



# Contemporary Photography as Collaboration

*Edited by*  
Mathilde Bertrand  
Karine Chambefort-Kay



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ISBN 978-3-031-41443-5      ISBN 978-3-031-41444-2 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2>

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## FOREWORD

My connection to this fine collection of essays goes back to when the editors invited me to speak at a conference they were organising in Paris in May 2020. Needless to say, 2020 did not unfold as expected. Instead of meeting at the conference in Paris to discuss photography and collaboration, we laboured alone in makeshift studios in our bedrooms. The city where I live, Melbourne, entered one of the longest COVID-19 lockdowns in the world, with universities shuttered for well over six months. But while the original conference may have been scuttled, Karine Chambeft-Kay and Mathilde Bertrand persevered. We all had to find new ways to collaborate remotely, and over a series of months commencing in late 2020, a series of stimulating seminars on photography as a collaborative act were held online across multiple time zones.

Karine and Mathilde have been single-minded in their collaborative desire to produce this book. They have assembled the leading practitioners in the field to present the most advanced thinking around the practice of community-based photography. Both historical and contemporary examples of collaborative practice are featured. And if the emphasis on British and French perspectives reflects the editors' geographical position and scholarly preoccupations, it also highlights the historical depth of documentary photographic practice in those regions. In particular, feminist and working-class collective practices in Britain in the 1970s have been a crucial inspiration to contemporary photographers around the world and have recently been properly celebrated. It also strikes me as notable that so

many of the contributors to this collection—not to mention the editors—are women, lending support to the idea that collaboration is gendered feminine.

In my book *Photography and Collaboration: From Conceptual Art to Crowdsourcing* (2017), I approach the topic from a broad perspective. As an art and photography historian, it had long been clear that in canonical histories of the medium, in museum collections, art school pedagogy and art market discourse, photography was framed, almost without exception, as an art of individuals who produce discrete works. In the twentieth century this took the form of the “master photographer”, with all the gendered implications of the term or the even more gendered photojournalist bearing witness to the world. I have nothing against loner figures, but I wrote the book to show that this is not the only way that the camera has or can be used. And once you start looking at photography in this way, it soon becomes clear that authorship in photography is more complex than we tend to imagine and that the artistic author figure in photography often seems like a compensation for its democratic mechanical nature.

That democratic nature—the fact that taking photographs is so relatively simple, that cameras are so available and that photographic images are so accessible to viewers—means that photography is uniquely positioned for collaborative approaches to image making with marginalised people, as we read about in this book. Yet even then, collaboration in the medium of photography can take many forms, because it can relate not only to explicit co-authorship but also a range of complex relationships between photographers and photographed subjects, not to mention the ongoing and never finished relationship between photographs and their spectators, both now and in the future. Photography’s role as an enabling agent of participation and collaboration is therefore infinitely diverse (in my own research I was struck by many examples of collaborative approaches in the history of photography I didn’t know about or hadn’t reflected on enough).

Many other photographers and writers have recently been thinking along similar lines. Ariella Azoulay, cited by several writers in this book, has provided an important theoretical contribution to this discussion with her return to the category of the “civil”, which she describes as “the interest that citizens display in themselves, in others, in their shared forms of coexistence, as well as in the world that they create and nurture”. Her emphasis on the “civil contract” and the “civil imagination” that resides in

photography—and her reframing of photography as an event and ongoing encounter—has been highly suggestive for many people working in this area.

Above all, the essays and the visual work in this book are a testament to the groundswell of interest in photography as an ethical and relational activity. In doing so it particularly highlights the ambitions of collaboration in the context of participatory community-based photography, which is often more about the process than the outcome. Beyond the paternal rhetoric of “empowering” subjects, we learn about more complex efforts to engage people and communities in their own representation, foregrounding reciprocity and respect. We also come to understand the differences between working today compared to the 1970s and 1980s, when it could still be a radical act to teach darkroom printing. Today, the almost ubiquitous availability of camera phones opens up different possibilities appropriate to the contemporary moment. And yet the need for relationships of trust remains constant. Collaboration with photography can be messy and challenging. But it can also contribute to the urgent task of creating a better shared future together with others.

Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
December 2022

Daniel Palmer

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors would like to thank all contributors to this volume for their trust and commitment to this project in all its forms, from the symposium in Bordeaux, and the conference in Paris that never was, to the online seminars throughout the COVID-19 lockdowns across hemispheres, and finally to this book.

The editors also thank their respective research units, IMAGER, Université Paris-Est Créteil and CLIMAS, Université Bordeaux Montaigne, and the ECLLA at Université Jean Monnet, Saint Etienne, for the funding and support they offered towards this international publication.

We extend our thanks to Maryam Firuzi for letting us use her photograph of Raziye Iranpour for this book's cover and express our solidarity with Iranian artists.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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**Mathilde Bertrand** is an assistant professor at the University Bordeaux-Montaigne, France, where she teaches in the Department of English Studies. Her research focuses on the history of independent British photography in the post-war period, particularly on the role of photography and print collectives, photographic magazines and the community photography movement in fostering a discussion around the politics of representation from the 1970s onwards.

**Louis Boulet** is a PhD student in Art History (UQAM, Canada) and Philosophy (Université de Tours, France). He studies the contemporary politicization strategies of photography through the example of the *Jeu de Paume* (Paris, France). He co-directed an issue of *Les Cahiers de l'ARIP* entitled "Photography and Environmental Risk: Images of Consequences

and Consequences of Images in the Climate Crisis” and recently published an article entitled “The Photographic White Cube. Survival or Subversion of an Old Idea?” in the journal *Dagerotyp*.

**Karine Chambefort-Kay** is Assistant Professor of British History and Visual Culture at University Paris Est Créteil and IMAGER research unit (France). Her research interests include the cultural, social and political uses of images in British contemporary society, as well as exhibition and archive policies, and the issues of identity formation, memory and nationalism. She has published on various photographic projects and artists in the UK.

**Angela Clarke** (BEd, MEd, PhD, SFHEA) is an artist, educator, and scholar. She is co-founder/director of the Melbourne-based independent embodied education provider Live Particle. Angela has worked extensively within tertiary education and community settings as a performance practitioner and academic leader in creative disciplines. She has published work on creativity, embodiment, fine art education, professional learning, educational change management, motherhood, and performance philosophy. Angela is co-editor of the DTAA publication *The Art of Embodiment* (2021).

**Inès Elsa Dalal** is a documentary photographer, committed to confronting systemic injustice. Dalal initiates long-form documentary portraiture projects and responds to commissions, tutors nationally and lectures internationally. In 2013 she independently hosted debut solo exhibition ‘West Indies to West Midlands’, documenting war veterans who fought for the British military. In 2018 she photographed pioneering nurses: ‘Here To Stay’ has toured between London and the West Midlands, including a solo exhibition at Wolverhampton Art Gallery featuring a sound installation of oral history recordings. Since the pandemic, Dalal has become increasingly concerned with workers’ rights to rest and fair pay. At the time of publishing she is documenting strike action across the UK, beginning where she is currently based: London.

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Margaret Cameron's Portraits' in *Photography and the Art: Essays on Nineteenth-century Practices and Debates*, edited by Juliet Hacking and Joanne Lukitsh (Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 115–127. Books include *Sculptural Photographs from The Calotype to Digital Technologies* (Bloomsbury, 2017), *The Photobook from Talbot to Ruscha* (IB Tauris, 2012), edited with Colette Wilson and Shamoan Zamir, and *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian Britain: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (Ashgate, 2007).

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**Paul Edwards** is an associate professor at Université Paris Cité and research associate at the Maison Française, Oxford. His research interests are in photography, translation and Punk. Publications include: *The Photobook World: Artists' Books and Forgotten Social Objects* (Manchester UP 2024); *Disorder: Histoire sociale des mouvements punk et post-punk* (Seteun 2019); *Perle noire. Le Photobook littéraire* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes 2016); *Soleil noir. Photographie et Littérature. Des origines au surréalisme* (PUR 2008); and *Je hais les photographes! Textes clés d'une polémique de l'image 1850–1916* (Anabet 2006). He curated “From Studio to Selfie” (Bodleian, Oxford, 2020) and “Early Literary Photobooks” (UCLA, 2016).

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**Maryam Firuzi** was born in 1986 in Shiraz, Iran. She is a graduate of the Art University of Tehran in scriptwriting (BA) and in film studies (MA). She lives in Tehran and works in photography and cinema. Her work has been exhibited in several solo and group photography shows and festivals, including the Festival du Film Franco-Arabe in France, the IWPA tour exhibition in Dubai, as well as shows in Beirut, Amman, Paris, Singapore, and Marseilles. In Austria, she received the Alfred Fried Peace Photography Award medal in 2018, and she was laureate of IWPA award sixth edition (2022).

**Charlene Heath** is archivist and research coordinator at the Image Centre at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) in Toronto and a doctoral candidate in the joint programme in Communication and Culture at TMU/York University in Toronto. She holds a BFA in photography from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, and an MA in photographic preservation and collections management from TMU in collaboration with the Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York, USA. She has written reviews and articles for *BlackFlash Magazine*, *Photography & Culture*, *Aperture Blog*, *Revue d'art canadienne/Canadian Art Review (RACER)*, and *Transbordeur photographie*. Through an analysis of the now-dispersed Jo Spence Memorial Archive, her forthcoming dissertation considers the enduring legacy of political photographic practice in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s.

**Kelly Hussey-Smith** is an artist, researcher, and educator whose research and practice focus on photography and collaboration, the politics of representation, and photography and ethics. She teaches photography and

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**Anthony Luvera** is a socially engaged artist, writer, and educator based in London. The long-term collaborative work he creates with individuals and communities has been exhibited widely in galleries, public spaces, and festivals, including Tate Liverpool, The Gallery at Foyles, the British Museum, London Underground's Art on the Underground, National Portrait Gallery London, Belfast Exposed Photography, Australian Centre for Photography, PhotoIreland, Malmö Fotobiennal, Goa International Photography Festival, Les Rencontres D'Arles Photographie, Oslo Negative, and Landskrona Foto Festival. His writing has appeared in a range of publications including *Photography and Culture*, *Visual Studies*, *Photoworks*, *Source*, and *Photographies*. Anthony is Associate Professor of Photography in the Centre for Arts, Memory and Communities at Coventry University and editor of *Photography For Whom?*, a periodical about socially engaged photography. Anthony is Chair of the Education Committee at the Royal Photographic Society. He has designed education and mentorship programmes, facilitated workshops, and given lectures for the public education departments of National Portrait Gallery, Tate, Magnum, Royal Academy of Arts, The Photographers' Gallery, Photofusion, Barbican Art Gallery, and community photography projects across the UK. [www.luvera.com](http://www.luvera.com)

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**Adam Page** is Senior Lecturer in Modern British History at the University of Lincoln. He completed his PhD at the University of Sheffield and was a fellow at the MECS Institute for Advanced Study, Leuphana University, Lüneburg, before taking up his position at Lincoln in 2016. His 2019 book, *Architectures of Survival: Air War and Urbanism in Britain, 1935–1952*, examined how the development of airpower and the targeting of cities and civilians influenced perceptions of urban spaces and visions of urban futures. He is developing a project on deindustrialisation and urban-environmental anxieties in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s.

**Maxence Rifflet** is a French photographer, whose series on the transformations of the Yangtze valley and city of Chengdu was exhibited in Arles in 2006 and received the “Prix Découverte”. In 2010, he published *Une route, un chemin*, documenting landscapes and environmental issues in the Cherbourg area while reflecting on landscape photography itself. His projects often involve collaboration and experimenting with artistic forms, as in *Fais un fils et jette-le à la mer* (2004) made with young immigrants in Marseille or in his latest series with inmates in various French prisons published as *Nos prisons* (Paris: Le point du jour, 2022).

**Leticia Valverdes** was born in Brazil and studied fine art and photography at London Met University. Her personal photographic work concentrates on interactions with people and starts with deep listening. Focusing on simple ideas, she invites for exploration of identity and self-compassion and a play with reality and magic realism. Her work has featured group and solo shows in the UK and abroad, and her reportage work has been published in various magazines such as the Sunday Times Magazine, The Independent, Telegraph, Marie Claire, and Colors Magazine, among others. She has received various awards and grants for her work among them Portrait of Britain, the Emergentes Award (Encontros da Imagem Portugal), Via Arts (given by Latin American and Iberian Embassies for UK-based artists), the Ian Parry Award, Arts Council Grants for the Arts and an IPRN fellowship. As well as her UK-based work, she develops photography and film projects with communities worldwide, specially in the Amazon focusing on indigenous conservation issues. She published in three monographs: *Brazilian Street Girls: Invisible Lives* (Vision On, UK, 2000), *Dear Ana* (Hurtwood-UK, 2021) about her Portuguese grandmother and *And Now My Children Know* (Ipsis-Brazil) made with her children and about the Amazon.

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# Introduction: Changing the Paradigm of Photographic Creation and Circulation

*Mathilde Bertrand and Karine Chambefort-Kay*

Collaboration is increasingly recognized as one of the main drivers in contemporary photographic practice, and many of today's practitioners demonstrate an attention to the dynamics and politics of collaborative work. The rise and ubiquitous development of digital photography has certainly allowed photographers to conceive of new ways to engage with the medium, to create and to share with others (Gunthert 2015). At the same time, funding streams now require projects to develop outreach and think in terms of participation with and from the public. Thus, it might seem that photography, as an art practice, is taking more collaborative directions, with projects involving participants, from the creation of images to the presentation of works. Therefore, there are signs that photography, like other contemporary art forms, has taken a “social turn” (Bishop

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Switzerland AG 2024

M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography  
as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_1)

2006). Yet it is the purpose of this book to question the assumption of a recent transformation of photography. By drawing on the notion that photography is not only a visual art but also a social practice, the authors of this book collectively debunk the standard story of photography as the work of a single operator, author or hero. Not only do they reveal the potential of photography as a collective practice by examining contemporary projects based on collaboration, but they also demonstrate that collaboration in photography has historical depth and can be construed as both an intrinsic quality and an ethical imperative for the medium. It is the central argument of this volume that beyond registering what could be understood as a recent trend in contemporary photography, a new paradigm may be defined, one in which photographic practices, both past and present, are construed as fundamentally collaborative.

There has been a growing focus on collaboration in institutional and academic perspectives on photography. The articulation between photography and collaboration has been the central theme of conferences, symposia and exhibitions in the last 15 years (1+1=3 Collaboration in Recent British Portraiture, Fremantle Arts Centre, 2006; Collaborative Images: New Models of Authorship and Aggregation, Aperture, 2014; Photography Expanded: Collaboration, Magnum Foundation, 2017; Collaboration, A Potential History of Photography, Ryerson Image Centre, 2018). Academic research in recent years has been consistently mining the implications of collaboration for photographic practice, considering it, like Daniel Palmer (2017), as inherent to the production of photographic images, as a form of “civil contract” according to Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2008), or as a distinctive political stance as shown by Steve Edwards (2017).

In photographic education, the issues of collaboration, social engagement and public outreach have also informed the creation of postgraduate courses.<sup>1</sup> These courses place new emphasis on “photographic situations”, contexts and publics, and train students towards devising community projects, activating collaborative methodologies in photographic creation, and developing critical and ethical positionings in addressing social challenges. By encouraging a critical rethinking of photography’s histories and

<sup>1</sup> MA Photography and Collaboration at Coventry University; MA Art and Social Practice at Middlesex University, MA Socially-engaged Photography at University of Salford (UK), MA Art and Social Engagement at Université Bordeaux Montaigne (France) MA Photography and Society at the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague (KABK) (Netherlands) or the Photography’s Photo Futures Lab for photography students at the RMIT (Australia).

practices centred on individual achievement, such courses have sought to expand the field of photography by envisioning collaborative photographic practices as strategies for social change or “tools for community development” as studied by Tiffany Fairey (2018).

Efforts have also been made to connect practitioners engaged in collaborative work, notably in the UK, with initiatives such as the Socially Engaged Photography Network, sponsored by the Open Eye Gallery, which operates as a catalyst of projects, events and exhibitions dedicated to participatory projects. Similarly, the online forum “Photography as a Social Practice” has played a crucial role in mapping out projects, books, exhibitions, and in amplifying artists’ conversations relating to this expanding field of photographic practices. Several contributors to this book have been part of this new momentum.

It may be argued that conditions of production, reception and distribution of photography have changed so radically that there can be no bridge between past and present practices, particularly when it comes to independent, oppositional, collective forms of photographic practice, or that any attempt to do so would be nostalgic. However, it is our purpose here to historicize these recent developments in photographic practices by confronting them with past practices operating on similar modes, and to address in wholly different terms what might *seem* to new generations like an unprecedented evolution of photographic practices. As the history of photography collectives and collaborative works are deservedly given increasing recognition (Harrison 2013; Bertrand 2018; Wilson 2015; Stacey 2020), it is now apparent that a whole expanse of photographic history has been marginalized by the traditional narrative of the lone photographer, overshadowing much more plural conceptions of photography. Recovering these histories, thanks, for example, to the digitization of archives and their transfer to public institutions, is fundamental. What do these archives reveal about the processes and politics of collaboration in photographic creation? While the legacy of past practices is crucial, the dialogue that is created in this collection of essays provides a focus on collaborative practice in itself.

A dialogue between past and present practices is created in this collection of essays and portfolios which aims to stimulate a broad rethinking of collaborative practice as a structuring force in historical and contemporary photography. We want to suggest that the notions of collaboration, the common, the collective, feed into contemporary photography, whether or not this is done in conscious relation to past practice. Beyond evidencing

an evolution of artistic practices towards a “relational aesthetics”, in the words of Nicolas Bourriaud (1998), we propose to define new paradigms for the study of photography, which fully establish collaboration as the core of photographic practices. Yet the nature, depth and “quality of the relationships” (Bishop 2004) produced through collaboration need to be carefully attended to, with regard to their capacity for creating truly democratic spaces and fostering agencies for all those involved.

### CHALLENGING THE BOUNDARIES OF VISIBILITY AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Participation has been a potent mode of addressing issues of inequality and the invisibilization of some social groups within society. The position of the socially engaged photographer is not new, yet in approaching marginalized groups with the prism of collaboration, photographers create the conditions for more horizontal relational processes of image-making and image-sharing to take place and lead to the production of a plurality of previously unheard or unheeded social narratives. Enabling and amplifying the voice of the voiceless has been the main stake of many of the participatory projects discussed in this volume. Such projects connect with antecedents by such pioneers as Wendy Ewald, Judy Harrison, Susan Meiselas, Paul Carter, Jo Spence and Terry Dennett, whose collaborative methods in photography are alive in the work of contemporary practitioners. The issues of social inclusion, struggles for recognition and the support of specific communities have informed the collaboration between artists and members of different groups.

These concerns have guided photographer Leticia Valverdes’s practice, from the moment she undertook work as a fine art student with homeless girls in Brazil, her native country (Chap. 9). Valverdes felt that a traditional, straight documentary approach would lack the sensitivity required to approach these particularly vulnerable girls and be accepted by them. Creating a safe space and bonds based on trust, through play and the performance of dressing up, made the photographic work possible, as one form of exchange among different possibilities of interactions. There was pride among the girls in seeing themselves revealed in photographs, their portraits presented in an exhibition which Valverdes says was theirs, and later in a book entitled *Invisible Lives* (Valverdes 2000). Valverdes went on to work with refugees and asylum seekers in London, as did Tiffany Fairey

with Photovoice (Chap. 2). As can be seen through these examples, collaborative photographic projects unfold over time and require two-way exchanges, trust, understanding and humility, as they set in train processes of visualization of the personal experiences of people whose social conditions are affected by deprivation (of a home, of their civil rights, of freedom, of economic or political power, of physical ability).

The work of Anthony Luvera, interviewed in this volume by Tate Modern curator Sarah Allen (Chap. 15), has developed along these lines, stemming from the intention to “shake up preconceptions, and in doing so lobby for change and prompt people to think differently”, by critically enquiring into issues of access, power, representation, and social justice. Luvera speaks of a collaborative turn at an early stage in his practice which was both contextual and born out of a personal reflection on the ethics of photographic representation. Driven by an intention to shift the power dynamics at play in image-making processes, Luvera’s projects have led to collaboration with a wide range of people, including individuals with experiences of homelessness, mental health issues, people with addiction problems, children from lower socio-economic households and people who identify as LGBTQ+.

A similar evolution informs Maxence Rifflet’s photographic work (Chap. 5), from an established photojournalistic practice to a series of ad hoc projects with people whose experiences of migration or imprisonment are seldom represented visually other than from a documentary, outsider perspective. At stake in this move is the fact that today Rifflet chooses to work *with* rather than *on* specific social groups, using photography as a mode of exchange and a formal means towards the representation of realities as they are lived by those concerned. The collaborations between Rifflet and the inmates have led to explorations of the prisoners’ sense of time, artistic imagination and relation to the prison’s architectural space.

The photographic projects undertaken by Andrea Eichenberger (Chap. 8) also take her to places of confinement. With prior experience of working in carceral environments, Eichenberger became involved in a project set in a psychiatric home in Northern France, which was to be dismantled. Commissioned by the Regional Photography Centre in partnership with the psychiatric unit at the Valenciennes hospital, the project’s initial brief was to create a visual memory of the place as experienced by those who lived and worked in it. The regular workshops and exchanges with participants shaped the project towards unforeseen outcomes, where the issue of psychiatric patients’ social, physical and symbolic invisibility came to the

fore. For Eichenberger, the work with residents and staff necessarily tied together both an artistic and an ethnographic approach, allowing for bonds to be created between participants and for a common appropriation of the project.

In Chap. 3, examining the activities and publications of the Bootle Art in Action collective of the late 1970s in the UK, Paul Edwards also shows that collaboration with inhabitants facing poverty in the working-class borough of Sefton, Liverpool - often represented in paternalistic ways through documentary images emphasizing, if not staging distress - yielded somewhat unexpected results, or paradoxical to middle-class viewers, with many images displaying forms of “positive self-expression”. This again points to the transformative power of collaborative practices and images, not as much in their capacity to raise awareness and eventually solve the issues faced by the people photographed but, more indirectly, in their ability to challenge stereotypes, and to offer a connection to the participant photographer’s vision, thus reducing the boundaries engrained in collective representations and memories.

## THE GENDER OF COLLABORATION

Being a type of approach which, as we have just argued, combats the marginalization of social groups, the visibility of women’s conditions is central in many of the practices that embrace collaboration. As kindly noted by Daniel Palmer in his Foreword, attention to gender runs throughout the photographic practices presented in this volume. For instance, Chap. 10 co-authored by Charlene Heath and Patrizia Di Bello revolves around the archives of the London-based Photography Workshop, whose key member was feminist photographer Jo Spence and whose projects were firmly rooted in a feminist and socialist perspective. Notably, five out of the eight photographers who have contributed reflexive portfolios to this volume are female. Their work in large part places women at the centre, be it in the participation of young Brazilian girls or vulnerable women in London in the work of Leticia Valverdes or in the collaborative portraits of members of staff in the NHS facilitated by Inès Elsa Dalal (Chap. 17). The contribution of Maryam Firuzi, winner of the 2022 International Women in Photography Award, specifically addresses the situation of female painters in Iran. Through collaboration with the artists themselves, her project “Distorted Future” explores their intimate dilemma between a desire to



emigrate and deep engagement with their local environment and the political struggles in their own country (Chap. 14).

How can this tangible connection between collaborative practices and gender politics be accounted for? Why have female practitioners so consistently embraced collaborative practices throughout the history of photography?

Needless to say, women have been one of those invisibilized social groups which collaborative practices may help to represent and give a voice to, among other means of expression. This was the case in the days of the Photography Workshop and of the Hackney Flashers (an all-women art collective initiated and co-animated by Jo Spence). Similarly, the drive to give visibility to women and girls, especially from the Bengali community in Southampton, UK, was central to photographer Judy Harrison's founding of the Mount Pleasant Photography Workshop in 1977. Access to cameras was inspirational and empowering for the Asian community as a whole and helped women and girls in particular find their voice (Harrison 2013). But as recent developments in feminist issues have shown, the need for collective action by and for women has remained as strong as ever, whether it be with the resurgence of domestic violence or with threats to abortion rights. Maryam Firuzi's essay about her work and the condition of women artists in today's Iran is a reminder that feminist struggles are still ongoing in every part of the world, at various degrees. She points to the vital necessity for female artists in Iran to share their experience and support each other, and to the solace and energy she finds in working collaboratively.

Within the canon of art history itself, women photographers have had to struggle for visibility just as well. Louis Boulet (Chap. 7) looks into the curatorial strategies of the major photographic institutions in France and discusses politicization and invisibilization processes within art collections and exhibitions. He asks whether the dominant trend for monographic exhibitions in most art centres dedicated to photography in France offers opportunities for new female names to emerge, or, to the contrary, only leads to reinforcing gender determinants. Within this volume, this contribution implicitly and indirectly sheds light on one of the reasons why women photographers may have embraced collaborative practices more than male practitioners, in a rejection of both the canon and traditional practices as tools for domination. Then, it will be for other chapters of the section dedicated to curation and archiving in this book to address the

complementary question of how collaborative works can find their way into collections and exhibitions.

Beyond this notion of women collaborating in order to be visible as a social group and as artists, it might also be argued that the shift to collaborative principles observed in many photographic projects of the 1970s, as described in Adam Page's work (Chap. 4), for example, was part of a broader radical rethinking of social relations and identities, and a reinvention of political engagement, which feminism largely fed into. The participatory dimension of many projects was in tune with, if not inspired by, the Women's Liberation Movement's organic development, emphasizing grassroots participation and collective, horizontal, leaderless organization (Wilson 2015; Klorman-Eraqi 2019). Thus, in many ways, the development of participatory practices in photography may be regarded to be correlative to gender-related struggles from the onset, as demonstrated in Liz Drew's presentation of Lucy Lippard's feminist activism in her study of the precedents to Mark Neville's alternative practices of distribution for his images (Chap. 6).

Besides, the thematic diversity of collaborative photographic projects observed from the 1970s onwards emulates another characteristic of second-wave feminism, that is, mutual interaction and support for diverse social struggles (such as the Miners' strike in the UK, the peace movement, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, or anti-racism). It seems to us that one of the contributors to our volume, Anthony Luvera epitomizes this legacy of social engagement across a diversity of issues: while some of his recent projects have focused on gender identity and involved LGBTQ+ participants, his work over the years has constantly tackled homelessness in the UK. Yet as Anthony Luvera's comments will show in his interview with Tate curator Sarah Allen, the whole body of his projects forms a coherent platform of social engagement based on collaboration.

Therefore, this book as a whole explores both the legacy of the first generation of participatory photographic projects and that of the political struggles of the same years—where feminism was central—and considers their contemporary developments in the neoliberal and postcolonial era. Rather than considering collaboration as a specifically feminine mode, this book hopefully sketches a sort of ethos of collaboration as a principle, and as a fairly universal form of engagement or empowerment in the face of the many forms of marginalization across the globe. Even though the volume does not cover an extensive range of countries (due to the original project being an attempt to connect French and British collaborative

practitioners in post-Brexit Europe!), we hope for this collection of chapters to raise common concerns among photographers, historians of photography, curators, educators and archivists and for similarities to emerge between the case studies on projects conducted in Brazil, with Middle Eastern refugees in London, with inmates in a French prison, volunteers in charities and people working in the care sector, or by students communities in Melbourne.

## A SITUATED GAZE TRANSFORMING THE POLITICS OF SHARED SPACE

Participatory photographic projects have allowed members of local communities to record their surroundings, to offer different views of it and perhaps express their own aspirations for the place they live in. By contrast with the gaze of an outsider - albeit that of a well-meaning photographer committed to adopting the ethnographic method of the participant-observer - the situated gaze of the very members of a community tends to position photography within an entirely different paradigm. As already shown by many, and especially by Jo Spence (Spence 1976), participatory photography can be a tool for emancipation, as individuals gain more control over the images that are produced, instead of being passive subjects as in the traditional photographer-sitter relationship. The sense of authorship and ownership over their image that is regained by participants also applies to their relationship to the environment they live in and their sense of belonging in a place (Ruygt 2019).

This shift is identified by historian Adam Page as parallel to a similar turn in urban development in the 1970s and 1980s. In a chapter dedicated to the critiques of modern urbanism in post-war decades based on images of child poverty, it is shown how participatory photographic representations of the local urban environment brought an active and valuable contribution from inhabitants to public consultations in the context of redevelopment schemes. Photographs produced by members of the community, including children, contributed to reclaiming ownership over the spaces to be redeveloped. Therefore, the notion of photography as collaboration was instrumental in the development of a new democracy of shared space, with inhabitants offering alternative plans for redevelopment.

The same turn was observed in France in the same period. Lydia Echeverria writes about two photography collectives *Faut Voir* and *Bar Floréal* (Chap. 13) whose members were committed to working with the inhabitants of the working-class and ethnically diverse “banlieues” to produce their own representations of their life and environment. They promoted a form of cultural democracy encouraged by the socialist government of the Mitterrand era and parallel to efforts at developing special centres dedicated to young people in deprived neighbourhoods. The emphasis was on shared creation instead of top-down attempts to spread culture to suburban areas. In that respect, the work undertaken meant a change of paradigm not only in the creation and circulation of images (images by inhabitants for inhabitants) but also in a transformation in the politics of shared space where photography became a tool for social communication. Such matters of inclusion and shared citizenship are re-enacted in the more recent work of Inès Elsa Dalal (Chap. 17). Her series “From West Indies to West Midlands” (2013–2015) and “Here to Stay” (2018) foreground the experiences of members of the Windrush generation and their conflicted sense of belonging in a society which again only recently called their legitimate presence in the UK into question.

The parallels, through this collection of essays, between projects produced at different moments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, lead us, however, to further interrogate the notion of collaborative turns in photographic history. Indeed, rather than time-specific turns, where collaboration would provide refreshing visions of some subjects and places, or even of the medium of photography, it is our argument that collaborative practices have been an ever-present route for photography. This route reaches back to the worker photography movement which emerged in different parts of the world in the 1930s (Ribalta 2015), and to the community photography movement and the radical photography collectives of the 1970s present in the UK, the US and France and examined in the chapters of this book. The projects presented in this volume all instantiate re-examinations of photographing processes that have been recurrent in the history of photography. In other words, they seem to activate a special mode of photography that has remained on the margins of the dominant paradigm in the history of the medium. Taken together, all these instances delineate a parallel conception of photography which we suggest could be regarded as a new paradigm for the history of photography.

## A NEW PARADIGM FOR AUTHORSHIP: A MATTER OF ETHICS

Such a shift of ground is also informed by the views of photographers themselves on their own roles and positions. This volume gives pride of place to reflective essays by practitioners who have engaged in participatory modes. Describing their work in prisons, care centres or with homeless people, they shed new light on the relationship between photographers and the people in the photographs. They indicate how, by de-centring the position of the photographer, even allowing themselves to be photographed, in some instances, they have acted as facilitators rather than mere observers and thus, have overthrown the long-held notion of a single author-artist in the practice of image-making. This concurs with what Andrea Eichenberger and Leticia Valverdes express in their reflective essays. As photographers, they may be assumed to be authors of the work, but they prefer to see their role as enablers in other people's access to authorship. Considering the exhibition instigated in 1984 by the French collective *Faut Voir* with young people living in suburbs, Lydia Echeverria sees in this shift an instance of an "upending of the position of the author" whereby the professional photographers become "visual educators" while the young people holding the camera discover the potential of their own vision on their lives and environment, allowing themselves to become authors.

Participants in all the projects presented here took their share in the production process or in editing and exhibition choices. This inevitably led to dialogues and negotiations, which artists open up about in their contributions, departing from the image of the inspired creator in total control of their own output. In a few instances, negotiations have led participants to restrain from taking pictures altogether, or to decide not to show some of them when consent was not given or withdrawn. Leticia Valverdes specifically addresses this question in connection with the project she conducted with a group of vulnerable women in partnership with All Change Arts and poet Francesca Beard, telling how the display of images had to be eventually limited for safety reasons. Similarly, photographer Andrea Eichenberger gives an honest and illuminating account of the negotiations that took place with both the residents and staff of the psychiatric care home when it came to exhibiting some of the portraits created during her project. As for Maxence Rifflet, the specific challenge presented by conducting photographic projects with prison inmates lay in the prerequisite of not repeating the surveillance apparatus and not

“locking” people up again in a photographic frame while being limited by legal constraints not to show a person’s face.

Finally, the ethics of photography regarding the positions of photographers and participants takes a crucial dimension in situations of conflict. As shown by Liz Drew (Chap. 6), photographer Mark Neville occasionally met with a degree of suspicion when engaging with local communities in Glasgow, where sectarian tensions might give special weight to issues of representation. More dramatically, Neville’s commission as an embedded photographer with British troops in Afghanistan led him to experience quite strongly the limits and double meaning of collaboration as his position among foreign soldiers seemed to foreclose any chance of exchange with or participation from the local civilian population.

Indeed, as shown in the previous example, the ethics of photography also lies in the vocabulary of photography itself. Some contributions to this volume ask whether the critical and practical shift towards a new paradigm for authorship in photography might not require a whole change of terms. In her essay, photographer Inès Elsa Dalal (Chap. 17) shows how the first years of her career have led her to pay acute attention to the vocabulary in use ever since the invention of photography and seldom questioned. Dalal’s work aims to co-create portraits that are authentic, respectful and produced dialogically with people who are usually spoken for, victimized, or marginalized. She discusses with humility her own position and the mechanisms of domination that need to be defused in photographic practices. In an effort to foreground an ethics of consent, Dalal insists on the need to decolonize photographic language, as part of the responsibility of the photographer not to induce relations of power with project participants.

The recognition of photography’s relational and collaborative dimension is a central tenet in the way educators Kelly Hussey-Smith and Angela Clarke (Chap. 16) approach and teach photography to undergraduate students at the RMIT in Melbourne. Moving away from histories and conceptualizations of photography favouring the celebration of sole-author figures and drawing on the theoretical perspectives opened by Azoulay and Palmer, Hussey-Smith and Clarke’s teaching practice seeks to fully embrace the complexities of collaborative work in photography, understood not as a style or method, but rather as inherent to an ethical definition of the medium. This model involves a repositioning of photographers in relation to the communities with which they engage. Authorship necessarily becomes a plural and dialogic effect of co-creation, as collaborative

processes entail renewed ethical relations and foster “expressions of citizenry”. Not only do these questions shape Hussey-Smith’s and Clarke’s practices in teaching photography, but they also reach into all aspects of the university course, with wide implications in terms of questioning participants’ world views as well as educational institutions’ practices.

## ALTERNATIVE CHANNELS FOR EXHIBITION AND CIRCULATION

Changing definitions of authorship through alternative production practices and renewed vocabulary may nevertheless fall short of bringing about the relevant institutional changes. Indeed, photographic galleries seldom promote collective work. Artistic institutions tend to favour monographic exhibitions that are likely to attract large audiences around the big names of the more famous photographers, at the expense of thematic or group shows, let alone collective works. Researcher Louis Boulet offers critical thoughts on this bias, specifically studying French photographic institutions and investigating the obstacles or even the strategies that lead to avoiding the curation of collective shows. At any rate, such positions tend to add to the invisibility of collaborative works.

Of course, the difficulties pertaining to the legal definition of collective copyright cannot be underestimated, but, beyond artistic estate matters, deeper issues of authorship are involved, due to the very organic way in which collaborative projects usually develop. Most chapters in this volume touch on these questions, with, on the one hand, individual photographers pointing at the paradox of contributing texts and images in their own names while (re)presenting collaborative works - for instance, Anthony Luvera offers to resolve this tension by considering that collaborative work is only “filtered through the artist’s singular voice”. On the other hand, historians like Adam Page or curators confess the difficulties that are sometimes encountered to even locate or attribute works through traditional conservation channels, drawing attention to the need to examine the alternative paths often taken by collaborative projects and to push the boundaries of what is traditionally understood or accepted as the field of photography.

Indeed, collaborations between photographers and members of specific social groups have often meant a questioning of the conditions of circulation and reception of the work. The art gallery in the high street may not

be the first point of encounter of the photographic work and its public. The proximity and familiarity of a school, a community centre, or a health centre, can be deemed more suited for the display of material which can be sensitive, or perceived as firstly relevant to the local community. Such familiar spaces provide a context for forms of restitution of images to the participants via exhibitions, the distribution of prints and innovative types of photobooks, as described in Chap. 12 by Valognes et al. This process of image restitution was specifically experimented with the photography collective Tulipe Mobile (Hervé Dez and Pablo Fernandez) first in Serbia and then extended in their collaboration with a team of geographers at the University of Caen (France) and residents of a coastal territory in Normandy, resulting in a series of exhibitions and events entitled “Qu’on est loin des Amériques” (“So far away from the Americas”) and the production of an original *Atlas de la Manche*, which associates the characteristics of a geographical atlas and a photobook.

As shown by Liz Drew about the work of Mark Neville with the inhabitants of Port Glasgow, the decision could even be made to keep the images “not commercially available”, in other words, to entirely discard the standard market practice of photography-book selling and to opt for alternative means of distribution that truly reflected the activist stance adopted for the project.

Thus, collaborative work invites shifts in the way photography is authored, but also received, transmitted and circulated, or not. By engaging in projects on their own terms, participants become co-authors of the work and make decisions about it. Such practices challenge conventional institutional models and call for a rethinking of the way art history is conceived.

## REINVENTING ARCHIVAL PRACTICES

What happens to archives of collectively produced photographic material when the group of creators having contributed to its constitution has ceased to exist? The plurality of authorship at the core of collaborative work is vulnerable to processes of individualization from the moment it becomes and is used as an archive. The dissemination of the Jo Spence Memorial Archive, which contains work produced by the Photography Workshop collective and has generated renewed interest in the last 10 years, provides a case in point. Dispersed in different institutions and indeed different parts of the world, this archive contains its own



ambiguities, with Jo Spence being singled out and given institutional recognition, while the names of other contributors to the work, such as Terry Dennett and Rosy Martin, have often been forgotten. Charlene Heath and Patrizia Di Bello are closely involved with this archive as academics, archivists and curators. Their co-authored work (Chap. 10) ponders on the role and responsibility of the archivist, conceived as an agent engaging in “collaborations with the dead”, in resisting the fixation of meanings and attributions to single authors. In the case of an archive of work constituted through collaborations, this entails resisting recuperations by the institutional art world and art market whose logic leans towards the identification of sole authors and the celebration of individualistic self-expression. How can collaborative work be salvaged from individualistic art historical tendencies, in a framework where the status of collaborator is not recognized, and has no value in the copyright system? How can archivists preserve the gist and political thrust of such an archive?

Prolonging these concerns in her contribution to this volume (Chap. 11), Carla Mitchell, artistic development director at the London-based Four Corners gallery, reflects on the responsibility of curators not to reify archives and consider them as sites of fixed power. Rather, Mitchell argues, attention should be paid to the original processes of their construction in order to ensure the archives’ continuing legacies within the contemporary narratives that shape their interpretation and transmission. Constant remediation and re-contextualization appears as a necessary condition in order to “reanimate” their legacies in the present, particularly when the digitizing of archives offers the possibility of activating new conversations. This echoes Heath and Di Bello’s proposition that work held in archives “continue[s] to be mined for undetonated energy”. Four Corners, as keeper of the archives of the independent photography collective Half Moon Photography Workshop/Camerawork, is the inheritor of complex and sometimes contested histories. Revisiting these histories from a contemporary perspective brings up correspondences with present-day issues, a process which has the potential to inspire contemporary practice. “Archive curators shouldn’t be gatekeepers of fixed legacies”, Mitchell contends, but rather facilitators in dialogues across generations, building bridges between past and present artistic practices, opening possibilities for renewed political interventions.

## TRANSFORMING THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS: PARTNERS, CO-CREATORS, SUPPORT STRUCTURES?

Many photographic galleries in the UK have been diversifying their programmes of exhibitions and activities, as well as developing their commissioning role, in directions which evidence a collaborative turn in the definition of their goals and methodologies. This can be seen as an effect of social inclusion policies implemented in the UK from the late 1990s under the New Labour government, which have transformed the way art galleries and museums envision their role in the community (Hewison 2014; ChambeFORT-Kay 2017a, b). Building community outreach, ensuring accessibility and thinking in terms of public engagement (at different local, national and international levels) are missions which guide the activities of art institutions.

In this respect, projects of a collaborative nature can be seen as providing processes and methodologies attuned to the outreach objectives of a gallery. Conversely, galleries play an immensely supportive role in sustaining projects which require an identifiable space and structure to flourish. Open Eye in Liverpool, Four Corners in London, Side Photographic Gallery in Newcastle, to name but a few in the UK are involved in such processes, where the interests of the gallery and those of the project's leaders interlock. Thus, on their website, Open Eye encourages the public to "Get involved" or through the phrase "Use Us!" suggests it "is working towards co-authoring its programme with communities, voluntary organizations, photographers and artists". This is a rather constructed or advanced stage regarding collaboration in the gallery context, which a number of other institutions have not reached or even considered. Examining the activities of French venues dedicated to photography paints a rather different picture. Places like the Jeu de Paume or Le Bal in Paris have operated on a limited definition of outreach in the past decade, mainly targeting young people through workshops and partnerships with schools. The more recent Institut pour la Photographie in Lille has taken a broader view of its mission termed "la transmission artistique et culturelle" (artistic and cultural transmission): it includes workshops and meetings with artists but also "participatory projects" - vocabulary still seldom used by French galleries - and extends the list of potential partners beyond educational institutions to communities and local organizations. Yet exhibitions programmes there as in other French institutions still seem to remain partitioned from these attempts at engaging with the public.

Collaboration tends to be ornamental (Matarasso 1997) at this stage rather than truly transformational and museums and galleries in general still appear to be rather vertical structures of power and knowledge.

In the United States, prominent institutions such as the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York have defined themselves along Cornell Capa's promise to champion "concerned photography"—socially and politically minded images that can educate and change the world" through "exhibitions, education programs, community outreach, and public programs". While the Centre for Visual Culture created in 2016 at the ICP has developed a large number of public programmes, there have been mostly talks and symposiums on contemporary photographic practices; although some of them focus on very political projects and approaches, the ICP, as an institution, has not engaged in a radical reappraisal or reinvention of the role of the gallery itself towards a greater participation of communities in the production and circulation of images. Finally, some of the latest comers on the international scene of photography, namely the Fotografiska centres opening in different cities of the world (Berlin, Shanghai and Miami in 2023), after Stockholm and New York, seem to be set on a rather traditional market-oriented course. Claiming to be "the World's most open Museum" on their websites, where "everyone is welcome", such galleries do not have any particular outreach agenda. Interestingly, Fotografiska stresses the way it "collaborates intimately [...] with each artist, their galleries and estates".

Thus, collaboration and participation can be engaged with varying degrees of commitment on the part of the actors involved. It might sometimes be the case that collaborative projects become instrumentalized to meet political demands of inclusivity and to reflect a public image as actors in the community. Nevertheless, some institutions have found in collaborative projects a strong and efficient modality of public engagement and have been committed to profoundly transform the way they operate, thus paving the way towards a new role for artistic institutions, as partners and support structures for projects in and for the community.

## PHOTOGRAPHY AS COLLABORATION: A SHIFT IN THE FIELD OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

Offering a decentring from the dominant conceptions on photographic theory and practice, the chapters and portfolios assembled in this book all contribute to evidencing, researching and strengthening what we believe is a new paradigm in photographic practice and theory: one in which collaboration is embraced, pursued, and defended as a condition for a redefinition of ethics in photography. Collaboration opens entirely new critical perspectives on histories of the medium, and on present and past practices. It takes the archetypal figure of the lone photographer down from the pedestal and creates shared spaces for opportunities of co-authored creation. Collaborative approaches and methodologies have deconstructed relations of power at stake in the relation photographer/subject and enabled a circulation of roles, perspectives and positions while placing new demands on photographers. That they be amplifiers of voices, and more facilitators than authors. That they welcome the unexpected outcome of processes of creation understood as plural. That they shed the aura associated with the role. That they seek positions of humility and give centrality to the notion of consent.

Understanding that collaboration is and has been a potent mode of production in image-making entails a whole reconceptualization of photographic theory, photographic practices and photographic histories. It places responsibilities on archivists to resist reductive attributions on works produced with a plurality of authors. It challenges the way photographic education is transmitted and framed. It prompts artistic institutions to reconsider their roles and revisit their programmes. This volume seeks to contribute to amplifying the reflections and insights from practitioners and academics involved in these concerns, thereby working towards a renewed definition of the ethics and politics of photography.

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PART I

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The Politics of Voice, Visibility and  
Identity



## CHAPTER 2

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# A Photography of Becoming: Re-imagining the Promise of Participatory Photography

*Tiffany Fairey*

Participatory photography projects with marginalised groups have become increasingly commonplace in recent decades. Underpinned by celebratory narratives that cast photography as an inherently empowering activity,

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M. Bertrand, K. Chambeft-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_2)

these participatory photography projects,<sup>1</sup> and their alter ego photovoice projects, promise to give people a voice and to enable change. However critical thinkers have raised concerns about the over-simplification of the participatory photography and photovoice narrative (Luttrell and Chalfen 2010; Fairey 2018; Liebenberg 2018). Voice in these projects is not a given but negotiated and emergent. Offers of voice can be tokenistic and these collaborative projects hold the potential to co-opt, appropriate and silence voices as much as they do to amplify them. There is a gap between the promise of a project and its actual workings where power dynamics and tensions between the differing agendas, concerns and priorities of the people involved—from participants and organisers to funders—shape what projects make possible and the voices that emerge. Technical advances have made photography accessible but the ‘user-friendliness’ of participatory photography and photovoice (Gubrium and Harper 2013, 73) can result in its misuse. There has been a hollowing of the critical potential of contemporary participatory and community-engaged photography.

The challenge for contemporary practitioners is: how to re-imagine the promise of participatory photography? How can we build a framework for thinking and doing participatory photography that captures both its limitations and potential? How can we re-imagine the critical and transformative potential of community-engaged photography practice in a way that can account for the tension and negotiation that participatory visual practices involve in a manner that does not instrumentalise, fetishise or de-politicise? Emancipatory discourses tend towards a binary thinking that undermines the development of critical interrogations that consider the context-specific ethics, nuances and ambiguities of participatory visual practice and the complex representational politics at play in these

<sup>1</sup>In this writing, ‘participatory photography’ is used as an umbrella term to refer to a range of community-engaged photographic practices in which participants or community members are supported by facilitators to create and produce their own photographic work. Participatory photography has been harnessed by a range of practitioners and researchers in diverse contexts with varying agendas. As a result, many different applications and forms of participatory photography now exist in different fields, each with their own terminology, lineage, protocols and criteria. One of the most popular of these is photovoice, a participatory action research methodology first developed by Caroline Wang (1997). Whilst participatory photography refers to a spectrum of practices with varying interpretations as to what constitutes ‘photography’ and ‘participation’, it can be distinguished from other forms of collaborative and socially engaged photography in which artists or professional image producers collaborate with community members to co-produce photographic work and retain co-authorship of the work produced. Authorship in participatory photography projects can be individual, collaborative and collective, but it lies with the participants or community members and is not shared with the artist or practitioner facilitator.



projects. How can we account for both the universal potential and the particular contextual constraints that are in constant dynamic motion within participatory visual processes (Shaw 2012)?

This chapter offers the conceptual metaphor of a photography of becoming as a means to re-imagine the promise of participatory photography through a pluralist imagination. Drawing on images taken by young people who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied refugees, it starts from a position that casts photography's participatory potential as lying in its plurality. A photography of becoming is characterised by three qualities: it is plural, it evolves and it is performative. A photography of becoming evokes the fluid, multiple and often contrary forms of photography that emerge from participatory projects and that are reflective of the evolving experiences, motivations and identities of the photographers involved. It also speaks to the instability of this form of photography. It pushes us to re-imagine the vulnerable character of the emergent politics of voice involved and the vital importance of these projects in capturing lived experiences, perspectives and stories often lost to history.

A photography of becoming is hard to pin down. Traditional modes of curation and editing require photography to be understood through particular and established categories and filters. When they enter the public domain, the images that come out of participatory and community initiatives are often considered worthy but not taken seriously as a form of photography that warrants sustained engagement or attention. In this environment, to validate the photography and attract audiences, participatory and community projects have relied on an appeal to authenticity. This persistent and misguided tendency frames participant-produced images as somehow more authentic than other kinds of photography because they are taken by amateur-insiders, the 'very' people living the lives depicted. Such a position falls back on the problematic and long-contested assumption that photography has a direct line to truth. However, when we conceptualise photography as a form of becoming rather than truth, we shift our understanding of what photography consists of and what it does, and does not, make visible.

The concept of a photography of becoming draws on thinking from multiple sources: theories of becoming (Butler 1999; Hall 1990), a sociology of voice (Couldry 2010), complexity theory, political theorist William Connolly's ideas around deep pluralism and a politics of becoming (2005) and Ariella Azoulay's influential arguments for a new ontology and citizenry of photography (2008, 2012). All this thinking points to an understanding of social phenomena that is complex, changing and unpredictable. A photography of becoming manifests this plurality and in re-casting participatory photography through a pluralist imagination it pushes us to imagine its

transformative promise, not in terms of its capacity to empower and give voice, but through its potential to enable and accommodate plural ways of seeing and to nurture a critical, dialogical engagement with difference.

Recent ruptures in thinking about photography have shifted attention away from its long-established preoccupation with vertical forms of photography towards an attentiveness to horizontal modes of photography that harness the medium's democratising and collaborative potential (Azoulay 2012; Palmer 2017). The renewed interest in the archives, history and activist politics of radical community photography initiatives from the 1970s–1980s,<sup>2</sup> forebearers of contemporary participatory photography practices, offers opportunities to reflect, orientate and develop contemporary community-engaged photographic practices (Fairey 2019). The great value of community-engaged initiatives and the images that come out of them, which often struggled for support and a platform when they are active, become apparent over time. As such, this chapter advocates a form of retrospective research that looks back to look forward. The hope is that the idea of a photography of becoming can help to focus us on the emergent and fragile character of participatory and community-engaged photography while re-affirming the vital contribution it makes to enabling emerging voices and claims, creating spaces for agency and resistance and making visible unheard and unrecognised stories.

### IMAGES OF BECOMING: PHOTOGRAPHY BY YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARRIVED IN THE UK AS UNACCOMPANIED REFUGEES

The notion of a photography of becoming is captured in the photographic work of young people living in London who arrived in the UK as refugee children, the majority unaccompanied by parents, family or carers. During my time running PhotoVoice,<sup>3</sup> myself and other PhotoVoice facilitators worked with Project DOST,<sup>4</sup> a project based in a community centre in Newham, East London, which provided support and services to young and unaccompanied refugees. With Project DOST, the young people could learn English, meet friends, find support for the issues they were

<sup>2</sup> See recent publications such as Stacey (2020) and Harrison (2014).

<sup>3</sup> PhotoVoice is a UK-based photographic charity which runs participatory photography projects in the UK and internationally. Co-founded by myself and Anna Blackman in 1999, I worked as a co-director of PhotoVoice for its first 11 years until 2010. <https://photovoice.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dostcentre.co.uk/>.

dealing with and take part in various activities including photography projects and workshops. Over 8 years, we ran a number of different photography projects.<sup>5</sup> These included a six-month photography course, a digital storytelling project with local school children, integrating photography to support English language and citizenship classes and a photo-mentoring project. We created exhibitions that toured venues from local libraries to regional galleries and published a book, *New Londoners* (PhotoVoice 2008), that was launched at the Tate Modern.

Thousands of pictures were produced over the course of the project. The young people pointed their cameras at everything they were seeing and living. Their images exemplify one of the key characteristics of a photography of becoming; they are plural. They used the camera to document and make memories, to commemorate people and places, to reflect on differences, to explore, to tell their stories, to daydream, to designate something as important or interesting and to imagine different lives. One young woman on the project said that through photography, she looked at things more deeply and saw how to move on. She described how ‘photography has been a therapy for me, I learnt how to break free of myself’ (PhotoVoice 2008, no page).

For others, photography was a more whimsical activity, something to experiment, play and be silly with. Others were more serious. Lots of the young people used photography as a way to record moments as they got their heads around the differences between the UK, this new country, and the countries they had come from; the disjuncture between what they had thought England would be like and how they actually found it. (Fig. 2.1) The author, Hari Kunzru, who penned the introduction to the *New Londoners* book, wrote,

The struggle to carve out a life in a global metropolis is, in a way, much like taking a picture. You reach into the churning flow and try to extract something, one thing, which has shape and a purpose, something which will belong only to you. (PhotoVoice 2008, no page)

With their images, I saw young people building meaning, friendships and memories and expressing confusion, frustration, worry and sadness as they re-made their lives in a new place. There was no coherent or single story that was being told. Their images told many stories. They were

<sup>5</sup>The projects ran from 2002 onwards and comprised a number of different initiatives including Transparency (2002–03), Moving Lives (2004–06) and New Londoners (2007–09).



**Fig. 2.1** It was a bit of a challenge for me to capture all the birds low down, in the same motion. I had to be patient and take my time. Lots of birds in this country are friendly and remind me of the parrots and wild animals in Africa. I took this picture in Green Park. Such looking places have changed my former perception of London. While still in Africa, I used to think there were no trees in London. Because Africa is totally bush, people imagine London is so modern that there are no trees, no bush. Maybe people here think that there are no buildings in Africa. Photo by Onesmus/DOST/PhotoVoice

scattered and contradictory. Each young person had their own distinct narrative. Some of them wanted, even needed, to share their experiences but for others, their story was deeply private and personal. Many were not yet sure what their story was or what they wanted it to be. Their stories were in the process of forming and becoming.

### EVOKING A PHOTOGRAPHY OF BECOMING: EVOLVING, PLURAL AND COMPLEX

The notion of becoming is based on a conception of the world that is chaotic and one of perpetual change and motion, where there is a resistance to the idea of fixed entities. The concept dates back to ancient Greek philosophy, when the philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus argued that nothing in this world is constant except change and becoming. Becoming can be broadly understood as the process or state of being coming about

in time and space. A number of thinkers have since worked with the idea, Nietzsche developed the vision of a chaotic world in perpetual change and the notion of becoming was further pursued in the work of Judith Butler (1999) and Stuart Hall (1990).

In Stuart Hall's work, identity is understood as a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being' which 'belongs to the future as much as to the past' (Hall 1990, 226). Identity is subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power and as such Hall argues it needs to be understood not as an essence but as a positioning which lacks final resolution (Hall 1990). A photography of becoming then is the process by which these shifting and evolving identities are explored and constructed through images and image-making. In participatory photography projects, participants can use the medium to look back in order to reflect on where they are and to look forward. Their images often skip between where they are, to what they have come from and to where they are going.<sup>6</sup>

Judith Butler uses the framework of 'becoming' to propose that the subject is always involved in an endless process of performing and evolving that has neither origin nor end (Butler 1999; Salih 2002). One young photographer's images literally involved her performing and trying on different characters for the camera.<sup>7</sup> Her photographs speak directly to Butler's idea that there is no self before the performance of self and that the performance itself is what constitutes the self. One young man did not know what to perform when it came to making his self-portrait (Fig. 2.2). When this picture was taken, a group of young people had come together to make self-portraits to submit to a competition being run by Channel 4. Everyone had ideas. Another participant who wanted to be a film director (and who now is, running his own videography company) created a photoshopped image of himself winning an Oscar but this young man struggled. Over again he said, 'I just don't know who I am' and that is the self-portrait he ended up composing. In performing his own confusion, he captured a sense of his self at that moment and he took great pride in the image when it was chosen as a finalist in the Self-Portrait UK competition and exhibited in tube stations around London.

In their photographs, these young people capture their emerging and evolving sense of self as they sought to make sense of the world around them. Paulo Freire's ideas and his notion of critical consciousness (Freire

<sup>6</sup> See Chalak Abdulrahman's visceral pairings of images in his project *Maybe* in PhotoVoice (2008) *New Londoners: Reflections on Home*. Trolley Books.

<sup>7</sup> See Shamin Nakalembe's project, *Side by Side*, in PhotoVoice (2008) *New Londoners: Reflections on Home*. Trolley Books.



**Fig. 2.2** In England I don't know who I am. I know my name and other things but I do not know what I am doing here. In my own language I could tell you many things about myself but I find it hard to speak in English. Photo by Florian/DOST/PhotoVoice

1970), the process whereby people gain an in-depth understanding of their lives in the world and act to change them, lie at the heart of the transformative potential of community and participatory photography practice. Freire understood images to be generative. At the core of community and participatory photography projects, the process of codifying and decodifying images enables communities to reflect back on themselves and identify the key themes that characterise their social reality. This process allows people to unconsciously and consciously identify, articulate and to challenge their sense of personal and public identity. Lykes, who has worked with Mayan women in Guatemala over many years, notes how participatory photography projects build new subjectivities, especially for communities who are in a state of flux and trying to make sense of their experience (2010). People are not simply communicating already-existing

stories rather, through producing images, they are working to actively perform and craft new narratives, meanings and identities.

Photography has long been understood through the lens of Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment, reduced to that split second of the exposure, but the work of Ariella Azoulay has freed us to think of photography in more extended terms, as an event. This process, the event of photography, is 'unfinished and will remain unfinished' (Azoulay 2008, 13), forever in a state of unfolding. A photography of becoming emerges from an expanded and iterative cycle in which the learning and creation of photography—shooting images, editing images, presenting images, looking at and discussing images—creates 'an experimental process that builds self-respect' (Pinney in Harrison 2014, 38).

In one of the first projects we ran with Project DOST, the young people compiled a list entitled 'Why We Are Taking Photographs' (Fig. 2.3). The reasons were broad and varied from discovering new skills, having fun and making new friends to becoming braver and showing and teaching others about the experiences of refugees. It aptly demonstrates how the process of photography was, for these young people, about much more than just making photographs. As Azoulay suggests, the event of photography sets in motion something greater than just the production of images. The diversity evident in the young people's reasons for taking pictures is mirrored in the multiplicity of images they went on to take.

Historically, photography has been used to fix people and identities, but it is inherently a plural medium. Plurality lies at the heart of a photography of becoming. For the political theorist William Connolly, the notion of becoming is central to his vision of 'deep pluralism' (2005). The pluralistic view is that there is no 'all-form'; rather, experience is replete with connections that are loose, incomplete and susceptible to change, connections that can never add up to a complete whole. The substance of reality may never be fully contained or collected but rather consists of a distributed form of reality in which time is experienced not only as linear and successional but also as folding and forking back and forth between future, past and present.

Increasingly social scientists are turning to complexity theory as a lens through which to examine contemporary social phenomena (Law and Urry 2005). Complexity theory suggests that social life escapes our capacities to make models of it, that it is resistant to the process of being gathered together into a single account or being explained by efficient, linear, casual frameworks, and that instead it is characterised by complexity,

**Why we are taking photos:**

- To discover new things, new skills
- We are interested in learning photography
- To tell our story, about our lives
- To teach about refugees in England and what it means to be a refugee in the UK
- To show how refugees survive in London
- To have lots of fun
- To take happy pictures because I have come from a country where there is fighting
- To make a record/memories
- To show what good photographers we are and that refugees can do it
- To develop our confidence and become braver
- To show that different cultures can create in modern times as well

**Fig. 2.3** ‘Why We Are Taking Photographs’, created by the Transparency group of young photographers, 2002

fluidity, multiplicity and uncertainty. Connolly uses complexity theory to explicate his vision of political plurality arguing that plurality and complexity theory feed each other and point to a larger world of becoming.

In a world of becoming, photography is the medium par excellence for communicating a sense of becoming as visual perception consists of an encounter between inter-sensory memory and a new situation (Connolly 2010, 232). It allows fluid movement between past, present and future and facilitates the negotiation and development of an evolving sense of self. Photography allows us to explore our multiple and changing selves. In creating, performing and mediating our worlds through the camera, photography becomes a way to assign meaning, to craft narratives that provide us with a structure and memories and to experiment with and build our sense of identity and place in the world. As such a photography of becoming poses challenges for those seeking to curate and order it. Attempts to distil and frame the work often result in a simplification that distorts its critical and political potential. Decisions have to be made about which self and story to show and tell. When we were working with these young photographers over the various project iterations, we came up time and again against the challenge of how to bring their work together in accessible ways, of how to make it coherent and meaningful for



participants and audiences but in forms that did not fix its message or negate its plurality.

### COMING TO VOICE USING PHOTOGRAPHY

I will return to this challenge but first I would like to discuss the notion of a photography of becoming in the context of participatory photography's rhetorical promise to give voice. Recent decades have seen an explosion of voice—in reality television, social networking, citizen media and the therapeutic industries (Couldry 2010). The language of voice has come to permeate the motivational narrative of participatory visual discourse and the conditions of voice—the process by which people come to voice through photography and by which voices speak and are, or are not, heard—have become the focus of critical attention. bell hooks describes the feminist focus on coming to voice, on moving from silence into speech, as a revolutionary gesture and act of resistance linked to developing critical consciousness which is especially relevant for groups who have previously not had a public voice (1989). For Azoulay, photography offers a form of citizenry in advance of conventional political citizenry (2008). In the citizenry of photography, distinctions are not made between professional and amateurs, the camera is there for subjects to use, to reclaim and redefine their image, to establish their rights and make themselves visible. Azoulay argues that because photography is in principle, available to all, it bestows a universal citizenship on those who produce, distribute and look at images and can play a vital political role in making others accessible and in designating all to be worthy of documentation and public display (2008, 134).

In this citizenry of photography, participants can use photography to assert their voice and to be heard and in doing so they open new forms of encounter and new possibilities of political action. However, in these projects, photographic citizenry is acquired as much through the process of making photographs as through being made visible in the resulting photographic images (Pinney in Harrison 2014, 39). The performative aspect of this slow event of photography, this photography of becoming, is central to how it facilitates a politics and process of voice.

Community and participatory photography projects have an important part to play in Azoulay's landscape and citizenry of photography. However, many authors point to the hollow promises of voice offered by participatory visual initiatives. Couldry highlights a broader contemporary crisis of voice 'where voice is persistently offered but is in important acts denied or

rendered illusory' (Couldry 2010, 1). In overly romanticising photography's capacity to 'give' voice, the popular narrative around participatory photography projects has obscured how photographic voices can be manipulated and hijacked. There is a pressing need for increased transparency and reflexivity around these negotiated processes and for an examination of the conditions that sanction some voices and silence others (Fairey 2018). In these projects, the processes of curation and editing, preparing work for display, publications and dissemination provide ample opportunities for the images and voices of communities to become, consciously and unconsciously, appropriated and de-contextualised. bell hooks describes the serious consequences of this potential co-optation, 'the appropriation of the marginal voice threatens the very core of self-determination and free self-expression' (1989, 14).

A photography of becoming then is vulnerable. Connolly's notion of a 'politics of becoming' helps deepen our understandings of why. A politics of becoming, the 'paradoxical politics by which new and unforeseen things surge into being' (2005, 122), is central to Connolly's vision of deep pluralism. He explains that pluralism is marked by the tension between already established patterns of diversity and the periodic eruption of new constituencies seeking a place on 'the register of legitimacy' (2005, 48). But he notes that these new constituencies are made vulnerable by the fact that their drive for recognition precedes consolidation of the identity to be recognised (1995, xv). Their nascent quality means they cannot fully declare themselves which makes them vulnerable to appropriation by others. It also means they can induce panic in established identities that often resort to judging them 'through disabling identifications already sedimented in the old code' (1995, xv).

Some participatory photography practitioners work with groups who are politically coherent and organised. Kester has queried if, in a bid to avoid paternalism and the potential for co-optation, projects are even viable if they are not working with groups who already have some form of cultivated political identity or consciousness (1995). However, this position would make participatory photography projects with groups that are labelled as vulnerable, marginalised or excluded untenable. It denies the critical potential of a photography of becoming: a form of photography that supports the vulnerable politics of becoming and that facilitates processes of self-definition and emerging political claims.

For many of the young people involved in PhotoVoice's work with young refugees, the process of finding their photographic voices was not

smooth (Orton 2009, 4). It was exploratory and uncertain. Groups, such as these young photographers, may be dispersed, isolated or recently formed. They might want to self-represent and to challenge the categories, labels or stereotypes that have been assigned to them by others, but they do not necessarily have a shared ethos, history or position from which to do so consistently or collectively. In a globalised world characterised by flow and fragmentation rather than consistency, how are we to understand a notion of political coherence? In many instances, the politics of communities, groups and people are not fully defined or readily accessible. The community itself may not have a sense of its own political identity or if they do, over time, this might change. Energies are often consumed with day-to-day survival. By its very nature, work to ‘make visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate’ (Mouffe 2009) often involves groups that have been marginalised to the point that they have no form of representation or organisation.

A pluralistic perspective is distrustful of the idea of ‘political coherence’. In contemporary society where the pace of life has accelerated, a politics of becoming, characterised by fragile spheres of emerging political identity is more widespread than before (Connolly 2005). For this reason, we need to expand our conception of the political and critical transformative potential of photography to incorporate the notion of a photography of becoming. A form of community-engaged and participatory photography immersed in a politics of becoming, an open-ended visual process rooted in an ethos of critical responsiveness that is occupied with the uncertain work of fostering voice and accompanying emerging demands for self-determination, recognition, action and justice. This is a photography concerned with tracing and enabling voice, which deals in incomplete narratives and with stories that are seeking a language through which to define themselves.

### THE ROLE OF LISTENING AND A YEARNING FOR AUTHENTICITY

The challenge for practitioners is to support this process of coming to voice without pre-determining its character. This involves not only a reflexive awareness of how voice can be co-opted by those directly involved—organisers, donors, facilitators and community members—but also an understanding of how voice is shaped by those who are listening.

Recent scholarship highlights the limits of participatory visual initiatives that are so overly concerned with giving voice and speaking that they neglect to consider whether those voices are heard (Dreher 2012) and how modes of listening shape the voices people are prepared to hear.

The images that emerge from these projects are not always the pictures that fit with what people want to see. In one of our first exhibitions of the work by the young photographers in this chapter, in a gallery in East London, audiences responded overwhelmingly positively to their photography. They were both humbled and enlightened. There was, however, one image that people had trouble with. It was a photograph of a pair of shoes and a mobile phone. In the caption, the young photographer wrote that these were their most important possessions. But the audience could not understand how a young refugee could afford a phone. This was 2002 before phones were ubiquitous and were still thought of, by some, to be a luxury item. Some struggled to see beyond this, to consider how vital a phone would be to a young person with no permanent home, to stay in contact with services and to build new networks.

The photography that comes out of community and participatory photography projects is often publicly validated on the grounds of its authenticity. The idea of a young refugee affording a phone did not gel with audiences' notion of an 'authentic' refugee child. Participatory photography's authenticity is located in the fact that the images are taken by insiders, the very community members themselves, which imbues their photography, in the eyes of audiences, with a distinct intimacy, knowledge and truth-value that aligns with spectators' own yearnings for authenticity. Such a position not only falls back on long-ingrained but contested assumptions about photography's special relationship to truth—photography's great power has always in part derived from every photograph acting as a 'certificate of presence' (Barthes 1982:87)—but also links to a trend within modern culture in which the turn to authenticity connects to concepts of freedom and modes of being in the world (Lindholm 2008).

Community and participatory photography advocates have long relied on an appeal to its authenticity to build trust and credibility, to attract audiences and donors and to attest to the resonance and significance of the images. But this ultimately serves to undermine participatory photography's potential to enable plural voices and stories to be heard and to facilitate an engagement with difference. While audiences might come with their own preconceptions about the kinds of images they want to see, there is no single truth or story to be told. bell hooks argues that when

audiences are determined by dominant groups it is easy for the marginal voice to be overdetermined by the needs of that majority that appear to be listening; 'it becomes easy to speak about what that group wants to hear, to describe and define experience in a language compatible with existing images and ways of knowing' (hooks 1989, 14). But as soon as narratives and identities become fixed by these dominant modes of listening that pre-determine authenticity, they become anti-democratic and suppress a political engagement with the paradox of difference (Connolly 1995). Contesting truths become pitched against each other with some being designated as more valid than others and working to silence different positions and competing points of view.

People are capable of speaking in many voices and an insistence on finding a singular narrative or style fits too neatly with a static and reductive notion of self and identity. A key aspect of self-affirmation is not to feel compelled to choose one voice over another, not to claim one as more authentic, but rather to construct social realities that celebrate, acknowledge and affirm differences and variety (hooks 1989). Re-imagining the promise of participatory photography is to frame a new ethics of spectatorship that, rather than appealing to authenticity, foments a critical engagement with difference by nurturing visual pluralism and a dialogue between multiple and different ways of seeing for both participants and audiences. From this perspective, a photography of becoming gives rise to plural views and narratives that are mediated to support and open up, rather than close down, opportunities for debate and reflection for everyone involved. Engaging with the different ways, we see, experience and understand the world becomes the critical pulse that re-orientates the promise of participatory photography.

Theorists argue the endless process of 'becoming' is an open-ended dialectic that has no resolution. They recognise that as soon as notions and narratives become fixed as 'truth' they become dangerously anti-democratic (Salih 2002). For Connolly, the biggest impetus to violence, anarchy and fragmentation today emerges from doctrines that try to impose totalising narratives and suppress political engagement with the paradox of difference (1995). When participatory photography is framed discursively within a narrative of authenticity, it implies a hierarchy of voice in which some are truer than others and which denies the plurality of human experience. It is my proposition that if participatory photography images are to realise and re-imagine their potential, then this must be achieved through a performative or curatorial framework that does not

depend on the idea of participatory photography as being ‘truer’ than other types of images but rather uses the framework of pluralism to aspire towards building spaces where people can challenge fixed ways of seeing by forging narratives that engage with difference and multiple subjectivities and that reveal contrasting, challenging and even contradictory truths.

### CURATING MULTIPLICITY

Let’s return to the challenge of editorial control and curation in participatory photography and in this project work with young people who came to the UK as unaccompanied refugees specifically. As project organisers and facilitators working with these young people, we saw conflicting desires. They wanted to use their photography to challenge negative conceptions of refugees while also wanting to use photography as a means to escape being a refugee, to reclaim a sense of self distinct from how they were viewed through the lens of their immigration status. One of the photographers wrote: ‘I want people looking at my photographs to put the idea of refugee out of their mind and think about humanity first’ (PhotoVoice 2006). As a group, they wanted to tell many stories, not one.

After we had been working with Project DOST for 6 years, we devised the photo-mentoring project, New Londoners, which involved a diverse group of young people, some of whom had been working with us for years (including as photography facilitators) and some who had only recently arrived. New Londoners offered a framework in which young people were supported to make a photo story of their choosing about their experiences of London and reflections on the theme of home. Their status as young refugee photographers was acknowledged but not headlined in the framing and contextual writing of the subsequent book publication (PhotoVoice 2008). The project was not perfect but in seeking to provide a platform for plural narratives that could accommodate for difference while speaking to a shared theme it aimed to nurture a way of speaking ‘no longer determined by one’s status as object’ (hooks 1989, 15). New Londoners sought to capture multiplicity without flattening it into a singular narrative that conformed to expectations of what a refugee experience consisted of. How successfully it managed to achieve that is for others to judge. Connolly suggests there are no clear criteria by which a politics of becoming succeeds (1995) and perhaps the same can be said of a photography of becoming. What is key is that this photography is not validated on the grounds that it is more ethical or authentic than other forms of imagery

but rather on whether it nurtures an affective engagement with new and different ways of seeing and knowing.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the frequent claim that photographs mirror the world, the focus here is on their role in ‘world-making’ (Mitchell 2005, xv) and as a force in the mediation of social and political relations. Community and participatory photography has, within a history of more than 50 years, sought to amplify and support grassroots voices and to enable change but the language and ideas underpinning contemporary practice, centred on problematic notions of empowerment and authenticity, has stagnated and skewed its critical and transformative promise. A rapidly changing digital, social, political and image landscape demands a re-articulation of the conceptual base of participatory photography.

I propose that the promise of participatory photography is re-imagined through pluralism. Photography is inherently plural. Its paradoxical, flexible and unknowable nature makes it apt for exploring the multiple ways in which people see and understand the world. Photography, as a point of encounter and as a catalyst for new subjectivities, can facilitate a dialogue that enables people to gain an insight into and negotiate with, rather than deny, the paradoxical relationship of identity and difference. Re-imagining participatory photography through a pluralist imagination locates participatory photography as an emergent process replete with tensions that is a vital part of the pursuit for new configurations of plurality and difference. It understands participatory photography not only as a stance on democratising photographic production or as a form of photographic facilitation, collaboration or activism but also as a mode of visual mediation that enables a plurality of seeing and supports the realisation of a new form of social relations and civil politics.

Pluralism is a possibility to pursue rather than a certain effect. If attained, it remains a fragile achievement (Connolly 2005). The notion of a photography of becoming highlights this precariousness. It designates participatory photography as a fragmented, negotiated process immersed in a vital but nascent and vulnerable politics of becoming and voice. Through the very process of its production, a photography of becoming engages in an ongoing process where participants are simultaneously coming to and claiming a voice. It can be tokenistic and it can be co-opted, but photography’s plurality means it cannot be fully appropriated by any one

party (Azoulay 2008). A photography of becoming requires certain conditions of possibility. All participants—producers, organisers and spectators—have to open themselves up to transformation and to engaging with the tensions that are constitutive of its practice.

A photography of becoming is not intended as a general metaphor that applies across all forms of participatory photography practice. It begets from a form of slow photography. The conditions of cultural production and tight timeframes of many contemporary participatory photographs curtail the iterative, extended process of photography that allows those involved to explore and develop their photographic voices or, as Azoulay might call it, their photographic citizenry. Some participatory photography initiatives engage with groups campaigning on a specific articulated claim within a conscious political agenda, already defined within a language of social justice. These projects may produce a more defined and united body of photography, less obviously fragmented or characterised by plurality and a sense of becoming.

The challenge for practitioners is to create a process that gives a photography of becoming its full expression while creating an encounter with the spectator that facilitates a critical responsiveness to its images and claims. The task is to enable a photography that captures the complexity of the porous identities and issues involved and that does deny multiplicity in a bid to claim attention, authenticity or legitimacy. Practitioners must remain alert to the ways in which the practice of participatory photography can end up closing off, hijacking or subduing an emergent politics of voice rather than enabling it. They must strive to safeguard the ambiguous and uncertain potential of participatory photography in a climate that pushes towards standardisation and short-termism. Practitioners need to work with a sense of perspective that acknowledges their limited capacity and the unreliable nature of their work but that cements their resolve and commitment to re-imagine what their projects make possible.

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# *Bootle, Art in Action and Pass the Valium Martha: On Community Photobooks and Positive Self-Expression*

*Paul Edwards*

I am not a nonentity.  
Give me back my identity.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter contextualises the community art photobook *Art in Action* (1980) and studies how it broke with the more overtly politicised model established in *Bootle: A Pictorial Study of the Dockland Community* (1978). Bootle, a town in the borough of Sefton, on the outskirts of Liverpool, was then undergoing considerable economic decline and suffered from high unemployment. This chapter seeks more especially to underline the importance of positive self-expression and stigma

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Casey, “Louts”, poem in [COLLECTIVE]: *Pass the Valium Martha. A Collection of Poetry, Prose and Short Stories from Merseyside*, Community Print Aid, Liverpool, 1982, p. 12.

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Switzerland AG 2024

M. Bertrand, K. Chambeffort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography  
as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_3)

management in the photographic construction of identity when documentary projects are participative or collective rather than invasive.

The 1970s and 1980s was a period when “expression” was the keyword of funding bodies, a word endlessly used to indicate that “art” had been produced, without the nature of that expression being investigated or commented upon further. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that community photography produced by disadvantaged children in Bootle resulted in creative efforts to produce classically composed pictures and what could pass for artistic expression (and in so doing achieve a degree of self-reliance and self-esteem, an ability to work in groups and with adults), this chapter proposes instead to apply sociologist Erving Goffman’s theories of positive self-expression to the photographic output. These theories provide a better understanding of insider photography and help explain the difference between insider and outsider photography, and how a particular style came to dominate certain forms of community photography and certain publications, both at the level of individual prints and at the level of the selections made to give a public image of community art. Finally, de-emphasising the artistic and aesthetic considerations in favour of an approach inspired by writings in sociology allows for a better understanding of how community photography practices enable people to picture themselves *socially* rather than *individually*, that is as part of a community rather than as isolated individuals with purely private modes of self-expression.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first is introductory and briefly presents the three main, interconnected arguments. First, the opposing notions of art employed by funding bodies and community arts projects. Second, the opposing notions of self-expression and self-image. Third, the opposition between insider and outsider gazes. The second part provides a history of the Bootle project as it honed its rhetoric to secure funding, while providing a more and more visible platform for self-empowerment in a marginalised neighbourhood.

### THE SLOPING PYRAMID MODEL OF THE ART WORLD

The *Art in Action* photobook is a compromise, reached between 1978 and 1980, which represents the common interests of several groups. The first was a collective, made up of the members of the community photography project “Art and Action”, founded in August 1978 by Margaret Pinnington, Bill Dolce, Les Edge and Allen Parry (Murray 1984, 5).

Secondly, there were the child-photographers from Bootle. Finally, there were the funding bodies—a collective of sorts, since they too were a group of people dedicated to a common cause, namely “art”, though the goal of grant-giving institutions is not to produce but to fund, promote, evaluate, qualify or disqualify.

In 1974, the Arts Council of Great Britain report on community photography concluded in favour of financial support,<sup>2</sup> but by 1977, the responsibility had devolved to the regions.<sup>3</sup> The regional grant accorded Bootle Art in Action was frozen in 1980 on the basis that the photographs actually produced did not constitute “art”. It is therefore necessary to take

<sup>2</sup>The “photography section” of the Arts Council of Great Britain was created in 1973–1974 (THE ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN, *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report and Accounts Year Ended 31 March 1974*, The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1974, 14). The co-opted members serving on the Photography Committee were: Bill Gaskins, Ron McCormick, Professor Aaron Scharf and Pete Turner (p. 3). The report on photography funding is very brief and does not mention community photography: “Activities in the field of photography were substantially expanded with the Council’s appointment of a full-time specialist member of staff. A new scheme for grants to photographers was initiated; four exhibitions of photography were toured and the year ended with an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery of the work of the New York photographer Diane Arbus” (p. 27). The exhibitions sponsored by the Arts Council during 1973–1974 were: Diane Arbus, *Coalface 1900* (Welsh Arts Council exhibition), Dr. P. H. Emerson, *Personal Views*, *Serpentine Photographers II*, Sir Benjamin Stone, *Two Views* (p. A29). There is also a mention of the exhibition at Nottingham “Midland Group Gallery: *Midland Seen... and other views (contemporary photography)*”, awarded £600 (p. A48), and “York: *Impressions Gallery of Photography: Cecil Beaton*”, awarded £300 (p. A48). In 1976, the exhibitions that were funded were mainly retrospectives and historical: Bill Brandt, Bert Hardy, Tony Ray Jones, George Rodger, Paul Strand, Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, Sir Benjamin Stone, and so on (ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN, *The: Thirty-first Annual Report and Accounts Year Ended 31 March 1976*, The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1976).

<sup>3</sup>Roy Shaw writes, “[...] the Arts Council [...] took in community arts because no-one else would, but decided 2 years ago [i.e. 1977] that it would be appropriate to devolve this work to Regional Arts Associations and to local authorities. Since much of the work mixes arts activity with social and educational work it may be that it should be increasingly financed by other government schemes, like Urban Aid. Certainly, the Arts Council cannot support community arts from its own funds at a level which the clamorous community arts movement is demanding.” (“Secretary General’s Report”, ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN, *The: Thirty-fourth Annual Report and Accounts Year Ended 31 March 1979*, The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1979, p. 9). For a summary of the funding actions and rationales of the Arts Council of Great Britain, see BERTRAND, Mathilde: “‘Making the Art of Fun Freely Accessible’: the Politics of Leisure in the Community Art Movement in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s”, *Angles: French Perspectives on the Anglophone World*, Société des Anglicistes de l’Enseignement Supérieur, 2017, pp. 9–11.

stock of the two opposing visions of what constitutes “art”, one for which photographic art is “silent”, clean, polished, universal, conformist and individual, another for which it is “loud”, dirty, sticky, local, dissenting and collective. Briefly, the funding bodies define art according to a vertical model of individual distinction requiring an audience of connoisseurs, whereas community photography projects work according to a horizontal model of mutual aid and collective achievement.

It could be argued that the two models are not in fact contradictory and that they occupy two distinct portions of the photographic “art world” (Becker 2008). The latter can be modelised as a concave pyramid, with a large flat base of collaborating equals, and a tip of famous names at the top of their profession. The slope of the sides indicates what might be termed “the will to distinction” (an expression modelled on Nietzsche’s “will to power”). This is evidenced by the fact that a professional photographer (at the top of the concave pyramid) is a “name”, and their name is their brand, whereas the community photographers (at the base of the pyramid) are anonymous and their photographs credited to “Art in Action”. No photographer is named in their 1982 postcard series, and the collective attribution is likewise used for all the pictures in the photobook *Pass the Valium Martha* (1982), a collaboration between Merseyside Workers Writers and Art in Action; none of the photographs are credited in the photobook *Bootle: A Pictorial Study of the Dockland Community* (1978),<sup>4</sup> whereas two-thirds of the photographs are attributed in *Art in Action* (1980), when the imperative was to prove the artistic status of the photographs in order to secure a grant.

As individual members improved their skills, they were encouraged to present their prints in a more “professional” way (“the work took on a more professional presentation”) (Pinnington 1986, 18), and so they were effectively aided in their potential careers as photographers — helped up the pyramid, as it were:

We attempt to take the youngsters out to venues displaying their work on opening nights and let them talk to people about their photographs [...] They have had the opportunity of meeting famous people in the art world

<sup>4</sup>“All the pictures were taken by residents—from kids to pensioners—in the area”, ARTS & ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Bootle: A Pictorial Study of the Dockland Community. A Community Art Project in Bootle*, An Arts & Action Publication, Bootle, 1978, p. 11.

and have the confidence now to articulate their ideas to them. (Pinnington 1986, 20)

This pyramid model formalises what was in fact a specific moment in the history of the public funding of community art, when bodies answerable to the government sought to bring high art to the masses through *education* (“The key to the enjoyment of the ‘high’ arts by a wider public is a better education in the arts at all age levels from primary school to adult education”),<sup>5</sup> while community art projects sought to make the *practice* of art available to all. This, at least, was the compromise reached between funding bodies with conservative notions of art based on class (for all they said to the contrary), and the community arts projects that had reformist agendas and for whom photography was, at least initially, a means to a political end.

### POSITIVE IMAGING AS “STIGMA MANAGEMENT”<sup>6</sup>

The problem with community art projects that achieved this compromise is that in helping to “redefine art around the concept of expression” (Bertrand 2017, 2), it becomes difficult to take into account (or theorise) the need of individuals to create a positive self-image, and a positive image

<sup>5</sup> ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN, *The: Thirty-second Annual Report and Accounts Year Ended 31 March 1977*, The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1977, “Secretary-General’s Report: Value for Money”, p. 7. Likewise, a lengthy “Secretary-General’s Report: Patronage and Responsibility”, by Sir Roy Shaw, argues for education rather than community art: “A growing number of people working in the arts would repudiate much of the foregoing argument as ‘elitist’. They reject the traditional culture as irrelevant to the needs of ordinary people and wish to replace it by an ‘alternative’ culture tailored to the needs of those people. This is the view of many who work in the field of community arts. [...] Against this I would argue that the great democratic task of the twentieth century is to initiate more people into an awareness that the culture which they felt was ‘not for us’ really *is* ‘their culture’. [...] To the present writer, however, to dismiss Europe’s cultural heritage as ‘bourgeois culture’ is simply politically inspired philistinism.” (ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN, *The: Thirty-fourth Annual Report and Accounts Year Ended 31 March 1979*, The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1979. pp. 8–9). And see Mathilde Bertrand’s summary of the Arts Council of Great Britain’s funding policies, in “‘Making the Art of Fun Freely Accessible’: the Politics of Leisure in the Community Art Movement in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s”, *Angles: French Perspectives on the Anglophone World*, Société des Anglicistes de l’Enseignement Supérieur, 2017, pp. 9–11.

<sup>6</sup>The expression is employed in GOFFMAN, Erving: *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs (New Jersey), 1963, 51.

of their environment as well. To put it flippantly, the community art organisers are saying “Look how bad it is”, and the kids with cameras are saying “Look how good it is”. This is partly acknowledged by the adult supervisors in the photobook *Bootle*, where the pictures show a “filthy disused railway”, a “rats’ breeding ground”, a derelict shopping street, seemingly endless ruined buildings, a baby playing in rubble: “The pictures here show our children in their play areas. They do not see them as we see them through our eyes [...] They are the innocents” (Arts & Action 1978a, 4). The choice of words is unfortunate, as the children are all but naive, and take their photographs according to a strict logic. It is a case of dealing with “stigma” and the “management of spoiled identity” (Goffman 1963).

The documentary photography that was produced by children and young adults that were part of the Art in Action community arts project was subjective, of course, as most of the photographs could be recaptioned: “this is me, these are my friends, this is where I live”. This was not a theorised subjectivity, connoting a take on art history or a position on the art market, it was simply an insider’s subjectivity, and held an insider’s meaning. The militant approach of the adults is absent from the children’s photographs and provided instead by the accompanying text, whose tone is politically motivated, informed and accusatory. The photographs taken on their own, however, may convey a meaning closer to that of the children’s vision to people living in similar conditions.

To a working-class audience, the photographs represent the possibility of overcoming stigma: the stigma of living in a poor neighbourhood, of unemployment, poor clothing, perceived failure to conform to middle-class expectations concerning language, education and manners. This overcoming is empowering, dynamic, inspiring and exciting (hence the success of Art in Action in finding more and more participants locally); to a middle-class audience, they represent a new style in documentary photography, one that is not the expected stark, dark socialist realism, and one which is difficult to imitate or adopt from the outside. To a funding body, the photographic work can therefore appear stylistically interesting. The creative work in stigma management, however, is not expressly visible, or made explicit in the captions, and so the social conditions that “spoiled” the identities remain likewise invisible.



## INSIDER VERSUS OUTSIDER GAZE

The photographs were often reproduced with little textual accompaniment from the child-photographers themselves about what the subjects represented for them, therefore making it difficult for the outsider's gaze to overlap with that of the insider. To take one example, the photograph by a 15-year-old girl of her neighbours (perhaps including her mother) shows two middle-aged women at the doorstep, one dressed for cleaning the house, the other huddled in a long coat against the cold, their hands clasped informally, one with her hair unkempt, giving the child an indulgent, exaggerated grin. They are seen from a low angle, through familiar eyes,<sup>7</sup> whereas a middle-class viewer, one more conversant with the beautifying effects of studio photography, a student of the history of photography, or a photojournalist, might be reminded of portraits by Diane Arbus, or by other disturbing portrait photographers in which the veneer of posing is absent. Such a comparison is the unavoidable consequence of an acquired culture in iconographical traditions. Is it clear that the two women are at ease with the child, though perhaps less so with the camera? Any misconceived, pseudo-Diane Arbus gaze on the part of the viewer can be evacuated through the textual presentation of the photograph, through a simple caption, or some knowledge of the context. And it is precisely through the captions, commentaries, or interviews that the insider's gaze can be understood, their "positivising" understood, and hence their "stigma" circumscribed.

More generally, it has to be remembered that the casual viewer will see photographed subjects as passing strangers and as such they will elicit stereotypical responses. As Goffman writes:

There is a popular notion that although impersonal contacts between strangers are particularly subject to stereotypical responses, as persons come to be on closer terms with each other this categoric approach recedes and gradually sympathy, understanding, and a realistic assessment of personal qualities

<sup>7</sup>Tricia [Patricia] Fisher, no title, photograph reproduced in half-tone in *Art in Action, A Community Photographic Project on Merseyside*, An Arts & Action Publication, Bootle, [October] 1980 p. 12. Also reproduced in [COLLECTIVE]: *Pass the Valium Martha. A Collection of Poetry, Prose and Short Stories from Merseyside*, Community Print Aid, Liverpool, 1982, page 15, to illustrate "A Conversation with Me Mam" by Marie Morris, in which clichéd, metaphorical expressions are strung together.

take its place. While a blemish such as a facial disfigurement might put off a stranger, intimates presumably would not be put off by such matters. (Goffman 1963, 51)

The caption that would indicate the familiar relationship between the photographer and the two women would help the viewer to imagine the intimacy between the photographer and the subject, and so help dismiss (class) stereotypes.

To take a more significant example: the recurrence of derelict buildings in the Art in Action photographs are framed as playgrounds by the photographers, such as in the portrait of a boy playing the guitar and another singing in front of half-demolished buildings<sup>8</sup>; a derelict building indicates that the area is un-cared for by Sefton council (one photograph in *Bootle* is captioned “Children at play in rat infested derelict land”, page 2), but by making it a playground, it takes on positive associations of childhood freedom, free space to occupy and explore, the ability to practice a musical instrument without annoying the neighbours and so on. The insider sees the appropriation of space, not its abandonment.

This positive image-making distinguishes insider-photography from outsider-photography, the latter being, typically, the product of photo-journalists. Documentary photography is (stereotypically) bleak and gloomy when the subject is working-class districts with high unemployment and poor housing. The disconnect between the type of documentary photography that had mostly been exhibited until then in the more famous galleries<sup>9</sup> and the Art in Action photographs is remarkable and may have contributed to the nationwide renown of the Bootle community photography project. Indeed, by November 1980, one month after the publication of *Art in Action*, “the gallery was visited by people from all over the country” (Murray 1984, 7); in 1981, *Art in Action* was filmed by the BBC for an Open Door programme, which led to Yorkshire, Granada and Thames TV following suit, and the response was “tremendous”, according to Rob Murray (1984, 7); the photography collective founded in

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Flinn (15), untitled [photograph of boys playing guitar in the ruins of demolished buildings], ART IN ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Art in Action*, Art in Action Publication, Bootle, n. d. [c. 1978–1984], double-sided A2 poster.

<sup>9</sup>Bill Brandt, for example, whose London, Scottish and regional exhibitions were funded by the Arts Council in 1976, 1978–1979, 1979–1980 and 1980–1981. By contrast, the work of Tish Murtha (1956–2013) was not reproduced in the photographic press until 2007, though she had solo exhibitions at the Side Gallery, Newcastle, in 1979 and 1981.

1981, *Belfast Exposed*, referred to Bootle as an example for them<sup>10</sup>; in September 1984, they were profiled in the well-known national weekly *Amateur Photographer* over three full pages.

The positive image-making has been borne out over time too, as the re-publication of the Art in Action photographs of the 1970s and 1980s on such platforms as Facebook and Flickr has generated commentaries from people who appear on the photographs or who knew people on the photographs, or who lived in the area at that time, and who comment on the photographs with expressions of nostalgia (“They were the days”, being a typical tongue-in-cheek remark), and not with righteous indignation at the local council’s housing policies.

### BOOTLE: ART AND EMPOWERMENT

The story of the community photography project “Bootle Art in Action” has been repeatedly told by its own members for two obvious reasons: firstly, as a direct or indirect means of fundraising; and secondly, to publicise the causes that the project was set up to fight in the first place, namely “the dreadful social and environmental problems of the Bootle area” (Pinnington 1986, 14). It can be seen as part of the community arts movement in Britain of the late 1960s to 1980s, when volunteer-led projects encouraged working-class people to express and organise their discontent with local politics that marginalised their interests: to quote Mathilde Bertrand, “Community arts organisations, through their encouragement of people’s expression on issues affecting their lives, were ferments of agitation and resistance at a community level” (Bertrand 2017, 5). According to Margaret Pinnington, in whose maisonette the project was first based, the voluntary project was set up by local residents in the Bootle area of Liverpool as a response to bad housing (in the mid-1960s, the terraced houses had been cleared for tower blocks, which were in disrepair by the mid-1970s), and as a creative answer to high unemployment and the lack of recreational facilities—problems which were not being properly tackled by the Conservative-run Sefton council (Pinnington 1986, 14). The photography project, Pinnington continues, grew out of other residents’ associations whose campaigns to shame the local authority into improving the council housing only worked when photographs were published (in *Communitywise*, No. 3). A photographic workshop was consequently set

<sup>10</sup>My thanks to Mathilde Bertrand, who informed me of this.

up with funding from Merseyside Arts, but with no funding from the local authority. There was local enthusiasm for the darkroom and photography workshop set up by Pinnington in her own home, as local people discovered that the skills required were not beyond their reach. The effervescence was such that it was decided that a photobook<sup>11</sup> should consecrate their efforts:

The production of this booklet became very important to us; through the photographic media we hoped to show that local people without professional help could have a say in the conditions of life within their own areas. We also wanted to show that working class people, with limited training and resources could produce a book of photographs that was of a high standard. We were aiming to produce a work of art as well as a social political document. (Pinnington 1986, 18)

The booklet, according to Rob Murray,

was distributed to all Local Authority Departments, and clergy, with a covering letter asking them to join with all local groups in setting up a working party to 'look in depth at the environmental and social problems of Bootle' to seek to bring about improvement.

The only formal reply came from a Tory councillor 'Thank you for your booklet. It seems a somewhat expensive publication! I would be interested to know how it was financed.' The response of Sefton's Chief Planning Officer was to send a directive to all his staff, stating that under no circumstances should any officer reply to or acknowledge, this letter or in any way offer co-operation or information to this 'organisation'. (Murray 1984, 6)

The book was financed through community activities (jumble sales, raffles, social evenings, and so on) but as the association had received aid from Merseyside Arts to buy photographic materials, an inquiry was held in April 1980 to determine whether public money had been misappropriated for political purposes. The allegation by Sefton Council made the headlines of the local press, *Art & Action* "being accused of indulging in activities of an extreme political and/or anti-social nature which rendered Arts and Action as an undesirable body to assist financially out of public

<sup>11</sup>This would be: ART IN ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Bootle: A Pictorial Study of the Dockland Community. A Community Art Project in Bootle*, An Arts & Action Publication, Bootle, 1978.

funds” (Elphick 1981; Murray 1984, 6–7). The collective’s Merseyside Arts grant was frozen in 1980 (Powell 1984, 99), as Pinnington recounts:

The booklet, however, did not please the local authority. We were branded as ‘reds’ and accused of using arts money to organise political opposition to Sefton Council. They contacted Merseyside Arts, demanded an investigation of our use of arts money, and insisted on a freeze of any further financial aid to the group. The arts association instigated an inquiry into our funding and the group was cleared of all charges. Further financial assistance was given to the group by the arts association which enabled us to rent small premises in the Bootle area. It was at this point that the photographic group became independent of the community association and Art in Action was born. (Pinnington 1986, 18)

“Bootle Art *and* Action” became “Bootle Art *in* Action” (my emphases).<sup>12</sup> The photographic group was therefore created as a separate entity in order to guarantee the continuation of public funding (restored in November 1980 after having been frozen for 6 months) (Murray 1984, 7). It became a registered charity and received funding from the Gulbenkian Foundation, as well as a grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain for a touring exhibition (Powell 1984, 99).<sup>13</sup> The fundraising argument was of necessity that community photography produce art and creativity within the community, since the Evaluation Working Party (c. 1976/1977) reported to the Arts Council that “there is clearly no justification for funding any activity which is not art based” (Kelly 1984, 15). The first overtly militant photobook, *Bootle: A Pictorial Study of a Dockland Community on Merseyside* (1978), gave rise to a second, *Art in Action: A Community Photographic Project on Merseyside* (1980). The second photobook was to exemplify the primary artistic focus of the group in response to the public inquiry and the allegations of organising political opposition to the local council:

Arts and Action and the local community faced this challenge with characteristic vigour and, determined that they would successfully refute these alle-

<sup>12</sup> It became “Art in Action Ltd.” in 1982, according to William Dolce, administrator of the Flickr site “Art in Action Bootle” (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/49684474@N06/4558058881/>, retrieved 20 July 2018).

<sup>13</sup> There is no mention of this in the annual reports of the Arts council for 1979–1980 or 1980–1981. Grants were given for darkrooms, however, to “nine organisations for their teaching and workshop programs” (annual report for 1980–1981, p. 19).

gations, produced their second book, *Art in Action*. This was no defensive reply to the unfounded attacks by the Local Authority but a demonstration of the project's art—the use of photography by members of the community. It illustrates clearly the role of art and creativity in an urban environment like Bootle and it demonstrates the impact of the project's work on the lives of people of all ages. The book helped to ensure that Bootle Arts and Action would, in future, be supported by public funds. (Elphick 1981)

With this second photobook, the emphasis had changed from militancy to creativity and pedagogy, following a trend that would concern all publicly funded community arts projects: “the practice of community photography has shifted its emphasis from direct political action to pedagogical processes directed primarily towards youth” (De Cuyper 1997–1998, 9).

The photographic group quickly became one of the best-known community photography projects in Britain, thanks to the booklet and exhibitions. Even more so on 8 April 1981, when BBC aired an “Open Door” programme called “It’s Bootle—But Is It Art?”, whose synopsis runs: “Programme made and presented by Art in Action, a Merseyside community photography project, which frustrates the local council’s version of the area with its view of a deprived dockland community”.<sup>14</sup> The project grew in notoriety and in size.

Art in Action provided darkrooms, gallery space and skills acquisition for local people: in 1985 alone, 250 people and 40 organisations used the facilities (Pinnington 1986, 18). As it expanded, so it needed more funding: they left Merseyside Arts in 1982 in favour of the Manpower Services Commission (Pinnington 1986, 18), which allowed them to hire 14 paid workers (Powell 1984, 100). In October 1982, they received help from the John Moores Foundation (in the form of a building and a cheap rent) (Powell 1984, 99; Murray 1984, 8). Another Arts Council of Great Britain Grant paid for the refurbishing of the darkrooms and the extension of the photographic gallery (Murray 1984, 8). Concurrently, the prints “took on a more professional presentation” (Pinnington 1986, 18), as self-expression became more important than producing documentary evidence. This shift away from militancy towards personal achievement and artistic education is clearly closer to the briefs of the funding bodies, as has been pointed out by social scientists (“it is all too easy for a photo-voice

<sup>14</sup>Synopsis provided by the British Film Institute. <http://collections-search.bfi.org.uk/web/Details/ChoiceFilmWorks/150245058> (retrieved 13 July 2018).

project to be co-opted to serve the agenda of people in power or those employed within the community development industry—however well-meaning—and thereby continue the disempowerment of the direct stakeholder group” (Webb 2004; Purcell 2009, 117)), and by Owen Kelly: “worried by the political activities of some community arts groups, [the Evaluation Working Party] pointedly reminded the Council that ‘there is clearly no justification for funding any activity which is not art based.’ [...] In many ways, this report *determined* the subsequent growth of community arts” (Kelly 1984, 15). The social motivation of Art in Action had changed since the days of the *Communitywise* campaigns against dilapidated council housing: now the (public) emphasis was on the social insertion of school dropouts:

Many of these youngsters had turned their backs on formal schooling and had little academic aspiration. Through photography they began to realise that they were not the ‘failures’ that the formal education system had labelled them. [...] In the early days people visiting the project were very surprised at the quality of the youngsters’ work, in some instances they did not really believe that youngsters without any formal or technical training in photography could produce such good photographs. (Pinnington 1986, 20)

The 1988 press statement confirms the twin ambition of fostering art at the same time as social responsibility:

We believe that every opportunity must be given to encourage local people to develop abilities, talents and faculties to their fullest extent. Encouraging and enabling children, teenagers and adults to learn how to use such facilities and to develop their artistic and creative potential, and to play an informed and responsible role within their community. (Dolce [1988a])

In addition to the educational argument of learning the craft of photography, the working definition of “art photography” that underlies Pinnington’s historical account is the combination of “self-expression” and “truth”:

This is part of the process of giving people confidence in their expression and putting visual creativity and self-expression within the reach of ordinary people. [...] The photographs at Bootle Art in Action are as powerful as any advertisement hoarding, but that is not because they’re clever, but because

they're true. There is nothing hidden, nothing contrived, and they speak by using simple juxtaposition or composition. (Pinnington 1986, 18–20)

This concept of art as self-expression—transparent, unproblematic, triumphant self-expression—can be seen as a response to a situation in which expressing your creative identity and making yourself heard is denied. Photography equates with empowerment, in that it allows people, even a whole community, to be represented, and to correct false representations. As De Culyer writes: “Community photographers shared a number of goals in common with visual anthropologists, including the desire [...] to represent the perspectives of groups absent from or misrepresented within dominant media” (De Cuyper 1997–1998, 3).

Before actively seeking to produce representations with a militant perspective, it has to be remembered that self-expression and self-representation entail other dynamics to do with self-esteem. As Rudkin and Davis point out, “Place identity research suggests that when youth reside in negative spaces, they must find ways of focusing on the positive aspects of those spaces in order to preserve a healthy sense of self” (Rudkin and Davis 2007, 119). This is the mechanism of managing stigma that is described by Erving Goffman: “the arts of impression management, the arts, basic in social life, through which the individual exerts strategic control over the image of himself” (Goffman 1963, 130). Picture-taking becomes a kind of theatre, a performance; the environment becomes a background, almost a film set; and the youth-photographers become directors. It is interesting to note in this respect that one of the most reproduced (iconic) photographs of the Bootle Art in Action corpus is one by (founder-member) Bill Dolce, showing a boy holding a camera to his eye with one hand and directing another boy with the other.<sup>15</sup> In this *mise en abyme* (the adult photographer over-looking the child photographer), the notions of empowerment, creative self-expression and collective efficacy are made manifest.

In this respect, it is also interesting and revealing to note that Bill Dolce, in a recent filmed interview,<sup>16</sup> chose his photograph of a mummified cat covered in mud by the kerbside as the most representative, because it

<sup>15</sup> Bill Dolce, untitled [photograph showing two children from the Art in Action workshop], reproduced in ART IN ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Art in Action. A Community Photographic Project on Merseyside*, An Arts & Action Publication, Bootle, [October] 1980, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Art in Action: “Art in Action TV” on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/channels/286469>), consulted 20 July 2018. Administrator: Eddie Singleton/Azzurri Films).



represented for him the “spirit of adventure” of Bootle residents (since the cat had taken the risk of going to the docks, where the other “cool cats” hang out). What to the casual observer is a photo of a run-over cat, to the insider is a self-portrait and an aggrandising one at that.

The example of the cat points to the importance of symbols and projection when attempting to read insiders’ photographs correctly, but care must also be taken to identify significant details. The use of accessories, such as a racer, a motorbike, a guitar, a fashionable suit and hat,<sup>17</sup> is example of “disidentifiers” (Goffman 1963, 44): a disidentifier is “a sign that tends—in fact or hope—to break up an otherwise coherent picture but in this case in a positive direction desired by the actor, not so much establishing a new claim as throwing severe doubt on the validity of the virtual one” (*Id.*). The children and young adults try to “pass” as upwardly mobile members of society, unhampered by class prejudice, unemployment, poor living conditions, lack of money, and so on, and all that might stigmatise them and discriminate against them.

The community project photographs show evidence of the “management of identity”, which seems a more accurate description than “self-expression”. There was no critique of “self-expression” in the texts produced by the project, and the term is omnipresent in the Art in Action publications as it harmonises with the language of the funding bodies. And as “academic” approaches were understandably viewed with suspicion (since establishment views of art tended to perpetuate the top-down approach to art, effectively disenfranchising those without the educational baggage to start with), the emphasis was never on photography theory, as Rob Powell explains in a 1984 article published in *Amateur Photographer*:

Despite its name, Art in Action doesn’t promote any complex notions of photography as an art form. But although its basic aims aren’t concerned with the turning out of fine prints and master works, the general quality of the photographs produced in its darkrooms, not least by children and teenagers, is remarkable. (Powell 1984, 99)

<sup>17</sup> Anon. [Art in Action], untitled, [photograph of a man with a racing bike], part of ART IN ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Art in Action, A Series of [6] Postcards*, Art in Action, Bootle, 1982; Anon., [Art in Action], untitled [photograph of a young man on a motorbike], part of ART IN ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Art in Action, A Series of [6] Postcards*, Art in Action, Bootle, 1982; Chris Walsh, untitled [photograph of a young man in a suit and trilby], ART IN ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Art in Action. A Community Photographic Project on Merseyside*, An Arts & Action Publication, Bootle, [October] 1980, p. 10.

The emphasis was instead on “demystifying photography while retaining a faith in it as a means of communication and expression” (Powell 1984, 100). The mechanisms of personal empowerment were not theorised, but felt to be present.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that the working-class community project, Art in Action, once it had accepted that it had to be seen to be producing “art” in order to receive funding, went on to produce photographs that created positive self-identities through stigma management, rather than documentary evidence of living environments that could be used publicly and politically. Such, at least, is the view from the outside, but locally the photographs were understood as reactions to the politics of Sefton council, whose own image was tarnished by any reminders of derelict buildings. In April 1981, “despite national interest in the work of Arts and Action, they are not allowed to exhibit their photographs in any Council-owned premises in Sefton (the Metropolitan District in which Bootle is situated)” (Elphick 1981). The photographs were read differently at the local and national levels, since Art in Action was receiving financial assistance from the Arts Council of Great Britain (as well as, for a time, from the Merseyside Arts Trust),<sup>18</sup> despite the political hostility at a local level. By July 1988, when I was in contact with Bill Dolce, Art in Action was not receiving “any Regional Arts Assoc grant aid, or large financial assistance from Charities”, and Dolce explained that “the situation for independent community photography in Bootle is now at a critical stage with the Local Council and the Regional Arts Assoc joining together to totally absorb all arts activities and arts groups into the Local Council Departments” (Dolce, July 1988b). The sub-text being that the local council was not prepared to fund the activities of the community photography project, which they had presumably continued to deem politically motivated since 1978. One may wonder whether the conservative Sefton council was objecting to the visibility of the bombed buildings, or to the non-conforming, creative self-identities of the inhabitants.

The way the photographs were read varied from one audience to the next, each projecting its hopes and fears onto the images. The use of

<sup>18</sup>Both funding bodies are mentioned in ART IN ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Art in Action*, Art in Action, Bootle, 1981, not paginated.

disidentifiers nevertheless proves that meaning was being constructed with a particular purpose, that of enhancing the self-image of the young inhabitants. The positive imaging is further enhanced by the selections that make up the portfolios, the photobooks and the illustrated features about Arts & Action. There are always pictures of the photographers in action, those holding the camera interacting with their subjects,<sup>19</sup> double portraits, group portraits, and action portraits. Clearly, it is the community arts project itself that is being portrayed across the spread of pictures, the collective photography enterprise with multiple photographers and people alternating between photographer and sitter.

More instructive still are the apparent exceptions. There are three often-reproduced portraits, each a far cry from what was usually produced in documentary photography: one showing a boy apparently caught in barbed wire and screaming,<sup>20</sup> another entirely enveloped in transparent plastic sheeting, likewise screaming,<sup>21</sup> and a third showing a boy lying “crucified” in the middle of the road.<sup>22</sup> These arresting portraits can be read as representations of isolation, and they perfectly complement the images of socialisation and achievement that the other photographs

<sup>19</sup> For example: there are six such photographs reproduced in PINNINGTON, Margaret: “Art in Action”, *Ten*•8, No. 21, (Birmingham, 1986), pp. 14–20; as well as one out of the four in MURRAY, Rob: “Art in Action”, *Bulletin of Environmental Education*, No. 158 (London, July 1984), p. 5; and one out of the five in POWELL, Rob: “Bootle Art in Action”, *Amateur Photographer*, (29 September 1984), pp. 98–100. And see

Bill DOLCE, untitled [photograph showing two children from the Art in Action workshop], reproduced in ART IN ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Art in Action. A Community Photographic Project on Merseyside*, An Arts & Action Publication, Bootle, [October] 1980, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Eddie Johnson, untitled, [photograph representing a child trapped between a wall and barbed wire, mimicking a scream], reproduced in ART IN ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Art in Action. A Community Photographic Project on Merseyside*, An Arts & Action Publication, Bootle, [October] 1980, p. 11. Also reproduced in PINNINGTON, Margaret: “Art in Action”, *Ten*•8, No. 21, (Birmingham, 1986), p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Anon., untitled, [photograph representing an adolescent trapped in transparent plastic sheeting], in ART IN ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Art in Action, A Series of [6] Postcards*, Art in Action, Bootle, 1982. Also reproduced on the poster ART IN ACTION COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT, *Photo-Gallery*, Art in Action, Bootle, n. d. [c. 1978–1984].

<sup>22</sup> Anon., untitled, [photograph representing a boy lying in the middle of the road, arms out in a “crucified” position]. Reproduced in POWELL, Rob, “Bootle Art in Action”, *Amateur Photographer*, (29 September 1984), p. 100; and in PINNINGTON, Margaret: “Art in Action”, *Ten*•8, No. 21, (Birmingham, 1986), p. 19.

demonstrate—such as the group shot with the kids doing a “thumbs up” on the cover of *Art in Action*. Interestingly, the photographs that appear the most shocking are just the ones that can be put forward as the most “artistic”. Clearly, the concept of “art” is less useful than the sociological approach that sees instead the degree of socialisation.

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# Photographic Representations of Urban Communities in Postwar Britain and the Emergence of Collaborative Alternatives

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This chapter examines how photography and images of cities have contributed to debates about urban and social change in postwar Britain. It uses three short case studies to examine the changing nature of photography and the role and agency of local communities in the creation and circulation of images of their environments. The first of these examines how photography by artist Nigel Henderson after the Second World War informed key architectural critiques of modernism and reconstruction. The second looks at how photography used in charity campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s recast cities as spaces of decay and urban inhabitants as passive victims of their environments. The third section considers a community-led intervention in planning debates in the 1970s and 1980s

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M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography  
as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_4)

in which community photography played an important role. The chapter argues that photography has served multiple functions in debates about urbanism in postwar Britain, which largely mirrors wider shifts in debates about participation in urban policy and planning.

Images of cities have been central to how Britain, and its future, was imagined in the postwar period. The meaning and significance of such images were heightened during the Second World War, by the end of which, the promises of reconstruction had become central to the narratives of national rebirth and future prosperity (Matless 1998, 201). Despite the years of austerity that followed the war, the national reconstruction scheme that emerged after 1945 was a key aspect of the so-called post-war settlement, in which successive Labour and Conservative governments broadly agreed on the importance of investment, low unemployment and reconstruction. This was most evident in the mass house-building schemes that resulted in around 2.5 million homes being built between 1945 and 1960 (Lawrence 2019, 72). This policy vision was reflected in common architectural and planning approaches, described by the historian Christopher Klemek as the ‘urban renewal consensus’ (Klemek 2011, 6). The dominant architectural styles and planning approaches of this loose movement have often been referred to as ‘urban modernism’, and were largely defined by high-rise and medium-rise blocks built on the fringes of cities, urban motorways, and city-centre office blocks and shopping centres. This was an international phenomenon, but in Britain, it was centred around the planner and the local authority architect, who had been empowered by the local and national governments following the Town and Country Planning Acts of 1944 and 1947 to enact major programmes of clearance and redevelopment with little consultation with local communities. By the mid-1960s, faith in this approach was waning and the quick collapse of ‘urban modernism’ was becoming apparent (Gunn 2010). Much of the pressure against such developments came from new community-based groups who were increasingly active in contesting proposed schemes that seemed largely oblivious to the concerns and interests of the residents themselves (Klemek 2011; Gunn 2018).<sup>1</sup>

Photography played a key role in these changes, not only as a documentary tool but also as a way of intervening in debates and even claiming authorship and ownership of urban spaces, challenging the powers of

<sup>1</sup>For international case studies see Klemek, *Transatlantic Collapse*. For a British example see Gunn, ‘Ring Road’, 227–248.



national and local governments (Mellor 2007; Williams & Bright 2007).<sup>2</sup> As historians of photography have shown, the work of photographers in this period and context was not a passive record of change, but an active contribution that dramatised and narrativised wider discourses of urban and social change (Bertrand 2018). Where in the 1940s and 1950s images of cities were used to visualise a promise of a new society, by the late 1960s, the photography of urban spaces and inhabitants that appeared in mass media and charity campaigns often told a story of disillusionment, material decay, and embedded poverty. In both instances, these tended to be photographs of urban areas taken by professional photographers, often working in a tradition of documentary photography or the context of photojournalism. But there were a range of other photographic practices and interventions, and this chapter draws on material from Nigel Henderson, a key artist and photographer in the 1940s and 1950s, photographers working for charities in the 1960s and 1970s, and a community photography group in the 1970s. It does this to highlight the range of ways in which photography was mobilised to not only contribute to debates about urban development and the nature of cities but also suggest that the development of participatory and community-led photography in cities reflects broader developments in urban politics across this period. These stories of activism and participation offer an alternative image of the 1970s in particular, one that challenges the narratives of ‘crisis’ that were so central to the arguments of Thatcherism in the period.

The chapter tracks key themes through the case studies, including the role and importance of photography of children, street scenes, domestic space, and the relationship between photographer and subject. Children were a consistent feature of photography in cities in the postwar period, drawing on a longer history of connections between photography, sociology, anthropology, and reformist or charitable interventions. After the Second World War, the importance of children in national politics was higher than ever and the resonance of such images was only heightened, even if the meanings were often ambiguous. Images of street scenes and domestic spaces were also central to cultural and social understandings of the postwar state and its function in society after the Second World War (Thomson 2014). The state firmly cast the family home as the centre of reconstruction and images that undercut the idea of secure families and

<sup>2</sup>For general histories of these movements see Williams and Bright, *How We Are*; Mellor, *No Such Thing as Society*.

economic and social progress disrupted the core narratives of the welfare state (Langhamer 2005, 342). The non-domestic spaces of the street, and particularly the presence of unsupervised children on the street, were the antithesis of this and became part of debates about how environments could foster perceived negative attributes and ‘delinquency’ in children and their psychologies (Thomson 2014, 35–44). All of these meanings were influenced by photographic practice and the relationship between the photographer and the subject, with the documentary gaze at once paternalistic, decisive, and distant, acting in a way comparable to the state and social science functions of observing and recording key information about the lives of private citizens. By highlighting the continuity of these issues across the postwar period, this chapter argues that developments in photography should be understood in the context of wider debates about urban renewal and faltering confidence in the state. Questions about the role of the state in postwar Britain were arguably nowhere more apparent than in debates about its ability to influence child development and thus shape the future of British society, with children and their material environments understood as inextricably linked.

### PHOTOGRAPHY AND STREETLIFE IN THE 1950s

Children had been key objects for state intervention before the Second World War, but wartime anxieties about the effects of air raids, evacuation, and family lives disrupted or destroyed by conflict raised official concerns to new levels. It was in this period and context that children were increasingly understood as ‘psychological subjects’ whose social and emotional development was shaped by environment and personal relationships (Thomson 2006). Concerns about children emotionally disturbed by the war informed a wide popular interest in psychoanalysis in the 1940s and 1950s, with individual psychoanalysts, including John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott, becoming household names as a result of their regular appearances in the media. So-called attachment theories were the most prominent psychological concepts at the time, and these emphasised the importance of family, and particularly maternal, relationships for the healthy development of a child. Children were perceived as containing the capacity for extreme violence and aggression and proper maternal nourishment was understood not just as a way to create healthy happy future citizens, but as essential to the maintenance of social democracy against totalitarianism (Shapira 2013). The family home was presented as the best

place for children to grow and develop, while images of children outside of the home could be encoded with a variety of more negative meanings. Some of the most well-known photographs of children in the city in the first decade after 1945 reflect these ambiguities, while also contributing to debates about architecture and community in reconstruction.

Nigel Henderson was an artist and photographer who lived and worked in East London in the years immediately following the end of the Second World War. His photographs of children in and around Bethnal Green in London, taken between 1949 and 1953, have received significant attention as records of postwar London streetlife, and for their connections to social science, and to the emerging architectural philosophy of Alison and Peter Smithson (Highmore 2017, 61–107). Henderson's interest in seeing and recording everyday life and society in postwar Britain was partly informed by the Mass Observation-inspired social science of the period, which was often concerned with ideas of community, place, and family life. Many of these social science studies were inspired by questions about the aftermath of the war and the consequences of the reconstruction programmes, which were decanting cities into new towns and garden suburbs. Henderson's photographs<sup>3</sup> can be considered in this context partly because of their connections to the ethnographic research his wife, Judith Stephen, an academic anthropologist with close connections to Tom Harrison and Mass Observation, was conducting at the time (Moran 2012, 167–68). Much like Mass Observation's approach to anthropology, Henderson's photographs are not straightforwardly documentary, but rather are an at times impressionistic account of the strangeness of the environments and scenes he witnessed. Some of the most arresting of these images are centred on children playing in the street, many taken by Henderson from the front steps of his house in Bethnal Green.

Henderson's photographs, like those by comparable photographers including Roger Mayne and Shirley Baker, articulated what historian Mathew Thomson describes as 'an essential and untamed quality of childhood', one that seems to challenge the various attempts to 'understand' children in this period by social scientists and psychiatrists, amongst others (Thomson 2014, 38). In one series of pictures, the camera peers down Henderson's front steps onto the street where groups of children play, some sprawled out in the road, some riding bikes, and some with a dog,

<sup>3</sup>The fullest published collection of the photographs is in Coward, *Nigel Henderson's Streets*.

while others stand very close leaning against the wall peering back at the camera (Coward 2017, 15). These pictures both exemplify the activity and life that existed on the street, indeed literally on his doorstep, and demonstrate the ambiguity that images of children could provoke. In most of the photographs, at least one of the children is looking towards the camera in a confident if not confrontational way, which creates a mild sense of uncertainty. Importantly, the child's eye-contact subverts the conventions of documentary photography before the Second World War, which had tended to present children as vulnerable and submissive when not in the presence of a family and a home (Thomson 2014, 35). In Henderson's images, the children do not appear in any way vulnerable, they look entirely at home in the urban environment and outside of domestic space, even able to remake and take ownership of the space around them simply by chalking hop-scotch squares on the road.

One of the key interests in Henderson's photos of this era is their position within a wider collection of artistic, architectural, and intellectual interventions in debates about reconstruction and the future of British cities. The writers, artists, and architects, who were collectively known as the Independent Group, and included Henderson and the Smithsons as well as Eduardo Paolozzi, Rayner Banham, Richard Hamilton and others, played a major role in evaluating the shifting landscapes and cultures in postwar Britain (Massey 1995). It is Henderson's connections with the Smithsons, and in particular how his images of streetlife and children informed their critique of the conventions and approaches of architectural modernism, that is of most significance for this chapter. The Smithsons posed an early challenge to the 'urban renewal consensus', and Henderson's photos were central to their attempt to redefine functionalism and the city in architectural theory. This is most clearly seen in the 'urban re-identification grid' they presented at the ninth meeting of the *Congrès international d'architecture moderne* (CIAM) in 1953, which directly challenged the assumptions of the founder-generation of twentieth-century international style modernism. The Smithsons' grid insisted on the importance of community and shared urban spaces in conceptions of the city, in contrast to the ordered division of the city into four zones ('dwellings', 'recreation', 'work', and 'transportation') that was so central to modernism and had been enshrined in CIAM's *Charte d'Athènes* in 1933 (Highmore 2017, 82–83).

The Smithsons' approach was based on the re-centring of spatial relationships within the city and amongst communities, and what they called

their ‘doorstep philosophy’, a reference to Henderson’s photography amongst other things. Their ‘grid’ used Henderson’s photos to communicate a relationship between two of the defining spaces of the city as they saw it, the house and the street. This was part of a larger artistic, intellectual, and architectural attempt to celebrate the ordinary and the local, as well as elevate the unpredictability and heterogeneity of bomb-scarred streets and streetlife into a vision of a type of community and lifestyle that seemed to resist the reformist planner’s vision of ordered development and zoned functionalism.<sup>4</sup> The integration of Henderson’s ‘as found’ street scenes into architectural, and thus idealised, visions of urban life demonstrates how photography worked here as a way of re-imagining urban spaces and creating a picture of how people *might* live. Although the Smithsons were not exactly early advocates of participatory planning, their writings have come to be seen as a landmark challenge to the certainties of modernism and its functional urban segregation, and a moment when at least the idea of the street and streetlife was re-emerging in architectural discourse (Highmore 2017, 82). Henderson’s images of children playing in the street embodied this idea of possibility and flexibility set against the unyielding structures of urban modernism.

In terms of the intellectual history of architecture and planning, this growing interest in the importance of the informal social encounter and streetlife was a key aspect in the wider trajectory of urban change (Moran 2012, 172). The argument reflected that of prominent social scientists, who worried that reconstruction would damage communities. The relocation of communities from dense terraced streets to decentralised high-rises or suburban ‘New Towns’ was understood as a major shift. This was articulated in popular social science at the time, most famously in Wilmott and Young’s 1957 *Family and Kinship in East London* and their 1960 follow-up *Family and Class in a London Suburb*, which warned that changes to patterns of living and housing were disassembling communities and causing people to turn inwards and become more isolated from their neighbours. Wilmott and Young recorded a fundamental shift ‘from a people-centred to a house-centred existence’, to a life where social relations were ‘window to window, not face-to-face’ (quoted in Lawrence 2019, 75). This general anxiety about social fracture reflected much of the wider debate in politics and culture about social change and national

<sup>4</sup>The classic essay is Raymond Williams, ‘Culture is Ordinary’ in *Resources of Hope* (London: Verso, 1989).

decline in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, and in which cities, children, and photography were again central.

### PHOTOGRAPHY AND CHARITY IN THE 1960s

The perception of decline was an ever-present element in political discussions of Britain's prospects throughout the postwar period and largely framed the rise of Thatcherism. In urban policy, the faltering of reconstruction schemes and the problems with high-profile developments (originally lauded as symbols of Britain's innovative high-tech future) were also understood as part of this wider challenge to the postwar state. As so often, housing was arguably the biggest point of contention and the area in which the policy and practices of the 'urban renewal consensus' received its most frequent challenges. Despite millions of homes being built since 1945 in the largest house-building scheme in British history, the 1960s saw a housing crisis that, along with other social problems, helped to shape perceptions and discourses of decline. An important element in this was the 'rediscovery of poverty' by a new generation of sociologists in the 1960s, whose conclusions challenged the assumptions and narratives of universal social progress and affluence after the institution of the welfare state (Evans 2009). These developments informed a new wave of voluntary sector organisations and single-issue campaign groups who operated outside of the traditional lanes of party politics (Hilton et al. 2013). Poverty and homelessness in Britain were the central concerns for a number of these groups, one of the most prominent of whom was Shelter, the homelessness charity founded in 1966, which used photography of children to illustrate the plight of the homeless and solicit donations from the public. Shelter's use of photography offers an illuminating comparison to Henderson's, highlighting how anxiety about children remained a key concern and photography's prominent role in its dramatisation.

The key element to Shelter's early campaigns was the re-definition of homelessness that shifted images of the homeless away from vagrancy and those sleeping on the street to those enduring poor housing conditions or staying in temporary accommodation. Shelter specifically focussed on families, arguing that a family is homeless 'if it is split up because the home is too small, or if it is living in housing conditions so unfit or overcrowded

that it cannot lead a civilized family life'.<sup>5</sup> Shelter in this period understood the home as the key site for personal and familial relationships and development and presented children as the main victims of homelessness or poor housing conditions. To make their argument, they employed advertising agencies who used 'shock tactics'.<sup>6</sup> Often this translated into black and white photographs of people, almost always young children and young mothers, in poor housing conditions looking forlorn and defeated, coupled with aggressive slogans.

Shelter's first advert, printed in the *Times* to mark their launch in December 1966, is a good example of the group's approach. The full-page advert was dominated by a photograph of young children and their mother in what appeared to be poor housing conditions. It included five children and one young woman (presumably the mother) in a grimy and dark room with mould staining the walls. In the foreground at the centre of the image is a young girl who wears a bow in her hair and looks directly into the camera. This is a significant detail as it mirrors the techniques of photographers like Henderson and Mayne but creates a different response, here eliciting sympathy rather than highlighting the child's potential challenge to the authority of the camera and photographer. The caption, written in a typeface resembling cross-stitch, reads 'Home Sweet Hell'. In text below the caption, the image is described as representing a homeless family, 'one of three million in Britain condemned to spend Christmas day in slums, or in grossly overcrowded conditions'.<sup>7</sup> Despite the suggestion given in the caption, Alison Hall's research has shown that this photograph was taken in a studio and posed with models, a technique advanced by the advertising agency hired by Shelter, and common to charity photographs of this sort going back to the mid-nineteenth century. The use of models in studios continued to be a key part of Shelter's photography and advertising until photographer Nick Hedges was commissioned in 1968 (Hall 2015, 103).

Shelter's launch, which coincided with the first broadcast of Jeremy Sandford and Ken Loach's TV play about homelessness *Cathy Come*

<sup>5</sup> Bishopsgate Institute Archives [BIA]: SHELTER 4/12, Shelter, *The Shelter Story*, (1970), 3. Materials from the Shelter collection at the Bishopsgate Institute are quoted with the permission of Shelter. The author wishes to stress that the material cited is historical and in no way reflects Shelter's current position and approach to homelessness. Shelter has not endorsed the argument or interpretation put forward in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> BIA: SHELTER 4/12, Shelter, *The Shelter Story*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Shelter, 'Home Sweet Hell', *The Times*, 2 December 1966, 9.

*Home*, was hugely successful in terms of donations and exposure. The adverts and photographs generated a significant response and the group persisted with the style of adverts that quickly became its hallmark. Black and white photographs of children and young mothers with harsh chiaroscuro in crowded, small, grimy, and mould-stained rooms were central to all Shelter's early campaigns, including their 1967 report on low educational attainment for children in poor housing, *Back to School... From a Holiday in the Slums* and 1969's *Face the Facts: Who Are the Homeless?* which detailed the poor housing conditions of those not considered homeless by the government and local authorities. Every advert Shelter published in *The Times* between 1968 and 1971 was focused on the plight of children, often with the same photos of forlorn children with dirty faces reused in slightly different contexts.

The photographs in *Back to School* were taken by Penny Tweedie who worked for Shelter between 1967 and 1970, before embarking on a wide-ranging and celebrated career in photojournalism. While it is hard to determine based on the archival material available, Hall suggests that at least some if not all of these pictures used models. Hedges' first commission for Shelter the following year was to take a photo of a young boy on a bed staged to look like he was in an institution, after which he made a condition of his work for Shelter that no more models would be used and that he would work in the field taking documentary photographs of people who were living in poor housing (Hall 2015, 27, 438). Despite this not insignificant change in policy and approach, the visual language of Shelter's campaigns after Hedges' commission was very similar to that of the 2 years before he was appointed, and it continued like this after he completed his work for the group in 1972.

Henderson's pictures can be considered alongside 1950s movements in architecture and social science, and the Shelter campaigns similarly reflected the renewed focus of sociologists on urban poverty in 1960s Britain, while again tapping into the persistent anxieties about children and delinquency. The focus on family and maternal relationships articulated by 'attachment theorists' in the 1950s was reiterated in Shelter's campaigns where the effects of homelessness on children were often described in psychological terms (Grosvenor & Hall 2011).<sup>8</sup> The versions

<sup>8</sup>This is particularly the case in BIA: SHELTER 4/12, Shelter, *Back to School... From a Holiday in the Slums* (1967). This report is discussed in detail in Ian Grosvenor and Alison Hall, 'Back to school from a holiday in the slums?', 11–30.



of photographs that appeared most frequently in Shelter's campaigns communicated the vulnerability of the subjects, but were also at times encoded with warnings about what would become of children and families who were not rehoused, and how this would impact society as a whole. One 1970 advert published on the front-page of *The Times* reiterated some of the key elements in narratives of British decline, warning that 'homelessness is broken families, ill-health, racial tension, delinquency'. This was illustrated by a picture of a child framed by sharp shadow, standing at the bottom of some narrow steps, whose face and body is obscured so that only an outline and posture is visible.<sup>9</sup> An advert published in *New Society* the following year took this further with one of Hedges' pictures reframed and presented as an image of future social disorder. The photo of a young boy sitting on some grass holding a glass bottle was cropped and enlarged by the advertising agency hired by Shelter and then captioned: 'He's a problem now. But you haven't seen anything yet' (Hall 2015, 171).

Hedges himself later critiqued these pictures, or perhaps more accurately critiqued how Shelter used them, while highlighting the photographs that Shelter did not use. In a 1979 article, Hedges described how the photographs Shelter used could be reduced to five essential categories or stereotypes of homelessness, the first two of which, (1) 'Forlorn child (innocent victim)' and (2) 'Mother and baby (Madonna and child)', certainly made up the majority of the pictures Shelter used in advertising and campaigning reports in the period (Hedges 1979, 162). Hedges argued the full range of his pictures and, in particular, the contact prints which never made it into final prints present a much more rounded and nuanced view of the people and lives he was photographing. Shelter's huge fundraising success, however, was built on the images it chose and in particular on pictures of children in poor housing conditions. Such images came under significant criticism from other photographers, notably in a *Camerawork* article by Jo Spence which described such works as 'graphically presented on glossy paper, tastefully designed, with suitably abject women or children on the covers'. The article was illustrated by Hedges' photo of two children on the front cover of Shelter's 1971 report *Condemned*.

A central element of the critique by Spence, and others, was the disconnect between the photographer and the subject that was particularly

<sup>9</sup>Shelter, 'Their Place in the Sun', *The Times*, 27 May 1970, 1.

apparent in the case of photographs for charities, where the photographer was likely ‘of a different class from those depicted’ in the pictures. While acknowledging that photographers working in this context faced a ‘difficult task’, she stressed that the creation of the type of images of pitiful people that would elicit sympathy and donations relied on showing ‘only the bleaker side of people’s lives’. The implication was that the aims behind such photographs and the practices used by photographers produced images of poverty that were unchanging, while reducing those photographed to passive objects and exhibits of the poorest sections of society and not providing opportunities for the subjects to actively contribute to or shape the presentation.

Spence then provided a short discussion of ‘some alternatives’ to this approach, citing community and publishing collectives as different ways to record working-class lives, social conditions, and inequalities. Of particular interest is Spence’s suggestion that photographic work produced in this way can ‘reveal the lack of understanding of the planners and decision-makers who shape our destinies’. In this context, she describes community photography as a ‘TOOL’, used by community activists partly to enable local communities to take the pictures of their neighbourhoods and lives. ‘Community photographers’, she wrote, ‘are encouraging people to photograph each other, friends and family, then their social environment’ with the objective of enabling people ‘to have some degree of autonomy in their own lives’ (Spence 1976, 1).<sup>10</sup> Writing a few years later, Su Braden again drew an unfavourable comparison between Hedges’ photographs for Shelter and those produced by community photography groups, making the same argument that such charity images deny ‘that the people most concerned have a voice of their own’ (Braden 1983, 73). These analyses largely mirror increasingly prominent debates in planning, architecture and urbanism about the role local communities should play in development schemes, which often resulted in sustained challenges to the ‘urban renewal consensus’.

### COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE 1970s

The collapse of the ‘urban renewal consensus’ was inspired by many different forces and actors, often with little in common beyond their opposition to mass redevelopment plans and the assumptions behind urban modernism. New Right thinkers rejected the centralised schemes of the

<sup>10</sup>Jo Spence, ‘The Politics of Photography’, *Camerawork*no. 1, February, 1976, 1. Capitals in original.

town planner and local authority architect and urged an embrace of the logic of market liberalism, while left-wing architects like the Smithsons envisioned a rediscovery of the sense of streetlife and community that mass suburban estates seemed to threaten, albeit translated into the ‘modernist analogue’ of ‘streets in the sky’ (Wetherell 2016; Klemek 2011, 101). Other prominent voices included architectural writer and journalist Ian Nairn whose vivid and withering criticisms of the new ‘subtopian’ landscapes of Britain were printed in national newspapers and broadcast in a series of television programmes on the BBC (Nairn 1955). It was, however, urban residents themselves who were almost certainly the most influential forces behind this rejection of urban modernism. It was in this period that ideas around participatory planning and community consultation became slowly but increasingly embedded in public consciousness and legislation. The mass schemes that were enacted with relatively little friction in the 1950s were struggling for approval by the late 1960s. Groups like Homes Before Roads made national headlines opposing a series of urban motorways in London and many other groups rose to prominence locally (Gunn 2018, 237). It was in this context that the Labour government commissioned a report in 1968 on how to alter the planning process to address community concerns, which slowly but surely began to embed more requirements for meaningful participation and engagement with communities. The subsequent Town and Country Planning Acts of 1968 and 1971 legislated to ensure that some kind of public consultation would be required for new redevelopment schemes (Tuckett 1988, 250).

Photography and community photography played a significant role in these developments that is perhaps not fully acknowledged in the historiography (Bertrand 2018; Grosvenor & McNab 2015).<sup>11</sup> Recent work in urban history that has addressed the end of ‘urban modernism’ and ‘urban renewal’ in this period has tended to focus on the development of concepts of the ‘inner city’ and ‘urban crisis’, often by concentrating on the politics and governance of urban renewal (Saumarez Smith 2016; Andrews 2018). Others have examined the role of key figures in planning and architecture both within and without the structures and institutions of planning and development (Doucet 2016; Saumarez Smith 2014). Some of

<sup>11</sup> For some exceptions, see Mathilde Bertrand, ‘The Half Moon Photography Workshop’; Ian Grosvenor and Natasha Macnab, ‘Photography as an Agent of Transformation’, 117–135.

the most innovative work on urban politics in Britain in this period has addressed the spatial and social transformations of squatting movements and their connections to queer cultures (Wall 2014; Cook 2013). Beyond the more well-known story of the campaign against the redevelopment of Covent Garden, London (Anson 1981), however, the role of community activism against redevelopment schemes has been more difficult to uncover for historians. The following discussion of the first community photography group of its kind to be established in England in the 1970s (Bertrand 2018, 247) and its contribution to a high-profile dispute about a different redevelopment scheme in central London highlights connections within these wider challenges to urban renewal.

The Blackfriars community photography project was established by photographer Paul Carter in the early 1970s and ran in various forms until the mid-1990s. It was part of the well-established Blackfriars Settlement, which had been providing support for local communities in various ways since the late nineteenth century. In the 1970s, the Settlement was active in local debates and activism around housing and the housing crisis that Shelter campaigned on, providing space for the Family Squatting Advisory Service in 1972 and developing Housing Co-operatives later in the decade to provide decent accommodation at affordable rents for local people (Barrett 1985, 49).<sup>12</sup> The photography project developed in this context when local groups were increasingly active in campaigns to improve local environments while protecting communities from redevelopments that would displace them. One of the most prominent and successful elements of the project was its work with local young people, who exhibited their work at the Half Moon Gallery in the 'Doing Photography' exhibition.

The 1976 exhibition ran 2 years after 150 local school children from the area were taken on a holiday to the seaside in Kent by the Settlement and given the chance to take some pictures. After they returned, the interest in photography remained and Carter was soon teaching groups of children how to take and develop photographs four nights a week. Carter interviewed a number of the young photographers in *Camerawork* in 1976 to coincide with the exhibition, and the exchanges show how they felt empowered and emboldened by the skills and knowledge they were

<sup>12</sup>Lambeth Archives, London: Gladys Barrett, *Blackfriars Settlement: A Short History, 1887–1987* (London: Blackfriars Settlement, 1985), 49.

gaining, as well as finding in photography new ways to articulate themselves (Carter 1976). The interviews offer a response to the image of young people as a potential threat to social stability evident in Shelter's campaigns, instead presenting them as engaged and thoughtful, and crucially, speaking for themselves. In the following year, the photographers ran workshops for teachers and youth workers and the project continued for more than a decade (Barrett 1985, 63).<sup>13</sup>

The Blackfriars youth photography club is an example of how community photography radically altered the relationship between photographers and subjects, which is particularly potent in the context of images of children and young people in cities in postwar Britain. The unknowability of children in Henderson's images reflects a wider cultural anxiety about social democracy and reconstruction after 1945, but also Henderson's own position as a quasi-social science observer of working-class lives that were remote from his own. Although the pictures are very different, the photographs used in advertising material by Shelter again communicated the unpredictable nature of children who are seemingly alienated from mainstream middle-class society and could either be 'rescued' or become 'social problems' in the future. Both of these instances are predicated on the distance between the photographer and subject, which the practices of the Blackfriars group (amongst others) systematically dismantled. The images from the Blackfriars project that are available to view in the North Lambeth archives present a view of urban life and particularly of children that is a marked contrast to those used by Shelter, which were so emblematic of wider discourses of crisis in British cities. Many of the pictures document local activism and show children at the centre of campaigns against school closures in particular, in contrast to the passivity of the children in Shelter's images. For example, the photographs by Caro Webb of children protesting in 1978 show them smiling, holding banners and placards, marching through the streets, and even picketing London County Hall.<sup>14</sup> Similarly to Henderson's photographs, which sought to celebrate the streetlife of Bethnal Green, many of the 'non-political' pictures are of communal spaces and groups of people in markets, streets, and cafés, but, unlike Henderson's pictures, the subjects are responsible for the creation

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>14</sup> Some images are available in Lambeth Archives: IV 182/8, Blackfriars Community Photography Project, Schools (1978).

of the images themselves. The often architecturally informal spaces, and their varied uses by the community members, reflected the critiques of the more rigid assumptions about the use of space in urban modernism.

A second element of the community photography project's work was its contribution to the campaign against the planned development of the Coin Street site, an area of Waterloo of around 13 acres that had been left derelict after the war. The site had been subject to numerous development plans and various new buildings had been built including offices for Shell and IBM in the wider area. But in the mid-1970s, in the context of a continuing housing crisis, a burgeoning squatting movement, and growing consciousness of planning structures and residents' rights to contribute to plans and to contest proposals, a major campaign was launched by the Coin Street Action Group to oppose the building of what would have been Europe's largest skyscraper hotel. The context for their objections was falling populations in the area and the attendant closure of key local facilities, including schools. Local groups had been developing their own plan for the area as part of the Waterloo Community Development Group based on amenities and housing, and the Action Group was formed when the property developers' plans for offices and hotels became known. The Group drew on established community organisations in the area, which had a history of activism, community education, organising and publishing. They were also able to draw on the support of Greater London Council (GLC) architects, who helped develop their plan, which was included alongside the office development plan in the first Public Inquiry held in 1979. The Action Group successfully stopped the redevelopment and were eventually sold the land by the GLC, after years of campaigning and a second major Public Inquiry. The Group were later granted planning permission for their scheme based on housing and improving local amenities rather than outsized office blocks and hotels (Tuckett 1988, 250–53).

Community photography played a key role in documenting these campaigns and in the creation of evidence to support the community group's alternative plans, including the creation of a 50-minute tape-slide show. The tape-slide, which involved a series of images being synchronised with a recorded soundtrack, functioned as a social history of the area and its communities and the changes experienced since the Second World War, principally the shrinking population and the effects of the closure of schools and shops. It was created and shown to community groups and

then re-made according to the priorities and concerns of local people. It included verbal and visual evidence, including images from within people's homes, and served as a way for communities and individuals to speak directly and articulate their feelings about the area and the proposed development. The creation of the tape-slide show helped the communities clarify their aims and come together to find agreements on how to proceed. Once it was completed, it was shown locally in various venues and contexts and functioned as a tool that helped local communities envision alternative plans for the area's future (Webb 1979). The tape-slide was then presented as evidence to the Public Inquiry in 1979 and provided a stark contrast to the imagery and approach deployed by the developers (Tuckett 1988, 253–54; Braden 1983, 81).<sup>15</sup> Here were members of the local community recording the spaces of their lives in the context of an attempt to reclaim the right to shape its future development and presenting this to the authorities directly in a public hearing.

Part of this tape-slide was reproduced in *Camerawork* in March 1979, where Caro Webb, one of the coordinators of the photography project, described the tape-slide show as a medium for communication that had huge potential and provided an illustrated guide for readers on how to make their own tape-slide. She praised its ability to enable communities to articulate their concerns through image and sound in a way that could be technically accessible to those with limited training, and reiterated the argument that, like community photography more generally, such developments could help in 'the struggles of the working-class for greater control over their own lives' (Webb 1979, 12). It presented an opportunity to articulate or practice something like local ownership or proprietorship over these spaces, through the act of seeing them, photographing them and then showing them to other members of the community. The act of attempting to observe and visually record urban spaces and the lives of those within them had been central to social science, planning, and political attempts to assess changing urban landscapes after 1945 and before, but always by outside observers rather than members of the community themselves. The photographing of an area by its residents and its presentation to a public inquiry is in many ways a classic kind of petitioning which

<sup>15</sup>The tape-slide has so far not emerged in an archive, but a selection of images related to Coin Street is available in the Lambeth Archives: IV 182/I, Blackfriars Community Photography Project, Coin Street (1979–1985).

of course has a long history, and it is particularly striking in the context of community challenges to development schemes. Photographs of urban spaces had been central to the proliferation of discourses of decline and crisis, and they were now being used as evidence of the vitality and identity of a community and a place.

## CONCLUSION

Images of cities and their inhabitants have played a key role in the urban history of postwar Britain. From the imagination of new modern buildings and infrastructure built upon the ruined cityscapes of the 1940s to the scenes of rapidly deteriorating high-rises and dark underpasses, cities were understood as the material sites in which the future would unfold, while children were the embodiment of a new society that would grow and be shaped by these environments. Henderson's photography helped the Smithsons to see urban spaces in new ways and challenge the zoned functionalism of modernism, re-asserting the value of the ordinary, the everyday, and the unexpected encounter in urban spaces. For Shelter, images of houses, streets, and children were a way to communicate stories of poverty and disenchantment where the absence of a comfortable family life was a cause for both pity and anxiety and a reflection of the failures of the post-war state. The Blackfriars community photography group challenged the associations of urbanism with decline, and young people with delinquency, by empowering them to take up the camera themselves and record their lives and environments in ways that were legible and meaningful for them. Photography was used to record local histories and local voices in the Coin Street campaign. It was actively mobilised to capture local concerns and communicate them directly to the planning authorities in a way which required no translation or mediation by an external figure.

The photography discussed here has highlighted a few examples of how the making of urban landscapes, and the framing of people within them, was contested after 1945. It has begun to illustrate how community photography responded to issues of representation and authorship in this context. It has also drawn connections between changes in approaches to photography and ideas about urban development and planning, which increasingly acknowledged the role and voice of local communities in planning decisions and processes. While the histories of reconstruction and the collapse of the 'urban renewal consensus' are increasingly well-known, the role of photography and community photography in



community action groups is a largely untold part of this story in Britain. The idea of participation or community consultation in urban planning and development marries very clearly with the logic of community photography: a democratising initiative that spreads skills and knowledge while empowering communities generally excluded from power and with little social capital. A deeper examination of the links between these kinds of interventions offers a chance to address this gap and draw important connections, while offering a telling counter-narrative of the 1970s that challenges its characterisation as a decade of ‘crisis’ and decline by Thatcherism.

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## Reflective Portfolio: Photographing with the Ears

*Maxence Rifflet*

When I began my photographic practice 25 years ago, I worked as a photojournalist for a few months. The last photographs I made for a newspaper were taken in Marseille with a non-profit organisation which used to help young immigrants under 18 who came on their own from Morocco and Algeria. At that time, I felt that my images failed to describe the situation of these boys. They were making photographs by themselves and I was interested in what they would reveal of the life they were living. I felt there was something to learn by taking into account their point of view on their situation. A few months later, I thus came back with Yto Barrada and Anaïs Masson for a two-year-long workshop in order to work *with* them rather than working *on* them.<sup>1</sup>

One of these boys made several self-portraits in which he systematically burned his face with the flash in front of different places he had precisely

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<sup>1</sup>Yto Barrada, Anaïs Masson, Maxence Rifflet, *Fais un fils et jette-le à la mer*, Paris: sujet-objet, 2004.

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**Fig. 5.1** Farid R., Marseille, mars 2001. Image from the book *Fais un fils et jette-le à la mer*, 2004, Paris, éditions Sujet/Objet

chosen (Fig. 5.1). We first considered this gesture only as a technical accident. But he did not listen to our advice not to use the flash so close to the camera, and he continued making such images. One day, another boy suggested a relation between these pictures and the Arab term “hrega”, “burner”, commonly used to name illegal immigrants because they burn their ID before climbing on a boat. By that time, we considered that these images were related to the psychic violence these boys were experiencing. And of course, none of my pictures of them could have reached that psychic dimension.

During the same project, another boy made a picture which I still consider today a very significant image of the intimate experience of exile. He simply arranged his clothes on his bed in order to suggest a body lying (Fig. 5.2). As he explained, he made this picture to show that he was well-dressed (meaning with branded clothes) as most French boys of his age. The image exceeds his intentions and reveals an unconscious speech. The clothes evoke a snakeskin abandoned after a moult. And I have always been amused by the thought of the photographer standing there in his underwear.



**Fig. 5.2** Otthman B., Marseille, mars 2001. Image from the book *Fais un fils et jette-le à la mer*, 2004, Paris, éditions Sujet/Objet

During this experience, though, I discovered the interest in making photographs with the people engaged in a situation I would try to document, instead of only describing the situation from the outside. From that moment, I continued this kind of collaborative practice on several occasions, mixing different points of view on the same reality. In my work, this collaborative practice of photography does not serve mainly a sociological purpose. It is a means to invent new forms and a possibility to reveal unexplored information.

In 2014, I was invited to run a photographic workshop in a French prison. I was initially very embarrassed by this proposal. Prison appeared to me as an impossible situation to make photographs. I had seen many photographs taken in prison and I could hardly single out any that would tell me something about the reality they were supposed to describe. Doors, corridors, locks, walls, grids and bars, the repetition of the same visual stereotypes seemed so bound to the subject that I was very likely to make the same kind of pictures illustrating confinement rather than documenting the reality of prison.

Moreover, how could I make photographs in a space designed for surveillance and observation? Prison architecture is an optical machine. Making pictures in prison amounts to taking part in a constrained and uneven play of gazes. In such a situation, I would be both a guard and someone who is guarded. My camera would be assimilated to the surveillance camera in the corridors while the penitentiary administration would choose the persons I could meet and control the images I would make. Not to mention the strong restrictions my practice would be submitted to. At first, I was told it was forbidden to show any faces and any security devices. What kind of human relations and artistic potential could I expect from such a situation?

I also felt that it would, in some way, lock up again the prisoners. Because framing a subject is comparable to locking it up. This is an ordinary problem for any photographer. But if I can forget this aspect of image-making in ordinary life, the problem is impossible to avoid in prison where the walls of the cells would always be related to the borders of the pictures.

During my investigation in different prisons in France, I met prisoners who were clearly aware of this problem. With one of them, in Conde-sur-Sarthe high-security prison, I realised that our collaboration had been entirely focused on this issue. Here is an extract of a narrative about my photographic experience in prison<sup>2</sup>:

*Paul wanted to show me the mirrors in the cells, fake plastic mirrors that were far too dark and that distorted faces. He considered them as an extra punishment, done on purpose. "You are not only deprived of liberty, you are also refused your own image." Once in front of his cell, he said to me: "You can take a photo of my cell and you can also take a photo of me, but I won't be photographed in my cell. I've always done it that way." Whether or not his photo would be published did not change his decision. I said to myself that he didn't want to be locked up twice. When taking a photo of itself in the mirror, the camera would only lock itself up.*

The only thing Paul obviously wanted was to be photographed on the running tracks in the sports room, which I agreed to do although I was quite reluctant to take part in what sounded to me like a show of physical force. With the first strides, the energy he put into it had something to do

<sup>2</sup> Maxence Rifflet, *Nos prisons*, Paris: Le point du jour, 2022.

with the discussion we had about photography. He seemed to say: “I won’t be put in a box. No way! I run!” (Fig. 5.3).

When I first visited a prison, I noticed specific architectural characteristics that drove me to conduct some documentary research about prison architecture. I discovered that prison architecture is incredibly diverse. So, despite my reluctance, I defined a documentary agenda: making photographs of some prisons, showing the architectural differences from one place to another (and therefore different sentences, because architecture accounts for the true sentence of the prisoner), rather than producing



Fig. 5.3 Maxence Rifflet, *Le paradoxe de la reine rouge* (The Paradox of the Red Queen), a collaboration with Paul L., Conde-sur-Sarthe high-security prison, 2016



photographs of prison in general. Between April 2016 and January 2018, I took photographs in seven different prisons together with inmates.

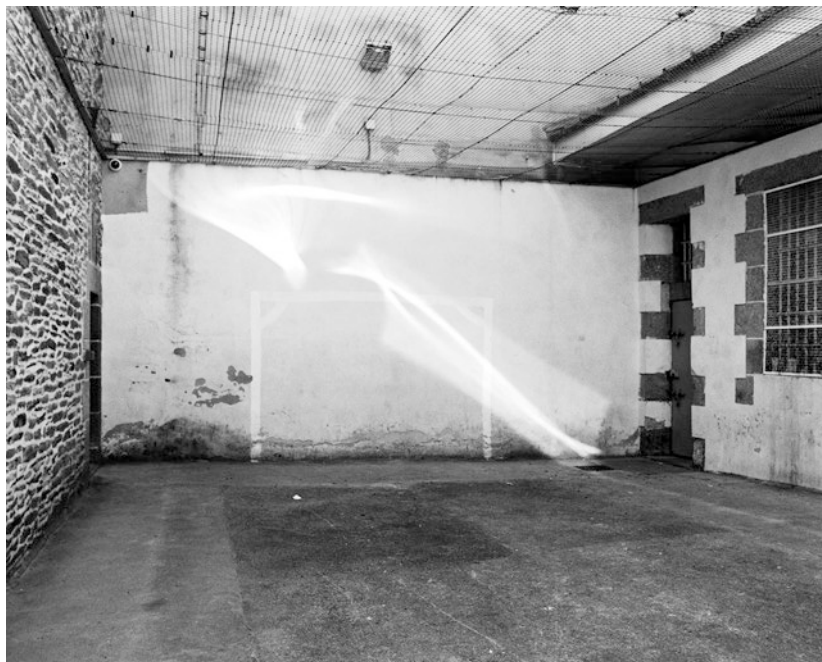
Although I had a documentary agenda, it did not solve the main problem: how could I make photographs in such a surveillance system? I could have asked permission to access the prison in order to make photographs of the premises, but I could not consider architecture without taking into account the bodies of those who daily have to deal with that architecture. So I organised workshops in each prison in order to share and question this difficulty with prisoners. These workshops were part of a state-run cultural program for the rehabilitation of prisoners. But I made it clear that my aim was not to help inmates. I said I needed *their* help as they had an experience of prison space, which I did not. I considered prisoners as prison architecture specialists rather than offenders to be rehabilitated.

We made photographs together; I made some on my own; we talked about prison as much as of our pictures and so forth. I would suggest specific practices but could as well give way to their demands. Without precise rules or methods.

I made first attempt in the Cherbourg jail where I had decided to go because of its uncommon organisation: inmates live in nine-bed dormitories (which is of course illegal—the law requires single rooms for each inmate). A few days before my arrival, the director finally decided I would not be permitted to photograph in the dormitories. I could no longer simply document architecture as a reporter would do. As I had decided to organise workshops with prisoners, I realised that these architectural spaces would not only be my subject but the place of an activity. Therefore, photography would not only be a recording tool but an action in itself, the means and the outcome of an exchange. It would even become the subject of the work. This made me reconsider seriously the situation of simply making photographs *in* prison rather than making photographs *of* some prisons (Fig. 5.4).

And because my questions about photography may have appeared too abstract or too personal to the prisoners, I wanted to make our photographic practice a game. To that purpose, for example, I brought plastic mirrors to be used as photo accessories. A mirror is an ambiguous place, both here and somewhere else at the same time. I thought it would be possible to use mirrors in order to document and transfigure space at the same time.

In another prison for long-term prisoners, a man called Emile placed a mirror in different spaces in the prison and systematically photographed



**Fig. 5.4** *Première tentative* (First attempt), a collaboration with Nicholas T. and Maximilien L., Cherbourg prison, Wednesday, April 6, 2016

himself taking a photograph. This man had been working for 10 years on a strange graphic research project: in his “Earth constellations”, as he calls them, he attempts to reveal mythological figures, not only observable, but inscribed on the landforms of the Earth. This activity of scrutinising aerial views and maps seemed to me an imaginary escape similar to the gesture of trying to go to the other side of the mirror. In the darkroom, I overlaid the pictures he had made in the prison and some details of his graphic production, in order, somehow, to produce an equivalent of his imaginary space.

In some other situations, I made photographs with inmates who knew precisely which pictures they wanted to do. With one of them, Julien, I made a series of three photographs in which, at first glance, he may simply appear as the sitter in a portrait, though in fact, he was actively engaged in the process of picture-making, as I relate in this second excerpt:

*Julien wants to make a photograph for his father who has recently sent him the smart clothes he is wearing. He decides of every detail by himself. His thumb pointing down, the watch clearly visible on his wrist, and the apple held in the left hand. The image is a coded message—meaning that he has received the suit, that time passes and that he is demoralized. The apple may have something to do with sin, of course.*

Then Julien wants to stage what he calls “the second trial” (Fig. 5.5). He definitely knows what he wants to do and has brought the accessories for it in a plastic bin: an apple, a potato, sunglasses. I don’t understand what it is all about, but I do my best to photograph the scene he is setting. When I come back with the pictures a month later, he explains: “When you get in, you are judged a second time by the other prisoners. What are you here for? What have you done? The apple and the potato are here to show that there are two types of persons: the real rogues who deserve respect and the weary-headed who also stand there asking you questions. That is the second judgment everyone has to go through when they arrive in prison.”

The photograph, entitled “A Perpetual Movement”, is the result of a conversation about the specific flow of time in prison (Fig. 5.6). We also talked about this circular piece of ground, which he considered “a ridiculous attempt to smooth things over compared to the angles of the walls”.

If I had to define my working method, I would say it is all about consideration. I try to pay a careful attention to what happens and to what is said, to pay attention to the desires and feelings of those I meet. I make photographs using my ears as much as using my eyes.

During my first visit in Caen prison, a man took me to his cell, and spread his arms to show me how he could touch the two opposite walls of his cell at the same time. Of course, he wanted to show that his cell was very small, but he was also surprised that the place chosen for his punishment should perfectly fit the span of his body. After that story, I always paid a careful attention to the relation between body and architecture, which I consider a fundamental characteristic of the situation: a body in relation with a type of architecture.

The epitome of this research is certainly the series of photographs made in collaboration with a woman in Rouen prison whom I photographed holding various postures in her cell (Fig. 5.7). These pictures are of course an alternative to the cliché of the prisoner prostrated in their cell. And I like the way these pictures can also be considered as a description of a cell.



**Fig. 5.5** Maxence Rifflet, *Le deuxième procès* (The Second Trial), a collaboration with Julien H., Conde-sur-Sarthe high-security prison, 2016



**Fig. 5.6** *Un mouvement perpétuel* (a Perpetual Movement), a collaboration with Julien H., Conde-sur-Sarthe high security prison, Tuesday, May 31, 2016



**Fig. 5.7** Maxence Rifflet, *En appui* (in Support), Rouen prison, a collaboration with Lucile S. and Valérie D., 2017

But these images are also very significant of the way the subject of the work has shifted. Prison architecture is both the subject of the photographic work and the place where it is undertaken. The bodies thus act as a measure of prison space, activating it, revealing it, and sometimes making an attempt to resist it.

The collaborative process that I set up in prison allowed me to overcome my initial reluctance to photograph in prison. Rather than trying to assert my personal view on this reality, I preferred to be attentive to the words and views of those who have a concrete and daily experience of these spaces. This decentring of the practice opens up a plurality of viewpoints on the same reality. It produces new forms and information.

PART II

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Public Display and the Distribution  
of Collective Projects



## Commercially Unavailable: Distribution as an Activist Tactic

*Liz Johnston Drew*

In a context of a wide scholarship on digital methods for the production and distribution of socially engaged photography, the purpose of this chapter is to foreground work from artist-activist Mark Neville who chooses to employ the larger format, carefully printed photo-book, as an appropriate form for his sustained commitment to strategic, targeted distribution. Neville's work has, over the last twenty years, engaged with the experience of changing environments, injustice, and conflict and has demonstrated close attention to equitable representation. He is committed to achieving this by working together with participants in his projects, often including elements of resistance and celebration, as well as meaningful distribution. His most prominent works include *The Port Glasgow Book Project* (2004–2006), *Deeds Not Words* (2010–2012) and *Parade* (2019). While engaging with conflict and war, Neville also produced *The Helmand Work* (2011), *Battle Against Stigma* (2015–2018) and *Stop Tanks with*

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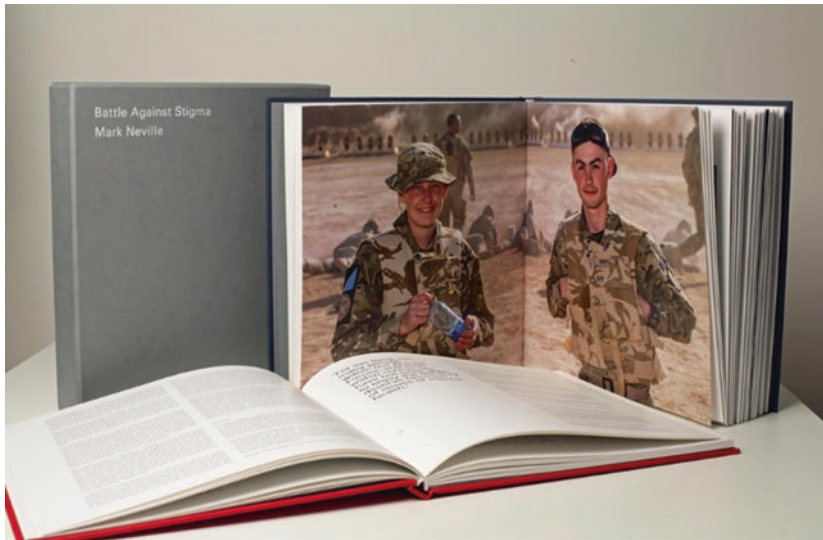
M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography  
as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_6)



*Books* (2022). The latter was made in Ukraine, to plead for international prevention before, and as, a major conflict escalated into an invasion and war where fossil fuel and nationalism play a central role (Fig. 6.1).

One of the things about any kind of social practice [...] is a tension between the process of working with participants and the products that are created and then circulated to audiences. To look at what is made within any form of social practice, as being solely the outcome, is to disavow the unique dialogue that the practice hinges on. (Luvera 2019)

Neville has often pointed out (while acknowledging the “tension” that Anthony Luvera has foregrounded here) that his works are developed with a highly targeted audience in mind. Indeed, it is the process and distribution that are central to his work, as will be discussed in this chapter. To contextualize Neville’s projects as part of a longer trajectory of work on the role of distribution in participatory contexts, I’ll first refer to



**Fig. 6.1** Battle Against Stigma Book Project, Mark Neville, 2015–2018, a two-volume book project, not commercially available. Open pages showing Firing Range 2010, from *The Helmand Work* 2010–2011. Images copyright Mark Neville

artist-activists from the late twentieth century, specifically Lucy R. Lippard, and Allan Sekula, who have steered their work towards participatory methods.

### THE CASE FOR THE DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY

Lippard has worked collaboratively for decades, with a sustained interest in the impact of war, pollution, and commercial over-development on internationally comparable local areas and communities. As for Sekula, his influential oeuvre provides a critique that demands a consideration of the responsibilities and limitations of photography, as well as the possibilities for meaningful interaction on a local level.

Photography for Sekula was haunted by both human labour and the hegemonic disregard for such agency and transaction from below. [...] Both his writings and art aimed to bridge the gap between conceptual and documentary practices, focusing on economic and social themes ranging from family life, work and unemployment to schooling and the military-industrial complex. While questioning many documentary conventions, Sekula continued to see photography as a social practice, answerable to the world and its problems. (Steiner and Stein 2021)

A recurring question, in critical theory addressing documentary photography, has been: who and what is seen and heard, and how? For Lippard, as described in her 1984 book *Get the Message—A Decade of Art for Social Change*, “The framework [...] is always social concern and responsibility” (Lippard 1984). Her work reacted to the context of the 1970s, an era of growing stock market-led globalization soon to be further facilitated by aggressive, deregulating socio-economic policies. The consequences manifested themselves in the loss of jobs, of livelihoods, homes, and environments, and were more literally visible than in previous centuries and decades; not least due to the proliferation of the ever more mobile and widespread use of cameras in the general population, including the development of citizen journalism, as well as a persistence of documentary practice in dedicated groups. Feminist strategies are also acknowledged as having had a significant impact on the development of oppositional practice and alternative distribution in visual arts in this decade, as demonstrated by Lippard, a founder member of the Heresies

Collective (1976–1993). The group’s radical agenda, questioning the mainstream production and consumption of art, was circulated through their journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*. Lippard foregrounds the contribution of visual feminist “interaction techniques” in terms of empowerment and self-representation at this time: “Video and photography are often used not so much to stimulate a passive audience as to welcome an actively participating audience, to help people discover who they are, where their own power lies and how they can make their own exchanges” (Lippard 1984, 150).

Providing both a reflective personal account and handbook for activists, *Get the Message* reviews a variety of community-based projects. Some are described as deliberately delivered outside of major galleries or museums: the protests, alerts, and messages are discussed by Lippard as having been strategically distributed on the streets, in vacant shop windows, as interactive performance, via artist’s books, billboards, photocopy handouts, murals, and photo-text posters, as she investigates “the dilemma” of “how to integrate art and politics” (Lippard 1984, 151). Participation and distribution form key elements in the projects presented in each section of *Get the Message*. In fact, the strategic use of alternative, disruptive distribution becomes the book’s central concept. A prime example, in a section on political posters, is introduced by a photograph of members of the pivotal Art Workers’ Coalition, of which Lippard was a founding member, standing outside of the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1969. Each member holds up the notorious anti-Vietnam War photo-text work *Q: AND BABIES? A: AND BABIES* known as the My-Lai massacre poster “collectively designed and distributed worldwide through the independent artists’ network” (Lippard 1984, 151). The poster immediately became another definitive image of opposition to the Vietnam war, the horrors of conflict and the abuse of civilians in subsequent conflicts. Since their original context of production, this image, and the poster, have been featured in many debates around photography and the ethics of seeing, notably by Steve Edwards as he discusses the repression of distribution of documentary photography and acknowledges the genre’s subversive potential.

Documentary, in some of its forms, can be seen as an analytic vision capable of great critical acuity. The powers that be have long understood this potential and have repeatedly censored documentary images. In the case of dictatorial regimes, with a vested interest in their nefarious deeds going

unrecorded, this should be obvious enough. But liberal-capitalist states also increasingly attempt to police the circulation of documentary photographs. (Edwards 2006, 37)

Lippard's concluding section in *Get the Message* is "Activist Art Now—A Picture Essay" which samples "a fraction of the work that was being done in 1982 around the world to develop a form, theory and distribution system for activist art" (Lippard 1984, 324). The issues at play towards the end of the twentieth century are familiar, namely, inequalities based on class, race or gender, the impact of environmental and community destruction and many kinds of displacement. Local examples convey a globally shared experience of exploitation and injustice; however, there is also a clear thread of resistance and celebration, including the wit and canniness that Neville also cites as an important part of a socially concerned participatory practice where a "distribution system" is key. Neville has also foregrounded the value of mutual experience, when discussing his long-duration projects, which emerged when living, as he has done, in Glasgow, or London or Kyiv in the twenty-first century, and aim to manifest and provoke "moral discourse" (Lippard 1997, 14).

In terms of alternative strategies, Allan Sekula, like Lippard, engaged with people and place on an empathetic, activist level, to achieve the production and distribution of projects as testimony, response, and record. His relationship with the MV (Merchant Vessel) *Global Mariner* epitomizes this. "We know that the idea of risk begins with the hazards of the sea" (Van Gelder 2015, 111). The project extended over many years, starting with the actual sailing (1998–2000), and resulting in a complex series of works (*Ship of Fools/Dockers' Museum* 1999–2013). The mission of the voyage was to raise awareness and support among and beyond the shipworkers' communities, through touring photographic exhibits on board that evidenced the precarity and plight of maritime workers exploited under the Flag of Convenience. This involves "imposing living and working conditions too harsh to be humanely acceptable" (Van Gelder 2015, 81).<sup>1</sup> The MV *Global Mariner* was converted into spaces of exhibition and "discussion platform" with the changing cohorts from each port welcome to participate in a meeting room, in a re-purposed upper hold. Sekula wryly recalled "the gothic turn" (Sekula 2010) taken as the exhibition

<sup>1</sup> Described as "a flimsy legal construct" for ships' owners "to transform their vessels into virtually lawless entities" (Johann Jacobs Museum 2015).

developed down through the levels of the ship, from the optimism of maritime adventure and camaraderie to scenes of physical exploitation and danger.

Along with Lippard's concern with the precarity of local experience, the maritime focus of Sekula has been motivational to my interest in visual and cultural histories. Coming from a working-class, maritime background my theoretical framing is, unsurprisingly, shaped by philosophical notions of equality and representation, particularly Jacques Rancière's proposals on "equality without conditions" and his insistence that the link between politics and aesthetics must "always be constructed" (Baumbach 2010, 57).

In terms of interference, the development and distribution of Mark Neville's socio-politically charged photobooks provide an exemplar of "work to achieve a change of perspective" (Rancière and Engelman 2009, 108). As a sustained attempt at meaningful practice, produced over two decades of escalating structural inequality and global instability, the work of Neville is steered by an ethics of representation through a participatory approach and a highly targeted distribution. His work can be viewed as pertaining to a transformative approach, of the kind demonstrated by Lippard and Sekula in previous decades, where alternative formats and strategies are developed to realize the elusive goal of equitable collaboration, and to achieve genuine and meaningful impact.

### COMMERCIALY UNAVAILABLE

My chapter title emerged after looking at Neville's website; it was notable that much of his well-known work was marked *Commercially Unavailable*. This at a stage when others, with a rising international profile, could be commanding very high art market prices. Neville was also critically well-received, award-winning, nominated for the prestigious Pulitzer Prize and shortlisted for the 2020 Deutsche Börse prize. Yet his motivation and methods, as expressed in his photo-book texts, were confirmed when I visited his work-live studio home, where he discussed his commitment and experience as a socially and morally concerned practitioner.

In my experience, the best ideas, in terms of documenting a community, but also theoretically, the concept of the work, is actually infinitely enhanced by the journey with the demographic you're working with. [...] The whole point of social documentary, as I see it, is the development of relationships with people, and that's very time dependent. I'm trying to examine what the

collaborative possibilities are and be directed as much as possible by the people. (Neville 2020)

Neville is critically aware and articulate on the issues and contradictions of attempting to work in a participatory mode: primarily, the contradiction in working to achieve meaningful, equitable engagement with, and representation of, communities or individuals who might be less empowered than the artist—this could be on a social, emotional, or physical level. The main contradiction is that the participation might result in

an unwanted social label. It is often the very label that groups look to challenge. [...] Advocacy-based projects go on to develop a public communications dimension, in which photographs are taken for and viewed by a wider, public audience in order to influence attitudes or policies. This may be in the form of an exhibition, display, slideshow, book, and website or through the media. The relationship between the relatively private and more public aspects of a project is a dynamic and delicate one, which requires careful balancing. (Photovoice 2022)

Neville has also been clear to identify as “an artist, who wants to make powerful pictures” (Neville 2020). Much of his work fits into the documentary category; ranging from social realism and community activism to images made in military contexts, including war zones. However, the visual style, sometimes cinematic or employing the *tableau vivant*, or framed as genre painting, often consciously recalls other art, as well as photographic, histories.

Mark Neville works at the intersection of art and documentary. [...] His work has consistently looked to subvert the traditional role of documentary practice, seeking to find new ways to empower the position of its subject over that of the author [...] in a collaborative process intended to be of direct, practical benefit to the subject. (Campany 2022)

*The Port Glasgow Book Project* (2004–2006), *Deeds Not Words* (2010–2012) and *Braddock/Sewickley* (2012) are three of Neville’s major projects, that he envisions as a “trilogy of works which explore notions of post-industrial identity in working-class communities” in this case, Northern American, Northern English and Scottish (Neville 2022).

*The Port Glasgow Book Project* and *Deeds Not Words* established his use of distribution as an activist tactic, central to these and subsequent

participatory projects. For *Port Glasgow*, described by Neville as having “a unique dissemination as a public artwork”, he relocated to Glasgow, about half an hour away from the working-class industrial port in steep decline due to the devastating loss of a once international status for shipbuilding. He was to be “artist in residence” for a year. Through several workshops, he introduced himself to, then worked closely with the local community. We see much exuberance in images of team sport, social clubs and community parties, there is more dancing than despair, in spite of the socio-economic challenges at the time. Neville describes the eventual output.

The result of this stay was a beautifully produced coffee table-style book conceived as a symbolic gift to the community. The book was uniquely delivered, free, to the eight thousand households. In this way, rather than having a public artwork imposed upon them, the Portonians received a document of their lives and of their participation as both hosts and protagonists. The book is not available anywhere else, commercially, or otherwise, in shops or by mail order. (Neville 2022)

The photographer also has insisted on high production values for the resulting photobooks, on standards usually employed for “middle-class coffee table documentary books” found “not in the homes of those depicted in them”. This is in order to “intercept and undermine this hierarchical, class-based relationship between images and their audience”. During my visit, an insightful anecdote was also recounted.

Half way through [the *Port Glasgow Book Project*], I realized that the budget that was allocated for the delivery of the books (I’d allocated fourteen thousand pounds to deliver 8000 books to each of the homes in Port Glasgow, that was a quote from Royal Mail) as a direct result of meeting and talking with the Boys Football Team—the idea came from a conversation—the manager of the Boys Football Team said “How you gonna deliver these books? Y’know—how you gonna get them out to people?” and I was like Royal Mail—he said “How much is that costing you?” and I said fourteen thousand pounds and he said “Fourteen thousand pounds! God, we could really use fourteen thousand pounds” and then it hit me. Of course, you could—and why the hell am I paying Royal Mail fourteen thousand pounds to deliver these books when the books could go directly back into the community in a real way—conceptually and ethically, that fed perfectly into an existing framework that I wanted to serve, which was about how can books, social documentary practice serve the subject matter. (Neville 2020)

David Campany, one of the first curators to engage with Neville critically and creatively, recognized the Port Glasgow work as part of a “turn to a more reflexive, performative approach. [...] So often documentarists pay mere lip service to this ethical demand. Neville made it the whole point of the project” (Campany 2006).

The community’s reaction was varied, from (mainly) extremely pleased to public book burnings, due to a perceived religious bias (although there are actually equal numbers of images of Catholics and Protestants in the book). Much of the subsequent engagement, in the form of emails, letters and news coverage, was then also incorporated into an exhibition to ensure the continued presence and distribution of the community’s voice.<sup>2</sup>

In part two of the trilogy, *Deeds Not Words* (2010–2012), Neville further developed the distribution strategy employed for *Port Glasgow*.

The photobook is not being commercially distributed. Instead it was sent out to each of the 433 local authorities in the UK, and to environmental agencies internationally, to raise awareness of issues around the handling of toxic waste and the reuse of contaminated land; it deals specifically with a court case that was brought in Corby, Northamptonshire, by a group of families. [...] affected by toxic waste following the reclamation of the town’s now defunct steel works in the 1980s. [...] It is not simply a ‘photo book’, it includes more than 20 pages of scientific evidence concerning the link between chemical pollutants and birth defects. (Neville 2022)

To people less familiar with this history, it is hard to convey the scale and significance of Corby Steelworks as a long-term hub of stable industrial employment, or the sense of disbelief about the scale of precarity and suffering wrought on Corby, as it became a prime example of the sudden and brutal dismantling of English working-class life in the late twentieth century. Corby was one of Europe’s largest steelworks until British Steel,

<sup>2</sup>As discussed with Neville, fifteen years after the books’ delivery by members of the Boys Football Club on bicycles, Port Glasgow has undergone the same changes that can be seen in most post-industrial cities, as well as many small-scale fishing and farming communities. Luxury flats are built by the water, workplaces and homes are displaced; such views are now privatized, unattainable for most. A sprawling and growing Retail Park dominates the harbour approach on the site of a former shipyard, with multinational chains operating out of huge featureless structures. Filled with cheap goods delivered by the maritime exploitation so keenly observed by Sekula, “Drive Through” fast-food outlets also provide “flexible”, often zero-hour contracts. Shipbuilding has all but disappeared, with Ferguson Marine Engineering, documented by Neville, being the last of its kind.



supported by the new Conservative government, closed it down in 1981. It was known as Little Scotland due to the many Scottish workers and families who settled there in search of work, similar to many steelmaking, coal mining or shipbuilding communities of Irish or Scottish descent in the North, with the strong cultural identities and traditions that can accompany displacement as a self, and community, support mechanism. This included organized and powerful union membership. Yet this sense of social and political community was regarded as obstructive to the new wave of “service industry” visions of monetarism, at the centre of the ideologically driven, de-regulating government. Whilst these industries, damaging to personal and environmental health, needed to eventually close, the rationale for closure was not based on environmental concern. There was no support for the sudden loss of livelihood or transition to meaningful alternatives. Ten thousand jobs were suddenly lost in Corby, with many more in related areas. The continued lack of care, in the unsupervised movement of hazardous waste from the dismantled steelworks, resulted in a poisoning of residents, including children, as well as land. The ensuing “Corby 16” court case, involving eighteen families against the local authority, was, after an intense eleven years, eventually won in 2009.

The project began in 2009 with an interest in Corby and the people who live there. As I talked to people, I heard about the Corby 16 court case. Corby had been the centre of a really outrageous case of land reclamation and many kids were born with birth defects. I wanted to address certain ethical, chemical, and biomedical issues. (Padley 2013)

Neville created a carefully nuanced and supportive narrative on “the persistence of a Scottish identity, a broader ‘lifeworld’ that encompasses industrial growth and decline, subsequent regeneration, and community solidarity” (Jewesbury 2011). It is a portrait made by Neville with the residents of Corby, including those at the centre of the court case which was the impetus for the wider project to achieve change at local, if not national, level. The resulting images from *Deeds Not Words* are typically empathetic and celebratory, displaying pride and joy, couples waltzing, women and girls bowling. Others are highly sensitive but clear in their intent, which is to counter depictions of some of the Corby children who were victims of poisoning. Neville “says he had been struck how journalists and photographers covering the court case had crudely captured the boys’ disabilities on film” (Razzall 2013). Countering this, he worked with two of the

young people, Ben Vissian and George Taylor, to create dignified and normalizing portraits of the boys popping balloons.

Neville wanted something more balanced and multi-layered. So, he used high-speed film equipment with a sonic trigger to record the moment the balloon burst. The boys' birth defects meant they were born with fingers missing. But although their hands are visible in the pictures, they are not the main focus. Mark Neville said: 'The balloon bursting is a metaphor for the court case. You can't see toxins; you can only see the birth defects that result from them. A high-speed photo allows you to see something the naked eye can't normally perceive. That's what the court case was about'. (Razzall 2013)

Neville has explained the disappointing response from the local councils in receipt of *Deeds Not Words*. However, the project was extended with an exhibition, with curator David Company, at The Photographers' Gallery in London, including videos (with witnesses from the court case) and a symposium to involve the Corby 16, and "public and commercial stakeholders" (Fig. 6.2). Neville also brought together "activist environmental

**Fig. 6.2** Poster of the exhibition of *Deeds not Words* at the Photographers' Gallery, London, August 2–September 29, 2013



lawyers” ClientEarth, politician Joan Walley (MP) and experts from the Wellcome Trust into the gallery symposium (Padley 2013, 32).

For me, the only way forward is to challenge existing ways of disseminating your work. [...] You’ve got to think hard about who is seeing your images, who those images impact, whether they’re really reaching their target audience, and why you’re doing what you’re doing. When you start to challenge those existing structures and modes, you can come up with new ways of working within documentary practice. (Padley 2013)

In producing an inclusive imaging of a particular community through a different perspective, the project was successful, an example of Neville’s tactical use of collaboration and robust use of research. Art historian Sarah E. James, reviewing both projects, evokes Dmitri Vilensky to identify Neville’s work, as “based on an affirmative, activist understanding of Brecht” in comparison to much work of the time that claimed to be so whilst failing

to register what was at the heart of Brecht’s project: an understanding that gaining distance or alienating capitalism itself should not be based only in scepticism, irony or even mimicry, but in “responsible intellectual action” [...] Neville’s approach to his photographic and filmic production is embedded in the need to collaborate and complicate the relationships between artistic authorship and art’s audiences while maintaining a belief in the transformative effects and affects of the aesthetic experience peculiar to the image. (James 2015, 6–10)

This dimension is evidenced in the third project in the trilogy on post-industrial identity, where Neville attempted a different approach. Entitled *Braddock/Sewickley 2012*, the project comprises fifty images, initially a slide projection series, later re-presented as C-type and silver gelatin prints. The work was instigated by the Andy Warhol Museum, situated five miles away from Braddock in the city of Pittsburgh, where Warhol was born and grew up. Pittsburgh shares histories with Sheffield or Newcastle in the North of England and Glasgow in Scotland, of having once been pivotal

industrial hubs.<sup>3</sup> As Neville explains, the project “examines the legacy of the steel industry in Pittsburgh, focusing on the impact it has had in forming the contrasting culture and lifestyles of its two boroughs” (Neville 2015).

The resulting images vividly convey the similarities as well as differences between residents. Mature women “dressed for the occasion” in large elaborate hats, teenagers drinking and dancing with similar abandon, yet dressed in contrasting social camouflage; pseudo-adult in long shiny satin and formal shirts and ties, or more casual and youthful in denim and vest tops.

The differences are mainly manifest via the cultures on display: Sewickley, still revolving around County Club events, hosting the Father and Daughter Dance (for under-twelve-year-old girls) and various Republican fundraisers so symbolic of wealth and conservatism, still boasting its wealth from the steelmaking hey-day. Meanwhile, Braddock, having survived post-industrial poverty upon the loss of steelmaking, shows uneven signs of recovery (not unlike Port Glasgow and Corby), through local regeneration. We see a fishmonger, a nightclub and an organic farm, people wilting, as their well-tended vegetables thrive, in the heat.

Neville was approached by the Andy Warhol museum shortly after *The New York Times* published *Here Is London*. This was Neville’s depiction of the contrasting lives, from city bankers to Occupy protesters, in London in 2011, as the era of “austerity” was imposed.

I had never worked for a publication before, nor had I ever produced work for immediate exhibition in an American museum. I had also never worked so quickly; the normal duration for my projects being a year or two. [...] Separate bodies of work became implicated with one another. Each provided me with an insight into race and class issues in respective countries. [...] Up until then, and subsequently, I have been realizing projects whose primary audience, beneficiaries and recipients are the very communities which featured in my films and photographs. [...] Here, I was interested to

<sup>3</sup>The museum has supported other projects in Braddock that reflect its commitment “to advancing diversity, equity and inclusion in every aspect of our work” (Andy Warhol Museum Mission Statement 2022). For example, contemporaneous with Neville’s commission was the proposal *A Monument for Braddock* by artist LaToya Ruby Frazier, who also works with photography for social and environmental projects. I discuss this further in my doctoral thesis on documentary photography and ecocriticality.

understand what happened when the work was disseminated to a broader audience. [...] Would it be possible to explore themes of social division without employing the targeted book and image dissemination? (Neville 2015)

Neville returned to his established way of working for future projects, such as *Child's Play* (2016), with a symposium, exhibition, distributed book and continued relationship with The Foundling Museum in London. Distributed to hundreds of local authorities, the project made the case against the closing of playgrounds and a lack of opportunity for children to exercise and play for the sake of their mental, as well as physical, wellbeing. Similarly, the overtly eco critical work *Parade* (2016–2019), made with the people of Guingamp, Brittany, France, focussed upon issues around fishing and agricultural production, at a time when the divisive “Brexit” negotiations reframed policies on these sectors (exploited in the British campaign to “leave Europe”). In a small town where food production and processing is a central industrial activity, Neville explored how difficult it is to establish local-scale, quality food production, let alone to live sustainably off the land, instead of depending on the multinational exploitative and polluting supermarket. Again, Neville described how his distribution strategy seeks to elicit positive action.

The resulting photobook and exhibition are now accompanied by a special publication containing interviews with Brittany farmers and a call to action written by Terre de Liens/Access to Land Network. The book urges support for a sustainable, humane, even ecotopian type of agriculture and greater access to land. Along with the photo book *Parade*, I have sent out this new publication *Parade Texts* free to the UK and European ministries of agriculture and food, key policymakers, and to both rural and urban schools and libraries both in Britain and France. (Neville 2022)

For a prime example in which dissemination became the rationale of his working method, I turn to Neville’s most unlikely, simultaneously most successful, and unsuccessful work as a “war artist”. Successful insofar as the eventual result was of important practical use to many neglected sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Unsuccessful, on the other hand, due to Neville being unable to work in a participatory way with the local civilian people in the war zone. I use the term “war artist” as applied when an artist is commissioned to accompany military

personnel in active conflict. The following, somewhat dispassionate statement, confirms this as an ongoing practice in public museums.

In Britain, official government-sponsored schemes were established for artists to record both the First and Second World Wars. The Imperial War Museum has continued to commission artists to record the events of war in more recent conflicts. As well as providing fascinating documentation of war time activities and events, much of the work produced by war artists is also interesting and important as art. (Tate 2022)

War and photography, particularly with regard to distribution, have a long-established, symbiotic relationship. There is a substantial critical literature on the development and circulation of photographic propaganda, in military and civilian contexts, throughout the history of the medium (Stallabrass 2020). Out of the many modern conflicts depicted by the media over the last thirty years (until more recently in Ukraine), the wars conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan have been especially visible. The clarity of images, of devastated towns, cities, hillsides, and bodies, conveyed via increasingly high-definition screens, in the home and in the hand, results in a terrible false familiarity. Visual material is, however, mediated by mainstream media, presented with varying narratives, harrowing detail not always forthcoming on prime-time television or in daily newspapers.

In circumstances that resulted in his developing a debilitating adjustment disorder, a long form of PTSD, Neville arrived in Helmand, Afghanistan, in December 2010. By his own admission, he did not feel he had been physically or mentally prepared for war on the ground (in a professional military sense) with soldiers who, despite some of them being very young, had undergone much challenging training to be de-sensitized to an extremely harsh and lethal situation. Other soldiers were not only experienced but seasoned “elite” airborne paratroopers (the “paras”). Even so, many of these soldiers were to also develop PTSD, such was the severity of the experience in Helmand and beyond.

Neville had been approached by public arts organization Firstsite Colchester, in October 2010. Colchester, in the East of England, has been a garrison town for centuries, the base of the “paras”. The commission was in association with the Imperial War Museum, London, for Neville to be “artist in residence” with the 16 Air Assault Brigade. By December, he had arrived with the soldiers on a military plane, at the epicentre Camp Bastion (Neville 2020).

Embedding with the British Army in a war zone, [...] Neville further complicated the relationship between photographer and photographed, author and public. The ethics of embedded journalism [...] are fraught and hotly debated. The argument is familiar: enjoying the protection of troops operating in dangerous situations, photographers gain uncensored access to conflict zones while strongly identifying with soldiers. This intimate exposure comes at a cost: it produces a positive view of the war, one that promotes consensus and panders to the media. [...] Made over a period of 3 months, *The Battle Against Stigma* offers a spare and haunting departure in the relentless portrayal of this international conflict. (Terracciano 2015)

The experience, from the shock of the first hours onwards to the difficult return, is described by Neville in various forthright interviews and through his own accounts. The work itself, in methods of production and content, responded to a frustrated expectation to work with local communities and soldiers in a participatory way, by interacting on a personal, normal civilian level. This was not at all possible, although a variety of equipment (e.g., crash testing cameras) was brought, in an attempt to avoid replicating any kind of clichéd misrepresentation. Although not “successful”, in his own words, in terms of collaboration, Neville was able to produce a body of “Helmand Work” including the powerful film *Bolan Market* (2011). The short length belies the sophisticated technical strategies at work to convey the distorted sense of time and perception when in an extremely stressful situation: “The film is only made possible through the deployment of an armoured vehicle and its crew: The footage is



**Fig. 6.3** Mark Neville, *Bolan Market*, Afghanistan 2011, 16 mm slow motion, silent film, 6.3 min. Two frames from a digital copy. Images and film copyright Mark Neville

mediated through an apparatus of war and an occupying force, forming a disturbing mediation on the relationship between subject and viewer” (Neville 2022).

Neville was taken to Bolan Market (in Lashkar Gah) to record a post-Taliban “success story” for the British army and ISAF (International Security Assistance Force). He travelled by tank, positioned by the gun turret, right next to a front-facing machine gunner, both hands holding onto the weapon. He describes how his film camera was held, by necessity in the same way, resulting in excruciating parallels.

pointing at people looking at the tank—I remember like that happened this morning—still one of my most vivid... and I just remember feeling ashamed to be an artist, as war artist (although) before that, it [the country] was Taliban run—and now you start to see the beginning of commerce... mobile phones... Still... I felt ashamed. (Neville 2020)

Made in extremely fragile circumstances using a 16 mm 1960s film camera, this work is very different from any sort of photojournalism.

Mark Neville: I did everything I could to confound the conventions of news reporting in Afghanistan—no sound—because in all the news reports you’re fed these images and told what to think. It’s that combination of misinformation and images that’s so pernicious. It’s silent, it’s about giving—trusting the viewer to respond to what was there.

Liz Drew: It was humanizing, people that look like us, the viewer, they just look like contemporaries—but it’s a returned gaze.

Mark Neville: Yes, exactly. (Neville 2020)

In a review of *Helmand Work*, eventually exhibited at the Imperial War Museum in 2014, Melanie Vandenbrouck also notes Neville’s distress at Bolan Market, one of three *Helmand* films, in exposing

a chasm all the more challenging for an artist whose work is about people and their communities. The film’s freedom and the uncomfortable absence of sound convey Neville’s feeling of being “trapped in a silent nightmare” [...] faced with the powerful gaze of the film’s subjects, the artist/viewer becomes, in a reversal of long-established orientalist conventions, the “other”. (Vandenbrouck 2014)

Having embarked on treatment for his adjustment disorder, Neville was able to re-orientate the project, applying his preferred alternative



distribution strategy to produce *The Battle Against Stigma Book Project* (2015). This was done in collaboration with Jamie Hacker Hughes, professor and practitioner of clinical psychology and expert in veterans as survivors of trauma, to confront the professional and social stigma of PTSD and to raise awareness and support. It was produced as a two-volume publication, as the Ministry of Defence barred Neville from creating a single book where the images from Helmand and accounts of PTSD from serving and ex-serving soldiers would be seen together (Campany 2022). It is not commercially available but free of charge, by request only, to individuals who are affected by PTSD, and to services that aim to give tangible support.

*The Battle Against Stigma* exhibition features photographs, films, emails, and copies of a book. [...] The first five hundred copies of the book were seized at customs by UK Border Force. However, a second consignment of one thousand copies entered the UK via a different route thus escaping seizure and arriving safely at Neville's studio. (Neville 2022)

Despite this most challenging project, a positive element was wrought in the participation and response of fellow victims of PTSD. Although “embedded”, Neville went to Afghanistan with his own agenda to “see what was happening” and despite the efforts of the Ministry of Defence, he managed to subvert censorship. The outcome counters any notion of Neville being involved in the sort of military-media collaboration that was prevalent at this time, as analysed by Julian Stallabrass discussing the notorious “Shock and Awe” campaign that opened the Iraq War. “The whole system of ‘embedding’ journalists and photographers with troop units was used to generate the images that the military wanted seen [...] used as ‘force multipliers’ [...] to persuade the enemy that resistance was useless” (Stallabrass 2020 Preface).

Neville voiced concern and regret that the Helmand project ever occurred and doesn't blame anyone: “the people that sent me there didn't have any real idea of what was going on there either”. One of the most significant interviews, these being also used as a form of distribution, of insights into Helmand and the life-changing effects of PTSD, was provided to *The Independent* newspaper in May 2015. Neville references anti-Vietnam artwork as important in his aspiration to communicate the

situation, to raise awareness, while also opening up about the frustrated effort to distribute the work as planned.

Soldiers were losing limbs every day, sometimes three or four, yet these devastating injuries were barely reported in the UK. [...] I had made it clear to the organisation that commissioned my war residency that I would be making work which commented upon the situation as it was in Helmand and that, for the work to achieve maximum impact, it needed to be disseminated and exhibited soon after my return, like news. [...] But there was no such exhibition opportunity [...], it was to take a further 3 years for my work to be seen, in a solo exhibition at the Imperial War Museum. It was a missed opportunity. [...] This agonising wait meant I felt I had to stay embedded in the war experience for 3 years, while I carried the work. (Neville 2015)

Whilst Neville was unsuccessful in being able to interact with local people or having the work disseminated quickly on return, his interview with *The Independent*, in which he offered free copies on request to those impacted by PTSD, was featured in print and online and proved to be a pivotal moment for the work to succeed as intended.

As soon as that went live, in May 2015, I got an email every 10 min for 3 months, from a veteran, saying not just: ‘can I have a free copy of your book *Battle Against Stigma*?—but going into incredible personal detail about what happened to them in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, and what happened when they came back. (Neville 2020)

Neville goes on to say that although his other projects are about things he feels and cares about, this project had straightforward outcomes: “other people felt empowered to share, and then, those responses—thousands of emails—became a new archive effectively. You can see you’ve tapped into some hidden pain which people aren’t articulating or don’t feel entitled to articulate” (Neville 2020).

In 2015, one response to Neville’s work included an unexpected invitation to Ukraine. The Kyiv Military Hospital had requested copies of *Battle Against Stigma* (in Ukrainian) for the traumatized and injured “who were, even then, returning from the frontline of Donbas”. After dozens of visits, this eventually resulted in his leaving London to live in Kyiv, until forced to flee in Spring 2022. Neville continues

When I flew to Ukraine for the first time to meet people at the Military Hospital, I immediately understood that this was a country traumatized by war. Even in its vibrant, modern capital Kyiv, I felt and saw in people's faces the weight of the conflict raging 600 km away. I recognised a trauma in them. (Neville 2022, 38)

Having produced the project *Conflict Dynamics and Border Regions: Displaced Ukrainians 2016–2017* (Varenikova 2017) a collaboration with The Centre of Eastern European and International Studies, Berlin, as a matter of urgency, Neville began work on the photobook *Stop Tanks with Books*. The introduction by Neville set the tone of the book: “the collective sense of trauma in that basement was palpable.” The novelist Lyuba Yakimchuk also contributed, employing harrowing anecdotes in short story form, but the text (in Ukrainian, Russian, and English) begins with two pages of timelines, grim facts and figures, and proposals for international intervention to prevent further conflict, for sanctions and assistance. Addressed to policy-makers, politicians, and powerful commentators, a frantic distribution effort was underway when the predicted missile attacks began in February 2022. Neville remains committed to disseminating this collection of affecting portraits, to convey the humanity at risk and to urge support, not least in response to widespread mental trauma.<sup>4</sup> The point of the book is, as Joanna L. Cresswell notes in her review, to amplify the case for peace.

Human empathy can certainly be a powerful drive. [...] A publication like *Stop Tanks with Books* may be a small beat of the butterfly's wing in the grand picture, but it's a tangible, active gesture [...] as it's sent out and lands on desks across the world, it has a cumulative effect, with the capacity to gain momentum and shift the narrative over time. [...] So, while media images get bumped further down feeds and fall from front pages, this book remains, and takes up space. (Cresswell 2022)

I have referred to “distribution” as a conceptual as well as literal activity, to encompass the sharing of ideas and experience as well as the dissemination of physical works. My examples of the work of Neville demonstrate a more visceral experience in participatory projects, where the locale of interaction is also of central significance. To even attend a warzone with a

<sup>4</sup>In September 2022, an updated second edition was released to respond to further developments in the war and to expand the distribution.

camera, embedded with military forces, could be discerned as a form of collaboration with the military. As Stallabrass has demonstrated, it often is, therefore work produced in war zones is difficult to navigate in the production of counter narratives. However, the rarity of non-commercially available output ensures a shift in our attention, so that, even in this situation, Neville, like Lippard and Sekula, is engaged in meaningful social practice. What Stein and Steiner write about Sekula also applies, in our view, to Neville.

Both his writings and art aimed to bridge the gap between conceptual and documentary practices, focusing on economic and social themes ranging from family life, work and unemployment to schooling and the military-industrial complex. While questioning many documentary conventions, Sekula continued to see photography as a social practice, answerable to the world and its problems. (Steiner and Stein 2021)

Across the scholarly field of participatory and social documentary photography, to create and offer depictions of communities, that you may or may not be part of, continues to be discussed in terms of ethics (Bertrand 2021; Photovoice 2022; Sealy 2021). In all cases, the mode of distribution is crucial in supporting the rationale and effectiveness of any attempts at socially concerned work as “answerable to the world”.

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## CHAPTER 7

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# The Dominance of Monographic Exhibitions in French Photographic Institutions: Data, Criticisms and Impact on Artists' Visibility

*Louis Boulet*

### INTRODUCTION

Considering the importance of collaborative and collective work in photography, as demonstrated in this volume, it is striking that contemporary photography exhibitions appear, paradoxically, to take a very different route. The medium of photography has the reputation of favouring solo shows—a far cry from the collective and collaborative tradition that is at the heart of our discussion.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This chapter was translated from the French by Meg Morley.

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Switzerland AG 2024

M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_7)

If photography exhibitions do indeed produce more monographic shows than generalist art institutions, which we will attempt to demonstrate here, we must then look at the reasons behind this specific feature and highlight the issues and political strategies that this practice implies. Are most photography exhibitions solo shows, and what are the political implications of this choice?

To address these questions, we will present our analysis in three steps, in the form of a false syllogism, or rather a defective syllogism. First, we will summarize the reactionary connotations of monographic shows in at least three intellectual traditions. In the second section, which is also the second premise of the syllogism, we will show that in the world of photography there are indeed significantly more monographic shows than shows with a more general theme. We do not conclude, however, that photographic shows are reactionary, as would have the syllogism. On the contrary, we look at the specific case of the Jeu de Paume art centre in Paris and the work of its director Marta Gili to move beyond these binary oppositions and bring a fresh perspective to the questions of collective practice and solo shows.

This chapter distinguishes monographic exhibitions—solo shows—from all other group or thematic shows. This distinction is necessarily a simplistic categorization in light of the complexity of art exhibitions, as readers are well aware. Without listing all the possible variations of types of exhibitions, it is easy to see that there is much room for overlap, and that types and categories are often built upon subjective criteria.<sup>2</sup> For example, the show of work by Hadjithomas and Joreige (Jeu de Paume 2016) can be seen as a monographic show because these photographers work as a couple and produce their images together. Inversely, the exhibition of work by Harun Farocki and Rodney Graham (Jeu de Paume 2009) is more like a group show, because it displays two different bodies of work, with only the fact that they were awarded a prize in common.

<sup>2</sup>We can list some general types, however: shows with a central theme (*Préhistoire, une énigme moderne*, Centre Pompidou 2019) or a focus on an artistic movement (*Le Cubisme*, Centre Pompidou 2018; *Provoke*, Le Bal, 2016); shows that display a collection (*Paris capitale photographique 1920–1940, Collection Christian Bouqueret*, Jeu de Paume 2009); shows of group productions or anonymous works. For a more detailed discussion see, among others, Jean-Marc Poinso, “Les grandes expositions, esquisse d’une typologie”, *Les Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne*, no. 17/18, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1986.



## THE STIGMA OF REACTION THAT CLINGS TO MONOGRAPHIC EXHIBITIONS

We first want to mention the reputation of “reactionary” politics that is associated with monographic exhibitions, defined as shows that present the work of a single person, or a duo that works together. The negative connotations of this characterization are illustrated by examples in three different intellectual fields. First, we observe that in contemporary practice and discourse, thematic or group shows are the most popular and prestigious. These “mega-exhibitions”, as Okwui Enwezor calls them, are generally opposed to monographic exhibitions, or solo shows (Enwezor 2003).<sup>3</sup> Group shows have the preference of today’s prominent curators at the helm of major artistic events around the globe, from Venice to Kassel, from Gwangju to Dakar and Havana. Likewise, much theoretical ink has been devoted to thematic exhibitions, which are those that are most likely to be retained and celebrated in the historical record. Among many examples are the *Armory Show* (1913), the *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme* (1938), *Quand les attitudes deviennent forme* (1969) and more recently *Magiciens de la terre* (1989). The “exemplary exhibitions” listed by Hegewisch and Klüser in their compendium are almost exclusively group shows (Hegewisch and Klüser 1998). In recent years, a voluminous literature has been produced on the “biennialization” of contemporary art, a sign of the attention devoted to thematic shows in the field of curatorial studies. A large body of theoretical writing on thematic shows has grown up, including authoritative publications by Altshuler (2009, 2013), Filipovic (2014) and Greenberg et al. (1996). Some critics have remarked that the proponents of curatorial studies are often those who stand to benefit materially from this trend. In a recent article, Felix Vogel writes that “the norm of ‘curatorial’ is the exception” (Vogel 2019, 70). It is nonetheless pertinent to observe that theoretical arguments are developed to justify the preference for thematic exhibitions over monographic shows.

These arguments in favour of group shows are couched in political terms: group exhibitions are an attempt to look at the relationships between works of art rather than focusing on their individual autonomy, according to Greenberg, Ferguson and Nairne, and this attention is

<sup>3</sup>We will leave aside the subtle distinctions that can be made between thematic exhibitions and group shows.

deemed to be “political”. In his authoritative article “The Curatorial Turn”, Paul O’Neill declares that “since the late eighties, the group exhibition has become the primary site for curatorial experimentation”. The author starkly opposes the group show to the “canonical model of monographic presentation” and underscores that the group show opens the door to a transcultural understanding with multiple inputs (O’Neill 2010, 242). Group shows also allow new artists to emerge and give more visibility to artists from minority backgrounds, according to O’Neill. Integrating the dimension of the artists’ identities, thematic shows are openly based on critical and materialist reasoning (Greenberg et al. 1996, 2).

Even before curatorial studies joined the battle, monographies, in published form or as exhibitions, were already the object of criticism in art history. The intellectual sources of this criticism are numerous, in particular stemming from the *Ecole des Annales*. This approach to history that emerged in the early twentieth century sought to study social structures rather than the careers of a few supposedly exceptional Great Men, and its practitioners distanced themselves from what they called an “edifying and optimistic ideology” and the figures of the “paternal hero” (Bertrand Dorléac 2006). Understandably, this approach to history could only drive researchers and curators away from the monographic form. This distance was accentuated with the structuralist theories of the 1960s and 1970s and the seminal texts of Barthes and Foucault on the demise of the author. Art historians frequently refer to Wölfflin’s vision of art history without names (Bertrand Dorléac 2006), an illustration of the profound rejection in this field of what Bourdieu (1986, 70) called the “biographical illusion”.

In this perspective, monographies stand accused of celebrating, idealizing and sacralizing individuals, and of straying from the criteria of objectivity and scientific rigour in research. They are deemed to be most certainly under the sway of financial interests, which are particularly influential in the art world. In the words of Éric de Chasse, “monographic work is tied to the promotion of the artist, to a list of credentials [...], in short to the business activity of cultural commerce, at least as much as it is involved with scientific issues” (Aubenas et al. 2006). Many historians espouse work that, unlike monography, puts artists in context, in relation to their social environment, even if this work is of a nature “to modify their symbolic and commercial value” (Stephan Bann et al. 2006) and break with the “pressures of the market and the public” (Aubenas et al. 2006). Leaving aside “history as story-telling” and turning to “history as question-asking”, abandoning so-called heroes to query the historical

conditions underpinning events or social structures, these theorists propose a new “problem-based monography” that breaks with static, accumulative, canonical and teleological history of art (Aubenas et al. 2006). For art historian Stephen Bann (2006), who calls attention to motivations that are often nationalistic, only in this way could monography cease to be in his word “reactionary”.

We see that there is a historical criticism of monography, rejecting this method which reduces art history to “a series of monographies of great authors” (Bann et al. 2006) and constitutes a pantheon of Great Men.<sup>4</sup> This observation leads us to evoke the third criticism of monographies, that is, the feminist critique of the canon. This critical position is grounded in the fact that, as the very expression “Great Men” indicates and as spelled out by the Guerrilla Girls, the history of Great Men excludes “women artists [, and also] non-whites, men and women” (Sofio et al. 2007, 6). Faced with this objective inequality of the canon, feminist theorists thoroughly reread the history of art and radically deconstruct its canon and its structure, following notably the thinking advanced by Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock. For these two authors, the canon is above all noxious in its very structure, which is incompatible with feminist research. Griselda Pollock (2007, 52) writes that the idea of “feminist art history is [...] a contradiction in terms”.<sup>5</sup>

This radical assertion is based on several arguments, the first of which is that a deconstructivist feminist method is fundamentally incompatible with art history in the form of a canon which can only consecrate heroes and propagate the mythology of artists’ biographies, as does the functioning of the art world itself. Canonical art history does indeed seem to be structurally bound to the mythical figure of the genius, “the myth of the Great Artist” and his “magical aura” (Nochlin 1993, 212). Linda Nochlin caustically unravels these elements, demonstrating that the artist’s destiny

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the former curator Jean-Paul Ameline, quoted by Charlotte Pudlowski, “Pourquoi certaines expositions sont moins intimidantes que d’autres”, *Slate*, 12 October 2013, <http://www.slate.fr/story/78560/expositions-monographiques-vallotton-braque> (accessed 1 December 2020).

<sup>5</sup> To move beyond this proposal, see Charlotte Gould, “Histoire de l’art et féminisme: la fin d’un oxymore? Les pratiques et théories féministes des années soixante-dix comme héritage”, in Claude le Fustec and Sophie Marret (eds.), *La fabrique du genre: (dé)constructions du féminin et du masculin dans les arts et la littérature anglophones*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008, <http://books.openedition.org/pur/30725> (accessed 1 December 2020).

does not exist outside of social structures that form racial and gender determinants. Her criticism is famously summed up in the question, “What if Picasso had been a girl? Would Señor Ruiz have paid as much attention to this little Pablita?” (214). Nochlin underscores the role of the gender-bound family structure and, among others, of education, financial conditions, mental burden, access to free time or what Maria Trasforini calls “the luck of biography” (Trasforini 2007, 128). All these factors create the sexist social structure that explains why there have been no Great Women Artists, to cite the title of Nochlin’s fundamental article. “Artistic genius” is also structured by social class, and as Nochlin slyly remarks, there have been no great aristocrat artists either (Nochlin 1993, 216). The feminist approach radically and inevitably breaks with the myths of art history. For Linda Nochlin, it must be accepted that “art cannot be conceived as the free and autonomous activity of a highly gifted individual” (1993, 218).<sup>6</sup> Demystifying and dis-enchanting, feminist criticism is of necessity opposed to this “ultra-free-market conception of the individual success story”, to use the expression coined by Linda Nochlin (1993, 215).

For these theoreticians, art history is irrevocably bound to the ideology of charisma, to use Bourdieu’s term, which holds that “only works of merit, those that ‘speak’ to humanity in all its diversity, will hold up over time” (Sofio et al. 2007, 10). Following Gramsci and Raymond Williams, Griselda Pollock shows that the canon in fact masks a hegemonic power, all the more forceful in that it is concealed in the garb of nature even as it holds sway.<sup>7</sup> Seemingly spontaneous and natural, the canon necessarily implies a claim to universality, a stance that can only be seen as partisan and oppressive from the feminist standpoint. Engaged in “the deconstruction of the discourses and practices of art history itself” (Trasforini 2007, 116), feminist criticism rejects the canon, by definition exclusionary and based on criteria that are not objective criteria of talent or beauty, but a selection that produces and perpetuates structural inequalities. As asserted by Griselda Pollock, “the canon is selective in what it includes and political in its forms of exclusion” (2007, 51). Pollock describes the canon as the foundation of all power, the tool of domination wielded by “the established

<sup>6</sup> Griselda Pollock calls for deconstruction of “the idea of a free subject, master of himself, self-sufficient, and even the very creator of himself”, Griselda Pollock, *op. cit.*, p. 64. Here she reworks a quote from Sigmund Freud.

<sup>7</sup> In particular *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, in which Raymond Williams applies the Gramscian concept of hegemony.

elites and dominant social groups, classes and ‘races’”.<sup>8</sup> The materialist feminist analysis of the conditions that allow artists to succeed is indeed incompatible with the universalist and hegemonic structures of Art History. This criticism also shows us that “the true value of the works consecrated by the tradition of canonical art history is not their ‘greatness’, their ‘originality’ or their ‘universality’, but their fundamental alignment with dominant ideologies”.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, feminist criticism underscores that the logic of exclusion is forcibly binary, as the canon accepts only two positions, in or out. This arbitrarily and abusively cleaves the field of art in two, where many varied forms of artistic expression could exist, leading Griselda Pollock to accuse the canon of impoverishing art and its history (2007, 48–49). Pollock suggests that cultural space should be seen as a “multi-positional space”, as a “polylog” that is to say as a polyphonic space where cultural hierarchies are relative and where differences are not negated but on the contrary allowed “to coexist, to nourish and provoke, to recognize, confront and mutually celebrate each other, without self-destruction, in a broad and shared cultural space” (2007, 58).

#### YET MOST SHOWS MOUNTED BY PHOTOGRAPHY INSTITUTIONS ARE MONOGRAPHIES

With the concept of “polylog”, we enter the debate that opposes group shows and monographic shows in the field of photography. The reputation of photography exhibitions is reiterated in a recent article by Christine Coste in the *Journal des Arts* introduced by the title “Why [photo] exhibitions prefer ‘solo shows’” and the subtitle “In photography the ‘solo show’ rules”. This journalist notes, for example, that “the programming of Paris institutions is largely dominated by shows devoted to one photographer” (Coste 2015). To push our exploration a bit farther, we should ask whether this reputation is justified, whether photography institutions do indeed present a significantly higher proportion of monographic shows than do more general art institutions.

<sup>8</sup> Griselda Pollock, *op. cit.*, p. 48. The author refers to Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Séverine Sofio et al., *op. cit.*, p. 10. The authors appear to sum up the thinking of Griselda Pollock developed in the previously cited article which was published at the same time.

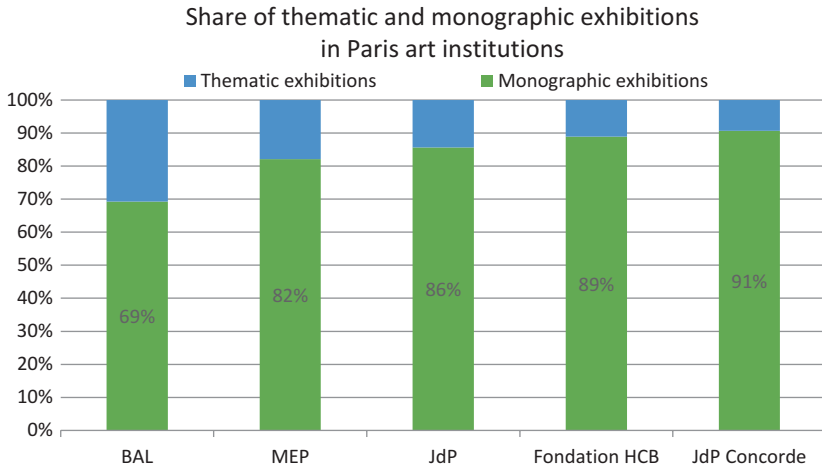
Before doing so, we wish to clarify two differences of method that distinguish our approach from that of Christine Coste. We look only at exhibitions held in institutions devoted specifically to photography, not all photo shows. This leads us to exclude from the scope of this study the exceptional events such as biennials that are often the object of curatorial studies. Secondly, we do not compare French practices to those of Anglo-Saxon institutions, as suggested by Coste, but rather the practices of photography institutions as compared to other art institutions. Here we must take into account that group shows appear to be less frequent in art centres, museums and institutions than implied by the discussions of curatorial studies. Indeed, generalist museums have also been reproached with holding too many monographic shows, to the detriment of group shows (Pudlowski 2013).

Nonetheless, a review of the exhibitions of various generalist institutions in Paris shows that while group shows are not in the majority, they are largely present in the overall programming. Group shows are held on a regular basis and make up between one-third and one-half of exhibitions each year. At the Palais de Tokyo, for instance, nearly half of the shows held in 2018 and 2019 were thematic exhibitions (8 out of 17 in 2018 and 7 out of 15 in 2019). The Centre Pompidou also devotes roughly one-third of its exhibitions to thematic events each year (outside of its permanent galleries): for example, in 2019, *Le cubisme, Une avant-garde polonaise, Prébistoire* and the photography show *Arme de classe* (Fig. 7.1).<sup>10</sup> The Fondation Cartier generally devotes at least half of its programming to thematic shows each year; this was true in 2018 and 2017 (in particular the show *Autophoto*). In 2019, all the exhibitions held at the foundation were thematic shows.<sup>11</sup>

Photography institutions in Paris do indeed lean heavily towards monographic exhibitions, compared to generalist institutions, as seen in Fig. 7.1.

<sup>10</sup>The show *Une Avant-garde polonaise* is particularly interesting, for its introductory text which begins as follows: “Pursuing its policy of broadening the artistic canon to include territories or figures ostracized for geographic or political reasons”. This declaration proclaiming the relevance of the show is consistent with the political framework of group shows described by Paul O’Neill that we outlined above. See Centre Pompidou, “Une avant-garde polonaise. Katarzyna Kobro et Wladyslaw Strzeminski”, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/programme/agenda/evenernement/c5nRALb> (accessed 1 December 2020).

<sup>11</sup>We can cite many other examples of thematic exhibitions in major Paris institutions: *Une brève histoire de l’avenir* at the Louvre in 2015, *Carambolages* at the Grand Palais in 2016, and the many shows held at the Maison Rouge, for instance the final one, *L’envol* in 2018.



**Fig. 7.1** Share of thematic and monographic exhibitions in Paris art institutions dedicated to photography: Le BAL, Maison Européenne de la Photographie (MEP), Jeu de Paume (JdP), Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson (Fondation HCB) and Jeu de Paume Concorde site (JdP Concorde) between 2012 and 2017

For the period 2012–2017 group shows made up no more than 20% of programming at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie (MEP), the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson (HCB) and the Jeu de Paume.<sup>12</sup> These three institutions propose mostly monographic exhibitions, such as the shows devoted to Berenice Abbott (Jeu de Paume), Francesca Woodman (HCB) and Zanele Muholi (MEP). In Paris, the Bal centre is an exception, with nearly one-third of its programming devoted to thematic shows during the same period, for instance *Images à charge* in 2015. Even so, across these four institutions, the prevalence of group shows is systematically much lower than in generalist institutions, confirming the intuition expressed by Christine Coste.

To grasp the dynamics at work in photography institutions, the Jeu de Paume is a particularly interesting case study. First of all, it is the institution that comes closest to being a national photography museum in France (even though it does not acquire works for a permanent collection). It is also the institution that presents the highest proportion of monographic

<sup>12</sup>The data reviewed for the Jeu de Paume cover all exhibitions from 2004 to 2020 included.

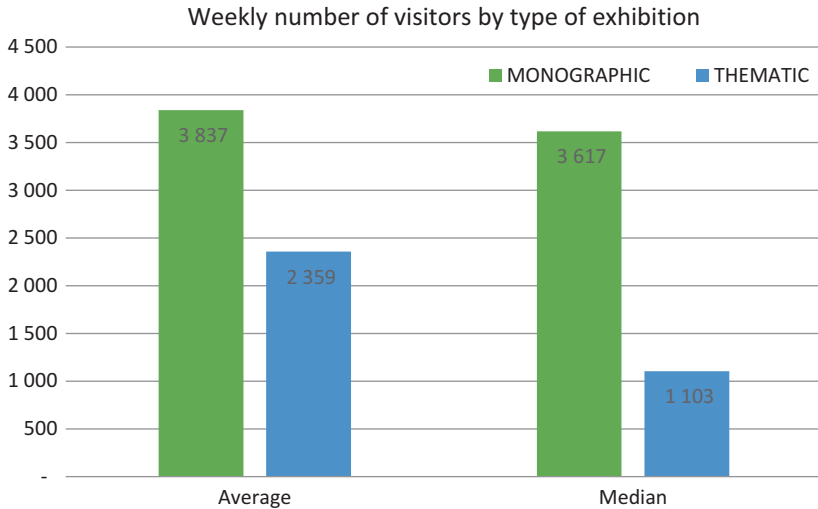
exhibitions, which constitute 91% of programming at the principal site on the Place de la Concorde.<sup>13</sup> The Jeu de Paume is thus particularly representative of this trend, and Marta Gili, who headed the institution from 2006 to 2018, was regularly questioned on this point and defended her choice. Marta Gili's action did indeed show a strong preference for monographic shows. Of the 25 exhibitions she curated at the Jeu de Paume, only one was a thematic show. Furthermore, this thematic show was the first exhibition she mounted at the Jeu de Paume, and she never again chose to put on a thematic show. Over time, this trend has grown stronger at the Jeu de Paume; starting in 2010, there have been half as many group shows as in earlier years (1.5 per year as compared to 3). Marta Gili thus deserves her reputation as a curator and institution director who quite clearly favours monographic shows. This characteristic has been noted by journalists Roxana Azimi (2007, 35), Valérie Giraud (2016) and Elsa Vettier (2017), as well as by Jeu de Paume staff members we have interviewed and by Marta Gili herself.

Several arguments are generally advanced to justify this trend in favour of monographic shows. The first reasons are material and financial. It is often explained that monographic shows are easier to produce and therefore less costly. In addition, they may receive financial support from heirs or galleries, and this can prove to be a non-negligible source of funding. As a symmetric argument, it is often said that thematic shows are less profitable, first of all because the general public is purportedly not well acquainted with the history of photography, and is more likely to recognize big names than to identify less famous groups of photographers or less familiar themes.<sup>14</sup> This sounds like common sense, and the attendance figures for shows at the Jeu de Paume record that more visitors come to monographic shows than to thematic ones: on average 3800 visitors a week compared to 2300, or 1.5 times as many. The median figures charted in Fig. 7.2 show even greater disparities, as a few highly popular thematic shows (for instance, *Soulèvements*) can pull up the average. The median

<sup>13</sup>Despite its particular identity, the Jeu de Paume shares common features with generalist institutions, which allows to make some parallels and comparisons: the Jeu de Paume has the administrative status of an art centre, like the Palais de Tokyo, while, Alain-Dominique Perrin, president of the Jeu de Paume board of directors, also presides the Fondation Cartier mentioned above.

<sup>14</sup>This argument has been reiterated by several journalists, also referring to exhibitions of paintings: see Charlotte Pudlowski, *op. cit.*





**Fig. 7.2** Weekly number of visitors by type of exhibition (monographic or thematic) at the Jeu de Paume since 2010

figures indicate that attendance at monographic shows is triple that of thematic shows.

While the gap in attendance is clear, and sometimes attributed to a sense of cultural exclusion, this discrepancy is probably not a characteristic of photography shows alone. Boltanski or Bacon at the Centre Pompidou undoubtedly draw more visitors than the show *Une avant-garde polonaise*, but this does not prevent the institution from mounting many thematic shows (Pudlowski 2013). Likewise, if monographic shows are easier to produce, this holds true for all institutions and does not in itself explain the difference in practice seen between photography institutions and generalist institutions.

It should be remarked that the institutions devoted to photography exhibitions are often smaller than the Centre Pompidou, and more fragile financially. The Jeu de Paume, the second-largest art centre in France, is certainly less vulnerable than others, but its annual budget of 7–8 million euros is far less than the resources of the Palais de Tokyo, the largest art centre, with a budget of 19 million euros. One might think, then, that institutions with greater resources could produce more thematic shows, deemed to be riskier in financial terms. The beginnings of the Jeu de

Paume do not confirm this hypothesis, however. When Régis Durand headed the institution, from 2004 to 2006, he proclaimed the intention to develop a “thematic exploration of the photographic collections held by the State and conserved by the Médiathèque de l’architecture et du patrimoine”.<sup>15</sup> He mounted three thematic shows in three years, devoted to this patrimonial collection which by statute is entrusted to the Jeu de Paume: *Figures de l’acteur* (2004), *Images de marques* (2005) and *Poétiques de la ville* (2006). This series of thematic shows drawn from the holdings of the state came to an end with the show *Résonances. Photographier après la guerre: France-Allemagne, 1945–1955*, the first show curated by Marta Gili at the Jeu de Paume, and as we have pointed out, the only thematic show she mounted there.

A second argument, more specifically linked to the medium of photography, is sometimes advanced to justify the large proportion of solo photo shows. The reasoning is that the dominant place of monographic shows is determined by the history of photography, or by customs developed over the years. According to Christine Coste (2015), this phenomenon exists since 1965 and the first Arles photography festival. In our view, this explanation is incomplete. In addition to the fact that the history of photography goes back farther than the past 50 years, this argument fails to acknowledge the profoundly experimental nature of photographic exhibitions throughout the twentieth century. It does not take into account that the first photography exhibitions were group shows, and this practice continued regularly throughout the nineteenth century, as seen in the first Bayard exhibition, and the various chapters of the publication *Photoshow* (Mauro 2014).<sup>16</sup> These examples lead us to think that the tradition of photography exhibitions, far from focusing on individuals as suggested by Coste and her citation of Gilles Mora, appears on the contrary to comprise many more models of collective shows than does painting, a field in which the Romantic figure of the solitary artist stands out. We might even conclude, as suggested by Clément Cherroix (also quoted by Christine Coste), that individualism in photography was imported from the art of painting, as some photographers and institutions aspired to the status associated with the painterly model of genius.

<sup>15</sup>Jeu de Paume, “Poétique de la ville”, <http://www.jeudepaume.org/index.php?page=article&cidArt=172> (accessed 1 December 2020).

<sup>16</sup>The article by Gerry Badger is pertinent here: “‘The Most Remarkable Discovery of Modern Times’: Three Photographic Exhibitions in 1850s London”.

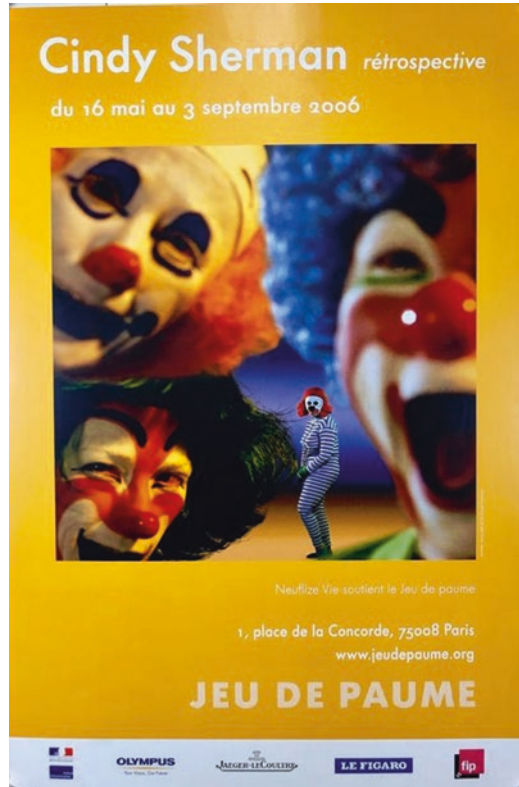
To make this reasoning even more convincing, we can extend it to the “psychology” of institutions. Specialized institutions feel the need to produce monographic shows, rather than group shows, because they believe, rightly or wrongly, that due to the relative youth of the medium, they have the mission to create the history of photography, to legitimate the medium, to publicize and celebrate its Grand Masters and Great Artists. If we follow this line of reasoning, it is the deficit of legitimacy, or rather the sense of being illegitimate, that drives the trend to monographic exhibitions. While this need to gain legitimacy has long been present, as demonstrated by Eléonore Challine (2017), the consecration of photography as art has undoubtedly reinforced and amplified the pressure. This artistic ambition engenders the transfer and exaggeration of the codes of painting shows and of the Romantic genius to the field of photography. It should be emphasized that this contemporary drive to legitimate the author in photography is all the more surprising that photography is among the media that in the twentieth century most broadly scrutinized and called into question the figure of the solitary and inspired artist. This can be seen notably in the work of artists such as Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman (Sherman’s work was shown at the Jeu de Paume as early as 2006; see Fig. 7.3).

### MUST WE DEDUCE THAT PHOTOGRAPHY INSTITUTIONS ARE REACTIONARY?

We have established that monographic shows are deemed to be reactionary, and that for the most part photography institutions produce monographic exhibitions, for complex reasons. Does this mean that these institutions are reactionary? Here we come to the third term of our reasoning, the conclusion of our syllogism, as it were. Our conclusion comes in the form of a paradox rather than a solution. Our question is: are the criticisms formulated sufficient to justify an across-the-board rejection of monography, and the condemnation of the institutions that produce monographic shows? We should keep in mind that these institutions are also recognized for their engagement, for instance, the Jeu de Paume that serves as the guiding motif of this article.

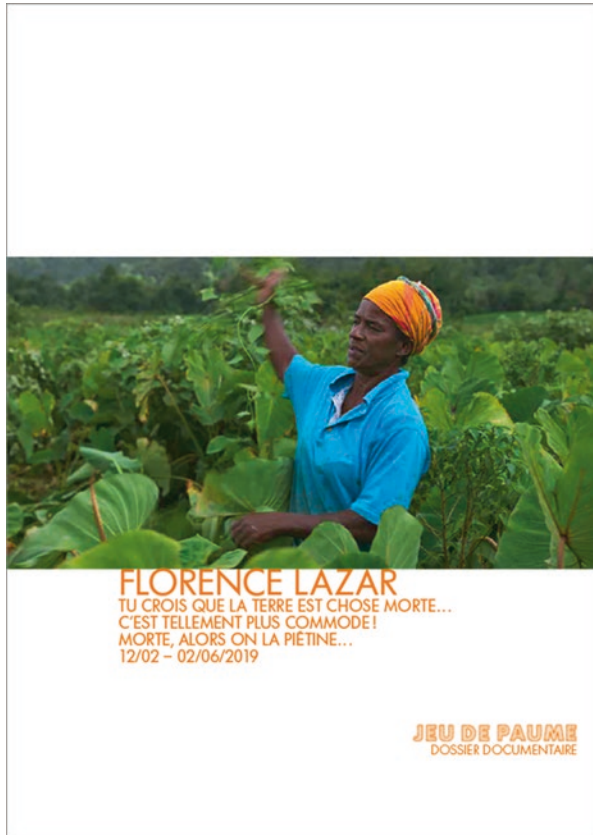
Marta Gili’s focus on solo shows, in her role as director of the Jeu de Paume, was also a component of opposition to the masculine canon, and gave visibility and legitimacy to artists such as Eva Besnyö and Zofia Rydet,

**Fig. 7.3** Exhibition poster. Cindy Sherman retrospective, 16 May–3 September 2006, Jeu de Paume



rarely shown in France. She also proposed a “rereading of the major names of history, celebrated or forgotten” (Coste 2015). She gave living artists their first solo shows in a major venue in France: Sophie Ristellhueber, Florence Lazar (Fig. 7.4), Ai Weiwei and Taryn Simon, among others. These shows in a prestigious centre such as the Jeu de Paume play an important role in the career and posterity of artists. Marta Gili used all the resources at her disposal to showcase artists she felt were important, and often these artists came from social minorities, notably in terms of gender. The Jeu de Paume is known for the large number of women artists, contemporary and historic, in its programming, and has done much to make the photographic canon more diverse and representative.

These considerations echo the feminists concerns about the canon expressed by Griselda Pollock and Linda Nochlin. These two theoreticians



**Fig. 7.4** Exhibition poster. Florence Lazar, 12 February–12 June 2019, Jeu de Paume

discuss this strategy of rehabilitation in their articles, but wish to go farther. In Nochlin's view responding to sexist discrimination by establishing a gallery of great artists is to "fall for the bait" because this response will not change the sexist structures that engender the discrimination in the first place (Nochlin 1993, 204). The good intentions of a few curators will never change reality, as Griselda Pollock bitterly remarks in observing the failure of this strategy at the time she was writing. Unfortunately, this observation still holds true today, 20 years later. No woman artist has been

truly accepted in the canon,<sup>17</sup> despite decades of activism, and backlash and pushback are constant and ever more violent. The risk of this strategy to integrate women into the canon is that these artists may be catalogued within the confines of a specifically feminine form that reinforces the masculine characteristics of the canon. In the words of Griselda Pollock (2007, 55), “As long as feminism tries to be also a discourse on art, truth and beauty, it will only confirm the structure of the canon, corroborating the excellence and power of men”.

We do not seek to resolve the differences that separate these two strategies, a divergence that can be compared to the political opposition between reformers and revolutionaries, or between structural analysis and conjunctural analysis. Looking at the different approaches to the problem, however, we ask whether all monographic exhibitions must necessarily be condemned in the same way. In doing so would we not run the risk of idealizing a form, while neglecting the concrete social relationships it implies? Once again, a review of the Jeu de Paume exhibitions will help us move beyond these too hastily drawn oppositions. Despite the fact that her shows were most often devoted to a single artist, Marta Gili regularly reiterated her opposition to the sacralization of art, artists and institutions (Azimi 2007). Gili stated that the choice of solo shows was not intended to glorify the mythic figure of the artist, but rather to give artists room to nurture their artistic offering. Monographic exhibitions are the best way, for Gili, to display the artist’s discourse, rather than the artist alone. In parallel, we raise another question: could it be that the big thematic exhibitions cited above only bandy about the names of artists, or their identity, to the detriment of their actual work? It can also be said that the narrow focus of monographic shows allows viewers to study an object in detail, and to accurately assess its context or the social and material conditions in which it was executed, whereas thematic exhibitions, which are by definition more ambitious in scope, must necessarily gloss over details more rapidly.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> “There are women artists who are now well known: Mary Cassatt, Frida Kahlo, Georgia O’Keeffe. But a close analysis of their status shows that they are not canonical, if their importance is taken into account. Rather, they have a reputation, they create a sensation” (Griselda Pollock, *op. cit.*, p. 55).

<sup>18</sup> Some critics assert that monographies “also take into account the clients who commission works, the places where the works are produced, and the artists are for the most part set in a broader context that calls upon all the resources of social sciences”. Sylvie Aubenat et al., *op. cit.* Katia Poletti writes that monographic shows can develop their contribution in all its dimensions and can delve into a subject and pursue complex work, instead of staying at the surface. See Charlotte Pudlowski, *op. cit.*

In addition, in her practice of monography Marta Gili declared her rejection of the “festivalization” of contemporary art, not so much in opposition to feminist studies as in opposition to curatorial studies and their vision of the curator as author, and even as artist. In contrast to what Gili considered to be use of the artist merely as illustration, in her exhibitions the artist has a central place and is closely associated with the curator in designing the show. In the context of the ongoing debate between artists and curators, exemplified by the figure of Buren strongly opposed to Szeeman,<sup>19</sup> Marta Gili seems to be wary of an overweening presence of curators and their globalizing vision. This fear of “substituting the exhibition for the work” also expresses a rejection of overly discursive exhibitions that aim to defend or illustrate a position (Montagnon 2010). Marta Gili defends a conception of the work of art and the exhibition as an object to be apprehended by the senses, rather than as a space for discourse (Azimi 2007).

In conclusion, if the curator takes the place of the artist, as is often the case in projects stemming from curatorial studies the problem of the canon has merely been shifted to one side, not addressed. Large group shows may be more diverse than other exhibitions, but they are often produced by a single curator, who vehicles a strong discourse or who is animated by a compelling inspiration. Indeed, the pantheon of the renowned curators mentioned here resembles the canon of artists: Jean-Hubert Martin, Harald Szeeman, Paul O’Neill and Georges Didi-Huberman are all white men, Okwui Enwezor being the only exception.<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Our review of photography exhibitions, in particular those of the Jeu de Paume, shows that specialized institutions, at least those in Paris, do indeed mount in proportion fewer group shows than other comparable generalist institutions. Looking at the three-pronged criticism of monographic exhibitions, coming from art history, curatorial studies and feminist studies, we introduce nuances and details to show that solo shows

<sup>19</sup>See, for instance, Jean-Philippe Uzel, “Le commissaire-auteur et ses critiques”, *esqe*, no. 72, 2011, <https://esqe.ca/fr/le-commissaire-auteur-et-ses-critiques> (accessed 1 December 2020).

<sup>20</sup>The star system of celebrity curators is widely recognized, and the monography written by Nathalie Heinich on the most prominent of these stars illustrates the phenomenon. See Nathalie Heinich, *Harald Szeemann, un cas singulier*, L’échoppe (éditions), Paris, 1995.

work in different ways, and do not necessarily all rest on the same social relationships of domination and submission. Accordingly, we prefer to stand back and avoid making a form—the group show—into a fetish object. Monographic exhibitions can also contribute to work to deconstruct the mythic figure of the artist and to address the issues of the biographical illusion and the universal nature of the canon.

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# “Untitled”: Photography as Collaborative Practice in the Creation of a Visual Memory of a Psychotherapeutic Facility

*Andrea Eichenberger*

## INTRODUCTION

In early 2019 I was asked to lead a workshop with a group of patients in the psychotherapy facility of Saint-Saulve, close to Valenciennes, France, using photography to develop artistic awareness and expression.<sup>1</sup> The request came from the Hauts-de-France Centre Régional de la Photographie (CRP) which had in turn been solicited by the psychiatric care pole of the hospital complex in the city of Valenciennes. The Saint-Saulve facility was to move to the Valenciennes Hospital Centre in December 2019.

<sup>1</sup>Translated from the French by Meg Morley.

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M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_8)

The aim was to construct, via a corpus of photographic work, a collective memory of this facility that had received patients and had been the workplace of staff since 1976. More specifically, the workshop was to allow the point of view and sensitivity of each participant to emerge, and to reveal a multiplicity of visions, stories and feelings about this place.

In the course of this project “(inter)stices” conducted by the CRP with a group of patients and therapeutic staff members from May 2019 to January 2020, we worked to develop collaboration nourished by dialogue, exchange of views and coordination during the photography workshop held at the facility for socio-therapeutic activities (Plateau d’Activités Socio-Thérapeutiques, or PAST).<sup>2</sup>

This chapter describes this experience and raises questions about this form of collaboration, its ambiguities, paradoxes and limitations, particularly in this context where the participants often feel they are subject to constraints and control.

### INCEPTION OF THE PROJECT AND INITIAL QUESTIONS

This project follows on my work during the last months of activity at the Beauvais Maison d’Arrêt before the jail was closed. Despite the similarity of their objectives—the creation of a “visual memory” pertaining to a place that would soon disappear—these two projects differ significantly in terms of their photographic approach. For the first project I was to photograph the jail myself, only occasionally interacting with the inmates; in the second project my task was to guide a group of individuals to take photographs with me.

In the first project the photographer brought an outsider’s view to the premises and life as it unfolded therein. I invited the inmates to participate, but given the constraints, they took part only timidly. They collaborated with me, but simply made proposals for staging scenes of their daily lives in the restricted spaces of their cells.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, they were not directly engaged in the construction of a memory of the jail. Rather, they perceived the project as an opportunity to reveal and denounce

<sup>2</sup><https://www.crp.photo/projets-interstices/>.

<sup>3</sup>I was not permitted to stay very long in the cells, and often I was accompanied by guards who supervised the photo shoots from start to finish. With the female inmates, however, I had a bit more leeway. The women guards sometimes left me in the inmates’ cells, which allowed for more natural exchange and effective collaboration. Nonetheless, unlike the Saint-Saulve project, I was the one who “pressed the button” on the camera.

conditions, or as a chance to talk about the experience of incarceration itself, and its consequences for their lives. This was reinforced by the fact that in parallel a psychologist was gathering accounts of life experiences in jail.<sup>4</sup>

Inversely, at the psychiatric facility, the participants had manifestly been solicited to contribute to the construction of a visual memory of the place. They were clearly expected to be involved in drawing up a history of the facility that was both a place where they lived and a place where they were subject to constraints.

To begin with, I had several questions: Would the proposed project have meaning for the participants? Would they want to keep a trace of this place? How could one imagine a representation of this sort of place? What direction should be given to the project?

### APPROACH

The major challenge was to bring the participants to appropriate the project aims for themselves. I had to find an approach that would give them as much freedom as possible within the confines of these closed spaces. In these facilities people are constantly subject to multiple forms of control: schedules, rules of behaviour, medication times, etc. I did not want the photography project to become yet another ordeal in their daily routine.

For this reason, the project imperatives had to be held to a minimum, both in overall approach and in time frame. Simply put, we had to take our time, the time to meet the participants and establish a rapport with them. And then we had to take the time to experiment and together find one or more paths to pursue in order to give an impulsion and direction to the project. This was all the more important in that this work touched upon their daily lives and intimate personal experiences in the psychotherapy centre.

This arrival in “the field” with an initially indeterminant “object of study”, the space devoted to exchange with the group, and the “situational character and work dialogue” (Pacheco de Oliveira 2009, 15) are

<sup>4</sup>This project was the initiative of Isabelle Marseille, a psychologist who worked with inmates at the jail at the time. The photographs and the inmates’ accounts gathered by Isabelle Marseille were compiled and edited by the writer Denis Dormois for publication: Eichenberger, Andrea; Marseille, Isabelle; Dormois, Denis. *Les mille briques*. Diaphane Éditions, 2018.

reminiscent of the prelude to an ethnographic survey. In addition, collaboration, participation, co-construction, displacement of the locus of speech, and the ethics of restitution—all of which were brought up in the initial discussions with the CRP/team—are terms and notions that are constantly used in the context of ethnographic field research. Today it would be inconceivable to conduct this sort of research without taking these aspects into account (Roche 2001). And these same issues arise increasingly in the arts as well.

By reason of the proximity of these two approaches, and in keeping with my personal choice to situate myself in this border zone of dialogue between art and anthropology, I decided early on to establish

*an ethnologist's attitude and to adopt a practice close to that of ethnographic field research, i.e. open to chance encounters, unforeseen circumstances and negotiations. In other words, I decided not to take the reins and lead the project purely as I desired. I set no ground rules. The project would take shape via experimentation and exchange with the group.*<sup>5</sup>

For reasons that I will explain below, I was not sure that I could or should take photographs in the course of the project. Accordingly, I wrote up notes throughout the period of the photographic workshop sessions at Saint-Saulve, and in the process of my writing, I both recorded a narrative of the experience and raised questions about the experiment itself. I was not familiar with the environment I found at Saint-Saulve. I had never approached the subject of psychiatry. Through writing I was able to stand back and understand the setting in which I was immersed. At the same time, I developed an organization and documentation of the photos taken in the course of the project that I coordinated with the written narrative.

## THE PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP AND THE MAKING OF IMAGES

As an introduction to the photography workshop, I chose to discuss the notion of place and the different ways to represent a place. I did not want to start with weighty topics such as illness, the image of madness, and the problems that these conditions pose for life in society. I thought that choosing another topic would enable the patients to see the project

<sup>5</sup> Notebook entry, 1st session, 10 May 2019.

differently, and I told myself that in any event the underlying issues would be present. Talking about different spaces and making images of them would be a way to get the patients to talk about how they had “taken root” (or not) in this “corner of the world”.<sup>6</sup>

To introduce the notion of place I prepared contact sheets with images of photographers who have widely explored living spaces in their work: Walker Evans and his American interiors, Claude Batho and Stephen Shore with their photographs of the spaces of daily life (Batho’s home, Shore’s daily life on the road), and Latoya Ruby Frazier, who staged herself and her friends and family to tell stories that are at once personal and collective. The CRP set up a small library of classic and contemporary photography books at the PAST site and the books were available to the participants throughout the project.

The workshops took place every 2 weeks on average, for a total of 11 sessions. Sometimes I spent half a day at the centre, sometimes a full day. In the days following each session, the group took photos that we viewed at the next session, in the form of contact sheets, proof prints and/or projected images. Five patients were in the project group from beginning to end, others dropped out or joined the group along the way. In all 18 people, patients and therapeutic staff, attended the workshop at different times. One patient was very interested in photography and although he was released from hospital in the course of the project he came back to the centre solely to attend the workshop sessions. Two members of the therapeutic staff were in attendance at each session, and from time to time, they held intermediary sessions to make up for the lack of hours allotted to the project. On occasion one or two, other CRP staff members attended the workshop.

<sup>6</sup>Excerpt from the project statement of intent:

In his work *La poétique de l'espace* (*The Poetics of Space*, 1958) the philosopher Gaston Bachelard shows “how we inhabit our vital space in keeping with all the dialectics of life, how we take root, day by day, in a corner of the world.”\* Guided by these questions the proposed project will explore the relationships that people have with the intimate and shared spaces where they live, that they inhabit on a daily basis in the common territory of the Saint-Saulve psychotherapy centre.

\* Citation translated by the translator of this article.

The full statement of intent can be found at

[https://www.crp.photo/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/note\\_Andrea-Eichenberger.pdf](https://www.crp.photo/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/note_Andrea-Eichenberger.pdf).

### *A Space for Talk*

As a general rule no one took photographs during the sessions. We looked at the work that had been done since the previous session and we talked about the photos and their form, but above all we discussed what they represented and evoked. After the first projection of their pictures, I wrote in my notebook:

*I am impressed by all the reactions elicited by the projection. We move quickly from the images to life experience and sensations. And then back to photography, and once more on to other things, and so on. Pictures liberate speech.<sup>7</sup>*

This space devoted to talk was fairly rapidly invested by the therapeutic staff, who encouraged the patients to talk more as the sessions progressed.

### *A Photographic Entry into the Premises*

The first body of photographs by participants (three out of five) is made up for the most part of pictures taken in the garden, a fairly large area planted with trees where the patients liked to spend time. Little by little, the participants timidly entered the buildings and appropriated them for themselves in successive sessions. As the sessions went along and we met together, as the patients took photographs and we talked about the images, they were increasingly able to take a look at the reality of life in the place, albeit with some difficulty. At the end of the project, they returned to the garden.

From time to time, however, it was necessary to call the project into question to prod the group into action. This was the case at the second session, when one patient questioned the project's meaningfulness, saying that she could not take nice pictures of such a place and that what she wanted to show could not be photographed.

*This patient had been forcibly hospitalized. She had been at the centre for nearly 2 months, but still did not accept the situation. She had just one desire, to get out and go back to her family and her adolescent children. Céline tried to show her how taking photographs could be a positive thing, how an artistic activity at the centre could be beneficial. She tried all sorts of arguments, but was unable to convince the patient. Samira replied that the whole thing made no sense to*

<sup>7</sup>Notebook entry, 2nd session, 24 May 2019.



*her, that she had other more important things on her mind. Then she asked us what sort of thing she could conceivably photograph.*

*[...]*

*Samira said that what she wanted to show could not be photographed. She cited the physical constraints, the straps to hold people in bed, the medication and drugs.<sup>8</sup>*

Samira did not come back to the workshop, but her words ultimately spurred the other participants to enter these “forbidden spaces”. And despite the hesitation of their co-workers, the PAST team did what was necessary to obtain permission for the patients to photograph an isolation room.

Indeed, it was at this juncture that one member of the therapeutic staff who accompanied the group also began taking photographs. In the wake of this experience and in light of the reactions of participants to these images when they were screened, at the end of the session, this same staff member told me she was worried about the direction the project was taking. She asked me if we were not straying too far from the initial project objective. She had imagined a set of photographs that simply showed the premises. The critical dimension taken by the images was an unexpected development for her.

*Maryse shares her concern about the participants’ position with me. She feels she is exerting an influence on the patients and guiding them more than is desirable. She also talks about the direction taken by the project and wonders if we are not straying too far from the objectives envisioned by her supervisor. She wonders if we shouldn’t focus simply on the physical spaces. I tell her that as far as I am concerned, I cannot imagine a place without the lives that make it what it is, but I offer to speak with her supervisor.<sup>9</sup>*

### *Between Description and Expression*

The project was called into question again at the fifth session, when a patient who had come to the workshop for the first time asked us to summarize what we had done up to that point.

<sup>8</sup>Notebook entry, 11th session, 17 January 2020.

<sup>9</sup>Notebook entry, 3rd session, 7 June 2019.

*Albane feels that we have done all there is to do, and that we have photographed everything. Her remarks lead us to think about the first images and their status as an inventory. We observe that with just a few exceptions we are still rather far from the register of lived experience and personal sensitivity. Some of the more intimate images lead us to this question: How can experience in this place and the feelings elicited be communicated? Céline [of the therapeutic staff] has a lot to say about what the photographs could “tell”. She tries to show that beyond mere documentation of landscape or architecture, photography could become a means of expression for the participants.<sup>10</sup>*

These first photographs described different places and certain activities in the centre, but did not tell the story of how people lived there, or not enough. It was not always easy to get beyond the surface of things. Often it was hard for the participants to go farther, for a number of reasons. I will return to this question below.

As we often talked about lived experience in the centre, near the end of the project a member of the therapeutic staff gathered the patients together for a collective experience, which she intended to photograph, in the garden and in the PAST room.

*Céline tells how she took the camera for the first time. One afternoon she organized a session with the workshop participants and also with other patients, with the aim of producing images that would make viewers feel the duration of time, of waiting, solidarity and sharing.*

[...]

*She asked the patients to choose a spot to have their picture taken. The favourite spots were the PAST and the garden, with its bench beneath a tree. [...] They created situations so that the group could share a moment together, and photography became a pretext to engender something like a relational experience. Nicolas Bourriaud<sup>11</sup> would say that “art is a state of encounter”.<sup>12</sup>*

## WHAT ABOUT MY PLACE IN THE PROJECT?

From the very first sessions I had questions about my role in the project. I was someone from the outside, who would have little time with the group, who had no experience of the place and did not know what really

<sup>10</sup>Notebook entry, 5th session, 12 July 2019.

<sup>11</sup>Nicolas Bourriaud, 2001.

<sup>12</sup>Notebook entry, 8th session, 13 September 2019.

went on in the centre. Should I take part as a photographer? If so, what should I photograph?

Between the second and third workshop sessions, two members of the therapeutic staff organized a meeting with the patients to look at the photography books together and discuss my place in the project. What I got was something like a list of tasks. One patient wanted to know how to take a nice photo, the others wanted to have their portrait taken. No one mentioned collective work or recording a trace of the centre. For me, this raised questions about the meaning of this memorial project for the patients.

At the following session I brought up the topic of portraits. I wanted to know more about what the participants expected from these images and what the pictures signified for them within the context of the project. I still do not know if they perceived the dimension that these portraits could take in relation to the work of the project. But each patient knew exactly how he or she wanted to appear in these images. They all wanted to have their picture taken in the garden, a place where they could forget where they were.

*The afternoon is devoted to portrait sessions. Ultimately, they all want to be photographed outside in the garden. They are no longer in the centre, they are elsewhere, they are not sick, they are Katia, Magali, Karine, Josué and Julio, that is all.*<sup>13</sup>

I worked closely with the subjects to make the portraits, as I habitually do in all my projects. They took part in the choice of setting and presented themselves in the way they wanted to construct their image. The portraits were executed unhurriedly, in a medium-sized format, with a tripod, to obtain the ritual dimension of the act and the exchange of glances that a chest-high camera position allows. We also used Polaroid snapshots to preview the shots so that the subjects could give their opinion of their portraits.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Notebook entry, 6th session, 19 July 2019.

<sup>14</sup>The Polaroid preview has been used by a number of photographers, including Marc Pataut. Pataut's work was shown in Paris at the Jeu de Paume at the very beginning of our project in June 2019, and I had a chance to speak with him. Referring to a portrait among his photographs, Pataut had this to say: “we made Polaroid control photos. Each person who went along with me was able to stand up for their image, their singularity, their difference”. Full text on: <http://www.nepasplier.fr/pdf/epicerie-panoramique/131-sonia.pdf>.

When I showed them the portrait contact sheets, the therapeutic staff expressed their hesitation about including these images in the exhibit. I noted the comments of one staff member in my notebook on that day.

*She immediately brings up the topic of the portraits and tells me that she thinks these images cannot be shown in the photo exhibit. She says that it does the patients good to see themselves in a favourable light in these photos, but that the portraits should be only a souvenir for them.<sup>15</sup>*

It worried them—all of us in fact—not to know how the patients would receive the portraits in the context of an exhibition at the hospital itself. Would the images shown at the psychiatric centre underscore for the patients their condition as “sick people”?

I had made prints of the portraits that had been selected and had given them to the subjects photographed. At the same time, I gave them a reworked version of the images, in response to this hesitation to include them in the exhibition. Not showing the portraits would be a way to protect the subjects, but at the same time it would once again make them invisible. I had added layers of white on the photos until it became difficult to identify the subjects. I explained to them that for me this retouching said a lot about their condition, inside the institution and vis-à-vis our society itself. It was a way to talk about subjection, invisibility, effacement, and memory, among other things. As we talked about this, each participant found a meaning in these “disappearing” portraits. In the end they all agreed that the portraits should be exhibited in their retouched versions (Fig. 8.1).

### RESTITUTION OF THE WORKSHOP PHOTOGRAPHS

The exhibition took shape as the workshop progressed. I had asked the staff for permission to hang the pictures on a wall in the PAST room as we went along, so that we could see the work mature en route. My aim was to design the exhibition with the effective input of all the participants at all levels, from selection of the photographs to decisions on the forms of reproduction. This approach had the support of the art centre, but worried the therapeutic staff somewhat (Fig. 8.2).

<sup>15</sup>Notebook entry, 6th session, 19 July 2019.



**Fig. 8.1** Portrait of Karine

*Céline [therapeutic staff] seems worried about the exhibition. She asks questions about the number of images, their size, etc. She says that each person has their own idea, and she would like to know how I see it. I tell her that it is precisely how they imagine the exhibition that interests me, and the idea of the work-in-progress wall is to be able to talk about their wishes and expectations and design the exhibition together.*

*[...]*

*I reflect that we did not talk long about the exhibition and I feel that Céline needs reassurance. I bring up the topic again. I talk to her again about the work-in-progress wall, and how important it is for me to have this space for discussion in relation to the images. I tell her that it interests me to see the exhibition take shape in the same way as the workshop itself: as a space where we can experiment and let things follow their course. The collective work on the display wall, confrontation with the images and the discussion that follows are all*



**Fig. 8.2** Work-in-progress wall at the Saint-Saulve psychotherapy centre.  
©Andrea Eichenberger, documentation

*factors that could introduce fruitful notions for the exhibition. Inversely, if the exhibition is framed from the outset we might miss out on some interesting ideas. Anaïs [CRP project coordinator] reiterates my views, saying that the exhibition is affected by lots of things. As a practical matter it depends on the budget and the space allotted by the hospital, but above all it will be determined by our collective searching.<sup>16</sup>*

The therapeutic staff were accustomed to more rigidly defined art workshops. The same was true for the patients. They were used to being guided, directed, assisted. This very issue came up in the course of a long conversation about the conditions experienced by the patients in the institution.

*Céline asks if one can be oneself when in hospital. Magali says no, she is not able to develop her personality in this place. She says it is not in her nature, she has an active character, and at the centre she is deprived of her daily activities,*

<sup>16</sup>Notebook entry, 8th session, 13 September 2019.

*which renders her inactive. Julio says that the centre takes charge of everything, they have no autonomy. Bruno adds that they are in a big machine.*<sup>17</sup>

I perceived that the patients found it difficult to take initiatives in the setting of our project, and this conversation was very important. Furthermore, we were in the presence of a team that was attentive and often questioned their own actions in light of our exchange with them. This enabled us to progress in a fruitful way.

We waited until the facility had moved into its new premises before deciding on how we would present our work; we thought it would be helpful to be at the exhibition site for this stage of the project. At this session I made the following entry in my notebook:

*I would have liked to see the patients more involved in defining the way their work would be presented. But time and budgetary constraints oblige us to move ahead quickly, and to some extent without the patients. And a lot of things have changed. The group is not the same as it was, there are not very many patients and maybe they want to move on to something else, or maybe they already have.*

[...]

*We talk about the photo projections: the content is to be decided together. Which photos do we select, and how should the images be assembled? How should they be shown? In sequences, by type of image? Céline suggests they be presented thematically (objects, exteriors, etc). Anaïs and I think it might be interesting to follow the movement seen in the different sequences of photos: from garden to the buildings, from indoors to life in the premises, and then back to the garden. I ask the patients for their opinions. They do not react. I insist, asking each person individually, in vain. Later, as we left the meeting, I talked with Anaïs. She pointed out that in the course of our sessions the patients had been more forthcoming when they could spontaneously offer their views. Thus, I fell into a trap even as I tried to give them a chance to speak out.*<sup>18</sup>

We had to find a title for the exhibition. We had a discussion, but did not reach a consensus. As nothing substantial had been found, in one of the intermediate sessions the group suggested that the work remain untitled. I suggested that we name it just that way.

*"Untitled" could be a powerful title, in that it evokes other images, those taken by Diane Arbus in a psychiatric hospital in the United States in the 1970s*

<sup>17</sup>Notebook entry, 6th session, 19 July 2019.

<sup>18</sup>Notebook entry, 11th session, 17 January 2020.

*(published in a book under the same title).<sup>19</sup> This would establish that people suffering from psychiatric problems continue to be relegated and confined to this day.<sup>20</sup>*

The presentation took the form of an audiovisual show installed in the activities room of the psychiatric centre. The portraits were printed on canvas,  $1.83 \times 1.50$  metres in size, and hung from the ceiling in the centre of the room. The large-format photographs were an imposing presence in the space. The images were somewhat blurred due to the transparency of the fabric. Creating a metaphor of encounter, this forced viewers to come closer, to circle around the canvases, to look carefully and try to see the people in the portraits (Fig. 8.3).

A three-projector slide show projected photographs taken by the group. A fourth screen displayed a list of words drawn from the discussion space that the photography workshop had become (Fig. 8.4).

The photographs made by the group along with the portraits and an account of the workshop experience were presented in a publication in the form of a file folder that evokes medical charts and the white walls of the hospital.<sup>21</sup> The publication was designed so that all the participants could keep a record of the experience. To complete the presentation, an audio recording of the workshop account was included in the exhibition via a QR code (Fig. 8.5).<sup>22</sup>

## THE CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES OF THE PROJECT

### *The Camera in the Psychotherapy Unit*

From the very first session of the photography workshop we found that the participants were subject to a framework that imposed some

<sup>19</sup>Arbus 2011

<sup>20</sup>Notebook entry, 11th session, 17 January 2020.

<sup>21</sup>Andrea Eichenberger & un groupe de patients et soignants du PAST de Saint-Saulve. *Sans titre*. Editions CRP/Centre regional de la photographie Hauts-de-France, 2020.

<sup>22</sup>The exhibition was initially scheduled to be shown in March 2020 at the activities room of the Constance Pascal psychiatric care facility at the Valenciennes hospital complex, where the patients and staff of the former psychotherapy unit were newly installed. The showing was cancelled due to the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown declared in France. The presentation was shown 1 year later, from 5 February to 15 March 2021. Due to public health measures, the exhibition was open only to patients and staff at the hospital complex, which was closed to all outside visitors at the time.





**Fig. 8.3** Installation in the activities room at the Valenciennes hospital complex.  
©CRP/staff, documentation



**Fig. 8.4** Installation in the activities room at the Valenciennes hospital complex.  
©CRP/staff, documentation



**Fig. 8.5** Project presentation publication. ©Andrea Eichenberger, documentation

limitations on the project. First there was the question of access to the cameras. While the CRP made camera equipment available so that each patient could have a camera at all times, the therapeutic staff restricted the use of the cameras, arguing that the cameras might be stolen, or that they would perturb the daily life of the patients.

*The CRP has made compact digital cameras available to workshop participants, for use during and outside of the workshop sessions. The idea is to provide each participant with a camera. This is where a contradiction arises. [...] Céline proposes that she keep the cameras, on the pretext that they will be safe from possible theft.*

[...]

*I intervene to explain that it is unfortunate that the participants do not have their cameras with them at all times, because they may miss interesting situations that can arise at any moment; furthermore, the spontaneous nature of taking a picture will be compromised. The idea of a “photographic diary” had been discussed earlier in the morning, and a control over the cameras would preclude this possibility.*

[...]

*We reach an agreement that the participants who do not have a padlock on their wardrobe will be given one so that the cameras can be kept safely.<sup>23</sup>*

At the second session the situation had not yet been resolved.

*The session starts and I learn that the participants had not kept the cameras. Céline explains to me that the staff had found it too complicated to leave the cameras with the patients at all times, especially at night, when a certain routine had to be maintained. There are timetables to be followed and medical treatment to be administered. The established order could be disturbed if the patients are able to take photos at any time. Then she turns to the repercussions of taking photographs in the facility. The personnel are surprised to see patients taking photos in the different spaces of the centre.<sup>24</sup>*

Subsequently a schedule of times was set when the patients would have access to the camera equipment. But at the fifth session, we returned to this issue.

*Talking about the experience of temporality reminds me that the participants do not have their cameras with them all the time. I manifest my understanding of the restrictions linked to medical treatments, but I insist that the participants should at least be allowed to keep the cameras during the day, that it would be productive if they could take pictures at least during the day hours. Céline tells me that it is not only a matter of restrictions, that the patients themselves avoid keeping their cameras for long periods, for fear of having them stolen, or confiscated under the system of barter that exists in the facility.<sup>25</sup>*

Ultimately, we gave the participants disposable cameras, with the advice that they were not expensive and that it would not much matter if they were stolen.

*The CRP has delivered disposable cameras. [...] I come back to the idea of photography as a mode of expression, as a way to talk about one's own life, one's experiences and feelings about the centre. [...] I add that they can keep the cameras with them at all times, on the premises and during trips outside of the*

<sup>23</sup>Notebook entry, 1st session, 10 May 2019.

<sup>24</sup>Notebook entry, 2nd session, 24 May 2019.

<sup>25</sup>Notebook entry, 5th session, 12 July 2019.

*facility. I suggest that they take pictures over time, and not just all at once as they have done up to now with the digital cameras.<sup>26</sup>*

Even so, the disposable cameras were not used more or differently from the digital cameras.

*The photos taken with the 39-image disposable cameras are contained in three contact sheets. Karine was the only participant to use all her film. Katia used just over half of her film. Bruno took barely ten photos. Contrary to our expectations, these small cameras did not afford more latitude to the patients. There are hardly any images that relate to living experience, the personnel or intimate situations on the contact sheets, excepting one or two views of a room and a picture of a plush animal. Inversely, we see more portraits.<sup>27</sup>*

### *Art Therapy Considerations*

An art workshop in a psychiatric facility is often framed as art therapy. In our case the photo workshop had a double role: to conserve a memory of a place that would soon cease to exist, and to provide patients with a space for talk and escape. Sometimes much of the time of the workshop sessions was devoted to talking about life in the facility and the feelings patients had about the place.

*The conversation with Maryse and Céline takes up a lot of time. We also talk about the status of the photo workshop. I tell them that I feel I am being used to some extent, although it is not altogether a bad thing, as I sense that the patients benefit from the talking room that the workshop has become. This seems to have the effect of a green light for Céline, and the morning session turns into more of a therapy session than a photo workshop. As the conversation unfolds I take advantage of slight breaks to bring the participants back to the project. We progress in a back-and-forth fashion, talking about things that in the end turn out to be complementary.<sup>28</sup>*

These conversations might be very enriching for the advancement of the project, but they could also be an impediment. Particularly because we did not have enough time to make headway with the photography.

<sup>26</sup>Notebook entry, 7th session, 26 July 2019.

<sup>27</sup>Notebook entry, 9th session, 27 September 2019.

<sup>28</sup>Notebook entry, 6th session, 19 July 2019.

Nonetheless, the therapeutic staff were very attentive and engaged in the project. The move to a new location loomed as a significant milestone in the life of the group, and the staff were very keen to have a visual memorial of the place when they left.

At various times in our conversations the patients mentioned the importance of artistic and cultural activities in this type of institution.

*Katia says that in her view the facility where we are is a special place. She compares her present experience with her past experience in another psychiatric hospital, and talks about the important role of art and sports activities in her treatment. She says that in the other hospital she stayed in bed all the time, and that just made things worse.<sup>29</sup>*

### *Attention from Political and Institutional Bodies*

A growing number of political and institutional bodies appear to be interested in this type of project involving an artist in collaborative work with nonprofessional participants. Several such projects have been developed recently, at different scales and with different audiences. In some cases, collaborative work is the condition sine qua non for the project. What drives this interest for collaborative projects? Is it the multiplicity of voices and open nature of the collaborative work that interests institutions? Are they attracted by the dynamics and scope of these projects? Is it the broad reach of the projects?

Whatever the attractions, there are a number of issues to be raised in relation to this approach. Some of them came up in my conversations with Anaïs Perrin, in charge of cultural development at the CRP.<sup>30</sup> For one, as a general rule, these projects cannot be implemented at all institutions. Some institutions are looking for models they can reproduce, but contexts may be very different, with very different sorts of protagonists involved. Collaborative projects do not conform to a single model, as they each have specific features. Institutions may hope to reach as many people as possible, over a relatively short period of time. But a collaborative project without real exchange with participants will not be successful. In other instances, a project may be subject to pressure from the administrative hierarchy or political entities, and be deprived of its independence. There

<sup>29</sup> Notebook entry, 8th session, 13 September 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Telephone conversation with Anaïs Perrin, 25 January 2021.

is also a risk that the participants may be used, in some way or another, to some purpose or another. In closing we should mention the potentially ambiguous status of collaborative work, and the question of authors' rights attached to collaborative work when it is disseminated and displayed. According to Anaïs Perrin, the notion of collaborative projects has not yet been subject to qualitative assessment. There are substantial questions to be addressed concerning collaboration and the hopes and expectations of the participants.

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## Reflective Portfolio: Invisible Lives, Universal Dreams

*Leticia Valverdes*

I have been involved in the making of socially engaged photography for over two decades, collaborating with participants in the UK and abroad. I initiated my first project in 1998 as a student of fine art and photography in the UK, working with girls living on the streets of Brazil's major cities. It was during that first project that I felt it was ethically appropriate to have an exchange and an invitation for participation and it was also an opportunity to start to develop feelings and a methodology that have guided me and permeated my way of working through collaboration since.

Those collaborations do not take a single format. Sometimes participants are photographing themselves by pressing the trigger. Other times I am. As well as photography, I bring my background in dance and performance as “tools”.

Before leaving Brazil, I had explored the world of performance and theatre in my teenage and I always admired the work of Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theatre practitioner and activist who founded the Theatre of the

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M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography  
as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_9)

Oppressed movement, an interactive and cathartic type of theatre, which invites people to actively take part, not be mere spectators. I incorporate the element of active performance side of Boal's work in some of the group work I invite people to take part on. It very much depends on the different groups' demographic. Sometimes it is opportune to stimulate dialogue and questioning of political issues. At other times an awareness of the body and somatic experiencing is the cathartic opportunity we need to bring change.

In all cases, the "photographed" person is invited to take some sort of action, however small. I see the lens as a compassionate "mirror" which always seems double-sided as I am myself often healing something inside too.

Together we explore role playing, movement, music, mirrors, garments, writing and more. Photography ends up being one aspect of our meaningful interactions and collaborations. And the outcomes are varied.

Some projects have been featured in mainstream media like the *Sunday Times Magazine*, *Evening Standard Magazine* and *Colours Magazine*, among others, and exhibited in established galleries like The Photographers' Gallery, Riverside Studios, Autograph in London and São Paulo Museum of Image and Sound. Some have found their ways and outcomes in different platforms and venues like JCDecaux screens around the UK, Sadler's Wells theatre, BBC breakfast and evening news, Radio 4 Women's Hour and Mildmay elderly people's homes in London, among many others.

I am grateful for each interaction, for being able to concentrate on socially engaged participatory projects. And for being an enabler, proposing collaboration. I hope to always continue framing and making meaning with people who might feel invisible to society.

In this brief portfolio I bring mainly my UK-based practice. Although, for me, it all started on the streets of Brazil over 20 years ago.

### BRAZILIAN STREET GIRLS, 1998–2000

While I was studying fine art and photography as a degree at London Metropolitan University in the late 1990s, I borrowed a department camera to return to my country of birth, Brazil. I have since done so many times in the past two decades. I grew up in a country of huge contrasts and as a sensitive child, I was always extremely aware of seeing people living rough on the streets. I raised questions to my parents and others, it always made me feel uneasy.



When I travelled to Brazil with this borrowed camera I went to see the most immediate homeless people I knew, not far from my parent's home. I soon realized I was uncomfortable photographing them using a more traditional, straight documentary approach.

With time, I ended up hanging out mainly with the girls who seem to dress down to protect themselves from unwanted attention. They would wear caps, big t-shirts and hand-me downs. But inside a public toilet and in front of a mirror, they would take the cap off and tighten their t-shirts on their bodies, play with their hair and make faces. I soon realized that they were not able to explore femininity in a way that a teenager might be free to do in a safe home. It inspired me to bring a dress-up box that I still had in my house and we played dressing up. From then on everything continued organically.

I went to other areas of the city and later to other cities. Always with the same clothes. We had dressing up sessions under viaducts, in shelters, on the beach, in parks, etc. It was clear that the girls did not want to be seen in a degrading way or place. They often took me to a beautiful public garden that they did not feel they could visit otherwise (Fig. 9.1).



Fig. 9.1 Leticia Valverdes, Elizabete in Rio

I became really aware of the invisible boundaries of a city. If you are poor, you don't feel entitled to cross certain limits or even go to a beautiful garden or nicer area of the city. The project grew instinctively. It was never about "before and after sessions" or about me "styling" them. The invitation was accepted enthusiastically as it provided a safe environment for role play and exploration. As a photography student, I wanted to photograph the girls myself, but it was natural to give them a camera too, which allowed them to photograph themselves and me. In retrospect, I think I was unaware then of the genre called socially engaged photography. In hindsight, it just felt ethically appropriate to have an exchange.

Neither was I aware of the importance of documenting this process more thoroughly and even keeping the photos they had done of each other. They felt invisible and unvalued and were so keen to have images of themselves looking great, playing brides and bride-maids. I gave most of it back to them and copies of my images of them. They taught me a lot and those interactions paved the way for everything else that I've done since. The project became the book *Brazilian Street Girls: Invisible Lives* (Valverdes 2000) and was exhibited in the UK and Brazil. Some of the girls proudly visited their exhibition in São Paulo Museum of Image and Sound and got the book.

### A DAY OUT, 2001

After university in London, I wanted to do more projects in the city that had adopted me. With a small Arts Council grant, I developed the "Day Out Project", where I invited Asylum Seekers to have a day out in their chosen site of London. It was a very personal invitation as I was also fulfilling my dream of visiting some places I had never been able to see myself, including the London Eye and a boat cruise on the river Thames (Fig. 9.2).

I was never a refugee and I never experienced the horrors of war. But when I first came, I was an outsider and did not have a visa for a time. I knew a little bit about how it felt not to have money and the language and how intimidating a big city can be.

The idea was simple: the project offered refugee families in London the opportunity to have a day out and to be able to take their own souvenir snaps with disposable cameras. An Afghan family chose to visit Buckingham Palace; some Kosovan children giggled at the Zoo; while a group of Rwandans went picnicking and pedal-boating in Hyde Park. One group



**Fig. 9.2** Leticia Valverdes, Afghan family visiting Buckingham Palace

took a river cruise, having not seen the Thames despite living in the capital for 10 months. Others flocked to the London Eye, the first time many could remember spending a day together at play. Given the chance, everyone would love to enjoy the same pleasures, have the same dreams and a sense of normality as the rest of us. For 1 day, participants were able to see themselves the way tourists see themselves, and to forget a little about their troubles. I hoped Londoners could see participants in places they are not normally seen. Asylum seekers and immigrants also want to be part of a vibrant city.

The project attracted a lot of press when it was exhibited at the Riverside Studios with everyone proudly attending. We had an Evening Standard journalist coming along for a day out with us to interview participants. We were happy that commuters would read about us on their daily commute. We also went to the BBC Breakfast News to talk about the families that had taken part.

The relief and enjoyment I saw on the children and parents' face in our various outings confirmed to me that I wanted to enable moments like this many more times in my professional life.

## REAL POSTCARDS, 2007

I regularly work in partnership with organizations that have thought out a clear code of conduct as regards the general safeguarding and protection, emotional and physical, of participants, in their approaches and briefs. I love those partnerships and I have been, for many years, an associate artist with London-based All Change Arts which has been for over 30 years, bringing artists and communities together (Fig. 9.3).

After the Day Out project, I invited All Change for a partnership as I wanted to be able to invite more groups to an outing. The Real Postcards Project was born.

True, asylum seekers arrive in a new country primarily needing support with acquiring documents, food and shelter, but psychological help is rare and just as necessary. I had by now realized how much need there is for a sense of normality. How much we all share simple universal dreams and long to transcend our realities, if only for a few hours. Through a series of meetings and conversations about their own backgrounds, the new city that was adopting them and more, we invited yet more groups to choose

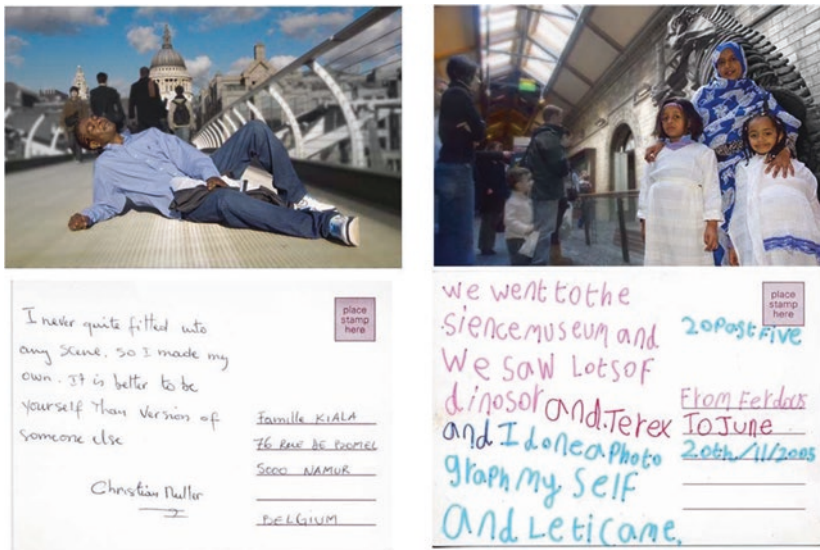


Fig. 9.3 Leticia Valverdes, Real postcards, London

somewhere in London that they had not felt entitled to visit, for various reasons. Every family or group had their own cameras and we visited galleries, famous landmarks and attractions chosen by them. There was plenty of excitement and dressing up and changing of clothes in museums' toilets.

Here we were crossing the invisible boundaries of a big city that I had found the homeless girls on the streets of Brazil had not felt entitled to cross. Subsequently, through more meetings, we created postcards with their chosen photos (often an image taken by myself as it meant they were all featured on it). They wrote on the back of the cards to families and friends abroad. We also printed hundreds of those cards and went back to the chosen sites to distribute them to the general public.

### PAINTED PORTRAITS: RETRATOS PINTADOS, 2011

Painted Portraits was a subsequent project created in partnership with All Change Arts. It was inspired by the tradition of hand-coloured photographs before colour photography existed and when painters used to offer their services to families wishing to own glamorous photo portraits. My granny used to have some images, proudly hanging in her working-class living room in Brazil as a symbol of status. Before Photoshop, the artists offering their services could make you look young, wear expensive clothes and jewellery you did not possess and even bring your dead back to life (Fig. 9.4).



Fig. 9.4 Leticia Valverdes, Painted portraits—Retratos pintados, 2011

In London for this project, we invited collaborators who were asylum seekers and had had their claims denied—members of the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) network<sup>1</sup>—to explore that old tradition while learning skills of studio photography and painting. We also worked with young mothers.

In a series of encounters, we looked into different styles of portraiture—from paintings by the “old Masters” to contemporary photographs. We visited galleries including the National Gallery and National Portrait Gallery and discussed different images. We then set out to create our own portraits of individual participants and their families in traditional studio sessions with the members of the group helping out in the photographing and lighting.

The resulting black and white portraits were selected by participants and, in painting workshops, each individual added colour to their own chosen portrait in the traditional manner of those vernacular ones. People who had never played with paints and brushes got involved with trepidation at first but grew excited with the results. Some added artefacts, personal objects or even more voluminous hair, veils and headpieces, colourful backgrounds, flowers and patterns that did not exist before.

At the time, many members of the NRPF group did not seem to have images from their past, having come to this country with very few possessions. As with previous projects the aim was to bring beauty, appreciation of themselves and their own families, and a respite, beyond the urgent need for food, shelter and help with paperwork. Together we created powerful portraits while encouraging a discussion and debate about representation, perception, dignity and pride.

<sup>1</sup>Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 states that a person will have “no recourse to public funds” if they are “subject to immigration control”. This means they have no entitlement to the majority of welfare benefits, including income support, housing benefit and a range of allowances and tax credits. The NRPF Network is a national network safeguarding the welfare of destitute families, adults and care leavers who are unable to access benefits due to their immigration status <https://www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/>.



## OUTCOMES

As mentioned before, the resulting work of these interactions tends to be presented in the medium of photography, but there is a recurrent invitation for somatic exploration, performance and group dynamic techniques in our workshops. I feel that it helps that I am aware, in an intellectual, emotional and somatic level, of the trauma and other life experiences the participants of various projects bring to the table. It means I can better bring the necessary tools (movement, breath, talking, writing, cameras etc.) to create a safe space for expression and joined creation. That's also the reason why each project has a different outcome as I actively and deeply listen to the desires and needs of different groups, with them opening my "box of tools" to make creation possible.

Outcomes can only ever be theoretical intentions at the start of each invitation for a project. Rather, they evolve and are redefined as the work progresses through weekly or monthly encounters and conversations. It's a real privilege to be able to concentrate on long-term projects and to partner up with multiple genre artists, something All Change Arts enables when I am working with them. In this way, we can respond and create together in terms that are not fixed in expected outcomes, but rather end up in various forms. We have created public facing performances, books, films or even forms of public intervention art.

Photography may be used or not, depending on what is felt necessary by the participants. Sometimes a group desires to be seen in a performance, dealing with personal issues such as, for example, facing growing old. Other times, a consensus is reached and the group feels that speaking up regarding a political issue and having their voices heard in a more public way is important.

A recent example of the varied nature of our outcomes is *A Dance for All Seasons*, an ambitious and magical immersive performance event which took place at London's Rich Mix in autumn 2019, created by All Change's Well-Versed company of older people, working with myself and poet Francesca Beard. The event mixed original photography, poetry, dance, music and sound exploring seasons and cycles of life—sharing original stories and inviting the audience to join in with the party (Fig. 9.5).



Fig. 9.5 Leticia Valverdes, Maria as Spring on a Dance for All Seasons

### CONSENT AND OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES AND A REMINDER OF WHOM THE WORK ULTIMATELY IS MADE FOR

I call socially engaged photography my practice as an artist. But I am very much aware that the resulting work is not always for wider public consumption.

One of the latest projects created with a group of vulnerable women and in partnership with All Change Arts and Pause,<sup>2</sup> another London-based charity, exemplifies that. In 2019 and 2020 (continuing a few months online into the COVID 19 pandemic) poet Francesca Beard and I worked with female participants being supported by Pause. Through various sessions, we did work that we were all really proud of, and that I would love to have on my website or portfolio. However, it was decided that, for safeguarding reasons, we would not be showing the results in a more public and permanent way like for example on the internet.

<sup>2</sup>Pause works with women who have experienced, or are at risk of, repeat removals of children from their care. <https://www.pause.org.uk/about-us/>.



From our first encounters, the women involved were invited to photograph their lives with their mobile phones or cameras we provided. Their choice was for those images to be in black and white as they felt those were more “classic” and different to images they usually posted on social media, for example. We met weekly for some months. They were bringing a few images and creating some poetry with Francesca. Most of the women participating were living in North London and coming to our meeting place in Islington, a place of contrasts. One day a participant said, “what if I was one of the rich ladies of the neighbourhood?”. The idea of creating alter egos came up. Someone within the charity had a huge “dressing up” wardrobe, some of the young women were good at makeup, others wanted to learn about using a bigger camera and studio lights in a professional setting. So, we ended up creating some studio sessions with dressing up clothes, make-up, smoke machine and music. Everyone got involved and each participant created their own alter ego with biographical details and characteristics. Most of the created characters were endowed with super powers. There were cathartic moments, where the images were taken in the space of a song that their character would have chosen and danced to. With Francesca, the women also created beautiful poetry about each of the fictional characters they had come up with.

From then on, their weekly black and white photo contributions evolved, as they created images from a place of fantasy, as if they were taken from the alter egos’ perspectives. Coincidentally, after these studio photo sessions, we were able to visit Cindy Sherman’s exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, which the women loved. They felt empowered with the fact that they had created such incredible work themselves, in a concept not dissimilar to the work of a famous artist like Sherman (Fig. 9.6).

The women involved were also empowered by showing the “alter ego” colour pictures along with their black and white ones in a private pop-up exhibition at Autograph, an institution established in London in 1988 with the mission of championing the work of artists who use photography and film to highlight questions of race, representation, human rights and social justice. On that occasion they also performed their poems to not many dried eyes left in the small audience.

After this event, it was decided, by the agencies involved, that the identity of the participants could not be revealed in order to avoid stigma and safeguard their future. Personally, as a practitioner, I had to deal with the fact that I could not show the resulting work in full with images that



**Fig. 9.6** Leticia Valverdes, All Change Arts project

revealed the collaborators' identities. Even though the women and I are so proud of the work, their safeguarding and protection is paramount.

There was some great learning there for me. It brought me back to the important question: Whom is the work for? Some of the work on this occasion was for us only, and the process of creating it was incredible and affirming. The studio sessions also enabled the women to create their weekly pictures from a more empowered place. The process becomes as important, if no more, than the results.

It reminded me that, in socially engaged arts, you, as an artist, photographer, cultural worker, are a facilitator and enabler for wonderful things to happen, and that presenting work to the world does not always take the same format. Sometimes it really is just about the process of creating cathartic work. We have to respect each project's outcome and where it goes organically, all based on an ongoing conversation where consent can be withdrawn at any stage by any part involved. A humbling reminder (Fig. 9.7).



**Fig. 9.7** Playing with Fire

## REFERENCE

Valverdes, Leticia. 2000. *Brazilian Street Girls. Invisible Lives*. London: Vision on Publishing.

PART III

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Archiving and Curating Collective  
Practices



## The Work Which Is Not One

*Charlene Heath and Patrizia Di Bello*

### COLLABORATING WITH THE DEAD (HEATH)

What is the nature of responsibility for a photo archivist whose duties include, in part, institutionalizing an anti-institutional archive? The photographic work of British photographer Jo Spence (British, 1934–1992), the focus of this chapter, was embedded in the resource material of Photography Workshop, an ad-hoc counter-cultural organization and research archive which she founded, created and maintained with her long-time collaborator Terry Dennett (British, 1938–2018). To be sure, Spence’s photographic practice was polemic; it was explicitly collaborative in ways that elide the individualized structures that shape cultural institutions, the art market and modern museum systems, all of which elevate single authors as artists, in an implicit effort to increase the value of ‘original’ works. After Spence’s death in 1992, Photography Workshop’s archive

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M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_10)

became the Jo Spence Memorial Archive under Dennett's stewardship in the original Islington apartment where the workshop was established in 1974. For the next 16 years, until his death in 2018, Dennett continued his efforts to fulfil Spence's final wishes of continuing to make the archive available as a nexus for the study and use of photography and photographic documents for social and political change. During that time, Dennett continued to amass, create, duplicate, list, file and circulate material in and from the Jo Spence Memorial Archive becoming, like all archivists, a co-creator of archives (Cook 2011, 606). Dennett eventually divided and deposited his holdings as art market material—now found in various cultural institutions in Europe and North America—and educational material, predominantly residing in university and independent community archives.<sup>1</sup>

Most of Dennett's archive has now crossed the boundary between the street and the sanctioned institution. Consequently, the material has shifted from the hands of the activist to those of the official archivist whose work is often mythologized as solely concerned with standardization and numbers of 'hits' rather than substance. According to Terry Cook, the archivists' profession, since the mid-twentieth century, has been severed from any association with the historian's; and characterized as a profession performed by neutral (mostly female) custodians and clerical handmaidens in servitude to (mostly male) researchers. The firm grip of this myth, he suggests, does a grave disservice to both professions—born side-by-side, as they were, and developed in a symbiotic relationship in the nineteenth century (Cook 2011, 601–608). How then, does the institutional archivist engage with the material of a photographer whose collaborative practice not only circulated outside institutions of art and state-sanctioned museums and archives, but who in fact viewed these institutions and their

<sup>1</sup>A correlation with what Walter Benjamin conceptualized as 'use' or 'cult value' in his famous 1936 'Work of Art' essay (Akker 2016) is evident here: several Spence and Dennett's original agit-prop panel exhibitions that perhaps, in Dennett's view, possessed an 'aura' of authenticity were sold to the *Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona* and the *Museo Nacional Centro de Reina Sofia* in Spain. Representation of the Jo Spence Estate was also signed over to the London-based commercial gallerist Richard Saltoun who sells components of the archive as fine art—both 'vintage' pieces and Dennett-approved limited-edition reprints from original negatives. In addition to The Image Centre's holdings, significant amounts of photographs, documents and reference material from the Jo Spence Memorial Archive can be found in collections at the History and Theory of Photography Research Centre, Birkbeck, University of London; Bishopsgate Institute, London; and the Tate Britain's archives.

spaces as detrimental to the utilization of photography within the (unfinished), socialist-feminist project of the 1970s and early 1980s? In other words, what are the critical questions the (female) archivist must face when dealing with archival collections that demand substance be contended with whilst also functioning under the weight of the profession's legacy?

Using the case of the Jo Spence Memorial Archive, this chapter opens with an attempt to function, in part, as a gesture of resistance to this pervasive myth by insisting that archival care critically depends on the redeployment of the historian-archivist/archivist-historian conception of record keeping/making.

It is already well known that Spence valued the rhetoric of the photographic message over and above all else in the work she made—indeed, it carried a message which was predominantly socialist-feminist (Wilson 2015, 179). Essential first questions must therefore be: are formal art markets, gallery and museum protocols and procedures capable of muting the anti-institutional voice of Spence's work and that of her numerous collaborators? And if they are—and I believe so indeed (Heath 2017)—how can archival 'stewardship' be newly defined? In other words, what strategies of engagement must the archivist first shed and what strategies must be mobilized to ensure the work's message survives in perpetuity? How might the traditional role of archivist be upended from one understood as neutral custodian, to one engaged in transparent, active records creation preserving not only the material integrity of Spence's work but, more importantly, its historical integrity? Two files in Toronto Metropolitan University Image Centre's Jo Spence Memorial Archive, and how I record and describe them, demonstrate how these questions might begin to be answered.

Spence almost always worked in an explicitly collaborative fashion and her photographic output predominantly involved using her camera to destabilize conventional modes of picture making related to popular fictions found in the conventional twentieth-century family album. Dennett's interests were primarily rooted in worker photography from the 1930s, specifically the activities of the British Workers' Film and Photo League and their priority of distributing images widely (Dennett 1979; Ribalta et al. 2015; Heath 2017, 2020). At the same time, both evaded normalized conventions of the original, one-of-a-kind 'fine art' print. Indeed, Spence specifically employed photography as a tool not for fixing anything—to use now-obsolete photographic terminology—but for

“unfixing” naturalized strategies of picture making and photographic documentation (Spence 1986a, 208). Her 1979 panel project *Beyond the Family Album*, for example, is about how little her family photographs told her. In it she reuses, restages, and narrates—therefore making visible—the invisible moments from her life and her family’s by picturing a story that until then had only existed in memory, or the ‘negative space’ between her family’s Kodak moments. Materially, nothing Photography Workshop ever did was ‘fixed’ per se. Their exhibitions comprised photographs and text laminated to a support. Simply hung using pushpins, these panel exhibitions were common as they were cheap to make, easily travelled and could be loaned for a nominal fee.<sup>2</sup> And they were loaned often, in part or in full, to not only galleries, but to whichever social-activist, feminist community group could make use of them, even to several groups concurrently. Users, much like Spence herself, could arrange the panels in various configurations according to their own aims in wanting to show them. This allowed the work to maintain its versatile, dynamic criticality without ever becoming moored by aesthetic categories of originality and uniqueness.

This first file in the collection at the Image Centre comprises over 100 high-quality colour photocopies and digital printouts that measure 42 × 29.60 cm. They were likely made by Dennett in the mid-1990s before the widespread arrival of the internet and appear to have been used for informal—yet sequentially organized and titled—posthumous showings of Spence’s work, and as reference for scholars, students, and other interested individuals visiting the archive (Fig. 10.1). The words ‘archive’ and indeed ‘archival’ and ‘archivist’—loosely associated with Dennett’s self-prescribed role within his own amalgamation of material, and my official, institutional job title—conjure notions of not only preservation but also permanence. Brien Brothman has in fact stated that the institutional archive is understood as a ‘fixing agent’ meant to “fix the. . . hitherto

<sup>2</sup> Spence was also a member of the Hackney Flashers’ collective and Siona Wilson briefly discusses their panel exhibition *Women and Work* (retitled at one point as *Women at Work*) and its appearance in numerous configurations, including in Spence’s autobiography *Putting Myself in the Picture*. She foregrounds the Hackney Flashers treatment of photographs as reproducible units of information, not fixed compositional elements. She emphasizes this as a direct reference to the proletariat amateurism of the interwar period and the use of the wall newspaper in factories and other contexts as a “temporary makeshift collage[s] of information and imagery that served as a leftist alternative to the mainstream press” (Wilson, 158–159).



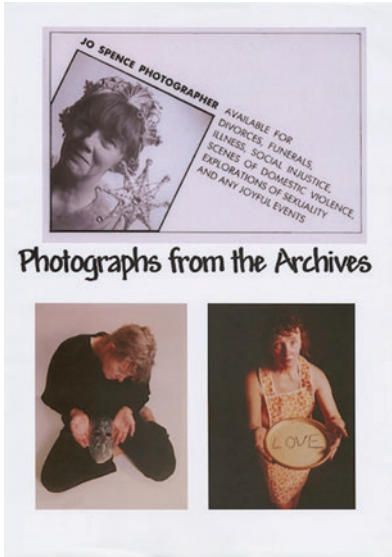


Fig. 10.1 Top left: Terry Dennett (British, 1938–2018), image ‘1’ from Photographs from the Archives, 1993, digital colour printout, 1993, 42 × 29.6 cm (AG03.2010.5003:0024). Top: Jo Spence, Photographer business card; bottom left:

undisciplined text – to fix it, and to fix it in place” (Brothman 1999, 79) and acts of preservation implicitly include efforts to set limits. Yet, as I will try to make clear, instead of setting limits in my work, I find myself involved in a continual process I think of as ‘collaborating with the dead’—what I understand archivist and historian Eric Ketelaar’s concept of *archivalization* to mean in practice. That is, a shift from a traditional engagement with archives as repositories containing stable, fixed records (with archivists as neutral custodians) to taking into serious account “*the conscious or unconscious choice (determined by social and cultural factors) that made something worth archiving*” (Ketelaar 2001, 133, author’s emphasis) to begin with. What is clear when ‘archivalization’ is employed as a strategy is that Dennett’s photocopies and printouts were kept in the archive for a reason. As he continued to deposit the original panels in institutional collections, photocopies and digital printouts—of no value as ‘originals’ in the art market—continued to be used in the same manner the panels once were: to open alternative spaces and audiences to an engagement with photography rooted in a desire for social change via community agency and education. They had an important function as cheaply made and easy to distribute showings of photographic work.

The second file in the Image Centre’s Spence archive pertains to the British Arts Council–funded panel exhibition *Children Photographed*. In 1973, Spence helped set up Children’s Rights Workshop and together with other volunteers (including Dennett—it’s where they met) reviewed

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Fig. 10.1 (continued) Jo Spence with Ya’acov Kahan, Yesterday’s Face (from the Triple Somersaults series), 1989; bottom right: Jo Spence with Dr. Tim Sheard, Love on a Plate (from the Unbecoming Mothers’ series). 1989. Jo Spence Memorial Archive, The Image Centre. Top right: Terry Dennett (British, 1938–2018), image ‘5’ from Photographs from the Archives, 1993, colour photocopy enlargement of magazine spread, page 9 from “Facing Up to Myself” by Jo Spence, Spare Rib, no. 68, March 1978, 42 × 29.6 cm (AG03.2010.5003:0028). Jo Spence Memorial Archive, The Image Centre. Bottom left: Terry Dennett (British, 1938–2018), image ‘17’ from Photographs from the Archives, 1993, digital colour printout of Jo Spence with Rosy Martin, *Infantilization from The Picture of Health?* 1984, 42 × 29.6 cm (AG03.2010.5003:0038). Jo Spence Memorial Archive, The Image Centre. Bottom right: Terry Dennett (British, 1938–2018), image ‘46’ from Photographs from the Archives, 1993, digital colour printout of Jo Spence, image from *The Final Project*, 1990–91, 42 × 29.6 cm (AG03.2010.5003:0063). Jo Spence Memorial Archive, The Image Centre

children's books for the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* (Spence 1986b, 48). *Children Photographed* toured extensively but unfortunately went missing; insofar as I know, the exhibition does not exist in any of the repositories of the original archive. The collection at the Image Centre, however, contains numerous audio cassettes that date from the early to mid-1980s. On one is a recorded answering machine message left on the machine at 152 Upper Street, Spence and Dennett's apartment and the original location of Photography Workshop. On it, a caller leaves a voice message indicating his interest in *Children Photographed* and asks for additional information about it. Halfway through his message Spence picks up the phone, but the recording continued, capturing their entire conversation whereby the caller asks questions which Spence answers, describing the motivation for *Children Photographed*, how it came to be, how the panels were organized, and what each one looked like. Although this is an audio description of what was a photographic, material creation, it is the only known manifestation of the project, albeit constituted in the mind's eye. For the archivist, this poses complicated questions and challenges but has, like Spence, pushed me to mobilize theory—archival theory in this case—into practice. By activating Ketelaar's concept of 'archivalization', I am forced to ask myself why Dennett archived this tape. We already know, for example, that the primary driving force behind the Photography Workshop's archive was to preserve the resources for ongoing research into documentary worker photography of the 1930s, and its strategies of engagement in the context of 1970s and 1980s socialist and feminist politics. Thus, Dennett maintaining the Memorial Archive was to preserve the essence of *that* work's future orientation by Spence and her collaborators, and continue its use as a source of information, consciousness-raising and inspiration. After all, their lifelong project valued, as feminist art historian Wilson highlights, the rhetoric of the photographic message over and above all else, and the maintenance of an archive as a resource for other, interested individuals and groups to make use of the material in the name of political change. In my archiving at the Image Centre, Spence's *message* is understood as continuing to survive outside the art world context via the photocopy and digital printout, and in the mind's eye via an audio recording, an artefact that defies the privileging of the visual above other human senses in western culture. In the official work of creating archival records then, the file titles of the two examples I've cited here shift from 'Miscellaneous photocopies and digital print-outs, ca. 1995' and 'Miscellaneous personal cassette tape, ca. 1975' to 'The photographic work of Jo Spence and

numerous collaborators, ca. 1987' and 'Children Photographed, 1973–74'. Given the non-status of colour photocopies and digital print-outs and recorded verbal descriptions of physical works in the modern art gallery and museum system, the strategies of engagement I have mentioned are importantly about emphasizing the works' rhetorical function; they foster a necessary, recuperative alignment with Photography Workshop's original mission.

This approach—an approach I liken to a posthumous collaboration with Dennett, Spence and their collaborators—functions as a recuperative gesture of Photography Workshop's polemic. Indeed, as the understanding of Spence's output is increasingly filtered through 'vintage' material subject to art-market and museum economies, strategies such as this are increasingly necessary. In 2017, an exhibition of her photographs was featured in a solo show titled *Memory Cards* at New York City's Shin Gallery,<sup>3</sup> accompanied by a review published in the September 4 issue of the *New Yorker*. The unknown author states that Spence followed in the footsteps of Cindy Sherman's (American, 1954–) feminine archetypes and cites work we know Spence made in collaboration with Rosy Martin (British, 1946–). Yet, there is no mention of Martin—the collaborative dimension of the work completely disappears.<sup>4</sup> Second, the word 'therapy' appears in the review twice: once to indicate the title of the work being discussed, and again to suggest that Spence's 'formal sophistication' is what renders her work successful, not its content. Content is "therapeutic and didactic" (Unknown 2017). Lastly, Spence's work is rendered worthy of note primarily by aligning it with an already-established product of the global contemporary art world's superstardom in the first two sentences of the review; according to the *New Yorker*, Spence's photographs are worth engaging with but only as sole-authored, formalist works that align with an American narrative of capital 'A' art, in this case, *The Pictures Generation*. Feminism, women's liberation, collaboration, consciousness raising, and the heterodox methods that comprised various approaches to

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.shin-gallery.com/Exhibition/?ex\\_cd=35&view\\_fg=P&site\\_gb=1](http://www.shin-gallery.com/Exhibition/?ex_cd=35&view_fg=P&site_gb=1) (accessed June 2021).

<sup>4</sup>In addition to Spence, the Shin Gallery maintains a stock of work by many artists and photographers. All the available Jo Spence work listed on their website excludes her collaborators: Dennett is not credited for *Remodelling Photo History (The History Lesson)* 1982, or *A Picture of Health: Helmet Shot* 1982, and Martin is not credited for *Phototherapy (Infantilization-Mind/Body)*, 1984.

radical documentary photography in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s—the genesis of Spence’s work—all but disappear.

In November 2015, I delivered a paper on The Image Centre’s Jo Spence Memorial Archive at the conference *Fast Forward: Women in Photography* at the Tate Modern. During the panel, an audience member who knew Spence when she was alive emphasized that in dealing with her history and her archive, her voice must be heard. While I do not claim to channel or revive Spence’s voice, I have tried to find traces of it at various registers across scattered pieces of her archive that still exist and are accessible. Major modern art galleries, museums and formal institutions will continue to ‘discover’ Spence’s collaborative and collective work, but I do not believe this represents a forfeit of her socialist-feminist politics. In fact, methods of ‘archivalization’ reveal the survival of her radical project in the archive. This strategy, as Elizabeth Freeman has shown, avoids any hint of nostalgia or disregarding of the past, and instead attempts to “mine the present for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions” (Freeman 2010, xvi).

### COLLABORATING AUTHORSHIP (DI BELLO)

In the rest of this chapter, I consider the issue of authorship raised by Heath, using the theoretical tools offered by the archive itself to think about the diverse and sometimes conflicting practices of authorship embedded in the materials now in the Jo Spence Memorial Library Archive at Birkbeck. This comes from a “personal collection” from the archive that Dennett had kept for “personal use” (Dennett 2012) and subsequently augmented by photographs and papers collected from Dennett’s flat after his death. Like its big sister at the Image Centre, it archives Dennett’s as much as Spence’s practices, as well as a particular moment in the political and cultural photographic scene in the UK, as photography moved from being a job, or tool for political activism, to being valued as art.

Photography has always had a complex relation to authorship, from nineteenth-century conceptualizations of it as mechanical (Di Bello 2018), to more recent understandings of photographic agency as never residing solely with the photographer (Azoulay 2008). Here, I consider briefly four areas. The first comes from the archive’s conceptualization of photography; the second from its commitment to operating in ways that are consonant with the political aims of the work; the third from the traces of tensions over ownership of collaboratively made work that can be found in

the archive; and the fourth is inspired by the co-counselling principles used by Spence and Martin in developing phototherapy, and by the feminist organizational principles of the Libreria delle Donne in Milan, Italy (1975-).

All photographic practices are inherently collaborative, because no one agency has ultimate control over the processes involved in *making* a photograph, before and after the shutter is clicked. Authorship is also in the equipment and materials photographers use, as is in the people who pose for the camera; meaning is determined by how images are used as much as by how they are taken. This is a theme throughout the archive. For Spence this understanding was rooted in her experience as a commercial portrait photographer, where each job involved negotiating a mutually satisfactory agreement over what would be a good (enough) portrait, given the material, cultural and economic parameters under which both client and photographer operated. Spence and Dennett were committed to making visible the agency of dominant ideologies of class and gender, as well as that of photographic manufactures, in over-determining all photographic practices, including those thought of as personal, neutral, or freely creative. In his job as a scientific photographer, Dennett had to be hyper-aware of the impact of photographic materials on making the most seemingly accurate or natural-looking image, testing each batch before use. Having worked with press photographers, Spence understood the importance of editing in the production of photographic meaning—from selecting negatives and cropping prints to sequencing and captioning. This was also one of the lessons from the photographic culture of the 1930s—John Heartfield photomontages (Spence 1986c) or the Workers' Film and Photo League movement (Dennett 1979)—that Photography Workshop was bringing to the late twentieth century, whether critiquing photographic history, as they did in *Remodelling Photo History*, 1981 to 1982, or the role of the family album, where parents construct narratives determined by ideology as much as personal history, that can later be contested, changed or read against the grain by rebellious daughters, as Spence did in *Beyond the Family Album*, 1979.

Collective practice rather than individualistic self-expression was also key to the project of developing photography as a tool for political emancipation, combining a Gramscian understanding of consciousness as social rather than individual, feminist practices of consciousness-raising groups, and working-class traditions of self-education and radical pedagogies where knowledge is created through collaborative, non-hierarchical

processes. Radical organizations even today tend to be run by collectives to make the means consonant with their ends.

The magazine *Camerawork*, a joint Photography Workshop and Half Moon Gallery enterprise, was run in this way, with no editor-in-chief and everyone pitching-in with all tasks however menial, with Spence, who was a trained secretary, as the only paid worker. These ideals were brushed aside, however, when ideological differences split the group. *Camerawork*'s legal set up under a Limited Company gave its nominal director the power to sack Spence (Spence and Dennett n.d.). The winnings from the ensuing Industrial Tribunal proceedings went into the production of *Photography Workshop One* (Dennett and Spence 1979). This is one example of the tensions created by working as a collective within hierarchical legal structures. It means having to rely on the integrity of individuals to honour a commitment to the collective that cannot be enforced by law.

While emphasising collaborations, the archive also includes documents that go against this grain, especially as photography started to gain a foothold in the art system during the 1980s and by the 1990s was beginning to operate within an art-law nexus favouring individual artists. Documents include a scan of a 1994 probate letter from Terry Dennett's digital archive, confirming that all Jo Spence's "Copyrights, Negatives and Prints produced during her working life as an Artist...have been passed to Terry Dennett" (Roberts 1994); a letter from Spence to Dennett detailing the conditions of this bequest; and copies of correspondence about tensions between Spence and Martin over attribution of their work together.

The conditions letter is a fascinating and contradictory text. It envisages the Memorial Archive as a community resource: "I want things to carry on as we did the at Photography Workshop"; yet by subsuming its name under that of "Jo Spence" it affirms her individuality as an artist: "I do like the idea of a Jo Spence Collection/Archive" (Spence 1992a), while also bestowing Dennett the power of doing things with work that has now become *hers* rather than *theirs*:

You must always have the final say how my work is presented and that goes for the captions and texts as well, if people disagree withdraw the work, I don't want you to "piss about" with middle-class feminist academics who think they know more about my work than the MAN I did the bulk of it with – namely, you. (Spence 1992a)



As editing and captioning are as important in determining the meaning of images as taking the photographs in the first place, she is effectively continuing their collaboration “from the grave” (Spence 1992a), but in her own name.

Spence also encourages Dennett to sell prints to fund the work of the archive; “keep it polemical and socially useful but don’t let that stop you flogging the odd bit of Fine Art” she writes, with a degree of idealism in thinking that it would be possible to maintain political integrity while operating within a neoliberal enterprise economy. Moreover, no provisions are made in the letter for the people other than Dennett that Spence had worked with, such as Martin. The authorship of their collaborative work had become a problematic issue, as suggested by a letter from Spence to Martin, in May 1992, scanned and titled ‘jo rosy letter’ by Dennett in his digital archive. In this, Spence seems to be refuting Martin’s claims over some of Spence’s phototherapy work—moral or financial it is not clear.

When I met you, I was a well-known collaborative and solo photographer with a well-established reputation and practice. I shared with you... all knowledge I had from technique to theory... In return you have always expected complete parity whether you earned it or not... We were never a double act, I at no time subsumed my identity into yours, nor did I have any desire for a ‘joint’ name to identify ‘us’ with. (Spence 1992b)

As Dennett later wrote to “Pat” [Patricia Holland]:

The situation in the radical arts has degenerated considerably since she [Spence] died, the name of the game is now almost universally competitive individualism, not the self-directed auto-didactic group activity that Jo tried to encourage. The question of who owns collaborative work has been an ongoing saga since we first tried to re-introduce collaborative working into the petty bourgeois practise of still photography... We take more than our skills and history into any working relationship creating genuine difficulty if that relationship breaks up and the partners perceptions of their worth and contribution, real or imagined, are at variance. (Dennett n.d.).

To elucidate the impact of this ‘variance’, this is how the work now known as *Libido Uprising* is captioned in a jointly authored article by Spence and Martin in *Ten.8* magazine: “From a series of 60 colour pictures on Libido work...sitter/director Jo Spence, photographer/therapist Rosy Martin.” In the same article, Martin’s work is credited to “sitter/



director Rosy Martin, photographer/therapist Jo Spence” (Spence and Martin 1988).

This is how *Libido Uprising* is captioned—to date—on the Tate website: “Artist: Jo Spence, 1934–1992. Medium: Photographs, c-prints; Part I made up of 13 prints, collaboration with Rosy Martin, Part II made up of 1 print, collaboration with David Roberts...Collection: Tate. Acquisition: Presented by Tate Patrons 2014.”

The website of art dealer Richard Saltoun captions individual images from the series as “JO SPENCE 1934-1992, *Libido Uprising*, 1989. Archival Pigment Print, 105 × 70 cm. Edition of 3, printed 2018,” but does acknowledge “Collaboration with Rosy Martin”, while the Hyman Collection of British Photography titles the same work as “Jo Spence, Photo therapy: *Libido Uprising* (part I), Vintage C-type print, 15 × 80 cm (5.90 × 31.44 in), 1989” with no mention of collaborations (this has been altered since writing this).<sup>5</sup> The non-acknowledgement of Martin’s role in the *New Yorker* earlier in the chapter is not just the result of uninformed journalism.

These variances in crediting collaborative work both reflect and affect the value of individual contributions to collaborative work, exacerbated by an art system that does not understand taking turns doing (menial) tasks—including operating the camera—or the co-counselling practices informing Spence and Martin’s methods (Martin and Spence 1985). Yet the art-law nexus is where the implications of fame and money in the afterlife of collaborative work are ultimately played out. Here as in the art gallery, the assumption is that the artist is a single individual. For example, the Artists’ Collecting Society collects royalties due to Jo Spence or her Estate as ‘an author of original works of art (including paintings, engravings, sculpture and ceramics)’ each time one of them is resold through the art market. The quote is from the UK government’s description of the Artist’s Resale Rights—note the absence of photography. Martin, incidentally, is not listed on the ACS website. As restated in the 1988 Copyright Act, available on [legislation.gov.uk](http://legislation.gov.uk), ideas cannot be copyrighted.<sup>6</sup> Suggestions

<sup>5</sup>The relevant links are: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/spence-libido-uprising-part-i-and-part-ii-p80411>; <https://www.richardsaltoun.com/artists/36-jo-spence/works/17422-jo-spence-libido-uprising-1989/>; <http://www.britishphotography.org/artists/19153/12335/jo-spence-photo-therapy-libido-uprising-part-1?r=artists/19153/jo-spence> (accessed June 2021).

<sup>6</sup><https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/48/contents> (accessed June 2021); see also Sanig 2002. Thanks to Alexandra Symons-Sutcliffe for help with the legal research for this.

and contributions by other professionals do not count in litigations over authorship, and the difference between ‘collaborator’ whose name can be lost in history and ‘joint author’ with a traction in law is ultimately determined by the balance of power between individuals (Kee 2019).

According to Dennett, Martin and Spence had ‘finally drafted an agreement’ after their collaboration had ended, splitting ownership of the negatives according to who featured as sitter/director, with the right to joint credits when each published work. As we have seen, how this joint credit is interpreted can vary considerably. The exchange of negatives and the drafted agreement, however, might demonstrate in law that a contract existed giving each the right to reproduce and sell prints without consulting or remunerating the other, because there is evidence of a ‘meeting of the minds’ (the legal term to indicate that parties are aware of the commitment they are making) and the negatives are the ‘consideration’ (the something of value that each party gets for fulfilling the terms of an agreement). In UK law at the time, what is invested with copyright (rather than moral right, to be recognized as author) in photography is not the print or the visible image but the light-sensitive surface onto which the image is firstly recorded—in their case, the negative.

To conclude, I want to suggest a way to think about Martin and Spence working together inspired by the Milan Women’s Bookstore’s method of collective work. This is based on ‘entrusting’ decision-making to pairings between a ‘woman who wants and a woman who knows’—more efficient than everyone in the collective having to agree on everything. Across different tasks, the same person might be the woman who knows in one situation or pairing, and the one who wants in another (Roe 2018, 49–73). If, as Spence asserted, she was the woman who knew about photography, and both knew co-counselling, was there anything that Martin knew and that placed Spence in the position of the woman who wants? Looking at the images by Spence they worked on together, I am struck by how they seem to show an elegance in styling the image, over and above the semi-otic significance of the props and clothes, consonant with Martin being a trained designer and the daughter of a tailor (Martin 2023). Take for example the phototherapy sessions in which they worked on their mothers. In the variously titled series *Photo Therapy: My Mother as a War Worker*, or *Photo Therapy: Double Shift/Double Crossed/Double Bind* (1984–88; the photographs are given different titles and dates in different sources, which might be all correct as referring to how they were used in different publications or exhibitions) (Fig. 10.2). The red of the headdress, highlighted

**Fig. 10.2** Jo Spence with Rosy Martin, Photo Therapy: My Mother as a War Worker, 1984–88, (print by Rick Miller, approx. 1992), chromogenic print, 93.9 × 60.96. Jo Spence Memorial Archive, The Image Centre



by contrast with the blue overall, matches the touches of red in the props used in the series, which imagines Spence’s mother having breaks at works during the war—in the roll-ups machine and Swan Vesta matches used during a cigarette break, in the cover of the *Housewife* magazine she is laughing at, in the Swarfega hand cleaner used to wash off the factory grime. These flashes of red give a simple yet affective visual coherence, a sense of design and vivacity that seems noticeable in comparison with her work before or after, even if equally powerful in its rough-and-ready rawness.

Beyond copyright and moral rights legislation, we still need to rely on the integrity of individuals, now archivists and curators, to honour a commitment to the collective that cannot be enforced by law, so the work can continue to be mined for undetonated energy.

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# Reanimating the Archive: How and for Whom? Archival and Curatorial Issues Raised by Collective Practices in Camerawork

*Carla Mitchell*

The Camerawork photography collective<sup>1</sup> was part of a vibrant and transformative moment in radical British culture of the 1970s. At a time when photography was still a relatively exclusive domain, it played a major role in developing a photographic practice that sought to democratise the entire production process. Photography was seen as a tool for social change that could enable marginalised communities to gain autonomy in the representation of their own lives. Its magazine, *Camerawork*, was a central platform for debates that questioned how art was made, in what

<sup>1</sup> Camerawork began as the Half Moon Photography Workshop and later changed its name to that of its magazine.

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Switzerland AG 2024

M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography  
as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_11)



Fig. 11.1 Radical Visions exhibition, Four Corners Gallery 2018

context, and for whom, and explored alternative forms of production, exhibition, and circulation. This chapter focuses on *Camerawork* magazine in particular, which is the best-known part of the collective's legacy (Fig. 11.1).

The archive of *Camerawork*/Half Moon Photography Workshop and *Camerawork* magazine form part of Four Corners Archive.<sup>2</sup> Both digital and physical, this extensive resource covers both the magazine and collective's early history from 1972 to 1987. It contains a rich variety of material that covers working life, anti-racist protest, feminism, images of childhood, international freedom struggles, and the politics of representation. It speaks directly to our own times, in which the rise of the far-right, racial injustice, a hostile immigration environment, and women's continuing inequality have politicised a new generation. There is a renewed interest in many of the themes with which *Camerawork* magazine engaged: social documentary, collaborative practice, and a focus on histories from below. It is an appropriate moment to consider how this legacy might inform

<sup>2</sup> [www.fourcornersarchive.org](http://www.fourcornersarchive.org).

contemporary practice and to ask what dialogues can be created between the past and the present. However, archives are social and cultural products, made up of histories that are privileged and others that are often hidden or ignored: what is collected and prioritised are political questions. The Camerawork archive, as with many others, emerges from a contested history. Within this context it is important to explain how Four Corners became its inheritor.

From 1976, Camerawork was based on Roman Road in East London, a close neighbour of the Four Corners film workshop. Both were part of the counterculture that emerged in London out of the upheavals of 1968: they formed part of an ecosystem of arts, film, writing, publishing, printing, and theatre workshops, which operated in collective and non-hierarchical ways and drew inspiration from the Women's Liberation Movement. For both of these organisations community arts and politics were intrinsically connected, from campaigns on women's work, childcare and housing, gay liberation, and anti-racism to liberation struggles in South Africa, Central America, and closer to home in Northern Ireland. During the 1980s, Camerawork and Four Corners collaborated on projects including El Salvador Solidarity campaign events, benefit nights for striking miners, and exhibitions and film screenings about the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp. The impact of Thatcherism, in particular, the cuts in community and arts funding following her government's abolition of the Greater London Council in 1986, put an end to much of this. By the late 1990s both organisations had arguably lost some of their radical edge but were important fixtures in London's arts scene.

In 1997, Camerawork received a total cut to its arts funding. The Arts Council encouraged a merger with its neighbour Four Corners, with whom there were strong historical links, but this proved unsuccessful. Four Corners then proposed a new organisation for both film and photography, and through a charitable transfer of Camerawork's assets it became the inheritor of its history. However, Four Corners did not immediately recognise the importance of this legacy. There was little interest in Camerawork's archives, which sat in forgotten cupboards gathering dust. Some of the original touring exhibitions were returned to the individual photographers, others to Shirley Read, a longstanding early member of the collective. The exhibitions paper archive was eventually lodged at the



Photography and the Archive Research Centre (PARC) at London College of Communication in the early 2000s.<sup>3</sup>

The nature of Camerawork's closure and the loss of some early touring exhibitions led to a prevailing narrative among some photographers that the organisation had destroyed its work prior to closing. This notion was compounded by an exhibition at Camerawork's gallery in the late 1990s, which involved the shredding of redundant copies of the National Schools Curriculum as part of an educational project entitled *Gustav Metzger is my Dad, AKA The Shredding Show*. This referred to the concept of Auto-Destructive Art and the Art Strike as developed by artist and political activist Gustav Metzger, who himself came in to help shred some of the documents. This myth of Camerawork's self-destruction persisted, a metaphor for the unresolved issues within its history.

By the early 2000s the status of archives had shifted, and there was a growing public and academic awareness of their nature and use (Breakwell 2008). Traditionally seen as fixed sites of power and authority, they were increasingly discussed in terms of their social purpose beyond the boundaries of formal archival institutions. The archive was no longer just a physical space but also a cultural concept. The expansion of digital technology offered new ways in which material could be accessed and reinterpreted, and this in turn inspired artists and researchers to engage with the tactile nature of physical archives. The idea of the archive as a space of cultural and social memory developed alongside the growing field of memory studies, which investigated contemporary memory as a means of remembering the past. Writer Hal Foster identified a new role of 'artist-as-archivist' and speculated whether this contemporary focus on the archive as a form of creation might be the product of 'a sense of a failure in cultural memory', in which artists sought to create 'alternative kinds of social relations' (Foster 2004, 22).

In this era of archival rediscovery, many organisations of the 1970s and 1980s began to document their own histories. Digital archive projects sprang up: the Hackney Flashers, the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, and

<sup>3</sup>The PARC (Photography and the Archive Research Centre) archive is now part of the UAL Archives and Special Collections Centre: <https://www.arts.ac.uk/research/research-centres/parc>.

Centerprise Books, among many others.<sup>4</sup> Four Corners began revisiting both its own and Camerawork's collections, and after discussions with early members, the idea of an online archive was developed, launching in 2018. The digital archive covers the period 1972–1987 and consists of the collections of Four Corners, Half Moon Photography Workshop/Camerawork, and a full run of *Camerawork* magazine's 32 issues. The website also features a historical timeline, contextual articles, oral history accounts by early members, film and audio clips, a research guide, and over 3000 photographs, posters, and documents. Material was digitised from PARC, the British Film Institute, and other collections. Physical archives held by Four Corners were housed at Bishopsgate Institute Archives, which provides a home for many radical collections.<sup>5</sup> This project was the first step in opening up Four Corners' archive as an active site for socially engaged practice, study, and collaboration.

The archive project provoked both positive and critical responses from former Camerawork members, as well as from researchers and cultural historians of the period. It is understandable that as a successor organisation, Four Corners was seen by some as an interloper in its ownership of Camerawork's legacy. However, the creation of the archive also reignited unresolved and conflicting narratives imbedded within Camerawork's own history. Early members found the archive project's oral history interviews both painful and cathartic, an opportunity to address long-maintained versions of events which many felt were deeply inaccurate. Their often-differing accounts raise challenges as to how the legacy of collective practice in Camerawork might be addressed.

From its inception there was a battle for the organisation's soul, and its history is marked by a series of ruptures. The Half Moon Photography Workshop (HMPW) began in 1975. It brought together two organisations: the Half Moon Gallery—the UK's second independent photography gallery showing socially concerned work at east London's Half Moon Theatre—and Jo Spence and Terry Dennett's Photography Workshop,

<sup>4</sup>On The Hackney Flashers, see Anon., "The Hackney Flashers", *The Radical History of Hackney*, 2013, <https://hackneyhistory.wordpress.com/2013/06/21/the-hackney-flashers/> accessed February 2023; On *Spare Rib*: <https://www.bl.uk/spare-rib>; on Centerprise see Tom Woodin, "Remembering 1968: the Hackney Centreprise Cooperative", *History Workshop Online*, 31st July 2018. <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/activism-solidarity/remembering-1968-the-hackney-centerprise-co-operative/>, accessed February 2023; and on MayDay Rooms archives: <https://maydayrooms.org/>.

<sup>5</sup><https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/archives>.

dedicated to the idea of a transformative community photography. The Half Moon Gallery had just held the significant *Camera Obscured?* seminar series, organised by Mike Goldwater and George Solomonides, which drew wide audiences to discuss the state of British photography. The seminars attracted Spence and Dennett, as well as Tom Picton, who was to become an important contributor to *Camerawork* magazine. Other early members of HMPW included Paul Trevor, Shirley Read, and Ed Barber. Spence and Goldwater became the organisation's first two paid staff, working out of a derelict office above the Half Moon Theatre. HMPW's ambitious programme included the creation of a new gallery, education workshops for local communities, photographic documentation of local history, public darkrooms, and, most importantly, a magazine (Fig. 11.2).

*Camerawork* magazine rapidly established itself as a forum for critical debates on the politics of documentary representation, the role of the photographer, and the use of the medium in oppositional politics. HMPW's Statement of Aims, published on the back page of the first



Fig. 11.2 Winter 1977: a meeting at Mike Goldwater's studio in Fitzroy Road, Primrose Hill. Mike Abrahams in the foreground. Left to right: Terry Dennett, Shirley Read, Jo Spence, Ed Barber, and Tom Picton. Photo by Mike Goldwater

edition in February 1976, set out its frame of reference: “The running of HMPW will reflect our central concern in photography which is not “Is it art?” but “Who is it for?””.<sup>6</sup> This was clearly influenced by Jo Spence and Terry Dennett’s interest in politically conscious photographic practices. The early magazine included articles on renowned photographers alongside alternative histories of photography, grassroots practice, and diagrams of DIY photographic processes drawn by Dennett. Critiques by cultural writers such as John Berger, Victor Burgin, and John Tagg explored the ideological constructions shaping photographic practice. As the use of larger images increased, a centre spread was added that could be pulled out to be used as a poster. The first was Robert Golden’s photograph of miners waiting for their shift at Kellingley Colliery, Yorkshire.

While all members were committed to democratising documentary photography, Spence and Dennett were fundamentally opposed to professional photographers: their primary aim was to open up the production process to ordinary people. Jo Spence’s much-quoted article in *Camerawork* Issue 1, ‘The Politics of Photography’, criticised photojournalists for their lack of awareness of the power relations inherent in taking photographs and the spurious idea of the neutrality of the photographer, which resulted in portrayals of working-class people as passive victims (Spence 1976). As a counter-approach she proposed the idea of a community photography, through which the medium could be used by people as a positive tool for social change. For Spence and Dennett, the politics of photography were central—the production of images was only one element in a radical practice of engagement in critical learning, production, and exhibition with working-class and minority groups. This approach ran counter to the aims of the other founders, who were primarily interested in taking and exhibiting photographs in the humanist tradition of Bill Brandt or Paul Strand. The early magazine’s pluralist, open, and improvisational approach represented the broad and sometimes conflicting interests of its collective editors, held together in a creative tension. The core group worked for free, putting together the magazine during marathon all-night folding sessions alongside regular volunteers. Mike Goldwater remembers the atmosphere of the early magazine:

a dynamic energy that came from working on the magazine, putting it out, doing the folding sessions, getting everything together from the *Camerawork* meetings, editing copy, coming up with ideas, and that

<sup>6</sup> *Camerawork* 1, February 1976.

within the context of finding a new building, planning darkrooms, planning the gallery, running some workshops, getting on with each other.<sup>7</sup>

But there were frictions in the collective's decision-making processes from the start, as Jo Spence recalled. Mike Goldwater, Tom Picton, and herself were the main editors, although everyone who worked on the magazine was credited equally. There was an informal hierarchy of control despite the appearance of collective practice and an unacknowledged gendered division of labour: the men did not type.<sup>8</sup> Liz Heron, a friend of Spence's and a fellow member of the Hackney Flashers collective, remembers a male-dominated environment in which women struggled to assert feminist approaches within the magazine:

I wrote a piece about Brassai's Paris by Night... And I was quite critical of those pictures from a feminist perspective... There were some members of the editorial board who weren't too happy with this article. Because Brassai was regarded as a major figure, one of the great photographers... There were women who were sort of involved, but they were much more marginal in terms of coming to meetings. So it was essentially Jo and I who kept the feminist argument to the forefront.<sup>9</sup>

With their office in Alie Street due for demolition, the Half Moon Photography Workshop moved to a large disused building on Roman Road, Bethnal Green. Here they began a building project to create a gallery and darkrooms while continuing with the magazine, touring exhibitions, and workshops. But growing personal and ideological differences within the group came to a head in summer 1977, leading to a critical split. Despite being a collective, HMPW was the legal employer. Mike Goldwater as one of its directors fired Jo Spence from her job, while Terry Dennett and Liz Heron were asked to leave by other members. Some found Dennett's uncompromising politics difficult to work with, and there were other personality clashes. Spence and Dennett were deeply bitter that the magazine they had helped to start had been taken from them. Spence went to an industrial tribunal and won, using the compensation money to publish *Photography/Politics I* (Dennett and Spence 1979),

<sup>7</sup>Mike Goldwater interviewed by Carla Mitchell, 2018. Four Corners Archive.

<sup>8</sup>Jo Spence interviewed by Val Williams, 1991. British Library Oral History of British Photography.

<sup>9</sup>Liz Heron interviewed by Carla Mitchell, 2018. Four Corners Archive.

which built on many of the ideas explored in the first seven issues of *Camerawork*. Mike Goldwater describes the split as ‘an inglorious episode’ and regrets it to this day, but says:

in any kind of collective there has to be give and take. You can’t always get your own way [...] it’s about [...] moving the group forward together, with a single common goal with everybody making their individual inputs with their own skill set and ideas.<sup>10</sup>

After Spence and Dennett’s departure, the magazine continued with a series of themed issues. *Camerawork* 8’s coverage of the ‘Battle of Lewisham’ demonstration against the far-right National Front’s march from New Cross in 1977, with dramatic photographs of pitched battles between demonstrators and the police, revealed a very different picture of events from those shown by the national media. National Front leader John Tyndall’s speech was republished in its entirety alongside ‘What are you taking pictures for?’, a series of interviews with protest photographers. Derek Boshier’s graphic reworking of the right-wing *Daily Mail*’s front page brilliantly dissected its use of violent rhetoric against the demonstrators. The issue represented an excellent example of the use of socially concerned, humanist photography. However, documentary photographers were increasingly seen as outdated, and conflicts between professional photographers and those more interested in the politics of representation continued within the magazine collective. Jill Pack, who worked as a fundraising administrator at HMPW in 1978 remembered:

there was the tension from the people who had set up the magazine, who were documentary photographers, and people like me, who dabbled, and were not professionals by any means, but came in with a theoretical perspective that was very different from the theoretical or lack of theoretical perspective that those professional documentary photographers had.<sup>11</sup>

By the early 1980s these tensions had grown, as the magazine’s focus moved away from issues of class towards those of feminism, identity, and postmodern theories of representation. From issue 20 the magazine’s new masthead stated that it was ‘a journal of the politics of photography’. The

<sup>10</sup> Mike Goldwater interview, *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> Jill Pack interviewed by Carla Mitchell (2018). Four Corners’ Archive.

editorial read: ‘We must pursue this politics of the image into all the struggles that affect our lives: struggles over class, patriarchy, power, knowledge, communication and education’. This went too far for the Arts Council, who reminded *Camerawork* that its funding subsidy was on the basis of its attention to photography, not as a platform for political comment. By issue 25 the masthead had changed to the neutral statement that ‘*Camerawork* aims to promote debate and discussion on politics, photography and representation’.

Early copies of *Camerawork* had depicted documentary images of working-class communities in articles on Clydeside ship builders, miners, and oil rig and factory workers, but such stories no longer appeared in the magazine. A shift to an emphasis on cultural politics was in part a response to the British Left’s retreat from class—the result of successive election wins by Thatcher and the defeat of trade unionism highlighted by the failure of the Miners’ Strike in 1985. Feminist critiques and semiotic theories of representation likewise undermined the primacy of realism: documentary was increasingly seen as a naïve form which could not get beyond the surface realism of the image. Artists turned to staged photographs, deconstructed imagery, and text to create radical messages. Don Slater, a *Camerawork* editorial board member from 1980, recalls heated discussions within the magazine collective. For Slater it was ‘the politics of representation’ that was important, not ‘the representation of politics’.<sup>12</sup> These debates were strongly influenced by debates on gender which challenged traditional hierarchies. There was also a suspicion of expertise:

With some irony we would talk about is it better to be Red or an Expert, or better to be an Expert than Red? On the whole I think Red won out. It was more important to formulate things in terms of democratic organisations than to actually know anything about photography... In the end you basically got the work done by trying to go around the back of the collective, otherwise nothing would get done.<sup>13</sup>

*Camerawork* magazine was increasingly staffed by administrators and cultural media theorists with a diminishing involvement of practising photographers. This situation led to a second organisational rupture with the departure of original members Mike Goldwater, Tom Picton, Paul Trevor,

<sup>12</sup> Don Slater, interviewed by Carla Mitchell (2018). Four Corners Archive.

<sup>13</sup> Don Slater, *ibid.*

and Ed Barber. They all left by 1980, deeply disappointed that the magazine and organisation they had helped to create had, in their eyes, been killed by theory. The magazine continued to struggle with its internal politics, formally ending its collective structure in 1984 with the appointment of an editor: first Kathy Myers and then Liz Wells. Later issues changed direction several times; from issue 29 the format was altered to an A4 magazine style. Production faltered; however, lack of funding and loss of direction could not be overcome, and the magazine folded in 1985 after issue 32. By then it had lost much of its readership to *Ten-8*, which published work by many of those previously involved with *Camerawork*.<sup>14</sup>

How does this history inform attempts to reanimate the *Camerawork* archive today? A starting point might be to acknowledge issues of obfuscation, omission, misattribution, and the privileging of certain voices in the *Camerawork* magazine legacy and to ask how these relate to its history and practice. Archive project discussions with Paul Trevor, Mike Goldwater, and Ed Barber revealed how they felt erased from their own history in the erroneously named book, *The Camerawork Essays*, edited by Jessica Evans with the organisation's then-director Barbara Hunt (Evans 1997). Until recently the only publication to provide an overview of the magazine's history, this comprised a selection of *Camerawork* magazine articles by John Berger, Victor Burgin, John Tagg, Don Slater, Kathy Myers, and others, with a response written by each contributor to their original articles. Early members felt that the book represented a travesty of the magazine, which entirely omitted its early work, and focused almost exclusively on its later engagement with media and cultural studies. In her introduction, Evans certainly misunderstood the nature of *Camerawork's* collective production process, describing the magazine's pluralist approach as 'an intriguing problem of editorial coherency' and the feel of the magazine which, 'even within the same issue, oscillated between hardline Marxism, humanist individualism, and the rhetoric of the 1960s' counter-culture – often with blissful unawareness' (Ibid 21). The central role played by Jo Spence in the first seven issues was ignored, and three of the four remaining co-founders—Paul Trevor, Mike Goldwater, and Tom Picton—were not interviewed. *Camerawork* photographer Peter Marshall concluded that the book 'represents a consolidation at an intellectual level of the actual take-over of *Camerawork* that occurred in its later years'

<sup>14</sup> *Ten-8* magazine was published in Birmingham from 1979 until 1993.



(Marshall n.d.). For Paul Trevor, this ‘dry, obfuscating book’ was ‘an exercise in that 90s phenomenon – repackaging’ (Trevor 1998).

Another issue within archival collections is misattribution, often the result of factual error but sometimes made for more deliberate reasons. Terry Dennett, as the guardian of his and Spence’s legacy, appears to have asserted a particular version of events, perhaps to right the wrong of their expulsion from Half Moon Photography Workshop. Laminated exhibition panels of a 1977 HMPW exhibition, *The Thirties & Today*, acquired from Dennett by the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, are credited to Spence and Dennett’s Photography Workshop. A similar misattribution is repeated in the Reina Sofia’s 2015 exhibition catalogue of *Not Yet: On the Reinvention of Documentary and the Critique of Modernism*, which states that Dennett and Spence ran the Half Moon Gallery and *Camerawork* magazine until 1977 (Ribalta 2015). Recent work by Mathilde Bertrand, Noni Stacey, and others has done much to readdress this history and to give a voice to the main protagonists within the early histories of Half Moon Gallery, Half Moon Photography Workshop, and *Camerawork* magazine (Bertrand 2018; Stacey 2020).

Curators of archives shouldn’t be gatekeepers of fixed legacies: archives, like memory itself, interact with the social and political world in which they exist. In their work on the politics of memory, Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone caution that:

Human memory is not a sealed box containing a pure record of events, uncontaminated by the outside world; individual memories are themselves formed in constant interaction with the cultural sphere, acquiring new inputs and interpretations, changing over time. (Hodgkin and Radstone 2005, 131–32)

Narratives by *Camerawork* members and collaborators are partial and multifarious, involving public and personal memories that are often incompletely acknowledged or recalled. Bringing such memories into an archive means recognising that they can be complex and fragmentary, and any reanimation of such archival material needs to enable contradictory voices and interpretations. Dagmar Brunow talks of the idea of the self-reflective archive and archivist who can make interventions to counter particular narratives, re-contextualise material, and create spaces in which new cultural connections can be made. The digitisation of archival collections is an important means of countering forgetting, but ‘cultural memory is

dependent on continuous remediation and recontextualization' (Brunow 2018). Oral histories are one means of achieving this, though they can only cover a fraction of people involved at the time. In the 'Behind the Lens' series of interviews with former *Camerawork* photographers as part of Four Corners' digital archive, original participants speak about their particular involvement—from producing issues of *Camerawork* magazine, to the creation of laminated touring exhibitions, to engaging in debates on the politics of documentary.<sup>15</sup> These interviews provide opportunities for reappraisal of the original exhibitions, articles, and working practices from the contributors' present-day perspectives.

The development of the *Camerawork* online archive has taken place in the context of a rediscovery of 1970s radical arts practices over the past decade by archives, galleries, and in academia. For a long time, it seemed that oppositional history was dead, and any art that struggled to be directly political was deeply unfashionable. Today we live in an era in which the impact of neoliberalism and unregulated globalisation, issues of feminism, racism, decolonisation, and the challenges of climate change demand new forms of visual resistance. Jorge Ribalta suggests that historical parallels can be drawn between the 1930s' and 1970s' documentary culture, which emerged as artistic responses to major crises of twentieth-century capitalism, and speculates whether the global financial crisis of 2008 might equally produce 'a new documentary experience' (Ribalta 2014).

The *Camerawork* magazine collective certainly looked to the 1930s as a source of inspiration for its radical cultural practice. Spence and Dennett drew on the history of the British Workers' Film and Photography movement, which produced explicitly anti-capitalist work. Their approach to the past mirrored that of History Workshop which was devoted to the development of 'history from below': the study of ordinary people's lives as an inspiration for political struggles (Taylor 2012). Radical photographic traditions were a recurrent theme both in *Camerawork* and in the Half Moon Photography Workshop touring exhibitions. The discovery of Edith Tudor-Hart's images of unemployment, slums, and protest in the Rhondda in *Camerawork* 19 suggested 'a lost radical tradition within

<sup>15</sup>See 'Behind the Lens' interviews conducted by Four Corners members, with Daniel Meadows, Derek Smith, Mike Goldwater, Paul Trevor, Tricia Widdison, George Plemper and Nick Hedges.

<https://www.fourcornersarchive.org/news-and-events/behind-the-lens-a-new-series-of-archive-interviews>.

photography in this country', while the exhibitions *To Build Jerusalem* and *The Thirties & Today* presented readers with little-known images of working-class life. *Camerawork* 11 dedicated an issue to Mass Observation's investigation of ordinary people's experiences and the use of personal testimony and reportage, alongside Humphrey Spender's *The Worktown Project* photographs, which had been unseen for 40 years. In a similar way, the rediscovery of John Heartfield's 1930s political photomontage was reanimated by Peter Kennard in his artwork against Thatcherism and nuclear weapons, in the Hackney Flashers' feminist agitprop, and in the photomurals of Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson. HMPW exhibitions included *Photomontage Now* (Peter Kennard 1977), *A Document on Chile* (Peter Kennard and Ric Sissons 1978), *No Nuclear Weapons* (Mike Abrahams and Peter Kennard 1980), and *Political Photomontage After Heartfield* (1982) and *The CND Picture Show* (Ed Barber and Peter Kennard 1983).

Looking at the politically engaged work of the 1970s today produces a similar sense of rediscovery. The idea of community photography as expressed by Jo Spence, Paul Carter of Blackfriars Photography Project, Philip Wolmuth of North Paddington Community Darkroom, and others is arguably one of *Camerawork*'s most important legacies. These kinds of projects, Wolmuth argued, 'are in continuous contact with the experiences of the community which is photographing and being photographed, and can relate their work to the experienced past, present, and future of that community' (Wolmuth 1980, 12). *Camerawork* 13, 'Photography in the Community', highlighted a wide range of such community photography initiatives in schools, youth clubs, and community groups.

Some at *Camerawork* saw community photography as a utopian ideal; others like Don Slater argued that it could be part of a political process in which people could represent their own lives and work collectively. His statement that a 'good community photograph' is one that 'keeps the least possible distance between those who produce and those who consume images' still holds today (Slater 1980, 8). Early Half Moon Photography Workshop touring exhibitions represented a range of such community-led approaches. Designed largely by Ed Barber, HMPW toured 50 exhibitions around Britain and abroad from 1976 to 1984. Created on laminated panels using purpose-designed laundry boxes, they were exhibited in non-traditional spaces: community centres, launderettes, factory canteens, and even a prison. These enabled thousands of people to view photographic work for the first time and arguably helped transform the cultural status of

photography as a whole. They included Derek Smith's photographs of Teeside industrial communities, Chick Chalmers' documentation of life on the Orkney Islands a group show on the Israeli occupation of Beirut in 1982/83, and Nick Hedges' images of factory workers in the West Midlands—exhibited in the works canteens that he visited. Hedges documented a new generation of Asian factory workers and gave a voice to his subjects through taped interviews, a similar approach to Centerprise's *Working Lives* project (Centreprise Publishing Project 1976, 1979).<sup>16</sup>

Today there is a revival of documentary practice through initiatives such as the Socially Engaged Photography Network at Open Eye Gallery and the periodical 'Photography for Whom?' edited by photographer and educator Anthony Luvera (2019, 2021). Museums and galleries have also entered this territory. The Hackney Flashers made a comeback at the Hayward Gallery as part of the *History is Now* exhibition in 2015; the Barbican's installation *How We Live Now* explored public space and the designed environment inspired by the radical 1980s feminist architecture co-operative Matrix; and events such as 'Performance and Politics in the 1970s' at the Whitechapel Gallery (May 2020) and Kettle's Yard's online series 'Grassroots: Art Making and Political Struggle' (April 2021) engaged broad audiences of artists, students, and academics. Recent exhibitions at the Tate have focused on post-war British documentary photography, while Gerry Badger's illustrated publication, *Another Country: British Documentary Photography Since 1945* (Badger 2022), offers a valuable overview. The impact of the Black Lives Matter movement has further propelled these initiatives, with exhibitions such as *War Inna Babylon: The Community's Struggle for Truth and Rights*, shown at the ICA in 2021, curated by the London-based racial advocacy and community organisation, Tottenham Rights. A collection of films from the 1980s Black Film Workshop Movement feature in *Second Sight*, a touring programme of black British filmmaking curated by the Independent Cinema Office with LUX.

There are risks in taking this kind of material into gallery contexts, and cultural revivals can be seen as a performative activism. Political agitprop risks becoming just another artefact to hang on a gallery wall—the incongruous display of the Hackney Flashers' work, *Who's Holding the Baby*, as part of the Hayward Gallery's *History Is Now* exhibition in 2015 is an example. As Michael Ann Mullen, a photographer in the group, said, 'It

<sup>16</sup> See also <https://www.hackneyautobiography.org.uk>.

was never made as an art installation – it was more an agitprop tool to raise consciousness of women with families to demand affordable childcare’ (East End Review 2015).

So how can the Camerawork archive be reanimated to engage with today’s communities of interest? A starting point could begin with the Half Moon Photography Workshop’s Statement of Aims to ask ‘Who is it for?’. We should derive inspiration from the practice of *Camerawork* magazine and the Half Moon Photography Workshop exhibitions by working outside of traditional contexts. While the techniques have changed, the relevance of people, producing, exhibiting, and contextualising their own work remains.

Four Corners seeks to develop active approaches to the Camerawork collection through public events and collaborative, socially engaged practice. The exhibition, *Radical Visions: Camerawork Revisited*, at Format Photography Festival 2019 offered a dialogue between articles in the magazine and images by contemporary documentary photographers within the context of our current social and political moment. They included Joanne Coates, a documentary photographer in the North of England, interested in modes of production, rurality, working life, and class inequality; Les Monaghan, working with families defined as destitute in Doncaster, South Yorkshire; and J. A. Mortram, whose work explores issues of poverty and mental health.

In reanimating archives, we need to go beyond the borders of the institution, to work with other radical archives, campaigning groups, and local community networks. Four Corners’ exhibition, *East End Suffragettes: the photographs of Norah Smyth* (2018), offered an intimate insight into early twentieth-century working-class women’s lives and their fight for equality. Local groups Focus E15 mothers and the ‘Save Tower Hamlets Nurseries’ discussed the exhibition in the context of their own campaigns for adequate housing and nursery provision. These kinds of encounters animate and connect archives with present-day lives.

Two case studies illustrate recent engagement with the Camerawork archive. In 2020 Four Corners hosted an archive-inspired, online programme curated by five Central St Martin MA students. *Dream. Snap. Freedom: Radical Play Through Photography* brought together material from Four Corners Archive alongside work by recent graduates to explore creative approaches to protest photography. Students said:

We want to re-activate the Four Corners Archive within a contemporary setting alongside a look at how we engage with the same issues of the archive today... Looking at creative responses to activism and protest through photography and film, we are particularly interested in embodied expressions of passion and joy in LGBTQ+, anti-racist and feminist activism.<sup>17</sup>

The intention was to spark an intergenerational dialogue between past and present protest, resistance, and action through the exhibition and talks. Their choice of exhibitions was significant in illustrating their generation's concerns: *Same Difference* (1986), work by five lesbian and five gay photographers which challenged the 'dominant mode of realism in photography' to examine the social constructions of sexuality; *A Peace of the Action* (1983) about the anti-nuclear Greenham Common women's peace camp; and *Our Space in Britain* (1987) which focused on experiences of migrant, immigrant, and black women photographers.

The second example is 'Brick Lane 1978: The Turning Point', Four Corners' collaboration with the Bengali heritage group, Swadhinata Trust, as part of a major heritage history project started in 2019.<sup>18</sup> This draws on photographs by Camerawork member Paul Trevor, some of which appeared in *Camerawork* 13 'Photography in the Community' in 1978 and in an early HMPW touring exhibition, *Brick Lane 1978: A Community Under Attack*. The project focused on the anti-racist protests in east London that followed the murder of a young machinist, Altab Ali, in 1978. This transformative moment for Britain's Bengali community sparked mass protests against far-right intimidation and institutional police racism and led to a turning point in race relations. A group of local people interviewed Bengali activists shown in Trevor's images. Participants raised important parallels with racist narratives in the run-up to the Brexit referendum; between the selling of the racist National Front papers on street corners and today's social media; and hostile immigration policies and the history of the far right. Participants' discussions focused on struggles for housing, racism in schools, and police violence, the role of photographer Paul Trevor and whom and how he chose to photograph, the lack of Bengali women represented in the images, and the need to gather images taken by the community. They raised important questions about the

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.fourcornersfilm.co.uk/whats-on/dream-snap-freedom-radical-play--through-photography> (accessed 16 June 2021).

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.fourcornersfilm.co.uk/whats-on/brick-lane-1978-the-turning-point> (accessed 16 June 2021).

ownership of personal and public histories and how collective memory can be defined.

Today's world is far removed from 40 years ago: conditions of production, reception, and distribution are radically different in our digital, global, and post-COVID era. Organisations and individuals are highly reliant on funding—we do not have alternative systems of mutual support, cheap housing, or somewhat reasonable unemployment benefits. We are saturated by images and bombarded by fake news and hyperrealities. But the expansion of photography into every sphere of contemporary life and a flourishing of archival and vernacular imagery also offer inspiration for cultural opposition. The pervasiveness of digital makes the 1970s' cultures surprisingly attractive to a generation that grew up clicking a mouse. Hopefully new forms of creative visual resistance can emerge from this encounter.

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PART IV

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Common Spaces, Collective  
Expressions



## *Atlas de La Manche* / “Qu’ on est loin des Amériques”: A Collaboration Between Photographers and Geographers

*Quentin Brouard-Sala, Hervé Dez, Pablo Fernandez,  
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and Stéphane Valognes*

Motivated by a common object, the landscapes of the Côte des Havres, i.e. the west coast of the Manche department,<sup>1</sup> the photographers’ collective Tulipe Mobile and geographers of the CNRS Research Unit 6590 Espaces & Sociétés (located in Caen) met in 2016 and collaborated towards the publication in 2018 of the *Atlas de la Manche: des polders au*

<sup>1</sup>French *départements* are administrative areas.

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*pôle d'air* (Guillemin et al. 2018) and the photographic exhibition “Qu'on est loin des Amériques”<sup>2</sup> and its catalogue (Tulipe Mobile 2018).

The Côte des Havres is shaped by the succession of eight coastal river estuaries between Carteret and Granville. It concentrates strong seaside and tourist attraction, urban and peri-urban pressure and the maintenance of agricultural and shellfish farming activities that mark and structure its landscapes. From the very first discussions between photographers and geographers, it appeared that this territory could be a good field for a fruitful collaboration, over common sources of interest within the Manche department. Although the photographers' project already existed, articulating participatory workshops, exhibitions and exchanges with geographers, following a method tried and tested in other French territories,<sup>3</sup> the discussion with geographers quickly led to the idea of an Atlas de la Manche, building on the accumulated work conducted on this territory by both scholars and students during collective or individual training courses and integrating images produced by Tulipe Mobile photographers during their workshops on the Côte des Havres.

Thus, in parallel with the *Atlas de La Manche*, a series of meetings and photographic workshops entitled “Qu'on est loin des Amériques” was organised by Tulipe Mobile with trainees from Apprentice Training Centres, secondary school students and inhabitants of Agon-Coutainville, Lessay, Coutances and Granville between 2016 and 2018. The workshops led to an exhibition in each of these towns, before the final exhibition at

<sup>2</sup>‘So far away from the Americas’.

<sup>3</sup>For instance, in Besançon and La Chaux de Fonds, with exchanges with the geographer Alexandre Moine from the University of Besançon.

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the *Maison de l’Histoire de la Manche*, the departmental archives centre in Saint-Lo, where the photographs were eventually deposited in digital format.

Three photographic portfolios by Tulipe Mobile (with six photographs each) were included in the *Atlas de la Manche*, and conversely, one of the coordinators of the *Atlas* produced a text that was published in the exhibition catalogue “Qu’on est loin des Amériques”. These two parallel initiatives, and their areas of convergence, were presented jointly in June 2018, during a conference entitled “La Manche: paysage(s) et géographies”, bringing together photographers, geographers, a landscape architect and an archivist at the *Maison de l’Histoire de la Manche*.

This collective text aims to describe and re-contextualise the encounter between actors immersed in different “iconographic systems” (Mendibil 2008) of image production and use, without obscuring the issues raised by the dissemination of academic knowledge, the search for new audiences, or the need for support and funding. This interdisciplinary and collaborative experience also raises the question of the reception of these initiatives, both by the inhabitants and users of the territories concerned and by local institutions or the regional press, in a context of territorial mutations, which are transforming the attractiveness and image of the Manche department.

The first part will look back at the relationship between geographers and the photographic image from a situated viewpoint and into the practices in use within the Espaces & Sociétés-Caen research team, placed in their academic context. The second part will aim to situate the experiences and careers of the photographers who are members of the Tulipe Mobile collective and the importance given to the “restitution of images” and the dialogue with the subjects of their images. Then the product, or at least one of the products resulting from the collaboration between the two groups, the *Atlas de La Manche*, will be examined afresh in terms of what the work contains and presents, due to the articulated combination of the different types of images that compose it, by comparing it to the catalogue of the exhibition “Qu’on est loin des Amériques”. Finally, in conclusion, the limits and merits of these initiatives and experiences will be discussed.

## THE “ICONOGRAPHIC SYSTEM” OF GEOGRAPHY AND ITS VARIATIONS

For geographer Didier Mendibil, “the illustrations in a geography book must satisfy several expectations: they must provide sensitive material for the readers’ imagination, offer them a reduced model of the world and respond to a cultural and existential horizon of expectation” (Mendibil 2008). This author, who has been interested in the question of images and their uses in geography, observed a corpus of works devoted to the geography of France published by French geographers and distinguishes four specific moments when the iconographic system of geography was reconfigured. The first era was marked by the pictorial tradition and national imagery which prevailed until the 1870s, and then a new era was reconfigured by the use and dissemination of photography and marked by a vision borrowed from naturalists, mountaineers and geologists. This mode of relation to the landscape image, that of “classical geography”, remained dominant until the 1970s, when “new geographies” (spatial analysis, geopolitics, social and then cultural geography), structured by other conceptual and quantitative approaches, reconfigured the use of photographs in geography, sidelining them in favour of, among other things, departmental maps and other types of figures. Then the renewed interest in landscapes over the recent years, which spread throughout social sciences, brought landscape photographs back to the fore.

By “iconographic system”, *Mendibil* therefore means a “particular way – a lasting one and becoming coherent through use, repetition and institutionalisation – of making the series of choices contributing to the production and dissemination of images mobilised by a scientific discipline in the exercise of its social function” (Mendibil 2008). At each of the different moments of this evolution, a predominant editorial practice was remarkable in geographical publications by a specific iconographic relationship to the world that Didier Mendibil attempts to characterise in his work by precise formal criteria (formats, layout and display of graphics and photographic images, writing postures and landscape description).

These relationships to images and imagery are recombined according to the types of works envisaged and their intended audiences: school textbooks, specialised atlases or atlases intended for the general public, academic publications, etc. The typology constructed by Didier Mendibil, while it does not exhaust the complexity of geographers’ relationships to the photographic image—due to varying theoretical movements,

appreciations, working methods in the field of geography and paradigms—does make it possible to identify trends and relations in the use of the photographic image by geographers.

However, if photography and geography (in the modern scientific and institutional sense of the terms) were both born in the middle of the nineteenth century, the first uses of photographers’ work by geographers are nevertheless characterised by a questionable use of printed photographs: sometimes used as a pretext image, the photograph illustrates the text of a scholarly work without any discussion or analysis of the picture or of the intentions of the photographer, his or her biases, constraints or choices. This kind of use can be found, for example, in the various volumes of the *Géographie universelle* by Paul Vidal de la Blache and his collaborators, published between 1927 and 1948, under the direction of Lucien Gallois after Vidal’s death in 1918. This is characterised by an articulation of text/map/photograph that is typical of the second period of the iconographic system analysed by Didier Mendibil, which can be termed “classical geography”, marked by a particular relationship to the terrain and its images.

For instance, the introduction of volume XII, entitled “*Afrique du milieu*”,<sup>4</sup> by Fernand Maurette, exemplifies this questionable use of photographic pictures (Maurette 1938). This introduction aimed to criticise the division of Africa proposed by German geographers before the First World War, suggesting the existence of a “Middle Africa”, a *Mittelafrika*, along the principle of *Mittleuropa*. The text included two photographic plates. The caption of plate n° 1 reads “Mount Stanley in the Rouvenzori Mountains” with the mention “phot. Sella”, without indicating the date when the picture was taken. It is an image by the Italian photographer and mountaineer Vittorio Sella (1859–1943), taken around 1905,<sup>5</sup> 33 years before the publication of the book. The photographs in the book were produced by agency photographers, government structures and colonial services and were not commented on directly but only mentioned in the text. The author’s choices and relationship to the images are left unexplained.

<sup>4</sup>“Middle Africa”, introduction by Fernand Maurette to Volume XII “Equatorial, Oriental and Austral Africa” of *Géographie universelle* by Paul Vidal de la Blache and his collaborators, published between 1927 and 1948, under the direction of Lucien Gallois after Vidal’s death in 1918.

<sup>5</sup>This photograph is estimated to have been taken around 1905 by the online auction site artnet and is referenced as “RW 144 da stampa” on the website of the Fondazione Vittorio Sella, <https://www.fondazionebella.org/fondi-fotografici/sella-vittorio-2/>.

Social geography emerged in the 1980s, producing a paradigmatic break with “classical” geography but also with the “new geographies” that developed at the same time, by seeking to “reverse the order of factors”, i.e. to no longer see space as the primary and “naturally” determining factor, by foregrounding the social aspects. Social geography aims to understand society through the study of the space it occupies, to focus on social groups, power relations, inequalities and their spatial dimensions. This positioning results in a change in the relationship to images and photography, which can no longer be used in an uncritical manner, by questioning their scope and their insertion in space production devices and the construction of spatialised social problems.

Along with other research teams in France and throughout the world, the CNRS Espaces et Sociétés Research Unit, based in five universities in Western France (Rennes, Nantes, Angers, Le Mans and Caen), asserts its affiliation to social geography and, via its scientific project, its commitment to studying socio-spatial inequalities and their conditions of production and reproduction. In their use of photographic images, geographers practising social geography will endeavour to resort to photographic approaches and techniques, which, alongside objectifying images or elevated viewpoints as in aerial photography, enable them to apprehend the perception and experience of the users and inhabitants of the territories studied and which may reveal barely visible or little studied dimensions.

Laetitia Delavoipière, Sylvaine Conord and Anaïs Marshall propose, for example, to complement aerial photographs with “photo-interviews”, taking up an approach developed by the anthropologist and photographer John Collier (1967). The photograph is used as visual material to start a discussion on a given theme, creating a “triangular relationship” (Duteil-Ogata 2007) between the interviewer, the respondent and the photographs. The aim of this interview method is therefore to elicit verbal reactions in the discussion and non-verbal reactions through inscriptions on the photographs. To elicit such reactions from the respondents, some of the most appropriate photographs in relation to the desired theme need to be selected.

Similarly, Delavoipière et al. (2020) used aerial photography as starting point for a photo-interview to interrogate the “living memory” (p. 3) of the former inhabitants of the slums of Nanterre, in the western suburbs of Paris. Aerial photographs are used in this instance as a *medium* for the respondents to talk about their daily lives, particularly the places close to the slums. Thus, some elements that were not visible on the aerial

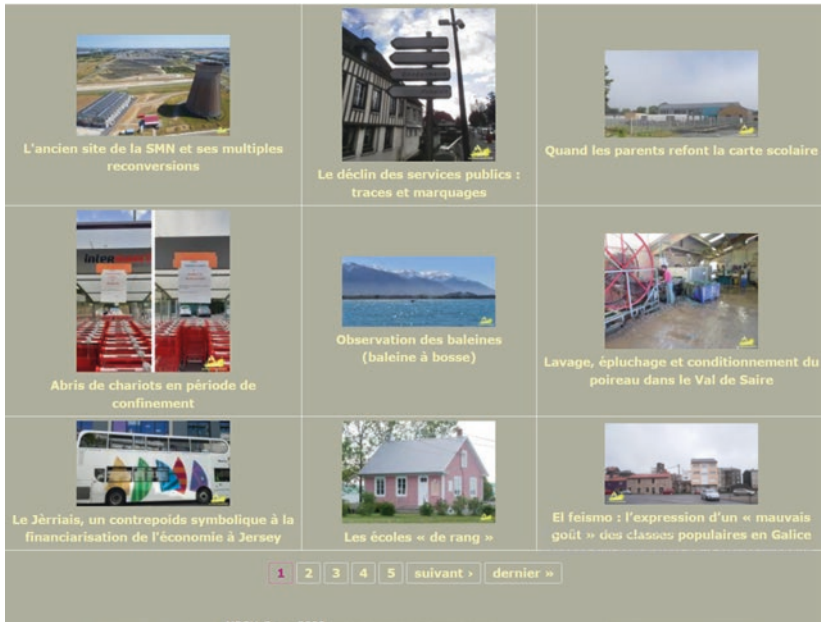
photographs appear in the speeches and are drawn on the aerial images, such as walls, streetlamps or even housing estates built after the photograph was taken. Eventually, it is from this starting point that the respondents can evoke more precisely their living conditions, characterised by insalubrity and socio-spatial segregation but also a certain “enchanted memory” (pp.11–13) of life in the slum.

The production of photographs by the inhabitants themselves and by the users of the spaces under study also enables a glimpse into their relationship to this space, complementing the figures and images produced by the researchers or other actors. Brioux Bisson (2019), in his PhD thesis conducted within the Espaces & Sociétés-Rennes team, seeks to identify the “geopsychology of the feeling of urbanity” by giving a camera to respondents so that they can photograph and explain their experiences of and emotional response to the city. This method called *photo-elicitation* (Bigando 2013 in Bisson 2019) enables the activation of a form of reflexivity on the part of the inhabitants. A similar method was used by Maxime Marie for his research on farmers’ representations of the transformations of bocage landscapes, by providing a camera to farmers so that they could photograph landscapes that they appreciated, rejected or found dignifying (Marie 2008). According to the author, this method limits the researcher’s subjectivity, encourages the autonomy and participation of the respondents and makes it possible to obtain a representation of their own subjectivity. The various photographs taken by the farmers were then used as a basis for discussion between the interviewer and the respondent on landscape changes and their representations. These practices are somewhat similar to the photographers’ practices of “dialogical reporting” and “image restitution”, which will be examined below. They are guided by a concern for access to subjectivities, through a dialogue between the interviewer and the respondents.

Since 2009, the Espaces & Sociétés-Caen research unit has displayed a photo gallery on its website (Fig. 12.1), presenting a “photo of the month” meant to illustrate the diversity of the uses of photography within the team.<sup>6</sup> Researchers and doctoral students regularly display their research by using a photograph and a short description. This practice also contributes to the integration of all members within the research group. Nearly 60 photographs now figure in the gallery: rituals, social movements, the commodification of space, sites undergoing reconversion,

<sup>6</sup><https://www.unicaen.fr/recherche/mrsh/eso-caen/galerie>.





**Fig. 12.1** Screenshot of the first page of the “photo of the month” photo gallery on the ESO-Caen team website, hosted on La forge numérique, the digital multimedia space of the Maison de la Recherche en Sciences Humaines of the University of Caen Normandie (From left to right: Former SMN steelworks and its multiple reconversions; Decline of public services: traces and signposting; When parents redraft the school district map; Shopping trolleys parking bays during lockdown; Whale watching (humpback whale); Rinsing, trimming and packing leeks in Val de Saire; Jèrriais: a symbolic counterbalance to the financialization of economy in Jersey; “One-room” schools; El feismo: “tackiness” in popular areas of Galicia)

agricultural mutations, and socio-spatial markings from Venezuela to Normandy, all earned their place in this gallery, which continues to accumulate images (and views on the Internet).

Although the uses of photography by geographers are not explicitly linked to the history of photography and the trends that run through it, it is relevant to note, according to Didier Mendibil, “the proximity, even the parallelism, of methodological questions relating to photographic uses in geography (Jean Brunhes, Emmanuel de Martonne or Pierre Monbeig) and in ethnography (Bronislaw Malinowski, Pierre Verger or Claude

Lévi-Strauss), as well as those formulated by photographic artists” in the 1930s (Mendibil 2008). Thus, Olivier Lugon has clearly shown in his work on *Le style documentaire d’August Sander à Walker Evans* (Lugon 2001) “how these two photographers contributed to defining a sort of standard of documentary objectivity in photography: sharpness, frontality, horizontality, direct view, simple and rather wide framing, absence of light effects, no close-ups. This list of qualities required for a photographic document includes many of the characteristics of photographs taken by geographers” (Mendibil 2008). This search for documentary objectivity also led Walker Evans to collect postcards, which he sometimes presented at the end of his career, along with his own photographs, at conferences (Evans in Prochaska and Mendelsonn 2010). If postcards can be seen as photographs transformed into “tourist icons”, they can also be regarded as geographical objects to document the evolution of a landscape or, in a more critical perspective, as hinging on a manipulation of the viewer and the use of cultural stereotypes by producers and publishers (Valognes 2013). This coincidence is probably not accidental and shows the potential elective affinities between photographers who identify with the legacies of Walker Evans and geographers over the long term.

### DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE REFLECTIVE RESTITUTION OF IMAGES

In 2005, in *La photographie - entre art et document contemporain*, André Rouillé introduced the notion of “dialogic reportage” in relation to the photographs of Olivier Pasquiers and Marc Pataut (Rouillé 2005). According to photographer and anthropologist Amandine Turri Hoelken, the concept of dialogism was formulated by Mikhail Bakhtin, in his book *The Poetics of Dostoyevsky* (1970), to talk about the novels of Fedor Dostoyevsky. Its main characteristics are dialogue, independence of the characters and readers, and non-totalising responses leading to incomplete dialogues and thus a polyphonic approach showing different points of view and different “voices” (Turri Hoelken 2016). One might think that this denomination marks the start of a theorisation of the photographic practice that would not simply “photograph things or people” but photograph “the state of things” with and “for people”. However, we have to travel back in time to understand how the practice of “image restitution” could become an alternative to both the world of mass media and the

world of art, a “u-topical” position that echoes the one Walker Evans defended when talking about his own practice: “I think I was photographing against the style of the time, against salon photography, against beauty photography, against art photography (...) I was doing non-artistic, non-commercial work” (Evans 1971).

The resonance with the practice of Walker Evans should not, however, make us forget how inexistent in those days were such views of a compatibility between a documentary approach and dialogues between photography, the people photographed and the photographers, or the possibility that photographs might also exist for the people concerned by what they contain, evoke or imagine. Indeed, in the United States of the 1930s, the question of the reception of photographs was absorbed by the desire to define modernity in photography, between art and document, by the desire for neutrality between content and form. This is what Walker Evans expressed in the above extract from his interview with Paul Cummings for the Smithsonian Institution in 1971.

The first photographer to establish such a connection was undoubtedly Gilles Saussier in 2001 in “Situation du reportage, actualité d’une alternative documentaire” (Saussier 2001). This text, which accurately describes the death of the myth of the “photo-reporter”, 10 years after its demise in Iraq, introduces at the same time the possibility of an alternative approach for recording and sharing information and for the restitution of images. Curiously, in the chapter entitled “the site”, which describes how restitution allows to establish relations between the exhibition site—the site—and the photographs, Gilles Saussier focuses on the display of his series “Living in the Fringes” on a storm surge barrier in the Netherlands in 1998 but seems to leave out “Shakhari Bazar”, his first solo exhibition in the Hindu quarter of Dhaka in Bangladesh in 1997.

Yet, here is what he says about it on his website: “The exhibition in Shakhari Bazar consisted of 74 portraits of inhabitants taken during a reportage on the old city of Dhaka from 1995 to 1996. The accumulated images formed a strange lot, like trinkets that I felt I could no longer sell to the Western press. I decided to exhibit the images that would be the most recognizable for the people photographed, to use the exhibition space as the beginning and not as the end of a shooting process”.<sup>7</sup>

The exhibition took place under a tent made of fabric and bamboo, erected on the only unbuilt plot of land in the street, owned by the

<sup>7</sup><http://www.gilles-saussier.fr/textes/situations-du-reportage.html?lang=fr>.

Kalpna Hotel, which reserved it for wedding banquets. Over a few days, 3000–4000 people visited the exhibition: inhabitants of Shakhari Bazar but also crowds of peddlers, labourers, beggars, fakirs and street children. On the last day, the photographs were distributed to the inhabitants. The exhibition ended with everyone leaving with their own portraits. Gilles Saussier’s photographs were no longer just his own but also the portraits that everybody took away. This dispersal of Gilles Saussier’s exhibition did not mean the disappearance of the images but their restitution. A return that Gilles Saussier documented in 2001 by “re-photographing” the prints in shops or at their owners’ home.

In a way, with “Shakhari Bazar”,<sup>8</sup> Gilles Saussier formalised a way of sharing with the people represented in the images, practised by many photographers individually and casually whenever they gave away prints of the photographs to the people appearing in them (Saussier 2006). Robert Doisneau, for instance, is known for having distributed many copies of his images—out of generosity but also to deride the institutionalisation of photography as an art form—so much so that his heirs struggled to draw up a list of 30 photo prints likely to be sold as works of art.

### CONVERGING PRACTICES AND FIRST COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

In 2003 Pablo Fernandez, a photographer living in Switzerland, practised this “return of images” as an interactive principle of documentation and restitution. Hervé Dez and Pablo Fernandez met in Surdulica in Serbia on this occasion. The former had come to make photographs; the latter was continuing work already exhibited there. From 2002, Pablo had established links with the inhabitants, musicians and cultural authorities of this small town in Southern Serbia, which has a large Roma minority, composing about one third of the population. For a year he returned several times to photograph the daily life of the inhabitants. Encouraged by the director of the cultural centre in Surdulica, he thought that the exhibition could take place there rather than in Switzerland. It could have been just another in-depth photo report, but “Musiques du vent, souffle des hommes” turned into an in situ project.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Saussier published *Studio Shakhari Bazar* in 2006 with the Parisian publishing house Le Point du Jour.

This event, repeated in 2004 and 2005, became an occasion to give copies of the book to the inhabitants and the city's cultural centre. In 2004, Pablo Fernandez and Hervé Dez supplemented this restitution process with a mobile studio located in a street of Surdulica to photograph the inhabitants (as part of the project *Slikaj me! - Photograph me!*). The portraits were shown each evening in the cultural centre as part of a projection, and the people photographed received a print made by the local photographer.

In a sense, this “return of images” was also the signature of the collective of which Olivier Pasquiers and Hervé Dez were members, *Le Bar Floréal* (1985–2015). We could mention the projects “Dieppe s’affiche” in 1987 with a 4 × 3 m exhibition in the city, “La Courneuve, rue Renoir” exhibited at the foot of the building in 1998 or even “La traversée de Belleville” by Willy Ronis in 1991: a journey through the streets of the Parisian district with Willy Ronis’ photographs displayed in the location where they had been taken. What is more, a large number of Oliver Pasquiers’ projects combine exchanges, workshops and restitutions for and with the individuals photographed.

The *Bar Floréal*, however, never produced any completed theorisation of their practice. In 2005, the publication of a book by Créaphis for the 20th anniversary of the collective was the occasion to begin framing “the return of images” with a text by Françoise Denoyelle, a photography historian who was president of the group at the time. For Françoise Denoyelle, “Photography, beyond its documentary function, works as an expression of multiple voices. Beyond just “taking“ photographs, it is urgent to “restitute“ them through a dialogue, an exchange with those who participated in the photographer’s approach”.<sup>9</sup>

#### DEVELOPMENT OF IMAGE RESTITUTION AND CREATION OF TULIPE MOBILE

After a series of experiments for individual projects (such as the use of notebooks with photographs annotated by the inhabitants of the city of Bor in Serbia in 2009) or collective ones (projection of portraits of the inhabitants on the walls of the city in 2012), Hervé Dez and Pablo Fernandez conceived their first documentary project dedicated to a territory and its inhabitants: *Nous ne faisons que passer* (2014–2016), about the

<sup>9</sup> *Le Bar Floréal photographie*, Créaphis éditions, 2005.

area lying across the Canton of Neuchâtel in Switzerland and the French department of Doubs (Tulipe Mobile 2016). This project was registered with an associative structure created by Pablo in La Chaux-de-Fonds, called Tulipe Mobile. The restitution to the inhabitants was at the heart of this project. As they journeyed from La Chaux-de-Fonds to Besançon, the photographers made various stops where a selection of images was exhibited and projected to allow for a mediation process with the inhabitants of the towns and cities that they visited. Midway through the project, a meeting with geographer Alexandre Moine, a researcher at the THÉMA laboratory of the University of Besançon, made the two photographers realise that their approach to the ordinary landscape in these “peripheral territories” resonated with the fieldwork of geographers. In 2017, a second branch of the collective Tulipe Mobile was created in Hauteville sur Mer (Manche) in order to replicate the experience in Normandy for the project “Qu’on est loin des Amériques” (2016–2018). This was done by contacting geographers from the University of Caen Normandy, in order to establish from the beginning of the project an exchange of information and photographs about this specific territory, i.e. the central-western coast of the channel and its hinterland. These discussions structured the project and helped refine the relationships with the inhabitants in the mediation and restitution processes.

For photographers who work on a territory and a theme in a documentary mode, a collaboration with geographers brings a better knowledge of the field for the shooting but also for the restitution of the images. Which images for which public in which place? This social function, present in the restitution phase, requires that the images be the object of a possible reflection on the part of the viewers, in this case the inhabitants concerned by the photographs. Therefore, it is no longer only the object represented in documentary photography that drives the viewers to pay attention to their world but also the freedom the project offers them to consider their world, or themselves, in a different light. This freedom is made possible by a “reflexive” restitution. The classic process of an aesthetic relationship, the consideration that the viewers have for their environment, then occurs naturally. This restitution is also a way of situating documentary photography in a utopia, between a document and an aesthetic object, outside the mass media and the art world. As outlined by Danièle Méaux, author of *Enquêtes. Nouvelles formes de photographie documentaire*, “we are thus moving from the long-prevailing ‘specular conception’ of representation

to a ternary model envisioning the practice of photography in an interaction with the world, in the service of a renewed perception and of a production of knowledge” (Méaux 2019a, b).

### SPONSORS AND BLIND SPOTS

These two initiatives, conducted jointly, received a great deal of local and regional support, often from the same bodies, such as the Département de la Manche, both at the start of the projects and at the stage of the publication and final exhibition, with the official launching at the Maison de l’Histoire de la Manche.

The meeting of the project leaders of the *Atlas de la Manche* with a member of the cabinet of the President of the Departmental Council, during the initial phase of the project, is worth narrating. At the beginning of the interview, the project leaders stated their intention to both valorise and disseminate the knowledge produced by academics, in a book made accessible to the general public, without omitting their critical analysis of the mutations in progress within the departmental territory (with challenges such as environmental struggles, gentrification, rise of the sea level). The response was relatively enthusiastic, urging the project’s bearers “not to be modest” about the amount of support requested (in pre-ordered copies of the book). Even if the final institutional support turned out to be less than expected, it was real. It seemed to be motivated by the need for an accessible and “useful” book providing updated knowledge for the department’s elected representatives, about the global changes affecting the area, and the opportunities offered by these changes for the future of the department. The reception of the project cannot be separated from a more aggressive image strategy, led by the departmental agency Latitude Manche, linking the tourist offer and the development of the economic attractiveness of the territory, taking up elements of integrated territorial marketing tried and tested elsewhere, in metropolitan areas like Nantes or on a regional scale such as Brittany. The reception of the *Atlas* and the reviews by the regional press were also enthusiastic, as shown by the report in local newspaper *Ouest-France*<sup>10</sup> published following the June 2018 meeting at the Maison de l’Histoire de la Manche.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ouest-france.fr/normandie/manche/manche-tout-savoir-sur-le-departement-dans-un-atlas-5863238>.

### A SHIFT FROM DOMINANT REPRESENTATIONS: THE *ATLAS DE LA MANCHE* AND “QU’ON EST LOIN DES AMÉRIQUES”

Tulipe Mobile’s photographs included in the *Atlas de la Manche* implicitly displace the dominant representations used by various bodies such as local authorities, tourist operators and the regional press. These photographs of the coastal and retro-coastal landscapes of the Côte des Havres present some strong characteristics: the absence of human figures, a predominance of close and objectifying points of view and, conversely, an absence of elevated viewpoints or distant views, very simple captions and an absence of the picturesque and of the monumental or remarkable. Several thematic orientations emerge: an interest in entropy (embankments, waste, piles of discarded vegetables), images within images, marks and traces of the foreign turned banal (replicas of North American landscapes or atmospheres, kebab shop fronts), the dialectics between the environmental heresy and the amenity of activity zones (Jolliet 2000), and landscapes of work and of time constraints.

The photograph inserted in the third photographic booklet (Fig. 12.2), entitled “Gouville sur Mer 2016” with its “Gouville sur Mer” billboard in the background, is undeniably reminiscent of Wim Wenders’ photograph “Western world”—taken in California and published in *Written in the West*



Agois-Coutancesville, 2016. © Photo: Tommaso / Haverly-Du.



Gouville sur Mer, 2016. © Photo: Tommaso / Haverly-Du.

Fig. 12.2 An extract from the third Tulipe Mobile photographic booklet included in the *Atlas de la Manche*, with the photograph of Gouville sur Mer, pp. 164–165



in 1987 (Wenders 2015)—while taking up one of the themes of the *Bar Floréal*, i.e. an image within the image.

These photographs contrast in part with the images and figures produced and inserted by geographers in the 55 plates that make up the *Atlas de la Manche*. Eight plates produced by geographers use photographs (sometimes aerial or overhead), but the predominant figures are maps, on a departmental scale, sometimes combined with graphs or diagrams.

The catalogue of the exhibition “Qu’on est loin des Amériques” makes more radical choices, by combining several series produced by trainees or inhabitants. The publication intensifies the shift made in the *Atlas de la Manche*, even though a few human figures are present in three series of photographs (vocational trainees in working and learning situations, an event about country music and views of the thousand-year-old fair in Lessay). Some of the photographs showing fairground rides taking up American icons (Avatar, Malibu) might suggest a connection with the work of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Stephen Izenour and their “Las Vegas lessons” (Scott-Brown 1971), which focus on the vernacular forms of commercial architecture epitomised the Las Vegas Strip. Similarly, the “portraits of houses” included in the catalogue are reminiscent of the urban landscapes of American “Pop Architecture” or of photographs by Walker Evans or Stephen Shore.<sup>11</sup>

#### LIMITATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR COLLABORATION: A PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

The projects *Atlas de la Manche* and “Qu’on est loin des Amériques” were carried out to completion, and their combination attempted to produce both new knowledge and new images. These projects were collaborative, thanks to the extensive exchanges between photographers and geographers, but they were also participatory, in the context of the series of workshops conducted by Tulipe Mobile with various publics. Both projects received institutional and academic support and were positively received in their respective spheres, without any criticism or public controversy. However, some boundaries could not be crossed, due to the compartmentalisation of social worlds and political temporalities. The atlas format is also not free from ambiguities between the appetite for maps

<sup>11</sup>On this point, De Larminat Eliane, *Houses and Homes. Photographier la Maison aux Etats-Unis 1930–1990*, Le Point du Jour éditeur, 2020.

inherent to the spatial turn in social sciences and the claim of exhaustiveness and cumulateness in the face of the fragmentation of the world, which can, according to Mathieu Noucher and Laurent Polidori, in the introduction to their *Atlas critique de la Guyane*, “lend the maps the power to assign roles” (Noucher and Laurent 2020).

The initiatives reported and discussed here have been more moderate, but they have nonetheless attempted to advance knowledge, promote its dissemination, and shift or decentre the representations of the Manche area. However, in order for these initiatives to have a greater impact, it will undoubtedly be necessary to cross more borders between (social) worlds, since “we live on the borderland between worlds” as suggested by the title of a series by the collective Tulipe Mobile “*Nous vivons à la limite des mondes*”.<sup>12</sup> These social boundaries became tangible when it came to organising signing sessions for the *Atlas de la Manche*. One took place at the newsagent and bookshop of Agon-Coutainville, located in the old and more “Parisian” part of this bourgeois seaside resort on the Côte des Havres, near the casino and hippodrome. Quite tellingly, the former prime minister and former mayor of Bordeaux Alain Juppé happened to come by and buy a signed copy of the *Atlas de la Manche*. However, another shop and bar, located in Le Passous, a more popular and suburban part of the resort, when contacted for a similar signing session, declined to host such an event.

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<sup>12</sup>Nous vivons à la limite des mondes, photographs taken in former-Yugoslavia between 2001 and 2010 by Hervé Dez and Pablo Fernandez, exhibited at the Foyer du Lycée Jean Guéhenno in June 2020 and Abbaye de Montebourg in 2021. The title was inspired by a chapter from *Death and the Dervish* by Meša Selimovic: “We live at a crossroads of worlds, at a border between peoples, in everyone’s way. And someone always thinks we’re to blame for something. The waves of history crash against us, as against a reef.” (Trans. Bogdan Rakić and Stephen M. Dickey, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996, pp. 329–31. First published 1966 as *Derviš i smrt*).

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# Faut Voir, the bar Floréal and “Shared Creation”: Photographers’ Collectives and Renewal of Photographic Practices in France

*Lydia Echeverria*

This chapter examines the conditions in which photographers’ collectives emerged in the early 1980s in France.<sup>1</sup> Faut Voir (1982–2004) was called an “agency” by its founders, Jean-Michel Montfort, cultural developer; Marc Pataut, photographer; and Martine Vantses, sociologist and writer. The agency’s ambition was to carry out “social communication” projects, through the practice of photography and with the collaboration of several

<sup>1</sup>This chapter was translated from the French by Meg Morley.

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Switzerland AG 2024

M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_13)

contributors, in most instances photographers and a writer.<sup>2</sup> In addition, these artistic projects were conceived as participative projects involving non-professionals.

The bar Floréal group (1985–2015) was created by photographers Noak Carrau and André Lejarre and the photographer and graphic artist Alex Jordan. Jordan had been a member of the historic nucleus of the renowned Grapus collective (1970–1990). In the eighties, working with the Grapus graphics design studio, he steered the artistic work of the new bar Floréal group towards production combining photography and graphic art. The bar Floréal collective later worked with Nous Travaillons Ensemble (NTE), a group founded by Alex Jordan in 1989 within Grapus and still active today. The alliance between photography and graphics ensured independent production: the group was in charge of the entire production process for its projects, from conception of the artistic idea to publication and dissemination via photography exhibitions and books. In the 2000s this singular mode of creation won critical acclaim for the bar Floréal group, which critics (having forgotten about *Faut Voir*) hailed as the pioneer of photographers' collective in France (Denoyelle 2005/2010; Pedon 2011).

To understand how these groups emerged, we must analyse the historical, sociopolitical and cultural landscape of the time and the factors that were determinant for the birth of these photographers' collectives. We will also look at the artistic and formal models which constituted their aesthetic and ethical baggage and influenced their formation.

In these two contextual frameworks, historical and artistic, we focus on the recourse to "*création partagée*" or "shared creation", a practice that was unique in France, as a creative mode that nourished the practices of photographers' collectives. These collectives inscribed their work in the field of social action and thereby took on a new role in contemporary French photography. Our thesis is that this artistic approach reflects a political commitment on the part of the collectives who were engaged in a process to rethink the visibility of the working class and common citizens using new strategies of visual representations.

<sup>2</sup>The expression "social communication" was forged in the 1970s and later taken up by Jean-Michel Montfort (Gauthier and Gaessler 1985, 16–22). It was also used in the press as a new term to describe the cultural action of the time, in particular the photographic work of *Faut Voir* in Orgeval, on the outskirts of Reims, in 1986. This denomination is also used to differentiate this type of work from commercial communication and advertising.

THE HISTORICAL, SOCIOPOLITICAL AND CULTURAL  
BACKDROP TO THE EMERGENCE  
OF PHOTOGRAPHERS’ COLLECTIVES

*Social Transformation in the 1980s*

Faut Voir and the bar Floréal collective emerged in the wake of a political shift in France, shortly after the electoral victory of the Union de la Gauche in the presidential election of 1981 and the rise to power of François Mitterrand, First Secretary of the Socialist Party. Yet in the following decade, political and economic policies guided by Western neoliberal thinking triggered profound changes in society (Cusset 2006; Bantigny 2019). The industrial landscape was transformed, and the working class plunged into mass unemployment, with the emergence of new forms of economic insecurity as a corollary (Brodiez 2006; Pialoux 2019).<sup>3</sup> At the same time the xenophobic rejection of “foreigners” grew in force, a consequence of social tension.<sup>4</sup> The expression “suburban malaise” appeared, associated with violent confrontation in working-class neighbourhoods between the police and youths, for the most part from (relatively) recently arrived immigrant families.<sup>5</sup> The antiracist movement that spawned the March for Equality and Against Racism in 1983 grew up in this climate of social tension. This movement was driven by the “children of immigration” (Mongo-Mboussa 2014) who, unlike the first generation of North African immigrants in the 1960s, raised their voices and denounced police violence, racism and the difficulties of integration in French society (Mills-Affif 2004).

<sup>3</sup> An example is communication by the Secours Populaire Français (SPF), a social solidarity charity that works to combat poverty, and the artistic work *Pauvre France*, a series of photos by André Lejarre (bar Floréal) and Marie-Paule Nègre commissioned by SPF in 1988.

<sup>4</sup> In 1983 the candidate of the far-right National Front party was elected mayor of the city of Dreux.

<sup>5</sup> The “mal des banlieues” (Duprez and Heldi 1992) refers to a historic moment of upheaval in France when urban violence broke out in the summer of 1981. The emblematic scenes of this violence were street “rodeos” in the Minguettes neighbourhood of Vénissieux, a town in the suburbs of Lyons. The expression took hold, and the terms “malaise”, “crisis” and “problem” have since become interchangeable to designate this social situation in working-class suburbs. The so-called rodeo phenomenon of youths became one of the “first symbols of the ‘crisis in the suburbs’” (Zancarini-Fournel 2016, 871). Although urban violence predated the Minguettes rodeos in Vénissieux, these forays were heavily covered by the media and condemned by politicians, establishing a “memorial marker” (ibid., 874).

This social context resonates directly in the photographic production of the collectives, whose images explore the contemporary nature of these events. Starting with its very first project, *Un autre regard sur les jeunes, leur leur / Another view of youth, their own* (1983–1984), Faut Voir set up artistic and cultural activities involving exclusively working-class neighbourhoods and their residents (Collectif, Faut Voir 1987). From the outset, the agency sought to develop a sociological dimension in its production of images, to escape the stereotypes imposed by the three-point conflation of working-class suburb, youth and immigrant population repeatedly broadcast in political discourse. The bar Floréal group also wanted to focus on the representation of places and persons among the least visible in French society. The first collective work of the group, *Cité Dunlop, Montluçon* (1986), was a photographic inventory of a working-class housing estate prior to its renovation (Collectif, bar Floréal 1988). This documentary outlook, maintained by the collective over the 30 years of its work, was the fruit of their thinking on changes in working-class neighbourhoods and their consequences for the collective memory of the working class.<sup>6</sup> We emphasize that Faut Voir and the bar Floréal group knew each other, in large part through connections with the Grapus collective. Grapus set up its workshop in the Maladrerie neighbourhood of Aubervilliers in the 1980s, where Marc Pataut, co-founder of Faut Voir, lived, and this is how the ties between the two collectives were established.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned above, Alex Jordan was a member of Grapus and co-founder of the bar

<sup>6</sup>The bar Floréal tackled in addition a range of subjects, from the representation of daily work, insertion of marginalized people, life in prison, to the living conditions of the impoverished and immigrants. Their work is found at the Médiathèque du Patrimoine et de la Photographie (MPP)/Archives photographiques; fonds photographique du collectif “le bar Floréal”, 1985–2015; Fonds 2015/29, Boxes 1–19, Files 1–255, inventoried by Lydia Echeverria under the supervision of Matthieu Rivallin, collections manager, and Mathilde Falguière, patrimonial heritage curator, 2018.

Faut Voir worked exclusively with the residents in working-class neighbourhoods on representation of their daily lives.

<sup>7</sup>This neighbourhood was built up between 1970 and 1988 according to plans designed by architect Renée Gailhoustet for social housing, including several dozen units attributed to artists. The installation of combined housing/studio units within the residential district was characteristic of the policy to build culture into the city, the hallmark of Communist Party mayors.



Floréal collective. As for Faut Voir and the bar Floréal (with Nous Travaillons Ensemble), they worked together on the project *Je veux vivre en Paix / I want to live in Peace* at the Cité Verte housing estate in Verdun in 1992, a sign of their shared interest in the working class.

### *Culture and Public Housing*

The work of the photographers' collectives was most often carried out in working-class suburbs in France. In current French usage, the word “banlieue”, often coupled with the adjective “popular” meaning “of the people” or “working class”, is by metonymy associated with “quartier”, a word which connotes a neighbourhood where the social difficulties are concentrated, particularly affecting immigrant and minority populations. The “quartier” is to be taken as a “category of public action” (Tissot 2007): a social and political construct, this category encompasses and embodies the structural problems linked to inequality in French society. The term is also invoked to frame policies and resources deployed to identify and attempt to resolve these problems. A prime example is the “Politique de la Ville” (Cities Policy) implemented to respond to “the problem of the suburbs” (Epstein 2016).<sup>8</sup> Public action under the Cities Policy has been conducted since the late 1970s to address problems related to unemployment, housing and social insertion in working-class neighbourhoods. The cultural dimension is central, along with the economic and social aspects, as seen with the 1985 forum in Bordeaux where a series of encounters was initiated to explore the links between “Culture et quartiers” (“Culture and public housing”) organized by the Commission Nationale pour le Développement Social des Quartiers (CNDSQ 1985). Hundreds of participants were present at this forum, including people active in cultural affairs, youth club moderators, artists, residents and representatives of neighbourhood non-profit groups, who described their experience in the field. In the course of these encounters, Marc Pataut took a picture that documents this political moment: in the foreground is the speakers' table setup for the event beneath a display of 40 posters

<sup>8</sup>The Habitat et Vie Sociale (HVS) programme was set up in 1977, but with the arrival of the Socialist Party in government in the 1980s, the Cities Policy was progressively institutionalized.



**Fig. 13.1** Marc Pataut, Faut Voir, Forum de Bordeaux “Culture et quartiers”, 1985. A display of 40 posters created during the project *Un autre regard sur les jeunes, le leur* (1983–1984). Marc Pataut, personal archive

created by hundreds of young residents of 10 French suburbs as part of the seminal Faut Voir project *Un autre regard sur les jeunes, le leur* (1983–1984) (Fig. 13.1).<sup>9</sup>

This set of posters served as a symbolic backdrop to the discussion of ways to implement cultural action. The debate crystallized around the concepts of democratization of culture and cultural democracy. Following the idea expressed by André Malraux, democratization of culture is a social phenomenon in education. It addresses concerns regarding dissemination of so-called legitimate culture and aims to make this culture more accessible by transporting it into settings that are presumed to be outside of or excluded from the artistic sphere. This top-down reasoning stems from the assumption that culture is absent from certain places and sociocultural

<sup>9</sup>The 40 images chosen for the posters were selected among 40,000 photographs taken by youth participants over several weeks during this project in 1983 and 1984.

strata in society.<sup>10</sup> The counterculture movements of May 1968 broke with this conception and introduced a new paradigm, the notion of cultural democracy, which leaves more room for artistic expression by all members of society. It was no longer a question of looking for the “aesthetic shock” when discovering works of art (Martigny et al. 2021, 253). Instead, the intent was to embrace participation and “work with” as many people as possible. This intentional inflection led to rethinking the ways in which culture is legitimated, and in this perspective, the artistic and cultural action advocated by Faut Voir and the bar Floréal group was conceived as “a strategy by which the modes of artistic production are transformed to reduce the scission between popular culture and elite culture” (Arnaud 2015).

The 1985 “Culture and public housing” forum aimed to move towards wider cultural democracy—and hence participation—and to think about the means to be deployed to create new artistic forms in the course of cultural action. One objective was “to demonstrate the riches and quite often the artistic qualities of the culture possessed by the residents of these neighborhoods [implicitly working-class] if they are given the means of expression and if we know how to display it” (CNDSQ 1985, 5). The objective was to go beyond democratization of culture, a necessary process in that it broadly disseminates artistic production (theatre, literature, fine arts), to envision “an appropriation of artistic and cultural languages by all” in order to achieve progress towards cultural democracy founded on the idea that “each individual can be a bearer of cultural expression” (Bordeaux 2006). In this respect Dominique Wallon, director of cultural development at the cultural affairs ministry,<sup>11</sup> stated that the “success [of

<sup>10</sup>The “Maisons de la Culture” were the vehicles of “democratization of culture” as conceived by André Malraux. Malraux was inspired by a Jacobinic and paternalistic vision of the dissemination of culture, as revealed in a speech he gave on 17 November 1959: “This means that, thanks to these houses of culture, which in each *département* in France will disseminate what we are trying to do in Paris, any child of 16 years of age, no matter how poor, will be able to have a genuine contact with his national heritage and with the glorious spirit of humanity”. Despite this condescending attitude, this stage was a necessary step towards the advent of another model, that of “cultural democracy”.

<sup>11</sup>“The Cultural Development Division was to constitute a sort of laboratory for the cultural action undertaken by the State, a ferment of innovation” (Martigny et al. 2021, 253–258).

cultural democracy] is [...] indissociable from the broadest possible participation of people in the definition and implementation of cultural action” (Moulinier 2012, 16). The notion of participation takes on a political role here: it is the vector of democracy and of cultural action and also of the artistic engagement of the photographers’ collectives.

### *Photography in the Lang Years*

Discussion of the notion of participation that grew out of thinking about the place of culture in the Cities Policy framework should be considered in a more global context, that of cultural policy in France in the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> This debate parallels the implementation of ambitious cultural policy at the national level espoused by Jack Lang, the government minister for cultural affairs (Martigny et al. 2021). In economic terms, new funding for artistic creation, especially for the cultural industries, helped legitimize photography via public commissions (Dubois 1999; Morel 2006). Photography gained institutional status and took root in the French cultural landscape. This decade was marked by the promotion of artistic creation and by the “figure of the author” as a solitary protagonist of contemporary photographic creativity (Morel 2006). By their choice of collective work, Faut Voir and the bar Floréal founders were out of step with the history of photography in France. What is more, the model of independent design and dissemination of their work was also in jeopardy, as it was disconnected from the economic sphere of photojournalism and the focus on breaking news (De Fenoÿl 1977). They also turned their back on the artistic approach inspired by “plastic art” (Baqué 1998/2004). Even so, the collectives were periodically in contact with the institutional cultural sphere and contributed to the programming of certain institutions. In 1987, Faut Voir presented *Un autre regard sur les jeunes, le leur* in the Observatoire

<sup>12</sup> Report by Hubert Dubedout, *Ensemble refaire la ville. Rapport au Premier ministre du Président de la Commission nationale pour le développement social des quartiers* (1983). This assessment contained the first proposals for action under the Cities Policy, and the “participation of residents” is evoked as a desirable goal, to rethink housing and social life in working-class and poor neighbourhoods.

Banlieues event at the Centre Pompidou.<sup>13</sup> The bar Floréal collective showed work at some of the biennial Mois de la Photo exhibitions in Paris, for the first time in 1990 with the show *La traversée de Belleville (A trip through Belleville)*.<sup>14</sup> This show presented photographs taken in the 1950s by Willy Ronis, a tutelary figure for the group and emblematic representative of French “humanist” photography (Collectif 2006).<sup>15</sup> The collectives in some ways profited from the wave of culture that characterized the Lang years, but the Observatoire Banlieues was ephemeral, and the bar Floréal group participated only occasionally in the Mois de la Photo event. The bar Floréal work was shown primarily in its own space, a former café located at 43 rue des Couronnes in the working-class neighbourhood of Belleville that is a popular Parisian district. The groups remained outside of the mainstream of institutional and legitimate culture of the period.

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE COLLECTIVES AND THEIR ARTISTIC ANCESTRY

The artistic precursors and projects proclaimed by Faut Voir and the bar Floréal reveal the militant and activist tradition that forms the core of their photographic practice. This militant stance highlights their alternative position in the dominant photographic culture of the time. In this respect,

<sup>13</sup>The Observatoire Banlieues focusing on suburbs can be seen as a laboratory of ideas, research and experimentation, destined to be used for “social communication”. An exhibition devoted to the representation of working-class suburbs and to consideration of urban planning issues was programmed at the Centre de Création Industrielle (CCI) at the Pompidou Centre. The founders of the observatory that we have identified and/or met with are Josée Chapelle, Observatoire Banlieues task officer, CCI; Chérif Chikh, president of the advocacy group Banlieues sans Frontières; and Dominique Rotival, journalist at France 3 Ile-de-France. The observatory, which undertook to bolster positive representation of working-class neighbourhoods and their residents, was an ephemeral phenomenon, from 1986 to 1990, and is now forgotten.

<sup>14</sup>The bar Floréal show *La Traversée de Belleville* was not included in the official selection, titled “Fragment of a social discourse”, but was listed among the “Events” accompanying the Mois de la Photo 1990.

<sup>15</sup>*La traversée de Belleville* involved a walking tour between two shows curated by the bar Floréal, one at the collective’s gallery on the rue des Couronnes in the Belleville neighbourhood (a former café called bar Floréal that the group took over in the mid-1980s) and the other at the town hall of the 20th arrondissement in Paris. The tour itself was a photographic promenade: advertising-size panels measuring 3 × 4 m were installed in the streets to display photos taken by Willy Ronis in the late 1940s at the exact point where the pictures had been taken (Voir Ronis and McOrlan 1954).

it was above all a graphic arts project, *ZUP! Album de famille* (1982), which was claimed as a precedent. This project was pursued by the members of the militant collective Grapus in Villeneuve-les-Salines, a neighbourhood of the city of La Rochelle (Favier 2014; De Smet and Fraenkel 2016).<sup>16</sup> The “sociocritical character of this action” was manifested in the transcription of comments by the residents of this outlying neighbourhood where unemployment ran high (De Smet and Fraenkel 2016, 104).<sup>17</sup> To express a political critique of daily life in this urban area designated as a priority for public action (Zone Urbaine Prioritaire, ZUP), Grapus sought out residents of all ages, from 0 to 100 years old (the oldest resident of Villeneuve-les-Salines was 98 years old in 1982), and questioned them all about happiness, with the same question: “What is happiness for you?” To carry out their project, Alex Jordan and Marc Dumas went from door to door to find residents representative of all ages, year by year. The work was produced as a large 24 × 30 cm book with an original graphic design conceived by Grapus: the residents are presented in order of age, from 98 to 0 years (“because in the other direction one is headed for the cemetery”, said Jordan whose words transmit the caustic spirit of the group). If no resident was found for a given age, the page was left solid black. Otherwise, the residents are depicted, sometimes in an abstract fashion, by drawings or photographs (photomontages) or a combination of the two, accompanied by the words of each respondent. The publication became the medium of a “durable trace”; 4000 copies were printed and given to the residents of Villeneuve-les-Salines (Collectif, Grapus 1982). This large-scale project grew out of a commission that resembled a “carte blanche”; in liaison with the Rencontres internationales d’art contemporain de La Rochelle (supported by the proactive cultural policy of the mayor Michel Crépeau of the Radicaux de gauche party) and with the support of the Maison de la Culture and the Collectif des Associations de Villeneuve-les-Salines, a proposal was made to Grapus to work in the neighbourhood for a period of several months.

<sup>16</sup> Grapus was founded by Pierre Bernard, François Miehé and Gérard Paris-Clavel in 1970. Jean-Paul Bachollet joined the group in 1975 and Alex Jordan in 1976.

<sup>17</sup> “There were many people out of work there, for a simple reason, the housing estate was close to the former Simca automobile factory, it had probably been built exclusively to house Simca workers. Simca, Talbot, Peugeot [automobile factories in France] and then we close down!” Transcription of remarks by Alex Jordan (Favier 2014, 97).

It becomes clear that the success of these projects derives from the fact that they were set in the heart of city, with a network of connections to local cultural activities and/or to neighbourhood groups, which were often advocates for left-wing activism. The bar Floréal group followed in the footsteps of the artistic action of Grapus, which had from the 1970s accepted commissions from the French Communist Party and the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) federation of labour unions. André Lejarre underscores how these “dynamics of complicity” allowed the bar Floréal photographers in turn to establish partnerships with municipal governments and institutions, prolonging the militant tradition that Grapus had forged.<sup>18</sup> One example of this interconnection is the *Secours populaire français* (SPF) charitable organization which helps people living in poverty. Thanks to Grapus (which had designed the SPF logo in 1981), SPF gave many commissions to the bar Floréal collective.

We also observe a line of filiation between the photographic practices of Faut Voir and the bar Floréal and the period called “renewal of social documentary” in the history of photography (Ribalta 2015). This renewed expression came when photographers began to take an interest in amateur photography devoted to the working class and social topics in the 1920s and 1930s (Ribalta 2011). This aesthetic shift was the theme of an exhibition in 2015 at Reina Sofía organized by the critic and theorist Jorge Ribalta. One of the high points of the show was the presentation of “photographic action as social intervention” carried out by the group Fotoaktion Nordstadt in Kassel in 1977. Fotoaktion Nordstadt was made up of students in graphic arts at the *Gesamthochschule Kassel* (academy of art and design) and their professor Gunther Rambow and of residents in a working-class neighbourhood of the city. The residents were photographed for portraits in situations of daily life, after the Henschel-Werke arms factory was closed. The portraits were printed in very large formats on site at the disused factory, accompanied by texts of the workers’ words, and were displayed on the exterior walls of this place of work, transformed into a medium of working-class memory. This work was edited in a large-format book by Syndikat in 1979 (Rambow 1979). This publication presented all the photographic and social actions and interventions undertaken in Kassel

<sup>18</sup> Interview with André Lejarre, 23 April 2018.

by the graphic arts students at the academy of art and design.<sup>19</sup> The editorial work by Syndikat is an example of the renewal of social documentary, in which the involvement of working-class families is fundamental; the documentary becomes an object that establishes a link between photography of the working class in Germany between the two world wars (with the Worker-Photography Movement) and the amateur practices re-appropriated by working-class photographers' groups in the 1970s. Alex Jordan, a Western German political exile, showed this book at meetings of the bar Floréal group and also to the members of Faut Voir. Representation of the world and culture of the people, and setting up projects to enable the subjects to be active protagonists in the process of creation: this was the artistic and political path chosen by photographers' collectives in France.

The artistic and cultural actions of Faut Voir and the bar Floréal are guided by a creative protocol. To begin with, a context favourable to political action must exist, to enable the photographers to enter into the heart of a town or neighbourhood, via partnerships established beforehand between the collectives and local entities active in culture. The collectives may also choose to accept public commissions, on the condition that their liberty of creation is not affected and that the work serves the general interest, according to the precepts of "public interest graphic art" (Maréchal 2019). Another guiding concept is to invent practices of co-creation and to display photographs in situ, to bring images back to the place where they were created and/or to produce a photo book to be given to participants (Airaud, Poulin, Preston 2019).

## OUTCOMES: NEW PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICES FOR AN AESTHETIC REVIVAL

Faut Voir conceived its first project *Un autre regard sur les jeunes, le leur* in 1983. This project, which adopted the principle of large-format posters that had been used in Kassel, was aimed at young people aged 16–25.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that the choice of photography as a medium came from the graphics department at the Kassel Gesamthochschule. The links between photography and graphics, present in Germany since the avant-garde movements of the 1920s, were reaffirmed. In this perspective Alex Jordan sought to establish a photography department within the Grapus collective, to harness the capacity for action and creation of this medium. This tandem was deployed in Lorraine in 1979 with photographs taken during the steelworkers' strikes at Longwy (*Longwy vivra/Solidarité, Union locale de la CGT de Longwy*, portfolio produced by the Grapus graphic design studio with photos by Alex Jordan, April 1979). But Grapus did not want a photography department in its studio. From this rejection emerged the bar Floréal venture, which maintained the photo/graphics synergy.



Jean-Michel Montfort in person took the idea to the cabinet of the ministry in charge of vocational training, headed by minister (and member of the Communist Party) Marcel Rigout, and obtained funding. Financial support also came from the Socialist Party minister of cultural affairs Jack Lang. In this project photography is considered to be a tool for professional and social insertion of youth, under the auspices of the new local action offices set up in 1982. These “Missions locales” were part of a public programme that targeted in particular young people at risk of dropping out of school and being excluded from society. The programme was a response to the urban violence that erupted during the summer of 1981, with the “rodeos” in the Minguettes neighbourhood of Vénissieux, a suburb of Lyons.<sup>20</sup> These events had spawned stereotypical media representations of youth in working-class suburbs as a cohort of violence and rejection of societal norms (Avenel 2010). To counter these representations that dominated the media and political discourse, Jean-Michel Montfort, Marc Pataut and Martine Vantses mobilized several well-known photographers to set up educational workshops on photography in 10 municipalities in working-class suburbs in France.<sup>21</sup> The images produced and disseminated were those of the young amateur photographers, not the professionals. From this experience Jean-Michel Montfort formulated the notion of “shared creation” (Colin, Seloron 1994, 128–132). He claimed to be the inventor of this expression which refers to political strategies to broaden access to culture and also to the potential for artistic expression possessed by all individuals, as opposed to culture broached only in terms of its exclusion and absence in working-class districts<sup>22</sup>:

The fundamental question to be addressed is the following: Has a segment of the population merely been deprived of culture, in which case the omission should be corrected and culture brought into their homes? Or is there something else? Those who have been “excluded” also have a culture, and it

<sup>20</sup> The local action offices are mentioned in the report written by Bernard Schwartz for the office of the prime minister, *L’insertion professionnelle et sociale des jeunes. Rapport au Premier ministre*, Paris, La Documentation française, 1981.

<sup>21</sup> Luc Choquer in Nanterre; Claude Raimond-Dityvon in La Rochelle; Jean-Robert Franco in Calais; Guy Le Querrec in Denain; Erik Levilly in Le Havre, Laurent Malone in Vénissieux; Jean-Michel Montfort in Grigny; Marie-Paule Nègre in Bagneux; Marc Pataut in Choisy-le-Roi; Patrick Zachmann in Marseille.

<sup>22</sup> Cyprien Avenel remarks that “it was primarily in the early 1990s that the idea of segregation appeared. For public opinion the suburbs became the archetypical ‘social problem’ represented by the emblematic figure of the outcast” (Avenel 2010, 11).

is not the culture of deprivation, but a range of cultures that have been forgotten, ignored, denigrated or scorned by contemporary society; cultures that encompass a sentimental and affective heritage, community practices that differ from the dominant forms, know-how and ways of living together that must be acknowledged, recognized and valued. Shared creation is a process of encounters between these residents and artists [...]. (Colin, Seloron 1994, 130)

“Shared creation” is thus a political act of cultural democracy because the “process of encounters” sought by the founder of Faut Voir leads to an inversion of values and of the dynamics of domination. It can no longer be a matter of top-down management to bring “culture into the home”; at issue is the place given to the expression of the cultures “forgotten, ignored, denigrated or scorned by contemporary society”. “Shared creation” is materialized in the framework of action creation that allows participants to appropriate their images, as observer subjects and not as observed subjects. In 1983 it became possible to affirm the positive value of youth culture and identity in working-class suburbs in France, by displaying the photographic work of these young people. The images created by these non-professionals are for the most part portraits and representations of a personal universe and daily life (Fig. 13.1).

The bar Floréal group initiated another “shared creation” project in the Paris suburb Blanc-Mesnil in 1995, called *Blanc-Mesnil c’est moi, mais moi c’est qui? / I am Blanc-Mesnil, but who am I?*. The project, set up under the national Cities Policy framework, was aimed at youth aged 15–25, some of whom lived in the Tilleuls housing estate. Photography workshops were conducted by André Lejarre and Olivier Pasquiers in the neighbourhood as part of the creation process.<sup>23</sup> Participation was voluntary, and the participants could meet with the photographers at regularly scheduled times in the various locations of partner organizations. Contact sheets were systematically used as a teaching tool, and discussion with the photographers encouraged the participants to pursue their photographic work. In aesthetic terms the pictures were once again self-representations

<sup>23</sup> André Lejarre was present at the municipal youth club premises, a sort of youth and culture centre, to lend out cameras and create a place for dialogue and discussion of the photos. The youth club moderators introduced the young attendees to the photographer and encouraged them to participate in the project. In parallel Olivier Pasquiers contacted the teaching staff at two vocational high schools (Lycée d’Enseignement Professionnel). Other meeting locations were the Yuri Gagarine centre and the Forum, both municipal premises for youth activities.



**Fig. 13.2** Olivier Pasquiers, Jean Epstein, *Premières photos de vacances*, designed by the graphic art studio Nous Travaillons Ensemble, Paris, bar Floréal éditions, 1999 Portfolio held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Estampes et de la photographie, Paris

and images of familiar daily surroundings; the photographs were compiled for publication by the graphists of Nous Travaillons Ensemble and published by the Blanc-Mesnil communication office (Collectif, bar Floréal 1995). Another emblematic project was undertaken by the bar Floréal in 1999, *Premières photos de vacances*, which grew out of collaborative work by Olivier Pasquiers and the charity Secours populaire français (SPF) (Fig. 13.2). This subject of this project was the experience of poor families who for the first time were able to go on a holiday trip, a milestone that SPF identified as a crucial moment. Enabling families to take holidays is one of the charity's main missions, and SPF commissioned the collective to work with them. The collaboration was headed by Olivier Pasquiers who had joined the group in 1991, and the work often shared out among different members of the collective. Characteristically, the group chose to combine images and words. With the participation of a psychosociologist,

Jean Epstein, the remarks collected reveal unexpected behaviours and interaction in families. Excerpts from families' comments and an analytical text were included in a booklet to accompany the reportage of black-and-white photographs by Olivier Pasquiers. Pasquiers' reportage was supplemented by colour photographs taken by the families, using disposable cameras. This corpus was compiled in a large portfolio, without hierarchy or distinction between amateur photos and the author's images (Pasquiers, Epstein, 1999). This presentation was ideally suited to the conception of portable shows that could be transported to different SPF locations and also widely disseminated in cultural and community venues to reach a wide audience. Faut Voir and the bar Floréal group pursued these singular modes of expression and dissemination and their potential for new aesthetic criteria. These modes foster shared work, employing various strategies for collaboration with institutional partners.

In our discussion of the artistic and cultural action of these two photographers' collectives in France, we make a semantic choice, preferring the expression "shared creation" used by Jean-Michel Montfort, rather than the terms of "participation" and participatory creation or photography.<sup>24</sup> In politics the notion of "participation" emerged as an objective of proactive policy guided by the state when its Cities Policy was put into place. In this context, when housing estates were to be refurbished, there was much talk about consultation and participation of residents, but this commitment did not necessarily materialize or become effective in actual practice in the field (Carrel 2013; Bacqué and Mehmache 2013). Participation accompanied by a political force to give a voice and visibility to the residents of working-class neighbourhoods was often no more than an illusion. The photographers' collectives framed their work in this political dynamic led by the left-wing government of the time, and they were able to set up partnerships according to the terms of Cities Policy commissions, under the injunction of participation, but their artistic engagement went beyond the abstract political discourse and embodied a more concrete involvement of residents. Participation took active shape and produced "shared creation". Shared creation meant that photographic documentary work was rigorously deployed, in a long time frame. The result was an artistic object, presented as an exhibition or a publication, that constituted a repository of memory for the residents involved. The residents took part

<sup>24</sup>The notion of "co-creation" can be seen as a current equivalent of "shared creation" (Airaud et al. 2019).

in the work as the protagonists of their culture and were not simply consulted or brought into contact with artistic forms.

The recourse to amateur photography produces an aesthetic of proximity. Moving away from slick, sharp, framed and intelligible images, the viewer is confronted with off-centre pictures, poorly framed views, over-exposed images and all the opacity of representation of reality. The protocol of shared creation is a counter-model to dominant photographic culture that emphasizes the role of the author. It forces viewers to look at unexpected and surprising images and plunges them into an intimate experience. Faut Voir reiterated its practices of “shared creation” in all its projects, spanning close to 20 years. This dynamic approach informed 30 years of creative work by the bar Floréal group.<sup>25</sup> Starting in the 2000s, this approach was invested by new generations of artists in the group.<sup>26</sup> In this respect the final show in 2015, entitled *Le partage du regard, un atelier ça sert à quoi? / The multiple eye: what are the uses of a workshop?*, underscores the importance of sharing, of pooling the gaze, to produce a multiplicity of representations and points of view.

[...] these [photography] workshops, while often touted as the expression of residents [in this context, residents implies residents of working-class districts], had little visibility. Let us turn the tables, because it is not enough to simply provide the means of expression, the results must show the world as it is lived and thought by the those whose voices are rarely if ever heard.<sup>27</sup>

The aim is to listen to the voices of people who are relegated to invisible and precarious lives in contemporary society and also to create the conditions needed to establish cultural democracy and allow another culture to

<sup>25</sup> The bar Floréal production also included documentary practices by individual authors in its projects, and the “shared creation” approach was not an exclusive standard, as it was for the Faut Voir collective. While some bar Floréal projects were guided by the documentary work of a single photographer in the collective, educational workshops were also upon occasion developed in parallel with the author’s work.

<sup>26</sup> “Le fonds du bar Floréal: parcours d’un collectif de photographes et recensement dans les collections du Département des Estampes et de la photographie à la BnF”, *Carnet de la recherche à la Bibliothèque nationale de France*, May 2020, on line: <https://bnf.hypotheses.org/9426>.

<sup>27</sup> Introductory text posted on the Centre National des Arts Plastiques website to accompany the exhibition “Le partage du regard. Un atelier, à quoi ça sert? En atelier avec les photographes du bar Floréal, May–June 2015, <https://www.cnap.fr/le-partage-du-regard-un-atelier-quoi-ca-sert-1>.

emerge, freed of the casing of dominant hegemonic culture, “by liberating speech that as been buried, shunted aside, ostracized, suppressed” (Arnaud 2015, 53). In this respect these “workshops”, synonymous with “artistic action” or “educational intervention”, outline the artistic commitment of these collectives and make teaching of and about photography an instrument of cultural democracy. Cultural democracy also implies thinking about the act of photography as empowerment and the acquisition of the capacity to act. The bar Floréal and Faut Voir collectives pursue a community art in France (Collectif 2012; Bertrand 2017). The community characteristic of this orientation is the pooling of an artistic process to elicit interaction in a community, for example, the residents of a given neighbourhood, “based on a common interest to change their living conditions” (De Varine and Montfort 1995, 72). The collectives advocate for social transformation by enabling all segments of society to appropriate the tools of representation and to accede to artistic forms, no longer simply as spectators but as actors. This inversion is possible on the condition that some thought be given to find “a transversal approach to culture in relation to the spheres of political, urban and social organization. This implies that the participating residents be recognized as the actors of their own lives, and that the artist accept the role of gadfly and stimulator of awareness” (Colin, Seloron 1994, 130). For these photographers’ collectives, the issue is to imagine ways to share the act of making images—to make with—in a liberating movement that is reminiscent of the foundations of popular education.

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## Reflective Portfolio: “Scattered Memories of a Distorted Future”

*Maryam Firuzi*

Collaboration in creating artworks has always been my concern. I studied cinema at the Art University of Tehran, and the first thing that I learned there was how to generate a group dynamic around a project and use the abilities and creativity of other artists to create a work of art. This feature can be found in all of my photo series, but in the project entitled “Scattered Memories of a Distorted Future,” started in May 2021 and still ongoing, collaboration has not been just to advance my project but has formed the core concept of the work.

In my previous series, I made my photos with the help of other artists, such as a makeup artist or set designer. This project also involved the help of a full-time assistant, throughout the preproduction phase of the project, which included finding the locations and painting days, and on the production day—which is always a separate working day. A lighting assistant was also present on the production day of nine photos. In total, this collection involved a group of 16 people, with usually between 3 and 5 on the scene for each photo. In fact, they were all part of my production

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M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_14)

team; but in this case, artistic collaboration and the presence of the painter and her work have been the main concept of this photo collection. The painter did not join the group only to help translate my main idea as a photographer, but she also played the role of an artist throughout the production with me.

In this series, my questions have been about the artist's presence and her relationship with the place and the society in which she lives and works. This relationship to place is deeply intertwined with the creation of the artwork.

These questions arose in my mind as I witnessed the deep economic, political, social, and environmental crises that the people of my country faced and continue to face today. Based on my studies of the history of civilization, I realized that whenever a country went through a phase of poverty and crisis, art and culture lost their importance and gradually disappeared, and in every society which achieves wealth and comfort, culture and art thrive accordingly. This has happened many times in the history of my country. Like the people of my homeland, I was frustrated and worried about the future, and one question kept coming up: what is our duty as an artist amid this devastation? Drought and environmental changes and the devastation that followed across Iran have led me to pay more attention to abandoned and ruined places in the countryside, and even when I was in the city, I just saw these abandoned places that had belonged to some people who left Iran.

Gradually, these ruins became a metaphor for everything in Iran, and then the idea emerged of the artist's presence among these ruins, making a work of art from within these ruins. But this was just the first step in the project. I had to find artists who were willing to work with me. From the beginning, I thought of painters who could paint on the surviving walls, and their paintings would become part of that place and hopefully survive. Although in my adolescence I practiced painting, as I left that practice, I lost my connection with the community of painters, and I did not know any of them closely. Therefore, I started to look for female painters who were coming from the same generation as mine on social media and followed them. There is also another characteristic of this generation in Iran: we were all born after the 1979 revolution, and we spent most of our childhood in an eight-year war. My generation is the last to reflect population growth, before Iran began witnessing a decrease in its population size; at the same time, this generation has been subjected to the most intense social restrictions in the wake of the Revolution in 1979. Over the

last 15 years, numerous elites of my generation in various fields have emigrated to Europe and North America, and those who have remained struggle every day with the dilemma of staying or leaving their land. This generation grew up with revolutionary and Islamic ideals taught in schools and later at a young age faced great identity crises and contradictions between reality and the ideology of the government.

But why choose women artists? First and foremost, I am a woman myself, and in that state of mind, I needed solidarity and companionship with artists who experienced similar situations to mine to overcome the frustration and suffering I carried with me, by talking and working with them. Working with women artists gave me more power to face problems because we had experienced similar problems in society. And secondly, for the first time in years, we were witnessing women's solidarity in women's movements in Iran. These were women who fight for their rights and not only against gender inequality but against widespread gender-based harassment and institutional oppression, which can also come from the men and women who abide by these patriarchal institutions.

On the other hand, artists are likely not to behave according to the traditions of a society, because breaking traditions is the nature of art. A woman has to overcome countless obstacles to become an artist in Iran, as being an artist is not easily accepted by traditional and religious people. Most of us have had to face a lot of challenges, especially from our family, because as students in art schools and universities we have learned to think freely and creatively, and as artists, our lifestyles are seen as alternative and dissident in Iranian society, which makes the position of women artists all the more special.

Women artists stand out as real fighters in my view: as people still capable to create regardless of circumstances, as pragmatists among the ruins, as in this series of photos, but also as group of fighters, not as isolated practitioners.

After finding women artists on social media, I corresponded with them without explaining the project. In these messages, I introduced myself and offered to meet them to discuss the idea of a joint cooperation and to explain the project to them in person. Little by little, the meetings took shape. They invited me to their studio, and at times, our conversation could go on for a couple of hours. This project was formed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns. Many of us had not socialized or met anyone for a long time as a result of restrictions. That's why when we eventually met for the first time, my personal encounters with each of them were so healing for both of us.

Our conversations were about issues that brought us closer together and friendships developed which were not directly related to my project. We talked about our experiences, the path we had taken, our bittersweet memories, our relationships and families, the problems we have struggled with, our failures and successes, the periods of depression we have gone through, and the frustrations we have endured in the miserable conditions of the country. I would share with them the suffering I felt with this society and government and how it questioned my whole life. We discussed how this could be raised through our work and what is our responsibility as an artist in this situation. Then I asked them to paint on the wall of ruined places to turn these mental questions into a visual question, which might sometimes contain an answer at the same time.

A number of them later told me that they had come closer to me than to the main idea of the project and had decided to try it out. At first, they had no idea about the outcome of the work or what was going on in my mind, but after the first photo of the series was taken, I would go to the meetings with that photo in hand, and I could more easily get a positive response for cooperation.

My biggest challenge at first was working with people who had no experience of teamwork. Their art was formed individually, while the nature of my work was formed in collaboration. But it was my job to be as flexible as I could. My budget for the project was very low, and it made it much harder. In addition, we worked in places that were not only in very bad condition, but some of them were very dangerous, and there was a possibility of debris falling. Some places were so poorly ventilated that we could not spend much time in them, and we had to go out and come back to find fresh air, which made it much harder for the painter. But the sense of responsibility that all painters had for creating their work on the wall made them endure all these bad conditions.

My preproduction was divided into two parts. While I was looking for painters, I was also visiting abandoned places in and around Tehran with my assistant. Getting to these places was the most complex part of the project. Some of them belonged to the government, and no government likes to show the ruined image of its city. Some places had private owners who had generally left the country for many years, and some places were left unattended, making them unsafe to stay in because addicts used these spaces to take drugs (Fig. 14.1). In one of the places, while the artist was painting on the wall and I tested the light of the place, addicts were using drugs behind the wall. In such a situation, it



Fig. 14.1 Ghazal Marvi, by Maryam Firuzi

was very difficult to convince the members of the group to come and work in these places.

My method was to take photos while visiting the place and send the photos to the painters according to their work style. For example, seeing Sahar Nahavandi's works, I realized that her focus is on drawing, using mostly pencil and charcoal, and that her subject was mostly embryos and intertwined bodies (Fig 14.2). While visiting a burnt school that had become a hangout for addicts and seeing its burnt walls, I remembered Sahar's drawing. I invited Sahar to visit that place together. Sahar spent an hour there and then said that she could feel the atmosphere of that place, she felt close to the school and its history, and we started work the following week. But sometimes the painter needed several days to find the subject and feel close to the place, while at other times, just seeing the photos was enough for them. Some painters came to visit different places several times until they eventually connected with one of them. But in the last photo, the painter, Zahra Shafie, and I traveled to an abandoned island in



Fig. 14.2 Sahar Nahavandi, by Maryam Firuzi

the north of Iran together without knowing what was awaiting us. It was a completely new experience for both of us. We had just called each other before the trip, and it was the first time we met. During the trip, we found the place we were looking for, and an hour later we started our work, and after 5 days, we returned to Tehran with our photo. When we returned to Tehran, we felt a sense of power and victory. Especially since we had gone on this trip alone as my assistant could not accompany us on this trip because he was in south of Iran on a different project. We had driven 10 h to reach our destination, and this trip had created a deep friendship and bond between us.

Each of the painters was free to engage in the project according to their view of their own work. We had a common goal, but everyone's approach was in line with their personal work mentality. For example, Najmeh Kazazi was looking for an opportunity to experience painting on a very large scale, so we looked for a place where the wall was large enough for her. Or Fateme Eslamyan said to me: "I know this painting is not going to



be my best work, even if the goal is not for you to take the best photo, I want to be in this place, part of this place, part of its identity, even part of its future.” (Fig 14.3) Some painters were looking for a place that was dramatic enough to complete their paintings. Raziye Iranpour wanted a place that suited the atmosphere of her personal approach in her paintings. She was very pleased when I shared the photo of an abandoned train station with her (Fig 14.4). But some painters were looking for a more creative challenge; they wanted to respond to the place, and the place would tell them what to paint and how to paint. The Hejazi sisters were in this category. They lived in Mashhad, and a month before starting work, they started to come up with ideas from just seeing a single photo of the location that I had sent to them. On the day the project started, they came to the location directly from Tehran airport and started working (Fig. 14.5). For some painters, architecture and the history behind it were very important. Despite her skin sensitivity to the soil, Faxteh Shamsian fell in love with the place as soon as she saw the basement of the colonel’s house,



Fig. 14.3 Fateme Eslamyani, by Maryam Firuzi





**Fig. 14.4** Raziye Iranpour, by Maryam Firuzi

which had a special Iranian architecture, so she adapted her work to the conditions she found there. During her painting, Tarlan Tabar talked to the owner of the abandoned public bath several times to hear his stories about the place. Memories are one of the most important concepts in her artworks (e.g., one of her painting series is *Amnesia*; about her childhood memories), making her whole approach to painting very fluid (Fig 14.6).

After my visits to the countless abandoned places I saw in the preproduction period, and based on the knowledge I gained from the painters during the project, I began to distribute the places and guess which place might be more attractive to each of them. Sometimes my guess was completely correct and sometimes not, and I had to continue looking for another abandoned place. It was my job to shape my idea and guide the collaborators and to constantly take care of the personal approach of each of the artists in the series. The most important thing for me in this situation was that none of the artists felt that their individuality had been removed from their work or that their work was just a piece in my



Fig. 14.5 Work by the Hejazi sisters (Parisa & Manijeh), by Maryam Firuzi

overarching idea. To this aim, they were free to choose the location of their work, and even the main decision was up to them about what to paint and what technique to use. And I was only indirectly influential in choosing the painting and its location. I was with the painter during the painting on the wall, and we were constantly talking about various issues. I also prepared the necessary equipment, and of course, I tested different compositions and lighting styles to get everything ready for the day of photography. At the end of each photography session, I sought out the painter's comments on the experience. Almost all of them believed that the result was better than they imagined, and they were happy that they had trusted me. This gave me extra morale to continue the project.

For the first time, I was working with artists who were as passionate as I was. The energy and experience I received from working with them brought me back to life. However, my initial questions about the nature of the artist's presence in a devastated society remain unanswered. I just want to say that even when we are completely hopeless, we should



Fig. 14.6 Tarlan Tabar, by Maryam Firuzi

continue to live and create because we don't have any other choice. I want to ask if our effort has any effects on the destruction. How powerful can art be, and how long can women artists resist this destruction? How long will women have to stand on the ruins that they did not cause and strive to improve their conditions?

The suffering we endure manifests itself in the language of ruins. As an artist, amid all this suffering (the language of the present), I hope to find out how artistic creation can be healing, inspiring, and effective. What effect does the artist have on this state of ruin? What role do we have in the ruins of mankind's constructions/creations?

In this series, ruins have become a metaphor for pain. Here, between a silent past and a distorted future, images are painted over a masculine history, on the face of the past, and photographs raise unanswered questions for the future.

PART V

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Towards an Ethics of Collaboration



# It's Not Enough to Just Point a Camera

*Anthony Luvera and Sarah Allen*

## ON COLLABORATION

**Sarah Allen (SA):** Perhaps we can begin with the definition of collaboration as it appears in the Oxford Dictionary of English. It is a definition that I know has interested you in the past in the past. It reads:

*Collaboration*

1. Untitled labour
2. Traitorous cooperation with the enemy

**Anthony Luvera (AL):** When my practice took a collaborative turn in 2002, I was immediately drawn to the definitions of collaboration. The double-edged meaning of the term not only sums up the many and varied contributions filtered through the singular voice of an artist, it also nods to the power balance between a photographer and their subject or

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M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_15)

participant. Critiques of the power dynamics that play out in photography, in documentary practices and photojournalism in particular, have been well articulated by a number of artists and writers in recent decades, most notably by the likes of Allan Sekula, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, A. D. Coleman, Martha Rosler, and Ariella Azoulay. When I began to think more self-reflexively about the activities I invite participants to take part in, I became acutely aware that regardless of how open an invitation to collaborate could be conceived, there is always a power imbalance which needs to be handled carefully.

**SA:** Thinking more about that power imbalance, do you feel that it is ever possible to have a truly collaborative practice?

**AL:** I'm not sure the problems of photographic representation can be entirely solved by collaboration. I question whether a truly collaborative practice is possible, especially when there are pronounced differences in social position, class, cultural capital, relative wealth, agency, and power between the artist and the individuals taking part in their practice. Having said this, I think it can be useful to consider collaboration as a scale. On one end of the scale, collaboration is often referred to in relation to decisions made by the participant, such as pose, dress, appearance, or gesture, enabled through conditions created or prompted by the artist. At the other end of this scale, the participant takes an active role in contributing to strategies of co-production or co-creation independently or in concert with the artist. There can be many ways in which an artist can use their practice to open up, or make explicit, the role various contributors play in the creation of socially engaged work. Central to a collaborative practice are questions about how the artist negotiates issues such as authorship, agency, ethics, representation, and the articulation of process.

**SA:** You often collaborate with misunderstood communities that are pushed to the so-called margins, but your engagement with homelessness has run throughout your entire career. What is it about this subject that motivates you?

**AL:** I grew up in small country town in Western Australia. I studied photography at university in Perth, which is one of the most remote cities in the world. I had seen photography projects that focused on social issues such as homelessness, poverty, and addiction, by the likes of Jim Goldberg, Larry Clark, Walker Evans, Susan Meiselas, and Richard Billingham, to name just a few. However, from where I was living at the time, they all appeared to focus on people and places which seemed so far away. While of course Australia is not without the systemic or structural problems that



propagate social, political, and economic inequality, it wasn't until I came to the United Kingdom in 1999 that I saw poverty and homelessness on a scale that was unlike anything I had ever witnessed first-hand. I would regularly go out with a camera and photograph on the streets around where I lived in Brixton. One day, I had an encounter which made a stark impression on me. As I held up my camera to take a photograph of a man carrying a duvet across a busy road, he stopped me and politely said, 'Please don't take a picture of me'. The man's request felt like a clear, urgent demonstration of all the critical writing on photography I had ever read which petitions photographers to take responsibility for the power they wield with a camera.

As much as my motivation to work with people experiencing homelessness stems from a sense of empathy and thinking critically about the ways photography is used, it is also fuelled by a sense of injustice about the social, political, and economic systems which create homelessness. Just as importantly, my motivation to continue working with people experiencing homelessness is propelled by the relationships I have with participants and a sense of guardianship I feel towards the photographs and other artefacts they have entrusted to me for use in my practice.

**SA:** Could you speak about the role of intention in your work?

**AL:** In conversations with participants about my intentions, particularly at the beginning of a project, the following kinds of questions are often asked of me: 'Why are you doing this?' 'What's in it for me?' 'What are you getting out of this?' 'Will you make money out of this?' 'Will I make any money?' 'How will I benefit from taking part?' Questions such as these are important to discuss, even if the answers are not always straightforward. Discussions with participants about my intentions always provide a fruitful reminder of why I undertake this work, and the limits of photography and socially engaged practice. Asserting that collaboration can have personal or social benefits raises even more questions, particularly in relation to the problems of paternalism and speaking on behalf of other people. As much as the intentions behind a collaborative practice may be to level out the power difference between the artist and participant, most often it is the artist, and the organizations which commission or fund their work, that frames the invitation to the participant to take part in the artist's practice.

When I began working with people experiencing homelessness, one of my underlying intentions was a seemingly simple inquiry into what could happen when the subjects of a project are able to take control of

representing themselves. In many respects, this is still one of the key drivers of my practice, but over time I've come to register how this throws up issues of power, agency, ethics, and representation. Attempting to understand and tackle the problems of representation pushes my practice forward, even when this means recognizing the limits of the value of socially engaged photography and acknowledging that sometimes photography is simply not enough.

**SA:** Thinking a little bit more about that question of when photography is 'not enough', perhaps we can consider the role of text/writing in your practice. I was always struck by a comment by Martha Rosler made in her essay, 'Post Documentary, Post Photography?' where she discusses the results of a photograph's potential 'muteness':

The muteness of a photograph of someone different from the viewer may paradoxically be more effective in inviting projection, empathy, or pity than even the same photo representing a speaking subject, because the icon is universalized and depoliticized. (1999, 208)

**AL:** In my formative education, Martha Rosler's writings made an impression on me, and I continue to find her work very interesting. Through essays such as, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)' (1981) and 'Post Documentary, Post Photography?' (1999), she calls into question the politics of photographic representation and the ethics involved in the production of images depicting social issues, disenfranchised people, and people living in poverty. Viewing her image/text artwork, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974–1975), for the first time as a young photographer was a light bulb moment for me. I was struck by the way this work draws attention to how taken-for-granted modes of communication such as photography and language can reinforce or disrupt the power dynamics involved in the representation of social issues. This is a theme that underscores much of Rosler's practice and is neatly encapsulated in the opening question of her essay, 'Place, Position, Power, Politics', where she asks, 'What is the responsibility of the artist to society?' (1994, 55). This line of critical enquiry speaks clearly to me in how it compels the practice of an artist or photographer—or the work of any cultural producer for that matter—to be considered as part of a broader system which informs and shapes knowledge.

With regard to your question about the role of text and writing in my work, I find it a productive tool to think through the problems of



representation and the ethics of engagement at play in my practice. I also find it to be a useful way to attempt to represent the collaborative processes and relationships which may not always be visible in the work.

**SA:** I wanted to ask you also about exchange, because you mentioned the question of money, with participants asking: 'Are you going to make money out of this?' I first discovered your practice when I wrote a piece about your *Assisted Self Portraits* (2002–ongoing) in dialogue with Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974–1975) and Boris Mikhailov's *Case History* (1999). This question of payment is interesting as I understand Mikhailov often paid the people he photographed. How have you navigated questions related to this form of exchange?

**AL:** My position, especially in the early part of my career, has been that I don't want to incentivize participation through payment. Often the people I work with will have various kinds of precarious financial situations and are reliant on social support payments, and any kind of formal payment would likely pose a problem for them in that regard. However, when possible and appropriate, I have provided expenses or vouchers for travel and hospitality. What I offer is an invitation to create images, develop skills, and to take part.

**SA:** And, of course, there are other modes of exchange.

**AL:** Yes, for example, I always give photographs to participants. And sometimes, participants have asked for assistance to further develop their interest in photography and I have given them camera equipment. I have also supported participants who have gone on to study photography by providing guidance on their course applications and feedback about their coursework. Additionally, there are a small number of participants who have gone on to develop a practice or career as a photographer, and I've continued to support them by providing advice and introducing them to colleagues in my professional networks.

At other times, when I have been invited by galleries and museums to give talks about my work, to design and facilitate workshops, or to develop a public engagement programme for an exhibition, I have invited participants to take part in these events and be paid by the organization for their contribution. One example of this is when Ed Wheelan, who took part in *Not Going Shopping*, co-delivered a workshop with me at The Photographers' Gallery. Another example is when Gerald McLaverty, my collaborator on *Frequently Asked Questions*, spoke alongside me at an event at Tate Modern. For the public programme of *Assembly* at the Phoenix Gallery in Brighton, Jeff Hubbard, who participated in my work



**Fig. 15.1** Documentation of the making of *Assisted Self-Portrait of Ben Evans* from *Assembly* (2012–2014) by Anthony Luvera

with people experiencing homelessness in London in the early 2000s, spoke on a panel discussion about his experience of working with me as a participant and how he went on to develop his own practice as a photographer and educator.

**SA:** How do you maintain your collaborations?

**AL:** I have worked with hundreds of people around the UK over the past 20 years, in places such as Belfast, Colchester, Brighton, Coventry, Birmingham, Manchester, and in various boroughs in London. Each person I've worked with has expressed very specific ideas about why they have wanted to take part in my work. Sometimes, participants are keen to use the equipment I offer them in order to have an opportunity to create photographs for their own personal use. At other times, participants have wanted to use photography to express their interests or ideas about a particular topic they find engaging. Many participants are keen to simply document their experiences, while others want to say something more directly about the experience of homelessness (Figs. 15.1, 15.2, and 15.3).



**Fig. 15.2** Documentation of the making of *Assisted Self-Portrait of Ben Rodda* from *Construct* (2018–2022) by Anthony Luvera

I came to realize early on, that in many respects, my relationships with the participants are as much the practice as the creation of the images, texts, and other artefacts. Following the culmination of each project, I have continued to be in regular contact with many participants, and, on occasion, I have worked with some of these people on other projects. An example of this is *Frequently Asked Questions*, a project created with Gerald McIlaverty, who I first met when he took part in *Assembly*.

With a number of people, after the project has finished, I have continued to find ways to enable the progression of their interest in photography or to provide support in other areas of their lives. Additionally, when opportunities arise, I will invite participants to contribute to public events and media interviews and to take part in other activities related to my practice. Remaining in contact with participants after a project has become much easier since the widespread use of social media platforms and smartphones, and, increasingly, communicative technology plays a key role in the process of making the work.



**Fig. 15.3** *Assisted Self-Portrait of Mauvette Reynolds* from *Construct* (2018–2022) by Anthony Luvera

### INTO THE GALLERY

**SA:** I want to talk a little bit more about the gallery and museum context because your practice as an artist and activist also sits within community spaces and public spaces. What is it about that gallery context that is important to you?

**AL:** I regularly present my work in the public realm and in community spaces. I am interested in thinking carefully about who the work is for and how to strategically engage audiences. I do this not only through the decisions I make about where an exhibition is situated but also through the



**Fig. 15.4** Installation of *Agency* by Anthony Luvera, Warwick Row, Coventry, Coventry UK City of Culture 2021, 8–28 October 2021

staging of events and public engagement programmes. It seems to me that museums and galleries are mostly populated by white middle-class people who come from educated backgrounds, and they may already have an understanding of, or an engagement with, social issues. So, presenting work outside of gallery and museum spaces is an important way of enabling more diverse and potentially larger audiences to view and engage with the work and the issues it addresses (Fig. 15.4). This was the impetus for the first showing of my work made with people experiencing homelessness in 2005 in the exhibition, *Stories from Gilded Pavements*, on the London Underground's public art programme, 'Art on the Underground'. It is also the intention behind the many other shows I've since produced in spaces and places which are not traditional galleries or museums.

Of course, museums and galleries are important places to show the work in because they can enable new and different readings of the work when it is seen in dialogue with other artworks or forms of cultural



production. When I do work with galleries and museums, I am thinking just as carefully about how to engage diverse audiences as I would be when showing work in the public realm. For me, it's not about simply displaying work in a gallery for an audience to look at, it's about thinking how the gallery can be used as a pedagogic space, a space for active engagement and participation.

One of the more exciting models of what a museum can be, I believe, is the Museum of Homelessness (MoH). The MoH works peripatetically within established cultural organizations, community spaces, and in the public realm. They operate in a number of different ways across museum practice, cultural production, direct support and service provision, and campaigning. The MoH first invited me to show work with them when they were developing an exhibition programme for Tate Liverpool, entitled *State of the Nation* in 2018. I saw this is a perfect opportunity to further develop the project *Frequently Asked Questions*.

*Frequently Asked Questions* began in 2014 as part of *Assembly*, a larger body of work made with over 50 homeless people living in Brighton and Hove, commissioned by Brighton Photo Fringe. Seeking a way to present research about support and services available to people experiencing homelessness, I struck up a collaboration with Gerald Mclaverty. This involved sending email correspondence to council representatives in cities and towns across the UK, written from Gerald's experience of homelessness, requesting information about services provided in each locality. At the heart of *Frequently Asked Questions* are several questions that ask about a homeless individual's right to access to basic living provisions such as shelter, personal safety, health, food, and communication. It is Gerald's firm belief that councils around the UK do not always have adequate answers to these questions.

Throughout 2017, Gerald and I undertook further research with a new round of enquiries, which was exhibited as part of *State of the Nation* at Tate Liverpool with the MoH. Considering the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which legally bound local authorities with new duties in relation to homeless individuals, we thought it was an important moment to conduct further questioning of councils in 2019 to see whether the Act had resulted in any discernible change in their behaviour, in effect putting their performance under the microscope. Further exhibitions of *Frequently Asked Questions* were held at The People's Republic of Stokes Croft in Bristol in 2019 and at The Gallery at Foyles in London in 2020.

*Frequently Asked Questions* is more than a display of data at an exhibition or in a publication. It is an invitation to take part in a conversation. In each presentation, space has been made to ask the audience, 'What Are Your Questions?' to enable viewers to directly contribute to future research by providing responses and suggestions that can be folded into the life of the project, bringing to the fore more questions that need to be asked.

The exhibitions of *Frequently Asked Questions* in the various galleries it has been shown are more than the display of text-based works hung on walls. Public engagement programmes are conceived as part of the work, with events staged in the gallery in collaboration with artists, activists, campaigners, organizations, and experts working across disciplines to shake up preconceptions, lobby for change, and prompt people to think differently. The programme of events at Tate Liverpool included a practical workshop on squatting commercial properties; film screenings by local activist film-makers; a panel discussion with policy advisors and CEOs of homelessness charities; and a performance by the Choir With No Name, a choir for people who have experienced homelessness (Fig. 15.5).



**Fig. 15.5** Workshop with Established Beyond, *Frequently Asked Questions* by Anthony Luvera, State of the Nation with Museum of Homelessness, Tate Liverpool, 22–28 January 2018

Additionally, I worked with Photopedagogy, an education network and platform for photography teachers and their students, to create a resource about representing homelessness (Photopedagogy 2019).

**SA:** We have talked before about the complexities of navigating situations where the intention of the artist butts up against the intention of the institution. I'm quite interested in what it means for institutions to invite certain modes of practice into their spaces. What has your experience been in this regard?

**AL:** When I'm invited to work with an institution, I will accept the invitation if I feel the ethos of the organization and the approach of the individuals with whom I'd be working chimes with my position on the ethics of collaboration and the politics of representation. While identifying these qualities in an institution may appear straightforward, it hasn't always been the case. One experience that was especially formative in developing my understanding of navigating the challenges of working with an institution was when I was commissioned by the Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service in 2011 to make work with people experiencing homelessness in Colchester.

After several preparatory discussions with the curator, which gave me a sense of confidence about their ethical standpoint on representing people experiencing homelessness, I accepted the invitation from the museum. I was interested in exploring how photography could be used to address the underrepresentation of people experiencing homelessness in the social history collection of the museum. I proposed to work with participants to create assisted self-portraits and photographs of their belongings, which would then be displayed inside the museum amongst the permanent collection and outside in the public realm of Colchester.

I began the project by spending time volunteering at Beacon House, a homelessness support service in Colchester, helping to teach cooking classes twice a week. This enabled me to develop relationships with the staff of Beacon House and get to know the people for whom the organization provides a range of support services. I then set up a photography workshop in which I invited participants to take cameras away to photograph their experiences and places in the city that were significant to them. I also worked with participants to teach them how to use professional camera equipment to create still life photographs and assisted self-portraits featuring objects that were treasured by the individual. A variety of belongings were presented by the participants, including a handmade tapestry, a family album, a birth certificate, a handbag, a dog leash, a ceramic



figurine, and a guitar. Additionally, audio recordings were made by the curator who interviewed participants about the objects they had chosen.

After several weeks, I discovered that the curator had been asking participants to donate their personal possessions to the museum. I felt very uneasy about this collection exercise being undertaken by the curator. When I questioned them about their intentions, the curator expressed to me that they believed there was no problem with doing this as the participants would be offered similar items in exchange for their belongings. Regardless of the apparent exchange of items, to my mind this kind of approach to the acquisition of artefacts for a museum collection is extractive and unethical. It bears an uncomfortable relationship to the colonial ethnographic collecting expeditions of centuries past and the disregard those collectors demonstrated towards the value systems of the individuals and communities they intruded upon to acquire objects. While the participant's belongings may have been seen as ephemeral by the curator, to the individuals they are imbued with an emotional attachment which is irreplaceable. When all of this came to light, and after several difficult exchanges with the curator, I questioned my capacity to continue with the commission. I considered walking away, but I felt unable to do this as I felt so connected to the participants and obliged to fulfil the promises I had made about our work together. It was a difficult situation to reconcile.

On reflection, I can see how this experience taught me a valuable lesson about gaining greater clarity about the full extent of the plans an institution has for my involvement in their programme. It also demonstrated to me that the restrictive processes of project funding and institutional requirements can sometimes mean staff within an institution may end up behaving in ways they may not necessarily choose in other kinds of settings or circumstances. Especially when there are limited resources available to deliver outcomes within an expected timeframe, which, in actuality, may not be achievable or appropriate for the institution, the artist, or the participants.

Since the financial crisis of 2007 to 2008, the radical cuts in investment in national portfolio organizations by the Arts Council England in 2011, and the continued financial squeeze on the arts and cultural sectors, I have noticed an increasing number of arts organizations operating with a business model based on short-term project funding. One of the effects of this kind of business model is that more attention is being paid to socially engaged practice, as these types of practices can often be used to demonstrate the objectives, target audiences, and positive social outcomes the

successful awarding of public funding is predicated upon. There are a number of photography organizations across the UK which were previously disengaged with photography as a social practice or relegated it in very marginal ways to their education or outreach programmes. Now, many of these organizations are apparently interested in supporting ideas and practices focused on themes such as community cohesion, intergenerational exchange, or art and health, and are commissioning work made with specific, diverse community groups. However, underneath these kinds of activities are the funders' objectives and requirements to which the organizations are answerable to.

In some ways, I believe this increase in support for socially engaged work is to be encouraged. But, at times, there can be a notable lack of critical thinking about socially engaged practice and the obligation of the organization or institution to responsibly navigate issues of agency and representation from within, rather than outsource their responsibilities through the practices of artists. Ultimately, I think it is important to remember that institutions are made up of people, and it is individuals who make decisions on behalf of the institution.

**SA:** I've been thinking a lot about the radical potential of institutions. You once quoted J.G. Ballard's autobiography *Miracles of Life*:

... the patronage of the arts by the state serves a political role by performing a castration ceremony, neutering any revolutionary impulse and reducing the 'arts community' to a docile herd. They are allowed to bleat, but are too enfeebled to ever paw the ground. (2008, 234)

This quote struck such a chord with me, especially considering the recent letter issued to national museums and cultural bodies by the current Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Oliver Dowden, in relation to 'contested heritage'. In this letter, Dowden reminds Arm's Length Bodies that their approach to contested heritage 'be consistent with the Government's position' (2020). It further implies that government funding may be withheld if museums do not comply.

**AL:** Ballard wrote this about the arts community of the 1970s. When I first read this passage, it felt so prophetic, despite being written about a previous time. I feel it resonates strongly with the ways artist practices today can be instrumentalized by arts organizations in order to access funding, essentially through the demonstration of a political agenda passed down from the UK Government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media

and Sport through Arts Council England (ACE). I'm always impressed by the individual or the team of people within an institution who enable work to take place that is not so tightly bound by predetermined outcomes, especially those who are willing to learn from mistakes. Artist's practices are not formulas; they evolve over a period of time, especially collaborative practices.

It is also worth acknowledging that beyond ACE, the ecosystem for funding within the cultural sector in the UK is actually quite varied and broad. Over time, I've learned that when I'm looking for funding or institutional support, there will be some organizations whose ethos and philosophy simply don't make sense to me, while there will be others to which I feel more aligned.

**SA:** I love the way you describe modes of manoeuvre within a larger structure, how one can make tiny acts of refusal while still maintaining a space.

**AL:** I think it would be negligent not to attempt to establish partnerships or access to resources which can enable the people and organizations I work with to access opportunities. There's a sense of responsibility here, not to just make work about the lived experiences of other people but to meaningfully connect this work with audiences. This is the drive that underpins the public engagement programmes for the exhibitions of *Frequently Asked Questions*, which are conceived to enable a range of audiences to come together to creatively take part in discussions, activities, screenings, and performances. It also led to an opportunity for Gerald Mclaverty and I to present our work to MPs who serve on the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Ending Homelessness in the Houses of Parliament. It was the motivation behind publishing the *Frequently Asked Questions* book, which was sent to all of the MPs in the UK; councillors, cabinet members, and housing and homelessness departments in local authorities across the country; as well as people working in the homelessness support sector (Luvera and Mclaverty 2020). The responses that came back from MPs, local politicians, and people employed in homelessness charities and support services were overwhelming, with many reporting how *Frequently Asked Questions* has made a positive impact on the organizations they work for.

## BEYOND PHOTOGRAPHY

**SA:** I want to ask you about your practice ‘beyond photography’, because so much of your work departs from the camera. How has embracing other means of expression aided your practice?

**AL:** While a photograph can have powerful impacts on people, I don’t think photographs or a photographic practice can change the world. I think what photography can do is contribute to a shift in critical consciousness, which may, in turn, have an impact upon political decisions. My practice of working with people experiencing homelessness is not just about saying, ‘this is what homeless people look like’, or ‘this is what homeless people want us to see’. It is an attempt to productively contribute to the real work being done in the homelessness sector. Work being done in campaigning, work being done by support services, work being done at a local level, work being done nationally. Embracing other modes of representation and methods for creating visual and textual materials has enabled my practice to reach audiences differently and for other forms of information to be communicated.

**SA:** I understand you were also involved in recording a chorus of sound. Can you tell me a little more about this?

**AL:** Throughout my visual practice, I have also made audio recordings, mostly of conversations with participants. But it wasn’t until the creation of *Assembly* when I began to use sound recordings more intentionally. *Assembly* was created in Brighton between 2012 and 2014. In order to create this work, I developed a relationship with two homelessness support services provided by the Brighton Housing Trust: a hostel called Phase One and the First Base Day Centre. First Base is located in St Stephen’s Church, which was originally built in the late eighteenth century to be a ballroom and was later used as an assembly room. The acoustics of the building are extraordinary.

After spending a year working in the kitchens helping to prepare and serve meals, I set up a photography workshop. I invited participants to take away disposable cameras and digital sound recorders to document their experiences. I made sound recordings with participants throughout the process of our work together, including the creation of assisted self-portraits, from the use of the equipment on location through to the selection of the final images for exhibition and publication. I also invited

participants to record conversations with me in which we discussed their views on issues related to photography, representation, and identity. Additionally, I collaborated with the Cascade Chorus, a choir of people in recovery, to sing, create sound recordings, and rehearse for a performance that was part of the exhibition. A 50-minute soundscape which weaves excerpts from all of these various sound recordings played in the gallery space when *Assembly* was exhibited for the first time in the Phoenix Gallery Brighton.

I find the act of bringing people together to sing and create public performances a useful way of engaging audiences. When working with choirs made up of people experiencing homelessness, these performances not only bring in different audiences to engage with the work in a gallery or in a public space, they also become an opportunity to enable the audience to connect with issues relating to homelessness in ways that are perhaps more visceral or sensorial than simply looking at photographs or texts.

**SA:** You also make books and newspapers. What strategies are you thinking through in deciding what form they will take and how they are disseminated?

**AL:** My interest in using printed materials such as books and newspapers is to make the work as accessible as possible and to use the publication as a vehicle to communicate directly with a specific audience. It is relatively cheap to mass produce a community newspaper and, with an effective distribution mechanism in place, it is possible to deliver the work directly to a large number of people's homes across a city or within a region. For example, when the recent work, *Agency*, was exhibited in the public realm in Coventry for the Coventry UK City of Culture festival, we created a community newspaper which was distributed freely across the city to households, venues, and businesses. When *Agency* was presented by Fotogalleri Vasli Souza at Oslo Negativ, a second edition was published and distributed across Oslo (Fig. 15.6). And with the *Frequently Asked Questions* book, which was conceived to present information about the research Gerald McIlaverty and I undertook into local authorities, the publication was sent directly to people in positions of influence in local and national government and to people working in the homelessness support sector. Using printed materials in this way is about taking the work directly to the people who I believe need to see the work and engage with the issues it addresses.



**Fig. 15.6** Installation view of *Agency* by Anthony Luvera featuring the Agency community newspaper at Fotogalleri Vasli Souza, Oslo Negative, Oslo, Norway, 23 September–16 October 2022

**SA:** Photography is really just one element of the equation.

**AL:** It's not enough to just point a camera. We need to find ways to use the photographs and other texts that we create and accumulate, effectively.

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# The Future of Photography and Collaboration in Education: Co-creating with Civil Intent

*Kelly Hussey-Smith and Angela Clarke*

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we argue that a photography education that seeks to provide critical perspectives on the ethics and politics of collaboration and engage students in co-created processes of critically reflective action needs to move beyond historical models of photography education that place the auteur at the centre of photographic production. In line with political theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2008, 2015) and art historian Daniel Palmer's (2017) reframing of photography as a series of relational, political, and collaborative events, we argue that the future of education in photography and collaboration is dependent upon photography educators orienting themselves and their students towards pedagogies that actively address the ontological and ethical complexities of collaboration. We

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Switzerland AG 2024

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M. Bertrand, K. Chambeftort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography  
as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_16)



address this through the case study of *The Photo Lab*—a situated education project run by RMIT University on the unceded lands of the Eastern Kulin Nations in Naarm/Melbourne, Australia, where undergraduate photography students co-create projects with community partners.

Western photography education has largely been oriented towards either technical mastery, or visual literacy and creative expression, with its critical content largely derived from art history and theory (Rubinstein 2009). More recently, the repositioning of photography as a collaborative and relational practice has inspired renewed conversations about the conditions of production, the agency of the many ‘users of photography’, and the myth of the solo auteur (Azoulay 2015; Palmer 2017). Palmer argues that photography has always incorporated varying degrees of collaboration and relationality, suggesting that the collaborative labour inherent in the event of photography has been a blind spot in its history (Palmer 2017). Likewise, Azoulay (2015) reframes photography as a series of relationships activated by ‘the event of photography’, proposing that this assemblage of events and relations makes photography ‘a special laboratory for the study and analysis of political relations’ (Azoulay 2015, 70). While this conceptualisation of photography as a relational and therefore embodied practice has entered photography discourse, these aspects remain under-recognised in photography education that tend to favour the postmodern critique of photography and foreground historical approaches.

Daniel Rubinstein (2009) observes that photography education has been slow to respond to the contemporary conditions of photography including its ubiquity, the enormous shifts in the distribution and circulation of digital photography, shifting conceptions of authorship, and its epistemic alliance with institutional ways of knowing. Rubinstein observes that while photography is widely practised within knowledge-producing institutions, there is often an absence of education at these sites about the ‘the ideologies that are being furnished within these processes’ (Rubinstein 2009, 141). Azoulay (2015, 13) and Palmer (2017, 19) note that perceptions of photography and authorship continue to be dominated by modernist ideas of the author and the image rather than embracing concepts of sharing and collaboration that more closely reflect contemporary cultures of digital transmission than they do modernist ideas of ‘ownership’ and ‘authorship’ (Fontcuberta in Bogre 2015, 37). Looking forward, Rubinstein argues that a photography education that does not move beyond technical mastery and creative expression runs the risk of

becoming redundant. In this respect, Palmer (2017, 14) suggests that photography is a particularly apt medium for engaging with ideas and processes of collaboration because of its role in producing shared encounters and action. These debates, combined with our observations and research, have focused our attention on the question of how to teach the collaborative aspects of photography in a way that engages with the relational, ethical, and ontological aspects of these practices as conscious educational matter.

More broadly, we recognise the need to actively facilitate interconnect- edness within tertiary education. This need is exacerbated by the com- modification and individualisation of education, a (renewed) pandemic-enforced enthusiasm for online delivery, and the narrow focus on employability. Focusing on interconnectedness means that there is cul- tural momentum to differently shape and activate how we learn, unlearn, and adapt education to the contemporary moment—of which photogra- phy education is no exception.

Practice-based pedagogies in mainstream photography and visual art education generally utilise what Shreeve et al. (2010) call a dialogic and critical ‘kind of exchange’ (135). This approach investigates personal ontologies with its aim being to effectively prepare independent creative practitioners. While a focus on technical ability, visual literacy, and creative expression is valuable, these pedagogies do not always address the broader contextual (social, political, historical) and interdisciplinary complexities raised by creative collaboration—particularly those situated in communi- ties. We suggest that when relational and collaborative practices are fore- grounded in education, different kinds of questions emerge. These questions—often related to positionality, intent, and value—can challenge personal ontologies and destabilise and unsettle students. For this reason, when photography is positioned as a series of relational ‘events’, the inter- relationships between community interaction, relational ethics, and pho- tography discourses need to be explicitly scaffolded through critical, experiential, and enacted pedagogies that move between and across stu- dents, staff, and community. These conscious pedagogies aim to create conditions where participants can act together to experience moments of understanding that we belong to and share a common world (Azoulay 2019; Biesta 2016).

If we accept that photography is a relational practice that brings ethical conflict to the fore in productive and discomfoting ways, then learning of this nature cannot be left to chance. In recognition of this, we blend

aspects of critical pedagogy (Freire 1998, 1970/2017; Hooks 2003; Giroux 2011; Biesta 2016) with embodied and relational acts that align with ontological concepts of becoming (Bergson 1911/2005; Grosz 2005). We note that processes and behaviours associated with collaboration are minimised when they are referred to as the ‘soft skills’ of education. Instead, we reframe and centre the skills associated with collaboration as ‘hard skills’ that not only contribute to photographic practice but, more broadly, help students explore questions of living together. In response to this, collaboration is recognised as a set of skills that need to be taught and enacted across curriculum and pedagogy. Our education practice therefore aims to de-centre individualised photographic practice by proposing integrated (community-oriented) and connected (relational) approaches to photography education. Building on Rubinstein’s calls to re-imagine photography education and Azoulay’s repositioning of photography as a relational practice with civil potential, we propose a pedagogical approach that consciously foregrounds the ontological and ethical conditions that enable collaborative actions to thrive.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Positionality Statement*

It is important to note that we are writing from the position of white-settler-artist-educators living on stolen land with a mutual interest in critical pedagogy, ethics of practice, and education as an embodied and relational practice. Our collaboration as teachers and academics outlines how we have worked with different disciplinary and epistemic ways of knowing to develop expansive approaches to the complexities of teaching photography and collaboration in undergraduate education.

We position ourselves and our education research in a settler colonial context where white ontologies and epistemic knowledge traditions have been naturalised as the dominant subject position (Moreton-Robinson 2004). Sovereignty was never ceded by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, and despite the rhetoric of reconciliation and multiculturalism, mainstream systems of education, governance, and justice remain embedded in cultures of whiteness (Moreton-Robinson 2004). Positioning ourselves in this way helps us to recognise that our interpretations and choices are always bound by our own processes of self-understanding and that our ideas are themselves a form of cultural activity.

### *The Photo Lab Case Study*

Our qualitative case study (The Photo Lab) was developed, in part, to generate an educational environment where students begin to consciously position themselves within these historical contexts and systems by examining and critiquing their own approaches and actions within contemporary discourses and practices of photography and collaboration. *The Photo Lab* was established in 2018 in a photography bachelor programme at RMIT University in the suburb of Collingwood in Melbourne. The pedagogical project was developed in response to the under-acknowledged relational and collaborative aspects of photography and the complex questions that emerge when teaching the processes of collaboration and co-creation.

From 2018 to 2021 *The Photo Lab* ran as a 14-week residency programme in the suburb of Collingwood where students and staff co-developed group projects with community members and partners.<sup>1</sup> Partners were approached and invited to collaborate based on their community led approach and interest in working with creative tertiary students. Community partners include local schools, social enterprises, advocacy groups, arts organisations, and live music venues located within the local precinct. The Lab was located on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country in the suburb of Collingwood which was, and remains, a significant place of connection and social and political organising for Aboriginal people (Foley 2000). Once a manufacturing hub housing large numbers of workers and families, the suburb and its surroundings are rapidly gentrifying.

Three undergraduate photography subjects ran from the Lab—*The Social Turn, Picturing Power, and Forms for Encounter and Exchange*—all of which involved varying degrees of collaboration with local partners and communities. Participating students came from the fields of photography, visual art, and media and communications. In addition to formal tertiary education, the project also ran an artist-in-residence programme where up to eight artists (alumni and local artists) were given space to work on personal and community projects. The Lab also hosted a small printing and self-publishing facility and a growing archive of community projects and

<sup>1</sup>The course continues at Collingwood Yards arts precinct under the revised framework of *Forms for Encounter and Exchange* (co-developed in 2020 with Dr. Marnie Badham).



**Fig. 16.1** Studying together, *The Photo Lab*, Collingwood, Semester 2, 2018

partnerships exploring critical approaches to photography, community, collaboration, and ethics (Fig. 16.1).

### *Research Design*

Our research employs a case study approach and draws on qualitative interviews and focus groups with 35 students, 8 alumni artists in residence, and 6 community partners. The purpose in using a case study approach lies both in learning about the case under investigation and the wider implications. This case study is therefore both intrinsic and instrumental (Stake 2000). For Stake, when ‘the researcher simultaneously has several interests, particular and general, there is no line distinguishing intrinsic case study from instrumental; rather, a zone of combined purpose separates them’ (437). As intrinsic, this research examines the approach taken by a particular lecturer within an undergraduate photography studio

learning setting to provide some insight into alternative educational practices. As instrumental, the study seeks to also play ‘a supportive role’ as it ‘facilitates our understanding of something else’ (Stake 2000, 437), namely, the extent to which this approach might service the discipline of photography more broadly.

The data was gathered over three semesters using semi-structured interviews conducted via small focus groups collected from participants.<sup>2</sup> The focus group questions explored the student learning experience and the effectiveness of their collaborations with alumni and community partners. The focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed. As researchers, we independently analysed the transcriptions for evidence of ideological positioning and shifts in student behaviour, attitudes, and action. We then corroborated our findings and agreed on recurring themes. This thematic analysis was then used to ascertain the effectiveness of our approach and was used to identify how the enabling forces of duration, difference, generation, and adaptability were instrumental in student becoming.

Specifically, our aim was to address the following research questions:

- How do we teach collaboration within the context of photography?
- How might concepts and practices of co-creation and civil intent foster conditions for student becoming?

In order to keep our findings fluid, we have at times interwoven quotations from the focus group transcripts into the main text in addition to adding our own analysis. At other times we have included sections of dialogue between groups. Participants have been de-identified.

<sup>2</sup>To mitigate against any power imbalance between students and their Lecturer Kelly Hussey-Smith, the focus group interviews were conducted by Angela Clarke who was in a role of Senior Learning and Teaching Advisor. This role had no direct power relationship with students, alumni, or community partners. In one semester students identified Angela as part of the teaching team for a short period but knew that she was not responsible for final assessment or grading. In the context of a qualitative inquiry, Angela, as the interviewer, aimed to minimise ‘the imposition of predetermined responses when gathering data’ (Patton 2002, 353).

## PHOTOGRAPHY EDUCATION BEYOND THE CRITIQUE

While the critical discourses of postmodern scholars are essential in photography education (not least because they challenge enduring positivist understandings of truth and evidence in photography and propose ethical questions about representation), we propose that contemporary practice requires expanded discourses and frameworks. To date, most (Western) photography programmes have relied heavily on the critical discourses of postmodern scholars to provide the ethical content in photography education. This ethical content comes in the form of important critical discourses on representation, power dynamics, surveillance, and the camera as an imperial technology. While this canon of literature remains foundational in the photography classroom and provokes urgent ethical questions regarding the politics of representation and the contexts of production and power relations, teaching the critique in isolation can also immobilise practice and de-politicise students due to fear of ethical misstep (Hussey-Smith and Hill 2018). In this paper we propose that because the practice of collaboration within a photography context raises ethical and ontological questions for students who, as we have observed, can get ‘stuck’ in critique, tertiary education in this space can benefit from the situated knowledges of community partnerships and the inclusion of discourses from outside photography.

While critical education is essential in helping students identify and think through complexity, learning does not begin and end with critique. Critique allows students to recognise problems but does not provide them with ‘alternative strategies, or different ways to live’ (Grosz and Hill 2017, 7). Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz observes that critique forces us to inhabit that which we are seeking to understand, but it doesn’t always offer a clear path out (Grosz and Hill 2017, 7). Grosz argues that critique provides the ‘political motivation to produce new practices and modes of thinking’ (2017, 6) but is only one aspect of becoming. Critique alone can immobilise because, by necessity, it forces us to stay too long in the systems we want to overcome to question and understand them. Education theorist Gert Biesta (2019, 12–14) expands on this by suggesting that education should not only point to critical readings but should support students to move through the frustration of encountering resistance. He writes that while withdrawal and refusal are powerful forms of ethical engagement, they can also operate in opposition to their intention. Rather than creating more critical and ethically motivated citizens, they can also

cause students to withdraw from the world when they encounter the complexity of resistance (*ibid.*). More concerningly, this may end up producing people who can critique the state of things but who, for fear of ethical misstep, cannot take action to change them.

While the impulses of the ‘socially concerned’ photographer will continue to be interrogated, due to the problems that arise when documentary approaches de-historicise, de-contextualise, and oversimplify complex social, political, and historical contexts (Sontag 1977/2002; Sekula 1986, 2016), we propose that education in photography and collaboration can help us channel those impulses into the domain of the civil. As Azoulay (2008) has observed, the invention of the camera did not only create new kinds of images, but it invented new ways of being with others in the world. Through this relational event, a new kind of citizenry emerged, one enabled by photography and whose membership created expressions of citizenry beyond the constraints and exclusions of ‘formal’ citizenship (Azoulay 2008).

For photography students, this question of how to be in the world with others while engaging in photography’s critical discourses in ethical and conscious ways needs to be activated in tertiary photography education. Therefore, educational practices that seek to move beyond critique into forms of reparative action need educators to foster learning environments that help students to identify their ontological positioning and the epistemologies that underpin their worldviews. This involves students learning to recognise that positionality has ensuing behavioural patterns with ethical consequences. Thus, the ontological and ethical conditions raised by photography and collaboration need to be reflected in the design of its pedagogy. This intersection, what Grosz calls ‘onto-ethics’, is not just an ontology of what is but of what might become and what ought to happen (Grosz and Hill 2017, 8). Onto-ethics therefore becomes both curriculum and pedagogy—shaped through and by the educational encounter.

When we consciously practice and foreground this onto-ethics, it creates opportunities for value to be ascribed differently. What is of value in our context is process and relationship. When process and relationship are foregrounded and studied, students are able to accept complexity and remain open to co-created and sustainable action with community partners that is dialogic, relational, and consciously civil. This approach creates an antidote to the immobilisation that students can experience when faced with only critique. We propose that practices that intersect with the ethical and ontological questions of photography and collaboration can create



space for students to explore civil intent, rehearse collaboration, and enact practices of co-creation. By extension, we propose that this can help students to recognise that humans are relational beings who are ethically obliged and living in a complex interconnected reality (Geerts 2016). We see value in shaping pedagogies and curricula that assist students to understand this and, as such, propose that the key enablers of this kind of ethical becoming in the context of photography and collaboration are co-creation and civil intent.

### ENABLERS OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND COLLABORATION: CO-CREATION AND CIVIL INTENT

Based on our research, the enablers of collaborative, community-oriented photography education are ‘co-creation’ and ‘civil intent’. These core concepts and practices are foundational to our pedagogy which is built around what feminist theorist Karen Barad calls ‘an ethics of worlding’ (2007, 392). This *ethics of worlding* starts from a relational, situated, and embodied model of (inter)subjectivity and moves through a range of processes that reveal how ethics, being, knowing, and doing cannot be separated. Through this understanding of ethics as a processual, contingent process to be understood and negotiated with others (Massumi 2015), the aim is to provide a container within which students have opportunities to shift perspectives, reflect on subject positionality, and experience photography as a social practice. In our pedagogy, content, process, and outcome are inextricably entwined and afforded equal value which in turn enables co-creation and civil intent to be understood through the embodied and sensorial processes of learning.

We understand co-creation as a process that enables and supports what Grosz (2005) and Bergson (1911/2005) before her call ‘becoming’. This kind of becoming is simultaneously ‘dynamic sites of unpredictable productivity’ and ‘systems of coherence’ orienting ‘what is becoming, to what does not yet exist’ (Grosz 2005, 121). Our approach to co-creation foregrounds what Grosz calls the ‘active dynamism’ of the world and activates fundamental life forces such as duration, difference, generation, and adaptability (Bergson 1911/2005; Grosz 2005, 2011). These forces are present in the way we learn to orient to the world and how processes of human learning, development, interaction, and creativity are supported. Students work with duration, recognise difference, and are expected to

self-generate collaborations which means they must be adaptable. Recognising the flow and challenges inherent in these processes allows them to critically reflect upon how they function as subjects who are integrated in the world (rather than simply how they function as individuals).

As we unpack the entanglement of the ontological and ethical aspects of teaching photography and collaboration, we propose a wider discourse, one that aligns practices of photography and collaboration with civil intent. Here we draw on Azoulay's concept of *civil intention* as intention that exceeds the limits of 'the professional' and creates a space for dialogue beyond disciplinary and professional boundaries (2015, 101–107). For the purposes of this chapter, we position the concept of civil intent as more than an individual 'ethical intention' (107) but a process for action based on a shared 'concern'. As Azoulay suggests, 'civil intention requires a different kind of work than that required by human beings within their regular form of action' (107). In our teaching practice, we have observed that community-oriented collaborations support the development of civil intent because students are not only made aware of the limits of 'good intentions' but asked to participate in relations of reciprocity with community partners that support an understanding of ethics as negotiated, contingent, and co-created.

We see connections between co-creation as a form of becoming and the concept of the civil as a processual, open, and dynamic space of possibility. Drawing from Michel de Certeau, cultural sociologists Philipp Dietechmair and Pascal Gielen (2017) describe the civil as a dynamic, unregulated, and open space that 'remains fluid, a place where positions still have to be taken up or created' (15). Differing from civic spaces that are determined by the established parameters and policies of institutions like governance, law, and education, they position the civil as a co-created space of action or praxis (15–18). In relation to photography, Azoulay (2015) proposes that the advent of photography gave rise to the possibility of a new 'civil space', a space of action that exists outside of the parameters of civic institutions and authoritarian regimes (ibid.). By recognising the potential of photography's civil space as a way of being in the world with others, and the importance of processes of collaboration and co-creation in developing and translating civil intent, we acknowledge the need for pedagogies that address this challenge.

## CO-CREATION AND CIVIL INTENT: PEDAGOGIES OF BECOMING

Our educational approach focuses on identifying and critiquing the ontologies and epistemologies that underpin dominant worldviews. This framework underpins pedagogical decisions related to the course design and the processes of assessment. We believe this approach and the ensuing acts of co-creation and civil intent that we have observed at *The Photo Lab* provide evidence of how students were able to confront onto-ethical realities to consciously and reflexively enter states of becoming. This onto-ethical shift (what we might also understand as an ‘unsettling’) is the result of carefully designed labour-intensive pedagogies that are embedded in learning ecosystems that afford agency and relational exchange across many contexts. In the following sections we outline how we foster these pedagogies and how students experience and manifest them through collaborative practice.

### *Co-creation in Practice*

It is important to foster conditions for processes of co-creation to thrive. In line with Biesta (2016), we understand teaching not as facilitation but a conscious act of orienting students to the world by bringing something to the context that was not already there. At *The Photo Lab* content is delivered via lectures, readings, community partnerships, feedback, workshops, student presentations, and discussions which are synthesised into the weekly rhythm of the class.

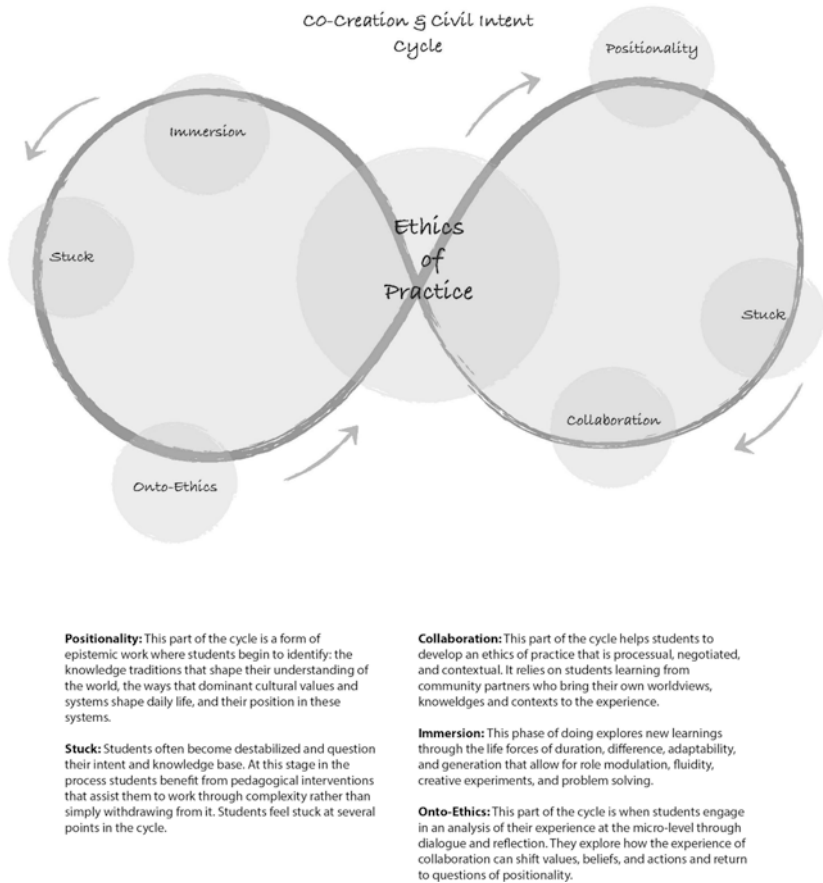
These discourses and discussions scaffold the complexities of co-creation and representation and offer a starting point for ethical evaluation. Texts used in weekly classes cover topics such as photography and collaboration (Palmer 2017; Helguera 2022), photography’s political ontology (Azoulay 2015), photography and imperialism (Azoulay 2019), decolonising photography (Sealy 2019), decolonising solidarity (Land 2015), art and activism (Thompson 2015), the origins of surveillance (Sekula 1986), and the dominance of white epistemologies in settler colonial contexts (Moreton-Robinson 2004, 2000/2020). The readings can be challenging for students who often just want to make pictures but provide a reference point for their work. For example, one student said, ‘It was stressful because I had to really relate [the readings] to the work I was doing’ (Focus Group C, Semester 2, 2019).

A number of students commented that the readings set up a framework and helped them understand that ‘the image isn’t the only thing in the class’ (Focus Group A, Semester 2, 2019). This suggests that contextualising practice broadly helped students to not only feel responsible and accountable but understand that they operated in sociopolitical contexts beyond the sphere of ‘professional’ photography. In our experience, these critical frameworks bring into conscious awareness the unexamined world-views that govern many of our students’ thoughts and behaviours. This was evidenced by the observation of one of the alumni artists in residence as follows:

I definitely noticed a self-reflexivity that I hadn’t seen in students before. They were thinking about the politics of race, class, systems of power... Things I had never really seen students reckon with before and they were being very honest with themselves and finding their own position in this. (Alumni artist in residence, 2018)

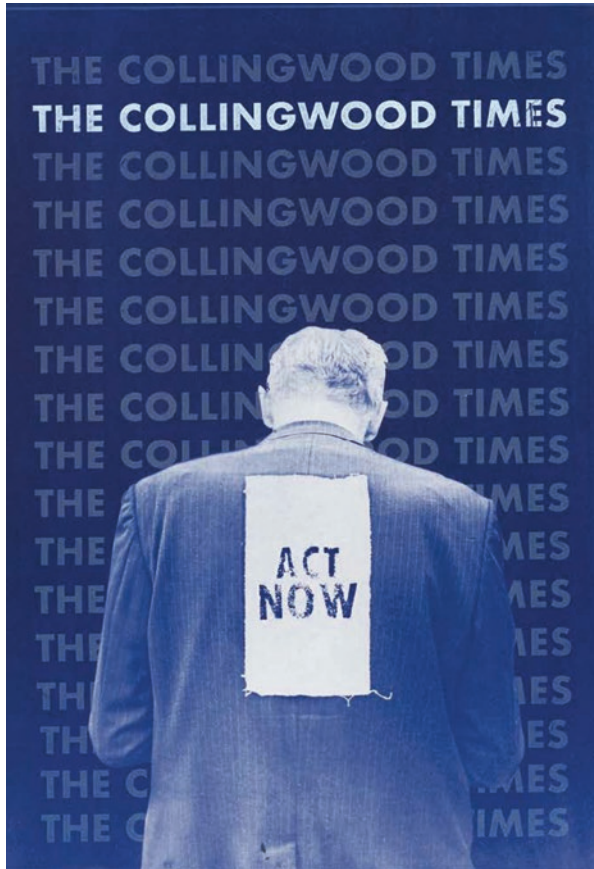
By using concepts and practices of co-creation to underpin action, we build an environment that can accommodate several levels of reality. For example, students are actively engaged in acts of collaboration with community partners whilst simultaneously learning about the ethics and politics of collaboration. For example, students might be co-creating a project with fashion designers from a local social enterprise while simultaneously grappling with their positionality and motivations for engagement. The educational environment is structured in such a way that students learn to switch realities within the same process. This personal mobility (see Fig. 16.2) allows them to be fully in the action at one moment and reflexively evaluating this action in the next (Nicolas-Le Strat cited in Poulin 2018, 17).

In one semester the entire class (20 students) decided to collaboratively produce a community newspaper (see Fig. 16.3). In line with the course content, students had to bring consideration to issues of representation, dominant culture, colonisation, and their ethical obligation to the local community in whose space they had landed. Many students came to understand that good intentions don’t ensure good outcomes and as a result had to process multiple critiques, agree on themes, consult with community partners, negotiate collective outcomes, and determine what was of ‘value’ to the newspaper. As one student noted, ‘anything you do in photography can be critiqued in some way – you can cause offence – it



**Fig. 16.2** Map of co-creation and civil intent in action at *The Photo Lab*

opened my eyes to think about what I want to show’ (Focus Group C, Semester 2, 2019). This evidences the student’s capacity to reckon with multiple realities and positionalities which students came to recognise as contingent on the context and particular circumstances in which they work. In this particular context, the decisions made by the group resulted in a newspaper co-created with local community members and initiatives. In response, students re-conceptualised the ‘traditional’ sections of a newspaper (e.g. Finance became Capital, The Nation became The



**Fig. 16.3** Front cover of *The Collingwood Times* newspaper. Produced by Expanded Documentary students in Semester 2, 2019

First Nations, and Environment became Climate) (see Figs. 16.4 and 16.5) and dedicated the first 10 pages of the newspaper to a co-created land acknowledgement written by the class in consultation with a Senior First Nations community leader.

Community partners are crucial to the learning process because they provide opportunities and work cultures that reinforce relational and critical practices. A community partner leading a summit for women from the African Diaspora commented on how this integrated approach to learning





### the melbourne ouroboros

The cyclical nature of the Melbourne property market and the role of late-stage capitalism in the downfall of the modern homeowner.

For generations the ideal of home ownership has been embedded deep within the psyche of the Australian people. The concept of the Australian dream is one of deep cultural significance and has been both immortalised in film and in political dogma. However, we currently view this as a myth. It is when homeownership is considered mandatory when the school ability to own a home is becoming increasingly distant.

The work of the market is also concerning. Once property is acquired there is now no guarantee of a solid economic policy to ensure the growth of both the debt that one must accept to own a home and the market that one still depends on to sustain itself.

The modern idea of the Australian home is best summarised in the 1977 film 'The Gardener' in film which reflected the Australian way of life as well as the concept of the home as a guarantee of stability and social standing and what one must do to defend the security of one's property. The culture of property ownership extends further than film and television, it is an integral part of the Australian political dogma.

Our politicians from all major parties espouse the belief that homeownership is an integral. This can be seen as recently as this year with the 2017 federal election in which the Liberal government announced its latest response to the home buyers' great program, to lower the needed deposit amount to only 5% of the total cost of the purchase. This policy was matched within hours by the Labor party, if only to reinforce the dogma that surrounds the ideal of the home.

The idea of property is one of deep cultural significance but also one of deep oppression. People struggle to own their home regardless of the financial burden

that it may entail. This dream blind faith can be attributed to the history of homeownership within the patriarchal structure. For children of the middle and working classes of Australia a home was what our parents had achieved through hard and honest labour.

The modern system of sales created a deep need of physiological need and aspiration that we like our parents would one day own our own home. This aspiration is a product of the Modernist age, in which one would achieve all that one needed to live comfortably via hard work. This idea promised to us by the dominant ideology of 20th century Australia was never always quite real, although it stuck in our minds.

We were told the idea that home ownership was all ways possible if you worked hard and were a good person you would achieve it. Because it's what we as children were promised. This Modernist idea of hard work and achievement now need come into contact with the realities of the Post-Modern system of late-stage Capitalism.

The nature of Post-Modernism is that one's work and production is meaningless. Gone is the idea that because you have worked hard you are worthy and deserving. Under the scrutiny of the wage stagnation and the profit margins of the companies now come first and foremost.

To put the realities of homeownership into perspective it is worth noting the growth in both home prices in Melbourne as to the actual wage growth that has occurred within the last 8 years in Australia. Whilst wages the average wage growth between 2012 and 2018 was 15%.

How this may seem like quite a bit, people are taking home more and thus it would make sense that the

capital  
finance



Fig. 16.5 Double page spread from the ‘Capital’ section of *The Collingwood Times*. Produced by Expanded Documentary students in Semester 2, 2019

and adaptability in developing an ethical practice that is contingent, negotiated, and relational. The next sections explore how these forces operate in practice.

### Duration and Difference

Biesta (2016) argues that education is a durational and conscious process of becoming often realised in what he frames as the ‘weak spots’. He suggests that it is in the weak spots of educational processes—the difficulty, discomfort, and risk—that education happens (2016, 1–2). The aim of *The Photo Lab* was to build lasting and ongoing relationships with community groups who work with different cohorts of students each semester. This long-term approach to collaboration is directly influenced by the traditions of long-term documentary practice and its intersections with



activism, advocacy, and collaboration. Over the course of the semester, students are immersed in the community and its contexts and as such report deeper engagement and a stronger sense of agency and responsibility as demonstrated by the following:

‘You feel like what you are doing matters more now, rather than just making an assignment to get a mark, this is so much more engaging because people are relying on me and I’m making something to go out into the world...’

‘It’s a lot different to an essay or a photo series... It’s something that’s ongoing’.

(Focus Group B, Semester 1, 2019)

Our findings show that in engaging with collaborative community projects, students become aware that ‘things take longer’ and that ‘the image is not the only measure of success’ (Focus Group A, Semester 2, 2019). There is a durational aspect to the projects where time becomes elastic; students have to do things differently and find the natural rhythm of the project. At times, students found this process uncomfortable and frustrating as evidenced by the following:

Being uncomfortable... I had to learn how to deal with this... I didn’t use to be good at that. You have this kind of shift... accepting that you are going to be uncomfortable can actually make you more comfortable – makes you learn how to deal with it... It was awkward talking to children, we didn’t know how to do it, but being there and feeling how hard that was really gave us an insight into how we needed to think about how we might talk to them not just about what we were going to talk about. They’re people and they are unpredictable. (Focus Group B, Semester 2, 2019)

Students learn that durational engagement is not reactive but a process of becoming responsive and attuned where knowledge and understanding develop over time. What students may have previously framed as ‘weakness’ or ‘failures’ in themselves or others, such as a (perceived) lack of ‘progress’ due to the slow pace of a project or a non-responsive partner, alerted them to the way they can ascribe value differently. It also opened possibilities for change as evidenced by the following:

We worked in the school and took on the teacher role which was really new – I had to find a different part of myself and couldn’t shy away in a corner. (Focus Group B, Semester 2, 2019)

The durational nature of the project also supported the process of building relationships. Students commented that a slower process was rewarding:

Engaging with the collaborative approach to image-making – taking a slower process. I used to just go and take images but now this is about working with someone and feels a lot better...sometimes we didn't even take out the camera – we started with conversation first...the presence of the camera can create a disconnect – there is literally something between you.... (Focus Group C, Semester 2, 2019)

Students also noted that the 'style of teaching' and the different approach to assessment helped them reshape their own values around timeframes and expectations, which also allowed them to ascribe value in new ways. For example, one student noted that 'if you haven't made a lot of obvious progress' you still feel valued, 'you don't feel like you're failing' (Focus Group B, Sem 2, 2019). This underscores how folding the ontological aspects of process-led relational practice into the pedagogical design of the studio created space for students to reframe their reliance on reactive, outcome-oriented value systems. Students found they had to actively generate their own work and continually adapt to their context as things did not always unfold as they expected.

### *Generation and Adaptability*

Enabling forces such as generation and adaptability are important in scaffolding ideas around collaboration. At *The Photo Lab* students are encouraged to generate their own projects, to immerse themselves in community, and to grow relationships that yield some kind of meaningful collaboration. Students create their own workspace and have at times co-created assessment criteria with staff. This conscious modelling of collaboration, through co-teaching, community partnerships, and class projects, requires that students adapt to different processes. This often causes productive discomfort. For example, one student said, 'I would describe it as being thrown in the deep end at points; although this was a positive change from often "easy to pass" classes and assignments' (Focus Group A, Semester 2, 2018). A number of students commented on the relational skills required to negotiate with the community. 'I found we would get very nervous going up to people the first time' (Focus Group B, Semester 2, 2019), and

another student said, ‘If you told me at the start of the semester that I would be doing these things then I would have been terrified’ (Focus Group A, Semester 2, 2019).

Practices of co-creation also activate role modulation. Relationships, projects, and timelines are unpredictable (and resources slim) so students and staff find themselves simultaneously engaged in multiple roles. Artist Francois Deck (2018) describes co-creation as ‘a relationship in which the roles are not frozen in place, knowledge is not compartmentalized, and possessing some part of that knowledge does not introduce a hierarchy’ (84). Students acknowledged that they required multiple skill sets and could no longer consider themselves a photographer separate from oppressive systems and histories of photography. Evidence of students modulating their role within their projects was acutely observed by one of our alumni artists in residence who noted:

I saw [students] come in on days that they didn’t have to come in. Working on books and taking up different roles in their groups as needed...doing things that they knew were not going to be graded or marked but that just needed to be done to get the project done. (Alumni artist-in-residence, 2018)

A number of students commented that the subject wasn’t really about photography but was more about ethics, collaboration, and positionality. Subsequent conversations generated new understandings, specifically that positionality, ethics, and accountability were not extracurricular add-ons but central to a responsible photography practice (see also Hussey-Smith 2022).

### *Civil Intent in Practice*

In this pedagogy, positionality provides a launching pad to recognise multiple ways of knowing. Deck suggests that ‘to enter into conversation with oneself, is to discover one’s own foreignness’ (2018, 86). This ‘foreignness’ can be understood as a form of undoing or unravelling which provides opportunities for students to reassess their position in the collaboration. Positionality also helps students understand personal accountability and citizenship as well as civil intent beyond educational metrics. We understand positionality as not only positioning oneself in power structures but understanding how we might also be complicit in these structures and their consequences. Photography’s critical discourses

help to create conditions for self-reflection through their sharp focus on power relations. When this is combined with practices of collaboration with community partners, we argue that this creates conditions for students to develop civil intent. This model has yielded significant growth for some students who were able to move towards different ways of ascribing value. One student reported that it challenged their understanding of what constitutes a good image, while another said:

[I've] shifted a lot... I've always wanted to work for National Geographic. But... learning about ethical research, representation by mass media, the prevalent stereotype of photographers being a "solo artist" and much more, has taught me about the world we live in, the practice of photography being quite... fragile... and not everything speaking truth about the world. (Focus Group C, Semester 2, 2018)

Students constantly found they had to adjust expectations, and one said that while working on co-authored and co-created projects, they realised 'now how many perspectives they have to take into account' (Focus Group A, Semester 1, 2019). Another student stated that 'in some ways I used to mindlessly take photos – I didn't think about how I was doing it or asking permission' (Focus Group A, Semester 2, 2019).

Since John Dewey (1938), educational philosophy has understood education as experiential, an act of growth and human agency, becoming, and an orientation towards the social and material world. Biesta calls this world-centred education, stating, 'If education takes its existential orientation seriously, it has to centre on the world – rather than on the curriculum or the [individual] – because it is only there, in the world, with others, that we can actually live our lives' (2019, 10).

We consider ethics to be a significant part of photography education, but we acknowledge its pedagogical complexity. It is an embodied and conscious process of learning to attune to people, contexts, and actions in order to make sense of one's position. It is also work that is never complete. Ethics is often taught informally in the photography classroom, through a form of 'classroom osmosis' in the form of critical discussions around images and power dynamics. While this is a part of modelling an ethical orientation to the world, it can also be narrow and rely too heavily on the perspectives of a single teacher or discipline. Instead, we propose that ethics education relating to collaboration in photography benefits from collaborative partnerships where ethical decisions are informed by

and negotiation through different lived experiences and knowledge traditions.

We consciously frame this process of ethical attunement as a form of ontological recognition of others that aims to orient students away from one-way and transactional gestures of collaboration into more conscious reciprocal encounters. For students, this conscious action of developing an ethical framework assists a deeper understanding of ethics not as something to be applied or acquired but a dynamic process that is ever changing based on context. Grosz writes that ‘ethics is our manner of living in the world with others. Politics is our mode of collective contestation of the ways in which such forms of living occur, and their costs, in the world. Ethics and politics are not two different levels of asking this question but two different dynamics by which to understand, find, and invent ways to live individually and collectively’ (Grosz and Hill 2017, 8). More simply she also states, ‘I become according to what I do, not who I am’ (Grosz 2011, 85).

As students become attuned to these forces, they begin to reflect on past actions. One student commented that the subject helped them reflect on previous work, stating, ‘My previous work was not [providing context] but I thought it was’. Another student commented that their main learning was ‘that collaboration can be *done wrong*’ and that they needed ‘to be considered and critical around issues of collaboration’ because it is ‘not always a good thing’ (Focus Group B, Semester 1, 2018).

In community-oriented collaborations, students are not answerable to a simple educational transaction but simultaneously engaged with questions of how they live in the world and what might happen if they change or experiment with new forms of living. For example, one student commented that:

By the end of the semester, from seeing the other projects, and discussions around them, I definitely felt as though rather than thinking of myself as a photographer, I was thinking of photography as a tool of my civic self, and that it was something I can use to ask questions and understand different things within society or culture, but that it became more of a tool to enhance my civic existence. (Focus Group B, Semester 2, 2018)

Students learned to be more conscious of their dispositional traits which paved the way for a new kind of behavioural ethic. For example, a student commented that studying sustainable and ethical fashion had

changed their consumption habits, ‘having knowledge helps you to make choices’ (Focus Group A, Semester 2, 2019). Likewise, another student commented that the most positive aspect of the course was ‘developing ethical relationships’ because ‘I can now say what that is’ (Focus Group C, Semester 2, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Ontology and ethics are inseparable forces that work together to form ways of becoming in the world. We have identified intersecting elements for the purposes of unpacking the educational experiences of photography and collaboration based on practices of co-creation and expressions of civil intent.

Responding to Rubinstein’s call for a photography education that moves beyond technical mastery and creative expression, we have explored alternative approaches to teaching ethics and collaboration. We suggest that while technical mastery and creative expression are important educational outcomes, their associated pedagogies do not always address the broader ontological, contextual, and interdisciplinary complexities raised by creative collaboration, particularly those situated in communities.

In traditional photography education students often think that collaboration is at the periphery. However, our findings show that when co-creation and civil intent are used as organising structures for learning, the politics of self and other come to the centre of things. We note that students need opportunities to rehearse collaboration and reflect on positionality, that is, they need a place to unpack the discomforts and challenges that arise when engaged in such activities.

Returning to our key question of how to teach collaboration within the context of photography, we argue that educational models that seek to do this need to include onto-ethics in their pedagogical design. Our findings suggest that photography education can indeed pave the way for a cultural shift, whereby the production, circulation, and reception of photography are actioned through a conscious attunement to co-creation and civil intent.

Furthermore, when educators foster learning environments that allow students to attune to life forces such as duration, difference, generation, and adaptability, they can have significant impacts upon student growth, development, and becoming. We propose that this educational model can support students to acquire the skills and knowledge to address the complexities of photography and collaboration, and our findings show that

co-creating with civil intent through processes of collaboration allows for positionality and its ensuing ethical consequences to surface which helps students act responsibly.

In recognising the important role that tertiary education plays in re/producing professional cultures of photography, our work seeks to prepare students for the inevitable conflict that arises when their civil intent collides with professional photography contexts. Through pedagogies that foreground this conflict, we propose that photography education related to the ontological and ethical aspects of collaboration can support students to recognise and resist extractive cultures and practices. To return to the idea of the loop (Fig. 16.2), we propose that our approach helps students understand collaboration as an ethics of practice that is processual, contingent, negotiated, and co-created.

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## Reflective Portfolio: The Politics of Care Within Documentary Portraiture

*Inès Elsa Dalal*

I have interpreted ‘collaboration’ in many ways over the past dozen or so years, but there is one meaning which holds the most truth for me at present: two or more people, groups, organisations or communities coming together to create something new, something either slightly or vastly different to what either had originally imagined. What I mean by this is for the so-called collaborative work to be genuine, sincere, reverent, heartfelt, ethical and professional, a shift in power must occur. Existing hierarchies should be acknowledged and dismantled, with care and consideration. A new ground, a level playing field, must first be established for the ‘collaboration’ to be truly authentic and steeped in a sense of mutual respect, dignity and integrity.

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Switzerland AG 2024

M. Bertrand, K. Chambefort-Kay (eds.), *Contemporary Photography  
as Collaboration*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41444-2_17)

## ECOLOGIES OF CARE

Parameters of care must be established, such as boundaries for each party to be able to pause and re-evaluate at any part of the process. In terms of portrait photography, this is more formally introduced by firstly asking permission before co-creating a photograph and secondly the discussion of formalised consent.

In my experience, written consent has a history of being presented in a rushed manner, often in print so small these documents are almost illegible! I detest the futility of this passive style, feeling that such an inaccessible document is just as unethical as no written consent at all.

The basics of consent in photography, as I understand it, is that there is documentation of when the photograph is created, by whom and of whom, so that the portrait participant is offered the opportunity to formally consent to co-creating the work with (not *for*) the photographer while ideally maintaining full copyright over an image of *their* likeness. In the instance of commercial photography, this would be the juncture where the photographer would claim full rights over any profit made or negotiate a contract of use for the image. However, within the context of documentary photography, I feel it's imperative for the photographer to be *of service* to the portrait sitter, not the other way around.

Personally, I prefer to make it optional for portrait sitters to choose how and where their image will appear, both online and offline. This allows the option of being part of small-scale exhibitions without being the face of a digitally viral social justice campaign, for example.

In 2018, data privacy laws were changed in the UK, in an attempt to begin to safeguard the technological changes taking place across the world, such as the democratisation of photography through the increasing availability and affordability of digital cameras. I was surprised to realise that previous to that, it hadn't been changed for 20 years (since 1998):

General Data Protection Regulation, Policy paper: Consent Policy, updated 4 June 2018

- Consent is one of the grounds for lawfully processing personal data under the Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR.
- Under GDPR, the concept of consent has been strengthened with some new rules that require organisations to be more transparent.

- It states that one's consent must be freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous.<sup>1</sup>

### RIGHT FOR REFUSAL

By 2018, consent had been an issue I had felt conflicted about for some time; the law change prompted me to take a more formal approach. I introduced physical consent forms, in place of verbal expressions of good will, relatively late in my practice. To me it is paramount that the text on these documents is legible and time is allocated before, during or after the portrait sitting—to explain them in as much detail as necessary. For me, the most integral part of consent is the right to revoke it, ensuring that every portrait sitter has my contact details and feels assured they can contact me anytime to revoke their consent from the project or exhibition for any reason, without justification. This could range from urgent personal or legal reasons (especially while navigating the delicate dynamics of co-creating with people whose Right to Remain in the UK might be under threat, following the Windrush Scandal) or simply due to a change of heart. It's essential for all portrait sitters' questions to be answered, any concerns to be addressed. It's their right to exercise as they please to decline being photographed in the first instance or to, over time, change their mind about when, how and if an image of their likeness is shared in public or private spaces.

### ETHICS OF LANGUAGE

Portrait-making has, historically, been associated with bourgeois culture and aristocracy. It is widely accepted that the majority of photographers, both living and dead, are white and male. Within this context, photographing people of colour in a contemporary context is still a delicate matter because if left unconsidered, the act of photographing can be interpreted as being synonymous with the dominant and dehumanising practices prevalent to white supremacy. Photographing someone against their will, while held captive in police custody for example, is reminiscent of slavery. Take into consideration the language which surrounds photography:

<sup>1</sup>Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consent-privacy-policy/consent-policy>. Accessed November 2022.

**Subject** (referring to a portrait sitter as subject matter rather than referring to them as a person or—better still—by their name)

**Using** (a model)

**Taking** (a photograph)

**Shooting** (a portrait)

**Capturing** (a moment)

All of this language has reprehensible colonial connotations. I propose, at the risk of being accused of exaggerated political correctness, to urge photographers to reconsider the language they utilise to describe their practice, approach, method and modus operandi.

**Portrait sitter** (in place of ‘subject’)

**Co-creating** (a portrait/photograph) instead of ‘taking/shooting’

**Co-producing** (a project/exhibition) in the context of presenting collaborative work in public

### ‘MARGINS OF SOCIETY’

As with many ‘socially engaged’ photographers, I didn’t realise what my work was; I wasn’t aware it was worthy of that categorisation until a couple of years into my practice.

Having been born in Nottingham (1990) and spending my formative years in Birmingham, I left my hometown in 2008 to study photography at Manchester School of Art.

Upon arrival in Manchester, I myself became an outsider, instantly intrigued by and intuitively drawn to the transient presence of street musicians, who became intangibly interwoven into the fabric of the city; more familiar to me than any of the strangers who passed me by while I was navigating this new city.

When I verbally asked or physically gestured to check if it was okay to photograph, I was met with a variety of responses. Some approved, some refused, and others might ask for money or inquire about where they could get support to learn English, as a form of exchange.

The first memorable reference to my work being of a ‘socially engaged’ nature was when a tutor remarked that the photographs I was presenting were of ‘people on the margins of society’. In retrospect, this might have been an ideal opportunity to engage in a discussion about ethics and hierarchies: the photographer’s responsibility in working with people who are

disadvantaged in ways relating to class status in terms of financial/domestic instability, legal status, as well as undocumented migrancy. However, I refrained from asking the tutor to expand on or contextualise their comment. The observation seemed neutral, expressed in a matter-of-fact manner, without any judgement or concern.

Encountering people on the street and reflecting on these exchanges left me feeling deeply uncomfortable with the concept of extracting something from them: an image of their likeness, without a readily available or appropriate method for energetic compensation. As a student, money was not available to me in abundance, and even if it had been, I feel money was the lowest form of exchange, and it felt deeply disrespectful, undignified and disorientating to even begin to quantify anyone's worth through financial means. The mere suggestion contradicted everything I stand for in terms of being anti-capitalist and actively countering systemic injustice with a sense of reverence.

While studying, I feasted on hundreds of photobooks at the university library. I would graze ravenously for hours and hours considering different approaches various international artists had when working with individuals or communities. One example of a project which resonated with me at the time and still moves me to this day is by the American photographer Bill Owens: *Suburbia* (1973). Owens worked at a newspaper during the week and photographed the newly formed suburb's inhabitants on weekends between the late 1960s and early 1970s. The durational nature of this project as well as the accompanying subjective statements from project participants was alluring to me, because it implied that Owens had invested time, care and attention in people he photographed. The resulting photobook was fascinating in its simplicity: objective and unpretentious.

Shortly after graduating from Manchester School of Art, I set out to begin my first social commentary documentary portraiture project.

### 'SUNNY INTERVALS', MOORPOOL ESTATE (2010–2013)

Moorpool Estate (Harborne, Birmingham) was built according to nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement, *Garden Suburb* principles: sensitive planning with the aim of social reform. The Garden Suburbs also drew on new ideas from the model of Garden Cities, which were intended to be self-sufficient economic units, as well as a protest against the back-to-back housing that excluded light, air and sunshine from urban dwellings (Fig. 17.1).



**Fig. 17.1** Mike Frost (2010) from the portrait series ‘Sunny Intervals’, Moorpool Estate, Harborne, Birmingham

I was particularly drawn to Moorpool Estate because there was an urgency to document both people and place, as it was at risk of undergoing irrevocable change due to unscrupulous property development. I felt a personal connection to the area, but not necessarily the people, having spent the majority of my childhood in Harborne and neighbouring, less affluent borough: Northfield.

I began by contacting the chair of Moorpool Residents Association, introducing myself and pitching a prospective project. After gaining his approval, I was introduced to some of the residents and began to frequent the estate, documenting daily life on an ad hoc basis for a couple of years. I set about inserting myself into the bustling itinerary of social meetings and recreational activities, by asking permission and obtaining invitations from residents and activity leaders, from photographing individuals and families in their homes to attending quizzes, parties and sports events. The cultural ambiguity of my name raised a few eyebrows and prompted a flurry of questions, a stark contrast in comparison to my understanding of the world up until that point. The quintessential Englishness of their culture and mannerisms was alien to me: my heritage is Swiss (French

speaking), Italian, German and Parsi (Iranian-Indian). Having grown up in Birmingham, many of my peers at secondary school were of Black, Brown or of mixed, non-English heritage.

I photographed white, middle and working-class residents of varying of ages and witnessed well-educated and articulate volunteers leading a hugely successful campaign to save their estate from the impending gentrification. Their success led me to ruminate on whether there was still an urgency to document, if it was no longer at risk of being destroyed?

Also, after visiting for a couple of years, one of the (white, male) portrait sitters disclosed some xenophobic views expressing that he ‘worries about the future of this country’ due to influx of (non-white) migration, which made me feel incredibly uncomfortable. Consequently, I felt reluctant to continue the project. I began to question: *who* should I photograph and *why*?

This question stayed with me. The five days of uprisings which took place across England during the second week of August 2011 catalysed a monumental change in my photographic practice. While I maintained the same duty of care and intuitive tenderness towards everyone I encountered, my lens shifted towards people who I felt were wrongly criminalised and demonised, particularly in predominantly Black and South Asian areas of Birmingham. Mark Duggan was murdered by police in Tottenham, north London, at a time of accelerated economic austerity. VAT was increased to 20% in 2011 and an addition £32 billion of spending cuts announced by 2015. This was particularly severe in fiscal years 2010–11 and 2011–12 with an enormous 40% real cut in public investment. A mixture of police brutality and ongoing austerity was the real cause of the uprisings. A surge of racist commentary followed, a lot of misinformation was spread, and no one seemed to be writing, photographing or reporting to counter the media’s rhetoric. I was living in Kings Heath at the time, travelling through Balsall Heath to access Birmingham City Centre. I was deeply moved by grief-stricken father Tariq Jahan pleading for peace after his son was the victim of a car crash while defending businesses in Winson Green, instead of retaliating with rage. Subsequently, I began attending community meetings and events.



### BALSALL HEATH CARNIVAL (2013–2017)

Balsall Heath Carnival has been around since the 1960s but in recent years has been shrouded with a feeling of impermanence, due to political and financial instability. Located near Birmingham city centre, Balsall Heath has always been a popular place for migrants to arrive, live, work and settle due to good transport links and affordable housing. An increase in ethnic minorities making this area their home inevitably led to shops selling foods hard to get hold of in most supermarkets and as with any chain of supply and demand, subsequently an increase in places of worship to cater to the growing South Asian and Middle Eastern and North African populations.

Together with local residents, I have been spontaneously co-creating an archive of photographs during this annual festival 2013–2017. Each year I have had a 5–10-minute window of opportunity to photograph the community in a way that would not be possible any other day of the year (Fig. 17.2).

To individually approach people by knocking on each door would have felt invasive and most likely would have been fruitless.

Year after year the same families in the same houses on the same streets stepped out to marvel at the procession winding down their streets, recognising me and expressing more and more familiarity, warmth and good will towards me and the presence of my camera, as time passed.

No formal or written consent was granted due to working independently and the fast-paced nature of this one-off, annual event.

After photographing Manchester's Romany community in previous years, I grew wary of language barriers and considered having a request for consent form translated in a variety of languages. I even pondered the possibility of employing an assistant to support with paperwork to follow up with selected families as I sprinted along the street—but introducing bureaucracy into such an informal environment felt unnatural to the point of jarring.

So I intuitively developed a method of holding up the camera halfway before actually bringing the viewfinder up to my eye, with a questioning expression, to indicate I would rather wait for their approval than proceed to photograph without any pause for unwritten/ verbal/ non-verbal consent. The majority of people nodded or smiled encouragingly. This got me thinking more about the intersubjectivity of consent through facial expressions and people presenting themselves for the camera. In some of the photographs of this series, the front door is left ajar: self-conscious mothers modestly shield themselves from view for cultural, religious or other,

**Fig. 17.2** Father and son watching the procession during Balsall Heath Carnival, Birmingham (2016)



personal reasons. In the case of photographing children, I was surprised that mothers seemed to have no reservations whatsoever about them being photographed, often pushing their children towards the camera and nodding from inside the darkened hallways at the entrance of their homes.

### ‘WEST INDIES TO WEST MIDLANDS’ (2013–2015)

In 2013, I began spending time with veterans from across the West Indies and West Africa who fought for the British military in contemporary conflicts (post-WWI and WWII)—as preparation for an exhibition I was planning, to mark the beginning of WWI’s 4-year centenary (Fig. 17.3).

While the digital process of these portraits took minutes if not seconds, I deliberately spent several hours at every portrait sitting, cherishing the



**Fig. 17.3** From the series ‘West Indies to West Midlands’ (2013)—this veteran has chosen to remain anonymous

opportunity to get to know each veteran more intimately, to listen to their memories of both military service and civilian life. I’m still in touch with several of the veterans I photographed in 2013/2014.

Five years after self-initiating this project, in 2018, the Windrush Scandal hit the headlines. I felt a mixture of grief and relief wash over me: grief to learn about the implementation of a Hostile Environment <sup>2</sup> for

<sup>2</sup>The UK Home Office ‘Hostile Environment’ policy is a set of administrative and legislative measures designed to make staying in the UK as difficult as possible for people without leave to remain, in the hope that they may ‘voluntarily leave’. The Home Office policy was first announced in 2012 under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. The policy was widely seen as being part of a strategy of reducing UK immigration figures to the levels promised in the 2010 Conservative Party Election Manifesto. The policy has been cited as one of the harshest immigration policies in the history of the UK and has been widely criticised as inhumane, ineffective and unlawful. The United Nations Human Rights Council has stated that the policy has fostered xenophobia within the UK, while the Equality and Human Rights Commission has found that the policy broke equalities law. It has notably led to significant issues with the Windrush Generation and other Commonwealth citizens being deported after not being able to prove their right to remain in the UK, despite being guaranteed that right upon their arrival decades ago.

Windrush Generation pioneers, elders and their families and relief that my exhibition did not land any of the project's participants into legally compromising situations.

In the previous years, I had felt deeply hurt, confused and ultimately insulted by the suggestion from one of two community organisers that I had considered to be project partners that—with one week to go before the exhibition launch—I might have ulterior motives in terms of attracting media attention and 'making a name for myself' through the fleeting fame of this type of story, which the media tends to sensationalise intensely only to never reference again.

While I was relieved that I had unquestioningly cooperated with increasingly anxious project partners' wishes to avoid attracting national press attention, I was apprehensive about censorship in the exhibition's interpretation at first, because I had originally intended to prevent the censorship of these narratives, rather than perpetuate it. From the beginning, we had agreed these oral history interviews may be therapeutic for veterans and be utilised for other public presentations and military memorials they were involved in (and that I had attended and documented) all year round. My instinct was to share what I had learnt from the veterans because none of the information they shared with me was publicly available, let alone included in the History and Geography curriculum within institutional education in the UK.

Some participants consented to being named and approved the details of their military service being shared publicly, but some did not. This dilemma stayed on my mind for years afterwards and I still think about it to this day.

### 'HERE TO STAY' (2018)

The first time I met and photographed Empress, she spoke of her pioneering work in the NHS. Two years later, during the pandemic, Empress spoke out on systemic injustice during a phone call we recorded, commissioned for photobook and exhibition *This Separated Isle* (2021):

Inclusivity hasn't come naturally to British society. It hasn't been an organic process; it's been more reactive. If the government wanted inclusivity, it wouldn't have led to what happened with the Windrush Generation. (...) The government seems to have turned its back on those who were given rights to remain in the UK. You only have to look at recent happenings with people being deported and the difficulty for some of us to prove nationality.

Racism is still rife within our education system, our healthcare systems and other systems that govern the way society runs. We have an uphill struggle. We have to battle, at all times. Recently, some government officials categorically stated that there is no racism in the UK. When you look back at history, I don't understand that statement. The whole of the British empire is based on – and has benefited greatly from - slavery. The historical perspective is deeply rooted in the system and is ingrained within UK society and institutions. It's going to take more than words to say that the UK is not racist when racism continues to exist and is integrated structurally in covert ways.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, Sick Be Nourished experienced a dramatic increase in donations and decrease in physical storage space, as they had recently had to relocate their headquarters due to unscrupulous landlords at their previous space (Figs. 17.4 and 17.5).

**Fig. 17.4** Empress Zauditu Ishuah, from the series *Here to Stay*: an archive of portraits and oral histories, commissioned by the National Health Service (NHS) in 2018. At the time of print, Empress's portrait has been licensed by *This Separated Isle* photobook and the accompanying, nationally touring exhibition. Supported by Ffotogallery (Cardiff, Wales), Street Level Photoworks (Glasgow, Scotland) and Impressions Gallery (Bradford, England)



**Fig. 17.5** Zamila Ewele, sorting through donated food, clothes, books and medical equipment, at Sick Be Nourished headquarters, Birmingham (2020)



Sick Be Nourished was founded by Zamila Ewele's sister (Empress Zauditu Ishua) who felt compelled to recycle and repurpose undamaged medical equipment that would otherwise get disposed of, despite being fully fit for purpose. A small team of volunteers package and send supplies around the world; medical equipment which would otherwise go to waste.

I have remained in contact with these sisters since first meeting them in 2018. I continue to remain in contact with participants, whenever possible. I work both independently and in partnership with like-minded organisations (ranging from healthcare and third sector to charitable and academic institutions). I continue to co-produce exhibitions and advocate paid public-speaking opportunities for portrait sitters and project participants to tell their stories in their own words.



Where appropriate, I keep in touch as a friend and take genuine interest in their personal lives, as well as professional careers.

### SOME CONCLUSIONS ON COLLABORATIVE WORK

Now, in 2023, as far as I am aware, there is no compulsory module about care and consent, or the ethics of photography, in contemporary photography education. There is a long-standing tradition of predominantly white photographers photographing people of colour without consent or neglecting to keep in contact to share the royalties of the resulting portraits, as well as nominating themselves for awards and prizes and growing in notoriety and popularity, wealth and power. That is not motivating or inspiring to me, as it only serves to perpetuate systemic injustice and the polarisation of social classes, both on an economic level and on a symbolic level, especially more discreet and nuanced injustices such as an assumed right to photograph someone and to maintain absolute power over *their* portrait by claiming it as your own. The normalisation of entitlement and privilege is foundational to the collusion between white supremacy and capitalism.

Consequently, a collaborative approach is crucial in any context where sitters have known ‘the struggle of feeling [they] don’t belong and not having support’.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting on collaborative work from the portrait participants’ perspective, Aysha Iqbal, community worker and co-founder of ‘Odara’ womens’ wellbeing network whose portrait (Fig. 17.6), was included in the exhibition and book *Invisible Britain* (2019), offered this comment:

Working with you gave us clarification of who we are; to see our journey in print makes it so much more real. It gave us a sense of value and made us feel confident again. It made me feel like we really are doing something special, the fact that you dedicated your time to work with us. A lot of people looked at our photograph – it sent out a strong message. The way you worked with us was so – you let us lead! You let us portray ourselves the way we wanted; to decide what kind of message we wanted to put out. We felt like we had the control to put out the message we wanted to. You were really accommodating in doing what we wanted. It was really client-led. We’re still very proud of our portrait being in that photobook.

<sup>3</sup> Aysha and Kiran Iqbal quoted on Asian Youth Culture: <https://asianyouthculture.co.uk/oral-histories/odara/> (last visited in January 2023).



**Fig. 17.6** Sisters Aysha and Kiran Iqbal sit either side of their mother, Zatoon, Balsall Heath, Birmingham (2017). Portrait licensed for exhibition and photo-book *Invisible Britain*, 2019

As for me, to host an exhibition in an accessible, beautiful venue that encapsulates the reverence and respect I have for the portrait sitters I co-create with, that's a success. For the portrait sitters to proudly invite friends and family to photograph them next to their portrait, that's a success. For these portraits to be treasured by the portrait sitters and celebrated at regular exhibitions and shared widely to contextualise the systemic injustice they're navigating, to actively educate the general public and advocate change, that, to me, is a success.



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