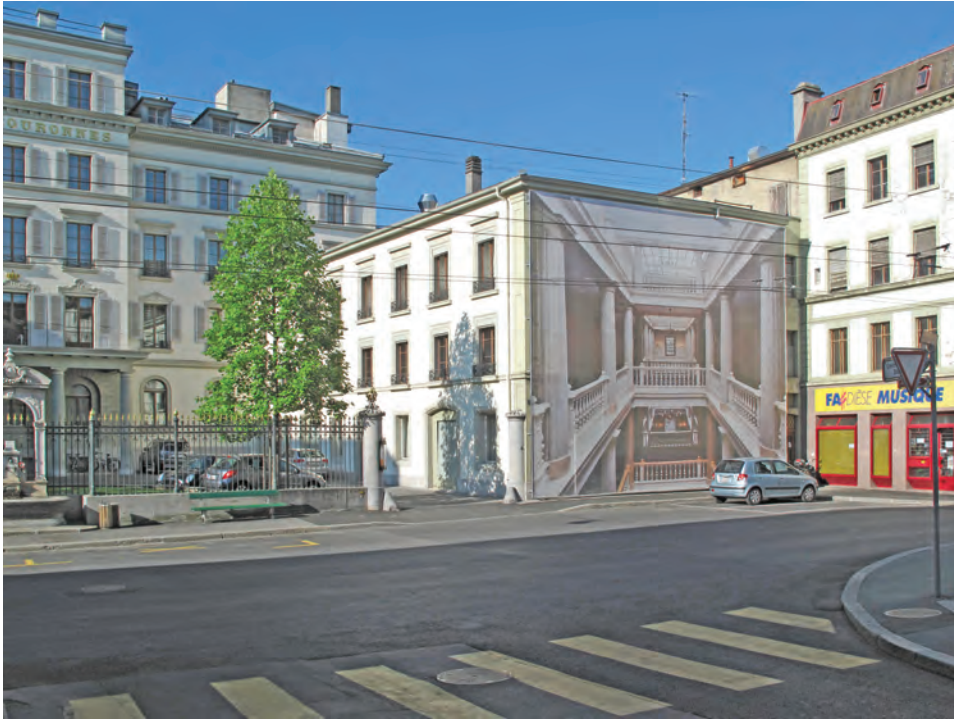


Figure 23.4 Renate Buser, *Rue d'Italie*, 2010. Installation at Images Vevey 2010. Courtesy of Images Vevey. Photograph: Renate Buser.

like a cutting through and more like a shift in perspective. In so doing, the work attends less to a momentary peek into the workings of the prison and more to a dynamic exploration of its structures and its ambitions. Taking the lobby of the exclusive and privileged *Hôtel des Trois Couronnes* and placing it outside in the next iteration of the festival (*Rue d'Italie* 49, 2010, Figure 23.4), Buser performed a subversion of Swiss discretion, using the photograph to move a site of exclusivity into public view, whilst magnifying its scale to bloat its contents and render it highly visible, even overblown. With its classical columns, the interior is forcefully projected to cover three floors of what appears to be a small extension or corner of the hotel that comes to meet the street. Such shifts in perspective and position are the logics of Buser's many installations at scale. Objects and viewers are encouraged to shift, as new viewpoints are brought about by the photograph.

The photograph as it begins to take on an architectural scale finds itself under a pressure to perform, at the intersection of technology, material and time. What we have examined as the stickiness of the image is nothing less than the photograph's structured and manifest mode of address, its iconomic trajectories between rapid calls on our attention, identifying us as subjects, and its calls for our participation, recognizing us as agents. We have seen that artists and photographers, in their use of new materialities, have assumed and developed a range of strategies that encompass the use of space, offering a multitude of positions where images exist as atmospheric and highly specific surfaces. In so doing, photography has assumed some forms which are influenced by the contemporary flow of information and the logics of technology. But whilst many of our photographs move towards reductive

simplicities in a feedback loop with the rapid turnover of ever more images, it is also possible to begin to identify strategies where the photograph acts as an intricately elaborated complexity, modifying and elaborating upon our experience.

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24

THE ARCHIVE OF UNNAMED WORKERS

Examining the Legacy of Colonial-Era Photography in AI

Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert and Alexia Achilleos

Introduction

This chapter explores how art practices that use Artificial Intelligence (AI) can point towards representational gaps and function as a form of archival activism. The first section of the chapter looks at the context of our investigation, examining archaeology-related photographic archives in museums formed during the colonial period in Cyprus, spanning 1878 to 1960. When brought together, these archives present a fragmented and incomplete history of Cypriot archaeology, especially when appearing online. The second section investigates how AI image generation makes use of existing datasets to produce new visual representations; databases which by nature reproduce power imbalances inherited from colonial-era photography. The third section presents and discusses an artwork titled “The Archive of Unnamed Workers” (2022) as an example of how artistic practices may use AI to reveal the inherent power imbalances found in historic archives, point towards visual gaps, and make an argument for the decolonization of Cypriot archaeology.

“The Archive of Unnamed Workers” is a collaboration between the co-authors of this paper – two Cypriot artists/researchers with a special interest in museums, archives, and postcolonial theory. Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert has been “excavating” archaeology-related archives for a few years now and has led a research project which examined selected museum archives in the UK and Cyprus, with an aim to develop policy suggestions on how these archives can be decolonized and given new uses (Hellenic Observatory 2022). Within the aims of this research project, selected archives are examined in terms of what they represent, along with their history, materiality, accessibility, and uses. Special attention is given to representations of local workers who worked at archaeological excavations during the colonial period. Alexia Achilleos is currently a practice-led PhD Fellow at the CYENS Centre of Excellence and the Cyprus University of Technology. She examines local AI ethics from an art and humanities perspective, specifically through postcolonial, decolonial and feminist theory. It is in the intersection of our interests that this project was conceived and created; the intersection of photographic archives, big data, AI, and postcolonial theory.

Colonial Cyprus and Archaeology-Related Photographic Archives

Born at the same time, photography and professional archaeology are bound together in their pursuit of accuracy, information, and detailed representation (Hamilakis & Ifantidis 2015). In archaeology, photography is utilized alongside cartography and drawings to measure, classify, record, and illustrate knowledge produced during fieldwork. During British colonial rule in Cyprus (1878–1960), the island saw an explosion of foreign explorers, excavators, and archaeologists who, to various degrees, measured, recorded, and photographed archaeological sites, objects, and, occasionally, local people. As in other colonial areas, the early history of archaeology in Cyprus is dominated by male foreign protagonists who played an important role in documenting and promoting Cypriot archaeology, while simultaneously exporting antiquities to various museums abroad (e.g. the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Ashmolean, the Medelhavsmuseet). As part of this activity, photographs of archaeological sites and objects (often kept in neat group arrangements or mounted alone on a white or black background) were sent to museums, collectors, and publishers to document expeditions and/or stimulate purchase interest. Eventually, some of these photographs formed the photographic archives of museums that collected Cypriot antiquities. For example, the British Museum owns a large book, which includes photographs and annotations, related to Cypriot archaeology. Most of the photographs show objects found in Cyprus and were sent to the British Museum in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The photographs might come from expeditions that the museum was involved in or from excavators who wanted to advertise their finds in hopes of a potential purchase by the museum. According to the British Museum's Curator of the Department of Greece and Rome, Dr Thomas Keily, "As the photos were sent to the Department they would have been stuck in the book" (Keily 2022). As a result, various photographs – often by unknown photographers – appear as they were stuck in the book on their arrival by museum staff.

Photographic archives in museums play a crucial role in constructing knowledge and are generally considered a source of unbiased and evidential information about the past. However, researchers are well aware that archives represent a limited and biased version of reality (Edwards and Lien 2014). Furthermore, photography is a highly selective tool, is connected to issues of power, and has never been innocent or value-free (Tagg 1999). As Christina Riggs argues: "It would be impossible to separate either archaeology or photography from the power structures, economic relations and subject formations that colonial modernity entailed" (Riggs 2019: 5–6). Riggs proposes an understanding of archives as being constructed and fused with colonial attitudes. Decolonizing efforts in museums (especially those with a colonial history) start with an acknowledgment that museum collections are the result of particular choices and that what becomes known as the 'official' history is shaped by power imbalances and is necessarily incomplete (Museums Association 2021).

In our case study, these power imbalances are evident in the way both foreign archaeologists and locals are represented. In her book *Photographing Tutankhamun*, Christina Riggs (2019) examines photographs by Harry Burton who was accompanying archaeologist Howard Carter in the excavations of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1923 and notes that, in archaeological photographs of Africa and the Middle East, the indigenous people are usually absent or misrepresented. When they are caught by the photographic lens, their names are not mentioned in publications. She concludes that "absence is in the nature of archive" (Riggs 2019: 164). When we examined the representations of colonial photographic docu-

mentation of archaeological excavations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Cyprus, we encountered something similar. We came across the expected images of empty archaeological sites (as sites of knowledge) and close-up photographs of archaeological objects (as evidence of finds). We observed mainly foreign archaeologists portrayed alone at archaeological sites, overseeing work, or handling artifacts. In the rare cases where local workers were included in the photographs, they were usually portrayed working together or in staged group arrangements. In essence, local workers were considered a mindless workforce; the “hands” of archaeology, while foreign excavators were photographed as seers, seekers, scholars, the “mind” and “eyes” of archaeology (Stylianou-Lambert 2021).

As we have seen, the attitudes and beliefs of colonial archaeologists influenced what was photographed and how. However, we need to keep in mind that the reality was much more complex than what photographs show. A mutual dependency developed between foreign archaeologists and the local population: Foreign archaeologists depended on the local workforce to locate and unearth artifacts while many Cypriots were dependent on mainly manual archaeological work for their livelihood. Also, foreign archaeologists depended heavily on their local foremen who had the knowledge and connections to help acquire land, find workers, buy equipment, coordinate the digs, etc. Often, these foremen directed their own excavations and had very close relationships with the archaeologists. These relationships are not immediately apparent in the photographs of the time.

As a result of the recognition that archives are not impartial or neutral, various initiatives have been undertaken by organizations, institutions, and government-supported projects to challenge discrimination, fill in collection gaps, and empower heritage institutions to reinterpret their collections (Flinn 2011). Referring to the practices of galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (known as GLAM institutions) and community-led projects, this process has been described as “archival activism” (Flinn 2011; Findlay 2016; Iacovino 2015). Archival activism may include acquiring collections which represent the whole of a society, updating catalogs, bringing hidden stories to the front, reviewing collections’ descriptions/metadata, or working with the communities portrayed. Sometimes, to enrich collections, museum professionals need to search for archives outside their institutions; archives that were not considered important in the past, created by marginalized people, or that are difficult to find. Decolonization from within the museum requires a change of attitude and a shift in perspectives which should also be reflected in its photographic archives.

In the case of Cypriot archaeology of the colonial era, there are several photographic archives dispersed throughout various museums and academic institutions in the UK (e.g. the British Museum, the Ashmolean Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum, and the University of Oxford) and in Cyprus (e.g. the Department of Antiquities of the Republic of Cyprus, the University of Cyprus, and the Cultural Foundation of the Bank of Cyprus). Apart from the UK and Cyprus, such archives are also dispersed in countries like the USA (e.g. Penn Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art) and Sweden (e.g. Medelhavsmuseet).

In the name of accessibility, research, and education, museums have recently intensified the digitization of their photographic archives to make them available online. However, not all museums have the human and financial resources to digitize, categorize, and make their photographic archives available online. Often, certain archives are given priority over others because they are perceived as more fragile and in need of preservation. Other times, the digitization of archives depends on research interests and needs (i.e. for an exhibition, book, or academic research). As a result, the online ecosystem of museum photographic archives is fragmented and equally incomplete. Most of the aforementioned museums that hold

archaeology-related material from colonial Cyprus have cataloged and digitized their analogue archives to some extent, but only a few have made their complete archives available online. It is also worth remembering that archaeological photographs are part of a larger system of documents that supported the work of archaeologists and include material such as letters, maps, diaries, and drawings. Apart from the fact that not all archives are available online, it is this broader context that is missing when looking at individual photographs online. This incomplete pool of dispersed, online images, which are removed from their initial context, are the ones scraped off the web and used as data sets in AI-generated images.

AI-Generated Images and the Perpetuation of Power Imbalances

Generative AI models, and specifically text-to-image tools, have made great advancements in the past five years. Current state-of-the-art models, such as DALL·E 2 (OpenAI 2022) and Midjourney (Midjourney 2023) have near-photorealistic qualities; a substantial improvement compared to the semi-abstract images generated by text-to-image models only a few years ago (for example, see AttnGAN in Xu et al. 2017). Despite these technological leaps, the outputs of generative AI continue to perpetuate colonial-era worldviews and power asymmetries. This section discusses how legacies of colonial-era narratives of Cypriot archaeological photographic archives are transferred to generative AI text-to-image tools.

Despite claims of objectivity by the AI industry, large datasets used to train AI models have often proven to be unreliable (Boyd and Crawford 2012). Indeed, hegemonic narratives and power asymmetries are transferred to generative text-to-image AI tools through the quality of the data used to train such models. AI datasets have been shown to have inherited historic patterns and worldviews (Crawford and Paglen 2021), which exacerbate wider existent power imbalances (Abebe et al. 2021) and further marginalize historically minoritized groups (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020). One reason for this is the common method used to collect the vast amounts of data that are required to train models – the practice of scraping data, such as images, from the internet (Crawford 2021). Web-scraped datasets, however, reflect the distorted worldview of the internet as seen from a white, straight, male, and Christian perspective (Noble 2018).

Although private AI companies, such as DALL·E 2’s creator OpenAI, do not disclose the data that their models have been trained on, most generative AI models rely on web-scraped training data (Heaven 2022). One such dataset is LAION-5B, which is composed of five billion image-text pairings that have been scraped from the internet (Schuhmann et al. 2022) and has been used to train text-to-image models (Heaven 2022). LAION-5B’s creator, the non-profit organization LAION.ai, has released its datasets to the public, which has allowed examination of such datasets’ content and generation. Birhane et al.’s (2021) investigations of the LAION-400M, an earlier iteration, have found that its contents perpetuate “historical, social, and cultural stereotypes and political biases” and “Anglo-centric, Euro-centric, and potentially, White-supremacist ideologies” (Birhane et al. 2021: 4). This skewed worldview can be problematic when models trained on such datasets are used to generate non-Western content or used by non-Western users. Critical examinations of generative AI have shown how generative imaging models impose Western cultural elements to depictions of non-Western societies (Jenka 2023), generate exoticized, stereotypical representations of non-Western ethnic groups, and sexualized depictions of women (Heikkilä 2022).

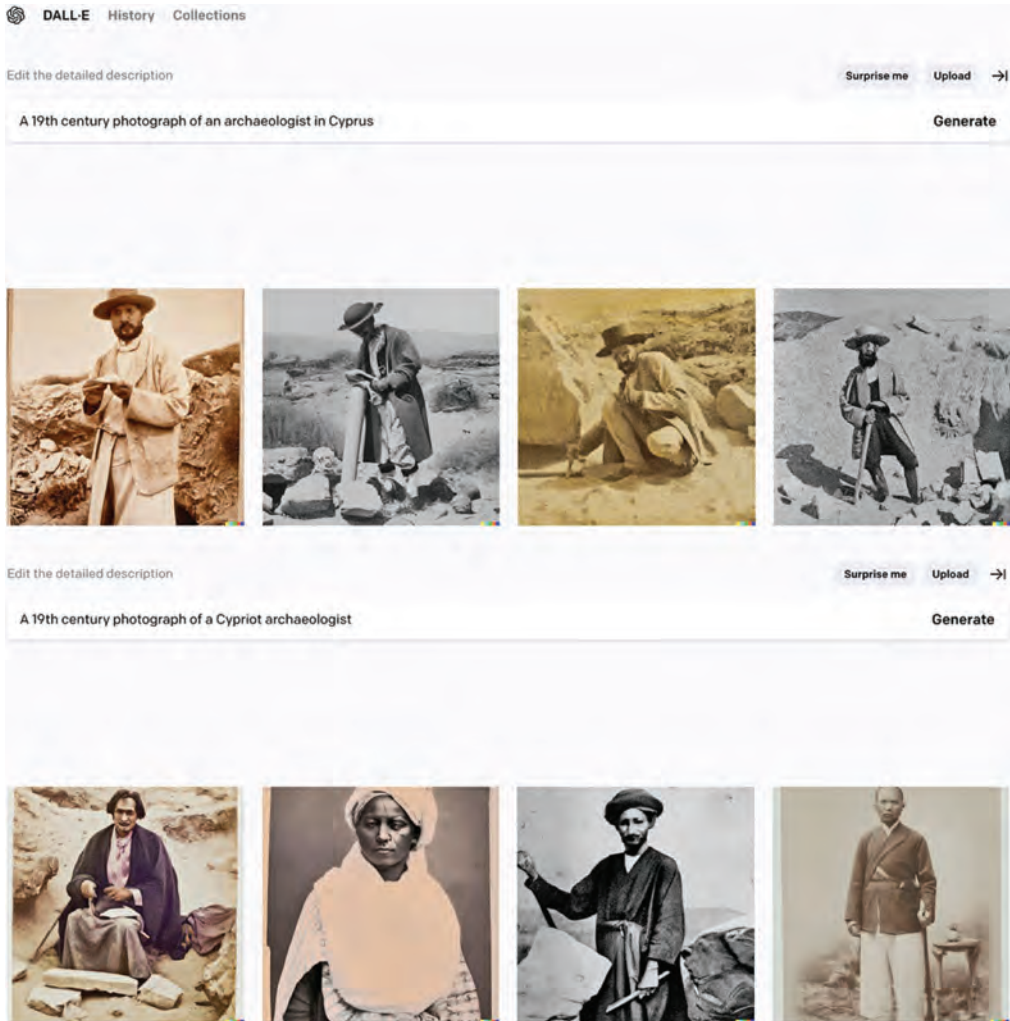


Figure 24.1 Images generated by DALL-E 2 from text prompts given by Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert and Alexia Achilleos on 1 May 2023. Courtesy of the artists.

Therefore, perhaps it is not surprising that historical power asymmetries and hegemonic, colonial-era narratives found in archaeological photographic archives of colonial-era Cyprus also come across in algorithmically curated depictions of archaeology. For example, when given the text prompt “A 19th century photograph of an archaeologist in Cyprus” to DALL-E 2, the model generated images of exclusively white men wearing Western clothing at a location that resembles an archaeological site, such as the generated examples in the top row of Figure 24.1, providing a gendered and racialized representation of what an archaeologist of that time would look like, following hegemonic narratives. On the other hand, when given the prompt “A 19th century photograph of a Cypriot archaeologist” as in the bottom row, the model was unable to generate images that bear any resemblance to

historic portrayals of the Cypriot population at the time (for example, wearing traditional Cypriot clothing). Instead, the model's outputs portray Orientalizing depictions of a variety of non-white people, only one of them placed visually in an archaeological context. The algorithmic representation of the "Cypriots" is generated through an Orientalizing Western gaze, portraying stereotypical interpretations and representing non-Western society as a monolith. Of course, we can produce countless images, but the results are more or less similar in terms of gender and race.

The data that generative AI models are trained on influence the outputs they generate. The gendered and racialized outputs of models such as DALL-E 2 reflect the distorted worldviews and narratives of their training datasets. Through user interfaces (UI) such as *clip front*, it is possible to "excavate" the data included in AI training datasets. The UI retrieves data that has been included in the LAION datasets, either through text queries, or by uploading an image and conducting a visual search (Beaumont 2021). Such investigations of the LAION datasets show that colonial-era photographs belonging to archaeological archives, that are available online, have been scraped and included in AI datasets.

When these photographs are shown as results when undertaking text queries, they also highlight the gaps in historic photography practices. When querying "A 19th century photograph of an archaeologist in Cyprus" on *clip front*, the majority of images that the UI presents are of white, non-Cypriot men, wearing Western clothing, similar to the images generated by the text-to-image model. No local, non-Western workers are included in the image results. Moreover, the search query "19th century Cypriot archaeologist" presents historic portraits of men from various Middle Eastern, Balkan, and Eastern Mediterranean countries (with no instances of Cypriots) who are not portrayed in an archaeological context. The fact that *clip front* does not return any images of Cypriot workers or other agents affirms how the lack of Cypriot representation of archaeological photographs of that period has a direct influence on image production that is informed by these AI datasets, despite the participation of locals – both men and women – in the documented archaeological excavations. As training data, these photographs transfer narratives and worldviews embedded in historical photography and continue to have an impact on how various groups of people are represented in generative AI. In the above examples, they perpetuate colonial-era narratives of archaeology being a gendered, racialized, Western profession.

The next part of this chapter will present an artistic investigation which, using generative AI, attempts to creatively counter this issue, and instead aims to make visible an essential part of colonial-era history of Cypriot archaeology which has been largely left out. Our interdisciplinary artistic work attempts to negotiate the absences, distortions, and omissions of archaeology-related photographic archives.

"The Archive of Unnamed Workers"

"The Archive of Unnamed Workers" (2022) includes forty fictional portraits of Cypriot workers that were created using Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) machine-learning technology. Despite their photorealism, the final images are artificially created, and do not portray specific people. Instead, they pay tribute to the countless and unphotographed workers who contributed to Cypriot archaeology but who remain unnamed and unacknowledged.

Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) machine-learning technology was first introduced in 2014 and has since continued to improve in image quality and size (for example, Karras et al. 2020). When supplied with enough training images, a GAN "learns" to gener-

ate new synthetic ones that are based on its training data. To do so, two algorithms work together: a “generator” which produces artificial outputs and a “discriminator”, which then compares these outputs with the original datasets and attempts to determine the real and the fake (K-tech Centre of Excellence 2021). Provided there is an adequate training data set, pitting the two algorithms against each other can produce new photorealistic images. To create new, machine-made portraits, we needed as many photographs portraying Cypriot workers as possible. We sourced our images from the photographic archives of the Swedish Cyprus Expedition (Medelhavsmuseet, n.d., online), the John Linton Myres photographic archive (HEIR, University of Oxford, n.d., online), Luigi Palma di Cesnola (courtesy of the Cultural Centre of the Bank of Cyprus, offline), as well as photographs from the photographic archive of the Department of Antiquities in Cyprus (offline). One hundred and six photographs of workers posing in groups or working together were cropped like passport photographs in a uniformed square format and then fed into the system. This constituted our training data and the source material for the creation of the new portraits. Because colonial archives do not have many representations of Cypriot workers, and when they do, they appear very small, the resulting machine-made portraits were sometimes distorted and out-of-focus. In the new portraits, most workers appear to be smiling and looking at an imaginary “camera” as most of the images derived from staged group photographs. Due to the nature of GAN image generation, the new portraits cannot diverge much from what is already available, and thus the power imbalances cannot be removed from these images. This questions even the very point of this project. “The Archive of Unnamed Workers” can point towards gaps of representations but can only do so by using the visual language and canons of existing colonial photography.

Out of hundreds of generated portraits of men and women, we selected forty that we felt were less distorted and repetitive. Interestingly, the AI portraits seem very familiar to contemporary Cypriot viewers. As they were produced from photographs of actual Cypriots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their physiognomy reminds us of real people – grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends and relatives. As we have observed in the previous section, this is something that current AI-generated software such as DALL·E 2 is unable to do as it produces either images of white, Western men, or alternatively, exoticized, non-Western people who do not look Cypriot.

Photographic archives of the period under investigation have a very real and tangible materiality: they are stored in boxes and are composed of negatives, lantern slides, 35mm slides, photographic prints, etc. It was extremely important for us to “return” the AI-generated images back into a materiality appropriate for a missing archive of the past. Not because AI images do not have a tangible material presence (they do so through screens, computers, data centers, etc.) but because the photographic technologies of the past shaped archives and their representations and are thus an essential part of any archive. For this reason, we decided to transfer the images to 35mm glass photographic slides (reversal film), a technology widely used in the mid-20th century that is almost obsolete today. To do so, we needed to send the digital images to a photo studio in Finland that kept blank old glass slides salvaged from other studios’ closing-down sales to create the physical slides and return them to us by mail (see Figure 24.2).

The completed work was presented for the first time in an exhibition titled “In the Sea of the Setting Sun: Contemporary Photographic Practices and the Archive” (November 2022–April 2023) that took place at the State Gallery of Contemporary Art – SPEL, in Nicosia, Cyprus. A collaboration between the newly formed Deputy Ministry of Culture



Figure 24.2 Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert and Alexia Achilleos, “The Archive of Unnamed Workers”, 2022. GAN-generated images on 35mm glass photographic slides (reversal film). Photograph by Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert.

and the International Association of Photography and Theory, the exhibition showcased the work of seventeen Cypriot artists, based in Cyprus and abroad, whose work engages with photographic archives and contemporary photographic practices. According to the exhibition’s curator, Elena Stylianou:

The works in this exhibition negotiate the tensions between romanticized understandings of the archive as a dusty place where one can retrieve treasures of the past and connect with history, and the archive as a metaphor or concept directly linked to the construction of interdisciplinary knowledge, systems of political imagination, power structures, the formation of national consciousness, and patterns of exclusion.

(International Association of Photography and Theory 2022: n.p.)

In the context of this exhibition, “The Archive of Unnamed Workers” aimed to expose power structures and patterns of exclusion. Our work was firmly positioned in postcolonial and feminist theories, and we attempted to stretch the boundaries of what is considered photographic.

In the exhibition, the portraits were projected using a Kodak carousel slide machine with a warm light bulb which created a more “archival” feel. A large white cube was constructed to house the projection and viewing the projection was only possible through pinholes at various heights on the white cube (Figure 24.3). The white cube created a feeling of a



Figure 24.3 Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert and Alexia Achilleos. “The Archive of Unnamed Workers”, 2022. GAN-generated images on 35mm glass photographic slides (reversal film). Views from the exhibition ‘In the Sea of the Setting Sun’ at the State Gallery of Contemporary Art - SPEL, Nicosia, Cyprus. Exhibition curated by Elena Stylianou, November 2022–April 2023. Photograph by Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert.

closed, inaccessible space – much like many photographic archives found in museums – that visitors had to physically approach and try to look through. But as soon as visitors made this effort, the small, soft-focused, warm-colored projections of familiar, smiling faces created a sense of intimacy and familiarity.

Conclusion

Archives are born from a human tendency to impose order and carve distinct areas of homogeneity out of chaos (Kopytoff 1986). As we have seen, despite the efforts to collect, organize and catalog, photographic archives of Cypriot archaeology remain fragmented and incomplete. The photographic lens functioned as an extension of the human eye (Zylinska 2017); the eyes of foreign archaeologists who saw a local workforce as the “hands” of archaeology and not important enough to name or document their contributions. As such, photographic archives represent the “standpoint” of the foreign archaeologists and reproduce power imbalances.

The legacies of colonial-era archives seem to be perpetuated by AI technologies. Colonial-era photographs from archaeological archives that are available online have been scraped by AI companies and included in datasets used to train generative AI models. In turn, the values and power dynamics embedded in those photographs have been transferred to the images generated by text-to-image models. Generative AI is developing fast, and the technology analyzed in this chapter has already been outperformed by new

generative AI tools. However, the transfer of historical power imbalances onto technology will continue unless attempts are made to address root causes of structural oppression and systemic power asymmetries (Birhane & Guest 2020; D'Ignazio & Klein 2020; Harding 2009).

Our art-based research and artistic practice aims to raise awareness about the omissions and distortions of archaeological archives and their effect on knowledge production. According to Finley, arts-based research “makes use of emotive, affective experiences, senses and bodies, and imagination and emotion as well as intellect, as ways of knowing and responding to the world.” (Finley 2008: 72). “The Archive of Unnamed Workers” is our way of responding to the representational gaps found in photographic archives in museums and speculating on a locally grounded, alternative fictional archive. We cannot go back in time to photograph the omitted, but art gives us the tools to imagine what might have been, question power imbalances, and point towards representational gaps. Having said that, we are well aware of the limitations of artistic practice to physically “fill in the gaps” of archaeological history or make an actual change in the museum ecosystem. Furthermore, one would assume that generating these new images and posting them online would somehow change the “ecosystem” of AI-generated images, ever so slightly. The process, however, is more complex. Firstly, current web-scraped AI datasets are static. The data they contain are a snapshot of the internet, from a specific moment in time when the data was scraped. For example, the LAION-5B dataset was released in 2022 (Schuhmann et al. 2022) and does not include any new images that were uploaded to the internet after its release. Consequently, current text-to-image models generate outputs that are based on the static datasets that they were trained on – they are not continually updated with newer data. To change the scope of images that are generated, the system must be trained again on a different dataset (for examples, see Midjourney 2023). Secondly, as mentioned, datasets such as LAION-5B consist of billions of image-text pairings which are needed to train a generative AI model to produce high-quality images from text prompts. In order to affect how, for example, an archaeologist is represented in text-to-image AI, it would not be enough to simply add thousands of new images of archaeologists. In addition, we argue, a thorough audit, decolonization and relabeling of the text pairings throughout the entire dataset would be required to challenge the systemic colonial, patriarchal worldviews that form the AI “gaze”. This is a highly challenging task to undertake, due to the vast size of these datasets.

To conclude, our work does not really change the museum archival ecosystem or the future material produced by AI. Instead, our work is a form of institutional critique or archival activism which illuminates gaps and power imbalances in museum photographic archives. Finally, we need to acknowledge that, as the photographic archives we examined are the product of their time, “The Archive of Unnamed Workers” is also a product of its time: only possible through the lens of today’s postcolonial theories and with the help of online archives and new technological tools.

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25

CAI DONGDONG'S ARTISTIC TRAJECTORY

From Conceptual Image Making to Photographic Installation

He Yining and Cai Dongdong

Cai Dongdong's introduction to photography came unexpectedly during his early days as a People's Liberation Army recruit in China from 1996 to 2001. Assigned as an instructor in a newly established military driving school, in a unit lacking an official propaganda photographer, he discovered his affinity for the art. With a background in fine arts from middle school, Cai was entrusted with the responsibility of capturing training sessions and student portraits.

The turning point in Cai's photographic journey occurred around 1998 when he stumbled upon a treasure trove of photography textbooks. Among them were *Contemporary Photography Masters: Twenty Witnesses of Humanity* (Juan, 1988) and *Rising Stars in Contemporary Photography: 17 Novice Image Creators* (Juan, 1990) by the renowned Taiwanese photographer Juan I-jong. The latter book, featuring luminaries like Diane Arbus and Cindy Sherman, opened a doorway to the wider world of art for Cai. Their captivating works not only influenced him but also laid the groundwork for his own photographic aspirations. Fueled by this inspiration and eager to refine his craft, Cai embarked on a path that led him to the prestigious Beijing Film Academy.

However, Cai found the academy's curriculum, which leaned heavily toward technical aspects, somewhat limiting for someone who had already gained substantial experience during his military service. After just six months in the program, Cai boldly decided to break free from the structured academic environment and establish his own photography studio in the vibrant landscape of Beijing. In the following years, leading up to 2002, he gradually built connections with Beijing's avant-garde artists, immersing himself in the city's contemporary art scene. Coinciding with China's economic boom and a surge in foreign investments, the art scene flourished, and Cai naturally found his niche, particularly in the realm of photography.

Cai's renowned works, which blend photography with avant-garde installations, reflect profoundly on societal intricacies such as cultural identity, power dynamics, and individuality. This chapter traces Cai's artistic journey post-2000, dividing it into three distinct phases. Initially, there was an intuitive phase spanning from the turn of the millennium up to 2008. Then, from 2008 to 2012, Cai's creations began to resonate with Western art influences, merging conceptual innovation with rich art-historical narratives. The heart of this narrative focuses on Cai's most recent phase, starting in 2014. During this period, he delved deep into

the essence of imagery, skillfully harnessing the versatility of photographic installations. He excavated historical Chinese photographs, exploring their tangible essence and drawing connections between photography, history, collective memory, and societal cohesion.

While the spotlight here is on Cai Dongdong's innovative approach to photographic installations, the broader canvas of China—with its rich history, dynamic society, and cultural ethos—serves as the backdrop. His art transcends a personal journey; it becomes a chronicle of an era and reflects society.

With each of his artistic endeavors, he embarks on a fresh exploration of reality and history while envisioning and anticipating the future. The interview below extends an invitation to the audience to adopt a more open perspective, encouraging them not merely to view the photographs in isolation but to immerse themselves in the artistic realm that his work constructs. Readers are invited to participate actively in his creative process, joining him on a journey to explore the boundless potential of photographic materiality.

Cai Dongdong's Early Exploration in Conceptual Image Making

He Yining (HY): As I explored your extensive body of work, *Offering* (2010) immediately struck a chord with me. This piece features a meticulously crafted darkroom, serving as the backdrop for photographic development. However, what makes it truly intriguing is the juxtaposition of this intimate space with the external world, where a man is pouring water. The fluidity of the water appears to dissolve the boundaries between these spaces. This composition recalls the spatial complexities seen in iconic works by Jeff Wall. Could you guide us through the twists and turns in your artistic journey leading up to your creating *Offering*? Looking back at your work before 2012, which pieces best encapsulate that stage of your creative journey?

Cai Dongdong (CD): Prior to 2012, my artistic endeavors were marked by a continuous phase of learning and exploration characterized by a lack of a fixed stylistic approach. This period can be divided into two distinct phases. Like many photographers, I carried my camera everywhere in the initial phase, capturing daily moments. A significant work from this period is titled *Dark Love* (2003). It is a deeply personal collection of images and serves as my debut work. I developed these photographs using expired photo paper, which had been dormant for two decades, imparting a mysterious silver hue to them. This phase of my photography was highly sensitive and intuitive, spanning seven years. Notably, this series debuted in the first Guangzhou Photo Biennial (Guangdong Museum of Art, 2005), marking my first exhibition.

The second phase, commencing in 2008, ushered in a more directorial and scenographic approach to what we call “staged photography.” This shift was influenced by artists like Jeff Wall and my self-study of Western art history. Over the course of four years, from 2008 to 2012, I immersed myself in this directorial style of photography. Many of my inspirations during this period were drawn from Western art history and the history of photography, including the creation of the installation piece *Offering*, which you mentioned.

The installation was purposefully designed to capture that specific photograph. Elements within the installation, such as the posture of the man pouring

water, were inspired by Vermeer's *The Milkmaid*. The chessboard-like flooring also drew connections to Vermeer's paintings. The photograph is replete with intricate details, featuring references like a frame from Fellini's movie *8½*, an execution scene, an image of China's earliest oracle bone inscriptions, and in the bottom left corner, a bag from the Kassel documentary exhibition, all juxtaposed with photographs in various stages of development. These meticulous details collectively create a rich tapestry of image production.

HY: From 2008 to 2012, a distinct number of your pieces resonated with canonical classics of art history, intertwining with narratives that engage in a dialogue about photographic techniques. *Offering* offers a journey to the pre-digital era of photography, capturing a sense of reverence for conventional photographic media. This piece, it can be argued, challenges the dominant paradigm of digital photography. The completion of the *Offering* marked a turning point, heralding a transformative phase in your artistic trajectory. Delving further into this pivotal piece, could you share its inspiration? What sparked the idea of capturing and constructing an ambiance, creating a specific set and room for it? Specifically, how did you translate your introspective thoughts into this body of work?

CD: The initial impulse behind creating *Offering* was deeply rooted in my background in analog photography. I have always had a great passion for working in the darkroom, which has been a cornerstone of my artistic journey. This connection made me perceive the darkroom as a metaphorical "matrix" where images are born. This served as the foundational inspiration.

To transform this conceptual idea into a tangible artwork, I contemplated how to encapsulate the essence of this "matrix" within a single frame. After extensive introspection, I began sketching preliminary drafts. Once I was satisfied with the sketches, I proceeded to source the materials needed for the physical construction. This journey was quite challenging. For example, I initially experimented with plasterboard, but its overly smooth surface didn't convey the desired texture. Therefore, I switched to wood. Initially, the wood framing was external, but it didn't align with my vision. Eventually, I decided to reverse the boards, concealing the framing internally. This decision brought to life the structural ambiance and the secure essence of the "matrix" I had envisioned.

HY: It's fascinating how soon after seeing the photographic version of *Offering*, I stumbled upon its three-dimensional form at Modern Space in Shanghai—essentially, the intricate environment you crafted as a backdrop for the photograph, along with the original photograph. At this moment, the work *Offering* evolved from being a mere backdrop to a photograph, further transforming into an installation art piece. What led you to showcase the backdrop as a standalone piece of art?

CD: My initial vision was purely to craft this backdrop for the photographic project. Yet, after the shoot, the set resonated with an artistic essence, prompting me to maintain its form intentionally. This backdrop's allure led to invitations from curators, resulting in its display at Taikang Space ("Pull Left", 2012) and the "Get it Louder, 2014" exhibition in Beijing. Its final showcase was at Modern Space in Shanghai. The set caught the attention of Shao Zhong—executive director at Meta Media Holdings (formerly Modern Media), who subsequently brought it into his collection.

HY: Your remarks on an artistic shift are reminiscent of my conversations with the publisher Yanyou from Jiazazhi Press. Around the year 2000, the international photographic arena appeared to be caught in a speculative tide. Astoundingly, some artworks fetched prices that seemed to overshoot their intrinsic artistic value. However, as 2010 approached, this speculative bubble started deflating, paving the way for a more authentic progression of Chinese photography. This shift presented a gamut of creative dilemmas for numerous artists. Being an integral part of Beijing's art community since that pivotal era, how did you navigate the complex sentiments and challenges that surfaced? What strategies did you employ to stay attuned to the fluctuating dynamics of the photographic domain?

CD: As the new millennium unfolded, Beijing's art landscape gravitated toward photography. Many traditional artists, lured by the allure and immediacy of this emerging medium, diverged from their rooted practices, embracing photography as a medium that could adeptly echo their interpretations of reality. This swell in interest was, without a doubt, interwoven with the global boom in the photography market. A veteran Western gallerist who had been deeply entrenched in China's art scene for over two decades once revealed to me that until 2010, the core clientele for contemporary Chinese art was largely Western. It was only post-2010 that Chinese collectors began marking their pronounced presence.

By the time 2012 rolled in, I found myself at a creative crossroads. The ubiquitous nature of digital photography seemed to blur the distinctive essence of the medium. Simultaneously, my earlier body of work, which was substantially influenced by Western artistic narratives, began to feel somewhat disconnected, given my geographic and cultural context. Eager to rejuvenate my creative spirit, I ventured outside the traditional confines of my studio in 2012. Over the subsequent two years, I immersed myself in various immersive and behaviorally driven social experiments.

HY: Could you elaborate on some projects you undertook post-2012 and their impact on your later artworks?

CD: Post-2012, I delved into some unconventional artistic ventures. In a memorable instance, my friends and I staged a midnight car drag race on Chang'an Street. Another time, we organized what could be termed an "artistic circus," though the police quickly dissolved it due to gathering concerns.

Collaborating with peers, we launched an intimate artistic haven aptly named "We said we wanted a space, so we created one." This space, however, faced challenges, including police shutdowns and disbandment. Yet, it hosted over ten exhibitions during its three-year lifespan. At Beijing's Caochangdi Village, artist Liu Chengrui intriguingly turned our space into a month-long shoe-repair workshop. In another audacious move, artist He Chi rebranded our gallery as "Rape Room," leading to its swift closure by local authorities.

After relocating to Heiqiao, we organized more exhibitions, including the significant "Night Walk in Heiqiao" project, which garnered the attention of 200 artists. However, our space was mysteriously demolished the night before its finale.

Another cherished initiative, "Oh My God!," was inspired by my rural upbringing and the ubiquitous local deity temples. Observing a lack of such spir-

itual centers in Beijing's periphery villages, I curated a temple in Heiqiao Village. But, in an avant-garde twist, it lacked deities. We invited online users to craft their own gods and received over 220 inventive, sometimes satirical, divine representations within two months.

These explorative three years were a treasure trove of insights, albeit laden with real-world challenges. Grassroots projects like ours often struggle to secure funding within China's artistic milieu. There's limited financial support, pushing artists to fund projects personally. Most of the art foundations in Mainland China align with official narratives or the gallery-industry nexus, sidelining ventures like ours.

Upon returning to my studio, I noticed a shift in my artistic lens. Earlier photographs were no longer mere visual memoirs but became dynamic art resources. Deconstructing these photographs was akin to mapping activism on a canvas. It rejuvenated lifeless snapshots, weaving new narratives and imparting dynamism to the stillness.

HY: Looking at your later pieces, such as *Miss the Target* (2016, Figure 25.1) and *Queue Exercise* (2023, Figure 25.2), it's evident that there's a deep link between the photographs used and the meaning created. There is a clear connection between the photos you choose and the overall message they convey. This connection stands out even more in artworks like *Two Doors* (2016) and *A Hundred Years* (2020). Your approach to art seems dual-layered. At times, you rework the photos, breathing new life into them. At other times, these photographs evolve into full-blown art installations. Could you delve into how you transform these standalone photographs into cohesive artworks?

CD: At first, I mostly worked with my own photographs, especially those that had been set aside and unused. But one can only have so many personal photos. So, I started exploring negatives taken by other photographers. I was particularly drawn to photos from the period when Chinese collectivism thrived because they spoke volumes and allowed me to add my own interpretation.

As I delved into these pictures, I noticed a trend: the ones that were more staged, where the original photographer was trying to push a certain message, were the ones I could most effectively modify. These photos gave me a base to either to challenge their original intent or playfully exaggerate their stories. For example, in *Miss the Target*, I added an arrow to the piece, connecting it with the image's target theme. This addition not only emphasized the photo but also grounded it. In *Queue Training*, I introduced a red line that disrupted the orderly line of girls, adding an unexpected twist. My changes aren't just for decoration—they feel like they're an organic part of the original photo, building a relationship between the old image and my new perspective.

As my collection of photographs grew, I began to see a bigger historical narrative emerge from within them. China's journey through the 20th century marked some of its most dramatic changes. These shifts are reflected in how people looked and acted, molding them according to the dominant beliefs of their times. For instance, you could easily tell the difference between people from the era of the Republic of China and those during Mao Zedong's time. And with China's move to open up its economy and society, another wave of transformation swept through, changing faces and spirits once again.

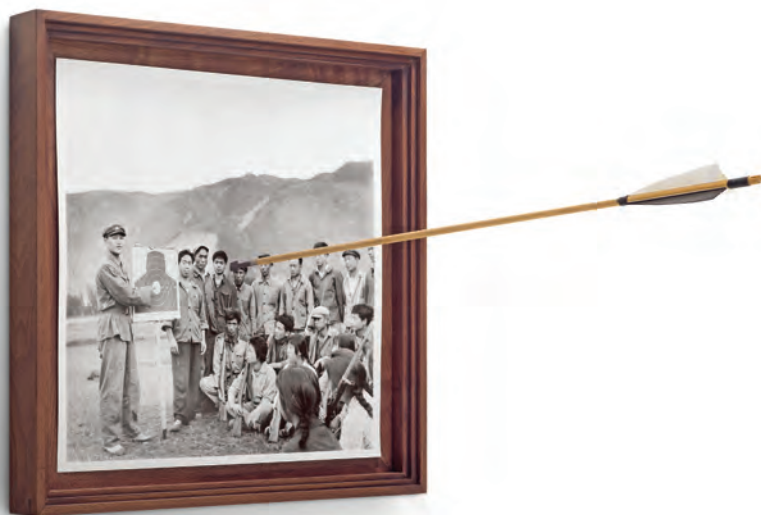


Figure 25.1 Cai Dongdong, *Miss the Target*, 2016, silver gelatin print, arrow, 54 × 54 × 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 25.2 Cai Dongdong, *Queue training*, 2023. silver gelatin print, rope, stone, 90 × 113 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

This change across eras wasn't slow and steady. It was punctuated, happening abruptly with short transitions. This pattern was evident in my many portrait photos from various ID documents showing how faces evolved over history's long stretch.

In one of my projects, *Two Doors* (2016), I used projections to show the differences in faces from the Republic era to Mao's time. This concept later became more tangible in my art. I expanded it by adding another door organizing the photos into three photographic portraits from a third distinct periods. These portraits were framed in clear boxes and then connected to create curtain-like installations within three door frames. Each frame contains a label indicating its historical period, covering a full century. As visitors walk through these doors, they're essentially walking through a century's worth of history. Creating these artworks was a journey of patience and exploration for me.

Cai Dongdong's Evocative Photographic Narratives

HY: Your photo installations from 2014 to 2019 grabbed attention when showcased under the title *Photography Reforged* at the Leo Gallery, Shanghai. Later, you worked with Jiazazhi Press to distribute a book named *A Game of Photos*, which included these artworks. Would you consider these pieces as a cohesive series titled *A Game of Photos*? Or do you see them as independent artworks? What's your take on these creations?

CD: It was only towards the end of 2021 that I settled on the title *A Game of Photos* for the book. The artworks in it definitely resonate with the theme of playing with photographs. But when I reflect on all the works from that time, I realize they are not limited to just this theme. Pieces like *Two Doors* (2016) and *A Hundred Years* (2020), the photobook *Left Right* (2022b), published by Le Maison de Z, and *History of Life* (2021), published by Imageless, push beyond the boundaries of just playing with photos.

HY: Your recent published works, notably *History of Life* (Imageless, 2021), *Left Right* (La Maison De Z, 2022), and *A Game of Photos* (Self-published, 2022a), offer unique insights into China's history. Can you tell us more about the inspirations and challenges in creating these publications?

CD: Absolutely. *History of Life* was born from the same creative space as *A Game of Photos*. In the early stages, I amassed numerous old photographs. While many didn't directly make it to any artwork, I was particularly drawn to the genuine, unaffected snapshots of life, even if they were imperfect. I tried to weave them into a cohesive story for a few years but hit a wall. Later, a light bulb went off. In their own unspoken way, these photographs echoed China's historical narrative over the past hundred years. I then treated the book's formation like drafting a movie script, adding more photos to deepen its story. Instead of being selective, I opted for bulk purchases from grassroots photo enthusiasts in China. Imagine getting a huge batch of 10,000 photos and sifting through them to find the perfect pieces to the puzzle.

Fast forward seven years, *History of Life* was realized—a journey across three generations and three transformative eras in China, told through 415 carefully chosen images. *Left Right*, on the other hand, offers a dual reading experience. You can start from either end. The contrasting pictures of women showcase the

cultural evolution from the Republic of China era to the pre-reform period of the People's Republic. The fashion, expressions, and even their makeup hint at the changing societal norms and values. Lastly, *A Game of Photos* is a mosaic of my previous works morphed into a photobook. Its visual journey is from older times, slowly moving to a more modern, consumer-driven age, truly highlighting the expansive nature of my photographic explorations.

HY: From 2014 onwards, it seems you've delved into the realms of image reproduction and history reintroduction through your photographic installations. In the age of digital photography, where does the tangible aspect of the photograph—its materiality—stand for you? And why the emphasis on turning photographs into installations in your art?

CD: My foundation is analog photography, and I still use film. The photos in my installations are printed using the traditional gelatin silver gelatin process, and they're unique, with every imperfection visible. These imperfections, the warmth, errors, and the passing of time are all essential to my art practices. I cherish the tactile feel in my work because it mirrors the soul of the artwork. I often see myself as a craftsman, loving the hands-on process. There's an element of discovery when physically handling materials—it's as if my hands are thinking. This tactile connection is why I love transforming photos into installations. Digital photography isn't my realm; I feel those images are meant for screens, not hands.

HY: Could you walk us through the creative journey behind some of your pieces?

CD: After 2014, my creative approach took a fresh turn. I've settled into a rhythm that involves patience, observation, and letting ideas evolve naturally. I have a wall in my studio that's a canvas of pinned-up photos. I start by selecting and displaying those that intrigue me, and then, it's all about waiting and occasionally glancing at them. Some images spark ideas instantly, while others might take years to inspire. This patient waiting allows me to find unique ways to present or even alter these photos. It's like the photos whisper their stories and structures to me.

Take *Tug-of-War* (2022, Figure 25.3), for example. The photo shows a group in a tug-of-war match. This inspired me to imagine the rope being extended, so the finished artwork uses this rope as its suspension. My aim is to enhance the photos subtly without overwhelming their essence.

For instance, with *Weeping Willows* (2022)—a snap I took 20 years ago in Beijing's Summer Palace—I simply rotated the image. This small change turned horizontally blown willow branches into the appearance of them drooping, shifting the entire mood of the photograph.

One of the artworks that took me significant time to develop was *A Monument to the Dying* (2022, Figure 25.4). I had in my possession a film roll from the 1980s, during an intense period when there was a harsh crackdown on crime. This film captured the heartbreaking moment when a young man, sentenced to death for robbery, was publicly marched towards his final fate. I remember witnessing such events firsthand during my childhood. Schools would even organize us to attend these public sentencings. After the verdict, those convicted would be showcased on trucks, paraded through town streets. The most serious offenders were taken to riverbanks for their tragic end. These experiences deeply etched themselves in my memory.



Figure 25.3 Cai Dongdong, *Tug-of-war*, 2022, silver gelatin print, watercolor, rope, 126 × 63 cm. (framed). Courtesy of the artist.

This particular photograph remained untouched on my studio wall for a long time as I pondered the right way to honor its gravity. Photos often serve as vessels for our memories and past encounters. Navigating how to genuinely and respectfully engage with these memories is integral to my artistry. My eventual decision was to immortalize the image by embedding it into a meter-tall stone, chosen for its patterns reminiscent of classic Chinese landscapes.

History, Image, and Collective Memory

HY: You mentioned that you started off by mining personal photographic works for materials and gradually transitioned to collecting large amounts of resources from other sources. This change seems to parallel a shift in your artistic practice, in which you've moved from being a photographer to adopting the mantle of a collector. In the context of your practice, in which history plays a significant role, I'm wondering, what about these historical materials piques your interest?

CD: When I create my works, I don't overly focus on the specific content within the photos. For me, those historical contexts seem relatively vague. They provide more of a backdrop or stage for my creations. I'm merely utilizing these photos to



Figure 25.4 Cai Dongdong, *A Monument to the Dying*, silver gelatin print, watercolor, rope, 126 × 63 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

expand or explore my artistic language. However, as time went on and as I delved deeper into my creations, I realized that many of the works are profoundly connected to China's history. Perhaps it's an inevitable fate deeply intertwined with my life on this land.

Not long ago, I heard an interview with the artist He An (b.1970), in which he mentioned that the Cultural Revolution is the only legacy of our generation. This statement resonated with me. I was born in 1978, right after the Cultural Revolution ended, and my grandfather committed suicide during that period. Even though I grew up in the era of reform and opening up, the shadow of the Cultural Revolution still subtly haunts our family; it's deeply embedded in my childhood memories. The early stages of life play a crucial role in shaping a person's order and perception of the world, and the experiences from that time often accompany them for the rest of their life.

My earliest visual memories are images from the Cultural Revolution. My family once lived in a military compound, and I would often browse through official pictorials in the military library. Those pictorials were filled with propagandist images deeply infused with ideology, and their profound impact on me is immeasurable. They connect to the previous generation and are experiences that I need to process and ponder. I feel that it's hard to break away from such a connection with history completely.

- HY:** You seem to be deconstructing your visual experience by tracing back through historical images. Apart from personal reasons, have you ever thought about why you present these historical images to a younger audience? As an artist, what is the core concept you are trying to convey throughout the process of collection, creation, transformation, and the final presentation? In other words, when I look at your works, it seems that you are trying to encapsulate Chinese modern history with historical photos and convey your perspective to the audience through artistic expression. For young Chinese viewers who know almost nothing about history, what is the core message you want them to understand?
- CD:** Beyond documenting history and capturing our feelings towards the world, photographs can easily become a tool for ideology. This is because photographs inherently possess a political nature, a subtleness that often eludes us. We tend to trust photographs too much, believing in their authenticity. My various deconstructions and disruptions of photographs aim to challenge the illusion of essential truthfulness of a photo and broaden the scope of what a single photo can represent. By showcasing ways to question the relationship between the photograph and the viewer, I create images that escape direct reference, loosening the historical illusions that photographs bring and reshaping my new relationship with these images.
- HY:** The introduction of photography to China coincided with the expansion of European colonialism in the country. With the development of photography, images have played a significant role in shaping the image of China over the past 180 years. Going back to the history of photography itself, whether passively or actively recorded, Chinese photography has largely continued the discourse of Western progress. Looking back at the history of photography's development in China, which phase do you find the most appealing?
- CD:** Considering the development of photography in China over the past 100+ years, I believe the most unique period is photography during the Cultural Revolution. Whether it's the photography salons during the Republic of China era or the documentary, experimental, and conceptual photography from the post-reform era to the present, all have been influenced by Western paradigms. The truly distinctive phase of photography in China was during the Cultural Revolution, a photographic form that still impacts current political life.
- HY:** How do you define the photographic paradigm of the Cultural Revolution era?
- CD:** The photographic resources during the Cultural Revolution were primarily official. At one point, photographic materials were considered military supplies, making them hard for the general public to access. Photography from the Cultural Revolution represents an ideologized paradigm. Photographers had to be qualified to use specific staging methods; even the smiles in the photos were standardized. These factors all influenced the way the general public approached photography. In fact, in the many photos I've collected, the shadow of Cultural Revolution-era photography persists in many ordinary people's photographs up to the 1990s. It's challenging to find a very liberal style of photography within that paradigm. The photos in *History of Life* are those warm, emotional pictures free from ideology. I collected many photos to curate this book, and it's not an exaggeration to say that out of every 10,000 photos I collect, I can only find ten that are vibrant and full of life.

- HY:** How do you see the relationship between your work and our time?
- CD:** After all these years and an increasing number of works on the theme of photo games, I've found that half of them address the topic of collectivism. History hasn't departed from us; collectivism still exists in our current context in China and is manifested worldwide.

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PART V

Forming Communities
Networks, Platforms, and Institutions

Edited by Camilo Páez Vanegas



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26

A MAPPING OF PHOTO COMMUNITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Zhuang Wubin

This chapter offers a mapping of photo communities that have emerged since the inception of photography in Southeast Asia. In his research on video art in Indonesia, Edwin Jurriëns (2015: 98) defines communities as “groups of people with shared artistic and social interests who work collaboratively.” I expand on his definition to include the former participants of various programs organized by a specific photo community as being constituent to the community. In this chapter, I propose a tentative typology of four kinds of photo communities based on their forms and functions. They include: photo societies that promoted salon photography; communities that proposed other ways of pursuing photographic art; communities relating to education initiatives; and communities that emerged for the politics of representation.

Salon Photography and Photo Societies

In Southeast Asia, the earliest attempts to form photo communities occurred within the praxis of Pictorialism or salon photography, which led to the founding of photo clubs and societies. There were two periods of growth in the founding of these communities—during the 1920s, and from the 1950s to the 1960s. Most, if not all, of these clubs were directly connected or enjoyed patronage from the political, business, and culture elites of the colonial society and the emerging nation (Kong 2016: 8; Veal 2016: 270–282; Zhuang 2018: 12, 15; 2021b: 64–67).

Prior to the 1980s, it was not possible to major in photography or photojournalism at a tertiary institution in Southeast Asia. The lack of educational opportunities had been taken up by the photo societies since their inception, offering formal lessons and informal tutelage for aspirants in photography. For decades, the contest culture of salon photography provided the only means for photographers to gauge their skills (Strassler 2010: 47–49; Veal 2016: 257–259; Toh 2020: 106–121). Winning salon awards became the easiest way for photographers to establish their name, which, in turn, garnered additional attention and patronage from the elites. When colonial and national elites sought to pursue their cultural and socio-political projects, they often turned to the photo clubs as potential collaborators, with the need for patronage and the threat of censure making it impossible for them to say no (Zhuang 2021a: 65–71). The connection between elite patronage and salon photography ensured the continued relevance of these photo communities today.

The active participation of ethnic Chinese photographers in salon photography also helped to sustain the longevity of the photo clubs. During the 1930s, there were already exhibitions showcasing the art photography of Chinese photographers in Singapore, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies by foregrounding their Chineseness (*Sin Po Speciaal-Nummer* 1931; Zhuang 2021b: 66–67). In 1936, the Oversea Chinese Photographic Society was established in Singapore. During the Cold War, the praxis of salon photography became entangled in the contestation between competing political forces of the bipolar world in influencing the Chinese overseas. It unfolded through the organizing of salon exhibitions that foregrounded overseas Chinese identity and the publishing of Chinese-language photo periodicals in Hong Kong (Zhuang 2023). The Chinese-speaking salon photographers in Southeast Asia were the main consumers of these periodicals (Lee 2017: 73–76; Zhuang 2023). Even though they were oriented towards the Sinophone imaginary, these initiatives offered ethnic Chinese photographers in Southeast Asia continued visibility during the Cold War and helped to sustain the photo clubs at the national level.

Beyond Salon: Communities That Proposed Other Approaches to Photographic Art

Since its inception, salon photography has supplied the dominant aesthetic of art photography in Southeast Asia. By the late 1950s, it had begun to germinate an aestheticized practice of street photography. Before the waning of salon photography, when practitioners proposed other ways of pursuing photographic art, they often had to negotiate its overbearing orthodoxy. In some cases, these practitioners would band together to pool resources, learn together, and propagate their practices.

Bandung is home to Perhimpunan Amatir Foto (PAF), the oldest extant salon club in Southeast Asia, founded in 1924, and the oldest art school in Indonesia, housed within the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB). Bandung Photography Forum (FFB) emerged in such a milieu, holding its first meeting in 1984 and its first exhibition, *Forum Alternatif*, in 1986 (Zhuang 2016: 72–73). Many of the participating practitioners were university students and young creatives, alongside a few working photographers. The exhibition catalog featured short contributions by R. M. Soelarko (1915–2005, b. Baturetno), a Javanese aristocrat who served as PAF president from 1954 to 1985, and A. D. Pirous (b. 1932, Meulaboh), an esteemed artist who taught at ITB from 1964. As its advisor, Pirous (1986) was celebratory of FFB, intimating that salon photography had impeded the emergence of newer approaches to photographic art. In contrast, Soelarko (1986) sought to defend the boundaries between photography, *seni rupa* [fine art], and even “fine art with collage technique,” effectively evicting FFB from the ecology of photo clubs to the art community. Undeterred, FFB opened its second exhibition, *Forum Ekpresi*, in 1988.

FFB was a loose grouping of individuals with diverse interests and backgrounds, united in their search for alternative approaches to photographic art beyond the salon aesthetic. At the same time, they wanted to open themselves to other disciplines, including journalism, art, and music (Sjuaibun Iljas 2013). Nevertheless, FFB lacked a unified standpoint that cohered the practices of its members. Some of them were already involved in PAF and tried to experiment with photography at FFB in ways that would not be permitted by the salon club. Differences also emerged over time, with the likes of Marintan Sirait (b. 1960, Braunschweig) (Marintan Sirait 2015) and Andar Manik (b. 1959, Bandung) accused of becoming “too political.” There was also no art market to sustain their practices. By the mid-1990s, FFB had become dormant.

It was around that time when Ruang MES 56 began to take shape informally at Yogyakarta. In 1994, Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) in Yogyakarta became the first institution in the country to offer a degree in photography. The first-generation members of Ruang MES 56 were enrolled at ISI, majoring in photography or visual communication design. The flat that they rented became the space for them to hang out, play music, drink beer, and discuss photography (Nuraini Juliastuti 2011: 13). Their dissatisfaction towards the ISI program compelled them to band together (Zhuang 2016: 111–113). Some of its founding members complained that the photography degree suffered from the pervasive imprint of salon photography, a deficiency of qualified teachers and a lack of modules concerning history and theory. In a 2009 interview, the figurehead of the collective Angki Purbandono (b. 1971) (Zhuang 2016: 114) reiterated that they were against the conservatism of Indonesian photography: “And since we can’t move documentary, commercial or salon photography, what Ruang MES 56 can do is to drop their concepts into a blender and make a new juice.” In short, their “new juice” was posited as a reactionary othering of “conservative” photographic practices, including salon photography. In its early years, the collective also rebelled against the class structure of the art world (Zhuang 2016: 113). That was, of course, before their works began to be snapped up by Indonesian Chinese collectors around 2010 (Nuraini Juliastuti 2011: 12). With market success, Ruang MES 56 is now the most visible contemporary photography collective in Southeast Asia.

There are places in Southeast Asia where the imprint of salon photography has been curtailed. When communities emerged with “newer” ways to pursue photographic art, they found it less important to differentiate themselves from the “more conservative” salon photography. This has had an indirect bearing on the acceptance of straight photography (photojournalism and documentary work) as contemporary art.

The case of Cambodia is illustrative. The onset of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1975 obliterated its vibrant practice of salon photography (Zhuang 2023). When photographers started using the camera to express themselves during the 1990s, they no longer had to deal with the specter of salon photography. Straight photography became more of a means to relativize their “newer” practice from the tradition of painting (Zhuang 2016: 443). The most visible contemporary art institution in Cambodia today is SA SA BASSAC, co-founded by Stiev Selapak (Art Rebels) and Erin Gleeson in 2011. Its origins could be traced to the photo workshop that Stéphane Janin conducted at Le Popil Photo Gallery, Phnom Penh, from September 2006 to June 2007. The workshop allowed the participants to meet with the more experienced Vandy Rattana (b. 1980, Phnom Penh) who was informally involved as an observer. In 2007, seven of them joined Vandy to form Stiev Selapak, which had an initial focus on photography. They formed the collective to continue their art practice together and to develop an art infrastructure in Cambodia different from the usual model of depending on external funding for development work (Vuth 2014: 258). Their meetings took place in their houses and the living rooms of friends where they watched films by renowned filmmakers and screened works by international photographers. Senior photographers like Mak Remissa (b. 1970, Phnom Penh) and John Vink were invited to share their practices. Immersed in such a milieu, documentary photography became an important part of their early practices (Vuth 2014: 258–59; Zhuang 2016: 260, 264). Since 2008, Vandy’s photographs have entered the circuit of commercial galleries and art biennales as contemporary art, even though he pursues a “very strict journalistic practice” (Zhuang 2016: 256–257).

The imprint of salon photography in the Philippines has also been muted since the end of the war. A vibrant pictorial periodical culture and the acceptance of photography at the Philippine Art Gallery (established in 1951) and Gallery Indigo (established in 1966) offered other ways for aspiring photographers to showcase their works beyond the ecology of salon photography (Zhuang 2016: 315, 319–320). To the Filipino photographers, the challenge has been to elevate the status of photography and create a collectors' market for photographs. This provides the immediate context to the founding of the Strange Fruit collective in 2020.

Since 2018, Art Fair Philippines has been trying to showcase photography. For its February 2020 edition, the fair offered a space to Jason Quibilan (b. 1977, Manila) who promptly invited five other photographers, including Raena Abella (b. 1977, Manila) and Jes Aznar (b. 1975, Manila), to exhibit their works together. To simplify matters, Aznar named the group Strange Fruit. Its members approach photography in different ways, encompassing photojournalism and documentary practices, commercial work, wet plate collodion, and alternative processes. They were emboldened by the sales of their work at the fair. Then, the pandemic struck. Strange Fruit participated in the 2021 art fair, which happened mostly online. Not surprisingly, it affected the sales of their work. Disappointed by the reception, some of its members met with other photo exhibitors, including Neal Oshima (b. 1951, New York) and Gio Panlilio (b. 1994, Manila). Their initial intention was to find a way to sell the prints that they already made. Somehow, the idea snowballed into the possibility of doing a big exhibition by inviting submissions from fellow photographers. That led to the founding of Fotomoto, a collective of 13 members. Its key initiative takes the form of a juried show, with the intention of mounting a photofestival eventually. Over 300 images from some 100 photographers made the cut for the first edition in 2021. The images were presented mostly in cafés and bars across Makati. Most of them were for sale. In May 2022, the entire exhibition traveled to Orange Project, Bacolod City. After that, the group launched the second edition with the theme of home. They invited submissions through an open call, charging a small fee to generate some income. In the end, they received some 700 photographs, from which around 250 were selected by the curators. The exhibition opened in November 2022 at the College of Fine Arts, University of the Philippines Diliman. They also teamed up with Modeka Art to market the exhibited works to prospective collectors. Serving on the curatorial team, Abella (2022) notes that the collecting of photography is still in its infancy. Hopefully, Fotomoto will encourage photographers to print out their work and collectors to start buying photography as art.

Communities Relating to Education Initiatives

Beyond the immediate context of promoting photographic art, there have been attempts to form communities as a way to propagate street photography, photojournalism, and documentary work. These ground-up initiatives address the lack of exhibition, funding, and education opportunities locally for these practices. They often begin when practitioners decide to volunteer their time to propagate these practices. As the initiatives gain traction, some communities attempt to generate income by charging a fee to program participants or by securing funding from NGOs and corporations. Not surprisingly, members of these communities operate at a distance from the contemporary art market, even though a few of them have had their works collected by individual collectors.

Born as a refugee in Thailand, Phanumad Disattha (b. 1982, Nong Khai) majored in film at Rangsit University, Bangkok. He eventually moved back to Vientiane and helped to establish Lao New Wave Cinema Productions in 2011 with other filmmakers in the country. In 2014, after the birth of his second child, Disattha stopped his filmmaking and videography work and stayed home. That was when he discovered street photography, with Street Photo Thailand serving as his reference point. The Thai group first took shape as a virtual community; in 2012, it became more of a collective. Disattha joined its workshops in 2017 and 2018. Back in Laos, Disattha (2022) wanted to “find a serious friend who would do street photography with him.” To introduce the genre to Laos, Disattha started the Facebook group, Street Photo Vientiane, in July 2018 for followers to upload their photographs. The first months of its existence were the most active. Traversing the online–offline divide, Disattha organized informal walks in Vientiane for enthusiasts who wanted to learn about the genre. He also tried to organize street photography workshops in Laos. Disattha concedes that it is difficult for the practice to gain traction because street photography demands frequent practice, but youths in Laos are more preoccupied with survival. The Facebook group still exists, but it is mostly inactive now.

In 2010, a group of Singaporean photographers with an interest in documentary photography founded Platform, a monthly, recurring gathering in which Singapore-based practitioners were invited to talk about their photographic work. The figurehead of the group was Tay Kay Chin (b. 1965, Singapore). The talks created an informal community of enthusiasts and practitioners interested in the potential of using photography to tell stories in Singapore. Other than students and young creatives, the talks attracted working professionals who pursued photography as a hobby and were intrigued by the mechanics of documentary work but did not have the chance to learn about it in an academic setting. Discussions stemming from the talks often spilled over to the post-event drinking or coffee sessions, with Tay taking center stage with his stories about photojournalism in Singapore. In 2013, Platform launched its TwentyFifteen initiative, with the intention of publishing 20 photobooks for selected Singaporean practitioners in anticipation of Singapore’s golden jubilee in 2015. The endeavor exhausted its founders. After the initiative, the responsibility of organizing the talks was handed over to younger practitioners. By 2019, the talks had stopped, leaving behind a vacuum for a public gathering that encourages documentary work in Singapore.

Despite its organic beginnings, PannaFoto Institute in Indonesia has eventually taken the route of setting up a *yayasan* (foundation) to institutionalize its education initiatives (Zhuang 2020). Before that, aspirants in photojournalism usually enrolled in the workshops offered by Antara Photojournalism Gallery (GFJA) in Jakarta. Established by the national news agency of Antara, GFJA started its training program in 1994, with the last batch of participants graduating in 2018. Edy Purnomo (b. 1968, Ponorogo), a founding member of PannaFoto, first studied photojournalism at GFJA in 1998. Over the years, Edy and his peers were involved in different photo initiatives, including JiwaFoto photo agency (2001–09) and Rana Foundation (2004–06). When World Press Photo (WPP) Foundation approached Sinartus Sosrodjojo (b. 1975, Jakarta) to facilitate a teaching module in Jakarta, he consulted his JiwaFoto peers and promptly established PannaFoto Institute in 2006. For the WPP workshops, PannaFoto decided to focus on photo stories, covering topics like producing a story, digital workflow, marketing, and visual literacy. From 2006 to 2007, PannaFoto graduated two batches of students. When the WPP funding ended, PannaFoto entered into a phase of uncertainty. Serendipity knocked again in 2011 when

PermataBank got in touch to collaborate with PannaFoto. It led to the creation of the Permata Photojournalist Grant (PPG), a two- to three-month education initiative with a grant incentive, which builds on the WPP workshop template. Since then, the recurring PPG has become integral to PannaFoto's annual programming, giving it the stability to attract other partners and collaborators while diversifying its workshop offerings. Its visual literacy class has become a standalone program. In 2015, managing director Ng Swan Ti (b. 1972, Malang) organized a series of three-day workshops at Bukittinggi, Malang and Kupang, bringing photographic education beyond Jakarta. In 2019, with support from the Jakarta government, PannaFoto inaugurated the Jakarta International Photo Festival.

PannaFoto has also germinated the emergence of other photo communities. In 2014, PPG alumni Yopy Pieter (b. 1984, Jakarta) and Muhammad Fadli (b. 1984, Bukittinggi) joined hands with Bali-based Putu Sayoga (b. 1986, Bali) to establish Arka Project, a collective of photographers focusing on long-term visual documentary. Yopy and Muhammad are also involved in Arkademy Project, a photo collective founded in 2018 which organizes collaborative workshops that aim to fuse critical theory and photographic practice. At that time, Ben Laksana (b. 1986, Bogor) and Rara Sekar (b. 1990, Bandung) had just returned from New Zealand. Ben has a background in the sociology of education while Rara's training is in cultural anthropology. Both of them share an interest in documentary photography.



Figure 26.1 Documentation image of the WACANA workshop of Arkademy Project, Yogyakarta, December 2018. Participants of Arkademy Project's WACANA workshop (writing and analyzing photos) are seen presenting their analysis of an assigned photograph using photographic and sociocultural frameworks. Photo: Ben K. C. Laksana. Courtesy of Arkademy Project.

Yoppy wanted to tap into their academic background, which led to the founding of Arkademy Project. Its workshops attract many participants from the development sector, on top of practicing photographers. While reiterating their ties to PannaFoto, Ben (2023) observes that it has become harder for the *yayasan* to take a stance on certain issues, given its connections to state and corporate partners. This has given Arkademy Project the freedom to foreground their politics in the workshops that they organize.

The education initiatives of GFJA, PannaFoto and Arkademy Project have created communities consisting of former workshop participants who, at the very least, formed a ready audience for their programs. This is similar to the situation at Angkor Photo Festival. Since its inception in 2005, the festival has offered free workshops for aspiring Asian photographers. Over the years, some of its alumni have continued to gather annually at Siem Reap to hang out with their tutors and peers. Since 2018, with Jessica Lim (b. 1983, Singapore) stepping up to helm the festival as its new director, there has been a more concerted effort to tap into its alumni community. Some of them have become part of its organizing committee, while others have taken a more involved role as workshop facilitators and contributing curators to the festival.

Communities and the Politics of Representation

Since the colonial era, photographers in Southeast Asia have formed communities to represent themselves in the marketplace of ideas and image-making. These communities are political in foregrounding the politics and concerns of their members. Some of the members have had a background in activism, political agitation, or development work while others have been driven by the possibility of photography in spotlighting issues that concern them.

The conditions of anticolonialism and revolution led to the setting up of Vietnam News Agency in Hanoi in 1945 and IPPHOS (Indonesian Press Photo Service) in Indonesia in 1946, which recorded, in photographs, the struggles of the emerging nation. The fall of dictator Suharto in 1998 brought about a chaotic space of openness in Indonesia, leading to the founding of *Pewarta Indonesia* (Indonesian Photojournalists), which served to “protect the rights of the photojournalist to take pictures in the public sphere” (Zhuang 2004: 51).

In 1972, Ferdinand Marcos imposed martial law in the Philippines, which germinated the anti-Marcos “mosquito press.” In the early 1980s, Alex Baluyut (b. 1956, Manila) and Luis Liwanag (b. 1960, Quezon City) were roommates at Malate while working for the wire services. The lifting of martial law in 1981 and the assassination of Benigno Aquino in 1983 fueled the demand for photographs from these critical publications. To elude their employers’ attention, Baluyut, Liwanag and a few other friends founded a “fake collective” named *Gomburza* in 1983 to contribute their outtakes without revealing their names. While the collective allowed them to generate extra income, Liwanag (2022) maintains that they were driven more by their fight for human rights and freedom against the dictatorship. The need for *Gomburza* was gone after the People Power Revolution in 1986.

Since 1999, Liwanag has been a member of the Philippine Center for Photojournalism (PCP). In 1951, Press Photographers of the Philippines (PPP) was formed to serve the interests of Filipino photojournalists. By the 1990s, its close connection with the state had made it less appealing to a group of activist photographers. In 1997, they established PCP, with Miguel Cortez (b. 1960, Butuan City) serving as its founding chairman until 2000. Cortez (2022) describes PCP as a progressive organization that attracted idealistic photographers, often with connections to activism and the Left. In this sense, it is also an exclusive organi-

zation that would not appeal to a photographer who is not politically conscious. This is why its membership numbers continue to be modest. Another intention of setting up PCP has been to elevate the status of photographers in the Philippine newsroom, where they are typically treated as second-class citizens in terms of salary and status.

In Thailand, the political crisis since 2006 has polarized the society. In 2010, Yostorn Triyos (b. 1983, Bangkok) was a young graduate working for an NGO as communication officer. He followed Shutter J, an online forum for practitioners and enthusiasts interested in photojournalism and documentary work. As the crisis deepened, the forum owner urged the followers to keep their commentary to aesthetic issues and away from politics. Unhappy with the restrictions, Triyos and the friends he met at the forum left to create Realframe. At that time, none of the seven founding members worked as a professional photojournalist. Realframe existed initially as an online community where they could foreground their politics and opinions through photography. Triyos (2022) adds: “Realframe supports democracy and freedom of expression; we don’t buy neutrality.” He is also not shy to align the group with the Red Shirts in Thailand. Over time, it has become an “unregistered NGO that uses photography.” With the support of international NGOs and Thai universities, Realframe organizes ad-hoc photo workshops for aspirants in photojournalism and marginalized groups across Thailand. There are currently five active members in Realframe, most of whom are working professionally as photojournalists.

In Southeast Asia, the profession of photojournalism and documentary work has been dominated by male practitioners. The need for gendered representation has led to the founding of all-women photo collectives in the Philippines and Myanmar. An academic report in 2013 highlighted some of the challenges affecting women photographers in the Philippines. They include physical danger and life-threatening situations that journalism work entails, physical and sexual abuse by other photographers, and the difficulty for female practitioners to fit into the male-dominated environment (Alampay 2013: 46–51, 62–65). In 2012, two PCP members, Cebu-based Cheryl Baldicantos (b. 1986, Iligan) and Manila-based Candice Reyes Talampas (b. 1986, Manila) germinated the idea of founding Tala Photo Collective and started gathering like-minded women practitioners. The founding members included photographers working for local newspapers and international wire services, alongside those involved in development work. The collective existed initially as a way for women photographers to support one another, recalls founding member Kat Palasi (b. 1967, Baguio) (Palasi 2022). It allowed them to share assignments and equipment, tackle harassment and discrimination, and offer emotional support for members facing relationship issues. The most active part of Tala’s existence occurred from 2015 to mid-2019 when the collective organized exhibitions and talks in the Philippines. Nevertheless, by 2019, Tala had become dormant due to the diverging lives of its members. Today, the collective still exists as a WhatsApp group of friends who continue to offer support amongst themselves.

In Myanmar, the gradual penetration of the Internet since the early 2000s, the Saffron Revolution in 2007, and political liberalization since 2011 had reinvigorated the practices of photojournalism and documentary work (Zhuang 2016: 202, 207–208). In 2017, after participating in a Yangon workshop for women photographers, the participants decided to establish Thuma. The lack of a space for dialogue and exchange was a key factor in founding the collective. Similar to the situation in Manila, the newsroom in Myanmar continues to be dominated by male photographers. If a female photojournalist wanted to talk about photography after work, she would have to join them at the bars and teashops,



Figure 26.2 (From left to right) Khin Kyi Htet, Shwe War Phoo, Shwe Wutt Hmon, Khin Rita, Yu Yu Myint Than, and Tin Htet Paing are seen at the launch event of “Bridging the Naf,” a six-part photography dialogue between female photographers from Myanmar and Bangladesh, on June 22, 2019. The collection of zines was the result of a cultural and artistic exchange of ideas between Thuma Collective from Myanmar and Kaali Collective in Bangladesh. Photo courtesy of Thet Paing Dwe.

smoking and drinking. Furthermore, conversations in Myanmar on photography typically revolved around the practice of photojournalism; it was uncommon to discuss narrative photography or longform documentary (Tin Htet Paing, 2023). Responding to the situation, a supplementary objective of Thuma was to diversify the photographic practices in Myanmar. During its active years, Thuma organized public talks, mounted exhibitions, conducted workshops, and received commissions from NGOs. It also collaborated with Kaali Collective from Bangladesh to produce the photobook *Bridging the Naf* (self-published in 2019). Unfortunately, the coup in 2021 has had a devastating impact on Thuma. Today, only one of its members remains in Myanmar; the rest have left for other nations. Nevertheless, Tin Htet Paing (b. 1989, Ayeyarwady Region) envisions the gradual resumption of Thuma activities, once its scattered members overcome their personal difficulties and figure out a way to operate in the present context.

In closing, this typology of photo communities is meant as a framework of analysis; naturally, there are other community-making initiatives that have eluded the present study. Historically speaking, the professional guilds of photography have been a visible presence across Southeast Asia, their imprint exceeding the commercial realm while interfacing with other photo communities. In recent years, there has also been an increase in publishing and photobook initiatives, which have germinated newer communities. A publication from

Taiwan, for instance, dedicated a chapter to SOKONG! Publish, an initiative founded in Yogyakarta in 2018, which aims to bridge the different art communities through photographic publishing (Lin 2022). The Internet and the digitization of photography have also allowed an initiative like Matca, founded in 2016 with the intention of facilitating conversations concerning photography in Vietnam, to attract followers and collaborators from Southeast Asia and beyond, thereby transcending the boundaries of nation. These are research trajectories that await further elucidation.

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PHOTOGRAPHY AND TRANS-AFRICANISM

A Story of Journeys

Emeka Okereke

My photographic career began in earnest in 2001 in Lagos, Nigeria. However, my first encounter with the medium was a little earlier. As a teenager, it was my most remarkable encounter – one that I always feel the need to recall whenever I am asked the question: why photography? It's been 22 years since then. Writing this chapter has allowed me to indulge in hindsight reflection, at the center of which is “Why photography?” I came into contact with photography at the end of military rule in Nigeria and the beginning of democracy. I say this to underscore the importance of this time, which also served to usher in the 21st century. A decade earlier, Nelson Mandela had been released from prison, and, by 1994, he became the first Black president of South Africa.

I was born in Africa at a time of what I have previously called a “volatile negotiation between the past and the present” (Okereke 2021). This era, without being quite aware of it, was molding us for the future. I remember that the earliest photo that ignited my enthusiasm was of the Afrobeat Pioneer, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, made by the photographer Uche James-Iroha, under whom I would later hone my photographic skills. It was a black-and-white photograph of the singer during a concert, sweaty saxophone fastened to a rope dangling from his neck, both arms lifted into the air with a clenched fist suggesting the “Black Power” gesture. This photograph was the first introduction to the “eventfulness” and, as such, power of an image to my naive yet hungrily inquisitive mind.

Why photography? It was not so much about the medium or techniques but about how photography activated my sense of perception. Growing up, I have always known that the best part of me lives in the realm of concepts – in other words, at the interstice of appearance and revelation. I hardly take anything at face value. It made me a skeptical young man. Now, thinking of it, photography was the medium through which my “poetic force” found expression (Glissant 1997). And it wouldn't stop at that. It would lead me to meet other creatives – “restless souls” like me. I would realize that they are scattered all over the globe, across borders and racial stratifications. Photography became a vehicle through which I moved, connected, and activated the social power of people and places.

I was born in Igbo in the eastern part of Nigeria. My parents and grandparents experienced the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, which took an estimated two million lives (ICE Case Studies 2001). As the firstborn of the family, I was raised to be ever-hopeful as a precondition to survival.

So when I left the eastern part of Nigeria and moved to the economic capital, Lagos, with its 17 million inhabitants, I did so with nothing but an inkling of an idea backed by an untested concept and a dream: to become a photographer and to travel the planet. Three days after I arrived in the big city, I started to work as a photographer's apprentice at Uche James-Iroha Studio.

I was led to James-Iroha by my uncle, who was his best friend at the time. Apparently, James-Iroha knew my dad through his close ties with my uncle. The day I showed up, he looked at me intently and said, "I know your dad. You came at the right time; I fired my assistant – you can start as my new assistant next week." Uche is a true visionary because he could see the potential in people. He saw something in me I had no way of knowing at the time. I am not the only photographer or artist who has benefited from this inkling of his. I remember that on the first day at the studio, I experienced a dark room for the first time. Witnessing how a photograph comes to life from the dark surface of the gelatine-coated film to become a "drawing with light" on paper was the most magical moment of my life. This feeling was deepened by Uche's insistence that I make my own print a few weeks later.

At the studio's door was a poster that clearly illustrated the descriptive and qualitative nature of the space. It was also its pseudonym: "The Asylum". And, true to James-Iroha's disposition, it was a space for the misfits, whose foremost creative brush is the knack for conceptualizing and visualizing. I found a home away from home. From then on, this pattern of luck buttressed by my passion for knowledge, growth, and human evolution would replicate itself, with photography always at its center.

My path to becoming a fully fledged artist and photographer took many turns, like a never-ending adventure. I rolled with the punches. The world of the image-maker is a cascade of intersecting realities. My restless mind found expansiveness in detangling and rearranging these realities photographically. Because photography, from the onset, was, for me, a medium for re-reading the appearance of reality, it also became a place of refuge, where I allowed myself to dream untenable dreams – expansive enough to suggest endless possibilities. This Utopian space allowed me to always reach beyond myself. Soon enough, it led me to a deep preoccupation with the concept of borders as something that, if accepted at face value, threatens expansiveness.

The Invisible Borders Trans-African Project

By 2009, I had participated in group exhibitions, photography festivals, and solo exhibitions. I had won my first major photography award, which paved the way for a fully funded scholarship at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where I obtained my master's degree in Fine Art. I have since traveled to over 25 countries across three continents – Africa, Europe, and North America. I always make a point to say that I "discovered" Africa only when I left Nigeria and, more so, when I traveled outside the continent.

The absurdity of borders and how they continue to be a thorn in the flesh of both the African continent and the Black person became apparent to me with every passing day. In Paris, I met fellow Africans – Senegalese and Malians – but I also befriended Palestinians, Australians, Armenians, and Italians. Those friendships shaped my sense of a planetary world while implanting in me an ardent wish to criticize the very premise of borders. Nationalism felt like it had outlived its usefulness and needed a total overhaul, the form of which would bring us closer to one another and conjure spaces for the performance of togetherness and the exchange of human stories. Only in human stories, as disparate as they come, can we genuinely recognize each other and, by extension, free ourselves from an ossifying and limiting gaze. I turned to Pan-Africanism as a natural consequence of these

concerns. That, too, felt like it had done its fair share of the work. Something more fitting for the aura of the 21st century is needed – something that positions Africa as “a story of journeys” through which the Black person has and continues to permeate the world. This has been the premise of my work ever since.

Photography is a potent medium for addressing this question of borders, yet I have become aware of how it is deployed in the “ordering and othering” of the world through ethnography and anthropology. As an artist and thinker, I saw an opening to position photography at the intersection of anthropology, ethnography, sociology, journalism, and art. Thus, the Invisible Borders Trans-African Project (IBTAP) was born. I will share a statement I wrote to introduce this:

I founded the project in 2009, and its aim has been “to work with individuals and organizations in the patching of the numerous gaps and misconceptions posed by frontiers within the 54 countries of the continent... Through photography, writing, film, performance, and site-specific interventions, African artists and thinkers have come together to reflect on the socio-politics of the movement. The flagship project has been the Trans-African Road Trip, which, as of January 2020, is in its 9th edition [2022 saw a spinoff in collaboration with the National Geographic Society]. The artistic road trip has seen African artists travel across borders of more than 20 countries in Africa, but also beyond — through Europe. The pioneer members and participants include Ray Daniels Okeugo (1980–2013), Uche Okpa Iroha, Amaize Ojeikere, Uche James Iroha, Nike Adesuyi Ojeikere (1968–2016), Lucy Azubuike, Charles Okereke, Chriss Aghana Nwobu and Unoma Giese. Later and recent members include Emmanuel Iduma, Jumoke Sanwo, Tom Saater, Ala Kheir, Nana Oforiatta Ayim, Kenechukwu Nwatu, Kechi Nomu, Delphine Wil, Kosisochukwu Ugwuode, Innocent Ekejiuba.

(Okereke 2021)

The first edition of the project was comprised mainly of photographers from Nigeria. The writer, whose participation would extend the platform beyond photography, joined the road trip by accident. Adenike Adesuyi Ojeikere (1968–2016) was a formidable poet and writer in her own right. She joined the road trip at a request by her husband, Amaize Ojeikere, who was a photographer on the trip. As we traversed our first-ever border of the road trip (Nigeria and the Benin Republic), Adenike was already producing accounts of the trip in writing – our travails of road travel across borders of the African continent were being documented not only by the photographer but by a scribe amongst us. The Invisible Borders Trans-African Project preceded Instagram by one year. At the time, our foremost preoccupation was to experience the continent for ourselves. How can we talk about the “African reality” without knowing it? We risk reproducing the same limiting gaze about the continent if we take for granted that Africa is complex in its difference. Our work is, first and foremost, to *embody* the continent and then let whatever photographers or writing we produce be a manifestation of that embodiment. This was the first conceptual and aesthetic position we concretized: from then on, everything felt natural. The road felt open to us because we traveled with open and intensely curious minds in a continent that carries so much knowledge about who we have always been, yet hidden in plain sight.



Figure 27.1 Emeka Okereke/Invisible Borders Trans-African Organisation, *Participants at Lugard's Rest House*. Lokoja, Nigeria. IB Borders Within Trans-Nigerian Road Trip. 2016. Copyright: Emeka Okereke/Invisible Borders Trans-African Organisation.

As photographers and writers, we attuned ourselves to the frequencies of the everyday space, honing our perception to align with the transient stories and “uneventful” events that are the weaving strands of the African reality:

If today someone asked me what precisely contemporary Africa is, I would first speak of radiations, a kind of energy that flows through the continent like a continuous line. This energy, this radiation, is what numerous people coin words to define. It has been there from the onset, and no matter how time changes, it surfaces in myriad forms; it is ever constant and re-inventive; it permeates everything and everyone whose feet are rooted in the continent's soil and thus has long since become our nature. This radiation gives rise to the shared reality of the people of the continent. In the same vein, it is nourished and fine-tuned by the struggle to circumvent unfavorable situations which loom above the destiny of the people. It is what gives rise to the “arbitrary” indefinable and often paradoxical nature of existence on the continent. This energy is the unequivocal tendency towards spontaneity, the sheer extent of improvisation—that which flaws any form of pre-defined statistics. It is said that in Africa, the weatherman is always wrong. Why? Because naturally, people live shoulder to shoulder with the moment, and between two moments, there are one billion ways of being.

(Okereke 2021)

This was the end of the first decade of the new century. Social media and microblogging had emerged. We set up a Blogspot platform for the first road trip: we shared photographs, writings, and snippets of films daily with online followers of our journey. We imagined these followers as traveling with us remotely. We made time for portfolio reviews and critique sessions of the works we produced, even as we were on the move. These sessions were frequent and, over the years, have served as the *praxis of learning while the landscape is changing*, which we have sustained up until this day. The attempt to carry along remote participants while immersed in the experience of the road trip was in recognition of how dispersed and far-reaching the African reality is through its Diaspora. It became a key conceptual/performative component of the project. By the fifth edition of the Trans-African Road Trip project in 2014, we had built our first mobile app complete with mapping/GPS technology that allows our remote followers to trace the journey according to our blog entries at each of our locations. In other words, we entered a process of *artistic re-contextualization of African borders through its Trans-African highways*, which are relics of the colonial past waiting to be repurposed for the benefit of the African peoples as a future-facing feature of the post-colonial. Those roads and highways – eight of them, connecting the entire continent like veins – were constructed during the scramble for the continent by colonial powers. They were made not to unite Africans but rather to create pathways for extraction through which her peoples were either bled dry or stifled. The Invisible Borders Project recontextualizes these highways but also detaches them from a vicious circle that divides more than imbricates the “African idea” beyond the confines of geographical locations. This concept led to what we now know today as *Trans-Africanism*.

Participants of the Invisible Borders Trans-African Road Trip were mainly photographers during the first three years of the project, with writers and filmmakers serving as complementary voices. This would soon tilt towards a truly trans-disciplinary project as writers such as Emmanuel Iduma began delineating a methodology and aesthetics of “writing from the road” (Iduma, 2018). It would pave the way for the participation of many other writers and researchers, such as Nana Oforiatta Ayim, Uche Okonkwo, Yinka Elujoba and Kosisochukwu Ugwuode. Many of these write about photography and visual culture today or are, themselves, photographers, carrying on that complementary relationship between photography and writing nurtured within the Invisible Borders Project.

The nature of the collective has always been a source of debate within the project. Earlier, some participants argued for a closed membership, following an already-established tradition. I was not so keen on this format because I witnessed its pitfalls with *Depth of Field*, the Nigerian photography collective I was a member of. An open membership aligns better with the concept of “open roads” and “it is about the journey, not the destination” of the Trans-African Project. Thus, for every edition of the road trip, we put out an open call across the network of artists in the African continent and the Diaspora. This approach has enabled us to sustain a network of budding artists but also allowed us to glimpse the “artistic flair” of young artists who may not have had the opportunity to be seen or known. For this reason, we often make it clear to our partners and funders that the vetting of participants is the sole discretion of IBTAP, and this does not necessarily rely on an impressive artistic résumé but rather a foresight about the participants’ personality and “poetic force.”

This method comes with its challenges. Throughout the years, my observation is that artists of the project often come with one of two outlooks: There are those whose intention to partake in the project is rooted in their deep appreciation for the idea and its expansive possibilities. Drawing from the support of previous participants, they see how such a collective and extensive



Figure 27.2 Emeka Okereke/Invisible Borders Trans-African Organisation, *Wishful Thinking*. Lagos-Benin Expressway, IB Trans-African Road Trip, Lagos-Libreville, 2012. Copyright: Emeka Okereke / Invisible Borders Trans-African Organisation.

endeavor is made tangible through their participation. These are invariably the participants who are less phased or derailed by the challenges and obstacles of the project. They are also amongst the most proactive participants, able to carry on the experiences of the project into their work long after their participation. By contrast, other participants see the project only as a means to an end. On the road trip, these participants protect their interests more than the collective. During hardships, clash of personalities, or unfavorable circumstances, they are incapable of entertaining a perspective that wades through obstacles. They are stuck in their subjectivity and are quick to weaponize their boundaries. As long as the journey is smooth and convenient, they are fine. Any slight challenge to the “enshrined self” they carry immediately induces a convulsive need for self-preservation. Yet, such recoiling into the “self” in the context of a project that relies so much on the strength that transcends the subjective can only undermine the collective. Consequently, these participants constitute the most catastrophic obstacles to the project throughout its existence. We described our way of working:

The Invisible Borders Trans-African project is not a collective as much as it is a collective way of being and thinking. It is a project that fully recognizes that the journey from point A (the individuals who come to the project with their limitations, assumptions, preconceived notions as well as strengths—a function of a defined “self”—the subjective) to point B (freshly acquired perception, clarity, intimate knowledge; the collective) is full of tumultuous tensions, precariousness, and thistles of inconsistencies. We do not shy away from this reality. It is not a safe space where this means com-

fort, self-preservation, and exclusion from the complexities and inexactitudes of the world encapsulating it. If anything, it is like Chinua Achebe's middle ground (2011): "the home of doubt and indecision, of suspension of disbelief, of make-believe, of playfulness, of the unpredictable, of irony".

(Okereke 2021)

Participants often tend to romanticize the idea of an artistic road trip across the African continent. The prospect enlivens scenes of adventure, across landscapes, rivers, and myriad peoples and delicious cuisines. Yet, the reality could not be any different. Traveling by road across borders of Africa is a drive through a turbulent cocktail of anxiety, fear (of the known and unknown), and frustration arising from the tensions between translating experiences into artistic outcomes, panic attacks, and exhaustion. It is a convolution reminiscent of what the late writer and critic Chinua Achebe calls "a messy workshop" that is the nature of "the middle ground" (Achebe 2011) where subjectivities encounter each other, collide, and are sublimated into the collective – for the collective is a sublimation of the subjective. The Invisible Borders road trip made us realize that encounters of subjectivities are never a walk in the park. As with Achebe's "messy workshop," we could speak of Edouard Glissant's "Chaos-Monde" as the true nature of that space where borders resist any form of transcendence (Glissant: 1997). Yet, the only way we could continue to sustain this project is to acknowledge and incorporate this phenomenon into its premise, even at the risk of implosion.



Figure 27.3 Emeka Okereke/Invisible Borders Trans-African Organisation, *Participants in the Invisible Borders Trans-Bangladeshi Road Trip*, Bangladesh, 2020. Copyright: Emeka Okereke / Invisible Borders Trans-African Organisation.

Thus, when we had our first-ever Africa-Asia journey in the form of the Trans-Bangladeshi Road trip in Bangladesh, involving photographers from the Drik Network, one would expect us to have an intense clash of personalities due to the many layers of unfamiliarity. But this was not the case. The artists of Bangladesh are groomed in the ecosystem of the Drik Network, founded by the photographer and political activist Shahidul Alam. This platform is the most proactive in the region, having sustained active engagement through a three-pronged initiative – the Drik Media Agency, The Pathshala Institute, and the Chobi Mela Festival of Photography – with over three decades of activities in Southeast Asia. Thus, our Bangladeshi participants came to the project not only with a sense of admiration for the work of Invisible Borders but also a clear sense of the relationship between photography and a much larger purpose. Despite our differences, everyone felt a deep kinship with the ideology behind the project. Not one participant allowed their personal difference to come in the way of that consensus. For that alone, the Trans-Bangladeshi project was exemplary of the power of the collective when sustained by synchronized intentions.

In 2022, we partnered with the National Geographic Society (NGS) to take four artists on an “Invisible Borders” road trip across the Okavango Delta in Southern Africa. This entailed crossing and engaging the borders of three countries: Botswana, Namibia and Angola. The artists were each from this country, except for myself, who was present as the artistic director. The earliest conundrum we faced with the prospect of working with the NGS was existential: How can we make an artistic/performative road trip that, in many ways, deviates from, and will critique, the approach of organizations such as the National Geographic Society? While IBTAP focuses on critical thinking through artistic interventions, the NGS largely favors discoveries through expeditions. Eventually, we could find common ground without compromising the core premise of the Invisible Borders project: the result was a poetic performance of “quiet listening” by photographers, writers, and filmmakers. A documentary film of the project is currently in production.

During an artist talk involving participants of the Trans-African project, Kosisochukwu Ugwuode, a writer and participant of the road trip, once said, “What we are trying to do is to humanize the borders.” Our overarching intention couldn’t be more aptly stated. As we trudge into the 21st century, it has become evident that what we are up against is a seismic shift in the geopolitical configuration of our world. Seething at the center and ricocheting outwards, like a centrifugal force, are the tentacular lines of border demarcations, many of which are volatile. Moreover, should we ever prioritize the more significant and ominous problem of our time, climate change, it will be inevitable to traverse the planetary scars and festering wounds that borders represent. In the past, photography played a significant role in encrusting a divisive gaze around the world. Photography can, today, contribute to a constructive delineation of difference and subjectivity in an increasingly multi-contextual world. To humanize borders is to make their junctures, interstices, crevices, and transitory spaces a place of encounter and conversation. This place will be populated by the sojourners of the world – those who, in their critical way of being and moving, remap the world and divest the difference of its inscribed violence.

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COLLECTION AND EDUCATIONAL DISSEMINATION

A Case Study in Bogotá, Colombia

Camilo Páez Vanegas

The first definition of ‘anxiety’ in the *Cambridge Dictionary* (2013) is an “uncomfortable feeling of nervousness or worry about something that is happening or might happen in the future.” Another is connected to the word ‘eager,’ a sharp-edged desire regarding something ambitious. In this order of ideas, the concept of eagerness invokes the longing and discomfort that is produced when something is pursued or desired, for example, a desire focused on an object that loses its original purpose and morphs into the materialization of this desire, almost like a fetish or an invented object of worship. Miniatures, furniture, and postcards, among others, which originally had mundane purposes and uses, gain new meaning in the eyes of a collector.

In this panorama of the world of objects, the accelerated technological transformation that has occurred since the 19th century brought a new variety of objects resulting from the endless repetition essential in the consolidation of today’s consumer society. Printed media peaked when machines published large volumes with better quality, accompanied by new means of reproducing images mechanically, heirs of engraving traditions that integrated the techniques of the developed photographic processes in this century. Thus, collections incorporate replicas born from the industrial world apart from valuable originals. With this, the role of the photographic image transcends the problem of the genuine to new narratives of recent history. The photographic exercise involves experimentation that accounts for a particular historical moment both from the narrative and the technological process. The photographic procedure inaugurates a new scale called mass media, which enters the universe of objects that are gathered, cataloged, organized, and, therefore, collected.

The relationships among the objects in a collection depend on the organizer’s eagerness to organize them. This taxonomic exercise can vary in how pieces are selected, in the manner of a re-writing of the world. Georges Didi-Huberman refers to Aby Warburg’s celebrated 1920s exercise in collection, the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, as a re-reading in which there is no taxonomic order of synthesis, description, or categorization but rather a search for iconographic relations that are free of the orders of the archive and bring into play spatial, aesthetic, and cultural relations. The concept of the atlas, which is not bound by logic, then becomes a bold proposition “in which images, gathered in a certain way, may offer us the possibility – or, even better, the inexhaustible resource – of a re-reading of the world” (Didi-

Huberman, 2009:58). As the builder of such an atlas, rewriting with objects, collectors make propositions. With this, they let us see that collections are never definitive, at least not until the collector is no longer the owner of them.

In keeping with their subjective character and constant growth, collections involve an intense search and the construction of a repertoire of meanings whose reification defines a particular social moment, acquiring a new validity in the environment of the collection. Anna Maria Guasch describes the way a collection creates meanings in the present moment by obliterating some of the meanings it once has held: “how the collector meets the past, even if it is an immediate past, and how he ‘quotes’ the object out of its context thus destroying the order in which this object originally had meaning” (Guasch: 2008:1).

By reconstituting the meaning of the object, it is circumscribed into a new sphere, which it cohabits with other objects that respond to the collector’s desire. Collections acquire a new status and abandon the idea of a hobby in favor of systematic orders in which each object must meet certain significant characteristics in order to enter a taxonomic selection which has arisen from the collector’s anxiety-eagerness. A once-disorderly and abrupt accumulation, like a clouded memory, is transformed into classification, hierarchization, and system, in which symbolism is transformed into codes and passes from the darkness of memory to the light of exhibition.

As an object or representation of power, a conscious, structured, and critical collection represents a political stance in which there is an ideological stake in the narrative being told. As a passion mediated by the collector’s bias, it is impossible for it to have an objective perspective. This is how organized accumulation acquires a social responsibility to open up to new perspectives, to scenarios that question the institutional hegemony of the history represented in the notion of a museum. Pérez Oramas articulates this burden:

In that sense, the challenge of responsible collecting is enormous: to oppose the generalization of the museum through a constant vindication of singularity, of the unclassifiable, of the incommensurable, and to traverse the wasteland of art history, through its meanders, wanderings, and margins.

(Pérez Oramas, 2019:117)

A collection that transcends the ideological discourse of its owner necessarily has a pedagogical nature. For this reason, one of the possible purposes of a collection is to be exhibited, so that its proposition may be presented to the world, its objects becoming phrases and statements. The collection thus becomes a voice validated in time, and the more it resonates in the new environment, the more relevant this system of objects will be and the more it will be able to write a history, either reaffirming or, on the contrary, questioning what has been hegemonically told as historic fact. After all, the objects possess the voice of another time, and the collector reconstructs this voice from their passion, just as any history that we take as official has been told.

Proyecto Bachué and Espacio El Dorado: A Collection as an Educational Platform

Although the art collection and its exhibitions have often been associated with the commercial purposes of acquisition and sale, collectings’ revitalization depends on opening it up to research and education that can result in creative processes that feed back into the collec-

tor's proposition. This chapter focuses on the initiative of José Darío Gutiérrez, the collector and manager of Fundación Proyecto Bachué (the Bachué Project Foundation) in Bogotá and its exhibition space, Espacio El Dorado (the El Dorado Space).¹ These initiatives take a contemporary perspective using objects historically considered part of the artistic sphere alongside artefacts such as documents, maps, and images; in this way, an archive is built that can generate a conceptual network of creative inquiries into Latin American identity (Gómez Echeverri and Gutiérrez 2013:2).

The Bachué collection originated in the 1980s, conceived as a way to reflect on modernity in Colombia and consider three critical moments from Gutiérrez's perspective. Firstly, the establishing of the Landscape Chair at the School of Fine Arts of Bogotá in 1894, during a period later known as the Bogotá School, was considered the entry point of Colombian art to modernity.² Secondly, around 1930, the Bachué artistic movement appeared: the beginning of industrial development in Colombia, the end of the War of a Thousand Days (a conflict that pitted liberals and conservatives against each other between 1899 and 1902), and the independence of Panama in 1903 (including, as a consequence, the payment of compensation by the United States of \$25 million in the 1920s). The Bachué movement would be part of the fury of appropriation of Amerindian roots in the face of the colonial legacy and imperialist influence.

Gutiérrez's third consideration is rooted in the influence of the political culture of the United States during the postwar period (Cold War). José Gómez Sicre, a key figure as director of the Department of Visual Arts at the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington and advisor to MoMA in New York, led the Pan-American modern art movement fostered by the US and influential in Colombia. There, writer, manager, and art critic Marta Traba advocated for modern art in contrast to the *Indigenismo* movement and other cultural expressions associated with left-wing movements. The interaction between these influential figures consolidated artistic discourse in Latin America following political guidelines in the North American sphere in the 1950s. As a position against the established canon of New York as the world capital of art, particularly the home of abstract expressionism, the Bachué collection adopted as its interest appropriations influenced by expressionism from a social and existential field (Gómez Echeverri and Gutiérrez 2013:47).

Gutiérrez's photographic collection consists mainly of a visual repository of Colombia's turbulent history. The pieces, whether they are originals by artists of the time or publications in the media, are part of a corpus that is highly relevant in the current context, in which the concept of national historical memory is being revised, particularly in relation to the Colombian armed conflict. As photography is one of the fundamental elements of Gutiérrez's collection, its value resides in the power of the photographic record to propose, disrupt and question. In addition to this, the interpretation of these images can vary depending on the point of view from which they are observed, giving each a particular attraction in terms of artistic expression, particularly in a plastic and visual sense, given its role as an instrument, letter, or word within a more elaborate construction in which an artistic statement or trajectory is framed.

Denial that the violence has, in fact, been a conflict has been the subject of right-wing politics, focusing on what was until a few years ago an official narrative of citizens being victims of terrorism. With the negotiation and signing of the peace treaty between 2012 and 2016, society has begun a process of gaining awareness of the conflict and what it entailed for society. The actions of the JEP (Special Jurisdiction for Peace) and the Truth Commission have opened the doors to an unofficial history free from the influence of tra-

ditional governments, in which the actors of the conflict explain their role and links with power structures. This revision has been accompanied by a rise in public awareness of artists and visual creators who, through their work, participated in a critical way during this historical period.

Consequently, from the collector's point of view, photography has a subtle power. Through its modernity and technological transformation, it can capture the precise moment to a miraculous extent. One can find there that the image was constructed specifically via the photographer's ability to focus it, wait for it, or build it, finding effects beyond the mere capture of the image. Apart from the mere procedure of taking a photograph, there is a political purpose, either dissident or conformist with regard to the situation of the moment, not only in the social context in which it is produced, but also in the regional and global environment. When we analyze the technical characteristics that accompany this discourse, for example the way a photograph is enlarged or a negative is framed, we can understand, with retrospect, that historic photographs held political intentions.

From this perspective in time, the collection directed by Gutiérrez is framed in the idea of examining the collection's contemporaneities, a constant counterpoint between the here and now, and a given period and context, not with a desire for a historicist explanation but in a critical way, looking into the darkness of time. As Giorgio Agamben articulates:

The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporaneity, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present.

(Agamben 2009:41)

The contemporary nature of the collection is rooted in the fact that it operates amid various complexities concerning the notion of art, as a challenge to be attentive to the manifestations that correspond to a creative process. This challenge implies, for example, the apparently non-existent connections between a corpus of costumbrista photographs (depicting traditional manners) from the first half of the 20th century, the interferences of soft propaganda, and the conceptual concerns of a photographer in the seventies, each observed in the light of current technological tasks; or the close ties between the image of the territory and the colonial logics internalized in the cultural story. These dialogues from the Bachué collection highlight the different manifestations and the subtexts that they contain, allowing links from the collector's perspective to emerge and make complex already layered objects and histories.

The period of interest of the Bachué Project's collection proceeds from the mid-twentieth century onward, because, apart from an exercise of political revision at this moment, it is also intriguing to observe how the photographic medium began to be used by artists who at that time were called experimental photographers with the idea of producing other effects far beyond the mere significance of the image captured. This experimentation took place in the space of the chemical laboratory and also in ways of capturing the image, constructing shots while making full use of the photographic procedure, to show the power of someone to express something different with a medium which is commonly anchored to the notion of reality.



Figure 28.1 *Un Supuesto Fotográfico: The Family of Man en Bogotá* exhibition. 2023. Courtesy: Espacio El Dorado

One example in which the collection has examined this retrospective or recuperative function is the exhibition *Un Supuesto Fotográfico: The Family of Man en Bogotá*, (*A Photographic Presumption*) which emerged from the research and curatorial process of José Ruiz and Arturo Salazar, two researchers from the field of history who have explored the collection to reconstruct social processes that occurred in the 20th century. Specifically, their curation refers to the famous exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, organized by Edward Steichen in 1955, whose objective was to show a “parable of human life” reflected in images of different places around the world and ways of living in it. The exhibition was grandiloquent in its presentation; images on a human scale or larger made a strong impression on MoMA visitors as they saw ways of human life different from the American standard (Ruiz 2022).

After its success at MoMA, the exhibition became part of the soft propaganda promoted by the United States in the postwar period as a guarantor of freedom and capitalist democracy against the common enemy of Soviet communist repression, an idea that surely was not part of Steichen’s original intentions in curating the show. The United States Information Agency (U.S.I.A.) organized a worldwide touring system with four copies of the exhibition that were intended to circulate throughout Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Southern Africa, Latin America, and Oceania.

The version that corresponded to Colombia began its tour in 1957 in Cuba and then traveled through Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, and Uruguay, before being exhibited in Australia, Laos, and Indonesia. After passing through Venezuela in 1957, the exhibition

was to be shown in Bogotá, but, by the time it was due to arrive, the city was in the midst of social and political upheaval due to the May 10 overthrow of the dictatorial president Rojas Pinilla. Several important events in the city were canceled, among them the Bogotá International Fair that was to host the exhibition, so the crates in which the exhibition was transported were never opened and the works were not exhibited. After Caracas, the exhibition was presented in Santiago de Chile, where it was a success.

How does the Proyecto Bachué collection intervene in the exhibition? The curatorship of the *Supuesto fotográfico* is based on the failed exhibition in Bogotá: it is a way of approaching what could have been but from a contemporary perspective, making use of the photographic collection of Proyecto Bachué and exhibiting it in Espacio El Dorado. The collection was used as a resource based on the research proposal developed by José Ruiz and Arturo Salazar:

Un Supuesto Fotográfico: The Family of Man en Bogotá presents an alternative to the original exhibition, with photographs of a country portrayed over the course of three decades by Colombian photographers who witnessed the development of the nation and its contradictions. The exhibition also includes the work of photographers who were part of the original exhibition, such as Dorothea Lange and Eugene Harris.

(Ruiz 2022)

The *mise-en-scène* of the exhibition was also part of Ruiz and Salazar's proposal. By moving from the 1:1 ratio of the original *Family of Man* to the reduced format of the collection images that made up *Supuesto Fotográfico*, they shift the viewer's perspective away from the impressive spectacle of Steichen's exhibition to a contemporary perspective on the ideals on which the original exhibition were based. In this way, the collection is understood



Figure 28.2 *Un Supuesto Fotográfico: The Family of Man en Bogotá* exhibition. 2023. Courtesy: Espacio El Dorado

as a research tool which leads to a creative curatorial process. Researchers, from their theoretical disciplines, approach a curatorial exercise as a creative proposition by imagining the possibilities of that presumption (*Supuesto*), while using the social and political connotations that the images of the collection harbor. In the same way, the museographic approach of *Supuesto Fotográfico* works with resources from the Bachué collection, but also compels a dialogue with images or other resources outside the exhibition. In short, it makes it possible to give an overview of what lies behind *The Family of Man*, the interference of a central power over peripheral nations, who may be aligned but, from today's perspective, manage to maintain distinct regional identities.

From this type of methodology, the collection is used as a pedagogical resource not just for display but also for practical purposes. It encompasses the idea of a historical review within the Bachué Project and highlights the individual's impact on the world, mainly through plastic or creative expressions. In the particular context of photography, it provides a focus on who is making a permanent reflection, and what it means to understand a photograph's disruption in the flow of events from the image produced. In other words, the collection is intended to challenge our understanding of specific themes. It prompts us to revisit and reconsider these themes, and instead of offering solutions, encourages us to reflect over time.

When it comes to developing a project, the use of different mediums plays a crucial role. Photography can be used as a means of expression, just like engraving, painting, or typography. The goal is to create artwork that goes beyond mere documentation and prompts deeper reflection. The medium should enhance the meaning behind the artwork and help it transcend beyond a surface level. Almost all the artists included in the collection have provided additional documents to satisfy researchers' interest in their use of media and the interpretation of these materials, with a predominant interest in the artist's process and methodology: how they do it, why they do it. This dynamic exposes a layer that is often hidden at the moment of exhibiting, which has to do with the technological process, intrinsic to the analysis of the era we wish to explore, and revealing another pedagogical layer to the possibilities of each era, appraising them through the lens of current technological practices.

Many processes of inquiry regarding the collection that are carried out in Espacio El Dorado are focused on the original artist's expression and its coherence with the definition of an artist. Another example of a project based on a photographic collection is *Sergio, la Cámara y Yo (Sergio, the Camera and Me)* (Ruiz and Salazar 2023), which makes use of the visual production of Sergio Trujillo, who is recognized for his work in audiovisual media related to advertising and graphic design, which was of great relevance between the seventies and nineties. Following on from his wide-ranging practice, the curatorial intervention is nourished by technological experimentations from photography, such as scale, framing, environment or the laboratory process; the images regain their discursive power concerning socio-political and intimate environments, which are the exhibition's central themes. The aim of the exhibition is not to be a retrospective, but instead to go deep into the characteristics of the artist, through which a contemporary proposal can be identified from the use of the photographic medium for a personal discourse, in which, as Trujillo himself has said, "they are digging up a dead man." This is the basis of this new investigation and curation by Ruiz and Salazar, focused on the artist, his relationship with the world, and his concerns about existence arising from the historical moment in which he lived and worked, and based on the photographic and audiovisual experimentation that shapes his artistic *telos*.



Figure 28.3 Sergio, *la Cámara y Yo* exhibition. 2023. Courtesy Espacio El Dorado.

For the Bachué Project, the interesting thing about this back and forth of the work is the way it projects local concerns onto global moments that influence creative production at different times of the twentieth century, and how this is represented in the particular way each artist produces their work to express similar concerns, especially in a globalized environment controlled by a consumer society. The particularity of these coincidences is that these artists, located in different geographical places, did not necessarily undertake this work under the guise of art but rather as personal reflections. This dialogue between work, artist, and researchers reveals a blend of intentions, a phenomenon in the midst of the obvious statement, that which appears in the everyday and begins to create a new phrase under the gaze of the collection and the curators.

The Illusion

The name El Dorado invokes expectations regarding territory leading towards a new life. It is an illusion, just as the artist's life is the construction of an illusion: it is based on a hope, on something that, even though it is materialized in the work, is also always immaterial. Here, a parallel can be found with the concept of El Dorado as a legend of the unattainable, of the constant and endless search that can be related to the immaterial aspect of art and to the contemporary idea of searching for meanings in the spaces between the endless number of significant layers that exist in the artistic endeavor.

At El Dorado, the research team for a particular project is not put together through calls for proposals, but instead it is organized based on a confluence of interests from which a

common question arises. This synergy is spontaneous and so hypotheses are built, resulting in a product that is defined during the exploratory process.

The working group has been formed based on the interests and trajectories (Wenger 2001) of each participant in their field. The projects start from an idea but not an absolutely defined hypothesis; rather they are approached from intuition. An example of this approach is the project centered on the work of Umberto Giangrandi, who is recognized as an engraver and painter, but who also has photographic work that was used more as a sketchbook than as an artistic statement. As in the other cases highlighted in the collection, this resource of Giangrandi's at the time he made it (from the sixties onward) acquires another dimension from the perspective of the researchers who participate specifically in this project. A different phenomenon emerges beyond artistic manifestation. If the artistic statement is declared via the work (its manifestation), these photographic notes, originally conceived as reminders or guides, open up new perceptual spaces, new phenomena which can also be perceived and examined. They are, in retrospect, observed from the counterpoints of historical images and moments, phenomena appearing in the interstices of the work in its close attention.

Because the method of those who come together to develop a project is at least partly built around intuition, which allows them to scrutinize what is hidden behind the manifestations observed in the works, this intuition leads to places that were not foreseen but that fit within José Darío Gutiérrez's intention as a collector. Unlike other exhibition spaces, El Dorado responds to this dynamic of intuition in the way things are exhibited. The different physical exhibition spaces have different environments in which there is room for propositions – or one could say speculations – that manage to transcend a preconceived purpose. The availability of physical space and time open up the possibility to discover.

The role of the collector in a methodology such as the one used by the Bachué Project consists of allowing researchers access to the collection with a confident attitude, without conditioning expected results, while valuing the intuition and contributions of the team. The management of the collection might be understood by the imagined image of finding a vein where a theme that unites the political, ideological, and artistic aspects of the collector with their works can be glimpsed. All these retrospective actions identifying phenomena beyond the manifestation are what will help the process of building an understanding of the artists, because it is not constrained to immediate solutions but to a commitment to a process and a permanent reflection of their artistic work.

The Challenges of a (Private) Collection as a Pedagogical Exercise

In the local context, the interaction between collections, archives, and creative processes is very recent, both in private and public spheres. The idea of the archive and the collection has traditionally been part of almost inaccessible private institutions, while public institutions are recent, so their use is not widely disseminated.

Cases such as the Proyecto Bachué take advantage of the repository to promote the collection from the interdisciplinary proposal in a fluid manner since the decisions come directly from the collector. At the same time, in public dynamics, the dependence on a bureaucratic system that supports the institution restricts the use of collection repositories.

That is why, in the private collection, there is always an element of ego, of enunciation, and, therefore, of power. This power gives the material possibility of surrounding oneself

with objects that provide the space to think, contemplate, question, and wait for other objects to complete the idea of the enunciation that was built from the works made by others, providing a rich benefit to the collector and their own development. But as a collection grows, things do not fit in the collector's environment, so they start to be put into storage and no longer pose questions for the collector, thereby losing the transcendental power they were given at a certain moment. In a collection there is an idea of being attached to the works, especially to those that are intrinsic to the discourse; in the case of Proyecto Bachué that discourse is very strong, so much so that an emphasis is placed on putting each and every work in the collection to use. Thus, power transcends private worlds to become a public stance, with a proactive attitude beyond the loan of the works to other institutional spaces such as museums. This is how the collection itself becomes a means of creation, leaving its place of passive contemplation in the private sphere.

Another important factor that the Proyecto Bachué challenges is the structure of the art world as faced by the collector, mediated by the figure of the gallery owner, who in turn is supported by curators and exhibition designers. The collector's message is often diluted by these perspectives, so that the collector ends up being structured and perceived as a resource, a philanthropist or a patron, a figure that is passive and survives because of its usefulness to the institution or the artist. Because the art world is readily influenced by economic capital, which often overrides cultural capital, the collector's opinion is not given as much weight or as much consideration as it should. Institutional stories, those of museums, are often used to defend the interests of the public and the curator. However, these voices can also fall into power dynamics when it comes to displaying art. Cases such as the Soumaya Museum have an important value in the character of their exhibitions, but are usually linked to the dynamics of economic power beyond the cultural capital of the collection. On the other hand, there are propositions focused on cultural capital, such as in the case of the Vogel collection (National Gallery of Art and Fine 2008), a model proposal based on an interest in a particular moment in art and not on economic concerns. In the end, collections such as the Bachué Project have a public purpose even though they are private in nature.

The collector's capacity to embody moments of a singular, perhaps unorthodox vision, has a value, supporting and also building a cultural value that exists outside the canon of the moment. The collector can highlight propositions that at the time of their creation were not given recognition by the establishment, which in the case of Proyecto Bachué and Espacio El Dorado, is focused on Colombian experimental photography from the second half of the century. The collection has brought works that were not recognized at the time back to the cultural spectrum, such as those of Taller 4 Rojo, Gertjan Bartelsman, Rosa Navarro, Becky Mayer, Beatriz Jaramillo, Camilo Lleras, Ida Esbar, Jaime Ardila, Ever Astudillo, Miguel Ángel Rojas, Oscar Monsalve, Fernell Franco, Patricia Bonilla, Antonio Inginio Caro, and Manolo Vellojín. In addition to a new appreciation of their work, its aesthetic content forms a social and political corpus of national history suddenly made tangible that can be an attempt to build other opportunities, but the difficulty of relying on the commercial market hangs over the existence of the project, which implies that it depends on what can be sold.

In the contemporary Colombian context, if institutions define what art and cultural heritage should be, and this is mediated by individuals who are in the position to give an opinion at a given time, it is necessary to consider the balance of power between the individual and the state institution. However, this bureaucracy has the problem that its budgets

are limited and depend on other dynamics unrelated to cultural propositions, in addition to being subject to government policies. In this regard, it is worth mentioning how institutions such as the Museum of Memory of Colombia have had their curatorial scripts changed, in this case because of government policies on the memory of the armed conflict (Lleras 2020). On the other hand, the private sector has the advantage of autonomous decision-making and provides possibilities to challenge the hegemony and show the other side of the coin. For this reason, a plurality of actors is necessary and, consequently, public collecting cannot be delegated all the responsibility for cultural memory, nor all the criteria for deciding what is included in the construction of a country's cultural heritage.

The collection is always a pedagogical object, like Jocotot's book that is open to anyone who wants to appropriate the language; the object regulates itself, and its virtue is to condition the process (Ranci re 2015:51). The collection of Proyecto Bachu e begins with a particular concern for conceptual art in the seventies that is surprised by what happens in its environment regarding other phenomena, such as creation processes or works of a similar nature; thus, the interpretation of this surprise in each project is to put these objects in dialogue. The curatorial proposals were built with bodies of work different from the publicly recognized work of the artists that make up the collection. In the particular cases linked to the photographic collection described in this chapter, the curatorship has been about works in progress, documents related to the works, or creative actions different from what we identify as the style of a specific artist. The axis of the collection – in this case, conceptual art and photography – is based on the fact that Colombia's art scene underwent a paradigm shift in the 1970s and 1980s, inextricably linked to the nation's contemporary sociopolitical upheaval. This period was defined by the political violence and unrest that plagued Colombia at the time, including the rise of drug cartels and guerilla warfare; this era witnessed a decisive break from traditional artistic expressions, with conceptual art and photography assuming the mantle of a groundbreaking movement. These mediums transcended mere aesthetic considerations, serving as a catalyst that propelled Colombian art onto the international stage. For the first time, Colombian artistic production actively engaged with the global discourse, its content reflecting the social and political realities of the region.

Photography plays a role of rapprochement, as it is a medium that is closer and more attractive to viewers who are not experts in a subject. In other artistic media, the viewer's attention wanders; in photography exhibitions, people tend to concentrate on the images. Although different media converge in the Bachu e Project collection, photography exceeds its role as a document, becoming an articulating axis for the construction of a creative process. Here photography's nature as a document does not lie principally in the idea of objectivity or reality, but in its narrative possibilities as a means to account for the historical moment from which this collection draws. As a central actor in this context, photography goes beyond photography and manages to impact viewers beyond the mere appreciation of the image.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- 1 Bachué and El Dorado are two figures from a traditional myth originating from Colombia's Andean region. Bachué was a deity worshiped by the Muisca people, who are the original inhabitants of the central area of Colombia. According to the legend, Bachué was considered the mother of these people, whom she taught various skills, including weaving and building. On the other hand, El Dorado is a well-known mythical city, believed to be made entirely of gold and situated somewhere in the Andes Mountains. It was a goal for several conquistadors during the period of the Viceroyalty of New Granada.
- 2 This period has now been reclassified under the title of the Sabana School (Escuela de la Sabana). Currently, there are different positions on this period, but they place it as the seed of the beginning of modernism in Colombia. For more information, consult: Serrano, E. (1990) *La Escuela en la Sabana*, Bogotá: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá y Novus Ediciones. Halim, B. (2017) *Historia urgente del arte en Colombia. Dos siglos de arte en el país*, Bogotá: Planeta. Malagón, R. (2023) "La pintura de paisaje de la Escuela de la Sabana: ¿una entrada a la modernidad pictórica en el arte colombiano o la naturalización de un paisaje cultural?" *H-ART. Revista de historia, teoría y crítica de arte* 13, pp. 81–104. <https://doi.org/10.25025/hart13.2023.05>.

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TOWARDS A NEW ARTS ECOSYSTEM

PhotoIreland's Strategy in Converging Communities Around Photography

Ángel Luis González Fernández

Over the last decade, PhotoIreland has evolved from a month-long annual event, named PhotoIreland Festival, to become a resource organization that supports international photography from Dublin with a multitude of projects that extend throughout the calendar year. Now constituting a festival, library, bookstore, exhibition organizer, Arts commissioning body, platform for print sales, project developer and collaborator, publisher of books, and a critical journal, the project has become an expansive ecosystem supporting contemporary photographic practice across its many stages. In doing so, it has demonstrated the potential of festivals as risk-tolerant laboratories where radical cultural production models can be incubated and grown, and around which new and diverse communities coalesce.

For over a decade, PhotoIreland Festival has facilitated an arena of experimentation which has made possible the generation of frameworks in support of artists, artform and audiences (the three pillars at the core of PhotoIreland's strategic planning) and has done so in a manner that has led the way in their development, exercising a critical role in the Arts. In reviewing and sharing its undertakings, this chapter sets out to ask whether it is possible to identify a set of ideas, processes, models, and structures that may inform and excite similar advances in other cultural contexts. What has informed the development of each of our projects, and how are these connected to local and international communities? What were, and perhaps continue to be, the main challenges that the organization faces in developing a thriving ecosystem?

The Context of Ireland

Having conversed with many photographers in Ireland, it is safe to say that British Documentary had an immense influence on Irish photographic practice in the 1980s, with Paul Graham being repeatedly mentioned as a key figure. His work *Troubled Land* (1986) offered a new approach to photographers beyond the exhausted vocabulary of photojournalism that was almost exclusively used to describe the Irish experience from the late 1960s. Graham's new way of observing, representing, and narrating brought together the bucolic and the critical, sharing the frame in a calm and conscious reflection of everyday life; the photographer replaced the space usually dedicated to sensationalism to allow instead for



Figure 29.1 PhotoIreland, *PhotoIreland's Support Framework*, 2022. Courtesy of PhotoIreland.

meditation, for pause, and for deeper engagement. Images became quiet, still, charged, and misleadingly simple. Irish photographers, from Paul Seawright, David Farrell, and Willie Doherty to Mary McIntyre and many others, triple-distilled this imported approach in their own ways and, over time, expanded their subject matters to other conflicts, lands, and peoples. The evolution of photography in Ireland is in great part to be credited to these and other contemporaneous photographers, as much as other artists, who later in the late 1990s contributed to the initiation of the first university degree programmes. Taught more often than not with a mixed approach between vocational profession and artistic practice, these programmes have generated a creative and critical space from which new practices thrived. Additionally, the European single market, the advent of the Internet, and the EU's deregulation of the air industry that facilitated the Ryanair boom, together intensified a transformation towards the wealth of practices that constitute photography in Ireland today. I count myself as a grateful beneficiary of this evolution.

Sometime during my final years in college finishing my BA Photography degree at the Dublin Institute of Technology (amalgamated into the Technological University Dublin in 2019), the idea of devising a photography festival in Dublin started to be formulated. I considered myself a product of that effervescent new arena that had been arising in the early 2000s, and I was excited by the new photographic practices developed by my peers at university as much as by the contemporary international context. I thought these were well worth presenting and celebrating. But the chances of this happening were pretty slim; since my arrival in Dublin in 1998, the number of relevant or engaging exhibitions programmed had been few and scattered, the opportunities offered to new graduates and emerging artists

were few, while at times the same senior photographers enjoyed back-to-back exhibitions. With a growing diversity of practices for the last decades, it was hard to comprehend why the discipline remained persistently underrepresented in Arts programming and Arts funding in Ireland, despite a demonstrated interest in local audiences towards photography – manifested for example by the queues for a number of recent ticketed traveling exhibitions by the likes of MoMA and the Bank of America Collection presented at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. This absence of a platform felt at odds with a society that exercised an eclectic and multidisciplinary mindset: the Irish embrace literature, theater, music, architecture, and the broad visual Arts. Why then leave aside photographic practices?

It was commonly understood by my college and photography peers that the landscape of the discipline in Ireland had been long associated with male-dominated conflict-focused practices. Such a notion was exemplified in the narratives put forward by two photography organizations associated with the discipline, a gallery in Dublin, *The Gallery of Photography* (founded 1978), recently self-appointed as *Photo Museum Ireland*, and a UK-focused publication in Belfast, *Source Magazine* (founded 1992). For years, their voice constituted an echo chamber that presented the public with a very narrow and repetitive scope of practices that we found inward-looking and unexciting. Surprisingly, in disregarding the many new ideas and practices that were arriving on the scene, they were actively leaving many practitioners out of their conversation. While one could usually attribute this to the result of restricted curatorial concerns, the focused curatorial voice of an organization, a lack of appetite for change or even an incapability to engage with it, personal interests may have been at play as they have clearly favored certain artists as much as a persistent focus on Ireland as a subject, in ways that, for us, became tedious.

Their narrow focus gave society a limited overview of what the expanse of photographic practices actually looked like in Ireland and internationally. Contemporary photography happened elsewhere, that is, in the many other cultural organizations that sporadically exhibited or published photography, where they would do so free from any agenda and preconception, welcoming new practices, approaching these with the same critical ambition and desire for urgency that they would apply to all their other curatorial projects. I believed that if I could present to the public what it was that excited me about this discipline, beyond this narrow band, I would be supporting artists I admired, and the response by audiences would be positive. Because of the huge gap in the provision of contemporary practices, change had been slowly manifesting in the cultural landscape. There had been a number of organizations and individuals pushing towards a broader and richer look into the artform. Worth mentioning in this regard, amongst others, is the immense hard work by individuals such as Peggy Sue Amison, Artistic Director between 2001 and 2014 at Sirius, in Cork, where she headed an ambitious multidisciplinary visual Arts and residency programme; Barry W. Hughes who ran the online magazine *SuperMassiveBlackhole* from 2009 but is currently inactive; and Agata Stoinska's *BLOW Photo magazine* that ran between 2010 and 2017. These, alongside other major agents without a strict disciplinary focus such as the Irish Museum of Modern Art, were contributing to the effervescent effect.

With all this in mind, I visited and experienced the energy around a number of photography festivals abroad. These events were successful in galvanizing the energy of many organizations and individuals, in gathering the public's attention towards relevant ideas and art practices, and in providing a space for experimentation in cultural production. Festivals are perceived as playful, current and diverse and their contagious intensity is a welcome addition to local everyday life. After all, their attractive and

participatory programming transforms with the experience of existing cultural spaces while providing unusual temporary sites that offer new readings of the fabric of the city. For this, I was convinced a festival was the ideal model to inform and excite local audiences: there was a need for an event of similar effect in Ireland, as a collective celebration that could bring together the broad and divergent communal energy around this discipline.

Over the course of a year and a half, I spoke with all the relevant individuals and organizations I considered my stakeholders: from the director of the Irish Museum of Modern Art to the local city council and the minister for culture; to many emerging and established artists, curators, and gallery directors; and to almost anyone that had anything to do with photography and the Arts on the island. Meanwhile, I approached a number of photography festivals around the world researching their philosophy, their reason for being, ways in which they supported their local community of artists, the model they followed, how funding was structured, and other aspects that I found essential. All these conversations informed and strengthened my proposition for a photography festival specifically for Ireland and allowed me to better understand the network of individuals and organizations I was to work with, including the many personal nuances, existing alliances, and a few animosities.

Around that time, I was put in contact with independent curator Moritz Neumüller, who had recently contributed to PhotoEspaña's program in various ways for a three-year run. He became the most important collaborator in the development of the festival's curatorial identity and core international community from the outset; his vast experience and knowledge of the international context was as valuable as his non-allegiance to any particular local community, Irish organization, artist, or art professional. Alongside my experience of the cultural landscape, before, during, and after graduating as a photographer, my collaboration with Neumüller enabled a great insight into the context of the festival, the existing shortcomings, and opportunities. In addition, my background in Journalism and Graphic Design would prove to be very useful in the coming years.

Structuring Change

Over the 15 years that I have worked developing PhotoIreland, I have had the opportunity to address a number of very specific needs, problems, and opportunities. Quite often the biggest challenge has been, and remains, how to operate in a critical and creative manner. That is, to devise projects in a way that is both relevant to the artists and discipline that provides the general public with rich experiences around current and relevant issues. It is in the particular response to each challenge that an organization formalizes its identity: its agility, openness, honesty, generosity, contemporaneity, and spirit of collaboration.

My conceptual approach always begins from a combination of critical and design-thinking processes. In order to prevent the repetition of formulaic, banal, or outdated approaches, and to avoid repeating mistakes, I work towards critically informed risk taken in the development of cultural projects. This involves a process of collective evaluation after every project to analyze successes, failures, and opportunities from which to draw conclusions that will inform and transform further iterations of said projects or any new ventures. In addition, the motivation behind each project as much as its identity are taken very seriously as, ultimately, I expect this approach to lead to a better comprehension of its aims and goals; it is important to be able to identify each project with a name, an attitude, a color

perhaps, and certainly a purpose, in this way it can then enjoy a voice and a personality behind which it should be easy to stand.

With this foundation, I have built structures of cultural production that are very specific in their remit, sharpened tools, and of which the festival has been perhaps the most fruitful—certainly one that generated the most fertile arena where other ideas could be tested. Here, I look at three aspects that facilitated structuring change that has been of substantial importance for PhotoIreland in the development of communities and exchange channels locally and internationally: portfolio reviews, transcontinental programmes, and more specifically institutional supports.

Networking the Discipline

In July 2010, the first edition of PhotoIreland Festival was launched, crystallizing the goodwill and excitement of the photographic community and supporting the local Arts scene with its arrival. While the first edition was a mere celebration of the discipline, with a non-curated selection of exhibitions in established, independent, and temporary spaces, the festival offered a powerful critical and creative voice from the second edition in 2011. Curator Moritz Neumüller proposed a constructive response against a defeatist mindset that was prevalent in the aftermath of Ireland's property-bubble crisis in the wake of the Celtic Tiger, by assembling a series of exhibitions, events, and conversations that brought together artists and professionals from various fields beyond the Arts into conversations around collaboration and contemporary issues.

That year, in order to broaden the scope of opportunities for local artists and to provide a wealth of new critical voices to converse with, we embraced the model of one-on-one portfolio reviews with a focus on inviting international specialists; during the so-called Professional Weekend, the festival provided local artists with access to these international guests, their ideas and expertise, which challenged, informed, and energized many practices. The invited professionals ranged from curators to publishers, from Europe and beyond, and in many cases their selection responded to strategic needs of our organization and curatorial planning. The reviews facilitated the formation of new friendships, partnerships, and collaborations beyond the festival timeframe in a way that was necessary and urgent. Seeing the work of our local network of artists being appreciated internationally felt like a corroboration of our purpose as an Arts organization, and the substantiation of the festival as a stimulating model, a laboratory of ideas, that provides the space to support artists, the discipline, and audiences.

Leaving aside various considerations regarding portfolio reviews including the power-relations they perpetuate (we developed our own format years later under the name Creative Practice Reviews, more attuned to small group critique), and despite their brevity in the calendar, it is clear that such meetings have contributed to the ongoing shift in the landscape of support for artists in Ireland that the festival provided from the outset, and I would recommend these as the starting point for any initiative looking to strengthen a local network around photography. Furthermore, they allowed us as an organization to enter a circuit of festivals, in Europe and beyond, where new international communities and projects started to take shape; an organization or collective, no matter the size, will benefit from the power of the internationalization of its endeavors, acting as a catalyst around which a local community will thrive.

European Platforms

Over the years, our growing team became aware of a number of Europe-wide networks, some self-funded, and some supported by Creative Europe, such as the ‘Festivals of Light’, of which some international colleagues were members. It was very clear that for a small organization based in a corner of Europe, two island hops off the continent, the idea of connecting with the wider Europe was essential: it would contribute to bypassing some of the many limitations of the local scene and what we saw as an excessive UK influence, and it would open up the exchange channels we were seeking.

In 2015, we received an invitation from the Portuguese cultural producer Procur.arte to join a €1m international partnership of some 20 organizations from 11 EU countries entitled ‘Flaneur – New Urban Narratives’. In receiving such an invitation, there was a sense of recognition of our labor over the years – our international colleagues were really paying attention – and it evidenced a sort of strategic value in the international landscape. Since then, we have participated in two other EU projects, specifically two platforms of ‘Photography: Parallel’, from 2017 to 2021 (also run by Procur.arte) and ‘Futures’, launched also in 2017 and that remains active and may run until 2028 if not beyond.

The value of these collaborations should not be trivialized. Whether they were co-funded by the EU or by any other regional cultural agents, or even funded at any level by those participating, in discussing how networks are formed and structured, one of the best and exemplary answers is in fact such multi-regional and transcontinental get-togethers, capable of propitiating the exchange of knowledge, resources, and most importantly practices and ideas. They do so through a model of collaboration that stipulates the sharing of responsibilities amongst members, more often than not equating their responsibilities and benefits, regardless of their size and contribution. Our experience as participants in these projects has been fantastic, enjoying very productive and informative results, being surrounded by organizations of shared ambition regardless of their size and infrastructure. In addition, seeing best practice at play through the many organizations and individuals we met and the projects we worked on has shaped a better awareness of our institution and its role in the Arts landscape locally and globally.

These networks were successes for us as participants, yet they continue to be meaningful beyond their own remit because of the many new relationships between individuals and organizations that they generated; these outlive the original timeframe of the projects and are incredibly unpredictable – that being a positive quality here – in the extent of their productivity.

Institutional Supports

In setting up an ambitious cultural project, various types of support are needed, whether from individuals or organizations. Identifying your stakeholders and starting conversations with them is the first step; they have a vested and very clear interest in the activities of your project and will consider how they align with their own aims and goals. Through these conversations, I was able to identify who would support the festival and how in the very early years, and would support other projects that followed. I realized early on that there will always be a number of institutions whose job is to support you, most likely financially, such as those administering art funds for the Ministry of Culture; other organizations may provide expert support as consultancies, such as local Enterprise Boards, which will aid with the sustainability of a project, of a business.

I also found out very early in the process how some organizations whose remit I believed was supporting the very same niche sector didn't want to collaborate or support the project unless they had some degree of control over it. Perhaps they perceived the festival as a potential threat to their monopoly, but nevertheless that was a revelation to a naive college graduate, and it has unfolded over the years in many surprising ways. A note of caution then is worthwhile here to underline that not all organizations that work in your sector will welcome you, and that is okay too.

Curiously, the first organizations that supported the festival project were the cultural institutions associated with the embassies such as the Alliance Française, Instituto Cervantes, Goethe-Institut, as much as the embassies, likely because they understood the value of the cultural model proposed, as they had similar events in their regions. Ideally, we should identify and engage with such organizations in developing long-lasting relationships through short- and medium-term projects, as these would facilitate opening those international exchange channels we desire.

A Hub for the Arts: The Library Project

In an attempt to discuss models that can support the work of an organization in affecting direct change to artists, artform, and audiences, we will revisit 2011, when, testing new grounds to galvanize the excitement around the discipline, PhotoIreland organized its first Art Book fair. The idea of the Art Book fair was always two-fold: it would allow us (as we seek in all our projects) to talk about the importance of photography and the photobook in contemporary practices, and to provide both art professionals (artists, curators, etc.) as much as the general public with an opportunity to engage with hundreds of practices, ideas, and creative approaches that were hardly reaching us at the time.

The interest was already generated in its developmental stage by the main festival exhibition of 2011 and accompanying publication *Martin Parr's Best Books of the Decade*, which gathered the 30 most influential photobooks of the last decade according to Parr, feeding our motivation to host an Art Book fair during the festival. The fair would not only expand the presentation beyond Parr's taste, but it would exemplify the value of the book format for contemporary artists. For this, our Arts Administrator volunteer at the time, Claudi Nir, made an ambitious push contacting hundreds of publishers from all over the world, ultimately gathering over 600 publications from more than 100 publishers. They were presented during the PhotoIreland Festival in July 2011 to a great response. The fair was not a commercial event per se; no books were available for purchase and they were mostly one-off copies donated to us as samples for presentation during the festival. The accompanying programme of events brought to Dublin the likes of Bruno Ceschel (Self Publish, Be Happy), Markus Schaden, and many other figures that, with Martin Parr, contributed to underline the importance of the book in the Arts.

After the fair, the books were stored in our office, and since then they have represented the core of our own project to constitute a resource library, just as we had promised the many book donors, artists, and publishers, so that the publications could be accessed all year round. This was what we called then The Library Project. Over the coming years, the books were presented in every edition of the festival, and curated selections were brought to other international festivals such as Self Publish Riga, Photobook Melbourne, and others. In September 2013, we received an invitation to take over the gallery space of Dublin's Black Church Print Studios for a month-long residency to showcase The Library

Project. This street-facing venue was the ground floor of a three-floor purpose-built facility, part of the development of the area during the late 1990s with EU capital. We took this opportunity, excited to have a presence in the city center to promote the work of artists.

During that time we offered the collection to all visitors as a non-lending library, a resource library where people could come in, browse, and sit down to enjoy the books. The publications ranged from art books to photobooks and fanzines and some specialized magazines. The response was excellent, with many visitors wanting to buy the books, many of which were the only copies in the country. Over that month, we realized that the space had a huge potential: it was granting us a new channel to converse with the public about contemporary practices, and it provided a generous space to use as a showcase. In the past, the venue was used as a gallery and before that as a print shop, with an ideal location in one of the busiest tourist districts. The idea of opening a bookshop was formulating in our heads, and soon we were presenting a proposal to become permanent tenants. Our relationship with artists and publishers would evolve, able now not only to showcase their materials but to actually sell them. We saw the potential of such a space despite the many limitations, with its subsidized rent (it is a building owned by the city council) right on one of the busiest streets, and worked hard to make it an exciting cultural hub.

The first two years were dedicated to making the space a venue constantly in use, hosting talks, exhibitions, residencies, book launches, and even Christmas markets, while connecting with the fabric of well-established festivals and events in the calendar, and supporting the practice of many graduates and emerging artists. Meanwhile, we were offering the book collection in the mezzanine area of the venue, safe and in a comfortable working space. In a way, we took the space and ran with it, thinking that this stroke of luck may not last long. Even though meeting the rent and bills was a struggle, it looked like our presence in the space was secured for as long as we could pay, so we realized there was a need for long-term planning. We placed our focus on improving the space and sharpening its voice to provide better support for local photographers.

In 2014, we developed a simple postcard project that proved to be quite successful. Across from The Library Project sits one of the busiest souvenir shops for tourists in the country, offering the largest selection of merchandise about Ireland one can imagine. These materials perpetuate a particular representation of Ireland as an imagined fairytale land, divorced from its complex reality, lost between the pun and the stereotype. We wanted to join the conversation, sharing a more authentic view of Ireland as told by local artists, promoting their work in the making. 'Greetings From Ireland' provided 40 vistas by 40 artists, and it was but an excuse to both show a less posed image of the country and, ultimately, to have the names of the photographers involved in the mouths of visitors. The postcards were sold in the bookshop, and tourists and locals alike loved them. As a project, the work was exhibited in 2015 at PhotoIreland Festival, Photobook Melbourne, the Triennial of Photography Hamburg, in 2016 at the Landskrona Photo Festival, and in 2017 as part of 'Post-Picturesque: Photographing Ireland' in Minnesota, USA, at the Perlman Teaching Museum and the Rochester Art Center.

In 2015, we launched HALFTONE, a print fair that would run for a month every year in November with the aim of promoting an understanding of the photographic work as a collectible object. Every year, the print fair brought together hundreds of artworks from a

wide variety of prices and dressed The Library Project site with a salon-style hang, placing photography at the center. The sale of artworks is perhaps the best and most direct way to support photographers and artists in general, as the revenue raised can have a considerable impact on their livelihoods. The fair has raised over €80,000 for artists since 2015, supporting and promoting the practice of over 800 participating artists, shipping their work internationally, and contributing to public and private collections. HALFTONE celebrated a very loose community of diverse artists that got together during the event and discovered each other's practices, expanding their local network and generating new alliances and friendships that have resulted over the years in a number of very productive cross-pollinations and collaborations. It also motivated many photographers to loosen up and experiment with other printing approaches, with Risography and four-color screen prints becoming very popular.

During 2016 and 2017, The Library Project hosted the 'New Irish Works' project, presenting a series of ten two-person exhibitions promoting the works of 20 artists. The artists were selected by an international panel and the project itself, a triennial push to market Irish talent, was in its second cycle. Alongside the exhibitions by two artists at a time, an A5 publication was launched, one per artist, eventually completing a set of 20 that was kept together in a slipcase. Having the opportunity to programme exhibitions showcasing artists within the PhotoIreland umbrella of projects gave the space a unique site amongst the photographic community as a new home and the place to find out about contemporary practice. The wide selection of photobooks available in the shop and the specialized photobook library made for an ideal package.

Given the self-funded nature of The Library Project, it is hard to find spare resources to develop projects, and often it is through applying that critical and creative mindset that new opportunities can be generated. A good example is TLP Editions, an ongoing series of publications started in 2017 that already has over 60 titles. The project took the lessons from the New Irish Works publications in the production of materials at low cost but with quality, gathering a community of peers around the project.

The nature of the TLP Editions goes far as publications. Being inexpensive on both sides, they are cost-effective to produce and affordable to purchase. With a mere 36 pages at A5 size, they offer an opportunity for artists to tease out a body of work with enough depth to make it meaningful. They became a handy resource to promote the artists beyond the bookshop, as we started to use them as a type of business card, giving them away to key colleagues at international events and donating them to libraries. Any funds raised from the sales for these were invested in printing more copies, making it a sustainable project.

It was our intention that these materials would provide a number of levels of engagement for the passer-by, for the tourist, and the local visitor. We learned that whenever the venue was presented as a gallery space, the levels of visitors would be worryingly low, but once the retail vocabulary of the art bookshop was present, the numbers skyrocketed. If the codes or expectations around negotiating an exhibition were a problem, a new approach had to be resolved to provide the same or a broader cultural *product*. Entering the space, visitors would discover a lot more than they expect about contemporary Arts in Ireland, browsing the many local publications by artists and galleries dotted amongst international examples, purchasing a postcard or a TLP Edition, or discovering new artworks by local artists.

Belonging

Being part of a popular postcard project, a programme of professional development, or a publication series; having a publication in the library collection for consultation and in the bookshop for sale; and being able to exhibit works publicly: each give participants another reason to feel part of a community of artists, to see themselves grounded in contemporary practice, gaining the confidence to continue in the challenging career of being an artist.

These are only some of the many projects that PhotoIreland developed over the decade to promote a healthy ecosystem, to provide opportunities, and to excite the local community. Many of them responded to both opportunities and crises, and the understanding that both are opposite sides of the same coin.

Such is the case of *OVER Journal*, ‘The Critical Journal of Photography and Visual Culture for the 21st century’ now in its third edition. The journal was born in the early months of COVID, seeking to recapture the tactility that the pandemic had made digital, with a global focus purposely seeking collaborators and stories from all continents. The mindset that brought *OVER Journal* to life is the same that feeds all our projects, whether process or output driven, from professional development supports such as New Irish Works and RADAR, to residencies like How To Flatten A Mountain and RELAY, and the critical arena we call the Critical Academy. It is a mindset born from a desire to provide a rich art infrastructure that contributes critically to the advancement of the Arts. It is what I have defined as ‘a 360 degree support system and platform for contemporary photography’ (PhotoIreland, n.d.). Through experimentation and a desire for a better future together, an event such as the festival has become over time a community of like-minded individuals, an international network of friendships. And, as the network solidified, it informed the consolidation of an organization. The organization today is able to provide highly targeted and deeply meaningful cultural structures for specific audiences, seeking opportunities to bring communities together around the Arts, and facilitating multiple communities to access cultural production.

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30

TOWARDS AN ARTISANAL INTELLIGENCE

Reflections From the Academic Periphery in Latin America

*Camilo Páez Vanegas, Anamaría Briede Westermeyer,
Ana Casas Broda, Alexander Fattal and Gisela Volá*

Moderated and introduced by Camilo Páez Vanegas.

Roundtable Participants: Anamaría Briede Westermeyer, Ana Casas Broda, Alexander Fattal, and Gisela Volá.

Photography as a combined practice and educational process awakens many meanings from the different contexts where it is practiced. As an object of study and as a dynamic tool for learning, its role has been crucial to a range of communities, from those who gather interest in photography itself as a means of creation and communication, to those who use it to establish participatory social practices and collaborative dynamics. In this roundtable, we discuss the impact of photography on different communities outside of what we can understand as an academic frame, that is, practices, communities, and workshops beyond the programs endorsed by the educational entities of each country which establish the duties and codes of photography teaching. This conversation is framed by the Latin American context, which today continues to debate the heterogeneities of multiculturalism, a multitude of social gaps, and the search for an identity across an extensive territory that, from the perspective of the central countries, is largely homogeneous in its colonial dynamics. Projects that participate in this conversation seek different forms of emancipation within the communities in which they operate, with the creative process of photography acting as a driving force to achieve modes and sites of enunciation for their participants.

In this sense, the process of emancipation refers to photography as a technology that plays roles in democratization and contestation through transformations in how its images are created, shared, and consumed. Likewise, the value of recursivity and reflection that photography enables is enhanced in precarious environments such as those of communities on the periphery. This results in possibilities for experimentation, but also a transcendence of discourses beyond the quality and technical efficiencies of the medium, towards a notion defined in this conversation as Artisanal Intelligence.

Artisanal Intelligence arises from the hybrid processes experienced intensely in post-colonial societies. This cultural mix establishes possibilities for the appropriation of

media inside and outside of those established by the power structure. The hybrid looks back at its images, not from an imposed nostalgia, but from a review of the possibilities to be interpreted again, turned towards the options and possibilities within the context where they take place. Therefore, the hybrid condition does not fit into the uniform and standardized processes characteristic of consumer societies. From this perspective, Artisanal Intelligence takes up the notion of an engaged user who appropriates the means for his or her service, abandoning the role of the passive consumer, technically and ideologically.

Critical to introducing our conversation is the power of collaboration, critical thinking, and empathy in the photography's collective exercises. Through the use of photography as a collaborative or social medium, links are strengthened, diversity and multiple positions are sought, and social justice is promoted through artistic expression amidst post-colonial and neoliberal dynamics circulating in the Latin American continent.

This conversation begins with presentations of each of the participants' projects and the communities they worked with.

Alexander Fattal (AF): I am from Philadelphia, and in an exchange year after my undergraduate studies with a Fulbright scholarship, I arrived in Colombia, where I developed a project called *Disparando Cámaras por la Paz* (Shooting Cameras for Peace). The seed of that project was raised in my undergraduate schooling, where I had the experience of participating in the Literacy Through Photography program founded by Wendy Ewald, a figure in the world of participatory photography. I spent an undergraduate semester in Chile. Still, that year in Colombia was an intense immersion for me and the communities [where] I worked in the southwest of Bogotá, in the El Progreso neighborhood.

After a year, the project had extensive media coverage, and several people approached me seeking to give it continuity, so we created the Shooting Cameras for Peace Foundation, which lasted more or less ten years between 2001 and 2011. Then, starting in 2016, I began to gather perspectives and archives of what we did, and in 2020, I published a bilingual book about that process. As I said, the proposal was advanced in El Progreso, which is a community in the Altos de Cazucá area, where many displaced people from the armed conflict and economic migrants arrive.

The book celebrates the images of the area's young people, more than 1,000, but it is also a critical look at participatory photography, reflecting on how often these projects are developed in a way that minimizes the crucial element. In 2006, I started a doctorate on image, advertising, and the conflict in Colombia, and I trained as an anthropologist. *Shooting Cameras* was my entrance to Colombia and is what I am most recognized for. At this moment, I am doing a couple of books with a Colombian researcher named Andrés Felipe Caicedo, and we are working on both the historical at the end of the 20th century and the contemporary.

Ana Casas Broda (ACB): I am a photographer by training. I studied painting, photography, and history, before founding the independent project Hydra. I first worked in Spain in Fine Arts education, then, from the inauguration of the Centro de la Imagen (Center for the Image) in Mexico, I was in charge of the educational area for many years. First, from 1993, before it was founded, until

1998, then from 2002 to 2006. We had a program together with another public institution. In Mexico, public institutions significantly promoted culture until only a few years ago.

I managed various activities between the Centro de la Imagen and the different publicly promoted areas of the artistic scene. From there, the photography seminar of the Centro de la Imagen was developed, which trained many photographers from Mexico in conjunction with the Centro de las Artes de San Agustín (San Agustín Arts Center) Oaxaca. This was one of the most significant experiences for training at this stage before the Internet began to emerge. We worked with indigenous communities using the camera: Mexico is the country in Latin America with the most living indigenous communities, with languages, customs, and living social structures prevalent since before the arrival of the Spanish people. This experience was incredible, and I continue working with these communities where photography has been the ideal medium for their development and communication. From this experience, we curated the book *Develar y Detonar: Fotografía en México ca. 2015* (Reveal and Detonate: Contemporary Mexican Photography), which was a study of 53 young Mexican photographers and an exhibition that traveled to many places worldwide.

Hydra emerged in 2012 with Gerardo Montiel Klint, Gabriela González Reyes, and I. Gerardo Montiel Klint is no longer active in the team, but Gabriela and I continue. Gabriela is dedicated to archives and conservation funds, and I have always focused on education. What I have done, apart from other educational programs, is promote the Photobooks program that I started in 2016. We have a bookstore where we began to import from Europe and then from Latin America: currently, it is a bookstore where you can see Photobooks from different parts of the world. That's how I started a program called *Incubadora de Fotolibros* (Photobook Incubator), which is in its fourth edition, actually fourth and fifth because this year it is both in person and online. It is a very active program based on the production and selection of a group of authors as heterogeneous as possible, with projects that have a viability to develop and be transformative. There are guests from all over the world, and each 'generation' varies, with the idea of transforming the idea of the photography book as a device that allows the creation of new narratives. In 2018, we published 22 Photobooks and went to all the possible fairs in Europe and the United States, but then we began to happily circulate throughout Latin America.

Anamaria Briede Westermeyer (ABW): I am part of the educational project Imagen Salvaje, which was born at the Festival Internacional de Fotografía de Valparaíso (Valparaíso International Photography Festival or FIFV). With 14 years of operations, it is the generator and founder of many projects we are developing: it is a festival that has generated its own publishing house, FIFV Editions; The Valparaíso Collection contains the books from the international and national residencies we have received in Valparaíso; Casa Espacio (Space House) is where our organization meets. We envisioned four pillars: 1. Our editorial team; 2. The Library, which has more than 2000 photobooks and prototypes of photobooks from around the world; 3. the FIFV; and 4. Imagen Salvaje (Wild Image).

We are developing a fifth initiative, which is an audiovisual project that we call Sensitive Machine. With *Imagen Salvaje*, for six years I have been dedicated to bringing together, mediating, and beginning collaborative creation processes with interested learning communities of the image to generate new links with a new audience. This brings closer and shares themes and concerns we raise internally at Casa Espacio – FIFV. These are questions that have to do with our contingency, our place, and connectivities.

Imagen Salvaje works with learning communities throughout Latin America, Peru, Mexico, and Argentina, local schools, private schools, and learning institutions without prior notions of photography and image training spaces. We try to generate interdisciplinary intersections; photography is a pretext to raise reflections and creative possibilities that trigger poetic social-political consciousness.

The project has been growing over time. Last year, we had youth brigades for the first time in the festival context. The project has been gradually expanding, and last year, we had a group of young trainers form brigades for the first time in a festival setting. These experiences occurred outside of institutional contexts and brought fresh ideas to the trainers, which they incorporated into the creative field. This is where we aim to inspire them to desire to live and realize the importance of what we do with the image.

Gisela Volá (GV): From my perspective, I dare to say, with a bit of irreverence, that I have spent my life since I was 12 years old in different educational art spaces, both multi-purpose art and film schools, private workshops, artistic residencies, in which I have trained with teachers, where you went to the mountains, to the beach; to study, to connect with tools that did not necessarily have to be technical. That inspired me to think about where I would position myself later when I decided to carry out this learning task that is an exercise of changing the codes, the language. It has been necessary for me to call students participants and teachers activators. This implies understanding each other as colleagues because in many spaces in which we participate, we are at the same level, becoming aware that the hierarchy is a learned place, and instead, it is a space where I, as a teacher, have always felt that I am the one who learns the most in the relationship, between those who teach and those who learn.

Ten years ago, I began to coordinate a space called *Sub Plataforma Educativa* (Sub Educational Platform), carrying out different experimental programs teaching photography, growing more than ever; after living in a physical space – like *Hydra* – which is school, is home, is a study, is everything. Today, I no longer have a physical place; I work in online spaces, but I am increasingly convinced that the meeting should be physical and in an undetermined place. So, since last year, I have been coordinating a meeting called *Eco Encuentro de Colectivos Iberoamericanos* (Eco Meeting of Ibero-American Collectives); the previous year, the event venue was in Mexico, and this year it will be in Bolivia. It brings together 50 people from at least eight or nine countries to have ten days' coexistence, having worked throughout the year. We will have an interdisciplinary



Figure 30.1 Gisela Volá, *Workshop Image I*, 2018–2019, Buenos Aires. Sub Plataforma Educativa space. Courtesy of Gisela Volá @giselavola.

learning space with photographers, anthropologists, and sociologists; there are five people from indigenous communities. This space generates a robust collaboration, always thinking about the value of the stories told through images, but above all, placing more and more emphasis on how the stories we tell pass through us and our lived experience, more than they might be considered in an academic program (Figures 30.1 and 30.2).

Camilo Páez Vanegas (CPV): From these introductions and their ideas, I want to open this conversation up to talk about the impact these projects have had, which are very fluid because they change, vary over time, take on other names. What meanings have they had within those communities? What are some of the contexts in which these projects have developed or changed?

ACB: In my case, I form heterogeneous groups of diverse cultures in a horizontal manner different from a traditional academic space. When I arrived in Mexico as a child, the Active School model was the trend, and they are spaces where I really learned, which have a basis in education and exchange. Our groups are always very heterogeneous, and I agree with what Gisela says about exchanging stories. Every time we make a program we are learning, I am really changing the content all the time because I believe that society and its relationship with the image are changing all the time in dizzying ways, and, therefore, we generate spaces where the authors recognize those changes. It is curious because



Figure 30.2 Gisela Volá, *Workshop Image II*, 2018–2019, Buenos Aires. Sub Plataforma Educativa space. Courtesy of Gisela Volá @giselavola.

Gisela questioned the idea of the relationship between students and teachers: for me, they are not participants, I consider them authors; they are people who share a story and who come to a creative process; they transform, and we all change collectively.

We do many things, publishing or things such as festivals, but very few people are in charge. To put it briefly or quickly: I have taken many risks personally at levels that I did not expect. We supported many Latin American authors to publish their first book, taking them to worldwide fairs based on the madness of doing this! To do so we have also made significant investments in infrastructure to generate a kind of creation in motion, and to be able to do things and place authors into an international context.

The purpose of this is not only to include the authors in an international context but to encourage a critical stance in the author within their own learning. We must give a place to this because for books the way out into the world is more complex than one believes because there is an established circuit to learn how to navigate. Books offer authors an incredible platform because they offer an exposure to something small which can operate on different substrates and with a multi-level experience, and I consider this very valuable at this moment: it is why I have focused so much on it. But I don't assume we are a publisher because a publisher edits other people's books; instead, we are a space that invites authors to generate their own stories, which is very different from being an editor. Then you might have a new way of looking at books.

Independent projects and their management are very complicated; in Mexico you sometimes have to get around the existing infrastructures and systems, and sometimes you have to sidestep them because it [Hydra] has to do things as simple as negotiating who rents the space, who pays for the services, who opens the door. From my experience, the collectivist mindset has become something tremendously concrete. While touring Latin America, I realized that Mexico, from the first part of the 20th century until 15 years ago, had the most significant cultural institutions in the region at a time when there were dictatorships in Spain, Argentina, and Chile [with restrictions on expression]. I had yet to realize how Mexico had been a paradise of official culture with a popular discourse with many opportunities, such as scholarships and exhibitions; this also nevertheless led to the bad habit of expecting the State to sponsor everything! Luckily, I was part of some of the State initiatives that were incredible and organized differently. At the *Centro de la Imagen* (Image Center) with Patricia Mendoza, we produced a program of 300 workshops a year, allowing generations of authors of different ages to attend because it was an open and democratic space.

In other parts of Latin America it is exciting to see independent spaces, something not very common here in Mexico. So for me, it was precious and fascinating to come to Sub and the FIFV and see this tradition of independent and alternative spaces, especially in Argentina and Chile where they had to fight against dictatorships, where things often happened behind closed doors. They are remarkable initiatives. In Mexico, there were practically no independent spaces because everything had to be paid for by the State.

ABW: I wanted to go back to what Gisela talked about, and how these desires to work with others are organized: for me, people are essential, and more than the institution to which they belong; there is an internal activation, a desire for finding an affinity with others, to continue weaving something that lasts. What has been confirmed to me in the time that I have been working is that the relationship generated with another through a creative process is nourishing and can be more profound than a friendship. I think that super powerful things are activated at a human level. I have verified this when I make the 'wild' call with our collaborators: they are always there, ready. There is a meaningful potential when you assume that the other can be part of a creative pair. We attend to and protect each other, suggest exercises, 'liquid exercises,' that we can share. In this sense, liquid is a kind of adaptability, an ability to respond, using a structure as a shelter that contains. Imagine if you have a small glass: in that glass the exercise arises and is worked on; if you have a larger one, you adapt to that shape. We are adapting to differences as organic potential. Wild Image is moldable liquidity. I don't know how to continue, but I have an intuitive certainty of the impulse that awakens creativity's mysterious but nourishing potential. Conscious, creative, reflective doing. How, with whom, and when to be with another? Going back to a little is also a lot. The precariousness that is our common denominator in Latin America generates exquisite improvisation, an adaptability itself improvised from our precarious present (Figures 30.3 and 30.4).



Figure 30.3 Anamaría Briede Westermeyer, Extracted image from REVISTA IMAGEN SALVAJE, a special edition about five years of working with learning communities in Chile, Latin America, and Europe (December 2021, FIFV EDICIONES). Courtesy of Anamaria Briede Westermeyer.

ACB: I consider that debatable. All the independent publishing projects emerged around 2012 or 2015 out of nowhere, that is, by authors who skipped the traditional editing processes. When you go to those book fairs, you realize that we are all the same and no one makes money, so there is a system, and a set of structures – for example, festivals – that also prioritizes things. The reality is that most of the publishers work from home, have no money and are in Europe. I think that what can absorb you has little or nothing to do with place because, for example, in Latin America there are hegemonic hierarchical structures in the field of education where the notion of teacher and student still exists and that must be negotiated.

GV: I believe that this is related to the situatedness that Anamaría commented on. All our learning and knowledge and how we construct meaning, we build in a situated way, in our way of producing, of circulating, our beliefs about how the path of an artist should be, from their beginning to their maximum goal. In Argentina, our school model was to look at Europe for a long time. So, the ultimate goal is to end up, for example, in Paris, in those spaces romanticized in the artist's imagination. Therefore, we must discuss critically why we look at Europe or the United States. I am teaching on a master's degree in Spain, where you find many



Figure 30.4 Anamaría Briede Westermeyer, Extracted image from REVISTA IMAGEN SALVAJE, a special edition about five years of working with learning communities in Chile, Latin America, and Europe (December 2021, FIFV EDICIONES). Courtesy of Anamaria Briede Westermeyer.

Latin American students because that is the journey that must be made. The question would be: Why in Latin America do we still need to validate ourselves in other continents and return to our lands with those legitimations from the global north? I meet many students in Spain and I ask them: will you stay and live here? Do you feel comfortable? Do you like it? And they usually tell me: No, I'm waiting to finish to go back and make my cultural center in Bogotá, in Cali, in Río Negro, in Argentina, or in Chile. There is a need for these legitimations. And it is for this reason that networks are so important, to feel that we are a synergy that on these continents are generating something, a fabric, even if it is invisible, even if it is artisanal. This is decisive, because I think the system at some point can fail. The machines fail. And when those systems fail we are there because, and I like this expression, we are not image capturers, we are not shooters; we are farmers, we are there sowing the land so that other things can grow.

Above all, this is because the possibility of being what that system has sold us as the idea of success, when you feel that you are on firm ground, is such a great fiction because there is not enough money, there is not enough of an infrastructure or career path to sustain that. So, we are living a very fragile fiction in the face of a harsh reality. We might think, especially when the image is so linked to

that concept of truth, that what is true is what is genuine. That is, what is sincere, what is human, what is political is as they say they it is, all because what we are doing are projects where we problematize and question and where there is a political activity outside a legitimizing system. Yet we could have schools where we charge expensive tuition, like they were private spaces, and then access to those places becomes for a very elitist field. We could call for a profile of highly recognized teachers to come to our spaces to further legitimize the participants. In the case of *Sub*, we opted for other things, and this, for me, is a political decision, like every year deciding that the fee should be accessible, or calling on people who don't figure everywhere, or granting more scholarships recipients because they nourish and enrich debates that would otherwise take place only amongst people who can already access the art world. I believe that those are decisions that we are constantly discussing, to dismantle the emphasis on privileged people who have access to the world of art.

AF: One of Gisela's ideas that resonated with me is that we are farmers of images. That was our experience when we went from the initial stage of working with 30 young people in a very homemade and precarious way with our local partner – an informal educational project with a community leader – to turning it into an NGO. We experienced quite a lot in the trajectory of *Disparando Cámaras por la Paz* that there was a contagion of enthusiasm: we developed a curriculum, which was the pinhole camera at some point. That was boring and trite for me, but young people loved it. It was magical and coherent with the context, using recycled materials from the same neighborhood. It allowed everyone to be a photographer without buying a camera. The land was controlled by groups outside the law, meaning young people could not move freely from hill to hill. But it was relayed by word of mouth that a group of young people were converting cans into cameras, creating a fascination. When I returned years later to talk about which projects had been most impactful, it was the pinhole camera. We had another more exciting project for me, which was working with a mirror with which they took some photographs as a self-portrait. This was a self-portrait as a group where they each held a corner of the mirror. So, in the photo, the hands and arms of many of them, even the dog, appear. It was very nice at the level of a framing concept and other technical ideas, but at the same time, it was about bodies and the relationships in a social group of friends. From my perspective, that was something more revealing, though for them, it was the pinhole camera! At the end of the project, a reflection arises that no matter how beautiful the project is, we must also recognize that it is being mediated by someone and something. It is not just photojournalism that is mediated by advertising or the editorial gaze. It is mediated by the interests of the humanitarian industry and the people there (Figure 30.5).

Part of our proposal was a group very dedicated to research and participatory action. With this, they began to coordinate with other students in other parts of the hills. When the project could not continue because there were no funds, it was a painful moment, but other projects are born, other groups. At this moment, I am observing the effervescence around the image in Colombia, several groups that are publishing a lot, and their editorial projects that are circulating. To a



Figure 30.5 Alex Fattal, *Backward self-portrait*, photographer unknown. Courtesy of Fundación Disparando Cámaras para la Paz.

certain extent, I feel proud to have been part of this phenomenon since I believe that *Disparando Cámaras por la Paz* played a role in that contagion.

I think that all of us here try to make photography achieve its democratic promise, a promise that is sometimes frustrated, and so I understand that Shooting Cameras acted to democratize at a micro-scale as a specific project. Although it never transcended the precariousness that has been mentioned, it did sow and nurture a culture of the image in a complicated context.

CPV: Technological mediation in the practice of photography is undeniable. How do your projects face this issue, and how do you take advantage of it?

GV: Every time I hear the words ‘artificial intelligence’ I feel that some great urgencies within photography and other disciplines emerge. When I think about technology and the technicality related to photography, I feel that there is a mechanical and technical association with photography related primarily to technical advances or setbacks. However, this year, when I was a judge at the World Press Photo in Latin America and the Pictures of the Year Latam (POY Latam), I saw the most artisanal intelligence, because I see more and more experimentation with photography as a medium. I see people who are authors who are looking for what happens on a sensitive level. I see things that matter more than shocking photos, raising questions: where does this come from? What does it mean? What is evoked? What are the materialities or the sensations? I believe that photographers are increasingly encouraged to experiment and transcend the image because I would even say that we are tired of images, perhaps tired of making them for the sake of making them, and this [is] when one becomes a conscious author.

- ACB:** I feel that for many years the image has been democratized. Indigenous communities in Mexico that previously saw the camera as a tool of power now work with it themselves. The exciting thing that differs is that what was once a photographic record has become a photographic creation. Given the enormous proliferation of images, it can be very positive that authors are much more aware that an image, to say something, has to surpass what was once set as a standard. Many renowned photographers use cell phones and I find it extraordinary because in the end, it is nothing more than a resource. It is now cheaper to publish, which allows authors to generate a body of work with more authentic content. There is a very interesting democratization in this; we are open to new narratives. Particularly in our workshops, people from different backgrounds, such as indigenous communities, participate. However, some of these narratives are distorted, and this is dangerous. There has been a long time when the exciting thing was that you were indigenous, and your voice was supposed to be as authentic and unpolished as possible: you won all the awards. Fortunately, this has been overcome. We are in an inspiring stage where projects can be carried out, working with communities, children, and young people, activating the creative process and intelligently using technology.
- ABW:** You must position yourself in those few places, the voids and the fissures: that constitutes us as Latin Americans. I learned with photocopies, as I have done only rarely with an original book on visual arts, that with pure photocopies, 'it is what it is.' From there, you can look and do. The same happens with new technologies and existing languages. We must readjust, vindicate, and review ourselves.
- AF:** Thinking about the process in *Disparando Cámaras por la Paz*, the physical space of the darkroom was vital, the desire to be there under the red light, waiting for the magic of the image when it appeared on the paper. A simple little house became a magical space and a social, playful gathering. When I arrived for the first time in 2001, I was loaded with photography books to show and discuss. I am critical of the framework that reduces participatory photography to giving away; when projects describe themselves as 'we give so many cameras to so many,' this is the wrong approach for me. I preferred to emphasize the dialogue that emerged around the image. This perspective has been strengthened by research in the new book. Photographers of my generation talk about their Tumblr experiences, consuming a lot of images and how that 'opened up worlds.' Obviously, there are many changes with the Internet and being able to access such a wide variety of jobs, but that feeling of working in the darkroom with someone has been lost. We must consider this impact on social projects and how it promotes this type of artisanal intelligence, which Gisela spoke about. For me, the future is hybrid (Figure 30.6).
- ACB:** We always talk about this experience of sharing with others, and it is something that has a lot to do with the body. It happens in different ways: networks are also terrific. But I completely agree that the present is a hybrid: the future is hybrid because you can follow a famous photographer on Instagram and access an online museum and this has really changed the world.
- GV:** Regarding the hybrid, and without going into details, what happened to us with the first edition of *Eco* in Mexico was that we spent an entire year seeing each other online working on processes with people. When we physically met in the



Figure 30.6 Alex Fattal, *Street Apparition*, photograph by Jefferson. Pinhole portrait, 2004. Courtesy of Fundación Disparando Cámaras para la Paz.

residency, it was not what we might have imagined at the beginning, which was to get together to create. No, we got together, and they asked us, “Do we have to bring our cameras?” We said no; “Are we going to take photos?” No; “It is a photography residency, and we are not going to take photos nor will we carry the camera?” No, it is not mandatory. What we did was think about the image: it was five days of being in one place thinking about the image. Doing exercises that had to do with listening to the image or writing about the image, thinking about the body and stories, looking into our eyes. Before that, 50 people from all over the world gathered in a place to photograph. To photograph what? The first thing you see!

ABW: It is essential to recognize the importance of poetry in the creative process, as it is closely related to storytelling and imagery. We should keep in mind that we need to constantly modify and reconstruct our perception and understanding of creating an image, as Gisela did in that seminar.

Our liquid and soft capacity (our soft and latent neurotransmitters) awaken us to be able to read our present continually. Both a nomadic and sedentary perspective are complementary. Poetry is, in my opinion, essential; it is our articulator.

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PART VI

Global Approaches to Photobooks

From Production to Distribution

Edited by Yinhua Chu and Zhuang Wubin



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31

THE EXPANSION OF THE PHOTOBOOK

From Traditional to Post-Digital

Yinhua Chu

In *Photobooks &: A Critical Companion to the Contemporary Medium* (2022), Matt Johnston outlines a timeline juxtaposing networked technologies with photobook events and releases between 2001 and 2020. Notably, in 2001, Apple debuted its first iPod, the portable music player allowing users to curate and store substantial number of songs, up to a thousand in number. That same year, Andrew Roth's *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century* showcased over 500 photobook plates. Successive publications followed in 2003, including *The Photobook: A History, Vol. 1* by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger and *The Open Book; A History of the Photographic Book from 1878 to the Present*, also by Andrew Roth. Much like the iPod, characterized by its compactness and dense storage of music that remains simultaneously bound by its finite digital capacity, these photobook compilations exhibit meticulous curation and are abundant with rich visual content, yet they are inherently confined by the finite number of pages within the book format. This demands discerning choices regarding inclusion and representation. This similarity delineates the parallel challenges and deliberate aesthetic decisions in both digital and print mediums, underscoring the selective nature and constraints inherent in each format. Johnston's timeline highlights Facebook's (local) emergence in 2004, followed by a surge of other social media platforms: Flickr (2005), Twitter (2006), Tumblr (2007), and Instagram (2010). These platforms epitomize the Web 2.0 era, emphasizing user-generated content, fostering collaboration, participation, and creating vibrant online communities.

With the rise of social media, photobook endeavors shifted from cataloging and publishing towards inclusive publishing, collaboration, and community engagement. By 2020, initiatives such as the "Indie Photobook Library", founded by Larissa Leclair, emerged, archiving independently published and distributed print-on-demand photobooks, artist books, and zines. In the same year, Bruno Ceschel's "Self Publish, Be Happy" project promoted self-published photobooks with activities spanning publishing, curating, educating, and collaborating (Ceschel, 2015).

Drawing from his timeline, Johnston characterizes this expansion of activities as "parallel emergences," highlighting the simultaneous escalation of interest in photobooks and networked technologies. This development opens avenues for discussions surrounding the

post-digital condition. He perceives the proliferation of contests, exhibitions, fairs, festivals, and workshops as direct manifestations of the post-digital milieu. Post-digital is a term used to describe a condition in which digital and analog media are not taken as distinct but are instead viewed as interconnected and overlapping (Cramer 2015: 22–23). This also brings up the challenges faced by “photobook”, a combination of “photography” and “book”, in light of the development of digital technologies. Discussions of post-photography, “after photography”, and the photographic image in digital culture collectively shape our understanding of photography in the 21st century (Mitchell 1992, Ritchin 2010, Lister 2014, Rubinstein 2018, Bate 2023). The emergence of e-readers, such as the Google Book project launched in 2004, Amazon’s Kindle in 2007, Adobe’s PDF wide release in 2008, and Apple’s first-generation iPad in 2010, has also spurred significant research into the challenges of the codex and the benefits of book digitization. These developments have not only transformed the reading experience but also reshaped how we think about the “book” in terms of interface and interactivity (Borsuk 2018: 197). From a post-digital perspective, the ubiquity of digital software has lowered the technical barriers to creativity, allowing photographers to combine traditional analog and digital methods in new and innovative ways. In terms of distribution, photographers can now self-publish their photobooks, find supportive communities online, and participate in relevant fairs and markets. This has opened up new possibilities for collaboration, with some photobook makers turning to tactile methods of bookmaking and using both online and offline channels to engage their audiences in new ways. If, as posited by Alessandro Ludovico (2012) in discussions of post-digital print, the essentials for contemporary culture include being mobile, searchable, editable, and shareable, we can ask how the concept of digital is integrated into contemporary photobook practices, particularly in terms of hybridization and decentralization.

Before the complete integration of digital technologies, the conventional methodology for publishing a photobook largely relied on publishers and presses, which were, in turn, influenced by regional cultural and historical contexts. Observing the evolution of the photobook landscape in Taiwan offers insights into the ways in which political, social, and technological shifts have the potential to mold publishing scenarios. Known as “Ilha Formosa”, Taiwan is located in the central Pacific Island chain and holds a strategic position in East Asia. The island’s multifaceted history encompasses a rich amalgamation of indigenous cultures, colonial influences, and modern development. Austronesian tribes have inhabited the land for centuries. Starting from the 17th century onward, Taiwan became a transit hub for Western maritime powers, attracting Dutch and Spanish colonizers and enhancing its role in Western trade with China, Japan, and the South Seas. Between 1630 and 1945, Taiwan underwent various phases of governance, including Dutch-Spanish rule, the Ming Zheng period, Qing Dynasty rule, and the Japanese colonial era. After World War II, Taiwan transitioned to the Republic of China’s governance in 1945. The civil war saw the Chinese Nationalist Party’s (KMT) great retreat to Taiwan by 1949, subsequently imposing martial law until 1987.

The 1980s marked a significant period of historical and societal transformation in Taiwan, as the government actively fostered investments in emerging high-tech sectors such as integrated circuits and computers, shifting the national focus from traditional to technology-intensive industries. This strategic shift resulted in Taiwan becoming a major producer of personal-computer motherboards and facilitated its transformation from an agrarian society to an industrialized one by the end of the decade. On the other hand, the 1987 lifting of 38 years of martial law had profound impacts on Taiwan’s culture and arts. The

country's democratization and economic boom in the late 80s significantly benefited the publishing industry, allowing it to achieve substantial growth. This period of liberalization enabled photographers and publishers to explore and express previously sensitive themes with newfound freedom, leading to the emergence of photobooks displaying a variety of themes and styles. Chang Shih-lun examines the emergence and formation of the concept of "documentary photography" within the framework of Taiwan's photographic evolution, identifying the magazine *Jen-Chien* (人間) as a critical influence in defining the Taiwanese documentary photography paradigm. Established by Chen Ying-zhen in 1985, *Jen-Chien* is perceived as a continuation of Taiwan's nativist literature and art from the 1970s, symbolizing a generational movement towards "returning to reality" in reaction to the pictorial salon photography that had prevailed under martial law. The name "Jen-Chien" conveys meanings close to the English "earthy/earthly", reflecting simplicity and humanistic values and claiming to present a "viewing position" that is intimately aligned with reality (Chang, 2021). Extending from this, the development of the documentary photography concept significantly influenced the publication of photobooks during this era. For instance, Wang Hsin's photobook *Farewell, Orchid Island* (《蘭嶼·再見》, 1985) depicted the indigenous Tao people's daily life in Orchid Island during the mid-1970s, a time prior to the commencement of transformations fueled by an upswing in economic development and shifts in governmental policies. During Japanese rule, Orchid Island was designated as an anthropological research area for indigenous peoples, prohibiting outsiders from settling in order to preserve its unique culture and customs. After the war, the island experienced a large influx of people and tourists, profoundly impacting the self-sufficient lifestyle and cultural forms of the Tao people. The sequenced black-and-white images in Wang Hsin's photobook captured the forever changed people and landscape of Orchid Island, evoking a nostalgia for the loss of traditional ways of life. Another related case is the three-volume photobook *Dignity and Humiliation: Borderland of the Country—Lanyu* (《尊嚴與屈辱：國境邊陲—蘭嶼》, 1991, 1992, 1994) by Guan Xiao-rong. These photobooks present the photographer's long-term documentary work on Orchid Island, utilizing both images and text to reveal how the island is confronting the encroachment of "modern civilization". Guan's work provides insights into the traditional daily life of the Tao people, capturing activities such as boat-making, house building, and flying-fish festivals. It also sheds light on the island's struggle against the multifarious impacts of tourism, the imposition of Sinicization education on the indigenous people, scarce medical resources, and the contentious issues involving the disposal of nuclear waste on the island. This collection of images was initially serialized in *Jen-Chien* magazine before being compiled into photobooks in the 90s, with the arrangement of chapters offering a more comprehensive depiction of the reportage articles on various thematic topics. These two titles, captured by two Han photographers, delve into the indigenous culture in Orchid Island and collectively reflect the essence and spirit of Taiwanese documentary photography during that era.

Some Taiwanese photographers used the camera as a narrative tool to document the transformation of the political situation. Yang Yung-chih's *Congressional Ecology* (《國會生態學》, 1987) exemplifies this approach. As a photojournalist, Yang devoted years to documenting the happenings within three deliberative bodies—the Legislative Yuan, the Control Yuan, and the National Assembly—bearing witness to pivotal changes ahead of the lifting of martial law. He aimed not to project a specific political standpoint but to interpret the unfolding scenarios with a straightforward, observational approach. Compiled from a robust collection of his documentary work, this photobook comes with

captions akin to those in newspapers. It captures seminal moments, such as the ruling party KMT making decisions, the opposition party DPP staging sit-in protests in the legislature, politicians' varied gestures and expressions, and instances of them dozing off during meetings. These images, extending beyond political stance, inject humor and portray everyday life, offering viewers a glimpse into the structural and operational nuances of the legislature during that era. Another instance worth noting involves the curation of photobook editions. The series, "Aspects & Visions. Taiwan Photographers" (台灣攝影家群像), edited by the renowned Taiwanese photographer Chang Chao-tang, has been published consecutively since 1989. The primary objective of this series was to assemble works from Taiwanese photographers spanning various generations, starting from the post-war era. Each photobook in the series features a statement by the photographer, a review article penned by another photographer or critic, a series of black-and-white photographs, and a listing of the works along with a chronological biography of the photographer. These photobooks are designed to be portable and reader-friendly. The biographies are also available in English, catering to international readers seeking information for further research. As the first series of photography monographs, this case shows that the market in Taiwan at that time could sustain the high cost of producing and distributing photobooks and that there was an escalating appreciation for photography. Prior to this, the majority of photography-related publications in Taiwan were predominantly technical, with photography often being perceived by readers as being illustrative and decorative. This perspective was primarily shaped by the prominence of salon photography advocacy in the post-war era during martial law. However, with the media's expansion and liberalization in the 90s, readers started to gain a more profound understanding and acknowledgment in photography.

The photobooks mentioned not only reflect the intricate relationship between photographers and traditional publishing gatekeepers but also provide insights into the aesthetic and thematic preferences of the photographers, revealing both the socio-political and cultural contexts that link to the publishing landscape of their times. Referring back to Johnston's timeline, the international proliferation of activities related to photobooks has seen a remarkable surge since 2010. While the photobooks from the 80s in Taiwan offer a localized glimpse into a specific timeframe, contemporary initiatives such as "Africa in the Photobook" and 10×10 demonstrate how photobooks have embraced the digital era, expanding their reach and challenging traditional notions of photography. These initiatives spotlight the transformative practice of editing in their approach to curating and showcasing photobooks, framing their thematic subjects through the fragments of published photobooks, much like assembling pieces of a puzzle.

"Africa in the Photobook" is a website founded by Ben Krewinkel, a historian and collector of photobooks based in the Netherlands who has a personal interest in African history. It serves as an open-access platform aiming to make photobooks on Africa more accessible to a wider audience and to provide a valuable resource for readers interested in African history, photography, and visual culture. The website showcases the evolving image of the continent of Africa through photobooks published at different times, revealing not only how Africa is portrayed in these photobooks but also exploring the reasons behind such portrayals and the ways in which these images are constructed. Despite possessing an extensive collection of photobooks, Krewinkel initially encountered challenges in locating specific books due to the lack of a pre-existing list. He relied, therefore, on searching the Internet using specific terms like "Ministry of Information" and the names of various countries' capitals. However, some materials found online are not typically categorized

as “photobooks”, leading to potential misinterpretations. To mitigate this, the collection expanded its scope to incorporate various visual materials, including loose photographs, picture postcards, pamphlets, brochures, and *cartes de visite*. This broadened scope underscores the inherent interrelationship between photobooks and other visual materials, providing a more enriched perspective on Africa’s visual history.

The structure of the website introduces a thoughtful method for classifying photobooks. Photobooks are arranged chronologically by their publication dates in the “Titles” and “Early Albums” sections, and by the depicted country in the “Countries” section. This arrangement offers viewers an insightful perspective on the evolving representation of Africa in photobooks, depicting variations across different eras and locations. It highlights the transition in Africa’s portrayal from the colonial perspectives in early photobooks to more nuanced and diverse viewpoints in later works. In the late 19th century, when the ambitions of colonial administrations, missionaries, scientists, and entrepreneurs aligned, photography emerged as a medium to document Africa and to broadcast colonial endeavors from an external perspective. Post-World War II, with multiple African countries attaining independence, a wave of photobooks celebrating the formation of new nation-states surfaced. New official press agencies depicted the inhabitants in a light differing from the previous colonial propaganda. Examples of such photobooks include *Ghana is Born* (1958) and *Senegal d’hier...Senegal d’aujourd’hui* (1961). These titles reflect the celebrations surrounding independence and depict the contrast between past and present societal visions. Such photobooks proliferated during this period, with photographers being commissioned to support the visions of the new administrations and leaders. While primarily targeted at diplomats, these photobooks also attracted tourists, enticing them to visit the newly independent nations and offering insights into the early stages of African independence and the development of unique national identities.

Krewinkel’s website acts as a dynamic archive, exhibiting photobooks, while its linked Facebook and Instagram pages create arenas for organic, interdisciplinary dialogues. These extensions enable varied conversations about photobooks on a plethora of topics, fostering diverse collaborations. The functions provided on both the main site and its social-media arms redefine the interaction with and consumption of photobooks. On the website, viewers can employ the “search” feature to pinpoint specific photobooks and glean extensive bibliographic information. Thumbnails of photobook spreads are displayed, allowing direct viewing of covers and internal pages. Individual images can be clicked and magnified, with a zoom feature allowing a closer examination. Navigation buttons facilitate seamless exploration of different pages within a photobook, providing an interaction distinct from the tactile experience of flipping through physical pages. This underscores that viewers are not mere absorbers of content; they are active participants in the reading experience, not restricted to conventional book formats, but are granted considerable navigational freedom. Essentially, digitization transforms the inherent materiality of the photobooks, recasting them as tools for interpretation and construction. Simultaneously, the incorporation of social media propels varied collaborations, utilizing the archive for curation and collectively shaping the representation of Africa.

10x10 is a nonprofit project established in New York City in 2012 that produces extensive anthologies on books, curated by invited specialists around geographic, social, and cultural themes. *What They Saw: Historical Photobooks by Women, 1843–1999* (2021), edited by Russet Lederman and Olga Yatskevich, broadens the concepts of editing and curation. This project stemmed from initial research for the preceding anthology, *How We See: Photobooks by Women* (Lederman et al., 2018), drawn from a study of the current photo-

book ecosystem. It included critical analysis of gender representation in notable photobook publications like *The Photobook: A History* by Gerry Badger and Martin Parr (3 volumes: 2004, 2006, 2014), *The Latin American Photobook* (Fernández, 2011), and *The Book of 101 Books* by Andrew Roth (2001, 2004). This analysis revealed a substantial underrepresentation of women. A 2018 investigation of inventories from leading photobook sellers like Mack, Aperture, and Steidl corroborated this finding, displaying a scarcity of women-authored photobooks. Examination of various award and book dummy shortlists showed a clear disparity between entries by women and the actual winners, underscoring the enduring gender imbalance in photobook creation and recognition. This prompted the initiation of the *What They Saw* project, an anthology highlighting the work of women photographers throughout history, to address the observed gaps in both the historical and contemporary landscape of photobooks.

What They Saw employs the deliberately inclusive project design formula that gives 10×10 its name: the book's editors invited ten historians, librarians, and researchers to each select ten photobooks and furnish them with social, historical, and cultural context. The book strings together thumbnail images of photobooks, igniting sparks of questions intended to spur further exploration into the ever-evolving history of photobooks. This methodology unearths and opens dialogue on previously unexplored issues in photobook history. The structured timeline and the chronological approach used in the project instigate an exploration into what constitutes a "photobook". This presented a challenge to the project's researchers; the conventional definition of a photobook as a bound, published book produced in multiple copies would exclude some works. For instance, African women in the 19th and early 20th centuries had limited opportunities to publish such books. Although this challenge differs from that encountered by "Africa in the Photobook", a similar approach was adopted—to broaden the search to include unique albums, pamphlets, and maquettes. This was crucial to incorporate works by amateur photographers, often sidelined due to gender, social class, or geography. Moreover, some early 19th-century photobooks were produced with ambiguous authorship attribution, or the creation of a book might not have reached fruition. The project's integrated timeline accommodates such unconventional photobooks and fragmented information, serving as valuable precursors for future research, even if they are not fully developed or realized.

Another challenge arises with the concept of "photobooks by women". Not all the photobooks scrutinized strictly adhered to the idea of a book solely photographed by a woman, given that some resulted from collaborations. For instance, *Groznyi smekh: Okna Rosta (A Menacing Laughter: The Rosta Windows, 1932)* includes photomontages by Varvara Stepanova, utilizing photography by Boris Ignatovich and Aleksandr Rodchenko. Inspired by Russian Constructivism, Stepanova's design is characterized by red and black sans-serif type set in letterpress on the book's cover, dust jacket, and endpapers. By encompassing Stepanova's work in this section, the case extends the concept of "photobooks by women". It emphasizes the collaborative roles and inputs of women in photobook creation, prompting further exploration and dialogue regarding the defining parameters of this category.

The selection process further raises the question of whether a reevaluation of controversial photobooks is needed, inviting exploration into how perspectives and interpretations have evolved and prompting reflection on the relevance and impact of such works in the contemporary sociocultural landscape. For instance, several early 20th-century photobooks exemplify the use of the medium for propagating political ideologies. Erna Lendvai-

Dirksen's *Das deutsche Volksgesicht* (*The Face of the German People*, 1932) overtly advanced the racist ideology of the Nazi Party, while *Reichsautobahn: Mensch und Werk* (*Reich's Exhibition of a Productive People*, 1937) highlighted the cultural and technological achievements of the Nazi Party, acting as a distinct vehicle for Third Reich propaganda. Similarly, Leni Riefenstahl's *Schönheit im Olympischen Kampf* (*Beauty in the Olympic Games*, 1937) is heavily intertwined with political propaganda; the 1936 Olympic Games were used as a platform to promote Hitler's ideals of racial superiority and portray them as inherent to the Nazi's cultural successes. However, the editors argue that excluding such controversial materials would hinder a comprehensive portrayal of photobook history. They chose to feature materials that may be deemed offensive in today's context, be it due to colonialist viewpoints or racial animosity. In *What They Saw*, 10×10's editorial strategy allows readers to probe and reflect on the definitions and evolving roles of photobooks by women throughout various epochs. Engaging with this historiographical photobook encourages readers to ponder the editorial concept and consider the selected photobooks as foundational, enabling them to construct their own conceptual frameworks and understandings.

Besides collaborating with professionals, researchers, editors, and designers, 10×10 also seeks to engage broader public audiences. For example, to accompany the launch of *What They Saw*, the platform opened a temporary reading room at the New York Public Library with two featured spaces: a hands-on space that was open to the public, and a rare books space that was available by appointment. Books, each accompanied by a small insert card containing bibliographic information and a brief description, were displayed on tables for readers to touch. While *What They Saw* is primarily framed as a photobook publication, its operations and methodologies distinctly align with the post-digital paradigm, characterized by hybridization, decentralization, and democratization. The project's reading room is a testament to its commitment to making knowledge and culture more accessible to everyone. By creating interactive and immersive experiences for readers, this case shows how photobook practitioners are challenging traditional notions of authorship and spectatorship.

Exploring photobook practices within the post-digital context unveils the innovative strategies practitioners use to enhance reader participation in producing and disseminating photobooks, utilizing both online and offline methods and challenging traditional notions of authorship and curation. As mentioned earlier, the photobooks of the 1980s in Taiwan were primarily centered around individual photographers and specific themes. The post-digital era, marked by decentralization and fragmentation, has ushered in diverse approaches in Taiwan's photobook ecology, particularly for exploring the concept of "Taiwanese" identity within this evolving landscape. For instance, the Lightbox Photo Library operates as a specialized, nonprofit photo library, open to all and committed to collecting, organizing, and preserving Taiwanese photographic publications. Its mission is to progressively deepen the understanding of Taiwanese imagery through initiatives like book-collection drives, educational outreach, and community participation. Essentially, within the post-digital context, the concept of the book has evolved beyond a static publication to become a hub for diverse engagements, reflecting a dynamic interplay between traditional and innovative elements and mirroring broader shifts in consumption, interpretation, and valuation in contemporary settings. After all, as Vilém Flusser wrote of the human affinity for the book as an intermediary between paper material and artificial intelligence: "we are book worms, being opposed to automated apparatuses and green forests, not out of bibliophilia—which today registers as necrophilia—but out of an engagement with historical freedom" (Flusser, 2011: 102).

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THE PHOTOBOOK AS SHAPE SHIFTER IN THE EXPANDED REALM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Examples from South Korea

Sunyoung Kim

The accelerated growth of digital technology has driven innovative changes in photography, as in other fields. It is now a commonplace idea that the advent of digital cameras, mobile devices, high-speed internet, and network computing has sparked debate over the end of photography's traditional era while producing an unprecedented rise in the social status of photography as a global channel of information and communication. Thus, in the photographic medium, we are in a new state – “a contemporary state of flux” (Meier 2014) – utilizing it as a ubiquitous visual language going beyond the conventional roles, functions, and definitions. Furthermore, photography enhanced by new digital technologies, such as 2.5D/3D printing, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML), Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR), often betrays what is believed to be the authenticity of the medium. Images that are similar to photographs, but not quite photographs, have shattered implicit rules about how photographs should be and should appear. Dewdney and Sluis (2022, i) state that the mode of vision and imaging, which has been shaped by photography for the past two centuries, has and continues to be radically reconfigured due to a hybridization of technological services and platforms in computational culture. Recalling an analog photography era that required relatively more manual labor, the machine medium that was once manipulated by human hands is now oscillating with unforeseeable changes in shape due to the intervention (or intrusion) of numerical codes and circuits that cannot be grasped manually.

Artists of today are keenly aware of this drastic change and have worked to incorporate it into their artistic practices. While adhering to the accepted tracks of the medium, they explore its potential for innovation and passionately express their interpretations of the latest tendencies in their creative endeavors. In other words, “the photographic medium has begun to oscillate in a tension between the classical ‘what has been’ and a constant waiting ‘what could be’” (Neumüller 2022: 228). Throughout this act of pushing and pulling photography's traditional boundaries, contemporary artists have created examples of the altered nature of photography. Photobooks are certainly the clearest embodiment reflecting such challenges and expansion in artists' core ideas. Photography has been closely associ-

ated with books since its inception, as a compilation of images conveys a cohesive narrative with a particular arrangement style, resembling the format of a book. The book serves a crucial role in elucidating a photographer's message and disseminating their work to a wide readership. More importantly, the book expresses the artist's intentions directly and intuitively, whereas in an exhibition there is often the need to modify the work's form and context according to different locations. A photobook is 'transparent' and 'movable' in the sense that it holds the artist's idea and message in its original form and carries it to all corners of the globe. An artist's struggle and reaction to this evolving nature of the medium is often explicitly reflected in a photobook, whether through dimensions, shapes, page layouts, typography, paper choices, printing, binding, inserts, or any other feature.

This chapter examines the Korean photobook scene in the vortex of these changes. Its focus will be on artists who acutely respond to the oscillations, experiment in the book form, and thus expand the parameters of the photobook. As such, it is not concerned with the entire scene, but rather with the most innovative portion. Their books are more than simply receptacles for visual images in a formatted layout. Instead, their very structure and form are adaptable, enabling them to seamlessly connect with the fluctuations and interpretations of today's photography. Even though they are still a small segment of the industry, these individuals are noteworthy as they span different generations and careers and have been instrumental in broadening and enriching the field.

South Korea has a vibrant and innovative tech sector. It is the country with the highest rate of internet penetration and the fastest adoption of new technologies (Kemp 2023). Among the most striking innovations of the past few years, the launch of 5G networks in 2019 has inevitably triggered a transient wave of photographic images through various innovative online service applications. As data speed accelerates, the scope and diversity in practice for uploading, viewing, and distributing photographic images expands, and related online platforms have evolved and grown sophisticated to offer unprecedented services. Photography finds itself employed in a wider array of ways. This expansion of photographic usage undeniably exerted a substantial influence on and molded the landscape of photography's role as a ubiquitous means of communication in our daily lives, as well as its function as an artistic language that frequently mirrors daily usage. The urge to expand and separate photography from its typical context drove artists to engage in experimentation with the medium and its primary conduit to a broader audience, which is a photobook. For these Korean artists, the contemporary photobook is a compilation of attitudes and actions toward photography. They utilize the photobook, which serves as a tangible and distinct form of artistic expression, to challenge the limits and definitions of photography and to redefine them according to their individual perspectives. This is how the following discrete examples of photobooks become realized in a variety of ways.

Networked Images and New Strategies of Photography

The photographic image has evolved from a static to a moving image today in the internet matrix of connections. Furthermore, the perception of this movement has significantly influenced the way in which the photograph is utilized. According to Nathan Jurgenson (2019) in his book *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media*, networked distribution must now be integrated into the very ontology of the photograph. Duncan Wooldridge (2021b: 18) also highlights the prevalence of distribution circuits in our daily lives, noting that "one of the first options available for any image on a smartphone is the 'share' button, which seems

to suggest that an image must, as quickly as it is produced, be propelled out into the world”. Consequently, most photographs are created with distribution in mind, with the intention of being placed in an environment for networked circuits and public consumption. Images are no longer considered fixed reproductions that indicate the particular and concrete; rather, they are seen as potential transformers capable of moving beyond their original contexts at any time. Contemporary artists who work with photography are acutely aware of the fluidity of photographic images and frequently devise new strategies to work with this phenomenon. It is now common for these artists to anticipate that, by joining the trajectory of images drifting rapidly online, they can expand the works’ significance in an explosive manner.

A series of related examples by Robert Shore (2014) in *Post-Photography: The Artist with a Camera* illustrate how photography’s mobility has transformed the strategy and form of art photography, opening up a wide range of possibilities. Citing Mishka Henner, Joachim Schmid, and Eva Stenram, Shore explains that “sharing” has become a crucial concept in the digital age, and that “appropriation” is the primary strategy for producing photographic images (Shore 2014: 7). According to these artists, the primary reservoirs for creating a comprehensive image are pre-existing images and data that await discovery. And their fundamental approach centers on skillfully navigating these resources, guided by an understanding of how to effectively recycle and frame these materials to construct an image. When a photograph adapts to various contexts through appropriation, its intrinsic significance experiences a continuous augmentation. It undergoes perpetual evolution, constantly reinventing itself as it traverses and adjusts to different contexts.

In this section, we will examine the photobooks of two artists who have a profound comprehension of the dynamic nature of photographs and adeptly harness their capabilities. The artists’ use of photographs demonstrates strategic approaches, similar to composing words, where vowels and consonants combine seamlessly to create a unified entity. According to their perspectives, individual photographs resemble syllables without inherent meaning, yet they are also units with boundless potential for expression. The images featured in the two artists’ books serve the specific purpose of proposing meanings, while each image fragment carries a multitude of contexts after undergoing a transformative journey both online and offline. The artists are fully cognizant of the potential of photographic image fragments to spin new possibilities and have appropriately and boldly structured their photobooks to do so.

As mentioned by Wooldridge (2021a), the current generation, often referred to as ‘digital natives,’ tends to prioritize the sharing of images at the instant of capture. Their focus lies more on the timing, method, and audience for distributing their images rather than the creative process itself. Dongkyun Vak (b. 1992), a prominent young South Korean artist, vividly exemplifies how this preference for immediate exposure and sharing can be seamlessly integrated into art photography. His main objective revolves around giving shape to a concept he terms “generic images” (Vak 2023). Vak firmly believes that photographic images should be generic – banal, even – devoid of any exclusive rights claims, and accessible for diverse purposes.

The term ‘generic’ is derived from the concept of generic drugs, which are medications that can be replicated once their patent terms expire. In the same way that generic drugs reach a wider audience with the same effect, the generic images resonate with the public as they transcend fixed meaning and spread through various channels. Vak contends that when an image transforms from being a special object into something accessible to as many viewers as possible and is applied in different contexts, individual interpretations and per-

spectives converge, blurring the boundaries of its specific meaning. As a result, the image presents a common perspective, allowing for a more extensive and multi-layered view of the object. The artist displays such multifaceted approaches and viewpoints layered upon a particular object to elevate its generic significance in diagram form (Figure 32.1). Vak (2023) draws a comparison between this concept and the “general will” proposed by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, suggesting that individual wills unite to express a collective will. Although he has yet to find a final form for this idea, it remains the passionate vision that Vak continues to pursue.

Notably, he has endeavored to illustrate how generic images can come together to create a collective and cohesive entity within the book form. The photobook, a conventional medium for distributing images, serves to preserve their original concepts and forms while also gathering diverse perspectives. Vak’s use of generic images could serve a similar purpose. The intention behind these generic images is also to disseminate them while gathering various viewpoints to construct a comprehensive generic collection. While the book project is still ongoing and many aspects are yet to be realized, it is worth examining the achievements made so far and the plans laid out for its future development. His approach to handling photobooks in pursuit of the ideal generic concept provides insights into the

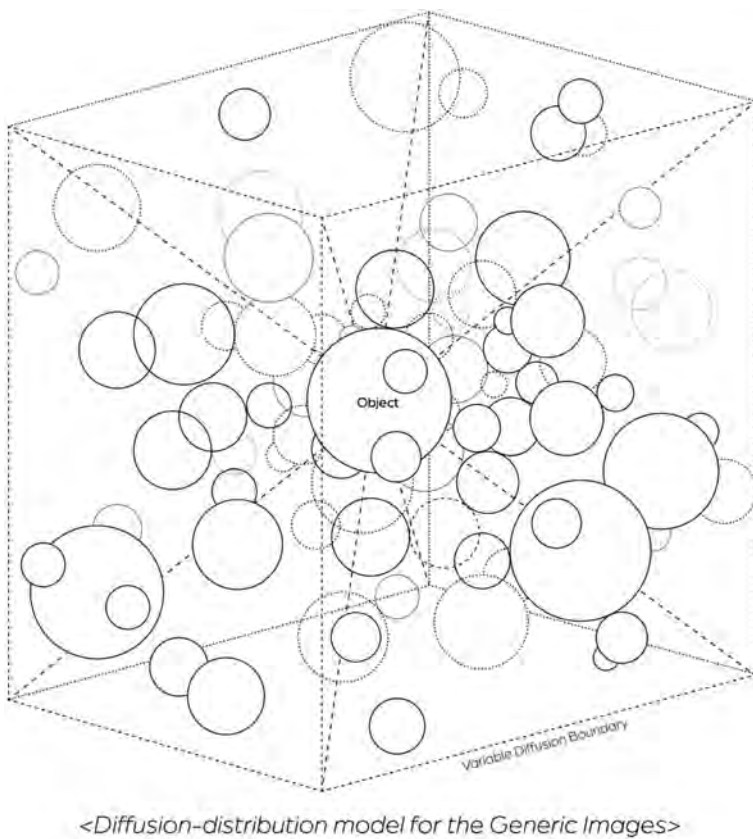


Figure 32.1 Dongkyun Vak, *Diffusion-distribution model for the Generic Images*. Courtesy of Dongkyun Vak.

emergence of contemporary strategies for integrating photographic images within the book format. It also sheds light on the potential intersections and shifts that occur when these newly strategized photographs and books converge.

Upon examining the artist's existing books *B777* (Vak 2022b) and *Heatwave* (Vak 2022a), you may notice that he frequently repeats images across the two series, even though they are distinct collections. Furthermore, you may observe what the images depict, but you might not fully understand how each individual image is linked to one another. The composition lacks a visual narrative that includes the conventional steps of introduction, development, turn, and conclusion. Throughout the book, the images appear to be floating in different directions. Only the plan page offers a clue to the artist's intentions, which could be interpreted as a blueprint for the series' structure. The blueprint consists of several interconnected components that revolve around the subject's apparent structure and operation. In the series *B777*, focusing on the Boeing 777 aircraft, the plan encompasses all the necessary components, systems, and environments required for operating the airplane. It includes aspects such as the physical structure of the aircraft body, airline systems, regulations, and the role of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport. Each of these words represents a keyword relevant to the aircraft industry and its interconnected relationship with other components in the matrix.

Images within the pages of the book are interconnected in some form, much like online networks. However, their interrelationship is rarely visible. Just as the images floating online approach individuals, sparking temporary inspiration and thoughts, each image on these pages meets with readers and invites individual narratives. As the image reaches a wider audience, the circuit of thought surrounding it multiplies, with some thoughts serving as bridges to other images. This interlinking of the separate images becomes possible due to the widespread diffusion of the images and the collection of thoughts, inspirations, and experiences added to them through the journey. The linkages between these images are not necessarily direct, strong, and fixed, but rather flexible and loose in nature. In the *B777* book, you can see a studio shot of a life jacket, shots of the airplane's fuselage, a portrait of a woman, and photographs of people standing in line before boarding, all placed next to each other. While these images may not have direct relevance, their alignment could reveal insights about the shared subject, the aircraft, as they gather various subjective associations. As a result, the collection of these images assumes the role of a unified representation of the generic image that Vak envisions.

Vak is currently planning to advance the translation of the generic image into the book format in a more intuitive manner. He likens this process to visualizing computer space, where the only structure that makes connections visible is a folder, which is arbitrary and fragile. Within a folder, the image units lack fixed hierarchy or links; they are merely discrete. As a repository of generic images, the book could serve as a platform for collaborative efforts, allowing individuals to create a diverse range of meanings. Consequently, it would exist as a tangible entity, offering the most extensive and multi-layered view – a general perspective, capable of circulating offline.

The second artist explored in this section is Shinwook Kim (b. 1982), and his photobook titled *In Search of Nessie* (Kim 2021). The book delves into a myth about Loch Ness, a vast lake in Scotland's Highlands region with origins dating back to the Ice Age. The lake is believed to be the origin of the mythical creature affectionately known as "Nessie" in Scottish folklore. Within the photobook, the artist unravels the intricate process of tracking Nessie and its intangible yet significant impacts on the place and its people, regardless of the creature's authenticity.

The book begins with an oval photograph of Nessie, or rather of a shape that was once believed to be Nessie, poking its head out of the water. This image, the first public picture taken in 1934, sparked popular interest, belief in the creature, and subsequent dispute. Although it is now known to be a hoax (Lee 2019), it remains the first image one finds when searching for the Loch Ness Monster online. Thanks to this photograph, people often describe the creature as sizable, with a long neck and one or more humps visible above the water. Following pages include testimony from St Columba, who was reportedly the first person to witness the monster. Subsequent pages feature the latitude and longitude of the location where the monster was claimed to have been found, a map of Loch Ness, and a small leaflet titled 'LOCH NESS AND ITS MONSTER' containing seemingly factual information about the mythical beast. The visuals and texts presented in the first portion of the book provide evidence supporting the existence of the monster, already a legendary creature. Shinwook Kim delves into the impact of specific places or memories on human experiences and their surroundings. His focus lies not on the places themselves but rather on the influence they exert on their peripheries. Guided by this interest, he conducts meticulous observation, collection, and classification of the various contextual elements that shape and support the world around us that we take for granted.

In his series *In Search of Nessie* (2018–2020), Kim seeks to identify the elements of a myth that have been created, disseminated, and sustained within a specific location. He particularly scrutinizes how photographic images have been employed to fabricate and perpetuate a myth. The thorough examination begins with one photograph taken in 1934 by a surgeon named Robert Wilson, who playfully staged a prank. Then, the artist explores the aftermath of this prank through the pages, divided into three main sectors, each offering visual insight into a group of people seriously searching for Nessie, the tourists of Loch Ness and what they consumed, and the scenic views of the lake from the artist's perspective. These three components constitute a deliberate archive for magnifying the myth ignited by the surgeon's faked photograph. It visualizes the invisible Nessie alongside various photos taken by the artist and others, as well as different archives and texts that Kim compiled. The book involves the appropriation and assemblage of diverse supporting visual materials from a variety of sources to fabricate rumors and myths about Nessie, which readers may find compelling.

Presented without commentary, each fragment of information in the book is for readers to choose, believe or disbelieve, supporting or disputing the myth as they wish. The parts may sometimes coalesce, or the package of information may disintegrate according to the reader's inclination. The reading process involves a cycle of contextualizing and decontextualizing a bundle of information. As we read through the pages, we create our version of Nessie. This is certainly a similar experience to searching online and collecting useful materials through hyperlinks to gain an understanding of a certain subject. Kim's book ultimately aims to entice readers to immerse themselves in a cleverly organized wealth of information and take their time exploring it. The artist has artfully crafted guidelines through different book structure techniques, such as image sequencing, size variations, and incorporating folding-out pages. The book contains a small leaflet about Loch Ness and Nessie (Figure 32.2), as well as a handbook for tourists, both of which were written, edited, and published by serious enthusiasts about Nessie in 1954 and 1971, respectively. These materials are presented in a small size, like books within a book, adding a nuanced touch of the original archive, catching the reader's attention among the excess of information.



Figure 32.2 Shinwook Kim, Inner page shot of book *In Search of Nessie*. Courtesy of Shinwook Kim / ARP

The book concludes with the thought-provoking statement, “It’s what’s in your mind” (Kim 2021: 147). The belief (or disbelief) in the existence of the Loch Ness Monster already resides within the readers themselves. As they navigate through the artist’s collection, they continuously reinforce and solidify that belief by sorting out and selecting pertinent references. This book vividly demonstrates how photographs today have transformed into strategic archives that shape our perception of reality. The particles of photographic images are in a constant state of drift online, temporarily settling within a specific context before moving on again. The meaning and appearance of the photographic collection can vary widely depending on the images that are borrowed and created for it. In the digital age, photographs have gained mobility, fragmentation, and flexibility, all of which the artist clearly understands and conveys in this book.

Digital Photographs, the Liberation and Loss of Physical Support

Martin Lister pinpoints changes that have taken place with respect to digital culture and photographic images in the period between the first (1995) and second (2013) editions of his book, *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*. “The first edition opened with an image of personal computers humming and blinking on desks in formal institutions. They are, of course, still to be found, but computers have also moved off desks and out of their beige boxes to be integrated into a range of embedded smart devices and closer to the fabric of everyday life, to be mobile, pervasive and ubiquitous” (Lister

2013: 2). In the further ten years since this chapter in the second edition was written, this vastly evolving set of digital media technologies have fully permeated photography. Now, we observe that the most significant change stemming from digital integration in photography is the liberation of the medium from its physical support. Photographs now exist without form or weight, making them more accessible and widespread than ever before, revolutionizing our interaction with images. Dealing with photographs has now become “the stuff of habit, routine, everyday life and work” (Lister 2013: 2). It is no longer simply considered a fixed form of culture, as it was during the early days of digital culture. The shift has been accelerated because people have embraced the convenience and efficiency of the virtual world, seeking to eliminate the burden of dealing with physical objects.

The automation of the virtual realm has liberated us from many of the labor-intensive tasks of collecting, organizing, storing, and cleaning physical belongings. Instead, we now perform similar tasks online, often without much control over the digital clutter we accumulate. While this transition has lightened our physical surroundings and enabled seamless sharing of information, it has come at a cost: the diminishing sense of reality. As we immerse ourselves in the virtual world, we may lose touch with the tangible aspects of our lives, disconnecting from the physical world’s richness. Despite the benefits of convenience and efficiency, there is a trade-off, a potential disconnection from the physical environment.

Kyungwoo Chun (b. 1969), a Korean artist known for his extensive work in both Europe and Asia, has crafted a series of photobooks as a deliberate response to this phenomenon. His artistic practice revolves around photography, which he combines with elements of performance, installation, and more recently, moving images. When capturing a photograph, Chun engages in a unique performance with his subjects. For example, he may ask people to hug each other for an extended period while he keeps the camera shutter open, resulting in the creation of blurred images. He sees this time-consuming process as a form of communion and discovery between photographer and subject, going beyond the mere act of clicking a shutter button. By challenging the aesthetics of the ‘decisive moment,’ Chun blurs the boundary between different art genres while redefining the possibilities of photography.

Each time Chun publishes a book, his primary focus is to create a strong bond between form and content. He deliberately plans the book’s design and production, ensuring that the form complements and enhances the abstract concept that he seeks to convey. By doing so, he aims to provide readers with an intuitive and physical experience while engaging with the book’s content. Chun perceives a photobook, much like an exhibition, as more than just a showcase of finished outcomes. Instead, it becomes a channel and process where the questions in his own mind converge with those of his audience, creating resonant connections through communication. Through the medium of photobooks, Chun openly shares his personal thoughts and senses with others, leading to a mutual and empathetic understanding that creates new and profound resonance. His photobooks reflect Chun’s work process itself, in which he interacts with subjects in front of the camera. Within their pages, he strategically places clues using specific dimensions, shapes, page layouts, and material choices. These indications allow readers to grasp the artist’s message and engage in a conversation with him, immersing themselves in the content and spending time exploring the books.



Figure 32.3 Willem van Zoetendaal, Cover page image of Kyungwoo Chun's *The Weight*, 2022. Photograph © Harold Strak. Courtesy of Kyungwoo Chun and Ga-hyeon Foundation of Culture/Van Zoetendaal Publishers.

Approximately the size of an A4 sheet, Chun's book *The Weight* (Ga-hyeon Foundation of Culture/Van Zoetendaal Publishers, Chun 2020) features a Korean-style side-stitched binding (Figure 32.3). The cover page is made of relatively thin and soft paper, and, when you open the book, you find inner pages that are even thinner and more flexible, specially folded in double layers. Images on the pages are intentionally blurry with no rigid shapes, creating a sense of movements as you flip through them. Each image serves as an afterimage for the one next to it, forming a cohesive and persistent visual entity. As you leaf through the pages, you notice a subtle smoothness that goes beyond the surface. The pages are not rigid but bend fluidly as your fingers glide over them, creating a gentle and continuous movement. This act of gently turning the pages enhances the sensory journey through the photobook. Moreover, the images bleed through the folded pages, and the soft outlines on the reverse evoke light forming a latent image on film over time. Physically exploring this photobook, caressing it with your hands while viewing it, allows you to instinctively recall abstract concepts like gentle motion, continuity, and the passage of time beyond the static moment.

Chun's other book, *Bird Listener* (HAM/Helsinki Biennial, Chun 2021) serves as another notable example emphasizing physical interaction in conveying the book's core message.

In this compact object, pages feature pen drawings of various bird species, accompanied by a QR code at the back that links to the recorded sound of the birds. As readers gaze upon the black silhouettes of the pen drawings while listening to the accompanying bird sounds, they are encouraged to animate the appearance of songbirds, fostering a sense of being next to them. This evokes a longing for physicality, prompting them to question and probe what people may be missing in our fast-paced world, and how to recognize and sustain these aspects amid the challenges of contemporary times. *Bird Listener* exemplifies Chun's versatility and ability to create engaging and evocative experiences for his audiences.

As evident from the previous examples, Chun emphasizes the importance of tactile and immersive experiences. Rather than merely browsing through the images, he invites readers to physically interact with the books, taking their time to explore the elements and details carefully crafted throughout its pages. This hands-on engagement using their sense of touch, sight, smell, and hearing allows readers to recall their own narratives and grasp the books' core message – the significance of physical existence and the essence of being within the context of time. This aligns with Chun's photography, where he aims to capture and convey the essence of his subjects, reflecting the passage of time in a static image. He maintains that the act of physically engaging with photobooks initiates individual dialogues, adding a layer of resonance to the book. He asserts that this experience cannot be replaced by virtual interactions. Instead, it necessitates taking the time to manually explore the book even if it may seem less efficient. As the books circulate and are experienced by readers in the physical world, they gain a larger set of connections and meanings. In this way, his books become collections of people's experiences, understandings, and senses – a book with substance and weight, encapsulating various meaningful connections.

In these photobook examples, we see the artists assign specific roles to the photographs and expect them to enact these roles within the context of the photobook. Rather than merely being showcased in the book pages, the photographs are integral to the book's overall purpose, serving as strategic devices or essential elements of a puzzle. As a result, photography takes on different meanings depending on how the artists utilize and present images in the books. Each photograph becomes a ghostly shape-shifter, assuming various appearances based on its context and defying easy categorization.

Likewise, the photobooks themselves undergo unforeseen transformations as they progress from being collections of images to becoming compilations of concepts and dedicated missions centered around photography. These photobooks cease to be simple repositories of pictures; instead, they become artifacts that communicate distinct ideas and objectives. They are delicately planned and crafted, capable of physical movement and interaction with people. They become dynamic assemblies of movable parts, changing their shapes depending on the connections they form and the arrangements they create.

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33

TRANSFORMING PERSPECTIVES

A Conversation with Yanyou Yuan Di, Pioneer of Chinese Contemporary Photographic Publishing

He Yining and Yanyou Yuan Di

Yuan Di, known by his nickname Yanyou, is a former magazine editor who established an online blog called “Jiazazhi” (假杂志, which translates to “fake magazine” in English) in 2009. His initiative came about when a new wave of photographers in China emerged, seeking a more robust support network for photo professionals. Yanyou aimed to expose these Chinese photographers to a wider audience, and over time, the blog transformed into a regular showcase for photographers, artists, designers, and their works.

I first encountered Yanyou in 2011, during an interview following his publication of Chinese photographer Sun Yanchu’s photo zine, *OBSESSED* (Sun 2011). This short interview delved into Yanyou’s efforts in managing the blog and marked the debut of his first self-published work. While this black-and-white photo zine, bound with a saddle stitch, might not fit the typical photobook definition, it marked the commencement of Jiazazhi Press (JZZP) as a photobook publisher.

With the release of *OBSESSED*, JZZP transitioned from a blog-based platform into a standalone publishing entity. Since then, it has produced 61 photobooks featuring Chinese and international artists and photographers (Figure 33.1). Noteworthy publications include Chinese artist Chen Zhe’s award-winning *Bees & Bearable* (first printed in 2016), French artist Thomas Sauvin’s widely popular *Until Death Do Us Part* (first printed in 2016), and the innovative *Cards of Chinese Animal Idioms* (first printed in 2021), crafted by the Chinese artist duo, Mountain River Jump!

In addition to its publishing initiatives, JZZP manages two venues in Ningbo (JZZP Photobook Library, the PO Project) and one in Shanghai (Special edition Project). Through these tangible spaces, Yanyou and his team at JZZP host various events, including workshops, screenings, exhibitions, and art festivals, often in collaboration with local and global institutions. These venues serve as platforms for Chinese photographers to showcase their work and engage in meaningful discourse. Moreover, they provide the public with enhanced opportunities to immerse themselves in and learn about photography and art.



Figure 33.1 Yanyou Yuan Di, *Selected publications by Jiazazhi Press*. Image courtesy of Jiazazhi Press.

In early 2023, JZZP and PHOTOFAIRS Shanghai embarked on their most ambitious venture, jointly initiating a global open call for a dummy book-award project. This endeavor seeks to bolster and inspire talented photographers and artists worldwide, encouraging them to engage with the publishing industry. Through their avant-garde approaches to bookmaking and curatorial endeavors, JZZP has fashioned a distinctive platform that showcases the abundant variety of Chinese photography and nurtures a lively, collaborative community of creative individuals.

Ever since my first encounter with Yanyou in 2011, we have fostered an enduring friendship, and often collaborated on various exhibitions, academic publications, and public dialogues. This chapter, crafted into an interview format that reflects our correspondence in May 2023, attempts to encapsulate the considerable strides Yanyou has made in publishing Chinese contemporary photography since JZZP's foundation. While the questions in this interview stem from my experiences as a Chinese curator and researcher, I have consciously tried to divorce my personal experiences from the queries, establishing a framework that traverses various aspects, spanning JZZP's publications, transformations in contemporary Chinese photography's creative paradigms over the past decade, the hurdles encountered by individuals in the artistic sphere, and the potential avenues for regional and international collaborations.

Carving Out a Niche: The Evolution of JZZP

He Yining (HY): Could you provide a succinct introduction to JZZP for someone unfamiliar with it?

Yanyou (YD): JZZP operates as an art institution with a particular emphasis on photographic and image-based art books. Its role is multifaceted, acting as a publisher and bookstore and coordinating exhibitions and various book-related events.

HY: If you were to compare JZZP with a publisher in the Western context, which would be the closest match?

YD: Initially, we aimed to create a photography and publishing institution akin to esteemed organizations like Aperture or Foam. However, we soon recognized the necessity for pre-existing frameworks for such a model to materialize effectively. Given the distinctive cultural environment in China, this realization has shaped JZZP into a unique and standalone entity. Instead of mirroring established models, we have evolved in response to our unique context, carving out our niche within the photography and publishing landscape.

HY: When people think of Chinese photography publishing, they often associate it with official photography propaganda books or works published by large publishers for renowned photographers. JZZP is an independent photography publishing house—can you elaborate on what’s specific about it?

YD: While China is rich in resources and capabilities, it still encounters numerous instances of uncharted territory and untapped potential. JZZP has sought to remedy the industry’s deficiencies by stepping into roles typically overlooked by conventional publishing entities. The conventional pathway for publishing a photography book in China involves the collaboration between state-owned publishing houses and recognized, often official, photographers. Initially, JZZP set its sights on publishing photobooks, an area generally neglected in China’s publishing industry. However, recognizing the need for a broader spectrum of resources, we extended its reach to encompass the production of content-heavy magazines.

Our platform began with a primary emphasis on photography. However, as we delved deeper into book production, we observed an ongoing evolution within the Chinese photography community, with artists increasingly exploring and utilizing a range of creative mediums. Recognizing this dynamic shift, we consciously adjusted our institutional identity to mirror these changes more accurately.

HY: It’s fascinating to observe how our generation, born in the 80s, contrasts with those born in China in the 60s and 70s. The older generation often leans on their qualifications to achieve their goals, while we place a stronger emphasis on the development of our community and our engagement within it. I remember you remarking that JZZP’s definition is developing in tandem with the evolving role of contemporary Chinese photographers. Could you provide some insights into the transformations you’ve noticed when you published your first book for Sun Yanchu in 2011?

YD: Change is a universal pursuit but can broadly be segmented into two categories. The first kind is enforced change, commonly experienced by photographers and artists who face the pressures of navigating an underdeveloped market in China. These individuals adapt their strategies to improve sales, but their lack of experience and resources often leads to unconventional results.

The second category is self-driven change, usually embraced by younger, more experienced individuals. Many of these individuals have been able to study overseas, enhancing their overall learning capacity. They revise their methodologies based on their unique needs, feeling that traditional photography needs to encapsulate their artistic intent. These alterations often yield successful outcomes, leading to increased sales and improved sustainability.

Rethinking Photobook-Making Through Artists' Endeavors

HY: The journey has allowed us to observe the unique nature of Chinese photography and its ability to capture the Chinese experience. We've seen how JZZP consistently evolves, crafting its unique narrative amidst its transformation. Now, let's turn our attention back to your experience in photobook-making. Over the last decade, China has experienced developmental leaps that mirror those of European nations. However, the rapid change in China means that our history of producing contemporary photography and art books is still in the fine-tuning stage. However, many young individuals returning from studying overseas will find an array of art institutions in China eager to nurture their talent, despite the obstacles they face. How does the book's changing context lead JZZP to work differently with artists and photographers? Could you recommend a few stand-out publications from JZZP's past repertoire?

YD: At JZZP, we value our artists' substantial and direct impact on shaping our photography books. My collaboration with Yang Yuanyuan on *10 Days in Krakow* (first published in 2014) is a case in point. Yang Yuanyuan, as a photographer, brought forth a unique book that strayed from her typical photography-centric works previously published with JZZP. This book combined her documentary photographs, archive photos, film stills, and more. Reading it was an intensely moving and intriguing experience. It sparked an interest in exploring the literary dimensions of my experiences, considering my background in Chinese literature and editing. Previously, our photobooks largely adhered to established norms, primarily featuring photographs. However, Yang Yuanyuan's books introduced a novel approach, ingeniously intertwining text and images for a more immersive experience. At first, I aimed to produce some non-conventional books, and I was taken aback by the unexpected acclaim Yang Yuanyuan's book received at book fairs. This was an eye-opening experience for me, demonstrating that our methodology of endorsing diverse and offbeat artistic interpretations connects with our audience and cultivates a singular experience for artists and readers. We remain committed to probing new avenues and extending the limitations of photobooks, led by the creative visions of our collaborating artists.

My later collaboration with Chen Zhe on the *Bees* (2010–2012) and *The Bearable* (2007–2010) projects was another significant chapter in my career. Chen Zhe, whom I knew long before I started my blog, had already self-published a book called *Bees*, styled like an art book. She wished to compile a comprehensive collection of *Bees* and *The Bearable* and was eager to team up with a designer, leading me to recommend Guang Yu. After seeing the preliminary version of the book they co-created, I candidly expressed my preference for Chen Zhe's earlier stark and impactful photographs, feeling that adding other elements somewhat diluted their power. However, Chen Zhe's later work on *Towards Evenings: Six Chapters* (since 2012) made me understand better the purpose and vision behind the book she and Guang Yu had developed [subsequently published by JZZP]. This indicates the artists' objective to showcase the evolution of the project through the interplay of text and imagery. This experience reaffirmed my belief that artists should ultimately guide their work based on personal inspiration rather than external opinions. The project, therefore, also left a deep impression on me.

Following that, we collaborated with Cheng Xinhao on *The Naming of a River* (Cheng 2016) and *Time from Different Sources: Images from Ciman Village* (Cheng 2017). Throughout these projects, I engaged with the creative process in an exploratory manner, guided by my imagination and insight, without relying on established examples or templates. After completing Cheng Xinhao's books, I began questioning whether our focus on the intellectual dimension of photography was overshadowing its emotional and documentary essence. This introspection inspired me to make *404 Not Found* (Li 2019), a visually driven photobook by Li Yang, free from textual distractions.

When making *404 Not Found*, some of our friends questioned why we created a book with only images, insisting that it lacked depth. My response was simply that I found this particular format appealing. However, in hindsight, our book selection and production process became increasingly self-determined as we moved forward. Even well-intentioned advice from friends didn't significantly impact our choices. Indeed, in the past two years, most of our publications have embraced this self-guided approach.

HY: Can you elaborate some more on how JZZP collaborates with artists?

YD: At JZZP, we partner with artists in three distinct ways. Firstly, we often initiate collaborations with artists we admire from our personally curated list, inviting them to work with us on book projects. This is a significant portion of our publishing endeavors. Secondly, there are instances when artists approach us, particularly those we've been acquainted with over time, suggesting potential collaborations on their new works. We also remain open to the idea of collaborating with emerging photographers we're still getting familiar with. Lastly, we collaborate with other organizations, a method that has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. For instance, if an organization appreciates our work and plans an exhibition, they might request that we create a publication or catalog to accompany the event. These collaborations help us combine the unique vision and creativity of the artists with our editing, design, and publishing expertise, enabling us to produce a wide variety of art and photography books.

Collaborations in the Yangtze River Delta: Nurturing Cultural Connections

HY: Moving on to photobook readership, it seems probable that today many individuals initially encounter your books through digital communities and subsequently become collectors and supporters. Take Douban, for example, a widely recognized Chinese online platform that serves as a repository and social networking site. It enables its registered users to catalog, generate, and share content about films, books, music, contemporary events, and activities in cities across China. Consequently, the original photobook audiences may have been art, photography, and literature enthusiasts who regularly follow the Jiazazhi blog and share their collections online. A decade later, have you noticed any shifts in the demographic or interests of the photobook or JZZ magazine readership?

YD: The readership of JZZP has become increasingly diverse over the years. Initially, our audience was largely drawn to photography, with a specific fondness for Japanese photography, primarily influenced by my personal preferences. Yet we've experienced two significant shifts wherein our audience started exhibiting a broader interest in global photography. More recently, we've also managed

to attract a segment of readers who appreciate art books encompassing diverse mediums beyond just photography.

HY: In 2015, you made the significant decision to relocate from Beijing to Ningbo and establish JZZP Photobook Library there (He 2015). Since then, Ningbo has emerged as a pivotal center for photographic culture within the Zhejiang province. How do you personally view the city of Ningbo, and what impact has JZZP's transition from Beijing to Ningbo had on the organization's subsequent development and expansion?

YD: While the cost of living in Ningbo may be comparatively low, it has not significantly benefited JZZP in other aspects. The absence of universities in Ningbo has posed challenges in establishing an art community in the city. Additionally, the proximity of Hangzhou and Shanghai, which serve as major centers for contemporary art, has made Ningbo relatively less attractive in art and photography.

JZZP may contemplate relocating from Ningbo when the right opportunity arises. The organization needs help organizing events like reading clubs in the city, which have a low attendance. Furthermore, during the pandemic, when some young students could not travel abroad, they opted not to stay in Ningbo for an extended period. This highlights the city's challenge in attracting and retaining individuals, leaving it in a similar state as it was four or five years ago.

HY: JZZP's decision to relocate from Beijing to Ningbo may have been driven by circumstances and deemed necessary at the time. The establishment of JZZP Photobook Library reflects an intriguing aspect of Chinese contemporary art development, shedding light on a contradiction. While independent publishing and critical practices may need more support in China, local governments often endorse cultural initiatives such as building libraries and art museums. JZZP Photobook Library could be seen as a model for local cultural endeavors, yet it also presents practical challenges and dilemmas due to these inherent contradictions. Please share any specific challenges you have encountered while navigating this complex situation.

YD: Running independent publishing in China presents many challenges, making it difficult. Despite my efforts to improve the overall environment, it's not enough. Lately, I have become open to the possibility of pursuing opportunities overseas, as the unpredictability of the situation in China has left me disheartened and disillusioned about continuing within the realm of independent publishing. The contradictions within China's cultural and art scene have created a sense of ambiguity about what art can truly resist. Rather than attempting to change the art system, my focus has shifted towards finding ways to navigate and survive within the existing landscape, given the limited alternatives available.

HY: JZZP now has three spaces: the JZZP Photobook Library in Ningbo, the PO Project in Hangzhou, and the Special edition Project in Shanghai. Could you tell us about the differences between these three spaces and the focus of each?

YD: JZZP Photobook Library, our main base in Ningbo, is the central hub for all our books, tools, and materials. It's a vibrant space that brings people together as a gathering place for our community. If we envision JZZP Photobook Library as an aircraft carrier, the PO Project and the Special edition Project (SeP) can be likened to smaller airships (Figure 33.2). They are nimble and mobile, enabling us to reach important cities and core areas, spreading the spirit of JZZP and engaging with a wider audience.



Figure 33.2 Yanyou Yuan Di, *The book corner of SeP*. Image courtesy Jiazazhi Press.

HY: How many staff are on your team now?

YD: We have 12 staff in total.

HY: Your organization is quite compact, with only 12 people managing three spaces and overseeing publishing, editing, and events. Can you discuss JZZP's collaborations with the regions of Ningbo, Shanghai, and Hangzhou from the perspective of your "aircraft carrier" and two "airships"? It would be great to hear about your organization's various activities in these areas over the years.

YD: Considering the cultural significance of the Yangtze River Delta, a prominent economic force and hub of the art industry in China, we developed the PO Project that reflected this essence. When we had the opportunity to organize events in Hangzhou, we carefully designed a range of activities to foster connections among people through books. Our intention was not limited to hosting book fairs but also to provide workshops, walking activities, and collaborations with local institutions. Unfortunately, all these plans had to be canceled due to the pandemic.

SeP's primary focus is on Shanghai, where we aim to explore cultural institutions like "Urban Network" and "Sandwich." We intend to establish collaborative partnerships with these institutions, going beyond the scope of organizing book fairs. Nevertheless, our ambitions extend beyond Shanghai and encompass

the Yangtze River Delta region. Given the opportunity, we are open to expanding our activities to other locations, such as Shenzhen or Chengdu.

The Unique Identity of Chinese Art Book Fairs and Aspirations for the SEA Art Book Fair

HY: JZZP frequently collaborates with many art organizations, most notably during book fairs like the Art Book in China (abC), Guangzhou Sunset Book Fair, and Chengdu A4 Art Book Fair (a4ab). How do Chinese art book fairs differentiate themselves from the ones you have experienced in other countries?

YD: In China, book fairs like abC, a4ab, and the Spring Book Fair, all facilitated by JZZP, are more akin to art festivals than conventional book fairs. These events highlight the interplay between art and urban life through the medium of books. Nevertheless, the orchestration of such events can be as strenuous and demanding as publishing itself. Occasionally, when the intellectual rigors of my work become too overwhelming, I find myself longing for simpler tasks. Our ambition for the inaugural SEA Art Book Fair (held in Shanghai, 18–21 May 2023) is to create a fair without a distinct theme. Unlike Offprint or Polycopies in Europe, where the main activity is the sale of books, the New York Art Book Fair resembles the abC and Spring Book Fair, showcasing thematic exhibitions and archive shows with an academic inclination.

HY: Could we discuss international collaborations further? I'm particularly interested in learning about your involvement in events such as PHOTOFAIRS Shanghai and connecting with international photography publishers through the "So Long Book Mart" (比邻书集), which allows domestic audiences to purchase works in various styles and from various regions. Please share some insight on your most significant international collaboration projects thus far.

YD: Among the array of publishing-related initiatives we've embarked upon over the past three years, "So Long Book Mart" bears the most importance to us. This is an event jointly founded by JZZP and PHOTOFAIRS Shanghai in 2021. Each year, during the fair, representatives from global photography publishers are invited to bring their latest publications to the fair. Furthermore, JZZP introduces the publishers' practices to Chinese readers through video interviews.

The constraints of the pandemic curtailed our ability to engage in other pursuits. As a result, my team and I pooled our ideas and chose to develop a video series utilizing the Chinese phrase "比邻," signifying "having a close friend makes the farthest corners of the world feel like next door." This provided us the opportunity to virtually traverse different locations and carry on with our work in spite of the imposed limitations.

The SEA Book Fair, standing for "Special Edition Art Book Fair", is an event taking place in Shanghai, extending the efforts of the Shanghai space SeP. The designation "SEA" draws inspiration from the word "海", a part of Shanghai's Chinese name (上海), and also incorporates the first two letters from the Shanghai-centric organizations, SeP and Same Paper. The selected name aptly embodies the proverb, "Despite being separated by the sea, with a deep acquaintance, the world feels as near as a neighbor."

Our initial aspirations were to meet with international publishers once the pandemic ended officially. However, numerous individuals could not participate in the scheduled gathering in May. The reasons for their absence weren't government restrictions but stemmed from personal reservations. Several friends and publishers voiced their unease, highlighting concerns about the pandemic in China, the trustworthiness of news sources, and the safety of their travel. Western media primarily shaped these concerns, often presenting a distorted view.

While we've progressed beyond the pandemic, a sense of distance persists despite our attempts to foster unity. A mere handful of international publishers managed to attend, with others choosing to wait and watch the unfolding scenario. The sudden initiation of the book fair also contributed to the scanty attendance. Despite such challenges, pushing forward and acting is vital, even when circumstances are less favorable. This situation harks back to the initial stages of publishing when conditions were far from optimal.

Power Structures, Western Standards, and the Creation of the Dummy Book Award

HY: On the topic of international collaborations, I'm intrigued by the JZZP Dummy Book Award. While awards can indeed encourage artists to present their creations, they simultaneously echo a power hierarchy. Given JZZP's past abstention from setting up awards, I want to understand the rationale behind launching an international Dummy Book Award. I'd appreciate it if you could elucidate the motivations behind this award, your strategies for implementing it on a grand scale, and the channels through which you intend to facilitate it.

YD: My plan to initiate this award was laid out before the pandemic, inspired by the successful blueprints of Paris Photo and Aperture. In 2019, Tang Xiaohui from PHOTOFAIRS Shanghai approached us for a partnership, and I seized the opportunity to propose the idea of such an award for 2020. As we were conceptualizing the 2021 edition, the head of PHOTOFAIRS Shanghai was firm that the award could only proceed with backing from a sponsor. Both parties undertook the effort to find a sponsor to ensure we didn't suffer financial losses and to launch the award successfully. However, searching for a sponsor was a formidable challenge, leading us to call off the inaugural edition.

From your observations, it's clear that you perceive awards as inherently manifesting power structures. Historically, JZZP predominantly focused on promoting Chinese artists, but when evaluations were sought from a Western standpoint, there were occasions where you needed assistance in embracing or interpreting their benchmarks. This provoked the question of why Western viewpoints should be the determining standard, prompting you to contemplate instituting an award based on your perspective. This thought process gave rise to the Dummy Book Award, and I concur with your viewpoint that awards can mirror power dynamics.

It's worth mentioning that another entity involved with the dummy book award, the Chinese photobook publisher "Imageless," has already initiated an

open call that is exclusive to Chinese photographers. As such, we do not have to establish a parallel award. Following contemplation and assessment, we've joined PHOTOFAIRS Shanghai to inaugurate the Dummy Book Award. While our focus remains primarily on China, our perspective is global. The panel of judges for the award will comprise individuals from various regions around the globe.

Advocating for the Chinese viewpoint and championing artistic plurality on an international platform carries significant importance. Incorporating judges from various corners of the globe allows the inclusion of an expansive array of perspectives and criteria, leading to a more diversified and equitable assessment process. This approach will foster a more inclusive stage for Chinese artists, bolstering the worldwide acknowledgment and cross-pollination of Chinese art.

HY: Our prior discussions have underscored the critical role of solidarity, collaboration, and connectivity in driving global advancement. Regrettably, the past few years have witnessed a strain in the relationship between China and various nations, precipitated by the pandemic and geopolitical tensions. This has adversely impacted the dialogue between Chinese artists and the international art fraternity. As you describe it, JZZP is committed to surmounting these obstacles to nurture enhanced ties as we advance. Despite acknowledging some adverse scenarios, you may need a more hopeful outlook on domestic matters. Notably, artists and art establishments in China continue to actively generate work, host exhibits, and interact with their communities. The perpetually shifting terrain of the art realm instills in us a thrill and inspiration to facilitate transformation. I'm intrigued to learn about your vision for the organization's future. What projections do you hold for the growth trajectory of JZZP in the forthcoming five to ten years?

YD: I firmly believe adopting a more inclusive mindset is the key to navigating the current circumstances. My vision for JZZP is to position it as a unifying platform. Our foremost priority will be refining image books, but I'm equally interested in untapping the potential inherent in exhibitions. While my previous attempts with SeP were unsuccessful due to financial constraints, this setback has not deterred my enthusiasm. I firmly believe that exhibitions offer a distinctive experience that books cannot replicate. My conviction was only strengthened upon witnessing Raymond Depardon's retrospective exhibition—*La Vie moderne*, held at Power Station of Art, Shanghai. I foresee JZZP growing into a comprehensive, multi-platform art institution.

Afterword

Over the last decade, the global momentum behind photobook creation and independent publishing has significantly impacted China, dovetailing with its own burgeoning contemporary photography scene. As a result, the Chinese photobook industry has experienced a resurgence of activity and innovation. Contemporary Chinese photobooks display an expansive range of photographic genres—from portraiture and landscape to fashion and documentary. While collaborations with institutional publishers, museums, and galleries remain prevalent, there's a notable shift towards artist-led initiatives, including handcrafted books and self-publishing. Collaborations with independent publishers are also gaining traction. Yet, the linguistic divide has somewhat limited the penetration of English scholarly

work into this Chinese phenomenon. The following bibliography highlights key publications by JZZP, as mentioned in the conversation above, and amalgamates insightful observations and scholarly contributions about the photobook trends in both China and Taiwan.

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34

TOWARD A PUBLISHING MODEL TO COME

Japanese Photography and Its Histories

Ivan Vartanian

In the 1970s, two landmark exhibitions—*New Japanese Photography* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1974) and *Japan: A Self-Portrait* (International Center of Photography, 1979)—helped to introduce Japanese photography to an international audience. Yet it would be about twenty years until Japanese photography would become a part of contemporary discourse. In 1997, for the 100th anniversary of the Viennese exhibition hall Secession Building, Nobuyoshi Araki’s sprawling, one-man extravaganza “Tokyo Comedy” opened to great fanfare. In 1999, Daido Moriyama’s exhibition “Stray Dog” opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and remained on exhibit for two entire years. These were not only breakout moments for the two photographers but also a turning point in the awareness of Japanese photography in general, whetting the appetite for other photography from Japan.

Going forward, the exhibition and installation of photographic prints were not necessarily the locale for the discovery of Japanese photography and what made it categorically different from photography in the West. Rather, the experience of photography on the printed page has been a key vehicle through which the discussion on the subject has expanded, making an understanding of the photobook an essential part of a contemporary discourse of photography. This was before Martin Parr and Gerry Badger were to publish their epic three volumes of *The Photobook* (2004–14), a pivotal moment that expanded the discussion of photography to include not only the image but the particular assembly of images and the macrostructure of presentation known as the photobook. This was quite favorable to photographers in Japan, where there had been a culture of appreciating photography in print as photobooks as well as magazines. Where photography in the West developed on a trajectory that would eventually privilege a fine art approach, particularly after WWII, photography in Japan was on the track of media in the form of photobooks and, far more broadly, as magazine publication. So much so that no understanding of Japanese photography is sufficient without a discussion of photography in print media.

Several photobooks from Japan that were recognized as masterpieces helped to establish an understanding that, as a genre, these publications were a world unto themselves. Eikoh Hosoe’s *Man and Woman* (1961) combined his photographs of two dancers in combinations that were plainly self-aware of the book as a sequence of layouts. Blocks of color

and geometric treatment of images as components of a layout underscored the interplay between photograph and printed page. Another of Hosoe's books, *Barakei (Ordeal by Roses)*, 1963, has been entirely redesigned four separate times over the decades since its initial publication. The book presents Hosoe's photographs of author Yukio Mishima. In each redesign, Hosoe's photography has taken on a new form and interpretation as a function of the book-object's reincarnation.

Kikuji Kawada's legendary *The Map* (1965) is a tour-de-force because the book's design, which was the work of Kohei Sugiura, extends the idea nascent to Kawada's images. The multiple gatefolds are a means by which one photographic idea can be inserted into another image. The opening and closing of these gatefolds activate the user's engagement with the book while also creating moments of time travel, collapsing the experience of past events and the memory of those events (both imagined and real).

Daido Moriyama's *Shashin yo Sayonara (Bye bye, Photography)*, 1972, was printed and published in a conventional manner. However, the photography that it contained represented a grand departure from how photobooks had been edited previously. Moriyama provided the publisher with a set of prints, and the editors were given license to make a book from those materials. As a result, the images were cropped almost at random and this sense of chaos is reinforced through the sequencing, which has no sense of organization. This was also a fundamental complication of the photobook as a vehicle for photography and its ability to let readers into the world of the images. Nobuyoshi Araki's *Sentimental Journey* (1971) was a self-published album of his honeymoon with his bride Yoko. The book was limited to 1,000 copies and sold directly by the photographer and his wife to people within their circle. This means of distribution paralleled the intimate nature of the photography. Despite what could be seen as a hackneyed idea, what made Araki's work interesting was his extremely personal approach, which centered on himself and his marriage. Among Western book collectors, photobooks such as these received such heightened recognition that they became pillars in establishing a history of the photobook in Japan.

The Photobook's Larger Publishing Context

Despite the vibrancy of Japan's photography community and its camera industry, the acquisition of exhibition prints was not something that public institutions or private collectors in Japan did in a way that was significant to the formation of a market. The Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, the country's first museum dedicated to the medium, did not open its doors until 1995. Reflecting the shift in discourse related to photography, in 2016, the museum renamed itself as Tokyo Photographic Art Museum. This dovetails with an industry-wide drive to synchronize the approach to photography with developments in the West, especially since the near non-existence of gallery activity for photographs in Japan had helped to keep photography out of the spotlight. In such a vacuum, the culture of publication blossomed. In essence, getting one's work exposed to as broad an audience as possible in the form of books and magazines trumped the returns from making exhibition prints for potential sale to collectors.

There was a problem with this scheme. Historically, publications have been seen as valueless in comparison to the exhibition print. This was not only in terms of commercial value but also artistic merit. As one of many that were manufactured by machine, a book could only become of considerable value if, perhaps, it was a sought-after rarity. For most of its history, the photobook has played a role secondary to the print. Those glistening exceptions

of artistic expression as a book highlight how the vast majority of photobooks have been conceived: as a facsimile of an original. Indeed, even now, it is not common for a photographer to give precedence to the book form and see it as an intervention in photography proper. In other words, the vast majority of photobooks today are conceived as vehicles for the content (photography or art) that they contain. Rare is the specimen that gives form equal weight to the imagery shown.

Particularly with photography from Japan, it is important to talk about and show the work in a specific form—whether that is as a magazine story, photobook, primary text, or installation. Given that the vast majority of photography is published in the form of monographs, it can foster an impression of photographers as isolated creators and their creations as self-contained, glistening crystals floating in a void, pristine and untouched by influence or time. This is perhaps why the Japanese photobook generated so much attention—because it was a convenient way to get a handle on Japanese photography that would fit within a preexisting Western approach; Japanese photographers could be read as book makers such that they, too, were creators working *ex nihilo*. One form of projection had been replaced by another.

Japanese Photography Magazines

While the acceptance of the photobook as a legitimate form of realizing a photographic project worked in favor of Japanese photography, there was another shift in photography that was less advantageous. In the 2000s, photography was recast as art and photographers as artists. The first fallout of this was that Japanese photography was seen as being conceptually weak. Where Western photography practitioners started writing fully formed treatises on the conceptual bearing and theoretical objective of what was now a photographic *project*, such rhetoric was absent from Japanese practitioners. Yet in print media there has been an active discourse. There was an extensive amount of thought and writing about photography that had been part of the culture that was in the form of debate between photographers, writers, and critics, reproduced in the pages of magazines and journals. These are only now being brought to broader awareness and appreciation, as in the recent publication *Japanese Photography Magazines: 1880s to 1980s* (Kaneko, Toda, and Vartanian, 2022). About twenty years ago, I edited and translated the writings of Japanese photographers in a publication called *Setting Sun: Writings by Japanese Photographers* (2005). In that book, I scratched the surface to show the extensive volume of writings that have been generated by Japanese photographers. Since that time, some writings by individual photographers have been translated into various languages. However, the greater significance of these writings becomes apparent when they are viewed as components of an iterative and continually developing discourse made up of many different voices. A survey of how the culture of textual discourse influenced the development of Japanese photography has yet to be made.

Known as the “Big Three”, the magazines *Camera Mainichi* (1954–85), *Asahi Camera* (1926–2020), and *Nippon Camera* (1950–2021) were monthly publications with a broad readership among camera hobbyists in Japan. Interspersed among advertisements for cameras, film, and related products, there was a prodigious amount of space dedicated to the development of a deep and nuanced understanding of the medium. This took the form of monthly competitions that were panel reviewed and the writings of critics as well as the textual contributions of the photographers themselves. Furthermore, the roundtable discussions, by a stable of magazine publications, significantly contributed to the discourse of

the day. In this way, practitioners would have a multi-faceted appreciation of what were the current issues. For example, in 1960, over a sequence of months, *Asahi Camera*, one of the most widely distributed camera magazines of the day, published an exchange between photographers Yonosuke Natori and Shomei Tomatsu. It has since come to be known as the “Natori-Tomatsu Debate” and showed the generational shift between the work of documentarian Natori and a member of the postwar generation, Tomatsu. The process of published essays and engagements with others in magazines established context as well as, for better or worse, allegiances among photographers, writers, and thinkers.

There are other approaches to photography yet to be excavated that will prove useful to a fuller appreciation of photography in general: writings, installations, magazine work, independent galleries, not to mention the lineage of aesthetics. While I applaud the attention that photobooks have received, it is directed toward a very narrow vertical slice of practice, excluding all the other aspects of the photo publishing world, including independent galleries and the zines they produced.

Independent Galleries and Zines

From 1976 and the first few years of the 80s, almost overnight a series of exhibition venues opened, mostly in Tokyo. These spaces were operated by photographers who formed associations with the specific intent of bringing into being an opportunity to exhibit their own photography within a forum open to the public. They were called *dojin galleries* (同人ギャラリー) and examples include Put (1976–79) and Camp (1976–84). These spaces focused on the presentation of prints and used the idea of installation as a central organizational tool. At the same time, these spaces also produced their own magazine publications, which were called *dojinshi* (同人誌). In these, publishers reproduced photography along with, in most cases, extensive writings that ranged from personal commentary to dialogues. The practices of image making and writing were not equivalents of one another, but complementary activities. One well-known example is Keizo Kitajima’s *Shashin Tokkyubin Tokyo* (Photo Express Tokyo, 1979), which was a series of exhibitions that were mounted once a month for a year. For each installation, Kitajima published a sixteen-page booklet. Their layouts did not replicate the changing installation methods that were used each month. Nonetheless, publishing work in a form akin to a periodical was in itself a fundamental aspect of the photography that was being disseminated. In this manner, Kitajima was able to reduce the lag time between shutter release and the distribution of an image in printed form. This was the essential tension of the project, and the publication scheme that the photographer chose was part and parcel of that.

Performance as Publishing

The language that we are now able to use to discuss a photobook as an object or sculptural form is a culmination of incremental changes in how books are made as well as sold. The basic ideas that I have touched upon thus far led to the practice of making editions with photographers under the imprint Goliga, an independent project I founded in Tokyo and run to this day. The idea of recreating a performance was inspired by Marina Abramović’s exhibition *The Artist is Present* (2010) that I saw at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Just as Abramović had recreated her previous performances for the exhibition, I asked Daido Moriyama if we could re-stage his 1974

event *Printing Show*, which we conducted inside New York's Aperture Foundation in 2011 and inside the Tate Modern in London the following year. *Printing Show* was originally held at Tokyo's Shimizu Gallery, an exhibition space, and in lieu of a conventional installation of wall-mounted prints, Moriyama used the venue as a performance or "happening" space. Using a Xerox copy machine, he duplicated his photographs, and then collated and staple-bound them within a cover that was also silkscreen printed within the exhibition space. On the copy machine, Moriyama would rearrange prints of his work to create new layouts and arrangements of the same images, making each iteration unique. In this way, Moriyama was able to generate new layouts and configurations automatically. For the re-staging, we decided to allow the event attendees to be participants. This was a decisive shift. Rather than the photographer creating arrangements, the event attendees were allowed to edit their own version. When participants arrived at the event venue, they would see a grid of photocopies on the wall that were numbered. Participants would fill out a card with the desired numbers and a desired order. Our staff would assemble and bind each copy, then hand the booklet to Moriyama, who would sign the colophon, thus completing the book-making process.

Letting the participants select their edit was a decision Moriyama made when we were working in his office on what was to be a "master edit." By abandoning a master edit and involving others in the editorial process, Moriyama made a decision as an artist. This approach was in keeping with the editing logic for the vast majority of Moriyama's books, wherein the work of selection and sequencing is left to the discretion of the publisher and editors. The artist's intent is not diminished by allowing others to do the editing or even having his work cropped, flipped, decolorized, applied onto a brand-name T-shirt collaboration, or any of the other myriad interventions that have been made to his images over the decades. It is in the proliferation of his images and decontextualization that they gain traction. This was an important idea. Photography, at least as far as Moriyama's work is concerned, is a function of mass media as a means to circulate one's images.

The following year, I decided to try the idea of using performance as an editorial device and publishing scheme with other photographers as well. I invited Takashi Homma to create some type of participation-based event. The result was *Rrreeeccconstruccttt* (2013). For this project, we were exploring the idea of recomposing a photograph and deconstructing the underpinning components of narrative or documentation. By literally chopping up photographic prints and then reassembling them into a new composition, participants were engaged in a process of overwriting the image, a process that parallels the work of a photographer, who himself is an over-writer of images, imposing his vision or voice onto something that was already there. It is important to note that half of the images that were available at the event were copies of vintage photographs that his subjects had shared with Homma.

During the *Rrreeeccconstruccttt* event, each participant selected a photograph and then gave Homma instructions on how detailed to make the cuts. Each new compilation was signed and dated by Homma once the participant was finished gluing the print cuttings onto a white board that was provided. We photographed the completed compositions within the event space to reproduce them as one photobook under the same title. The book was not bound. It was a set of folios that were held together with a rubber band. In this way, the facing pages could continue to extend the recombination action of the performance itself. The recto and versos of different folios would abut in the book, and the sequence was unfixed.

With photographer Daisuke Yokota, we took these ideas a step further. By combining alternative printing techniques to play with the idea of darkroom processes, we created a performance that “developed” the image as part of the publication process. While this was not a participation-based event, the performance happened in a controlled environment. Yokota’s images were printed onto sheets of paper that were coated in a brass powder (the brass powder was mixed with silkscreen medium and printed flat onto the paper). Once Yokota applied acetic acid in drips by flicking the liquid onto the sheets, a chemical reaction took place between the acid and the metallic elements. The resulting deformation of the image was a pure chance operation that depended on temperature, atmospheric conditions, and the random action of the artist’s hand. We presented the action of acid application in public at the FOAM book fair (2014) as well as in London in association with the literary magazine *Granta* (2015).

Sohei Nishino is a photographer who is best known for his collages of different cities. These large-scale constructions are made by piecing together thousands of individual frames that Nishino has shot while walking a city. With Nishino, we created a participation-based event that would use publishing as a means of artistic intervention. We enlarged and recreated his collages as a massive grid comprised of postcard-sized inkjet prints. Measuring about two meters in height, the component tiles were affixed to prepared walls using small magnets. The use of magnets allowed us to remove individual prints easily from the installation during an event. The width of the piece varied for each of the cities where we held the performance/installation. These cities included Amsterdam (2015), Paris (2015), Tokyo (2016), and London (2016). Participants would choose ten tiles from the grid. Once a tile had been selected, it was removed from the grid and no longer available for selection. As the event progressed, all the tiles would be dispersed among several participants, each of whom had part of the whole. This was a parallel to the manner in which Nishino creates his collages, piecing together multitudes of angles to create one composition that describes his experience of a city.

The work of a publisher in this context is to use the book object and the publishing platform as a re-materialization of the artistic act. Rather than using the book as a catalog that describes an artistic moment or intent that happened at some point in the past, by engaging the readership both as an audience as well as a participant, the book can be an experience that happens in the present moment. It can be a process that is only complete once the reader is engaged with the material. This expands the process of publishing from something uni-directional to multi-directional. Readers are not passive consumers but, instead, active participants in the act of publication.

As the audience for photobooks grows, the position of the photobook itself has evolved and deepened in significance. So much so that there is an increasing interest internationally in books that are edited by the artist themselves, with format and design serving as an extension of the creative process. The photobook is evolving away from a wrapper for preexisting content and the book itself (as a fully realized artistic endeavor) is becoming the focus of attention. The work of editor Yumi Goto is noteworthy in this regard. Through workshops that she organizes through Reminders Photography Stronghold, she is able to engage a process whereby participating photographers synthesize their photography into book works. By finding a logic, structure, and organization that is realized through the form of the book as an assemblage, a photographer is also able to be a book maker. In comparison to the “photobook as object” approach that Goto teaches, almost all contemporary monographs that are published are between-two-covers reworkings of photography projects.

Bringing awareness to the possibilities of the book form does several things: it encourages photographers to learn book-making skills and find their voice; it means that people who aren't image makers can also make photobooks. Where is artistic intent located? The extent to which this is reflected in publications is something that will grow in importance going forward. This too opens up many possibilities. For example, the book forms can be akin to the mono-print. Photographers have the option of exploring the mono-book, a book that wouldn't exist in multiple copies but as something that is an edition of one. Within a social-media context, even an object that exists as a unique piece can be re-materialized as a multiple. In other words, social media makes it possible for a book maker to create an online analog for a book object that has its own ways of being read and disseminated. The two (mono-book and online presentation) can have a mutually beneficial symbiosis.

It is worth noting that changes to publishing approaches have had an effect on photography and the process of making images as well. Photography has shifted away from being the result of a rigorously controlled darkroom practice, wherein the final product exudes a controlled and manufactured facsimile of reality, expertly concealing its artifice, so much so that the image itself becomes a transparent medium that shows some other reality that once existed elsewhere, continually pointing away from its materiality as well as its nature as an image that was created by one individual and that also exists within a particular context. As the means of distribution and the relationship with the object-ness of a print have become parameters of experimentation, these definitive aspects of photography need to find new applications in a post-digital world in the form of self-referential and self-aware imagery. That is what the photobook can either add to or amplify in the wider photographic field: establishing a dialogue between the visual on the page and the physicality of the book object. The experience of photography then doesn't happen off-site. The book is the experience in itself, not pointing to something beyond itself.

Books in a Post-Digital World

The photobook and its publication in a post-digital world will need to take into consideration the effects of context as well as extreme market segmentation. Even as their physical manufacturing has become easier, the concomitant costs of book distribution, as well as market saturation, add sharp restrictions to the economic feasibility of publishing. At the same time, all bookmakers can now access niche markets with ever greater precision and efficiency. Conventional publishers that get books into bookstores through distribution channels are tapping into a broad network that is set up for mass exposure. But, as photobooks become more idiosyncratic and specific, the established distribution scheme quickly reaches its limit.

There is a possibility to break with the established conventions of what has become established as a successful model for publishing. It is important to create forums and ways of selling books that are equally new, to allow for new experimental modes of books to find their audiences. The book fair has been productive for this, but it is just one channel of dissemination. Art needs a plurality of platforms and the process of making a photobook needs to happen on multiple levels. Using the means of publishing as an artistic act is a shift that I welcome.

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FOTO FÉMINAS

Shaping the Narrative of Female Photographers
from Latin America and the Caribbean*Verónica Sanchis Bencomo*

Since 2012 Verónica Sanchis Bencomo has focused on interviewing and researching Latin American contemporary photographers to deepen the understanding of their work. Her initial research led her to investigate the practice of women photographers, a quest which later evolved into founding and directing her own online platform, Foto Féminas, to promote Latin American and Caribbean women photographers. Today, Foto Féminas has become an important resource for contemporary photographers working across different genres in the Latin American region.

As the founder and curator of Foto Féminas, Sanchis Bencomo has edited all the presented portfolios online. She has also curated photo exhibitions in Argentina, China, Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru. In addition, she founded the Foto Féminas Library, a collection of photobooks by Latin American and Caribbean women photographers. Verónica has displayed this collection at multiple art book fairs in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and New York. She has given talks about the platform in Asia, Europe, and both North and South America.

Over the years, Verónica has been invited to judge many international photography competitions, including World Press Photo and Pictures of the Year Latam, and to nominate artists for prestigious awards such as Prix Pictet. She has also been invited to conduct lectures at SCAD College of Art and Design in Hong Kong, Arizona State University, the School of Visual Arts, New York, the International Center of Photography, New York, and the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, Arizona. This chapter is written from the first-person perspective of Verónica Sanchis Bencomo, offering insights into her practices.

The Mission of Foto Féminas: Background, Vision, and Motivations

In January 2015, while living in New York, I launched Foto Féminas with the objective of creating a digital archive of women and non-binary photographers from Latin America and the Caribbean, highlighting local representation of these regions. The archive's birth was the result of several years of research into Latin American photography, a drive that started while in university and continued to grow as a fresh graduate. I see Foto Féminas as a result of my personal interest in the topic of Latin American photography, but, equally, as

a response to a frustrating lack of representation. I continue to be motivated by the same emotions. This research is a personal call for my community that I feel deeply committed to continue representing.

A few years after starting Foto Fémimas as an online photographic archive and having undertaken a few collaborations and events under our name, I had the opportunity to relocate to Hong Kong. In this process of relocation from one continent to another, I did not know how this personal shift could impact my photographic research and practice. As I arrived in Asia, I continued to feature and interview photographers on Foto Fémimas. As this evolved online, I couldn't help but think about the physical experience and interaction that our community still needed in this corner of the world. How should I connect my existing project and interest to the Hong Kong local audience?

In 2016, motivated by my interest in the topic, I decided to begin a physical collection of photobooks by Latin American and Caribbean women photographers. Books could range from artists' books, academic or editorial. To contextualise this idea, I took two steps. One, I openly announced the project through social media and invited Foto Fémimas' photographers to donate their publications with a view to promoting their works. Secondly, in 2017, I embarked on a trip to Argentina and Chile with the hope of meeting more women photographers, attending events, and building connections with publishers, photographers, and collectives. During this field trip, I was fortunate to gather multiple publications by different photographers and collectives, including *Hijos* (Children, 2016) by Julia Toro (Chile); *Las Novias de Antonio* (Antonio's Girlfriends, 2009) by Zaida González (Chile); *Vigilia* (Vigil, 2016) by Catalina Juger (Chile); *Raiz* (Root, 2016) by Colectivo Las Niñas (Chile), among others. In my encounters with photographers and independent publishers it always seemed relevant to discuss the lack of representation of women photobooks in the Latin region. Again, I was facing a similar challenge to the moment I established Foto Fémimas' website: There is a lack of balance in terms of the representation of female practitioners in the publishing of photobooks in Latin America. This rapidly caught my attention and pushed me to continue this call of promoting Latin American women photographers, but this time focusing on the physicality of their photobooks.

I decided to create a new endeavour, Foto Fémimas' library, which I later named *Foto Fémimas' Library – María Cristina Orive – 1931–2017* after the late Guatemalan photographer María Cristina Orive, who had worked as a photojournalist. Together with Sara Facio, she founded the Buenos Aires publishing house La Azotea, which specialises in publishing the work of Latin American photographers. The purpose of the library mirrored the website's principle to continue promoting the works of Latin American and Caribbean women. My vision was to create a photobook trade route from Latin America to Asia, where I was then based. My intention was to promote the photobook stories, designs, materials and edits that the photographers had to share in their publications, using the photobook context as a process of exchange with other individuals.

While starting the Foto Fémimas library in 2016, I could not help but remember a moving quote by Jorge Luis Borges that I came across while volunteering at the International Center of Photography (ICP) library in New York: "I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library." This quote by the late Argentine writer together with my understanding of the concept of the library, a physical space collecting books, periodicals, and audiovisual material for people to reference, read or borrow, motivated me to create my own concept of library for the Foto Fémimas library. Under this framework, I began to explore the diversity of women photobooks in the Latin American region.

From here, I started to visualise a route that could connect these two opposite ends: Latin America and Asia. My wish was to embrace this collective effort to create promotion and a valuable community on both sides of the planet. From the start, I knew I wanted this collection to be accessible to people, similar to the Foto F minas' website, but I also wanted to respect design and editorial copyrights, so I knew I did not want to upload videos with all the books online. My vision was to upload the cover of the book and include details such as the name of the photographer, a web link to the photographer's work, the country of origin, and the publisher. For me, the inclusion of the hyperlink was an opportunity to continue promoting and connecting photographers and their published works to a wider audience. As I had experienced positive feedback from photographers being tagged on our website, newsletter, and social channels, I decided to continue the same approach for our photobooks collection to encourage more opportunities for our community of photographers.

Distinctive Characteristics of Latin American Photobooks

A similarity across many of the books in the Foto F minas library is the photographic representation of family in different projects, taken in different styles: documentary and conceptual. You can also see that photographers explore elements of identity and belonging in their narratives, playing out across themes of family, country, sexuality, maternity, death/loss, and abortion, among other topics. It is fascinating to see how family is portrayed across different experimentations, edits, and sometimes even collaboration with family members. Examples of this are found in books such as *Los Mundos de Tita* (2016) by Fabiola Cedillo, photographing her disabled sister Tita, *Donde No Puedas Verme* (2018) by Sara  Ojeda, documenting the house where three generations had lived and combining vintage photography with her own contemporary take, and *Un Mont n de Ropa* (2016) by Luj n Agusti, using archival photography to talk about her deceased mother. In her book design, Luj n mixes self-portraits wearing her mother's clothes while juxtaposed with images of her mother wearing the same outfits.

Family representation was often picked up by the audience at fairs as well. I think family documentation is a response to the Latin culture of family, close proximity, collective decisions and shared environments, often across generations, and I think this is visible in several of the books, in their own unique forms and voices. What is fascinating about the collection is that even though there is that similar thread of family across many books, each photographer has interpreted the topic differently. Not a single one is the same, even if certain elements like archival photography, medium format, and text are used, none feel repetitive.

The use of archival family photography is a distinctive characteristic of Latin American photobooks in the Foto F minas' collection, sometimes mixed within contemporary photography or reworked by the photographer. Interventions vary from colouring the photographs to writing over the images or creating paper montages within the design of the book, as in *Las Novias de Antonio* (2009) by Zaida Gonz lez.

Asian viewers often ask about the collaborations underlying the library's several collective publications. It is interesting for them to discover that more women photographers in the Latin American region are working collectively, responding to a theme and publishing a collaborative book/publication. Examples of these collaborations are *Ofrendas*, *Ra z*, *WAR-Mi Photo*, and *Venus*.

Across the collection there are many self-published photobooks, which first appeared in a more crafted manner, as well as in a smaller edition. Another common feature across the

design is the inclusion of geometrical shapes, especially on the cover of the books—this is something that was often noted by visitors to photobook fairs—circles, triangles, squares, and rectangles. Notably, these are not all from the same publisher, photographer, or country; somehow this geometric language is a common design across the books in the library collection.

Materiality was also of interest to our Asian audience. As paper resources are scarcer in Latin America, paper and cover choices differ from those produced by the wide variety of papers in Hong Kong, for example. Simple elements like weight, texture, and colours attracted notice. Audiences were also drawn to the interactivity of the publications; a few of the books come in boxes or slipcases so that narratives unwrap as the reader reveals a new book. Examples of such books are *El Eje En La Luna* (2016) by Catalina Juger Cerda and *Umbral* (2019) by Erika Morilla.

Foto Fémimas as a Platform: Publications and Collaborations

I always pictured my lack of physical library space as an advantage. This concept of not having a restrictive space and having received multiple books for the library motivated me to create a flexible concept for our library. This is how I came up with the idea of attending pop-up events to display the growing library collection. I started to apply to open calls at local book fairs, bookstores, and pop-up events. From these events, many exchanges with local venues and artists began to occur. In displaying the library at different events, I found that visitors had a genuine interest in learning about my collection, but I was equally interested in learning about their questions and curiosity in response to it. I felt there was often an equal interest in learning from each other. The public responded to the features of the photobooks, including the materials, especially the paper, colour usage, design, book dimensions, number of copies and international distribution; these were among the more common enquiries regarding our collection. As I organised more events the demand for the books started to increase, so sales began to occur for many of the photographers who were able to start shipping copies to Hong Kong. I did not have an interest in becoming a store, but I did feel a commitment to help with distribution, especially in a territory so distant from our region. The books were sold on consignment, and the purpose was to make the library self-sustainable through the sales. A small percentage of sales would go towards the fair costs, an equation that ensured both parties could benefit from promotion and covering expenses.

Audiences reacted with curiosity to the contents of the library. An interest in learning from one another was clear. As the Foto Fémimas' collection grew, I also received books that included vinyl records, and music became part of the library display experience. For the pop-up setting, I had all the books on display on one side, and the record player and speaker playing right next to the collection. Records include: an album called *Nariz* (Nose) with music by É Arenas (USA) and photographs by Lorena Endara (Panama), and an album called *A Thousand Ancestors*, with music by Eivind Opsvik (Norway) and photographs by Michelle Arcila (USA-Colombia-Costa Rica). The library began to take shape and 'personality' as the collection expanded. Collectively, through books, we had created a presence in a new territory that wasn't defined by a street address or particular space, but more as a presence of where it would be displayed. Its itinerant feature was an opportunity for me to explore and experiment with the concepts of the library and collection.

Behind the Scenes at Foto F minas Library: Photobooks as Medium

I discovered risograph, which was both accessible in Hong Kong and interested me. Poster design became my way of merging Foto F minas into a collaboration with a local design studio, DotDotDot Studio, in the Sham Shui Po area of Kowloon. In 2017, when I knew I was heading to the Art Book Fair Taipei, I designed my first poster and searched for a studio to print it. This is when I started printing with DotDotDot Studio. My idea was to simply announce the fair's name and the city in English and Chinese characters. The poster design became an important part in the events. These were sold at a very low cost, just to cover the expense and continue distributing them. The size was A3 and printed in no more than three or four colours. I was attracted to risograph for its sharp, neon colours and its low cost, which allowed me the freedom to experiment. I felt attracted to explore a printing format that was different from the photographic quality I was familiar with. I sought this freedom and the imperfection of the colour finish, and I felt that the risograph was the right medium for my interest and initial vision. Besides the printing style, the posters also became a visual glossary of our library's journey and events. I have kept all the posters and have included them in subsequent fairs.



Figure 35.1 Ver nica Sanchis Bencomo, Risograph posters made for Foto F minas events in Taipei, Hong Kong, and Lima, 2017–2018. Poster design and photography by Ver nica Sanchis Bencomo.



Figure 35.2 Verónica Sanchis Bencomo at Art Book Fair Taipei displaying the Foto Féminas library in October 2017. Poster design and photography ©Mikko Takkunen.

As I spent more time displaying the library, I began to see the fairs as an opportunity to perform in interaction with the books. I began to wonder: how can I gain the audience's attention in this sea of people. I felt that, as a person, I needed to serve as the bridge between the collection and the public. How could I spark curiosity or interest in these heavily crowded environments? While processing these questions, it occurred to me that I could become 'The Mobile Library'. In 2019, I was invited by Queer Reads Library (Hong Kong) to participate in Hong Kong Queer Literary and Cultural Festival in Sham Shui Po, Kowloon. I expressed my idea to them. The founders – Beatrix Pang, Rachel Lau, and Kaitlin Chan – introduced me to Cathleen Ching Yee Lau, then a sculpture student at Hong Kong Art School (RMIT). Lau and I designed and created Foto Féminas' first mobile library as a sculptural form: two wooden rectangle sheets attached by straps that go over my shoulders, which was created with the intention of being worn with books to be walked across the book fairs as a way of connecting the library to the public. Lau then sent me a proposal design with six different colours. Since I started Foto Féminas, I have experimented with the logo's background colour, and I selected a soft pink, which for me represented somehow a girl's room. I think it

is a colour that, as women, we have all been exposed to, so it seemed universal in this community. We moved forward using a similar pink, and Lau made the library at her studio in Aberdeen, Hong Kong.

Once finished I would then place a selection of light books at the back and at the front. I would open and shut the front cabinets, some people would laugh, others would approach me with an interest in asking questions about the library or a specific book in question. Wearing the library elicited different kinds of responses from the public: some people responded with great curiosity and others with disinterest. On some occasions, people would rather not be near me or would even laugh at the performance.

Impact and Reception: Foto Féminas Exhibitions Across East Asia and Singapore

Every book display that I have attended has had similarities, such as table set-up, organisation of the space, and sometimes even the same guests participating at multiple book fairs. What has changed my display is the growth of the library. Receiving more books meant finding alternative ways to include more books in the display. Music also seemed a very natural inclusion as we had received vinyl records accompanying photobooks. Music is a big part of our culture in Latin America, so these other ingredients allowed me to experiment and challenge more traditional fair setups.

The library was originally displayed at the Bethune House Migrant Women's Refugee in Hong Kong in 2017. I had learnt about the women's refugee centre through a Filipino photographer, Xyza Bacani Cruz, in Hong Kong. She had mentioned this centre would accommodate domestic helpers who had experienced violent incidents with employers or had changed employers, leaving them without accommodation, and that this charity would accommodate them for the time being. These women would be allowed to stay in the centre for a period until their visas would be renewed; otherwise, they would simply return home.

I felt compelled to display the Foto Féminas' library at the refugee centre since I was interested in exchanging our content with more women. I felt this space could grant us the opportunity to look at the books and discuss the books' stories. The highlight of this exchange was the fact that the representation of family in the photobooks prompted questions and interest in the photobooks. This topic moreover provided an opportunity for some of the viewers to talk about their own family and personal experiences. Some of them were more willing to open up than others, but the experience itself felt to me as though the books became a platform for the sharing of insights, almost an ice breaker one could say.

Such insightful exchanges really motivated me to continue looking for display opportunities in Hong Kong. Later that year I attended Single Disco Ball, a pop-up art book fair at Para Site, one of Hong Kong's leading contemporary art centres. Para Site produces exhibitions, publications, and educational projects across the city. I knew I wanted to attend this event because I was interested in meeting more local publishers, artists, writers, and curators. Attending Para Site was a window into Hong Kong's contemporary artists and art scene. As in previous countries where I had lived, it was important to me to find a creative community. Attending art/photography events gave me a sense of understanding and belonging to the place where I was continuing my photographic project.

Also in Hong Kong is the Foo Tak building, a hidden cultural hub housed in a regular residential building. There I discovered many independent artists' studios, community events, and the ACO (Art and Culture Outreach) independent bookstore on the top floor. In this rare quiet space in the heart of buzzing Wanchai on Hong Kong Island, I began a valuable exchange with the bookstore. I was for the first time able to sell photobooks by Latin American women photographers at a store in Hong Kong. Photographers sent me copies under consignment and the bookstore displayed them for sale. Soon I had an opportunity to present my early library collection at the bookstore. From that intimate presentation, I received an invitation to display Foto Féminas' library at the Hong Kong Zine & Print Fest organised by Hong Kong Open Printshop and curated by Ranee Ng. This was an important moment because it was my first official festival invitation to participate in displaying the collection and giving a talk about Foto Féminas' mission and library collection.

This acceptance led to my first opportunity to mobilise the library overseas, to the Art Book Fair Taipei, and to display it in a completely different manner. One unique feature of this fair is that it runs under a theme, which for that year was "Herb", so I designed and painted a marquee, ornamented with cactus shapes. This is something I have only done at this fair. Art Book Fair Taipei also motivated more artists to ship their books to Taipei for sale, as was the case for Chilean publisher La Visita. Receiving more books for the library became vital to grow as a library and as a community in Hong Kong; therefore, distributing more books from South America to Hong Kong started to occur more regularly. The trade in books was occurring.

The Taipei Art Book Fair opened my mind about all the different styles and possibilities that a table display has for the book format. It challenged me to think about how I wanted to present our collection and what I was looking to achieve with the books. While in Taipei, I had an opportunity to meet Hong Kong artists and collectives who had also flown for the fair as well as other foreigners from different countries. Among all the exhibitors there was a thread: we all had an interest in promoting artists' works and distributing publications. Everybody at each booth or table had focused on different topics. This, as a starting point, was an inspiring and transforming experience. Another interesting aspect about the fair in Taipei, which I haven't encountered anywhere else, is that the fair included other arts in the fair, meaning that, besides art books, some were also selling handcrafted items. I realised there wasn't a rigid book-display style or even a classic library-display expectation. The books were displayed in the particular manner of each booth participant. The fair allowed me to connect with other artists, publishers, curators, and the general audience, but it also invited me to think differently about the collection. I was willing to embrace that process.

While displaying our collection and explaining to the public what Foto Féminas' mission was, I also realised I wanted to continue growing it as a collection. It was important for me to begin to gather physical books made by Latin American and Caribbean women photographers, not only made or published by our community of photographers in Foto Féminas, but of women and non-binary photographers from the Latin region. I realised how important it was to archive and share such publications when most people were so unaware of the publications and photographers' names at presentations, fairs, and pop-up events. I remained uninterested in becoming a store, yet I continue to seek more fairs, especially focusing on photography. As I returned to Hong Kong, it became important for me to display my collection at the Hong Kong Photo Fair. It seemed logical to connect to other local artists, especially those working photographically in Hong Kong. In 2018,

I took part in the Hong Kong Photobook Fair at Hong Kong Art Centre, where I began to learn about other local publishers, sellers, and practitioners, including Brownie Publishing, *Photography is Art* magazine, and The Salt Yard.

Displaying the library at book fairs always provides a sort of surprise for the audience, given the fact that we are not a bookstore or seeking sales; we are essentially a library looking to promote photobooks, always in the hope of creating opportunities for each photographer and book maker. The displays at fairs are meant more to explain what we do as a platform, the reason for the library collection, and how we collaborate with other organisations. Profits from sales are used to cover costs for the library like transportation and promotional printing costs (posters and flyers). The concession sale percentage is a way to make the process sustainable and to continue displaying the books to the public. I would not be able to sustain the project purely by displaying the library, as Foto Féminas does not rely on any public funding. As far as limitations are concerned, transportation can be challenging, especially when going overseas. The advantage of showing the library in Hong Kong, where I was then based, was the possibility of displaying pretty much all our content.

Soon I became very aware that I also needed to dedicate time and space to talk about our mission. At many of the fairs, I started making solo presentations as well as presentations with other platforms and collectives. In these, I would explain where we come from, how the library came about, and its purpose. I couldn't just rely on people viewing the library displayed at fairs, I felt people should understand and learn about the photographers working on the opposite side of the globe. I would explain their stories and interests to build a bridge between our cultures. Language, aesthetics, and materiality were common interests. There was genuine interest in learning about the photographers displayed in the table at fairs, and people also wanted to learn about Foto Féminas' mission as a platform and community. Quite often Asian female photographers would ask if I could launch a similar platform including Asian women photographers, as they felt they didn't have any representation or community. What's interesting is that, as we share our gender, we encounter a similar emotion. We know so little about each other, but photography and our desire for a local community brings us closer.

My largest event came in 2019 when I was invited to display Foto Féminas' library at BOOKED: Hong Kong Art Book Fair at Tai Kwun Contemporary, a newly refurbished cultural centre in the heart of Hong Kong displaying heritage and contemporary art. This space immediately attracted artists from all fields as well as curators, researchers, and collectors. Displaying in Hong Kong Contemporary Art Centre also meant I could bring more content to the exhibiting table, with no limitations regarding travelling and weight. This was an opportunity to display our poster collection, all books and catalogues as well as selling as many copies as I could. The lack of limitations to move and display books really made me feel like I could spread my wings wide and connect further in this city.

Not long after presenting at Tai Kwun, I engaged with other spaces in Hong Kong such as 8edroom zine club in Kowloon, Hong Kong Queer Literary and Cultural Festival at JCCAC in Sham Shui Po, and Art Now Hong Kong at SCAD University. Display formats changed from informal spaces and open artists' discussions to experimental display, mobile library performance, and to more academic setups while lecturing at SCAD and displaying a selection of books at one of the university's heritage locations. Again, the freedom, as a library, of not belonging to any institution or defined space allowed me to revisit the collection with new and fresh eyes. I could see how the collection could always re-adapt to new environments.

Expanding Connections: Collaborations and Empowering Female Photographers

At the beginning of 2020, we presented our library collection a second time at BOOKED: Hong Kong Contemporary Art Book Fair. At that time we didn't know this was going to be our last book fair in Hong Kong. When the pandemic hit in 2020, all our plans were changed or got cancelled. A new wave of collaboration came for Foto Fémimas and the library. As a community we became closer in the virtual world since we started to communicate more with each other while using social-media channels to create talks and exchanges among the community. Using Instagram Live, I started to organise live talks with photographers from our community. Some of the photographers presented individual talks and others collaborated as duos. The talks didn't last longer than 60 minutes due to the platform's time limitation. Questions were opened to the public and connections naturally occurred. From that exchange I created our first collective work responding to the pandemic: *Historias Covid-19* (Sanchis Bencomo, 2020). In this collaboration, more than 20 photographers living in Latin America and beyond focused their lenses to share their personal pandemic experiences. Some photographers focused on individual images, others on series. The idea to exhibit it online was in connection to our then-pandemic circumstance. The virtual world has become our thread to communicate and exchange. All physical spaces had also closed due to the pandemic. I curated and designed the web space, and now it remains online. The site is wholly in Spanish, and I hope to keep it as our collective collaboration.

Later, during 2021, we were invited to present at PhotoFairs Shanghai, which again occurred virtually due to the pandemic. Once more, albeit virtually, this yielded the possibility of presenting artistic work to a new audience and in a new territory that is not often accessible.

The collective effort of sharing work provides fresh impetus to continue attending events. Every event and exchange feeds this book trade. The collection continues, expanding and inviting discussion. Experimentation seems to be fully a part of our library concept's language and DNA. The flexibility of not being attached to a space allows me to always look at the collection from a new perspective. I intend to continue making it accessible to others, and I hope its stories make their way to new territories.

Foto Fémimas has been now running since 2015. Female Latin American photographers continue to be unrepresented, and I remain true to the goal of changing that, but we have also achieved a lot, and I believe Foto Fémimas' has brought the photographers to new audiences in distant parts of the world who might otherwise not learnt about them. We have over one hundred photographers featured and continue to grow. Foto Fémimas has become a reference for Latin American women photography, opening new opportunities to the community. I have learnt from members of the community that they have received new opportunities for their work as a result of Foto Fémimas, and for me that feels like the biggest achievement of all.

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36

CURATING PHOTOBOOKS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND HONG KONG

A Roundtable

*Zhuang Wubin, Hà Đào, Kalen Wing Ki Lee,
Jeffrey J C Lim and Kurniadi Widodo*

Moderated and introduced by Zhuang Wubin

Participants: Hà Đào, Kalen Wing Ki Lee, Jeffrey J C Lim and Kurniadi Widodo

Attendees: Lucy Soutter and Duncan Wooldridge

In 2014, PannaFoto Institute, a non-profit organization in Indonesia focusing on photographic education, invited educator-photographer Kurniadi Widodo (b. 1985, Medan), educator-curator Ahmad Salman (b. 1970, Semarang) and publisher Lans Brahmantyo (b. 1966, Surabaya) to select 20 Indonesian photobooks for an exhibition. It was one of the first attempts to historicize Indonesian photobooks through exhibition-making. In October 2020, Lightbox, a non-profit photography library in Taipei, opened an exhibition titled *The Invisible Future, Facing the Visible Past: Photobooks of Malaysia*. The selection of some 120 publications was made by artist Jeffrey Lim (b. 1978, Kuala Lumpur) and writer Bernice Chauly (b. 1968, Penang). It was Lightbox's first attempt at transnational collaboration, showcasing publications from a neighboring country in Southeast Asia. In April 2021, educator-artist Kalen Wing Ki Lee (b. 1981, HK) curated *Unfolding Hong Kong: Photobooks Collection from Lumervisum* for the inaugural Hong Kong Photobook Festival. The festival is organized by Lumervisum, a non-profit dedicated to the promotion of photography in Hong Kong (HK). In August 2022, Matca presented a modest showcase of photo publications from its collection. Based in Hanoi, Matca is an independent initiative interested in facilitating conversations around photography in Vietnam. Selected by Matca's managing editor and program coordinator Hà Đào (b. 1995, Hanoi), the publications were displayed at its café and on Instagram.

This roundtable aims to document these recent attempts in curating photobooks in Southeast Asia and HK. In an inter-referencing manner, the roundtable charts the different ways in which the culture of photobooks has been embedded across the region. It surfaces the issues that confronted the roundtable participants in curating photobooks, including, amongst others, the challenges of making publications available and accessible, the relevance of periodicals and zines, and the limits of canon-making in the praxis of photography.

Kurniadi Widodo (KW): Let me begin with the context of how we came to curate the exhibition of Indonesian photobooks in 2014. Deutscher Fotobuchpreis [German Photobook Prize] is an annual award for photobooks published in German-speaking countries. Since 2008, the winning and nominated publications have been exhibited in Jakarta, hosted by Goethe-Institut. At that time, the idea of making a photobook was not popular in Indonesia. Most people felt that it was more relevant for accomplished photographers. For younger photographers, they would usually mount exhibitions to present their work. My first involvement in photobooks came in 2013 when I joined a workshop in Jakarta with Markus Schaden and Wolfgang Zurborn, organized by Antara Photojournalism Gallery in conjunction with the Fotobuchpreis.

In 2011, Ahmad Salman set up a Facebook group called Buku Foto Indonesia (Photo Books Indonesia). In its early years, members were encouraged to share information about the Indonesian photobooks they owned, indicating their year of publication and other details. That was because we did not have a proper archive of Indonesian photobooks. It became a way to collect information regarding Indonesian photobooks. A year later, in 2012, the group organized an offline gathering called Kumpul Buku (book gathering) at PannaFoto Institute in Jakarta. That was when people started to get interested in the photobook format. People would bring their photobooks to share with others, creating a temporary library for the day. There were some discussions and book-signing sessions. It was a landmark moment in the development of Indonesian photobooks. After that, similar events began to be organized elsewhere.

In 2014, PannaFoto was tasked to organize the Deutscher Fotobuchpreis exhibition. The Japan Foundation decided to contribute a small number of Japanese photobooks to the showcase. To complement the German and Japanese selections, PannaFoto decided to host an exhibition of Indonesian photobooks. Ahmad, Lans Brahmantyo and I were invited to select the Indonesian photobooks. If we had only chosen photobooks from the previous year in 2013, there would only be ten publications at most. We decided to consider photobooks published since the 1950s because the oldest publication in the listing collated by Buku Foto Indonesia was from that period. By then, its members had posted some 140 photobooks into the Facebook group. It was not a complete listing, but we did not have the chance to do proper research. The listing became our starting point. We also considered a few other photobooks that we knew, which did not appear in the listing. In the end, we picked 20 photobooks for the showcase. Eight of the selected photobooks were published before 2008.

During the curating process, there was a discussion on what defined an Indonesian photobook. Should it be made by Indonesians? Should the subject matter be about Indonesia? In the end, we prioritized those made by Indonesians but also selected a few titles shot in Indonesia by foreigners, including *Tanah Air Kita: A Book on the Country and People of Indonesia* (1950) by N. A. Douwes Dekker. Overall, there were books that showcased documentary work. We included a few coffee-table books. There was also a book by commercial photographer Indra Leonardi. *Indonesian Press Photo Service (IPPHOS): Remastered Edition* (2013) showcased archival images from the first Indonesian photo agency and was the



Figure 36.1 Dwianto Wibowo, *An image of the Indonesian photobook exhibition hosted by PannaFoto in 2014*. Courtesy of the photographer.

result of Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo's research. We also selected an exhibition catalog by Paul Kadarisman titled *Boring Happy Days* (2010).

There was a little bit of everything in the selection. The idea was to give a sense of how varied Indonesian photobooks were at that time. Even though the number of titles was not great, there were already some interesting approaches to photobook-making in Indonesia. Personally, the period from 2012 to 2014 marked the first wave of Indonesian photobook culture. The more interesting development happened after that.

After Kumpul Buku Jakarta in 2012, similar gatherings were held in several cities across Indonesia. Budi N. D. Dharmawan and I organized Kumpul Buku at Yogyakarta in 2013 using our collection of photobooks. We also invited our friends to share their photobooks for the pop-up library. Unlike Jakarta, our purchasing power at Yogyakarta was limited. There wasn't any selling during the gathering. It was more of an opportunity to share our love for photobooks and to discuss the different aspects of photobook-making.

In Indonesia, these gatherings are usually organized by local communities. When people from another city visit such an event, they would create similar ones back home, like the gatherings at Malang in 2015 and Semarang in 2017. While the gatherings were still located in Java, that was how the photobook phenomenon spread from Jakarta to smaller cities. Of course, people can always look at photobooks on the Internet. However, you cannot experience a photo-

book as a physical object just on the screen. Through the discussions, people started to understand why this medium is different from exhibition-making, and we started to develop our language of photobook-making.

Other than the gatherings, there were also more workshops that addressed the making of photobooks and zines. In 2016, designer Andi Ari Setiadi, PannaFoto's managing director Ng Swan Ti and I organized a photobook-making workshop for people in Yogyakarta and Bandung. Ari and I were participants of the workshop by Markus and Wolfgang in 2013. That was the effect of the initial phase of activities from 2012 to 2014; people began to bring their knowledge of photobooks to the local communities, creating their own initiatives. That was how the interest in photobooks spread gradually throughout Indonesia.

Jeffrey Lim (JL): Let me continue by introducing the exhibition I co-curated at Taipei, titled *The Invisible Future, Facing the Visible Past: Photobooks of Malaysia*. The brief from Lightbox was to introduce Malaysian photobooks to the Taiwanese audience. I began to think about the definition of a photobook and how I would represent the country through photobooks. There was also the challenge of the pandemic, which meant that we couldn't actually get to Taiwan.

In the end, the directive I took was "periodic ways of seeing". I wanted to look beyond what photography had to offer. I wanted to remove the prejudice that photography had in representing a country or a region. I collected over 120 books, out of which 20 were selected to give an overview of Malaysia. The remaining books became part of the expanded collection. We also commissioned several artists to produce photobooks or zines; ten publications were made through that process.

We categorized the publications into five periods, beginning with indigeneity, followed by the age of conquest, colonization, nationalism and the post analytical. Photography came around the period of colonization. However, it is important to begin the story at the age of indigeneity. At that time, it was mainly cave drawings, which were also a way of seeing. We picked a book titled *Spirit of Wood: The Art of Malay Woodcarving* (2003) because woodcarving was a way of representing stories through symbolism and form.

In our selection, some of the publications would not be considered by most people to be photobooks. Firstly, it was hard to find enough books, so we included journals and even academic books. We felt that the focus should be to represent the nation through all kinds of publications instead of limiting ourselves to photobooks because not many people have had the possibility of publishing a photobook to tell stories. Our focus is on "periodic ways of seeing", a linear account from pre-photography to the present moment. We included, for instance, John Thomson's *The Straits of Malacca, Siam and Indo-China: Travels and Adventures of a Nineteenth-Century Photographer* (1993), which gave the West its first glimpse of Southeast Asia. For the nationalism period, we included books by non-Malaysian photographers working on Malaysian topics because we wanted to foreground these subject matters concerning Malaysia.

I know I'm stretching the definition of a photobook by saying that a publication with one photograph should be considered a photobook; it should have this balance between imagery and the written word. In our case, what takes precedence in considering a publication is its narrative.

Kalen Lee (KL): To continue the conversation, let me present *Unfolding Hong Kong*, a photobook exhibition that I curated in 2021 in HK. Located at Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre, Lumenvisum and its library were established in 2007. Since its inception, the library has collected over 3,000 local and global photo publications. *Unfolding Hong Kong* aimed to unfold these thousands of books.

The unfolding revealed that there are over 300 publications created by HK photographers or featuring HK as subject matter. *Unfolding Hong Kong* was a six-day exhibition that showcased nearly 180 titles. These books are photographic reflections of HK history and offer traces for reminiscence. Photobooks are springboards to connect the past, present and future. A photobook is a place, perhaps home, for photography to suspend, spread, situate and shine. In this exhibition, we focused on photobooks and not exhibition catalogs. Publishing a photobook constitutes a milestone in a photographer's career. In *Unfolding Hong Kong*, I aimed to include as many HK photographers as possible, exhibiting at least one of their publications. The exhibition featured the works of more than 100 photographers.

Initially, I planned to present these photobooks chronologically, from the 1960s to the present moment. However, there were several practical concerns regarding such a presentation. Firstly, publications from the 1960s are rather rare. The only surviving titles in the library include Frank Fischbeck's *The Face of Hong Kong* (1969) and *Photography in Hong Kong 1954–1969* (1969), published by *Sing Tao Man Pao* and Stereo Limited. Meanwhile, publications since the new millennium are flourishing and blossoming. While it might be meaningful to adopt a chronological approach, we would have to sacrifice the possibility of categorization and analysis.

In the end, we categorized the photobooks according to six themes, namely history, stories, photozines, conceptual photography, portrait photography and documentary photography. The theme of history features photobooks and publications since the 1960s related to the grand narrative of HK, including historical images. The section on stories includes visual storytelling and micro-narratives of HK's sense of place and milieu to delineate the silhouette of the city and its local culture. Photozines compiled generations of photographer-collectives and their publications, from *NuNaHeDuo (Dislocation)* (1992–99) to *KLACK* (2010–12), from *Mahjong* (2009–11) to the zines from the Kinggaiwui 傾計會 collective (2010–11). Conceptual photography collected works by photographers whose practice stems from conceptual thinking and includes books that are conceptually designed, which explore the possibility of the photobook format. Portrait photography featured books on celebrities, socialites and 'common people', and included self-portraits, staged portraits and queer portraiture. Documentary photography pinpointed the importance of visual narrative in a photobook. Publications from the six themes were exhibited consecutively, each theme for a day. We also compiled a booklist in poster format.

Some of you might ask: What about the theme of cityscape? Snapshot? Salon photography? Female photographers? Independent publishing? These are as important as the six designated themes. I confess that there are limitations in the six designated themes, as they would never encompass the diversity of HK photography. And yet, we hope to provide a conceptual framework and a system of classification as the very first steps in organizing a photobook repository for HK. There are more themes and topics waiting for us to discover.



Figure 36.2 Kalen Wing Ki Lee, *Installation view of the exhibition 'Unfolding Hong Kong'*. Courtesy of the photographer.

Hà Đào (HD): First of all, I was a bit surprised by the invitation to talk about our very casual showcase of photobooks at Matca in August 2022. It didn't even have a name! In any case, let me begin with an introduction of our photobook collection. The showcase was born of the need to share our photobook collection. How did the collection come about? It happened quite organically. My two colleagues at Matca, photographers Linh Phạm and Lê Xuân Phong, and myself are interested in books, specifically how photography can be presented, shared and archived through printed matter. We are also practitioners in photography, in a context where there is no center to see even our own history of photography. The curiosity to know our past and present, to see what is happening outside of Vietnam, is always there. Over the years, the number of photobooks at Matca has grown to over 600 titles, made up of our personal collections; some of which are donated. As it comprises our personal collections, there isn't a clear direction on what to acquire. Our interests are quite eclectic, which means that the collection has become quite diverse in terms of form, content and geographical location. We have monographs, theory books and zines. A big part of the collection consists of publications about Vietnam. We gravitated towards locally produced publications and those made by Vietnamese photographers because they are less visible, less studied and scattered everywhere. *Viet Nam in Flames (1969)* is one of the most expensive books in the collection. It is a rare surviving piece of propaganda on the Vietnam War, articulated from the perspective of the Republic of Vietnam government and made by two Saigon photographers, Nguyễn Mạnh Đan and

Nguyễn Ngọc Hạnh. The book was shipped from the US to our friends in the UK who then hand-carried it to Vietnam, delivering the publication to us in a cocktail bar.

In the 2022 showcase, we included, for instance, *Vietnam: Our Beloved Land* (1968). The photobook featured a portfolio of images shot by pioneering Saigon photographers Nguyễn Cao Đàm and Trần Cao Lĩnh who produced romantic portraits of the country and some funky darkroom experiments. We included periodicals like *Nhiếp Ảnh* (1978–2018), published by the state-linked Vietnamese Association of Photographic Artists (VAPA).

Before we continue, I would like to emphasize the difficulty in getting books into Vietnam. Most photobooks are priced at around 20 to 60 dollars, which is a small fortune for someone from a developing country like Vietnam. After making the purchase online, there is no guarantee that the books would arrive because each publication has to be checked at the customs. Many books we purchased have failed to make the cut. Therefore, the most reliable way is to hand-carry them whenever we have the opportunity to travel. Or else, we have to rely on friends visiting Vietnam. Other than publications, we are also on the lookout for other knick-knacks like contact sheets, envelopes from photo studios and photo albums. This is our personal attempt to address the many gaps in our understanding of Vietnamese photographic history, apart from the nationalistic account offered by VAPA.

The 2022 showcase was a pilot. We picked eight titles, spanning 1967 to 2021. I included some books by foreign photographers who made work about Vietnam, including *Hanoi. Am Tage vor dem Frieden* (*Hanoi: The Day before Peace*; 1973) by East German photographer Thomas Billhardt who sided with the North, publishing work to condemn the wrongdoings of the Americans. The selection also featured *Khoảnh Khắc* (*Moments: Photograph Material on the Vietnam War*; 2012) by Đoàn Công Tính, a veteran photojournalist working for the communist Vietnam News Agency. He is known for his willingness to go to the front during the Vietnam War to document combat action. He is nicknamed ‘King of the Battlefield’—we have many kings in Vietnamese photography. In 2014, his work was featured at *Visa pour l’image*. It was later found out that his image of soldiers climbing a waterfall was actually doctored. The photograph in the photobook is different from the exhibited image. In the end, the organizers had to apologize for the lack of due diligence in their curating process. Đoàn also apologized publicly, which is unusual in Vietnam. I included his photobook to create the opportunity to introduce his life’s work. I feel that Đoàn did his best to fulfill his task as a war photographer but had to suffer the situation of being placed in a foreign context that measured his works against a different set of standards.

In comparison, in *Vietnam: Our Beloved Land*, we see that staging was a common practice in war photography. I am quite impressed by their elaborate setup of combat scenes. As the photographers explained in the text, they wanted to showcase the more humane side of the soldiers, expressing their vulnerability, exhaustion and loneliness. It is quite different from Đoàn Công Tính’s portrayal of highly spirited, healthy young men in solidarity. This kind of comparison is only possible when we begin to create a collection of books at Matca, making them available through exhibitions and satellite programs.

Making Photobooks Accessible: Circulations and Control

Zhuang Wubin (ZW): Hà Đào, you mentioned the casual nature of the showcase. The eight publications were displayed at the café of Matca and on Instagram. Do you want to say more about its informality?

HD: It is important to keep the showcase simple because it is befitting of our goals and resources. I should add that showcasing photography through books allows us to introduce the work in its entirety. A book is very compact. In our space, which is small, you can still showcase a lot of books, unlike an exhibition. With exhibitions, there's always the risk that we might be required to take down certain photographs. For the books, because they are from our collection, it would be harder for people to come and ask us to rip some pages off, even though you can never be overconfident. This is an important issue in Vietnam, but it is not the main driving force for the things we do.

Duncan Wooldridge (DW): I am struck by your account of logistics and how it affects whether a book even arrives at a particular place. Having this in the background has a knock-on effect in shaping your collection and the way you collect.

ZW: I often say that photography takes effect through circulations. In this case, there are structural issues that affect whether a book actually arrives at a certain place in Southeast Asia. In the past, when I couriered my photobooks to Indonesia, the customs actually held them back because they wanted coffee money from me, even though I had already paid the fees and tax.

JL: I have problems publishing my work in Malaysia because to apply for ISBN, you have to go through the National Library and it actually practices censorship. This is despite the fact that I could easily apply for ISBN elsewhere and get my book published.

KW: In terms of censorship, most photographers in Indonesia rarely pursue sensitive topics. However, there are critical photobooks that have been published over the years, which explore, for instance, the communist purge in the 1960s. In the way we showcase photobooks in Indonesia, the emphasis is often to highlight the publication format, rather than the issues they cover.

ZW: Let me give an example to illuminate Kurniadi's point. Indonesian photographer Adrian Mulya published a photobook titled *Pemenang Kehidupan* (*Winners of Life*; 2016), which resurfaces the suppressed narratives of women activists connected to Gerwani (Indonesian Women's Movement), a mass-based left-wing organization active during the 1950s and 1960s. When Suharto came into power, Gerwani members were killed or imprisoned for years and decades. When the book is shown in Indonesia, it is often presented in an exhibition of photobooks, without calling attention to the sensitive issue that the work addresses. I think this is also a strategy to stay safe.

KW: Yes, you don't want to attract unwanted attention from the officials, even though the critical photobooks are still shown; people could still come and read them.

KL: I want to touch a bit on nudity. From 2012 to 2013, I did research on *Photo Pictorial* 攝影畫報 (1964–2005), an iconic photo periodical published in HK and distributed across Southeast Asia and, later on, in China. If you revisit the early issues of the periodical, female nudity was on its cover, completely accessible to the public. It is ironic that there is now an increasingly bureaucratic procedure to publish a semi-naked book cover in HK.

The Place of Periodicals and Zines

- ZW:** This is a nice segue to another issue that might be worth discussing. In the curating initiatives presented today, some of you have included zines and periodicals. In Jeffrey's case, you actually commissioned Malaysian photographers to make zines for the Lightbox exhibition in 2020. If we are in the midst of a photobook craze in Southeast Asia and HK, it seems that some of you have acknowledged the importance of periodicals and zines in your curating work. Why is this the case?
- KL:** Photographers make zines and magazines before they create photobooks. There is a progression. As you know, zines are very ephemeral and fragile. I actually have a lot of really precious zines that I would like to show in an exhibition. However, in a photobook exhibition, I like people to really touch the books, to go through them properly. This is the dilemma: I cannot afford to let them touch the fragile and beautiful zines. It would be nice to have an archive focusing on zines, magazines and other kinds of ephemera—even a postcard. The photobook is being celebrated these days. But it is very expensive to make, especially those that resemble coffee-table books. In contrast, zines are very flexible and versatile. You could produce ten or 100 copies—whatever you want.
- JL:** In the digital era, the photobook is already a traditional medium. It is not cost effective as a medium of communication because the phone has taken precedence in that regard. It is more of a romantic notion that people produce photobooks because the cost is really exorbitant. In *The Invisible Future, Facing the Visible Past*, we commissioned a few photographers to produce zines. However, when the publication goes to print, it is already obsolete, compared to something online, which is a living document.
- ZW:** If the work becomes obsolete when you print the publication, why did you commission the photographers to make zines and photobooks for the exhibition?
- JL:** Well, it is to make their work tangible. As a tangible document, the publication can be placed in a library. If the work is in digital format, you can't archive it. Most institutions still believe in the tangible format. We have not bridged the gap between the digital and the tangible.
- HD:** In our 2022 showcase at Matca, we included *Nhiếp Ảnh*. A friend gave us copies of this periodical because he was moving house and was about to throw them away. They are not valuable in that the periodicals are not collector's item. However, within the limits of a casual showcase, it is good to display a diversity of formats in terms of photo publications. The issues of *Nhiếp Ảnh* in our collection are from the 1990s to the early 2000s. They already seem like relics of the past. There is a certain nostalgia attached to them, which a lot of our audience on Instagram found interesting. The postings about the periodical did very well in terms of interaction and gaining "likes". During the 1990s, *Nhiếp Ảnh* published a Critical Discourse section, which was written by VAPA members. They also answered questions posed by the readers. I feel that the discussions then were very robust. Maybe it was because the nation was fresh out of war, and we were in the process of rebuilding the country and redefining the role of photography in today's world.

There is also the issue of generation gap. I am not in contact with VAPA members. It's a bit hard to reach out and talk to them because—I know this is gross generalization—most of them wouldn't care to talk to independent photographers like us who don't have any awards or status within the association. In this sense, reading these periodicals helps us understand their concerns then. In a way, we share more similarities than differences, especially our interest in photo education and the right to maintain the genre of nude photography in Vietnam. Photographers who did nude photography had to be sneaky about it. In 1967, Hanoi photographer Nguyễn Duy Kiên was caught possessing a nude photo at home and faced an eight-year sentence. By delving into the periodicals, I learned that our concerns as photo practitioners across the generations are quite similar.

Possibilities and Limits in Canon-Making

- ZW:** As a way to round off the session, I would like to return to an issue that Kurniadi intimated right at the start, which is the lack of an inventory of photobooks published in Indonesia. Without that, where do we begin to look for Indonesian photobooks? At the same time, when we curate Indonesian or Vietnamese photobooks, we are embarking on the possibility of creating a canon. In a way, you have used exhibition-making to write a history of photobooks in Malaysia or HK. Would you agree with such a proposition?
- JL:** When I first did the curatorial methodology for *The Invisible Future, Facing the Visible Past*, the intention was to create a concise way of looking at the history of Malaysia. Based on the collection that we amassed, I was trying to create the groundwork for a linear narrative, so that the next artist or curator could pick a specific period and deliberate on specific topics. The temporal framework of the exhibition allowed us to foreground our belief that photography only came very recently as a way of seeing. Photography at the early period was also very stereotypical and prejudiced. The timeline extended into the pre-photographic period and allowed us to talk about imageries on a general level.
- KL:** At the end of the day, someone has to do the job of creating a canon, whether it is a good canon or not. When I named the exhibition *Unfolding Hong Kong*, there was an intention to give a historical reading of HK because we felt so lost after 2019. I wanted to create an exhibition, at least for me, to reflect on my own past and that of the city. However, in terms of setting up the exhibition, we did not just place the photobooks on table. We wanted to invite the audience to really unfold the publications, to mess it up, to find their own timelines and their own narratives. If someone wanted to make a counter narrative to unfold HK, I would love that. We were making a canon and inviting people to undo it.
- KW:** In the 2014 exhibition at PannaFoto, we were not trying to create an exhaustive survey of photobooks. However, like many other practitioners in Indonesia, we want to have a database or a repository, so that we can see it and organize or process something from it. Personally, I am not interested in making a canon. If we have this data, at least we can use it. Right now, when we want to do something, we don't really know where to go. Even at the National Library of Indonesia, there is no inventory of photobooks. For a lot of us here, we want to create the database first. What we do afterwards, we'll think about that later.

- ZW:** That's a common experience for us in Southeast Asia and HK. Perhaps the most important outcome of your exhibition at PannaFoto is the organizing and creation of an inventory of photobooks concerning Indonesia.
- HD:** At Matca, we are also in the process of creating an inventory of publications on photography more broadly. But we haven't done enough. The timeline of publications that we featured at the 2022 showcase is quite short. To be considered a canon, it has to command a certain historical or cultural influence on a widespread level. We're not that influential in Vietnam. Our personal practices have always been located at the margins. The short answer is no—I don't think we are creating a canon.
- DW:** Perhaps we are slowly shifting from an emphasis on different kinds of canons to different kinds of models? A canon is singular; one canon displaces another. The framework of models and counter-models seems to foreground the relationships between models which existed alongside one another. Maybe this allows us to identify frictions and intersections?

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INDEX

- 5G networks 354
10×10 349, 351
69W 77N, *Evening 25 May, 2004*
(Hardenberg) 114–115
404 *Not Found* (Li) 368
- a4ab *see* Chengdu A4 Book Fair
A Light Inside (Villasana) 174
Abandoned Dwellings (Buchakjian) 243
abC *see* Art Book in China
Abdouni, Mohamad 161–162, 166
Abidi, Bani 89
Abramović, Marina 378
Abril, Laia 149
abstract expressionism 309
Abya Yala 68
Achebe, Chinua 304
Acosta, Ignacio 214
Action pants: Genitalpanik (Export) 149
Adams, Thomas 93
Adjusted to Fit (Lawler) 254
aerial photography 19
Africa: climate change 37; extraction 28, 31–32;
photobooks 348–349; Trans-African project
301–305
“Africa in the Photobook” 348
“African Middle Class” 97
African women 172–173
African Women in Photography network 174
*Against Photography. An Annotated History of
the Arab Image Foundation* (Zaatari) 243
Against Time (Fleetwood, Ractliffe, and
Joseph) 217
Agamben, Giorgio 310
Agassiz, Louis 67, 152
Agbogloshie waste dump (Accra, Ghana) 29
- AGFA 207
Ahmed, Sara 22
AI *see* Artificial Intelligence
AIDS epidemic 164
AIF *see* Arab Image Foundation
Akkermans, Arie 242
Aktiengesellschaft für Anilinfabrikation 207
Alam, Shahidul 231–234
Albuquerque, Jasmine 164
Alcázar, Josefina 191
All-India Photo Salons 229
Almerisa (Dijkstra) 171–172
Almog, Lili 152
Alves, Maria Thereza 22–23
American Alphabets (Ewald) 111
Amin, Idi 173
Amison, Peggy Sue 321
Andraos, Joana 245
András, Edit 122–123
Anoranza (Lombera) 159–160
Antara Photojournalism Gallery (GFJA) 291, 395
Antarctic Treaty 49
Antarctica 48–49, 60–62; Brundrit, Jean 51–53;
contemporary art 49–50; Jenkinson, Megan
50–51; Juan, Andrea 53–55
Antarctica Project (Juan) 55
Anthony, Patrick 212
Anthropocene 17–18, 27–28, 37, 58–59, 62,
208–209; view from the South 22–25
anticolonialism 293
ANTI-ICON (Gutierrez) 162
Aparición (Galindo) 189
apartheid 218
Aperture 165
Apparition (Fattal) 191–193
April 13 massacre 238

- Arab Image Foundation (AIF) 239, 241
 Araki, Nobuyoshi 375, 376
The Arcades Project (Benjamin) 140
 archaeology-related photographic archives,
 Cyprus 262–264
 archival activism 261
 archival family photography, Latin America 385
The Archive of Becoming (Ohiri) 140
 “The Archive of Unnamed Workers” (Stylianou-
 Lambert and Achilleos) 261, 266–269
 archives 72; Artificial Intelligence (AI) 261;
 Beirut 238–240; Cyprus, 262–264, 269–270;
 Hungary 136; online availability of 263–264;
 queer photography 161–163; South Asia
 84–89; Uganda 140; West Africa 136–137
 Arcila, Michelle 386
 Arendt, Hannah 94, 154, 198
 Aresheva, Victoria 184
 Argentina, Gender Identity Law (2012) 165
 Arka Project 292
 Arkademy Project 292; WACANA workshop 292
 Arke, Pia 108–110, 115
 Arnal, Kike 165
 Arni, Clare 86
Around the Pink House (Hadjithomas and
 Joreige) 240
 art 3, 201–202
 Art Book Fair, PhotoIreland Festival 325
 Art Book Fair Taipei 387–388, 390
 art book fairs, China 371–372
 Art Book in China (abC) 371–372
 Art Fair Philippines 290
 Artificial Intelligence (AI) 261, 338;
 AI-generated images and perpetuation of
 power imbalances 264–266
 Artisanal Intelligence 329–330
The Artist is Present (Abramovic) 378
As the Water Flows (Atwood) 160
Asahi Camera (1926–2020) 377–378
 Ashcroft, Bill 27
 “Aspects & Visions. Taiwan Photographers”
 (Chang) 348
*Association des femmes photographes
 du Mali* (Association of Women
 Photographers in Mali) 138
 “The Asylum” 299
*At the Edge of the World Lies the Ebb and
 Flow of Promise* (Abbey) 245
 atlas 307–308
 The Atlas Group 240–241
 atmospheric phenomena, mirages 50
 Aurubis AG 213
 autoethnography 79
 auto-narrative, as political method 79–84
 autonomy 174
 Avakian, Vartan 243
 AWARE Women Artists 184
 Azeez, Abdul Halik 82, 91
 Aznar, Jes 290
 Azor, Josué 165
 Azoulay, Ariella 84–86, 94, 134
B777 (2022) 357
 Bacani, Xyza Cruz 172
 Bachué collection 309–317
 Badcock, Jacob 29
 Badger, Gerry 345, 375
 Bajorek, Jennifer 72, 131–141
 Baldicantos, Cheryl 294
 Balibar, Étienne 147
Balika Mela (Girl’s fair) (Gill) 154
 Balkanization 119
 Balkans 119
 Baluyut, Alex 293
Bamako Encounters (*Rencontres de Bamako*) 217
 Bandung Photography Forum (FFB) 288
 Bangladesh 86–87, 90, 305; distribution of
 images 232–233
 Bangladesh Photographic Society (BPS) 233
 Bannon, Pamela 179
 Barakat, Saleh 242
Barakei (*Ordeal by Roses*, Hosoe) 376
 Barthes, Roland 149
 Baskar, Sukanya 229
 Batchen, Geoffrey 166
 Baumgart, Klaus 213
The Bearable (Yanyou and Chen) 367
 beauty 44
 Beauvoir, Simone de 152
 Beckers, Marion 180–181
Bees (Yanyou and Chen) 367
 Behboudi, Fatemeh 149–150
Behind Glass (Sorgini) 153
Being and Having (Opie) 148
 Beirut: archives 238–240; generating and
 disclosing images 244–248; ruined images
 240–243
Beirut City Centre (Eddé) 242
 Benally Atwood, Evan 160
 Bengal Famine (1943) 86
 Benjamin, Walter 140, 149, 188, 202
 Bethune House Migrant Women’s Refugee 389
Betweenness (Almog) 152
Beyrouth Empire (Sargologo) 242
 Bezos, Jeff 15–16
 Bhabha, Homi 108, 219
 Billhardt, Thomas 400
 Biow, Hermann 205–206, 214
Bird Listener (HAM/Helsinki Biennial, Chun) 361
 Biró, Eszter 125
 Bitumen de Judea 207
 Black LGBTQIA+ community 184–185

- Black middle class (20th century) 97–101
Black Photo Album 98
 Black portraiture 98–99
 Black self-portraiture 99
Bleaching Time (Thobani K) 39–40, 45
Bleaching Water (Thobani K) 45
The Blue Marble (1972) 15–17, 19–20, 59
 Blue Origin 15, 19–20
 bodies: discursivity 190–191; as “other” 146–149
 Bodnár, Judit 121, 124
 Boffin, Tessa 157, 162–163, 165
Bombril (Rezende) 189, 191–193
 BOOKED: Hong Kong Art Book Fair 391
 border thinking 129
 borders 18, 304–305
 Borges, Jorge Luis 384
Born nowhere (Pontes) 151
 Bourriaud, Nicolas 191
 Boustany, Georges 238
 Bozak, Nadia 215
 BPS *see* Bangladesh Photographic Society
 Brahmantyo, Lans 394
 “Brave Beauties” (2014–ongoing) 185
 Brecht, Bertolt 149
 Breslauer, Marianne 180
 Breton, Andre 202
 “Bridging the Naf” 295
 Bright, Deborah 157
 British Museum, Cypriot archaeology 262
 Broda, Ana Casas 147, 330–331, 340
 Brodsky, Marcelo 73
 Brown, Gavin 254
 Brückner, Janos 125–126
 Brundrit, Jean 51–53
 Buchakjian, Gregory 242
 Buku Foto Indonesia 395
 Burden, Boris 123
 burial rites 41
Burning World (Mendel) 37
 Burson, Nancy 151
 Burton, Harry 262
 Buser, Renate 257–259
 Butler, Judith 146–147, 191, 195
- Cahun, Claude 179
 Cai, Dongdong 273–284
 Cambodia, photo societies 289
Camera Mainichi (1954–85) 377
 Cameron, Julia Margaret 146
 Campbell, James T. 98, 225
 Camppt, Tina 72, 112–113, 134, 163–164
 canon-making 403
 CAP *see* Contemporary Archive Project
 Capa, Robert 180
 capitalism 23, 37, 209; extraction 28
 Capitalocene 32, 209–210
 Carames, Anxéla 189
 carbon emissions 209
 carbon footprint 209
 Cartesian perspectivalism 209–210
 Carter, Howard 262
 Cassils 164
 caste system 80–82
 Catherine the Great 120
 Caycedo, Carolina 21
Cecilia (Pabst) 148
 Cedillo, Fabiola 385
 Central Europe 119
 Centro de la Imagen 331, 335
Certain Islands (Jenkinson) 50–51
 Ceschel, Bruno 345
 Chang, Chao-tang 348
 Chang, Shih-lun 347
 “Chaos-Monde” 304
 Charbonnier, Pierre 207
 Chauly, Bernice 394
 Chen, Ying-zhen 347
 Chen, Zhe 367
 Cheng, Xinhao 368
 Chengdu A4 Book Fair (a4ab) 371
 Cherri, Ali 242
 Chetrit, Talia 158–159
 Chew, Selfa A. 151, 198–200
 Chicago, Judy 146
 Chigumadzi, Panashe 102
Child Labour (Thobani K) 38, 43
 China: art book fairs 371–372; Cai, Dongdong
 273–284; Douban 368; photographic
 publishing 364–374; Yangtze River Delta
 370–371
 Chitrakar, Amrit Bahadur 236
 Chobi Mela 233–234, 237, 305
 Chun, Kyungwoo 360–362
Circle of Deceit 242
 civil imagination (Azoulay) 94
 class solidarity, Evaton 101–103
 classless society 101
 climate change 18, 22–23, 27, 37, 62, 207–209
Climate Outreach 61–62
 coal 208, 213
 cobalt 23
Cold Cuts 161
 Cold War 122–124
 Cole, Ernest 97
 collaborative work 154–155, 173, 335; Jiazazhi
 Press (JZZP) 368; PhotoIreland Festival 324
 collecting 140
 collections 307–308; Bachué collection 309–317
 Colombia, Fundacion Proyecto Bachué (The
 Bachué Project Foundation) 309–314
 colonial extraction 208
 colonial space 74

Index

- colonialism 17, 28, 32, 67–69, 100, 133, 190
coloniality 67, 69–70, 76, 96, 115
colonization 19, 68, 120, 211; self-colonization 119
coltan 23
“Columbian exchange” 209
commercial forests 20–21
committed art 193
commons 89
Congressional Ecology (Yang) 347
Consagra, Pietro 256
Container of Feminisms (Nogueira, Caramés, Permui) 189, 191–193
Contemporary Archive Project (CAP) 43
contemporary art 7, 49–50, 118, 122, 124, 129, 134, 140, 146, 184, 191, 205, 213, 254–255, 273, 289–290, 325, 327, 353, 369, 389, 391–392
contemporary photography 78, 118, 134, 137, 249–250, 268, 273, 289, 365, 367, 373, 385
Continental philosophy 131
copper 212–213
Corrao, Ludovico 255
Cortázar, Julio 195
Cosmos: A Personal Voyage (Sagan) 15
Cottard-Hachem, Clémence 245
Covid-19 pandemic 391
crash helmets 34
Creative Europe 324
Crosby, Alfred 209
Crutzen, P. J. 208
Cruz, Xyza Bacani 389
Cuadernos de dieta/Diet notebooks (Broda) 147
cultural identity 122
Cultural Revolution 282–283
cultural translation 7–8
cultures of hybridity 8
Cvetkovich, Ann 162
Cyprus: AI-generated images and perpetuation of power imbalances 264–266; archaeology-related photographic archives 262–264; “The Archive of Unnamed Workers” (2022) 266–269; archives 269–270
Dafydd 1 (Evans) 158
daguerreotype 205–208, 212
Dalit 80–82, 85–86
DALL-E 2 264–265
Dark Love (Cai) 274
Daston, Lorraine 210
Dayal, Sumit 231
decolonial 75–76, 79
decolonial framework, *Wake Up Call for My Ancestors* 85–86
decolonial photography 67
decolonial potential, *The Quiet Diversity* (Hardenberg) 110–112
decoloniality 67–70, 76, 78, 95, 121–122, 133; Eastern Europe 118–119; Evaton 95–97; Greenland 106–115; India 89
decolonisation, education 100–101
decolonization 67–69, 122
“Decolonizing Detritus” (Nsabimana) 60
decolonizing photography 73, 174
deconstructing established discourses 199
Dekker, N. A. Doouwes 395–396
Deleuze, G. 190, 192
Delmas Treason Trial 104n3
Demas, Charles 99
Demas, Ella 99
Demas, Mary 99
Denmark 106–107; infantilizing view of Greenland 111–112
dependency theory 68
Depth of Field 302
Desert Dreaming (Azeez) 82
deterritorialization 192
Detritus Heroes (Nsabimana) 29–30
Deutscher Fotobuchpreis 395
d’Hauteville, Laure 245
Dhungana, Bunu 235
Diallo, Amsatou 138
Diament, Mindla 181–182
Didi-Huberman, Georges 307
diffusion-distribution model for generic images 356
digital display 137
digital infrastructure, West Africa 136
digital natives 355
digital photographs 359–362
digital stickiness 251
digital technologies, publishing photobooks 346
Dignity and Humiliation: Borderland of the Country—Lanyu (Guan) 347
Dijkstra, Rineke 171–172
Diné 160
Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Katrine 112
Disattha, Phanumad 291
disobedient photobooks 3
Disparando Cámaras por la Paz (Shooting Cameras for Peace, Fattal) 330, 338–340
displacement 31, 93
dispossession, South Africa 41
dissident artists 188–190
distribution circuits 354
distribution of images 232–233; networked distribution 354
Dixit, Kanak Mani 78
Đoàn, Công Tính 400
Doan, Laura 161
documentary photography 4, 42–44, 164, 229, 233, 289, 291–292, 347, 398
dojin galleries 378

Index

- dojinshi* 378
Donde No Puedas Verme (Cedillo) 385
 DotDotDot Studio 387
 Douaihi, Ieva Saudargaite 247
 Douban 368
 drag queens/kings 185
 DRIK (1989) 233
 DRIK Media Agency 305
Drowning World (Mendel) 37
 Drucket, Zackary 165
 Dummy Book Award 372–373
 Dunster, Flora 199–201

Earthrise (1968) 15
 Eastern Europe 118–119, 124; Cold War
 122–124; postcoloniality 121–122
 Easton, Charles John 93
Eat with Great Delight (Goody) 85
Eco Encuentro de Colectivos
 Iberoamericanos (Eco Meeting of
 Ibero-American Collectives) 332
 ecology, and photography 207–208
 Eddé, Dominique 242
 education: decolonisation 100–101; segregated
 classes in Greenland 112–115
 education initiatives, Southeast Asia 290–293
 Edwards, Elizabeth 113
 Ehlers, Jeannette 73
 EHRC *see* Equality and Human
 Rights Commission
 El Helou, Karina 243, 247
 Eldahlil, Rehab 151
 Elkoury, Fouad 239, 242–243
 Endara, Lorena 386
Endurance 60
 Eng, David L. 157
 Enghoff, Tina 111
 entanglement 2; wire entanglement 32–35
 environmental justice 37
 environmentalism 15–18
 Enwezor, Okwui 122
 Episalla, Joy 166–167
 Equality and Human Rights Commission
 (EHRC) 165
Erdapfel (Behaim) 18
 e-readers 346
 Escobar, Ticio 189, 193, 195
 Eskebhenzi community, South Africa 40–46, 60
 Eskildsen, Ute 180
 Espacio El Dorado (El Dorado Space) 309–314,
 309–317
 ethno-aesthetics 108
 ethnographic photography 72
 European barbarity 211
 Eurowhiteness 126
 Evans, Llyr 158–159

 Evaton 93–97; Black middle class (20th century)
 97–101; class solidarity 101–103; education
 100–101
 Evaton Ratepayers Association (ERA) 103
Everyone Is the Creator of One's Own Faith
 (Vartivarian) 244
 Ewald, Wendy 111
 e-waste, Africa 29–32
 exhibition-making, India 229
 exhibition-specific print 230
 Export, Valie 149
 extraction from Africa 28, 31–32
Extravaganza: Out of the Ordinary 256–257
 Eyal, Nir 251

The Face of Hong Kong (Fischbeck) 398
 Facebook 136
 “Faces and Phases” 184–185
 Fadli, Muhammad 292
 fairs 6–7; Paris Photo 6
 Fallist decolonial movements 102
 family albums 222
The Family of Man 229
 family representation, Latin America 385
 Farah, Abdallah 240
Farewell, Orchid Island (Wang) 347
 fascism 22
 fashion narratives 44–46
 Fattal, Alexander 330, 338–341
 Fátýol, Viola 125–126
Feather Library 231–232
 Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW) 103
 Feinberg, Leslie 161
 femicides 151, 155
 feminism 145, 148, 152, 198–202
 festivals in urban spaces 254–260;
 see also photo festivals
 Festivals of Light 324
 FFB *see* Bandung Photography Forum
Fields of Sight (Gill) 83, 154–155
 First Nations, identity 160
 Fischbeck, Frank 398
 Fischer, Urs 254
 fish-eye epistemes 21
 “Five Eyes” 19
 Fleetwood, John 217
 Flusser, Vilém 227–228, 351
 Fodoulian, Gaia 244
 foldtograms 166–167
 Foo Tak building (Hong Kong) 390
 forests, commercial forests 20–21
Forever Young (Shwe) 90
 Fortepan 136
Forum Alternatif 288
 Foto Féminas 383–391
 Foto Féminas’ Library 384

Index

- Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam (FOAM) 250
 “Fotografieren hieß teilnehmen: Fotografinnen der Weimarer Republik” 180
 Foucault, Michel 74, 147
 François, Caroline 181, 183
 Francophone West African project 136
 Fraser, Jean 157
 free distribution of images 232
Free Shabidul (Karim) 231
Freedom from Fear (Naing) 90
 FRELIMO guerrillas (Mozambique) 20
 French language, inclusive writing 185–186
 French Resistance 181–182
 Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) 20
 Friedmann, Endre (“Robert Capa”) 180
 F.T.P. (Franc-tireurs et partisans) 183
 Fuku Foto Indonesia 395
 Fundacion Proyecto Bachué (The Bachué Project Foundation) 309–314

 Galindo, Regina Jose 189
 Galison, Peter 210
 galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM institutions) 263
 Gallery Indigo 290
The Gallery of Photography 321
A Game of Photos (Cai) 279–280
 GAN *see* Generative Adversarial Network
 Garb, Tamar 39
 Gardner, Anthony 124
 gay identity 157
 gaze 72–73, 75, 198; male gaze 184; vertical gaze 214
 gender 145–146, 151, 185, 195, 197–198; performative theory of 147; photobooks 350; and photography 138
 gender identities 145
 Gender Identity Law (2012), Argentina 165
 Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) 266–267
 generative AI models 264
 generic images 355, 357
 genres 39–40; documentary photography 42–44, 291, 347; fashion narratives 44–46; queer photography 157–159; travel photography 49; West African photography 131
 “Get it Louder, 2014” 275
Get off your horse and drink your milk (Bustamante) 148
 GFJA *see* Antara Photojournalism Gallery
 Ghioldi, Eleonora 176–177
 ghost work 41
 Giangrandi, Umberto 315
 Gibellina Photo Road 254–256
 Gill, Gauri 83–84, 154

 GLAM institutions 263
Glass plate with shot (Export) 149
 Gleeson, Erin 289
 global contemporary 6
 Global Photographies Network 8
 Global South, climate change 22–23
 globalism 6
 globalization 6, 171
Glocal (Hammad) 84
 “god trick” 210
 Godard, Jean-Luc 201
 Godeffroy, Johan Cesar 213
 Goliga 378
 Gomburza 293
 Gomez-Barris, Macarena 21
 Goñi, Josefina 151, 199–200
 González, Melissa M. 161
 González, Zaida 385
 Goody, Rajyashri 85
 Gopal, Priyamvada 89
 Gorkova, Anya 162, 166
 Gossett, Che 164
 Goto, Yumi 380
 Graham, Paul 319
 Gran Fury 163
 Grant, Catherine 152
Granta (2015) 380
 “Great Nations” 120
 Greenland: decoloniality 106–115; hybrid identities 107–110; language 112–115
 Greenlandic Home Rule Government 107
Greeting the Sun (Pabst) 153
 Griffiths, Gareth 27
Grosse Fatigue (Henrot) 251
 Grosso, Belén 155
 Grosz, Elizabeth 201
 Group Areas Act, South Africa 93
Groznyi smekh: Okna Rosta (A Menacing Laughter: The Rosta Windows, Stepanova) 350
 Grunbaum, Arno 180
 Guan, Xiao-rong 347
 Guangzhou Sunset Book Fair 371
 Guasch, Anna Maria 308
 Guattari, F. 190, 192
Guerreras (Ghioldi) 176–177
 Gutiérrez, José Darío 309–314
 Gutiérrez, Martine 163
 Guy, Laura 162
 Guyton, Wade 254

 Hà, Đào 399–401
 ‘Habo Patience ka bokhathe II’ (Kganye) 221
 Hadjithomas, Joana 239–240
 Halberstam, Jack 157
 HALFTONE 326–327
 Hall, Stuart 99, 162

Index

- Hammad, Amber 84
 Haraway, Donna 74
 Hardenberg, Julie Edel 106–115
 Harney, Stefano 22
 Harris, Thomas Allen 98
 Harrison, Margaret 154
 He, An 282
 He, Chi 276
Heatwave (Vak) 357
 Heidegger, Martin 19
Heir Story (Kganye) 217, 222–225
 heliography 207
 Henning, Michelle 206
 Henrot, Camille 251
Her Story (Kganye) 217, 220–222
 Hernández, Robb 161
 herstory 146
 Herzog Bills 100
 High Line 254
 Hijra 160
 Hilton, Jane 147
Historias Covid-19 (Bencomo) 391
History in Progress Uganda 136
History of Life (Imageless) 279, 283
History of Misogyny (Abril) 149
 HIV/AIDS 163
 Hmon, Shwe Hutt 89–90
 Homemakers Club 99
 Homma, Takashi 379
 Hong Kong, photobooks 394–404, 398
 Hong Kong Photobook Fair 391, 394
 Hosni, Malek 243
 Hosoe, Eikoh 375–376
House beautiful, bringing the war home
 (Rosler) 147
How We See: Photobooks by Women
 (Lederman) 349
 Huber, Sasha 152
 Hughes, Barry W. 321
 Hugo, Pieter 29
The Human Condition (Arendt) 154
Human Measure (Cassils) 164
 humanistic photography 149
A Hundred Years (Cai) 277, 279
 Hungary: contemporary photography 118;
 folk choirs 125–126; Fortepan 136; memory
 politics 125
 Hunt, Kay 154
 Hurley, Frank 49
 Hurwitz, Laurie 184
 Hussle, Nipsey 42
 Huxtable, Juliana 162
 hybrid identities 107–110
 hybridity 8, 108
 hydrofeminist 245–246
Hygia Watches Over Us (Acosta) 214
I Feel Like a Fish (Nageswaran) 82
 IBTAP *see* Invisible Borders
 Trans-African Project
 Iconomics 252
 identity 80, 107, 154, 198, 201; cultural identity
 122; gender identities 145; hybrid identities
 107–110; liquid identities 151; queer
 157–158; self-selected identity 160
If You Have a Heart (Fátyol) 125–126
Ifoto y’umuryango (The Family Portrait,
Nsabimana) 30, 32
 image arrays 253
 image consciousness 252
 image wraps 253–254
 “Imageless” 372
 Imagen Salvaje 331–332
 Images Vevey 254–255
 imperialism 17, 19
In Eleven Fragmented Seas (Tabet) 246
In search of Nessie (Kim) 357–359
in situ 139–140
 Inanda Dam 40–42
Incubadora de Fotolibros (Photobook
 Incubator) 331
 India 79; Dalit 81–82, 85–86; decoloniality 89;
 exhibition-making 229; internal colonisation 79
The Indian Memory Project (Yadav) 85
 Indie Photobook Library 345
 indigenous 114
 Indigenous cultures, identity 160
 Indigenous people 171; absence/
 misrepresentations in photographs 262–263
 Indigo revolt (1859) 87
 Indonesia: PannaFoto Institute 291; Pewarta
 Indonesia 293; photobooks 394–396
 Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) 289
 Indonesian Press Photo Service (IPPHOS) 293
 industrialization 121, 208–209
Information Superhighway (2016) 250–251
 instrumental realism 209
 internal colonisation, India 79
 internalising images 228
 International Council of Women 99
 Inuit, nature 114
 Invisible Borders Trans-African Project (IBTAP)
 300, 302–303, 305
The Invisible Future, Facing the Visible Past:
Photobooks of Malaysia 394, 397, 402–403
 IPPHOS *see* Indonesian Press Photo Service
 Iran-Iraq War 150
 Ireland 319–323
 Irigaray, Luce 146, 148
 ISI *see* Indonesian Institute of the Arts
 Islamophobia 82
Iyarara: Loss and Found (Nsabimana) 29–30,
 32, 59

Index

- James-Iroha, Uche 298
 Janin, Stéphane 289
 Japan, performance as publishing 378–381
Japan: A Self-Portrait (1979) 375
 Japan Foundation 395
 Japanese photography 375–381
 Japanese photography magazines 377–378
Jen-Chien 347
 Jenkinson, Megan 50–51
 Jiazazhi Press (JZZP) 364–365, 369–370;
 collaborative work 368; Dummy Book Award
 372–373; evolution of 365–366; photobook-
 making through artists’ endeavors 367–368;
 power structures 372–373
 Johnston, Matt 345
 Jones, Amelia 159
 Joreige, Khalil 239–240
 Joreige, Lamia 238, 246
 Joselit, David 251
 Josephy, Svea 217
 Juan, Andrea 53–55, 60, 62
 “Julia Pirotte, photographe et résistante” 181
Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29 1994
 (Dijkstra) 171
 Jurgenson, Nathan 354
 JZZP *see* Jiazazhi Press
 JZZP Photobook Library 369
- The Kaddu Wasswa Archive* (Stultiens) 140
 Kaersenhout, Patricia 70–72
 Kakshapati, Nayantara Gurung 89, 235
 Kamal, Hala 160
 Kanyangara, Patrick 31
 Karim, Sofia 231–232
 Kashmir 80
 Kawada, Kikuji 376
 “Ke lefa laka” 217; *Heir Story* 222–225;
 Her Story 220–222
 Keily, Thomas 262
 Kelly, Mary 154
 Kerekes, Emőke 127
 Kesting, Marietta 223
 Kganye, Elsie Dimakatso 218–220, 225
 Kganye, Lebohang 217–224
 Khader, Manal 242
 Khalaf, Samir 240
 Khumalo, Nomusa 40
 Khumalo, Thobani (Thobani K) 38–40, 59–60,
 62; fashion narratives 44–46; water apartheid
 42–44; water politics 41–42
 Kim, Shinwook 357–359
 Kinggaiwui collective (2010–2011) 398
 Kiossev, Aleksander 119–120
 Kisombe, Florence 174
Kissing Doesn’t Kill (Fury) 163
 Kitajima, Keizo 378
 KLACK (2010–2012) 398
The Knight’s Move (Boffin) 162
 Kodak 208
 Kosofsky, Eve 157
 Kothi 160
Kothis, Hijras, Giryas, and Others (Singh) 160
 Krauss, Rosalind 18
 Krebs, Nico 256
 Krewinkel, Ben 348–349
 Krief, Jean-Pierre 183
 Kristoffersen, David Samuel Josef Naeman 111
 Kruger, Barbara 146–147
 Kumar, M Palani 81
 Kumaraswamy, Vishal 81–82
 Kumpul Buku 395–396
 Kuti, Fela Anikulapo 298
- La Azotea 384
 “La guerre du Liban au jour le jour”
 (The Lebanese War Day by Day) 238
La Saone (Tabet) 246
 Lacan, Jacques 148
 LAION datasets 266
 Laksana, Ben 292
 Land Act (1913) 93
 language 165–166; crossing artistic
 languages 192–193; Greenland 112–115;
 and photography 138
 Lao New Wave Cinema Productions 291
 Larsen Ice Shelf 54, 61
Las Novias de Antonio (Gonzalez) 385
Last Years’ Snow (While We Wait) (Douaihi) 247
Latent Images 240
 Latin America 329–341; photobooks 385–386
 Lau, Rachel 388–389
 de Lauretis, Teresa 201
 Lawler, Louise 254
 Le Popil Photo Gallery 289
 Lebanon *see* Beirut
 Leclair, Larissa 345
 Lederman, Russet 349
 Lee, Kalen Wing Ki 394, 398–399
Left Right (2022) 279
 Lekan, Thomas 20, 25
 Lendvai-Dircksen, Erna 350–351
Leningrad (Buchakjian) 242
 Leonard, Indra 395
 lesbian identity 157
 Lewis, Emma 222
 Leyva, Ingrid 175–176
 LGBTQ communities 173–174; Black
 LGBTQIA+ community 184–185
 The Library Project, PhotoIreland Festival
 325–327
 Lightbox 402
 Lightbox Photo Library 351, 394

Index

- Lillian Derrick Institute 96
 Lim, Jeffrey 394, 397
 Lim, Jessica 293
 liquid modernity 151
 listening 75, 112–113, 163
 Lister, Martin 359
 Liu, Chengrui 276
 Liwanag, Luis 293
 Lo Biundo, Bruna 181–183
 Lombera, Alexis Ruiseco 159–160
The Lookout, Mbenga (Nsabimana) 34
L'Orient-Le Jour 238
Los Mundos de Tita (Cedillo) 385
Love for Sale (Hilton) 147
 Lucas, Sarah 148
 Ludovico, Alessandro 346
 Lugones, Maria 195
lumen over lux (Copjec) 228
 Lumervisum 394
- MacKenzie, Donald 207
Made in (Hardenberg) 109
Maga Ura (One's own master, Piti) 127
 Magnum Foundation 5
 Mahadevan, Sudhir 228
Mahjong (2009–2011) 398
 Maier, Vivian 179
 Maison Europeenne de la Photographie (MEP) 184
 Majority World 3
 Malaysia, *The Invisible Future, Facing the Visible Past: Photobooks of Malaysia* 397
 Mali 138
 Malm, Andreas 208
Man and Woman (Hosoe) 375–376
 Mandela, Nelson 298
 “Mandello” 180
 Mandello, Jeanne 179–181
 Manfredi, Roman 161
 Mani, Sajan 85–86
 MAP, Co-operative 233
The Map (Kawada) 376
 Mapanzela, Abegail 101
Marana (Demise, Kumaraswamy) 81
 Marcos, Ferdinand 293
Marea Verde (Ghioldi) 177
 Maria Lugones Decolonial Summer School 75
Marseille Overflow (Tabet) 246
 Martell, Mayra 151
 Martin, Rosy 220–221
 Marx, Karl 210
Masculinities: Liberation through Photography 148
 Matca 394, 399, 404
 materialities 221–222, 386; *Heir Story* 223–225; queer photography 165–167
- Maynard, Patrick 207
 McKenzie, Peter 43
 mediation 198, 201
 Mèhomey, Édouard 138
 Mèhomey, Ida 138
 Melken, Rolando Vázquez 67–77
Memory of a Paper City (Boustany) 238
 memory politics, Hungary 125
 Mendel, Gideon 37
 metabolism 210, 211
Mexican Shoppers (Leyva) 175–176
 Midjourney 264
 Mignolo, Walter 134
 migration 150
 Miller, Lee 179
 Millet, Kate 147
 Million Signature Campaign 103
Mini Album / Summer 1982 (Zaatari and Raad) 241, 247
 mining 23, 28
Mining Photography: The Ecological Footprint of Image Production 205, 207, 212–214
 Mirza, Randa 246
 Mirzoeff, Nicholas 110
Miss the Target (Cai) 277–278
Mnemosyne Atlas (Warburg) 307
 mobile libraries 388
 mobile phone photography 53
 Mocaico, Guido 255
 Modeka Art 290
Modern Lovers (Rheims) 149
 modernity 68–69, 119–121; liquid modernity 151; reflexive modernity 124
 modernization 121
 Mofokeng, Santu 98, 218, 225
 Mohanty, Chandra Talpade 170
 Mohdad, Samer 239
 “Mois de la photo au Liban” (Month of Photography in Lebanon) 239
 Mokoena, Morake Petrus “Smash” 102–103
 Mokoena, Teboho 102–103
Monsterbryder (Pattern breaker, Hardenberg) 109
A Monument to the Dying (Cai) 280, 282
 Moortgat, Elisabeth 180–181
 Morales, Nelson 165
 Moriyama, Daido 256–259, 375–376, 378–379
 Mosquera, Gerardo 123
 “mosquito press” 293
 Moten, Fred 22, 134
 motherhood 152–154
Mothers of patience (Behboudi) 150
 Mozambique, FRELIMO guerrillas 20
 Mroue, Rabih 240
 Muholi, Zanele 179, 184–185
 Mulvey, Laura 152

Index

- Muñoz, José Esteban 157
Munshi, Esha 231–232
Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg 205
Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) 311
Muslims, vilification of 82
muxes 165
My Land (Kerekes) 127
Myanmar 89–90, 294
- Nadar 19
nádleehi 160–161
Nagel, Sandra 199
Nageswaran, Jaisingh 82
Naing, Mayco 90
The Naming of a River (Cheng) 368
Nariz (Nose, Endara) 386
narratives 149–152; Cai, Dongdong
 279–281; familial narratives 222;
 personal narratives 222
National Council of African Women in South
 Africa (NCAW) 99–100
National Geographic 49
National Geographic Society (NGS) 305
*Native Women of South India: Manner and
 Customs* (Pushpamala N and Clare Arni) 86
Natori, Yonosuke 378
Natori-Tomatsu Debate 378
nature 113–114, 206, 209–215
Nature/Culture dualism 209
NCAW *see* National Council of African Women
 in South Africa
Nelson, Maggie 165
neo-colonialism 32
Nepal, *The Public Life of Women—A Feminist
 Memory Project* (Kakshapati) 88–89
Nepal Picture Library (NPL) 88, 234–236
networked distribution 354
networking, PhotoIreland Festival 323
Neumüller, Moritz 322–323
New Irish Works project 327
New Japanese Photography (1974) 375
The New Mothers (Dijkstra) 171
‘New Photography 2023’ exhibition 140–141
New South Greenland (Jenkinson) 50–51
New Species (Juan) 54–55, 60
New Species XVI (Juan) 54–55
‘The New Woman behind the Camera’ 181
Ng, Swan Ti 292, 397
Ngcoya, Mvuselelo 42
Ngigi, Margaret Njeri 172–173
NGS *see* National Geographic Society
Nguyễn, Cao Đàm 400
Nguyễn, Duy Kiên 403
Nguyễn, Mạnh Đan 400
Nguyễn, Ngọc Hạnh 400
Nhiếp Ảnh 400–402
- Niépcé, Nicéphore 207
Nigerian Nostalgia Project 136
‘Night Walk in Heiqiao’ 276
Nippon Camera (1950–2021) 377
Nir, Claudi 325
Nishino, Sohei 380
Nogueira, Carme 189
Norddeutsche Affinerie AG 213
Northropocene 28
Novogen (Szalai) 128
Nqaba, Nobukho 150
Nsabimana, Jean Claude 23–24, 28–35, 59, 62
Nshuti Yanjye (My Dear Friend) Shaba & Pox
 (Nsabimana) 33
Ntila, Lunga 95
NuNaHeDuo (Dislocation, 1992–99) 398
- observational evidence 51
OBSESSED (2011) 364
Offering (Cai) 274–275
Ogunji, Wura Natash 189–190
‘Oh My God!’ (Cai) 276
Ohiri, Karl 140
Ojeda, Sarai 385
Ojeikere, Adenike Adesuyi 300
Ojeikere, Amaize 300
*On Photography in Lebanon. Essays and
 Stories* (Cottard-Hachem and Salamé)
 238–239, 243, 245
One Night of Sleep (Joreige) 246
Onorato, Taiyo 256
Opie, Catherine 148
Opsvik, Eivind 386
Oramas, Pérez 308
Orchid Island 347
ordinary life, South Africa 218–219
Orive, Maria Cristina 384
Oshima, Neal 290
other 122–123; bodies as 146–149
Otherness 120
‘Our Colonial Inheritance’ (2023) 72
‘Our Light Will Outlast Their Flags’
 (Kaersenhout and Melken) 70–72
Ovaherero and Nama genocide (Namibia) 73
OVER Journal 328
Over the Horizon (Brundrit) 51–53
Oversea Chinese Photographic Society 288
Overview Effect 15–16
- Pabst, Sarah 148, 153–154
PAF *see* Perhimpunan Amatir Foto
Palasi, Kat 294
Pan-Africanism 299
Pan-American modern art movement 309
Pani, Sebastian 155
Panlilio, Gio 290

- PannaFoto Institute 291, 394–395
 Para Site 389
 parafiction 241
 Pardo, Alona 148
 Paris Photo 6
 Parr, Martin 325, 345, 375
Participants at Lugard's Rest House (Okereke) 301
Participants in the Invisible Borders Trans-Bangladeshi Road Trip (Okereke) 304
Passing Time 243
The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire (Bright) 157
Paths Through Air (Gill and Vangad) 83
 Pathshala South Asian Media Institute 233, 305
 patriarchal order 147
 pedagogies of positionality 74
 pedagogies of relationality 74
 pedagogies of transition 74
Pellicula 242
People of India (Watson and Kaye) 85
 Pereira, Lilia 153–154
 performances 190–191; *Bombril* (Rezende) 189, 192–193; Kganye, Lebohang 223–224; as publishing, Japan 378–381
 performative theory of gender 147
 Perhimpunan Amatir Foto (PAF) 288
 peripheries 62
Permanent Error (Hugo) 29
 Permata Photojournalist Grant (PPG) 292
 PermataBank 292
 Permui, Uqui 189
 “personal is political” 145–146
 Pewarta Indonesia 293
 phallocracy 148
 Pham, Linh 399
 Philippine Art Gallery 290
 Philippines 294; mosquito press 293–294; salon photography 290
 Phnom Penh 289
 phone photography 137
 Phong, Lê Xuân 399
 Photo Circle 234
 photo communities, Southeast Asia 287–295
 photo festivals 228, 230–231, 233–235; Ireland 319–322
 Photo Kathmandu 231, 234–237, 254
Photo Museum Ireland 321
Photo Pictorial (1964–2005) 401
 photo societies, Southeast Asia 287–293
The Photobook (Parr and Badger) 375
 photobooks 5, 331, 345–354; *B777* (2022) 357; *Bird Listener* (2021) 361; Foto Féminas 387–389; gender 350; Hong Kong 394–404; Indonesia 394–396; Japan 375–381; Latin America 385–386; making through artists' endeavors 367–368; post-digital 381; *The Quiet Diversity* (2005) 107–112; *In search of NESSIE* (2021) 357–359; South Korea 354, 356–362; Southeast Asia 394–404; *The Weight* (2022) 361; women 349–350; Yanyou Yuan Di 364–374
 PHOTOFAIRS Shanghai 365, 371–373
 PhotoFairs Shanghai 391
 photographic archives 72
 photographic legacies, South Africa 38–40
Photographic Object 67 (Gorkova) 166
 photographic publishing, Yanyou Yuan Di 364–374
 photographs 4–5
Photography in Hong Kong 1954–1969 (Fischbeck) 398
 photography magazines, Japan 377–378
Photography Reforged 279
 #PhotoKTM5 231
 Photolreland Festival 319–320, 322–323; Art Book fair 325; belonging 328; HALFTONE 326–327; institutional supports 324–325; The Library Project 325–327; networking 323; New Irish Works project 327
Photolreland's Support Framework (2022) 320
 photojournalism, Southeast Asia 294–295
 photozines 398; *see also* zines
 Picot, Grégoire-Georges 183
 Pictorialism 287
Pied Piper (Kganye) 223–224
 Pieter, Yoppy 292–293
 Pinney, Christopher 228
 Piotrowski, Piotr 123–124
 Pirotte, Julia 181–184
 Pirous, A. D. 288
 Pissed Off Trannies (POT) 165
 Piti, Marcell 127
A Place Called Away (Puckett) 31
 planetary crisis 27, 37
 plastic pollution 29–30
Platform (Moriyama) 257–258
 PO Project 369
Point of View (Hardenberg) 114–115
Policing Gender (Triburgo) 163
 political photography 133
 Pontes, Lais 151
 Ponting, Herbert 49
Portrait of Protest (Sen) 230
 portrait photography 103
 positive images, queer photography 164
 postcards 70, 73, 239, 242; Library Project 326; *Wonder Beirut* 241
 postcolonial 69; India 79
 post-colonial theories 123, 132
 post-colonialism 151
 postcoloniality 121–122
 post-digital 346; photobooks 381

- postmodernism 121–122
 post-socialism 119, 122
 POT *see* Pissed Off Trannies
 power 172, 298, 310; AI-generated images
 264–266; representations of 308
 power structures 372–373
 PPG *see* Permata Photojournalist Grant
 PPP *see* Press Photographers of the Philippines
 Prager, Alex 257
 “Premio Jeanne Mandello” 181
 Press Photographers of the Philippines
 (PPP) 293
Printing Show 379
 Procur.arte 324
 Protick, Sarker 234
 Proyecto Bachué 316–317
 Public Art Fund 254
The Public Life of Women—A Feminist Memory
 Project 88–89
 public mourning 191
 publishing 335–336, 338; as performances,
 Japan 378–381; photobooks 345–352;
 self-publishing 345–346
 Puckett, Jim 31
 Pushpamala N 86
Pyréolophore 207
- queer 157–161, 197
 queer effects 159
 queer photography 157–158; archives 161–163;
 materialities 165–167; translation 159–161;
 visibility 163–165
 Queer Reads Library 388
 “Queering Public Space” (2006–ongoing) 185
 queerphobia 179
Queue Exercise (Cai) 277–278
Queue Training (Cai) 277–278
 Quibilan, Jason 290
The Quiet Diversity (Hardenberg) 106–115
 Quijano, Anibal 68–69
- Raad, Walid 240–241, 244
 racial segregation, South Africa 101–102
 racial time 95
 racism 67, 72–73; White privilege 102
 Ractliffe, Jo 217
 “Radio Karantina” 247
 Raha, Nat 164
 Raja KC, Diwas 89
 Rana Foundation 291
 Rancière, Jacques 151
 “Rape Room” 276
 Rattana, Vandy 289
 Raworth, Kate 28
 Realframe (Thailand) 294
 reappropriating iconic images 84
*The Reassuring Hand Gestures of Big Men,
 Small Men, All Men* (Abidi) 89
 recycling 59
 reflexive modernity 124
Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud) 191
 (re)membering 219–220
 Reminder Photography Stronghold 380
 Remissa, Mak 289
 representational gaps 261
 representations 17–18; of gender 145–146; of
 other 122–123; of politics 164, 293–296; of
 power 308
*Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial
 Exhibition in Five Acts* (2004) 109
A Review of Grief (Andraos) 245
 REVISTA IMAGEN SALVAJE 336–337
 (re)writing histories 225
 Rezende, Priscila 189
 Rheims, Bettina 149
 Rickshaw Van Mobile Exhibition 234
 Riefenstahl, Leni 351
 Riggs, Christina 262
The River (Tabet) 245–247
The Road to Peace 242
 Ronis, Willy 183
 Rosenmunthe, Johan 250
 Rosler, Martha 147, 252–253
 Roth, Andrew 345
Rrreeeccconstruccttt (2013) 379
 Ruang MES 56 289
 Rubeiz, Galerie Janine 239
Rue d’Italie (Buser) 259
Rue du Panorama 4 (Buser) 257
 Ruelfs, Esther 205
 Ruvalcaba, Héctor Domínguez 160
 Rwanda genocide (1994) 31, 33
- SA SA BASSAC 289
 Sagan, Carl 15
Saida, June 6, 1982 (Zaatari) 241
 Salloum, Jayce 238
 Salman, Ahmad 394–395
 salon photography, Southeast Asia 287–290
 same-sex marriage 173
 Sami people 67
 Samuelson, Meg 27–28
 Sanchis Bencomo, Véronica 383–391
 Sandbye, Mette 108, 110
 Sargologo, François 242
 Sau, Victoria 153
 Sawada, Tomoko 151
 Sayegh, Nasri 247
 Sayoga, Putu 292
*Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and
 Transnational Practices* (Mohanty) 170
 Schlöndorff, Volker 242

- scientific racism 67
 Scott, James C. 20–21
 Scott, Robert Falcon 49, 61
 scraping data 264
 SEA Art Book Fair 371–372
 Sealy, Mark 95
Secrets in the Open Sea (Raad) 240
Seeds of Change (Alves) 22–23
Seeds Shall Set Us Free (Wasif) 86–87
 Segato, Rita 155, 195
 Sekar, Rara 292
 Sekula, Allan 163, 206
 Selapak, Stiev 289
 Self Publish, Be Happy 345
 self-colonization 119
 self-determination 79, 145
 selfie-culture 228
 self-selected identity 160
 Sen, Ronny 230
 Sensitive Machine 332
Sentimental Journey (Araki) 376
Sergio, la Camara y Yo (Sergio, the Camera and Me, Ruiz and Salazar) 313
 Setiadi, Andi Ari 397
Setting Sun: Writing by Japanese Photographers (Vartanian) 377
 sexual violence 177
Shaba (Revisit) (Nsabimana) 23–24
 Shackleton, Ernest 49, 60
 sharing photographs 354–355
 Sharpe, Christina 134
Shashin Tokkyubin Tokyo (Kitajima) 378
Shashin yo Sayonara (Bye bye, Photography, Moriyama) 376
 Sherman, Cindy 152
 Shooting Cameras for Peace Foundation 330
 Shore, Robert 355
 Sicre, JoséGómez 309
 silver 212
 Sing Tao Man Pao 398
 Singapore 173; education initiatives 291
 Singh, Charan 160
 Singh, Dayanita 111
 Single Disco Ball (Hong Kong) 389
Skin of Chitwan (Chitrakar) 236
 smartphones, share button 354–355
 Smilde, Berndnault 257
 Smith, Linda Tuhiwai 170
 “So Long Book Mart” (Yanyou) 371
 social media 345; stickiness 251
 “social metabolism” 210
 social unrest, South Africa 37
 socialism, post-socialism 119
 Soelarko, R. M. 288
 soil exhaustion 210
 sojourners 171, 175–176
 SOKONG! Publish 296
 “Somnyama Ngonyama” 185
 Sorgini, Lisa 153
 Sosrodjojo, Sinartus 291
Source Magazine 321
 South, view of the Anthropocene 22–25
 South Africa 231–233; apartheid 218; class solidarity 101–103; fashion narratives 44–46; flooding 37; Inanda Dam 40–42; photographic legacies 38–40; racial segregation 101–102; social unrest 37; water 38; water apartheid 42–44
 South African art, Kganye, Lebohang 217–224
 South Asia 78, 227; archives 84–89; auto-narrative 79–84
 South Korea, photobooks 354, 356–362
 Southasian 78
 Southasian imaginary 78
 Southeast Asia: education initiatives 290–293; photo communities 287–295; photobooks 394–404; representation of politics 293–296; salon photography 287–288
 Southern hemisphere 59
 Southern Lights 50
 Southern Ocean 48
 Spaak, Suzanne 182
 space of appearance 94
 space travel 19–20
The space within 152
 Special Edition Art Book Fair 371
 Special edition Project 369
 Spivak, Gayatri 80, 100, 112
 Spring Book Fair 371
 Sri Lanka 79, 82, 90–91
 staged photography 274
 steam 208
 Stereo Unlimited 398
 stickiness 250–253
 Stoermer, E. F. 208
 Stoinska, Agata 321
Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs (Boffin and Fraser) 157
Storage Size: The Scramble for Water 44–45
The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer 239
Stranger in a familiar land (Waiswa) 174
 “Stray Dog” (1999) 375
 Stryker, Susan 165
 studio portraiture 133
 Stultiens, Andrea 140
 Stylianou, Elena 268
Sub (Volá) 338
Sub Plataforma Educativa (Sub Educational Platform) 332–333
 subject matter, discursivity 190
The Suit (Kganye) 224
 Sun, Yanchu 364

- ‘The Supermarket of Images’ 252
 Suri-Gonzalez, Rafael 159–160
Suspended Silver (Avakian) 243
 Sweden, Sami people 67
 Swedish Cyprus Expedition, “The Archive of Unnamed Workers” (2022) 267
 symbolic system of the Cold War 122–124
 Szalai, Dániel 128
 Szendy, Peter 252
- Tabet, Caroline 244–245
 Tabet, Lara 245–247
Tailoring Freedom (Huber) 152
 Taiwan, photobooks 346–348
 Tala Photo Collective 294
 Talampas, Candice Reyes 294
 Talbot, William Henry Fox 207, 210
A Tale of II Cities 4 (Moriyama) 257
Talent (FOAM) 250
 Tan, Kay Chin 291
 Tarazi, Alfred 238
 Taro, Gerda (“Robert Capa”) 180
 Taylor, Diana 189
 Taylor, Joelle 163
 Taylor, Renty 152
Tectonic (Rosenmunthe) 250
 Ten Hours Work Day Act of 1847 208
Terra Nova expedition 61
terra nullius 58–59
 territory, discursivity 191–192
 Thacker and Company 228
 Thailand 294
The penis as a work instrument. To get rid of the macho in Freud (Bustamante) 148
 Third Space 108
 “this has been staged” 149
 Thomson, John 397
A Thousand Ancestors 386
 Thuma 294–295
 Tiffin, Helen 27
Time from Different Sources: Images from Ciman Village (Cheng) 368
 Tin, Htet Paing 295
 TLP Editions 327
 Todorova, Marina 125
 “Tokyo Comedy” (Araki) 375
 Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography 376
 Tokyo Photographic Art Museum 376
 Tomatsu, Shomei 378
 Tournachon, Gaspard-Felix (Nadar) 19
 Traba, Marta 309
 Trần, Cao Linh 400
 Trans-African project 298–305
 Trans-Africanism 302
 Trans-Bangladeshi Road Trip 304–305
Transformadoras (Pabst) 147–148
 transgender sexual workers 174
 transitology 123
 translation, queer photography 159
 translational erasure 69
 translators, cultural 8
 transmigrants 171–174
 transnational life 175
Transportraits. Women and mobility in the city 154
 transsexuals 147–148
 transwomen 177
Trembling Landscapes (Cherri) 242, 244
 Triburgo, Lorenzo 163–164
 Tricameral parliament 104n4
 Triyos, Yostorn 294
Troubled Land (Graham) 319
 Trujillo, Sergio 313
Tug-of-War (Cai) 280–281
Turbine Bagh (Karim) 231–232
Two Doors (2016) 277, 279
 “two spirit” 160
- Uganda, archives 140
 Ugwuode, Kosisochukwu 305
ukuzilanda 95, 103
 Umngeni Drift Store (Eskebheni) 40–41
umusambi (mat made from *imigwegwe*) 34
Un Montón de Ropa (Agusti) 385
Un Supuesto Fotográfico: The Family of Man en Bogota 311–313
Under-Writing Beirut—Mathaf 247
Unfolding Hong Kong (Lee) 398, 403
 United States Information Agency (U.S.I.A.) 311
Unleash Your Herd’s Potential (Szalai) 128
Untitled (Hardenberg) 113
 ‘Untitled 10’ (Nqaba) 150
 ‘Untitled 15,’ *Over the Horizon* (Brundrit) 52–53
Untitled—Cargo Cult (Rosler) 252–253
Untitled film stills (Sherman) 152
 urban spaces, festivals and interventions 254–260
- Vaal Uprisings 103
 Vak, Dongkyun 355–356
 Valdivieso, Mercedes 180
 Vanegas, Camilo Páez 333
 Vangad, Rajesh Chaitya 83–84, 154
 VAPA *see* Vietnamese Association of Photographic Artists
 Vartivarian, Annie 244
 Vékony, Dorottya 128
Venus of Potato (Vákony) 128
 Verborgenes Museum 180–181
 Vercheval-Vervoort, Jeanne 182–183
 vertical gaze 214

- verticality 20–21
Vesta (Bacigalupi) 193–195
Vies Intérieures, Antérieures (Inner Lives/
 Previous Lives, Tabet) 244–245
Viet Nam in Flames (Nguyễn and Nguyễn) 399
 Vietnam: Matca 394, 399, 404; photobooks
 399–400
 Vietnam News Agency 293
Vietnam: Our Beloved Land
 (Nguyễn and Tran) 400
 Vietnamese Association of Photographic Artists
 (VAPA) 400, 403
The View from the South 59, 62
 Villasana, Danielle 174
 Vink, John 289
 vinyl images 249–251
 visibility 192–193; queer photography 163–165
Vistas of Modernity (Melken) 70, 74
 Viteri, Maria-Amelia 159
 Volá, Gisela 332–334, 336–337, 340–341
 Von Humboldt, Alexander 205–206, 211–214
- WACANA workshop 292
 Waiswa, Sara 173–174
Wake Up Call for My Ancestors (Mani) 85–86
 Walsh-Vorster, Niamh 42
 Wang, Hsin 347
 Warli community 83
 Wasif, Munem 86–87
 waste 28–29, 59–60; and trade 30–31
 waste colonialism 29
 waste-time 24
 water: Inanda Dam 40–42; South Africa 38
 water apartheid 59; South Africa 42–44
 Water Institute of Southern Africa 43
 Watney, Simon 167
We Are Like Air (Bacani) 172
*We decided to let them say ‘We are convinced’
 twice* (Raad and Zaatari) 241, 244
 “We said we wanted a space, so we
 created one” 276
 Web 2.0 era 345
 web-scraped data sets 264
 Weddell Sea 60
 Weems, Carrie Mae 98
Weeping Willows (Cai) 280
The Weight (Chun) 361
 Wereld Museum 73; ‘Our Colonial Inheritance’ 72
 Wessely, Anna 129
 West Africa 131, 134; archives 136–137; digital
 infrastructure 136
 Westermeyer, Anamaria Briede 331–332,
 335–337, 340–341
 Western modernism 18
 Western standards, Jiazazhi Press (JZZP) 372
We/Us (Wilkinson) 161
*What They Saw: Historical Photobooks
 by Women, 1843–1999* (Lederman and
 Yatskevich) 349–351
Where is Kajol (Karim) 231
 White, Frank, 15
White washed (Hardenberg) 115
 whiteness 102
Who’s Afraid of Jasper Johns? (Brown) 254
Who’s afraid of women photographers? 179
 Widodo, Kurniadi 394–395
 Wilberforce Institute 96
 Wild Image 335
Will I still carry water when I’m a dead woman?
 (Ogunji) 189–193
 Wiriyamu massacre 20
Wish You Live Long (Dayal) 231
Wishful Thinking (Okereke) 303
*Witness Kashmir: 1986–2016/Nine
 Photographers* (Kak) 80
 women 145–146; African women 172–173;
 Black women 172–173; bodies 146–149;
 femicides 155; feminism 145; motherhood
 152–154; photobooks 349–350; *see also*
 Foto Féminas
*Women and Work: A Document on the Division
 of Labour in Industry* (1973–75) (Harrison,
 Kelly and Hunt) 154
Women of the south (Eldahlil) 151
Wonder Beirut 239–241
 Wooldridge, Duncan 354, 401
Workshop Image I (Volá) 332
Workshop Image II (Volá) 334
 world building 223
 ‘A World in Common: Contemporary African
 Photography’ 141
 World Press Photo (WPP) Foundation 291
- Y un dia el fuego* (*And one day the fire*, Grosso
 and Pani) 155
 Yadav, Anusha 85
 Yang, Yuanyuan 367
 Yang, Yung-chih 347
 Yangtze River Delta 370–371
 Yanyou Yuan Di 364–374
 Yatskevich, Olga 349
 Yokota, Daisuke 380
YUMA, or the Land of Friends (Caycedo) 21
- Zaatari, Akram 239, 241, 243–244
 Zabel, Igor 120–121
 Zealey, Joseph T. 152
 Zhuang, Wubin 401–402
Zilande: The Evaton Peoples’ Archive 93, 95–97
 zines 402; Japan 378