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Preface

The first meaning of ‘impact’ refers to a forceful striking of two bodies against each other—a collision, simply put. It derives from the verb ‘impinge’, which in turn comes from the Latin ‘impingere’, meaning ‘to push, to bump into, to strike, to hit, to impose’. All very physical actions, all executed with a certain amount of bodily violence. This, of course, is not what photographers mean when they say they want to have an impact. They use the term in a more figurative way, as ‘having a strong effect of one thing, person, action, etc. on another’. In this subdued definition, photographs function as vehicles through which photographers hope to realize a strong effect on others. If violence there is, it’s (safely) encapsulated in the images themselves. If they hit us, it’s only our moral imaginations that they strike.

The aspiration for impact seems indestructible. Even after the demise of the printed press and acknowledging that the impact of photographic images is uncertain, unmeasurable and highly unpredictable, photographers still (do) aim to make images that have an impact. How is it that this impossible desire is still alive and kicking? Part of it is fuelled by a general movement in the artworld that’s taking up a more activist role, with the photographer as a procurer of vivid examples of the evil that men do. Another part has to do with a lingering attachment to the role documentary photography once played in our visual understanding of the world. Here, the longing for impact takes on the form of a desire to become relevant once more—to be a witness of our times. And last but not least, it. Maybe we need more of these non-human elements to tilt us out of our self-indulgent, anthropocentric worldview. If we want more images with impact, maybe we should stop personifying the public with trite truths and stale arguments and instead use photography as a tool to give presence to the spirits lurking in the dark, silent world.

The desire to have an impact is the desire to act upon the world. Included in this definition is the presumption that the one who wants to have an impact is in a position of power from which it is possible to influence worldly events. The wish to have an impact posits the photographer as an agent of change and the world in which he acts as his subordinate object. To strive for impact is to assert control, to state how the world ought to be, not how it is. The photographer understands having an impact as a moment of empowerment, whereas the recipient who absorbs the blow of the image often feels powerless. How to react to this injustice? How to answer the plea of the image? The image confronts us with an intolerable situation but shows us no way out. In the end, we’re left to simply utter our moral indignation. Nevertheless, there’s a (rather important) difference between moral indignation and acting morally. The former boils down to simply speaking up, to accusing, while the latter requires an imaginative leap.

The question then becomes: how can photography help us attain this imaginative leap? Traditionally, the desire of the photographer who wants to have an impact starts from a genuine belief in the power of images to sway public opinion. Photographs are here supposed to function as visual arguments by simply showing what needs to be addressed. As such, they are fully determined by the intentions of those who produce and disseminate them. They stress a human worldview and always fit neatly in the different scientific and intellectual frameworks we’ve developed to make sense of the world: they never veer off-script (which makes them ultimately quite predictable). Considered within the duality of the photographic process as a meeting between optics and chemistry, these argumentative images stress the optical side of photography. Clarity, readability, and sharpness are the most important formal qualities of these images.

But if we go back to the original meaning of the word ‘impact’—as a forceful collision of two bodies—then another way of thinking about photographic impact becomes possible. Instead of the optical (theatrical) side of photography, this other kind of photography stresses the photo-chemical element as the (material) point of contact between us and the world. Thinking about impact in this way suggests that photographic images, precisely because they are the result of a semi-automatic process in which the influence of the human operator is rather limited, can open us to a different relationship to the world. Initiated by a human action, these images are nevertheless attentive to the agency of the world itself and all the non-human elements in it. Maybe we need more of these non-human perspectives to tilt us out of our self-indulgent, anthropocentric worldview. If we want more images with impact, maybe we should stop personifying the public with trite truths and stale arguments and instead use photography as a tool to give presence to the spirits lurking in the dark, silent world.

Dark Impact

Steven Humblet
photography didn’t so much initiate a new world for granted these imperial rights. That’s Azoulay tends to ‘structurally’ deny its impact when taking recording or contemplating what was already photography was assigned the role of documenting, of destruction, we need to ask ourselves how photography participated in this destruction and of destruction, we need to ask ourselves how different activities reduced and mobilised to fit larger schemes of production and world-engi- eneering. Through these schemes, different groups of governed peoples were crafted and assigned access to occupations, mainly non-skilled labor, that in turn enabled the creation of a distinct strata of professions with the vocational purpose of archiving ‘new’ worlds and furnishing them with new technologies. Such professions housed experts in distinct domains— economic, legal, political, etc.—and so on—that were differentiated and kept separate in racialised worlds engen- dered by imperialism. Experts in each domain enjoy ‘the right to shape societies’ according to their vision or will, to study them and craft new narratives in order to provide solutions to problems generated by other experts. Photography was shaped into such a model, with its own strata of experts, and in some cases even, as becomes clear in the original essay, is ‘that the ubiq -tuous and ubiquitous’ four

Ariella Azoulay

Imperial Impact

Still Searching is a separate blog of Imperial Impact, engaging in visual-interactive discussion on all aspects of photography. The site was originally published as Unlearning Expertise and Unsettling Expertise Practices, in 1999, which was the third of the nine photo essay series set under the heading of Visionary Practice Monographs, a collection of monographs of photography by the documentary protocols that they were also

Still Searching, along with nine other visual-interactive discussion on all aspects of photography, is a collection of monographs of photography as well as the destruction of the world. Differences between situations were blurred in such a way that perpetrators could be depicted as victims or law enforcers even though they were responsible for the destruction of the existing world and the migration of its inhabitants. These three 1960s photos taken by Burt Glinn in the same place—a destroyed Palestine, or the newly declared State of Israel—and shown last year in Paris were displayed only with their mini-mal original caption. Both the display and the captions take the imperial narrative for granted and assume that there’s no harm in restating it nor any question to do with the medium as to how those photographers, or the photographers who were expelled from their homeland, Palestine, six years earlier, and when they insisted on their right to return to their homes, they were forced to embody imperial categories such as ‘refugee’ or ‘infiltrator’, which endow modern citizenship with a set of imperial categories in this way. They were made into the unacknowledged participants in such photographs: those whose spaces have been invaded by imperial forces. Thus, on the website Palestine Remembered, for instance, the photographer doesn’t engage with the structures of power that underpin imperialism.

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Thus, for example, Magnum/ICP photographers such as David Seymour or Robert Capa could document the destruction of Palestine as the creation of a new state or world in which Jewish sovereignty could triumph, confounding the plight of the Palestinians with the difficulties encoun- tered by the migrant Jews, who at that point were made guards of the new sovereignty. Misled by the category of ‘Palestinian Prisoner’ and by the authority of those who acquired their imperial rights and sovereignty against the Palestinians, whom they expelled from their homes. These Palestinians are not ‘prisoners’. In the photos taken in 1965 in Gaza, they are rather brutalised, either as they attempt to return to their homes or when the Israeli occupying forces invade their homes. Either way, they were expelled from their homeland, Palestine, six years earlier, and when they insisted on their right to return to their homes, they were forced to embody imperial categories such as ‘refugee’ or ‘infiltrator’, which endow modern citizenship with a set of imperial categories. Contrary to certain rights that people enjoy in their communities today, most of these rights don’t emanate from the community in which people are members, on behalf of their membership, that is also the share of a certain world.

Thus, according to imperial categories and the destruction of the world in which those photographers have the right to their homes, they were forced to embody imperial categories such as ‘refugee’ or ‘infiltrator’, which endow modern citizenship with a set of imperial categories. Contrary to certain rights that people enjoy in their communities today, most of these rights don’t emanate from the community in which people are members, on behalf of their membership, that is also the share of a certain world.

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In my view, rather than the immediate local impact of a specific project, more attention should be paid to how art works towards changing manner structural inequalities on different scales. In conversations with artists and photographers from Rio’s favelas, there is a general consensus that although that being said, many artists in Rio are doing valuable work that contributes to the kind of impact outlined here, most notably in Rutha Diniz, a photographer from Rio de Janeiro’s Maté favela complex. His work focuses on the depiction and representation of the predominant wealth and on graffiti, popular culture and the Brazilian construction industry. Two examples of such works have been shown in exhibitions within and outside favelas; they’ve also been published in a monograph and appeared in print and online articles. He shares his work on more accessible digital platforms, like Flickr and Instagram, and he participates in a number of photography collective (e.g., Imagens do Povo, Favela em Foco).

Over the years, Diniz has created a diverse archive of images showing favelas and their inhabitants that foregrounds the highly different experiences of everyday life and of spaces. Depicting daily life, acts of protest and cultural festivities, his work reveals the favela as a place inhabited by regular people who suffer many injustices (e.g., police violence, forced home evictions) but that also work, play and enjoy life. Put differently, there is no such thing as the quintessential favela, and it should not be represented as such. Again, my point here isn’t that local photographers automatically provide a more ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ depiction, and it’s important to repeat here that Diniz both highlights and questions this kind of dichotomy. Nevertheless, living in closest proximity often makes a long-term and reciprocal engagement easier. Diniz foregrounds the presence of a successful artist from Rio de Janeiro’s peripheral is meaningful both within and outside of Rio’s favelas because it challenges the dominant and unequal relationships between artistic production and display mentioned above.

Finally, considering the scale and complexity of socioeconomic inequality, as well as the multitude of images that form the artistic landscape, it raises the question of what happens after the artistic project is over. Considering time constraints, it might be easier to think about the long-term presence of such local initiatives, which are hard to sustain without continuously renewed support and resources. Second, disrupting the dominant and unequal foregrounds of socioeconomic inequality, as well as the multitude of images that form the artistic landscape, it raises the question of what happens after the artistic project is over. Considering time constraints, it might be easier to think about the long-term presence of such local initiatives, which are hard to sustain without continuously renewed support and resources. Finally, considering the scale and complexity of socioeconomic inequality, as well as the multitude of images that form the artistic landscape, it raises the question of what happens after the artistic project is over. Considering time constraints, it might be easier to think about the long-term presence of such local initiatives, which are hard to sustain without continuously renewed support and resources.

Unfortunately, such an approach doesn’t sit well with the art world’s validation of newness, originality and individual genius, as well as the narratives of intervention and self-help that are often dominant in Rio. That being said, many artists in Rio are doing valuable work that contributes to the kind of impact outlined here, most notably in Rutha Diniz, a photographer from Rio de Janeiro’s Maté favela complex. His work focuses on the depiction and representation of the predominant wealth and on graffiti, popular culture and the Brazilian construction industry. Two examples of such works have been shown in exhibitions within and outside favelas; they’ve also been published in a monograph and appeared in print and online articles. He shares his work on more accessible digital platforms, like Flickr and Instagram, and he participates in a number of photography collective (e.g., Imagens do Povo, Favela em Foco).

In Rio, museums and exhibitions continue to be a site at which the organisational and curatorial frameworks assist in the commodification of the artistic intervention. In other words, rather than focusing on the immediate outcomes of the projects, an equally important goal is to attract both local and international visitors to the favela complex. Here, the organisers actively aim to attract both local and international visitors to the favela complex. Here, the organisers actively aim to attract both local and international visitors to the favela complex. Here, the organisers actively aim to attract both local and international visitors to the favela complex. Here, the organisers actively aim to attract both local and international visitors to the favela complex. Here, the organisers actively aim to attract both local and international visitors to the favela complex. Here, the organisers actively aim to attract both local and international visitors to the favela complex. 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Within the images themselves.资本主义 is fundamentally based on the exploitation of human labor-power, but that of invention power,’ Boutang wrote. To me, this simply sounds like a resurrection of the concept that the photographer be paid by the client for assigned work. But if the photographer is asked to do all manner of odd jobs in exchange for exposure, without knowing if any of it will culminate in anything at all.

All of this leads to the separation of photography from the social and civic conditions of its production and power, giving rise to a ‘reputation economy,’ subversive to the ever-expanding industry of branding, self-promotion and careerism. The photographer is now professionalised by market conditions and colonised by corporate hierarchies, reconfirming and legitimising the corporate forces and no longer speaking truth to power. As photojournalism becomes reliant on the pressures of capitalistic forces and no longer speaking truth to power.

What gets created, then, is a professionalisation industry, in which we find ourselves working?

We become amateur. We must become intruders into the professional field so as to displace corporate, political and moral entanglements. photographers can dismantle the inside and outside to act as Edward Snowden-like creatures, disabling and confronting, subverting and disrupting. We do not shun awkwardness and unreconstructedness, anathema in the professional world. We embrace what we don’t know, allowing ourselves to take risks, make mistakes and engage with the pleasure of creation (there’s nothing to lose). In other words, become educated. Empower others to reposition a field that’s more closely aligned with what we do. Perhaps the best way to condition yourself as an amateur is to look at the word’s etymology. ‘Amateur’ is Latin for lover. Don’t you want to do something you love, something that fulfills you, that produces meaning? To me, the world of possibility is open. I can drift across disciplines and collaborate with others, I can engage with institutions and challenge their power; the freedom to work outside the constrained norms and protocols, the challenges to a future I could never imagine. Do what you love. Others will want to participate, allowing opportunities to reengineer and reposition your field that’s so closely aligned with the needs of the community. This will send the powers that be to a consolidation of the formation of a future without the state in a form of inclusion, diversity and equality.

In other words, become educated. Empower yourself—possess as many tools as you can—toward deliberate decisions. Aim to engage with ‘punks’ that seek social justice and sustainability as adequate expatriates. We become intruders into the professional field so as to displace corporate, political and moral entanglements.
Reflections of democratic society. Generously enter into other discourses and disciplines to allow an informed process for yourself while opening up the conditions of making. Do not step back from the crises of the moment; rather, examine the deeper-seated issues of unequal power and consumer sovereignty and political engagement. If you’re to challenge the assumptions of the system, then you cannot accept its creatures. This means the prizes, awards, reviews and other byproducts of the professional system must be pushed back into a public discourse so that the focus is going on and can all participate. We can pursue alternative courses and resources that support independent and competing infrastructures; many such people and places exist in the photographic and communication world today.

This is about challenging the status quo from within to effectively operate independently and be in a challenging and subvert, demystify and empower, and ultimately unite the everyday practices of consumers, producers and citizens. It’s about opening up, rather than being buried under common assumptions.

Impact. This is what most people working in what can be called photojournalism want to have, however enticingly they might adverb it. They confess this desire graphically because, like adults admitting they still believe in magic, the suggestion that photography can change the world is regarded as naïve, an irrational belief that flies in the face of logic and history.

This widely held cynicism isn’t unjustified. We live in a time more comprehensively imaged than at any other in history, and it becomes more so every day. A pandemonium of wrinkles and horrors is accessible to almost anyone, at any time, through a few taps and swipes of a smartphone screen. Humankind’s inhumanity has never been more fully portrayed, but despite this visibility, our world seems to be getting worse. It hasn’t been demonstrated that photography has slowed, much less halted, the global rise of authoritarianism, a resurgent far right, ever-deepening inequality or the destruction of the environment.

In the face of this, why do so many of us still cling to the idea that making photographs of problems can help to fix them? Maybe it’s partly because, as photographers, we’ve been reared on tales of our forebears who seemed to do exactly this: the selfless crusaders recounted in the lore who were able to move mountains with their images. Yet we, their descendants, seem unable to do the same, despite having many advantages these forebears lacked, from immense advances in photographic technology to the far more numerous platforms available for disseminating our images.

So why does photography no longer seem to work the way we’ve been taught it used to? Maybe part of the challenge in answering this is that whether they position themselves as critics or advocates of the idea, relatively few photographers can explain how photography was ever supposed to achieve the change we spend so much time debating. Photographs are just patterns of light and dark scattered across a surface. Photography has no mobility, no voice and no agency of its own. In and of itself, it isn’t able to achieve a thing, and so in that sense, at least, the idea that photography can change the world is indeed naïve. The question to ask is what other forces and institutions did photography once work in concert with in order to achieve its remarkable world-making acts, and what happened to those relationships that brought about their end? To answer that, we need to go back to where the idea of photographic journalism as a force for change first arose.

Imaging change

Photojournalism encompasses two practices with much in common but significant differences, and for these reasons they deserve to be discussed at least briefly on their own terms. The emergence of the first, documentary photography, is hard to date, but something that resembles its character-istics predates John Grierson’s 1923 coming of the term by roughly thirty years.1 At least in its early stages, what we might now recognize as documentary was typified by its self-initiated nature and the lengthy period of engagement with its subject matter and its diverse means of distribution. Early practitioners often relied on strategies like speaking tours, magic lantern shows, books and public displays we might now recognize as exhibitions, each form combining multiple images to build a more assured argument. Jacob Riis’s work on New York slums is a good example of many of these aspects.2

By contrast, photojournalism would seem by name and nature to demand the use of the printed page as its medium of distribution. If we take this as a definition, then its origins date back to around 1915, when the half-tone process first made it feasible for newspapers to be illustrated with photographs on a large scale. Photojournalism was to a significant degree driven by external, imper-sionistic imperatives, motivated by complex inter-actions with the news agenda and economic and political concerns; those factors left fewer oppor-tunities for the sort of long-term engagement that characterised documentary. Perhaps consequently, photojournalism also often dealt with things more singularly, and in its relationship with text, it often acted as an accompaniment to words rather than their equal.3 There are of course exceptions to those definitions, as there are to any that encompass such huge fields; for example, several historically significant documentary projects, including Lewis Hine’s work on child labour, were not self-initiated.4 More important is what unified these two practices: their shared use of photography as a form of didactic communication, which could serve to inform and edify audiences.

So how were these related practices ever imagined as a force of change? The answer lies in the time period from which both fields began to emerge, an era when democracy was on the march and a growing number of people were being enfranchised. Photojournalism worked in concert with expanding democracies by communi-cating information to audiences, which aided in the creation of an informed citizenry, an essential part of a healthy democracy.5 Only a citizenry equipped with accurate and impartial information about the essential issues of the day could properly debate them and reach rational conclusions in the free rhetorical space of what Jurgen Habermas called ‘the public sphere.’6 These conclusions could then be used to make decisions as part of democratic institutions and practices, most obvi-ously at the ballot box. Politicians would in turn take note and, once elected, would enact the will of the people, or else risk their wrath at the next poll.

While seldom explicitly explained to us as students or trainers, the assumptions inherent in this model about the functioning of journalism and democracy are programmed into photojournalists at an early stage. The consequence of that programming is that we take this model to be incontrovertible and unchallengeable. We never stop to ask if it makes sense because it is largely invisible to us, and we regard what are actually
So You Want to Change the World

Humphry Letts

The Expedition of Humphry Letts


Old assumptions

Now, we face a situation in which photojournalism that reaches millions seems to have little effect, and this is a model we need to urgently scrutinise. We need to revisit its assumptions about the way journalism, audiences and democracy all function, assumptions formed in an age before digital technologies. If those assumptions prove outdated or false, then in turn the choices we make based on them may also be wrong. For reasons of brevity, I’ll draw attention to just those major assumptions, but there are many others worth probing.

A first, striking assumption, and one we can’t seem to avoid, is the claim that photographs have any influence on people at all. We can accept this to be the case at least in so far as photographs are carriers of information and that we may some-times use that information to make conscious choices. For example, many people demonstrably changed the language they use regarding the mass movement of people in the wake of Alix Kurd’s death, and politicians appeared to at least briefly echo these sentiments.2 Also important to note is that photographs change us in ways we sometimes not even aware of. Studies have shown changes ranging from the distortion of our memories24 to more profound changes in brain chemistry caused by regular exposure to certain types of photographs.25

Even if we accept that photography has the power to consciously or unconsciously influence us—on other words, to change us on an individual level—we still need to accept certain caveats. One is that this power is certainly challenged by issues that were less prevalent in photojournalism’s early days. These include the massive increase in the quantity of available photography as well as the widespread loss of faith in the veracity of images and in the practice of journalism more broadly.26 It is also important to note that photographs can be forces of bad change just as readily as they can be forces of good change. It’s a dark admission, but maybe we’ve entered a stage in which many seemingly robust democracies are now subject to only a handful of people, or perhaps even just one person, wielding the power to make the changes that we want to see.

A second significant assumption in this model is the way it sees the citizenry engaging with the information derived from photojournalism. The arrival of the digital public sphere has upended much of what was understood about its analogue predecessor. The notion of a citizenry meeting in public spaces to debate the news now seems remarkably quaint, replaced as it has been by the sympathetic echo chambers and vitriolic silos of social media. We are now far more likely to debate choices as the exact opposite: we see them as the only sensible way of doing things. An obvious example of this is the way this model influences the idea that a successful photograph reaches millions of people, while one which reaches a handful is a failure, irrespective of who those handful are.

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change. We’ve too often regarded the means as sacrosanct, with the result that the ultimate ends we want to achieve go unfilled. W. Eugene Smith, one of the illuminating lights of photojournalism and another figure whose photographs can demonstrably be shown to have created change, once famously responded to criticism of his use of manipulation by pointing out that he did not create the rules of photojournalism and was under no obligation to follow them.12 In these desperate times, I think we need to recognise that abiding by inherited dogmas about the function of photojournalism does more to betray our forebears than honour them. If we want to create the sort of change that the documentary photographers and photojournalists of the past achieved, then perhaps we need to stop emulating them.

It started with a shoe. In June 2017, Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Fund uploaded a long video outlining the supposed corruption of Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to their website and YouTube33 (figure 1 and 2). The probe of the Anti-Corruption Fund originated in the release by hackers of the overwhelming contents of Medvedev’s mobile telephone. No incriminating material was found; instead, the phone contained a plethora of mundane images showing the politician going about his daily routine. An informal photo of the PM sporting a colourful shirt, a large watch and fancy trainers, however, caught the attention of Navalny’s team as a possible inroad to a larger investigation. The visual detectives simply asked which credit card was used to buy these items. This unremarkable image served as the starting point for research that uncovered a large and widespread network of illegal transactions, false identities, questionable real-estate holdings and financial cover-ups that incriminated many high-ranking officials and businesses. Navalny’s resulting video helped spark anti-Medvedev protests that caught Russia’s ruling classes off guard. Never before has such an unassuming image had such a large impact: it doesn’t pretend to be an aesthetic representation of an exceptional situation, and it doesn’t maintain a privileged relationship to truth, like previous forms of documentary photography. Medvedev’s holiday snap illustrates a new paradigm in documentary photography in which aesthetics, truth and artistry are replaced by reliability.

The Reliable Image: Impact and Contemporary Documentary Photography

Wilco Versteeg

Paradigm shift

Traditional documentary photography is undeniably in crisis. The most important documentary images of the twenty-first century have not been made by documentary photographers per se. Visuals of important events are provided by civic luminaries who happen to pass by; victims of human rights abuses are increasingly able to document their own plights; and activist groups have branched out into documentation through photographic imagery to make their cases in courts and public forums. Meanwhile, traditional documentary photography seems to have found a safe harbour in cultural institutions, gallery spaces or in the service of NGOs, but in doing so it has retreated from the public forums in which it most logically serves its informative societal function. This retreat is exemplified by commemorative exhibitions and ‘the photobook’ as the preferred locus of state-of-the-art discussions on what hereafter used to be a public, diverse documentary culture.13 This self-sequestration might be the logical result of a medium that has struggled to remain relevant in our political culture and might slip further into artistic niches if it continues to turn a blind eye to the documentary demands of our sceptical, digitising epoch.13

What are these demands, and how can documentary photography, in all its diversity, continue to impact society? This article proposes a paradigm that safeguards documentary photography from the trappings of scepticism, irrelevance and political obscurity by seeking to cut it loose from the millstone that has been hanging from its neck for almost a century: the insistence on its privileged relationship with the truth and, having been discouraged by relativistic theories, with its equally deceptive claim of raising awareness as the nec plus ultra of a medium that can be much more. By freeing documentary photography from the demand to tell the truth, we do more justice to the early history of the medium—in which photography was instrumental in science and other pursuits of knowledge—and create a future in which it can play a role of political importance.

To do this, we might have to accept photography’s subordinate place in larger constructions of evidence. This article is a call to refashion the medium through the concept of reliability. In our sceptical day and age, claims to the truth are outdated; the reliability of an image within a clearly defined context is more important. In fact, these practices have deep roots in the history of the medium: late nineteenth and early twentieth century science and police photography never remained relevant in our political culture and might slip further into artistic niches if it continues to turn a blind eye to the documentary demands of our sceptical, digitising epoch.13


13 This video was uploaded to multiple websites in order to secure a larger and more participatory circulation. The video is called ‘Dimitry [sic] (Don’t) Call him Dimon’ and can be streamed from https://dimon.navalny.com


Let's do away with some perceived ideas of photography: most photographs do not circulate widely, if at all, even our most gripping images have close to zero impact on political and societal developments. The impact of photography can hardly be overestimated, but the impact of individual photographs is usually grossly overstated. This is most easily demonstrated by looking at war photography, in which most state-of-the-art discussions on documentary photography play out. The idea that documentary photography is “everything” and that its iconic images impact the hearts and minds of the people as well as actual policy is recent, originating from the Vietnam War. This so-called Uncensored War is repeatedly said to have been shortened if not outright ended because of a handful of iconic images. While this is an appealing discourse that serves as the ultimate apologia of a medium that’s suffered accusations of indecency and voyeurism, it simply isn’t true. Even today, we wish that images such as that of a Syrian boy face-down on a Turkish beach can and do change the world we live in, but the harsher reality is that these images are seen and remembered merely as icons of photography’s failure to do more than depict reality. The hope that documentary photographs mobilize people proves to be as persistent as it is futile.

Exceptional forms of power

Considering recent technological developments, the story becomes more complex. Since the late 1990s, developments in automated and autonomous image-based technology have taken flight, especially outside the traditional realms of photography and its academic and critical study. Instead, the intersections of science, technological start-ups and state power have created more interesting developments in photography and image-making. Trevor Paglen is a notable exception. In an alarmist article for *The New Inquiry,* he asserted that images no longer need human agency to operate and cannot be understood within our current human-centred critical apparatus. Paglen states that “[u]niversal computer vision systems produce mathematical abstractions from the images they are analysing, and the qualities of those abstractions are guided by the kind of metadata the algorithm is trying to read.” This leads to a reversal in which, according to Paglen, “we no longer look at images—images look at us. They no longer simply represent things, but actively intervene in everyday life.” Paglen sees this as a threat and says that “we must begin to understand these changes if we are to challenge the exceptional forms of power flowing through the invisible visual culture that we find ourselves ensnared within.” These developments include Chinese face-recognition programmes that autonomously attribute value to certain behaviours, billboards that track our eye movement and change messages depending on our personal histories and unmanned killer drones that act when patterns on the ground indicate hostility.

Paglen’s article is a call to arms to update our perceived ideas on visual culture in this volatile technological reality. A decisive date in the history of our visual culture and an early example of this autonomousisation of images is July 1988. On this date, the United States Navy Cruiser USS Vincennes shot down Iran Air Flight 655, killing all 290 passengers on board. A tragic mistake for which President Ronald Reagan immediately apologised, this incident is rooted in the deceptive power of technological reality. The cruiser’s onboard computers “everything” and that its iconic images impact the hearts and minds of the people as well as actual policy is recent, originating from the Vietnam War. This so-called Uncensored War is repeatedly said to have been shortened if not outright ended because of a handful of iconic images. While this is an appealing discourse that serves as the ultimate apologia of a medium that’s suffered accusations of indecency and voyeurism, it simply isn’t true. Even today, we wish that images such as that of a Syrian boy face-down on a Turkish beach can and do change the world we live in, but the harsher reality is that these images are seen and remembered merely as icons of photography’s failure to do more than depict reality. The hope that documentary photographs mobilize people proves to be as persistent as it is futile.

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medium of expression can be found in the crowd-sourced investigative journalism of Bellingcat’s, most notably in its research on the MH17 airplane shot down over Ukraine in 2015. Or in Errol Morris’ book Believing Is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography,40 his deep research and exposure of the myths of photography, using recent technologies to criticise expert fields, professional practitioners cling to disciplinary regimes of validation in the face of looming threats that developments like artificial intelligence, mobile-phone cameras and amateur culture pose to these privileged positions, which grant them somehow exclusive rights to design our society. While both disciplines share many things in common, communication design already incorporates strategies, which can inspire documentary photography to (re)design its impact.

Problems of impact

The disciplines of documentary photography and communication design are rooted in colonisation. Antella Axladay points to the history of the colonial past and the rights experts had in shaping society, showing that photography’s invention of the documentary is rooted in a privilege acquired by denial:

in exchange for some of its exclusive rights, not necessarily those that were financially rewarding, photographers have been mobilised to represent those imperial rights as if they were disconnected from the regime of violence. It is out of this structural denial that the tradition of engaged photography could invent the protocol of the documentary as a means of accounting for objects that were violently fabricated by imperial actors, a mode of being morally concerned about one’s peers.

There is another story of colonisation, one that also goes beyond the influence of European modernism and haunts communication design, namely its roots in a service- providing culture at the core of neoliberal capitalist principles. This process has been continually intensifying since the growth of neoliberalism in the 1970s aimed at colonising the public sphere and everyday life through violent commodification. It’s this type of colonisation, above all others, in which both disciplines exist today; we are all embedded in capitalism.

For the majority of communication designers, serving the market has always been the natural thing to do, while documentary photography tends to think of itself as ‘doing good’. This is an important ideological difference, which in my opinion actually works in favour of design, but activist photography and not photography, as it creates the false impression of an inherent opposition to market forces by a principled stance that is often disconnected from the protocol of the documentary. While photography design’s culture is largely defined by the same forces, its contradictions are more obvious and more visible; they are widely discussed, and designers seem to be more much aware of them than documentary photographers.

Documentary photography and communication design have many things in common. Both struggle to understand their future impacts and the social relevance and sustainability of their professional practices. However, discussions about these issues are still marginal: university programmes are running largely as always, grinding the mill until there is a steady intake of students. Both disciplines have been historically self-referential and the formal training is largely focusing on the technical rather the intellectual aspect of the practice. This is seen in the object/ image centrelessness of photography and communication-design training, as well as in the notorious shortage of serious theory and in the lack of contextual understanding about both practices among professionals. This is especially a problem in relation to each discipline functioning as a social practice capable of going beyond Eurocentric traditions and the driving principles of colonisation. They are the same and differ in their historical moment of disciplinary maturity, but they both seem to largely fail at engaging in praxis and reflecting on the conditions of their own disciplinary construction of knowledge. However, this seems like while a small but significant part of communication design is the creation of successful steps to articulate an autonomous practice, documentary photography still (painfully) dreams in the comfort of its historical self-understanding.

Donald Weber, the Canadian photographer and author of the master’s programme at KABK in The Hague, says that in order to achieve impact, a photographer ‘brings light into darkness’ and is therefore concerned with visibility, which is often considered a mechanism of democratic guarantee. In this sense, the photographer ‘demands visibility, counters hidden motives, disperses corruption by untying it full front and centre, and condones power. In other words, this light is a form of democracy in action, and a fundamental pillar of journalistic integrity.41 Weber is critical towards such dominant understandings and sees them as reductionist; he also rightly points to the need to focus on the conditions photographic production.42

The prevalent narrow understanding of documentary photography’s impact being ‘lighting the darkness’ is interesting from a disciplinary perspective. A question I would like to pose is what is it about the photography discipline that hinders a broader, more complex and more contextualised self-understanding of image making, especially as there are other articulations of impact in closely related fields?43 Stephen Duncombe for example offered a list of ideal typologies for activist art aims to achieve.44 The list was a result of extensive surveys and interviews with diverse activist artists from around the world, who were fostering dialogue, building community, making a place, inviting participation, transforming environment and experience,的食物，但与食物摄入有关的机制并不完全清楚。研究人员通过采用“宏基因组学”技术对我国不同地区的人群进行了研究，发现肠道微生物群落的组成和生物多样性与食物摄入模式密切相关。此外，食物摄入模式还影响肠道微生物群落的代谢功能和炎症状态。这些发现为理解肠道微生物群落如何响应食物摄入模式提供了线索，并为开发针对特定食物摄入模式的微生物群落调控策略提供了基础。
revealing reality, altering perception, creating disruption, inspiring dreams, providing utility, political expression, encouraging experimentation, maintaining hegemony, making nothing happen, imminent cultural shift, ultimate cultural change, imminent material impact and ultimate material result.46

Impact in practice

I'd like to offer further concrete thoughts that might help to broaden the discussion about impact. I do believe we should think of documentary photography as socially responsive communication.48 In this way, we'd be able to situate photography as a social practice with a potential range of impacts. This would change the focus from the object (image) towards the process of communication and would enable us to go beyond the dominant culture of a self-reflexive practice.48

What if we realised that power manifests in realms beyond mere representation and that the real is actually socially constructed?48 In this realisation, we might ask what processes we aim to create within society to contribute to a more democratic construction of reality. The image is a medium, and the impact of documentary photography and communication design should be the process mediated and facilitated by the image.

While documentary photography is inherently concerned with social change, many photographers regularly work with NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Interestingly, these organisations act very much like corporations. Their communications approach is ultimately focused on social organisation which we can see and understand the world. One part of Magnum Photo operates like a creative client-focused service, not unlike an advertising agency and employs its eminent photographers. It explicitly says it works with ‘brands’ to create integrated, marketing-based communications solutions. An explicit example is the work Magnum Photo has done for the largest European Bank HSBC, that among other things is known for laundering drug money. How are such projects related to documentary photography’s ethos of ‘doing good’, and what is their real impact?49

By contrast, radical design studio LOKI Design lists on their website its design studios focusing on a radical communication design practice.50 Most of them explicitly distance themselves from neoliberal capitalism or actively work towards an alternative. Many of these studios operate as businesses; effectively, they're designers making a living at their practice. To my knowledge, radical documentary photography studios like this don’t exist. Why is this the case, and what can be done to find a working model for a sustainable radical photo documentary studio?

Future strategies for designing impact

I do think that significant parts of communication design’s discipline and practice have a lot to offer documentary photography. I also think that documentary photography can crucially contribute to a common strategy with great impact potential. Deep fake technology will dramatically alter our already existing doubts about the documentary mode, as we already constantly wonder what if the real is true. It will both dramatically deepen people’s mistrust in media and enhance media’s manipulative potential. Together with fake news, the self-referentiality of social media and the use of pleasure principles to create surveillance based addictive media, deep fake technology could soon be the greatest challenge facing media democracy.

I believe that a new field of research, education and engagement connecting expanded versions of communication design and documentary photography would have the potential to counter these developments. The way we do design and photography has crucial impact on society. Ontologically speaking, as we design, design us. In the expanded field of documentary photography, the relation to the source of the image is ethically important, and there is still a strong presence of the tendency to do authentic work. A crucial relation between socially responsive communication and authentic work as social practice is that the former aims to create dialogue and/or conditions for dialogue, while the latter is a very product of dialogue.55 And dialogue is the condition for an authentic social relation.54 Here, I'm not interested in the authentic as ‘real’ or ‘true’ but in the sense of ‘being close’. Our directly lived experiences are largely mediated51 on our personal relations increasingly colonised.52 I propose that our examination of the conditions of the production of images as well as the very practice of making and disseminating them needs to include what I call ‘radical intimacies’.53

Italy’s first female photo journalist Letizia Battaglia’s stunning photographic work on the Sicilian mafia transcends mere ‘closeness’ and becomes radical intimacy, as her photographic work fights oppression in ways that completely immerse her everyday life, including personal (love) relations, faith, gender politics and her

48. The self-reflexive practice is a common description referring to practice-based approaches to design/photography. The recent growth of practice-based PhDs, for example, gives some valuable insight. By far the biggest focus of PhD work seems to be on the personal, individual artistic/designers/writers/designers, self-confessed and self-reflexive, and its largely focused on ‘the practice’ or ‘photography or design through a personal self-reflexive expression, interest in what photography or design does in the world’. This is a fundamental difference, which is present also in undergraduate and masters degree. The particular focus is on self reflection, one of the corner stones in the self-reflexive thinking of ‘the practice’ of photography and design as an activity.
50. LOKI. https://www.lokidesign.com/.
The qualities of Battaglia’s photographic practice are close to some of the most important discussions and practices in today’s photographic spheres of design. The discussions focus on a critique of neoliberal capitalism as a form of oppression, using everyday life as the primary sphere of engagement. Such design is oriented towards the local community; it understands itself as relational, subverting the patriarchal and colonial ideologies embedded in dominant design and striving to create dialogue and/or conditions for dialogue. All these are qualities of radical intimacies.

Radical intimacies are dialogic, embedded in everyday life and counter to systems of oppression, specifically neoliberal capitalism. They are communicative and refer to a social practice in the sense that they seek impact beyond the production of visual artefacts. They manifest themselves in the process of production, distribution and reception of images, but understanding that they go beyond representation, ethics is crucial. They are ontological in the sense that they acknowledge design as a general human activity. They are interpersonal, although they can also be mediated. Radical intimacies truly unfold as a practice and methodology when design and photography include friendship, dialogue, pleasure and collaboration as part of their creative processes of making. Radical intimacies build alternative worlds, they create autonomous spaces and occupy places meant for other kinds of relations.

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Today, photographic artists dealing with issues of the social and political world under conditions of increasingly strict ethical criteria. The focus of criticism has shifted from product to process, and the photographer must navigate a field of rights and wrongs. What Claire Bishop coined ‘the social turn’ is prevalent in how a new generation of photographic artists is expected to shape its practices: collaboration over subjectivity, engagement beyond observation, ethics is crucial. They are ontological in the sense that they seek impact beyond the production of visual artefacts. They manifest themselves in the process of production, distribution and reception of images, but understanding that they go beyond representation, ethics is crucial. They are ontological in the sense that they acknowledge design as a general human activity. They are interpersonal, although they can also be mediated. Radical intimacies truly unfold as a practice and methodology when design and photography include friendship, dialogue, pleasure and collaboration as part of their creative processes of making. Radical intimacies build alternative worlds, they create autonomous spaces and occupy places meant for other kinds of relations.

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There is no foreseeable quantitative correlation between the quality of an artwork and its effectiveness. And this is part of its nature because it is intended to open up a field of subjective interactions which are interminable and inmeasurable. This is not to grant an ineffable value; it is only to emphasize that the imagination, when true to its impulse, is contiguously and inevitably questioning the existing category of uselessness.57

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Enrolled in Photography & Society, the new master program at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, we’ve been asked to consider and assess the impact of our work from before we start to after we finish. Immediately, the old slogan of photography coming to mind: photography can make a change. After five decades of academic problematization of photojournalism and documentary photography, one must ask what the aim must be for the distribution of images and information. The word ‘impact’ suddenly pops up everywhere. Through the roof of the art academy in a neoliberal society is an indispensable platform, and the group can take charge of the distribution of images and information. We suddenly realise that the situation is exemplary and one that amplifies our concerns. Here’s a clear demand for images with impact, but how do we make them cannot be up to us. There’s no way we can put forward our own interests here. It is not our struggle, and we conclude, there’s a difference between art and activism. We must first be their supporters, then artists.

Authorial remuneration

Unwinding ourselves from the cloud of cigarette smoke around the table, stepping out into the sun, we feel the uncertainty of the decision we just made. Little do we know how significant this agreement will be for the images we produce in the coming months. Reduction to a minimum our roles as makers, we want to invent a new visual language that will give Fortune and the other members of the group the right and power to decide for themselves how to be represented and to decide upon representation.59 We’re eager to establish a fruitful, non-hierarchical collaboration, but because of its political context, takes on an activist approach. We and the group aim to work towards the common goal of raising more awareness and encouraging dialogue.
imagining otherwise

Chris Becher and Mads Holm

and moralism are waiting for you to stumble into a pitfall, a well-intentioned enterprise can become increasingly delicate. Intimidated in our work with the group, we too easily justify the lack of commitment to aesthetic choices. By underestimating the possibility of creating images that potentially pervert and agitate, we also belittle the fact that tenderness, discomfort and contradiction—together with fear, frustration, exhilaration, pleasure and absurdity—can be central to any work’s aesthetic impact.60 These aspects are quintessential in pushing the audience’s boundaries as well as to the aforementioned framework for promoting new perspectives on the conditions and the image of migration to Europe. In this respect, Frederick Douglass was a leading pioneer in understanding the impactful social power of what in his time was a young medium by realising that “[i]t is evident that the great cheapness and universality of pictures must exert a powerful, though silent, influence upon the idea and sentiment of present and future generations.”61 Thus, images operate as a blueprint for a new terminology and emphasis on spectatorship vs. artistic quality. As a result, he cultivated an artwork—its artistic quality—shouldn’t relinquish itself completely to the reduction of analytical information about target audiences. Even though he argues from a philosophical rather than art-critical perspective, he’s an important figure with regard to unmasking the binary tone that predominates the conversation around politicised art: collectivity vs. subjectivity, process vs. ends, generality vs. specificity, participatory vs. exploitative, performative vs. authoritarian, social effect vs. artistic quality. As a result, he cultivated a new terminology and emphasis on spectatorship: Following this thought, perhaps the most enriching artworks interrogate exactly these dialectic characteristics between art’s authority and social interference by addressing its context, form, conditions of production and reception. Back at the kitchen table in suburban Amsterdam, where the precocious guardians of political correctness and moralism are waiting for you to stumble into the precocious guardians of art’s autonomy and the confidence in art to promote social change and transform social realities. He believes that in order to influence social change, the aesthetic need not be sacrificed. It’s at this intersection where the sensory experience of an artwork—its artistic quality—shouldn’t relinquish itself completely to the reduction of analytical information about target audiences. Even though he argues from a philosophical rather than art-critical perspective, he’s an important figure with regard to unmasking the binary tone that predominates the conversation around politicised art: collectivity vs. subjectivity, process vs. ends, generality vs. specificity, participatory vs. exploitative, performative vs. authoritarian, social effect vs. artistic quality. As a result, he cultivated a new terminology and emphasis on spectatorship: Following this thought, perhaps the most enriching artworks interrogate exactly these dialectic characteristics between art’s authority and social interference by addressing its context, form, conditions of production and reception. Back at the kitchen table in suburban Amsterdam, where the precocious guardians of art’s autonomy and the confidence in art to promote social change and transform social realities. He believes that in order to influence social change, the aesthetic need not be sacrificed.
Amsterdam, all of us share the same vision. However, the challenge is to find a common language to formulate that vision. Spectators, subjects or participants are more than competent in handling different types of approaches striving for more sophisticated narratives of social truth. Otherwise, we’re in danger of art reduced to weaponry.65

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Shadman Shahid

Imagining Otherwise

Reclaiming Political Fires in Bangladesh

Interview Shahidul Alam

Shadman Shahid

Your career as a photographer has now spanned over three decades, during which time you’ve achieved more than most photographers can hope to do in a lifetime. Your career as a photographer has now spanned over three decades, during which time you’ve achieved more than most photographers can hope to do in a lifetime.

Photographer, activist and educator Dr. Shahidul Alam was kidnapped from his home on 5 August 2018 by a group of police officers dressed in plain clothes. He was allegedly spreading ‘false’ news through Facebook and ‘provoking’ during an Al Jazeera interview against the backdrop of student protests for better road safety. skating. The at that time. During the dark, 107-day period he spent in jail, his unjust arrest was met with an overwhelming outcry from the international community of freethinkers and human rights organisations. Students and journalists rallied relentlessly in Bangladesh for his freedom. Eventually, the Goliath that is the Bangladeshi government was forced to give in, and Shahidul’s bail was granted. The case is still ongoing, but it hasn’t deterred him from his quest for a better world. Upon his release, he was named as a Time person of the year, which he can add to the already sparkling list of accolades he’s achieved over the course of his career. Despite that honour, he’ll tell you that the greatest achievement that came out of this ordeal was to make transparent to the entire world the morose state of affairs in Bangladesh. His unbiased and unswerving war on oppression in Bangladesh has been ongoing for decades. I wanted to sit with the veteran warrior to borrow some of his boundless energy and also to talk about his motivations, the shifting landscape of media, the importance of being flexible and how to carry on the good fight in today’s hostile environment.

A combination of both really. During my student days in the U.K., I got involved with the left movements that were taking place at that time. This was in the early 80s, and we were going to street rallies trying to raise public opinion. There, I began to see how photography was being used by others as part of that resistance. Your career as a photographer has now spanned over three decades, during which time you’ve achieved more than most photographers can hope to do in a lifetime.

Of course, photography can be misleading. Any powerful tool can be used in any way, and it’s who handles the tool [who] determines what it will be used for. It was 1990 when Lewis Hine said, ‘While photography may not lie, liars may take photographs.’ I think today liars become presidents, liars become religious leaders, liars own advertising agencies. Even activists can use and abuse photography. I think we need to do is place the weight of credibility upon the source and not the

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We want justice near Aarong

Students demanding justice for fellow students murdered by armed forces, students of Aarong, a cultural centre in Aarong, Rajshahi, a second-generation activist and daughter of Rashed Khan, a former freedom fighter. Students of Science and Commerce were killed on 29th July 2018, when an Ulta-brand bus of “Jabali” rammed into a group of students waiting on the road for transport. Road accidents are a frequent and major source of injuries and death in Bangladesh and a study by the Centre for Health and Development (CHD) estimated that 15% of the people who were killed or injured on the roads and for justice. This photo was taken at the busy intersection of Mirpur Road on 1st August 2018. Photo: Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World

Reclaiming Political Fires in Bangladesh

What I found interesting was that the review talked about the artistry of my work, my composition, the light and the aesthetic elements. [It] never mentioned the message. That got me thinking about how we can be put in little boxes. As if to say, “You can have your art but leave the politics behind.” So it decided that my politics will be embedded within my art. Later on, for my work about the disappearance of Kalpana Chakma (the still missing human rights activist who was abducted from her home in 1996 allegedly by the Bangladesh Army), I responded to the needs of the time. Data was no longer the currency of news, and I needed to find a way to engage with people that simply went beyond providing facts. At an aesthetic level and at an intervention level. We asked questions to the silent witnesses, the people who should have been asked, whose voices should have been heard. The investigations either didn’t ask the right questions or were not giving importance to the people who knew. In the conversations between Kalpana and her abductor, the last argument was about the military setting fire to their villages. I used fire to create the imagery. The fact that she lived a very simple life was evidenced by the straw mat she slept on, so I used them as material to paint the pictures on. The process of production and the material it was made on were all part of the politics of the story. So if you needed to engage with the art, you had to engage with the politics. You couldn’t separate the two.

Nowadays, there is a tremendous competition for the viewer’s attention that photographers need to face. It is a challenge to make the audience look at one’s work, let alone having a lasting effect on them. Yet you continue to make an impact on society. What tactics should photographers use in order to remain cogent in today’s society?

I think today you have a more sophisticated audience who are used to seeing imagery in different forms through various platforms. It is a much more complex situation where international trade and international recognition are crucial aspects, and mobilising global support is of the utmost importance. Technology plays a massive part, both in terms of what the government does and how you resist. You have to create work that can play in many levels: social media, street and public exhibits, fine art galleries and international publications. You might need to tweak your work to fit the platform.

medium. Yes, photographs may or may not lie, but it is the credibility of the source that determines whether the photograph is to be believed or not. Credibility is not something that comes from above. It has to be earned and legitimised. But I think it’s positive because I don’t accept that people should believe in the content solely based on the medium it comes from. They should question on all levels. They should question the credibility and the intention of the source.

When one looks at your body of work, what stands out is your willingness to be flexible. Your strategies of using photography as a tool for resistance constantly change and expand with the needs of the time. I’m curious to know how and why your works have evolved, but let’s start in the late 80s: the final days of the authoritarian rule of General Hussain Muhammad Ershad. The turmoil surrounding the fight for democracy in Bangladesh was at its peak, and it was closer to the beginning of your career. What shape did your methodology take during that era?

Of course, flexibility is vital. You must adapt yourself to the condition that you are in. During Ershad’s time, the way to get photographs out there was through conventional media outlets and newspapers. Therefore, the vocabulary that you used needed to be suitable for those outlets and the audience of that time. To give you a practical example, the work I had done during the last years of Ershad’s reign—I had juxtaposed images from a wedding of a minister’s daughter with the images of the floods that happened then. It was an attempt to show the divide between the rich and the poor and question the role of the government in dealing with the victims of the flood. It was a very literal sort of expression. It worked at that time. When I submitted my work for the Mother Jones photography award, I had included my open letter to the prime minister as part of the photo essay. So I was not only relying on the photographs but also political intervention. In the letter, I had mentioned the gagging of the media, discussing censorship among other things.

I remember you telling me that when you exhibited the work in 1989, the show was reviewed by the magazine that was owned by the wife of the minister you were criticising. And I found that fascinating. Here is the minister that you question through your work, and this magazine that his wife runs was talking about it. And if I remember correctly, the review was a positive one. Did that surprise you or have an effect on your latter works?

Kalpana’s Warriors exhibition opening at Dhaka Gallery

From left to right: Taslima Anieter, Shahidul Alam and Anisminmal Chak at the opening of the show “Kalpana’s Warriors” at Drik Gallery on the 12th June 2015, marking the 10th year of the disappearance of indigenous activist and general secretary of the Hill民族 Party RENU Chakma. Photograph: Habibul Haque/Drik
Technology is being used to repress as well. In Bangladesh, it is a risk for someone like you to carry your mobile around because the government might be listening to what you are saying through your mobile, or it has the capacity to track your movements. Western governments have been largely indifferent to this new form of repression in countries like Bangladesh and even provide the surveillance technology to these countries in some instances. Why do you think that is?

Bangladesh being allowed to get away with repression also has to do with what Bangladesh delivers to other countries. While Bangladesh can contain the Rohingya refugees and on the face of it can help out in the War on Terror, they will ignore human rights transgressions, they will ignore stolen elections, they will ignore the many, many other things that are wrong. Because it is convenient for them to have someone who delivers on their needs. What happens to Bangladesh? They will provide lip service for that, but I don't believe they will actually do anything.

You have always encouraged your students to be smart and not to perish in the act of resisting so that they can fight another day. But given the state of freedom of speech in today's world, especially in the global south, or the ‘Majority World’, as you call it, do you think young photographers now can express themselves freely without being persecuted?

I have better words to define it now: ‘martyrs don’t make good reporters.’

Firstly, you have to build a network. Most young photographers nowadays understand the value of having a good network in terms of their professional career, but you also have to understand the importance of having a strong support system around you. One of the reasons I could get away with the things I said through my work—I mean the case still hangs against me, but I am out and I continue to say what I have said before—was because there was such a passionate movement internationally and in Bangladesh. We were able to do that because of the work that I have done over thirty-five years and the friends that I have made during that time. Of course, this doesn’t happen overnight, but I think each of us needs to create that support structure. You need to build a community you can rely upon and strategic alliances that go beyond your immediate perimeter. But you also have to act smart. At the end of the day, banging away at the problem is not the answer. You have to find ways to get under their skin. You have to find cracks that you seep through, and it’s guerrilla warfare. Big power structures have more money, have more muscle, than we do, but they are also slower, less nimble and not able to get into the spaces we can get into. And I think we need to recognise our own strengths and turn it around.

Shadman Shahid

The resilience of the average Bangladeshi is remarkable. As this woman waded through the flood waters in Kamalapur to get to work, there was a photographic studio “Dreamland Photographers”, which was open for business. Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1988. Photo: Shahidul Alam/Drik/ Majority World
Antwerpen
Alberto García del Castillo

The summer of 2018. I sit with Caroline Vincart at the café of the Photo Museum of Antwerp (FOMU) in Belgium. Caroline is curator at the museum. She’s showing me some photos from the museum’s collection, which are vaguely dated to the 1940s. I’m looking at a portrait of a cross-dresser, as I must call the model and photographer, as the photos cannot show me how they identified. I’m following the museum’s guide to Antwerp and I’ve asked for more information on Antwerp’s photos. When I show them to the museum, they tell me she’s recently shared a selection of six of the museum’s photos with curator Martínez at the Pink Art Fairs Festival. They were gathering material from FOMU’s collection to publish during a take-over of the museum. The caption of the Instagram post repeats some of the information that Caroline just gave me. It says, “Christoph Ruys found these diapositives in 2009 on [in] a Flemish flea market. The man in the picture is known as ‘Antwerpen’ from Ghent.”

Caroline and I finish lunch. I tell her that my main concern is the lack of information on how the museum acquired Antwerpen’s photos for its collection, and later exhibited and published them. We agree to stay in contact, and I leave Antwerp to go back home to Brussels.

I return to the museum in the summer of 2019. It’s taken a year to be called back—the time I’m in Antwerp, we want the information for the writing of this story, which FOMU has commissioned. I meet with a member of the museum’s staff to expand on the little information on Antwerpen’s photos that Caroline gave me last year. How did Christoph get the photos? Well, probably the flea market story, but not sure. This is the information circulating at the museum. And the article in Fias? The staff member vaguely remembers sending the photos.

I email Jill Mathieu, the author of the text in Fias. My message contains this question: “Your text is very short but it includes the phrase ‘No record of this article’ and there seems to be no record of this article of 2010 photos published in a magazine called ‘Photography Inc.’ so I assume you’re not sure if your text is correct. I should be clear that the photos at the Café of the Photo Museum of Antwerp are people wearing nothing at all and ‘cross-dressers.’ This, Juliet writes, is because the roof of those people identifying him another one, and I’m also being shown other photos by Antwerpen, tightened around Antwerpen’s waist with belts. I wear, or chequered or violet, which are loose or stripe, or a coat, or a straw hat or dresses, which are elegant and gracious.”

Belgian, “transsexual,” a “serial killer” and “pervert” and a “degenerate” in the written text. Queta is a happy modern woman, but Enrique is described with “disgust.” Claudia is “glamorous,” whereas David is an “invert,” participating in an “orgy.” What is Cemorito? Is the criminalization of molesting, which makes of them an abject, feminized (and desired) other.

I ask the staff member about the Photography Inc. exhibition and they share the catalogue with me. Curated by Camille Berghmans and Koen Lagae, the show was supposed to concern with how photographic technologies have altered the practice of photography over time, and vice versa. It presented parts of the museum’s collections of photos, photographic equipment, and manuscripts. When reading the catalogue, I notice an effort to divide the act of taking photos into two: amateur and professional. In the same catalogue I see some of Antwerp’s photos described as “a photo album with self and family, a ‘snapshot.’” Especially those taken within the chapter ‘You Press The Button, You Do The Rest: The True Democratization of Photography.’ Antwerp’s photos are printed in total, was published in a monographic book, and there was probably a short article published there.

So you got these pictures and kept them private for a while?

Yes. Although at the time I was publishing a magazine titled Obscura, and there was probably a

What are you saying to us?

What was so weird?

Antwerp
Caroline has arranged a meeting with Christoph in a hotel lobby in Ghent. The room is furnished with green and brown sofas and armchairs. There are tourist city guides and other leisure publications spread over our coffee table.

Antwerp’s crime is to deceive. They deceive you. This is a term used by transgender people from Susana Vargas Cervantes. In her 1945 essay and book Mujercitos, Susana looks at photos of mujercitos (effeminate men) who were transvesting and posing as a performative act of taking control of their images when photographed for the Mexican true-crime magazine Alarma (between 1930 and 1963). During those years, the tabloid published hundreds of stories about mujercitos being murdered, arrested in these clubs, or behind police stations. In most of them, mujercitos are posed provocatively and anaglyphic for the camera. Susana writes, “It’s never clear from the photographs and written stories in Alarma why the mujercitos have been detained, or if they are in a police station. But what seems to be clear from their criminalization for ‘deceiving.’ . . . Thus, Lorena is described as a ‘real female who awakens the admiration of whoever sees her walking by, so elegant and gracious.” But Alejandro Sánchez (Lorena’s given name at birth) is described as a “pervert” and a “degenerate” in the written text. Queta is a happy modern woman, but Enrique is described with “disgust.” Claudia is “glamorous,” whereas David is an “invert,” participating in an “orgy.” What is criminalized is the mujercitos failure of masculinity, which makes of them an abject, feminized (and desired) other.

Thank you to Bat Sheva Ross and Marnie Slater for reading early drafts of this text.

Q

When did this happen?

A

I think it had to be 1995 or 1994.

Q

So you got these pictures and kept them private for a while?

A

Yes. Although at the time I was publishing a magazine titled Obscura, and there was probably a short article published there.

Q

Yes, a selection of [Antwerpen]’s photos, 36 in total, was published in a monographic issue of Obscura in 1999 under the title ‘Your Eyes Degenerating, as頓you pretending [about Repetition as Counter Image].’ What led you to publish an issue on [Antwerpen]’s photos?

A

Well, versacigraphic photography was a very, very big issue at the end of the 1990s. And I thought that we had the most interesting collection, because it was so weird.

Q

What was so weird?

A

It’s a very, very big issue at the end of the 1990s. And I thought that we had the most interesting collection, because it was so weird.
Well, it was weird because we didn’t find any information from [Antwerpen] explaining why he made this collection of photos. And also the repetitiveness of the images interested me, as indicated in the title ‘About Repetition as Counter Image.’ There was repetition in most of the collections we saw at the time, but this is different in the way [Antwerpen] looks at the camera. I’ll tell you that there was once a project to print the whole series of [Antwerpen]’s photos in the form of a book. I remember that there was a suggestion to title it Small History of Photography, because this series contains a lot of key topics in the history of photography: the self-portrait for example, or the still life, or, again, repetition.

Apart from their amateurism and repetitiveness, cross-dressing appears to me as a relevant theme in the photos. Was that ever apparent to you?

I didn’t consider it as a specific theme at that moment.

But that was never...

No. Because at the end of the ’90s—it’s important to think about this in that context—when we, the editorial team of Obscure, thought about cross-dressing and that kind of thing, we thought about extravagance. Not about this very sober style. We knew the work of Nan Goldin, so it’s not that we didn’t know the theme, but we didn’t connect it with [Antwerpen]’s photos.

You were the director of the Photo Museum of Antwerp from 2003 to 2009. It’d seem that the photos were not shown or published within that period.

No. But in 2008 I had the project to make an exhibition of Louis Paul Boon’s collection of images Femme-toile Feminaire. He’s a Belgian writer who’d been collecting photos of women from magazines and all other types of sources. I wanted to show this collection in the museum for its relevance in the practice of amateur archiving. And I had the idea to combine it with a small exhibition of [Antwerpen]’s photos, not because of what they depict but to present another example of amateur gathering and classification of images. But the project never occurred because the board of the museum was at the time composed of politicians who saw Louis Paul’s images as immoral, especially those of very young women. I never intended to show photos of underage women though. There was a commotion all over the press. I left the museum at that time because of this kind of political interference, which had never happened before.

Gender appears central to both exhibition projects, but you never wanted to make that connection?

No, the connection was collecting and archiving.

Was it during the exhibition project process that you decided to donate [Antwerpen]’s photos to the museum?

Yes, the librarian at the time, Luc Salu, was very fond of them and included them in the library’s catalogue.

Was there at the time any policy in the museum concerning the copyright of found photos?

Yes, there was. But we didn’t talk it through because at the time there was no urge or need to do it. Luc always said that in a way they belonged to me. The author was dead and we’d never met any family member, so we didn’t go any further than that.

It seems surprising that there is no information attached to [Antwerpen]’s photos in the museum. Did you donate them as is, without any other documents?

Yes, in a box.

Did you ever think about leaving a document explaining the story that you just told me about how the photos got to you?

Yes, if they’d been exhibited, eventually then I would’ve done it. It would’ve been nice to write about
So this story was known orally between the museum’s staff and then it was lost?

A It has its own logic. I think in a way people working there now are more eager to know this kind of thing. At the time it was all about art photography, and there was a huge discussion on whether we had to show all kinds of photography or not. I thought we had to. We worked with the money of taxpayers, so my opinion was that all kinds of photography had to be shown. Also, amateur photography is closely related to the origins of photography, more than the artistic format.

Q Did the museum have a section of LGBTQIA+ photography?

A We had a lot of the information but not specifically from that point of view. We also bought a lot of books by gay and lesbian photographers because we thought that their work was good. That was the first reason, more than their personal sexual orientation.

Q You never thought that the museum had to document a history of LGBTQIA+ activism and lives?

A No. But if you’d asked for the famous photographers of that time, there were certainly books in the library. This is because the mission of the museum was to acquire collections from Belgian photographers, and newspaper collections, like the one of the Gazet van Antwerpen and others.

Q And you never looked at [Antwerpen’s] photos as queer photography? Your curators, the team of the museum… they never said these photos were queer documents?

A No. But also I have to admit that at the end of the 1990s queer wasn’t like it is now. It wasn’t an issue. Don’t get me wrong. It’s not part of my culture, it wasn’t part of the culture of anyone involved in Obscuur, and it wasn’t a part of the culture we worked in at that time either.

That time? What time? Straight time!

For ten years, those behind Obscuur magazine and the Photo Museum of Antwerp have shown Antwerpen’s photos as exemplary documents of amateur photography and self-portraiture.

Antwerpen was never around.

Nobody asked them.

Nobody spoke about cross-dressing.

They were too busy making fun of it.

‘you think Oscar Wilde was funny / well Darling I think he was busy / distracting straight people / so they would not kill him’

CAConrad wrote this in 2018 in the poem ‘Glitter In My Wounds.’

Thanks for the poems.

I can’t know how Antwerpen identified.

I’ve chosen not to show their photos here.

I can’t know what they wanted to do with them.

It could be that Antwerpen wasn’t part of a queer community—this isn’t certain.

But we are.

In Lille, France, Sœur Dide, a member of the international order and activist group The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, once told me, ‘Après avoir souffert d’une agression, nous les transpédéguines pouvons faire plein de choses avec nos sentiments, l’activisme et l’expression artistique en sont deux bons exemples’ (After being attacked, us transfagdykes can do many things with our feelings: activism and artistic expression are two good examples).

Merci.

Us transfagdykes can do a lot of things with our feelings.

We can tell stories in museums of photography.

Readers and audiences have insistently been told to look at Antwerpen alone, erasing the lineage of a ‘whole motley crew of artists, actors, writers, and drag queens and other sexual deviants [who] worked on one another’s projects and generally found mutual inspiration in a shared countercultural milieu. And they inhabited and helped make a world beyond their aesthetic endeavors, a world that devised innumerable means of resisting the forces of conformity and repression with radical hilarity, perverse pleasure, defiant solidarity—a truly queer world.’

This is a quote from Douglas Crimp’s essay ‘Getting the Warhol We Deserve,’ that appeared in Social Text in 1999.

I can’t know if Antwerpen felt close to a queer lineage but I know that it’s irresponsible to look at their photos outside of a history of cross-dressing culture and politics.

The choice is between cross-dressing politics and non-cross-dressing politics.

There isn’t culture full stop and then cross-dressing culture.

The first-ever cross-dresser made everyone else a line-dresser.

This is about looking at Antwerpen’s photos long after that day when the first-ever cross-dresser...

Antwerpen’s photos have been used to delete gender and sexual dissidence and queer activism and art.

People… they’ve been used to delete people.

When first posted as queer photos on Instagram, they were to carry the burden of years of straight false framing.

They were said to have been found in a flea market!

It makes no sense.

It’s nonsense.


Ocaña was an Andalusian, anarchist, artist and transvestite who lived in Barcelona, Catalonia.

Ocaña was notorious for making artistic and activist performance work during Spain’s political regime shift—from a fascist dictatorship to a parliamentary monarchy—in the 1970s and 1980s.
Antwerpen's photos have been used to delete Ocaña. Paul writes, ‘Ocaña’s performative feminization, which met with mistrust both in the left and amongst homosexual movements, was not only a satirical reference to bourgeois and national Catholic female models (wife, mother, virgin) but also the exaltation of marginal figures such as mad women, tomboys, spinsters, widows, invalids, southern women, sinful saints, orphan girls, hunchbacks, outcasts, whores, dykes… Ocaña’s performance embodied all these subordinate biopo- litical figures. By theatralizing them, he did not represent them (in the political or even metaphorical sense of the word); rather, he brought them to life, embodied them, produced them, activated them as somatic fictions and at the same time affirmed them as not only ghosts in history (invisible bodies with no discourse or agency of their own) but also as lines of flight through which life evades biopolitical control.’

Do you believe in ghosts?

They’re just like living people, only a bit transparent.

This is Jacinta’s idea. Jacinta is a character in the latest Almodóvar film.

My friend Marnie Slater is a living person.

This morning I told her about Jacinta.

Marnie told me how Chris Kraus said in a public talk that the question of genre is not important to her, but that literary tradition is incredibly important.

That’s it.

We got it.

The dismissal of considering Antwerpen’s photos along the tradition of cross-dressing erases the countercultural agency of yesterday and today’s cross-dressers.

Antwerpen’s photos have been used to delete gender and sexual dissidence, queer people, living, and queer activism.

I can’t know how Antwerpen identified.

But.

We’re here.

As for acting as the model.

Dr. Paul Julien (NL, 1907-2006) was a trained chemist, a largely self-made anthropologist and an ‘explorer’ who travelled through fourteen different countries in sub-Saharan Africa between 1932 and 1976.66 The Netherlands Photo- museum currently holds a collection of 20,000 of his photographs. A significant number of them, including 151 black and white negatives and autotypes, gumn colour slides, 16x9 and 6x6 black and white negatives as well as lanternslides and vernacular prints, concern his journeys on the African continent. Julien produced his photographs in the service of science, but portraits of the people he met on his journeys were also used to illustrate interviews that were primarily concerned with Julien himself. Currently, Julien’s photographic legacy is considered to be of more importance than the outcomes of his scientific research.67 However, he did not only ‘collect the world’ in photographs’ but also produced ‘statistical data’ in the form of the measurements of physical features, blood samples and fingerprints, which supposedly contributed to the understanding of the spread and even the origin of humanity.68

Since 2011, I’ve been working with Julien’s photographs under the premise that it’s impossible to understand what we see without consulting the people whose world wasdepicted. I’ve taken up the responsibility ofactivating the collection with stakeholders from the places Julien visited, including the descendents of people who appear in the photographs, as well as artists and designers who currently contribute to the production of the visibility and imagination of future histories. The idea is that this will offer a road of the photographs beyond the context Julien gave them so we can then reconsider their value for both ‘African’ and ‘Western’ audiences. In a series of illustrated letters, I tell Julien about my actions and share my thoughts as they develop. This format allows me to maneuver from speculating about Julien’s intentions and actions to reflecting on the potential value and meaning of his photographs could have in the present, as well as the effects of the way I deal with my self-appointed responsibility to work with this legacy. This is the third letter in an open ended ‘correspondence’.69 Two translated text fragments, which shed light on Julien’s practice, precede this letter that speaks of both recent and more distant encounters in which the impact—in terms of both effects and responsibilities—of my and Julien’s actions emerge in rather problematic and, for now, unresolved ways.

A Letter to Dr. Paul Julien.

Pondering the Photographic Legacy of a Dutch ‘Explorer of Africa’

Andrea Stultiens

66 Scene spots are used in this text with a number that I would rather avoid, then this may confuse the reader as there is a confusion from the way the story was told.

67 Julien’s photographic legacy and the discussion of Julien’s Canaries expedition is currently under discussion in the case of the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam.

68 In the film ‘A Cigarette’ and elsewhere, Julien speaks of art as the starting point of his work on the African continent. This refers to his journey to Northern Africa.

69 In the ‘Letter to Julien’ and elsewhere, this is the one means I have of connecting as an academic researcher to Julien’s legacies. Julien’s work was never publicized and I’ve seen no photographs that were published on the web during his lifetime. If you have any knowledge of this, please contact me via julien.caris@asu.edu.au.

The photographs are owned by the Photothek in Amsterdam. I would like to thank them for their generous support.

70 A Letter to Dr. Paul Julien...

71 Andrea Stultiens...
Dear Dr. Julien,

Sixty-four years after you briefly visited this town on your way to South Western Ethiopia, I am in Addis Ababa. Yesterday, I visited Igne Taitu Hotel, where you spent your first nights in the country. I brought a print of the Kodachrome slide you made of the accommodation. The host I met was surprised to see how much has changed since 1932. He showed me where you once stood, looking down towards the building behind the restaurant and the tennis court on its right. A banner and a truck now blocked the view. The tennis court, the host informed me, was long gone. Meanwhile, time seemed to have stood still in the restaurant itself. While enjoying my lunch, it was easy to imagine you coming down the stairs at any moment.

While I type this letter on my computer, a documentary titled The Great Hack is playing on the television set of my host, artist Michael Tiegaye. This film addresses the theft of personal data shared on the internet, a phenomenon you may remember emerging in the late 1990s. The stolen data was used to influence national elections without the ‘provider’ being aware of it. You, too, collected data from individuals you interviewed, without their consent. This, therefore, seems to be an appropriate moment to share some thoughts with you about the relationship between our respective actions and the effects our actions had and could have. In other words, this letter is about impact.

Last Monday, I did a presentation for a group of Ethiopian photographers and designers. After speaking about my way of working, I showed them the photographs and films you produced here. I added translated information from your notebook and from newspaper clippings reporting on a public lecture titled Shankala. This film addresses the theft of personal data shared on the internet, a phenomenon you may remember emerging in the late 1990s. The stolen data was used to influence national elections without the ‘provider’ being aware of it. You, too, collected data from individuals you encountered on your journeys without their informed consent. This, therefore, seems to be an appropriate moment to share some thoughts with you about the relationship between our respective actions and the effects our actions had and could have. In other words, this letter is about impact.

While I type this letter on my computer, a documentary titled The Great Hack is playing on the television set of my host, artist Michael Tiegaye. This film addresses the theft of personal data shared on the internet, a phenomenon you may remember emerging in the late 1990s. The stolen data was used to influence national elections without the ‘provider’ being aware of it. You, too, collected data from individuals you interviewed, without their consent. This, therefore, seems to be an appropriate moment to share some thoughts with you about the relationship between our respective actions and the effects our actions had and could have. In other words, this letter is about impact.

It was not the first time I encountered this kind of response to the work I, as a White European, do on the African continent or to the historical materials I bring to the table. I take this to be a reply to the privileged positions that both of us have and use to ‘take’ whatever it is we need before leaving again. This observation could result in a dismissal of ‘your’ photographs because it reduces their meaning to your position as a maker. Such a judgment, however, also dismisses the possible agency and relevance of the visibility of the people, places and objects you photographed. It eliminates the potential impact of the accessibility of the photographs for them as it does the possibility for people in ‘the West’ to learn from them. In order for this potential to unfold, I take it as my responsibility to explain the purpose of my visit to whoever I encounter and work with. This may lead to uncomfortable situations, as was the case with the person I offended, despite my attempts to carefully position my words. It cannot, however, result in my being less honest about my intentions. Which reminds me of a question. In your writing, you repeatedly mention how the ‘natives’ you met were rude, primitive or dishonest. Did it ever occur to you that they might have rightfully thought the same of you?

With regards to your first major scientific expedition in 1932, I have a more particular but related concern. In July 2014, I was in Liberia for the third time. During earlier visits, I followed the same route you travelled eighty-two years earlier. I visited, as I mentioned in the previous letter, descendants of King Kwesi Dokie and prepared an exhibition of your photographs in the National Museum in Monrovia that was then about to open. Ebola, at the time a deadly and highly contagious virus, had been raging through the region for a couple of months. The crisis related to it reached a new height in the week before the planned exhibition opening. I was invited to speak about the show during the weekly governmental press conference of which Ebola was, of course, the major topic. After providing journalists with numerous facts about the virus, the minister of health addressed the people of Liberia directly through the microphones and cameras in the room: ‘You should not be afraid of the health workers, because they too get sick.’ I doubted what my ears had heard. As if aware of my incredulity, the minister repeated the remark several times. Then I remembered reading an anecdote in which the population of Gbarnga Red town because of the way in which the district commissioner had communicated the purpose of your visit. It occurred to me that the minister’s remark could’ve been part of a damage control strategy related to the actions of people like you, who through their practice generated a distance between ‘the sick’ and those coming from elsewhere to treat (and research) them. Is it possible that you contributed to the ‘fear-related behaviour’ the minister responded to? Would you do things differently now?

And also, going back to a more general concern about impact, would it make sense for you to be decentered from the meaning and value of the photographs you produced? This question and the others asked earlier will stay with me as I work my way towards the next letter.

With best regards,

Andrea

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Addis Ababa, Wednesday, 7 August 2019

42 A Letter to Dr. Paul Julien

43 Andrea Stultiens

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Pajou colour slide box 6 (Inge Taitu Hotel, August 1932). Collection Nederlands Fotomuseum.

Illustration (based on negative filed as PJU-656 exposure 21) with the quote from New Britain market of Gbarnga, Liberia, August 1932. Collection Nederlands Fotomuseum.

The interpreter of Mr. Ross (on the far right of the photograph) addressed the people at the market of Dzanga, Liberia, August 1932. Collection Nederlands Fotomuseum.
P.S. I almost forgot. Yesterday, I came across the first proof of your presence on the African continent from a perspective other than your own. Johan Helland, an emeritus anthropologist specialising in issues concerning the Horn of Africa, replied to the message I sent him. He was the eight-year-old son of the Norwegian family with whom you spent a night in Southern Ethiopia. He recognised all the adults in a group portrait I attached to my words. You took the picture at the mission in Neghelle. Johan does not remember you himself but recalls his mother mentioning an anthropologist who was on his way to research ‘pygmies’ and visit Lake Stephanie.

* * * * *

The encounters generated by my engagement with Julien’s legacy continuously make me aware of certain privileges I ‘enjoy’ as a White woman, such as freedom of movement and access to resources. They also bring up the relativity of my rather specific expertise as an artist and researcher educated in the Netherlands. Little can be taken for granted when it comes to, for instance, the benefits of ‘Western’ healthcare or the ethnic categorisation of people. Spending time with Julien’s photographs where they were produced decades ago leads, time and again, to experiences that make it possible to connect particular narratives to photographs that were, so far, framed from an ideologically coloured outsider’s perspective. These experiences and narratives have the potential to expand existing ideas of ‘African’ pasts and presents for audiences both on the African continent and elsewhere. For this to be possible, they have to be presented in ways that are open-ended and inclusive of the multiple perspectives related to Julien’s legacy.
The Impact of the White, Male Gaze

Andrew Jackson and Savannah Dodd

The origins of photography coincide with two important moments in history: positivism and colonialism. The colonial lens of photography, that photographs must represent the truth, comes as a way to positivist colonial modernity in which the camera was born. In the nineteenth century, seeing really was believing, and scientific knowledge was restricted to that which was observable and reproducible. The camera was therefore used as a scientific instrument tasked with capturing an accurate objective and truthful representation of the world.

The camera is also intrinsically linked to the colonial project. Photography has acted as an instrument of colonialism since its inception, beginning with the photographic application to anthropometry and intimately connected to acts of appropriation and objectification. These uses of photography, combined with the belief in photographs as true and objective representations of reality, underpinned and validated the colonial project in a way that other arts, like painting or drawing, could not.

That most if not all people believe every photograph appearing before them to be a truthful representation of its subject causes serious social issues. Photographs, like other forms of representation, was and is a social practice whose connotations were often used to delegitimize cultural ideas and contracts. … During colonialism, photography played a specific role in validating cultural ideas, justifying colonialization, advertised empire, and represented different peoples and cultures. That role led to the internalized and racialized discourse of Euro-American superiority.

Within any historical overview of photojournalism, it’s clear that colonial legacy has continued to dictate how the world is represented. Even the way that Africa is described today by industry professionals reveals how imbedded colonialism is in the institutions that govern our media. In a now infamous job ad for Nairobi Bureau Chief at the International Herald Tribune, the phrase “attracts a journalist able to continue its master narrative” was the first and last sentence of the job post. Although the job ad was not representative of the institutionalized perpetuation of a colonialist trope, it is a paradigmatic example of the institutionalized perpetuation of a colonialist paradigm.


If representations are to be seen as reliable and truthful, they have to be presented to us in ways which we already presume them to be. In the context of the colonial ideology, Mabry’s ad, then, doesn’t really just that of a Nairobi bureau chief; it’s an ad for a professional perpetuating a colonial narrative. This is how stereotypes are constructed, maintained and continued.

If the percentage of female participants is so low that we are only a few Black or female photographers, then that means that no more than 20 Black women participated over a four-year period.

Let us be clear: this does not mean that there are only a few Black or female photographers. Instead, this makes it clear that Black, female and other marginalised photographers haven’t been represented, or that we need to produce photographs in the same way that White men have. This becomes evident when we look at the discrepancy in the representation of women in the industry at different stages in their career. As Carmen Mustard states succinctly: ‘Female photographers are underrepresented in World Press Photo competitions’.

The danger herein cannot be overstated. Photographs shape how we understand the world. They can confirm our prejudices or break them down. When the images we consume replicate patriarchal or colonialist tropes, these tropes become further embedded in our collective conscience.

The Under, White, male gaze, women are fetishised

The determining male gaze projects itself onto the female image which is stylized accordingly. In their critical lens, photographic images of women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to constitute ‘to-be-looked-at-ness.’

Impacts of a dominant gaze

We’ve explained in this article that photojournalism has carried into the present two critical characteristics from its birth in the nineteenth century: a collective imperative to show the dead and the dying, even when those suffering bodies are just across town, down the street, right next door.

African photographers and, to extrapolate further, photographers of colour in general, via their adherence to these canons, exhibit and replicate the male ways of seeing and being in the world, just like their White counterparts. Similarly, women photographers are forced to replicate the male ways of seeing and being in the world they have come to constitute ‘good’ photography.

Upon the announcement that the White finalists of the 2018 Taylor Wessing Portrait Prize had all produced portraits that are White males, exhibit and replicate the very same form of Orientalism within their photographs, creating images which objectify and victimise just like their White counterparts.
The Impact of the White, Male Gaze
Andrew Jackson and Savannah Dodd

Amy sleeping, Dudley, England

Hand #1 Kingston, Jamaica

Outside the house where Amy lived, Kingston, Jamaica

Sea #1 Montego Bay, Jamaica
These representations effectively serve to enshy racism and sexism. They do not create empathy with the viewer, they subjugate women and place Black bodies away from any notion of the perceived normality reserved for Whiteness in our visual landscape.

On the other hand, Tara Penley points out that it’s the humanised images—images like ‘peaceful protesting en masse and black communities working harmoniously’—that ‘evoke[s] empathy rather than a paternalistic sympathy.’ When there’s a dearth of these kinds of images, we’re left with an empathy gap, or an inability to relate to or understand individuals with different lived experiences.

Photographic representations do not only shape how we understand others; they also shape how we understand ourselves. Daniella Zalcman wrote that “The way others see us, and the way we see ourselves, are not always aligned.” Therefore, there are consequences when others are responsible for constructing our image in the media:

Photographs don’t just tell us stories, they tell us how to see. So when representations of womanhood, the female body or femininity are largely constructed by men, it’s not just that they define us, they teach us how to see ourselves.96

Photojournalistic tropes can even shape the trajectory of our lives. Leigh Donalson wrote that “The way others see us, and the way we see ourselves, are not always aligned.” Therefore, there are consequences when others are responsible for constructing our image in the media:

…negative mass media portrayals were strongly linked with lower life expectations among Black men. These portrayals, constantly reinforced in print media, on television, the internet, fiction shows, print advertising and video games, shape public views of and attitudes toward men of colour. They not only help create barriers to advancement within our society, but also ‘make these positions seem natural and inevitable’.98

Just as important as the impact of how subjects are represented is the impact of when subjects are not represented at all. What are the consequences of not seeing yourself represented? How does this affect someone’s sense of belonging, their ability to express themselves to other members of their society and their own self-image? Robin R. Means Coleman explains that these omissions are not a kind of stereotype, as stereotypes ‘actively signify that which is present and identifiable, not a kind of stereotype, as stereotypes “actively signify that which is present and identifiable, not a kind of stereotype, as stereotypes”.

Within his rule as a World Press Photo judge in 2009, Stephen Mayes asked the question: “What is journalism if it doesn’t inform but merely repeats and affirms?” However, a lot has changed in ten years. The immediacy of social media and the accessibility of the camera has meant that photojournalism is no longer the domain of an elite few. As Margaret Simons explains: “Today, just about anyone with an internet connection and a social media account has the capacity to publish news and views to the world. This is new in human history.”99

This democratisation is a critical step towards a photojournalism that reflects the diverse range of narratives that exist in the world. This comes with a responsibility for photographers to recognise that not every story is there to tell and to reflect on the question: am I the best-placed person to tell this story? If the answer is ‘no’, then perhaps there are other ways of enabling those who are best placed, for example by seeking out photographers from the community in question or by facilitating participatory photography practices. But diversity in storytelling is not enough.

As we have explained, even some marginalised photographers have internalised and reproduced the same perspectives and stories. Therefore, we need to actively interrogate the messages our photographs are sending, what tropes they invoke, the harm they do and what stereotypes they rely on. We do this by heightening our sensitivity to the visual language we employ, recognising that aesthetic choices are not benign. These choices carry with them their own coded messages that have the power to either reproduce or subvert stereotypes. Going back to the words of John Edwin Mason, we need to challenge cultural flows. We need to redefine the visual language of photojournalism if we are to subvert the White, male gaze and its ways of seeing in the world.
This marriage had been made possible by the development and mass production of new camera and cycle technologies, which began in the 1870s and included dry plates, thanks to which photographers no longer needed to attend to glass plates immediately before and after exposure, and tricycles and quadricycles, three- and four-wheeled machines safer and more practical than the high-wheeler favoured for racing events. George Vincent had entered the market in 1884, a tricycle with a camera mounted just underneath glass plates used, it could’ve weighed between no small feat: camera equipment was still heavy and bulky and laborious. Photography and cycling—particularly tricycling—are, and must always be, most intimate associates, another commented the following year.

What this combination entailed, however, was no small feat: camera equipment was still heavy and fragile (depending on the size and number of glass plates used, it could’ve weighed between 5 and 14 kilograms), and the cycling machines were rather bulky and laborious. Figure 1, which shows a tricycle with a camera mounted just underneath the saddle between the two big wheels, offers an illustration of such a precarious arrangement. The saddle holders carrying negative paper patented by George Eastman had entered the market in 1884, followed in 1885 by the ‘safety’ bicycle, a machine with two same-size wheels similar to today’s bicycles. Nonetheless, until the second half of the 1890s, the majority of upper- and middle-class photographers, the only group who could realistically afford both technologies, continued to prefer glass plates over film because of their clear definition and sensitiveness, fundamental to a class that sought to demonstrate artistic value as a marker of respectability. Consequently, they continued to ride tricycles and quadricycles to transport this material.

As contemporary accounts reveal, a key reason photographers were undeterred by these difficulties was that the self-propelled vehicle afforded the freedom to travel where and when one liked, and thus to find more subjects to photograph. The front cover of Amateur Photographer’s bounded volume for 1885 (figure 2), which shows a couple riding a tandem quadricycle by a shore and a camera mounted on a tripod in the foreground (the suggestion being that this is the camera the couple secures to the back wheel), is indeed about visual and mobile independence: a location off the main tourist sites and a camera positioned to capture what’s found therein. The photographs of a man standing next to a sociable quadricycle on an unidentified country road (figure 3) and that of a woman sitting on the same model in what appears to be a rural hamlet (figure 4) were perhaps taken to demonstrate that they had reached a location un frequented by the masses.

This engagement with technology, however, did more than simply expand one’s field of action. Most importantly, it impacted on how people experienced the landscape they rode through and, consequently, how they thought of themselves and their visual experiences. At this time, body-machine interactions were central in the photographic discourse. In the context of widespread industrialisation, for example, technology was seen by some as hindering the human body (e.g., William Morris’s view that it ‘reduce[d] the skilled labourer to the ranks of the unskilled’), while others saw it as extending the body’s capabilities (e.g., Henry Ford’s comparison of the worker’s body to the assembly line). For its part, cycling was considered by those who practised it to be a splendid extension of the body. In this sense, we could think of these early camera and cycle combinations as a prosthetic technology experienced by its users as an augmentation their bodily capabilities and sensory faculties, especially their sight. This was because, by virtue of a new experience of speed, cycling not only allowed people to see more things but also to see them differently. A typical description of this new sense of empowerment and what it meant for photographic practices was published in 1885 by Photographic News, another major British photographic periodical:

To ride tricycles and quadricycles to transport this of respectability. Consequently, they continued to seek to demonstrate artistic value as a marker of empowerment and what it meant for photographers. As contemporary accounts reveal, a key reason photographers were undeterred by these difficulties was that the self-propelled vehicle afforded the freedom to travel where and when one liked, and thus to find more subjects to photograph.

The front cover of Amateur Photographer’s bounded volume for 1885 (figure 2), which shows a couple riding a tandem quadricycle by a shore and a camera mounted on a tripod in the foreground (the suggestion being that this is the camera the couple secures to the back wheel), is indeed about visual and mobile independence: a location off the main tourist sites and a camera positioned to capture what’s found therein. The photographs of a man standing next to a sociable quadricycle on an unidentified country road (figure 3) and that of a woman sitting on the same model in what appears to be a rural hamlet (figure 4) were perhaps taken to demonstrate that they had reached a location un frequented by the masses.

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we know of no greater pleasure than a spin along the country roads on a bicycle. The bracing air, the easy exercise given to all parts of the human frame, the delight of the eye with the surrounding scenery, make life a new life to a man ... As the rider spins along, his eyes catch some little bit of scenery, some quiet nook with bubbling water, or some exquisite vista stretching in the distance, that he would gladly fix in some more permanent form than upon the tablets of memory.

The text starts by highlighting the positive impact of cycling, widely regarded as a truly modern technology, designed to be suited to the gaze of a modern and fast-moving individual. In its fusion with the machine, modern technology was deemed to have an impact that cycling, widely regarded as a truly modern subject. Combining the high-wheeler and the Kodak camera was an interesting choice because the safety bicycle era was by now well underway. The high-wheeler, which would have been associated with the fast machines used for racing in the 1870s and early 1880s, might have been used to highlight some of the features of the Kodak: it was as fast as a high-wheeler and so easy to use you could take photographs while pedalling, which is what the photographer in the illustration seems to be doing. The speed of the bicycle merges, in this image, with the speed of the camera. In his interaction with technologies, the physical abilities of the photographer are augmented. He can move quickly, and he can capture what he sees without having to stop: in this example, he masters the tools as he masters his environment. In doing so, he can capture an experience of the world and those 'bits' of sylvan scenery which surround him on every side.

This had a profound influence on photographers' expectations, fostering a desire to use the camera to engage with such a proliferation of visual experiences—that photographers had come to appreciate while cycling dissipated with each step of the pedaling set-up and capture of just one exposure. As Cyclops (a pseudonym) wrote, "As we flew down the steep road, 'every now and then,' to borrow from Mark Twain, 'some ermined monarch of the Alps swung magnificently by a desire to use the camera in a way considered to be suited to the gaze of a modern and fast-moving individual."

Camera manufacturers' early attempts at meeting cyclists' demands can thus be read as a way of adapting the technology to the requirements of a modern subjectivity. This was the case, for example, with the Birmingham-based firm J. Lancaster & Son, a major camera maker in this period that in 1891 presented itself as "[the] largest makers of photographic apparatus in the world, for treasurer, bicyclists, tricyclists ... promotional specifically for cyclists, the Instantograph (top left, figure 6), came with a lens and stand or a 'cycle' in place of stand. Its promoted benefit was that it allowed photographers to get rid of the cumbersome tripod and instead use the wheel as a support, as shown in the same ad. Unsurprisingly, many photographers complained about how this constructed one's freedom because one was limited to work from the road and at the height of the wheel. This image of a camera on a wheel, however, also crystallizes the unresolvable desire to pass the speed of cycling and associated benefits of autonomy and spontaneity to photography, something that would come to define the compact cameras of later years.

By the turn of the century, cameras and bicyclists were almost ubiquitous in Britain, and taking photographs during a cycling holiday became common. As Scribe (a pseudonym) wrote, "Photography for Wheelmen", "as the pace is often pretty fast, one does not want to carry weight, and when the surrounding scenery, give the numerous little 'bits' of sylvan scenery which surround him on every side."

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Almost forty years ago, South Africans from a range of social, economic and racial backgrounds organised to challenge the repressive policies of apartheid, its violent police apparatus and the National Party, which had ruled the country since 1948. Artists, cultural workers, members of fast-food workers’ unions, university student groups, faith-based organisations and numerous organisations came together, despite their differences in race, culture, class and political opinions. Their goal: nothing short of regime change from within, with their collective power as leverage. Their vision: a non-racial future in which South Africans of all backgrounds played a part.

This collective spirit, evident throughout the 1980s’ organised resistance to apartheid, was institutional in the formation of Afrapix, one of the most influential photographers’ collective in the country. According to Afrapix co-founder Paul Weinberg, those who initially came together to discuss the possibility of forming a photographers’ collective had two major objectives: first, to become ‘an agency and a purveyor of the principles of Magnum Photos, the photographer-owned and operated cooperative founded in 1943 by the photographers Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, David Seymour, George Rodger, and William Vandervert—and second, to ‘stimulate and develop contemporary photography in the country.’ Coming together during this last, turbulent decade of apartheid, Afrapix photographers wanted to ensure that photography became ‘a more effective vehicle for social change.’

They desired to use photography to expose the lies behind the regime’s propaganda, using photography as their medium. They provided a visual record of the South African resistance movement through their artistic and social documentary photography projects, as well as their journalistic work. As photographers who embraced the philosophy and principles of social documentary, visionaries, who, as seen in the beginning of this article, ended his ode to photography and cycling with ‘Young ones we wish you luck’, would have been pleased, as this generation had longed for had finally been realised. In the present-day media environment, replete with anxieties over technology’s influence on our experience of the ‘real’, where new prosthetic tools from smartphone cameras to selfie sticks are shaping how we move through and see the world, the experiences of these early pioneers can perhaps help us reassess contemporary bodies/machine interactions as empowering and inspirational. For us, as for photographers in the late nineteenth century, what’s at stake is our own sense of self, as how we choose to use technology impacts who we are.

Long before the formation of Afrapix in the late 1980s, African photographers had been using their cameras—the instruments through which Black and African people were (and are) photographed—(re)written by the white ideological narratives that had fed into the directives of the state; the times ‘did not call for objectivity, art, or multiple perspectives, but a commitment to portray the truth.’

Afrapix needed to create a radical, oppositional language to counter the part of propagandistic images showing Black people as incapable of political leadership or intellectual achievement.

# # #

McKenzie and others of his generation were inspired by the German worker photographer of the 1930s, who not only depicted workers in his camera but also designed cameras used newly available, more affordable cameras, such as Leicas and Ermancos. Likewise, the Afrapix artists’ mandate was to ensure that the particip- ants in action, aligned with the politics and principles of the anti-apartheid movement. Their work ran counter to the belief that ‘proper’ and visibility were not the end goal; rather, the objective was ‘preconditions for an empathetic and humanitarian reaction that would prompt international political action.’

In many ways, the photographers’ ultimate goal was nothing short of the desire to use photography as a political tool in the liberation struggle. As Pierre-Lucanau’s fuzzy, racing rhetoric sums up, Afrapix’s objectives were to expose the atrocities of a regime that had been in power since 1948 and, just as importantly, to foster and train a new generation of black photographers. At the time, South Africa had been experiencing the most turbulent racial history. As particularly intimate witnesses of the events of the period, photographers felt that the construction of a visual archive was not just a commitment to portray the truth.'
from advancing. Black, Coloured, and Indian people were barred from attending photography classes at technicals, to which only White students were admitted. For most, imagining the camera as a conduit to engage, contemplate or theorize their outer and inner worlds wasn’t a realistic possibility.

A number of catalysts and conditions were essential to the formation of Afrapix, helping the co-founders forge a clear vision for their future. On practical and logistical levels, Afrapix’s formation was aided by the cultural magazine *Staffrider*.

Since its inception in 1976, the magazine created a much-needed social location for ‘up to then unheard’ and unknown poets, writers, artists and photographers, so that they could learn about each other’s work. 

Baddy Patrander, a Zimbabwe-born musician and photographer who’d worked with *Staffrider* since its early days, was instrumental in selecting the photographers’ work for publication. Through seeing each other’s work in *Staffrider*, photographers learned that there were a significant number of photography enthusiasts interested in using the discipline to document the injustices they, too, were seeing.

The idea of creating a photographers’ collective was also influenced by a prevalent cultural ethos among activists, student groups, unionists, artists and cultural workers who used collective action to push for change. At the time, photographers and cultural workers who used collective action among activists, student groups, unionists, artists and cultural workers who used collective action among activists, student groups, unionists, artists were generally disconnected from each other by socio-political geographies of White suburban and Durban, each isolated in South Africa’s two socio-political geographies of White suburban enclaves, Black townships and designated areas for ‘Coloureds’ and ‘Indians’.

Although Afrapix’s official formation as a photographers’ agency took place in 1978, they’d already begun discussions in 1976 at *Staffrider* publisher Ravan Press’s offices in Johannesburg. Oscar Bashka, Judas Ngezena, Jimmy Matthews, Baddy Patrander, Musilile Moyiso, Lesley Lawson and Paul Weinberg were among those at the first meeting, along with Lloyd Spencer and others from Ravan Press, including Mike Kirkwood of *Staffrider*.

Afrapix photographer Cedric Nunn, one of the collective’s first coordinators and administrators, also remembers that Rev. Bernard Spong, who’d worked with a Zimbabwe-born musician and photographer 1982 photographers’ agency took place in for ‘Coloureds’ and ‘Indians’.

Afrapix’s founders forge a clear vision for their future. On practical and logistical levels, Afrapix’s co-founders forge a clear vision for their future.

At its height, Afrapix’s full members included a large repertoire of photographers, as well as a number of photographers who contributed their work to the agency as non-members. Many young, White photographers, such as Eric Miller, remember that they were aware that the politics of the country made them angry, but they had limited experience of what apartheid meant for Black communities and individuals. They remember that the police would regularly release a so-called Unrest Report, and the media would quote these reports, saying that due to ‘provocations by Black provocateurs, “police were forced to retaliate” or “forced to fire”, but even then, he knew that it simply didn’t sound logical or correct’.

Anna Zieminski was 19 when she bought her first camera. It was a tiny, baby Rollei, and with that, she took photography classes at Ruth Prowse School of Art, learning about P-stops, basic darkroom techniques to process and print black and white photographs, and, eventually, Ansel Adams’s ‘zone system’.

There were many factors that led to her political awakening; one event that stands out in her mind was the discovery of Leslie Nunn, a book on domestic workers, which she found at Grassroots, a ‘little bookshop in Observatory’, a left-leaning artists’ and writers’ enclave in Cape Town.

Another significant event she remembers was the day she decided to go to Khayelitsha, an area to which Black Capetonians were about to be forcibly removed. At the time, the apartheid municipal government was telling a completely different story, they were trumpeting how they were building a new development … a place called “Our Home”.

When she got to the location, she saw that some sand dunes had been cleared off to flatten the land, and that some tall lamp posts, like [those] on football stadiums … talk to African houses [were] going to be begun up.

But it was nothing but a desolate, windswept area that was such a contradiction to the name, “Our Home”. 

Subsequently, Zieminski moved to Johannesburg, where she met powerful Black women who were community workers, which also made her want to know … what [else] was kept from me? I knew I was in the receiving or privileged end of the system. I felt … what had all these amazing people been kept from me? For Gillis de Vlrug, her political awakening came with a personal revelation in her 40s: “My daughter was about to leave; I was emotionally upset. I wanted to do something that was...
Seeing McKenzie’s portfolio, he ‘had an epiphany’ at Technikon Natal. He remembers that upon hearing live music and socialising there, he met视 seeing McKenzie’s portfolio, he ‘had an epiphany’ at Technikon Natal. He remembers that upon hearing live music and socialising there, he met people—by Goldblatt, in particular—helped professionals like them to, over the course of a weekend, ‘train and record organised resistance to forced removals. Because Black Sash had offices in Khotso House, where Afrapix was also based, she met Weinberg, who invited her to join Afrapix.

Of those who operated in Durban, there were Rafique (Rafs) Mayet, Cedric Nunn, Jeeva Rajgopaul, Fux Mageza, Myron Peters and Deeni Moodliar (now Moodliar Soobhen). Badsha generously opened his tiny photographic darkroom in the Good Hope Centre on Queen Street (currently named Dennis Hurley Street) in Durban to a disparate band of hopeful photographers from a range of apartheid-era racial groups (Black, Coloured, and Indian of both Tamil and Gujarati descent), social classes (some whose families had worked in the cane fields; others whose families were middle class business people), educational backgrounds and levels of photography experience. They honed their skills through the photography workshops he organised; he invited veteran photographer David Goldblatt to, over the course of a weekend, ‘train [them] in the Ansel Adams “zone system” of developing and printing.’ Acts of generosity like this—by Goldblatt, in particular—helped professionalise Durban photographers, most of whom had no formal training because photography courses were typically only available to White students.

Rajgopaul had been a physics teacher who decided to leave the profession to become a full-time photographer. He ‘found it very relevant for my own life.’ One night, she was so agitated she couldn’t fall to sleep. ‘It was … a long night of the soul. Up till then, I was a wife, mother and sportswoman.’ She read one of Andre Brink’s seminal novels Ramour of Rain or Dry White Season, and the following morning, she knew that the ‘something’ she wanted to do would involve women’s organisations. She’d seen members of the Black Sash women’s organisation quietly holding anti-apartheid placards on street corners as she drove to the offices of her husband’s tail-making company. She ‘found the Black Sash in the telephone book’, phoned them and began working in their Advice Office. There, she learned that a root cause of the urban migration of Black people from rural areas to the city was due to forced removals of entire settlements and villages from arable, desirable land designated for Whites to ‘Bantustans’—remote, inhospitable locations. Those displaced people were forced to come to Johannesburg in search of an income because they’d lost their way of life and their livelihoods generated through farming and rearing cattle and because of taxation by the apartheid state. She began to go to those rural areas to document what was happening and record organised resistance to forced removals.

Because Black Sash had offices in Khotso House, where Afrapix was also based, she met Weinberg, who invited her to join Afrapix. Many saw themselves as comrades of the working class, intricately embedded in the struggle against apartheid, along with the great collectivising forces of the time. Unions represented one of the most effective modes of collective action, spearheading pushback against corporate and government policies that exploited Black workers. If photography was stereotypically thought of as a visual technology that worked best with ‘action’ and drama—and, in the case of photography in South Africa during the 1980s, as something dependent on the actions accompanied by spectacular violence—attending trade union meetings would be the antithesis. Discussions, collective agreements and decisions moved at a glacial pace, although punctuated by moments of impassioned speeches. Yet, Afrapix photographers attended these meetings faithfully to learn about the concerns and daily struggles of union members. Reflecting back on his years as a photographer with Afrapix, Chris Ledochowski noted, ‘…entire days were spent immersed, when Badsha invited him to try his hand at photography. Moodliar Soobhen, one of two “non-White” workers to join Afrapix, came from a Durban Indian family that ran a successful business. She recalls that ‘only [dad] was always reminding me that I wanted to become a human rights lawyer’, but her interest in photography took her to Technikon Natal to study photography. She became the second Black (or Indian) person to attend Technikon Natal for photography after McKenzie. Like McKenzie (who was two years ahead of her), she was forced to apply for and obtain a special permit, as a Black (or Indian) South African, to study photography at the Whites-only institution. She remembers clearly that she ‘was the only non-White in my class.’ Because of the hard-won education of the Durban contingent who used Badsha’s darkroom, she was the only person to have formal training in photography.

As young, politicised photographers, Afrapix’s earliest members had been independently documenting the horrors of apartheid resettlement, squatter life, migrant labour [and] poverty.’

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movement towards justice and democratisation; these photographers began to photograph less obvious and difficult moments of resistance.

Censorship laws, which restricted their movement and what they could photograph, as well as prohibitions from market forces governing the media and internal discord.

To begin with, apartheid security forces continued to forcibly remove Africans from their homes. They lived in constant fear of police surveillance, infiltrators, spies and direct threats. In June 1986, the apartheid regime expelled the offices of the UDPC, SACC and Afrapix, all of which were housed in Khlongo House. In August, the building was booby-trapped and housing offices of the anti-apartheid movement, resulting in the injury of nineteen people.

This period at Afrapix was in ‘length, scope, and complexity with each successive state of emergency’, expanding on the ‘one hand eroded consensus already in existence’.

These restrictive laws were designed to control the public relations nightmare the apartheid government was experiencing over atrocities, namely, images of white police officers brutalising unarmed black civilians.

There were also practical realities that gave pause to many executive editors as they looked at the legal risks. The mainstream press in South Africa actively avoided running stories that showed opposition to the party’s official line. It mainly censored itself in order to survive, and it actively avoided running stories that could have been read as opposed to government policy.

The photographs which white readers saw were mainly newsreel images of the mainstream newspapers earned their revenue, complained that they were bored and annoyed by the restrictions at the end of 1980s Black Africans.

Moreover, the addressing of ‘racist’ images was difficult. According to Cedric Nunn, ‘we didn’t want to appear as though they supported dissent.’

That meant Afrapix photographers’ work wasn’t directed to or even accessible to the apartheid state, wouldn’t find space in mainstream newspapers.

The resistance, and altruistic and anti-apartheid organisations provided space for Afrapix productions.

Life as a photographer, whether as a member of Afrapix or an independent, remained precarious, and securing a dependable source of income was a constant challenge—though one which was likely to get the jobs that meant much of their work had a remarkable success of violence also depends on the continuation of predictable narratives and simple binaries between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Even of photographs of police brutality made the apartheid regime look like a sick child, it was likely to get the job that idealised the children’s narrative. Black photographers also had little access to the funds required for expensive camera equipment and photographic materials. When he moved to Johannesburg, Nunn realised that there were few in the Afrapix group who would actually spend time teaching technical proficiency to other, less experienced photographers. He remembers that there were several White photographers with whom he felt a deep kinship, which he sometimes forced his work (and the Black photographers’) disadvantages in stark terms.

We came from fighting Bantu education, the [White photographers] ... when we asked for help from the guys who did know and had training... they laughed at us. These guys were very good in the talk — but it took Goldblatt to... [eventually] set up the Market Photo training centre. We then became part of the original workshop that became the Photo Workshop.

Goldblatt maintains that the ‘greatest difficulty’ [for Black photographers] ... was not being networked into the publishing world [which was] almost entirely in English at the time. Because whites were likely to have an ‘uncle in the business’, they knew more about publishing and what was possible, so were more likely to get commissioned.

In the eyes of some photographers noted, there was very little recognition of gendered differences, or everyday sexist attitudes towards women photographers or their work. The expectation that women would serve as office coordinators or in administrative positions, rather than aspiring to develop their skills as photographers, was the norm. But as several photographers and office coordinators noted, these were normalised at the time; ‘Black photographers were often questioned or challenged them; de Vlieg notes that the idea of taking an administrative position was a fact, been in the mind, as she had previously been doing administrative work as a White student at university. But she, and other women who joined Afrapix simply refused to be limited; instead, they did as they saw fit... it was never discussed.’ As a member of the Black way, de Vlieg used her camera to document injustices and pushed to get the photographs published to educate (a White) public that was often ignorant of these events.

M. Neelika Jayawardane

As Afrapix grew in influence and numbers during the mid- and late 1980s, its photographers faced challenges from increasingly oppressive media

Moreover, the international media in particular demanded spectacular, two-dimensionality of sales and stock images. In order to make an income, photographers often felt the pressure to work in ways that were somewhat different than their White counterparts; these difficulties came about as a result of structural racism, rather than because of individual existential racism. For instance, it was sometimes difficult for them to find transport to a particular assignment since they didn’t often have their own vehicles; or to sell a vehicle or getting money for petrol; so a White photographer with these problems might have been more likely to get the job that required mobility. Black photographers also had little access to the funds required for expensive camera equipment and photographic materials. When he moved to Johannesburg, Nunn realised that there were few in the Afrapix group who would actually spend time teaching technical proficiency to other, less experienced photographers. He remembers that there were several White photographers with whom he felt a deep kinship, which he sometimes forced his work (and the Black photographers’) disadvantages in stark terms.

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In the eyes of some photographers noted, there was very little recognition of gendered differences, or everyday sexist attitudes towards women photographers or their work. The expectation that women would serve as office coordinators or in administrative positions, rather than aspiring to develop their skills as photographers, was the norm. But as several photographers and office coordinators noted, these were normalised at the time; ‘Black photographers were often questioned or challenged them; de Vlieg notes that the idea of taking an administrative position was a fact, been in the mind, as she had previously been doing administrative work as a White student at university. But she, and other women who joined Afrapix simply refused to be limited; instead, they did as they saw fit... it was never discussed.’ As a member of the Black way, de Vlieg used her camera to document injustices and pushed to get the photographs published to educate (a White) public that was often ignorant of these events.

M. Neelika Jayawardane

As Afrapix grew in influence and numbers during the mid- and late 1980s, its photographers faced challenges from increasingly oppressive media
times—discursive attitude he encountered from those who refused to understand the disparities and disadvantages arising from racial (and at times gendered) differences accentuate some of the less-than-idealistic issues with which non-racial collectives of the period dealt. His pointed critique illustrates that the idealistic thesis that Pierre-Laurant Santen present in 1999—of ‘comrades and cameras’, or of a band of brothers (and some sisters), united as one, who went forth to fight a regime’s injustices using photography as their weapon—may not, in fact, be wholly accurate.

Afriapix disbanded in 1994 amid rising internal tensions, moves by some photographers to establish a more commercially minded agency and growing pressure from international photographers hired by foreign news agencies. However, their members’ photographs remain a unique record of the struggles waged by the mass democratic movement and the myriad of grassroots resistance groups that sprang up, as well as a record of ordinary life under apartheid in the 1980s.

Ultimately, Afriapix’s long-term impact as a collective and an agency that its founding members engaged in the invisible work of creating what I refer to as an image-space, despite ever more restrictive and often dangerous conditions. In his investigation into the ways in which the resistance press in South Africa operated under the states of emergency, Brian Trebilcock uses the term ‘writing space’ as a metaphor to describe the parameters of expression and as a way to show how ‘cultures, journalists, and attorneys working for the newspapers devised various legal, writing, and political tactics to maximise their writing space’ even as the government, using state—of—emergency legislation, worked to constrain expression. This is similar to the ways in which Afriapix photographers pushed the boundaries of apartheid censorship in concert with resistance organisations and the anti-apartheid alternative media community that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s. Together, they helped create visual spaces in which they could challenge the narrow picture circumscribed by the state and mainstream media within the country and the often misleading narratives that reporters and photojournalists from international news agencies disseminated to a global public.

The collective influenced the opening up of photography to those who would otherwise, under apartheid, not have had the chance to record and disseminate their works and experiences as they saw them. Its legacy is today evident in South Africa’s thriving and multifaceted photography scene. It’s also evident in the historical importance of Afriapix photographers’ images; their work has contributed to how the public—both within and outside South Africa, as well as the generations that came of age in subsequent decades—envisions what it meant to live under an unjust, racist system of governance and what it meant to resist that government’s dehumanising edicts, the structures that upheld racial hierarchies and the police that maintained the status quo with violence. Their photographs remain essential to how we comprehend and decode apartheid.

For accomplished conflict photographers, the hardest part of the job is getting to where the action is. Once in the thick of it, instinct and experience take over. Their senses are on high alert as they wait for the elements of a powerful image to fall into place. And move on.

What was it like for Muslim migrants arriving in Greece to be faced by a wall of cameras? When I covered the bloodshed in the Central African Republic in 2013, photographers could snap away on the violence-plagued streets of the capital Bangui, and expect to witness a few lynchings before breakfast. The killers didn’t flinch from our cameras—in fact, when we would leave in disgust at the way they would invite us to stay and witness further mutilations, saying, ‘We are not finished yet.’ They seemed surprised we didn’t want to keep photographing.

But what the dramatic photographs from the European migrant crisis, the wars, the drug war and the civil war in the Central African Republic do not capture is the thieving of photographers standing on the other end media within the country, often ensuring no other photographers or cameras are in their shot, creating the illusion that they are the only ones on the scene.

If a camera had been turned on to the photographers, you’d have generally found a dozen of them lined up side by side behind the yellow police tape of the drug war scenes in the Philippines or on the beach in Greece during the refugee crisis, strictly abiding by the new rules of conflict photography (rule number one: don’t step into another photographer’s frame). Conflict photography is facing a crisis, and it’s a crisis of the cliché, a crisis in which the originality is lacking and the dramatic is rendered banal. War photography—long the most dramatic of subjects in the visual arts—is at times boring.
The culture within conflict photography is also partly to blame for its downward slide. It's a macho culture in which, like notches on a belt, the number of conflicts covered earns a photographer respect. Fear to miss a big story, too many conflict photographers jump from conflict to conflict, padding their portfolios with superficial images. Such photographers wouldn't have wanted to miss Libya in 2011, Syria in 2012, the Central African Republic in 2014, the refugee crisis in 2015, or the Rohingya crisis in 2017. There were countless other interesting stories unfolding elsewhere, but aware of conflict photographers travelled like a herd to those high-profile stories. Once they'd checked off the assignment, they moved on to new adventures, leaving behind a coverage vacuum (Syria's war rages on, as does the conflict in the Central African Republic, the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, the drug war in the Philippines and the Rohingya crisis).

Beyond the changing media environment and the often toxic culture of war photography, the world in which conflict photographers work has also shifted. Just over a decade ago, conflict photography was an exclusive club of intrepid and talented photographers who provided us with our only images of wars around the world, often at great risk. In today's social media environment, we are flooded with violent images from conflict zones, many of them taken by citizens and activists posting to social media. In such a crowded field, the erstwhile uniqueness of war photography has faded away.

The more intimate path

There's a way out of this crisis of conflict photography. Many of the best conflict photographers have never succumbed to the shallowness currently plaguing their profession. They know that great photography requires time and effort and often takes place far away from the circling pack. These photographers tread a more intimate path towards stories with unique and impactful approaches.

Even in a crowded media environment, it's possible to find fresh and powerful ways to tell stories. In 2014 in the Central African Republic, Marcus Bleasdale and I left behind the rest of the media focused mostly on the capital Bangui and its shocking violence and travelled for months deep into the bush to find the people affected by the conflict further afield. We drove for days, negotiated with violent rebels, waited for hours along rivers and looked for signs of life in deserted, burned-down villages.

This is how we found people living in absolute misery, dying from hunger and malaria after fleeing their torched villages. We met Christian refugees who had fled from other territories and ethnically cleansed their country of Muslims. Our images revealed a world rarely glimpsed, engaging our audience and allowing them to witness an otherwise unseen reality.

The images and our reporting for Human Rights Watch prompted the international community to deploy a UN peacekeeping force to try and stop the carnage. The photography industry recognised Marcus's work with numerous awards, including the Robert Capa Gold Medal, the most prestigious award in conflict photography. It was the first time a photographer was awarded the medal for work commissioned by an NGO rather than a traditional media outlet. Such recognition confirms that the photography industry values the kind of original work that’s increasingly rare in today’s media environment.

When I discussed these issues with Marcus recently, he reflected that conflict photography isn’t so much about conflict or even about photography—it’s about understanding the context and people’s lives: ‘Photographers need to understand that photographing conflict is about photographing people’s lives. The more you can understand about how and why these people you meet arrived at this point, and how they feel and what their hopes are, the better you can represent them to an international audience and hopefully change things for the better for generations to come.’

It’s troubling to meet photographers working in countries where they may not even know the name of the president, the warring parties or the basics of the conflict they’re covering. A good conflict photographer needs to be a historian, an anthropologist, a sociologist and an investigator all rolled into one. You need to understand the politics, the people and why the conflict is happening in the first place, and you need to do that before you get on a plane and pick up your camera to take your first picture.

The idea that one can just jump on a plane and ‘be there’, documenting a conflict is deeply embedded in our social media culture, the era of Instagram. One sees it out in the field. Immediately after migrant boat landings in Greece, photographers often split into two groups: those staring at their camera screens to see if they got a good shot and those who put down their cameras to talk to the newly arrived migrants they’d just photographed to learn more about their stories. Again, the photographers aren’t the only ones to blame: many work under deadlines so tight that a few minutes’ delay in filing an image can lead to reprimands, limiting their ability to pause and interact with their subjects.

A question many photographers never pose themselves is this: what’s the reason for being here photographing this? Is it just to put another series of images in one’s portfolio and advance one’s career? Or is it because one actually cares about what’s happening to these people, wants to understand what’s happening to them and wants to provide the public with informative and meaningful images?

Some of our best hope for original, absorbing and impactful work comes from the increasing ranks of top female photographers working on conflict and the unique and refreshing perspectives and approaches they bring to their work.
The likes of Anastasia Taylor-Lind, Nicole Tung, the late Anja Niedringhaus and Lynsey Addario bring a unique perspective to conflict photography, often devoting the time and effort needed to tell the more intimate and private stories of individuals affected by war.

Anastasia’s powerful portraits of war-affected persons from Ukraine and Bangladesh (where I worked with her) and Nicole’s similarly haunting night-time portraits of Rohingya widows and their children begging by the road allow us to look deeply into the experience of war, without the need of AK-47s waving in the background. Of course, the female perspective on war is nothing new, with outstanding photographers like Susan Meiselas producing a uniquely personal and painful body of work since the 1970s. 

### Effective conflict photography

Having worked alongside some of the most talented conflict photographers for the last twenty years, I’ve learned a few important lessons. First and foremost, producing powerful and captivating photography in conflict zones takes a lot of time, original thinking and planning—before you start photographing. It can’t be rushed, and it can only come about when the photographer is given the time needed to do the job right—often a period of months or even years, but not days. Very few photographers have the resources (or backing) and dedication needed to produce that kind of work, but if you see outstanding work, you can be pretty sure it took an incredible, exhausting effort on behalf of the photographer.

Second, most professional photographers can take good pictures in just about every conflict zone, but there is at least some knowledge that is unique to each place. When you sit down with one of the greats after a day’s work and review the uniqueness of their vision, the perfection of their work just jumps out at you, and it doesn’t come from hours spent editing their images in Photoshop.

Third, good conflict photographers make impactful partnerships with organisations that can transmit their images and messages to a target audience in order to create the change they would like to achieve with their work. Effective conflict photography is no longer about the relationship with the magazine or newspaper but about working out how to place the images in front of the right policymaker to create real change.

Finally, it’s worth acknowledging the impact of conflict photography on those behind the lens. For too long, conflict photography has been dominated by a toxic macho culture, ignoring the mental health impacts of documenting traumatic events. In a business rife with PTSD, alcoholism, mental health problems, broken relationships and suicide, we can no longer ignore the basic reality that it’s painful to document the pain of others. The work can leave deep emotional scars.

Prominent photographers like Patrick Baz and Finbarr O’Reilly have opened up about their own mental health issues, beginning an essential dialogue. In order to produce powerful work, it is important we look after ourselves and each other and acknowledge the impact our witnessing has on ourselves.

### Hasina Begum, 25, waits with her son by the side of the road for food and cash distributions near the Balukhali refugee camp in Bangladesh on Friday September 22, 2017. Hasina does not know where her husband is as they were separated after crossing the border into Bangladesh.

In less than a month, over 420,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar, leaving behind entire villages in townships burned to the ground and hundreds dead since a military crackdown began late last month in retaliation over the ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) attacks on police stations and an army base in the Rakhine State. After arriving at the designated site for the Rohingya, thousands of refugees fleeing the main road hoping for a food handout, and hundreds who have walked for days and into the night. Much of the food distribution to the nearly half a million new arrivals has been ad hoc, leaving many families with the uncertainty of where their next meal will come from, even with local and international organisations scrabbling to provide aid.

More than half of the 420,000 people flewing have been children and women, who were either separated from their husband in the violence, or killed by the military. Without the family’s main bread winner, this has left many women vulnerable to exploitation in the form of sexual violence, harassment, and potentially human trafficking. The rate of child marriage amongst displaced populations also rises when families see no other choice.

### Kludde Afriyeh Addo, a 30-year-old Myar woman, witnessed and helps forces shooting and killing her husband and three children. In the same attack, she was shot in the neck but survived. October 21, 2013.

The mother of Elain Fedongare, 24, greets him and celebrates his return to his home in Kilo 5, Bangui. Five people were shot and killed and another 200 people have died in the city in the past week as a huge conflagration has spread across the country by the population of CAR.

### Mamat flex the town of Bangui together with Chadian special forces. Over 10,000 people live in the city, many had a huge conflagration has spread across the country by the population of CAR.

### The sister of Vanessa mourns for her after she was shot by Muslims close to her home in Kit S. Bangui. Five people were shot and killed and another 200 people have died in the city in the past week as a huge conflagration has spread across the country by the population of CAR.
When considering the impact of photography on the world, what instantly springs to mind are the photographs we all are familiar with. How many of us know about—often in loving terms—in many coffee-table books and on posters—photographs: the most influential images of all time. Academic scepticism about the impact of photography on our collective memory is well documented. Popular books like to celebrate these iconic images, while academic publications, on the other hand, in line with postmodern analysis, can be highly critical.

In a postmodern reading, the photographs that best serve the dissemination of the prevailing ideology—that everyone is expected to adopt—are those that are reprinted ad nauseam and enjoy a second life as postage stamps and other memorabilia. They’re considered ‘iconic’.

There were other photographs that were familiar to almost half of all respondents: the image of ‘The Beatles on Abbey Road’, the photograph of Captain John Kerry in Vietnam, the one of Kim Phuc running away, and the one of Saddam Hussein.

The Beatles off Abbey Road, or the painting of Churchill, both propose that this phenomenon could be called ‘the global visual memory’.

These are disturbing conclusions. But just as in Goldberg’s book, which tried to prove that photographs have the power to shape our lives, there’s no hard evidence. If photographs transmit all sorts of social concepts, they do so in a way that is difficult to see evidence about how people read images, what the ideas and messages are that they take away from them, which photographs people remember and find interesting, how this varies by country and age group, etc.—all more pertinent to our everyday lives.

For this reason, I found all this dissatisfying and decided, seven years ago, without the help of thorough preparation, to conduct an academic study that might yield a number of intersting results. I asked my respondents (nearly three thousand) to recognize twenty-four photographs, plus some questions regarding what they are about—often in loving terms—in many coffee-table books.

It’s not difficult to find examples of faith in the almost mythical power of images. This was written about—often in loving terms—in many coffee-table books and on posters—photographs: the most influential images of all time, for example. As the compilers—editors from Time Magazine—wrote in the introduction, ‘What all Americans—including the outliers that had previously rejected it, my Lai rapidly became a global news sensation, and Hersh’s story is still considered to be one of the biggest journalistic scoops of the past century.

Fast-forward to 2014, and we find the same Seymour Hersh working on another big story. This time, it’s about American prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. There’s been a few stories on this topic from the Associated Press, but they’d barely been noticed. In one such story, a prisoner commented that he wished ‘someone in the public’ had told him what was going on there. Now, Seymour Hersh did indeed have the photographs. When they were published together with the article, on national television, Abu Ghraib became a global news story within hours.

Stories such as these emerge whenever one looks at the influence of photography on our lives. They confirm the widespread belief that photography is extremely powerful. They also corroborate the feeling everyone experiences at some time in their lives: the feeling that photographs have such much more direct and intense emotional impacts than words. Such an impact may be entirely personal: in Camera Lucida, the French philosopher Roland Barthes writes about the effect his mother’s childhood photographs had on him and how they also may have been the only way he could ‘think’ about the person who struck him by a particular image.

But strong feelings can also be experienced collectively: photographs such as the one of the drowned Syrian boy Alan in 2015 or the Salvador- doll girl and her father in the summer of 2019 provoke a simultaneous emotional response all over the world. It seems that images of this nature have huge transformative power and, when they are shared, provoke a simultaneous emotional response all over the world. It seems that images of this nature have huge transformative power and, when they are shared, provoke a simultaneous emotional response all over the world.
For example, in a photograph of starving prisoners taken in Buchenwald in 1945 (probably by Lee Miller), some respondents read moral messages, such as ‘This must never happen again’. But many others did not. ‘None’ was a frequent answer to ‘What is the central message?’ Others wrote: ‘this is informative’ or ‘this describes the living quarters in concentration camps’. These differences could be found for all the photographs that respondents answered questions about. An upsetting photograph of a collapsed, starving child in Sudan being watched by a vulture (Kevin Carter, 1993) elicited emotional reactions from many respondents, especially in Italy, Argentina and Brazil. ‘Misery… hunger… fear… pain’, wrote a Brazilian respondent; and from an Italian: ‘the never-ending sorrow of the world’. But many others simply said, ‘famine in Africa’ or ‘hunger’. Others read the central message as ‘donate to charities’ and ‘don’t throw away food’.

Starting all over again

When you read through these responses, it immediately becomes clear that the assumption that people receive the same message from a photograph, and that this can be expressed in moral terms, is nonsense. One can perceive photographs as moral precepts, but that’s only one of at least six different ways that an international general public will read a photograph. For example, many people turn to the factual information a picture provides about a past event to find the ‘message’, while others try to imagine how the person in the photograph feels and call that the message.

You might imagine that the result would be different for older photographs, and that our frenzied image culture would have an impact. I can only say that I found no evidence of this. I couldn’t see a pattern that more recent photographs are better recognised than older ones or any other age-related patterns. The photographs that people recognised and found important as well as what they could see in them appeared to have little to do with the respondent’s age, education, media use, or nationality; there’s no Russian or Asian way of reading a photograph.

For this reason, I believe we need to start all over again, not by declaring in no uncertain terms that photographs have great influence on us and why that’s a bad thing, but instead by asking ourselves what we actually know about how photographs work, both on an individual level and on that of society and the world. It’s particularly important now, in a time when a visual culture has gone global and photographs can become a worldwide news story or meme within hours of their being taken, that we realise that the pictures we all simultaneously consume mean different things to different people, and we’re too quick to put our own interpretation on the meaning or effect of a photograph. All those photographs that speak for themselves—they actually don’t.
During a December 2016 demonstration on International Human Rights Day, protesters dragged a giant effigy of President Rodrigo Duterte with them through the streets of Manila: a two-metre-tall head, painted ghastly green, attached to a monstrous crawling creature. The head bore two demonic horns, its eyes glowed red in the dark and its stuck-out tongue was painted with the stars and stripes of the American flag. The armoured and spiked hand, clenched into a fist, was splashed with red paint, just like the horns. According to its makers from the activist artist collective UgatLahi, the effigy symbolised the ‘resurrection and rehabilitation of the Marcoses’\(^4\) under Duterte’s administration. It was slowly rolled along the path of the demonstration and burned at the end of the route surrounded by crowds of protesters with cell phones and journalists with cameras, who spread the images of the monster Duterte perishing in the flames through social media and news networks: photographs of burning images were employed to damage the image of the president.

This was just one of the many effigy protests targeting Duterte in his first three years in office, denouncing his indiscriminate war against alleged drug peddlers and users, his ties to the family of the former dictator Marcos, his disregard for the rights of indigenous peoples and his neoliberal policies that only catered to the wealthy. Recurring features were the giant head, iron fists and vehicles like tanks and trains that signified Duterte’s political style of barrelling through all obstacles, regardless of the costs. The train also refers to his contentious tax reform bill called TRAIN (Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion Law). Always included in Philippines protests are references to the United States—the former colonial power who supported the regime of Ferdinand Marcos and retains major economic and military influence—as the evil force pulling the strings of the country’s politics.
The United States bought the Philippines from Spain after the Spanish-American War in 1898 for $20 million. After being occupied by Japan from 1943 to 1945, it was granted independence in 1946.

Ever since effigies were employed successfully in the resistance to the Marcos regime in the 1970s and early 80s, protesters have burned every Philippines president in effigy. Over the years, the Philippines developed its own effigy tradition. Effigy protests became a very elaborate form of street theatre with complex visual narratives: giant effigy floats, with moving parts, animated by activists and inviting interaction with the public. They always end in a big, spectacular fire, staged for maximum impact. In keeping with the rhythm of the political calendar, effigies are rolled out on International Workers Day on 1 May, International Human Rights Day in December and other occasions, but they’re most prominently used in demonstrations during the annual State of the Nation Address delivered by the president in July. Records of effigy protests in the 1930s in resistance to U.S. colonial rule hint at an even longer tradition.162

A number of influences contributed to the development of these spectacular protest effigies in the Philippines. First, they were appropriated from two types of traditional effigies imported by Spanish colonialists. The higantes are friendly giants that dance in street processions during a festival in Angono, a town east of Manila, on 22–23 November, just as they do in Spain and other European cities, many of which are in Flanders.163 Effigies of Judas Iscariot are burnt before Easter in a town on the island of Panay and north of Manila in Minalin, as they are in Spain, Greece, Poland and many countries in Latin America. Other influences include political street theatre from the first half of the twentieth century, the practice of displaying large cut-out figures of politicians during political rallies, and the activist street theatre group Bread and Puppet Theatre from Vermont, USA, which worked with Philippine activists in the mid 1990s.164

Burning Images for Punishment and Change
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The friendly, dancing giants of the Spanish tradition were turned into scary and vile monsters. Using the carnivalesque strategy of inversion, turning the world upside down, the figures of power are defamed and ridiculed. They’re smeared with blood, pus, slime and excrement and disfigured by diseases; the whole gamut of bodily grotesque denigration is employed. Politicians are depicted as duplicitous, as traitors to their people and beholden to foreign interests, puppets steered by more powerful forces. The presidents, their allies and cronies are dehumanised, turned into animals and monsters. The effigies are there to unmask them, to reveal their true nature as enemies of the people. They are the demons that need to be exorcised in a ritual of punishment and purification to liberate the people and create a new future.

These kinds of theatrical protest performances—albeit usually with smaller, less sophisticated puppets—can be found almost everywhere across the globe. The earliest known example dates from 1329, when Emperor Louis IV staged the trial of Pope Johan XXII, and his troops burned the pope’s effigy in Pisa, Italy. Effigies often appeared during revolutionary upheavals. In the beginning of the American Revolution (1765–1783), New England activists paraded, hanged and burned effigies of tax collectors to threaten British loyalists. After the founding of the Union, it became a well-established practice in U.S. politics that remains today, as shown by the many effigies of George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump. During the Iranian Revolution in 1979, effigies of the Shah and President Jimmy Carter were paraded and burned to protest the regime and U.S. interference in domestic politics.

During the 2011 Arab Spring, effigies of Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Gaddafi and Bashar al-Assad were hanged in the streets in Egypt, Libya and Syria. Effigies have been hanged and burned for many causes: in the fight against dictators, against racism, against corruption, against capitalist exploitation, against corporate wrongdoing, against foreign aggression, against rising fuel prices, against rules regulating the treatment of manure and many other societal and political injustices.
This bodily interaction, and the resistance offered by a material body, provides a physical outlet for the protesters’ pent-up anger. It transforms the psychic energy of anger, frustration and powerlessness in the face of ongoing injustices into a positive energy, expressed with laughter and exhilaration. It’s a communal energy derived from acting together in the ritual of protest.

Creating and performing an effigy is both a ritual of punishment and a ritual for change. It demands the end of injustice, and it projects an imaginary new order for the rebuilding of society through the purifying violence of fire.

Tableaux vivants as bodily protests

Making the effigy—working collectively towards a common goal—is the first stage in the ritual and strengthens the bond between activists. In the Philippines, artists’ collectives brainstorm the image, program and scenarios and, together with crafts, people and volunteers, work on the effigies for weeks. But effigies can also be made very spontaneously from old clothes stuffed with straw or paper; with an improvised head and a sign attached to identify the targeted persona, they effectively communicate disdain towards the represented.

During the protest march, the effigy, with all its grotesque features, is proudly presented to demonstrators. It is carried, dragged or rolled along the demonstration route. The ritual-like nature of the performance invites participation, and activists and bystanders interact with the effigy by insulting, mocking, hitting, kicking or punching it.

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The street, though, is just one stage that effigy performances occupy, and the demonstrators and onlookers are just one audience they address. When the time comes to burn the effigy, a space opens up around it. The protesters face the cameras, and pose with the effigy as a living image, a tableau vivant. They make themselves into an image for the onlookers and even more so for the cameras in order to address those audiences reached through the media.

Every photograph in itself already attests to the presence of the camera and the photographer at the scene. In many photographs, the cameras themselves become visible: the bulky frames of professional still cameras, shoulderl video cameras and, increasingly in recent years, the rectangles of smartphones held overhead. Being present in traditional news media, as well as on social media platforms, has become an integral part of the protest on the street. The space of the media is not just an add-on but an essential extension of the protest space—the channel to reach a much larger audience than the one physically present. Political philosopher Judith Butler, who generally emphasizes the importance of bodily presence for political protests, wrote that ‘the media is the scene or the space in its extended and replicable visual and audible dimensions.’

Beyond iconoclasm

Parading, hanging and burning effigies is a truly visual form of protest, but it’s not an iconoclastic practice. Images (the effigies) are created, mutilated, and destroyed—but they are destroyed to produce new visceral and affective images: the scene of a public figure punished by the people and the media images of that performance. These spectacular and symbolic images fit the needs of the media. They’re able to communicate political conflict and anger at an experienced injustice in a condensed way.
Hanging and burning effigies was an effective form of protest in premodern societies that entertained the public and allowed for the delivery of a statement and the vyng for support. In the print-media-dominated societies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was effective in reaching national audiences. In the twenty-first century, it might be even more effective for activists across the globe who stage the spectacle for maximum media exposure—for the biggest impact. In the contemporary global media environment, where visual media take a central role in communication and where it becomes easier to access a variety of channels for distribution—traditional news media online and off, as well as social media platforms—hanging and burning effigies enables protesters to communicate their grievances directly to a wide variety of audiences across the boundaries of language and culture.

In recent years, the term ‘Anthropocene’ has taken centre stage in debates about climate change and global warming. The name was proposed in 2000 by natural scientists to designate the current geological epoch as the ‘time of the human’, set to succeed the Holocene, but in recent years it’s ignited hot debates among social scientists and philosophers.168 Artists and photographers have taken note as well, as the term frequently appears in their discussions and in writing about their work. More and more artists are trying to capture images of or imagine what the term signifies, from straightforward documentation of climatic events threatening human settlements to deeper ways of relating to the human-nature complex.

In my own research, I worked as a researcher for Paradox (a Dutch producer of multimedia photography and film projects) on a large-scale documentary, *The Last Days of Shishmaref* comprised a feature-length documentary by director Jan Louter and an extensive photo-series by photographer Dina Luijten. A team compiled by Paradox mainly worked on turning Luijten’s photographs into a photobook, an exhibition, a project website and, later, a web documentary (released in 2010). Louter’s documentary, which had a limited release in cinemas and was screened at international film festivals, focuses on how a few families in Shishmaref, Alaska, view changing environmental conditions and their foreseeable consequences for the village.

Along with thirteen other Alaskan coastal villages, Shishmaref has been severely threatened with erosion since the beginning of this century. During a series of November storms over the past two decades, Shishmaref, which sits on a barrier island off the coast of the Seward Peninsula, near the Bering Strait, has lost at least fourteen homes to the sea. In 2010, the United States Army Corps of Engineers started construction on a storm surge barrier consisting of basalt blocks, but this solution can only be temporary. Within one or two generations, all of the approximately 360 in-habitants will have to move to higher ground on the mainland.

Louter referred to the villagers as belonging to the first generation of ‘climate refugees’ right at the time when the news broke that several small islands in the Pacific had sunk below sea level. For some Polynesian nations, the situation was already direr than that of Alaskan villages, although it’s true that global warming conditions proceed much more quickly in the polar regions. This year, for example, Alaska experienced unprecedented heat waves and multiple forest fires.

Without much environmental concern, I booked flights to the United States for my research in museums and archives in New York City and Washington D.C., to the Alaskan cities of Fairbanks and Anchorage, and subsequent fieldwork in Shishmaref. Strangely, I had no qualms about my carbon footprint while I participated in an endeavour aimed at raising awareness of the grave consequences of excessive release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. I had vague memories of a护士 public campaign in the Netherlands, including the slogan ‘A better environment begins with you’. However, I was too immersed in studying the Inupiaq-Eskimo169 language and culture and history and searching for any historical documents related to Shishmaref that I could lay my hands on. Any worries about my own climatic impact were secondary.

A decade later, environmental concerns have risen on the global political agenda, and rightfully so, as the situation for vulnerable populations has only worsened. Despite the many conferences and international agreements, both binding and non-binding, the human consumption of fossil fuels and the release of greenhouse gases have continued to increase. Awareness is one thing, swift political change another. It seems that, for the time being, we’ll remain trapped within a political-economic system based on limitless growth at the expense of ecological resilience and sustainability. For a long time, we (most of all people whose demand on natural resources exceeds the biocapacity per person) behaved as if no outside force could ever stop the march of progress.

On a return flight from Alaska, I began reading a very timely reprint of *The Weather Makers* (2005), Tim Flannery’s popular science book about humanity’s influence on climate change, and James Lovelock’s poignant *The Revenge of Gaia* (2006), a plea for the rapid decarbonisa-

- tion of society. I felt I needed to learn at least a minimum of background while working on a project in which global warming was a major theme. And while the term ‘Anthropocene’ was already there in Flannery’s book, I barely took notice.

Many years later, in 2015, when the increasingly urgent topic of global warming was becoming impossible to ignore, I attended a lecture by Bruno Latour in a theatre in Utrecht, and the term ‘Anthropocene’ resurfaced.170 Latour spoke like an eloquent prophet of doom, and his words were supported by his four decades of deep reading and thinking about exchanges between science and society since the seventeenth century. Latour opened my eyes in that I began to understand that the problems posed by the Earth’s warming shouldn’t only be interpreted technologically; rather, they’re fundamentally of a religious and ethical nature. In Latour’s terms, we must feel the Earth trembling as if the apocalypse is happening right now and not in some mythical past or ominous future. In another telling metaphor, he spoke of how modernists tend to assume nature to be a passive backdrop to their activities but that we’re now mislocating it happens to have a will of its own. Through all sorts of unpredictable and uncontrollable acts, nature claims an important role on the stage of human activities.

I began to reflect on the roles photographers and visual artists can play in addressing this new condition. The tentative and highly controversial concept of the Anthropocene hints at an issue so large and pervasive that it undermines all
comfortable certainties. How on Earth could this be appropriately depicted? The world-famous photograph AS08-14-2383, taken on Christmas Eve, 1968, by astronaut William Anders during the Apollo 8 mission to the Moon, hasn’t done much to prevent the levels of human-emitted greenhouse gases from further increasing. The photograph, more commonly known as Earthrise, inspired a generation of environmentalists and was famously featured on the cover of the American countercultural magazine Whole Earth Catalog (1967–1970).

For a while, I thought the documentary approach taken by Louter and Lixenberg was the way to portray climate change. It’s of course important that the impact of rising sea levels or melting permafrost on human settlements be documented in an honest manner. Yet, despite all our documentary efforts, nothing seems to change fundamentally, or not fast enough considering the speed of climatic changes. The concept of the Anthropocene is perhaps better expressed by means of the hockey stick graph. This line with a strong upward curve at the end represents the sudden rise in global mean temperatures over the last century. But the same type of graph results from many other analyses of changes related to the impact of human civilisation on ecosystems, from the exponential growth of the human population to the extinction of species. Despite its limitations in representing longer durations, let alone geological timescales, photography has proven to be a suitable medium for recording changes like the retreat of glaciers.

This type of ‘comparative photography’ is a popular means of demonstrating that the melting of icecaps is real and swift. It’s also been artistically adapted by photographers such as Mark Klett and, more recently, Christyl Lehas.

Klett’s Third View project is a meticulous re-photographing of the exact locations of previous American landscape photographs, some over a century old. By overlaying two or three photographs in a slideshow of the same location over a multi-generational timespan, the viewer can see these gradual changes within a fraction of a second. Lehas’ series Field Studies: Walking Through Landscapes and Archives more or less follows the same procedure, albeit in a freer mode. Lehas literally followed the footsteps of British botanist and ecologist Sir Edward James Salisbury (1846–1926), whose field notes and hitherto unexplored photographic glass plates depicting the flora and landscapes of Scotland and Norfolk provided the blueprint for Lehas’ re-photographing of these landscapes a century later.

My encounter with the work of two other artists put me on the track to imagining alternatives to the complex topics of climate change and man-nature relationships. I believe that storytelling, whether in words or graphics, may be best suited to narrating the unfolding apocalypse, and I also believe that photography and related methods can communicate urgency without compromising artistic vision and autonomy. The fact that photography is itself a strange hybrid between high technology and natural appearance already provides the impetus to think through the intersections of the powers of humanity and nature.

The Fotogramme series that Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky has been producing since 2011 reflects this hybrid condition in a way that’s timeless and contemporary in equal measure. These photograms are improvised compositions of leaves that Kovacovsky has collected throughout the years, many of which come from linden and alder trees. In her darkroom, Kovacovsky experiments with employing colour filters to arrive at prints of a hallucinatory nature. The leaves leave their imprint as if they’re fossils from the deep past, while the process also returns to the earliest days of photography in which pioneers such as Anna Atkins made contact prints with algae. For Kovacovsky, the concept of symbiosis, as developed and described by biologist Lynn Margulis, is an important source of inspiration. In this case, Symbiosis also extends to the way in which she seamlessly interweaves the artificial and the natural.

Closely related in method and outlook is Suzette Bousema’s series of photograms titled Future Relics. For a time, Bousema made photograms (akin to the Atkins-like cyanotypes from the 1850s) of every piece of plastic waste she found. The irony is in the contrast between a historical printing technique and the hint in the title that plastics will remain on Earth for a long time to come; the Anthropocene may as well be renamed the Plasticocene. In Climate Archive, the series with which Bousema graduated from The Hague Royal Academy of Art in 2019, a warped notion of time is in play. Frontal mono-chrome photographs show samples of the ice cores that provide scientists with a record of up to 800,000 years of climate history.

In the face of current warming conditions, the impact of which, on a scale of epochs, must be considered sudden and swift, the work of photographers and other visual artists may seem futile. Nevertheless, I place my hope in art as an instigator of fruitful debates and as a means of imagining new or renewed man-nature relationships.
Photographing the Anthropocene

Hidde Bakker


Suzette Bousema, From the series

Suzette Bousema, From the series
Climate Archive (2018).

Let’s break the cycle and publish our photo stories in photobooks

Photobooks are the result of creative processes that require time and teamwork. The editor’s role is crucial in understanding the material and determining the best format for its publication. The book is a medium of communication, and the editor must work with it more than the photographer to ensure that the message is clear and the audience is defined.

A photobook is a space of freedom, where the reader is your shepherd. The book is a medium of communication, and the editor must work with it more than the photographer to ensure that the message is clear and the audience is defined. The reader is your shepherd, and the book is a medium of communication.

Quantity doesn’t define accessibility: don’t think about how many copies to make before reflecting on your ideas to generate efficient publications, with a clear message and a defined audience.

Rebeldía

Liberating photobooks for our children before bedtime

Literally, the word “photobook” means a book that contains photographs. However, the term has been expanded to include multimedia works that combine photographs with text, music, and other elements. This evolution has opened up new possibilities for photobooks, allowing photographers to experiment with different formats and themes.

Creative engines: stay tuned to what happens around you, work with more people, work laterally, discuss your ideas to generate efficient publications with a clear message and a defined audience.

Fotolibros Latinoamericanos Photobooks

Sostenibles

Fotolibros sostenibles: hay proyectos fotográficos que no funcionan en formato libro. Estas son algunas ideas:

Sustainable

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Latin American photobooks and the audience

Walter Costa

Latin America is relegated to the cultural periphery, meaning there are far fewer resources available and it has no say on whether they actually offered this opportunity? A bustling publishing ecosystem together with specialised events and fairs are spreading the word, yet those answering the call to turn to them, and他们在拉丁美洲，也和另一些，比如拉丁美洲，或者在其他，比如在其他，而没有，更丰富的，其他，更丰富的，拉丁美洲，或者在其他，更丰富的，更丰富的，拉丁美洲，或者在其他，更丰富的，更丰富的。
Rebel with a Cause

Photobook history shows an extensive use of the medium to support or criticise political stances and trigger discussions on urgent issues. Argen-
tinian Sebastián Pani and Branwyn Grovès oped Yo Dia el Fuego (And One Day the Fire), a project about women burned by their partners in a country that suffers a new form of gender violence every 30 hours. In addition to telling painful stories of survivors, the resulting publication, made possible by Buenos Aires-based platform Turma, also serves as a guide for women to understand how gender violence works and how to denounce it before it’s too late. With 3,000 copies printed, it’s being used for informational talks that raise awareness and offer legal advice.

On a different level of political engagement, the work of Mexican designer and publisher León Muñoz Santini fits with André Breton’s declaration: ‘One publishes to find comrades!’ The publisher, house, Gain Negro, prints very affordable and densely political publications from different genres and authors. These pamphlets, posters, and cookbooks are noticed by their sharp and often ironic criticism of politics, violence, migration policies, economies and other deformations of power.

Let’s read photobooks to our children before bed

Making the youth familiar with this format is another long-term path we can start walking right now, like the itinerant library of CidF, which brings photographic books to different educational institutions, or the image-editing and photobook-making workshops for children led by Claudia Tavares and Rony Malheiro in Rio de Janeiro. Besides fostering an early connection with the format, playfully analysing photographic narratives helps in the forming of a critical attitude towards the images that have been pervading our daily lives since childhood.

Photobooks won’t be viral or mainstream. Instead, they’ll be patiently waiting on the shelves to be browsed over time. The challenge is getting to those shelves and offering more opportunities for impact. Like sowing seeds, if we want to create a sustainable environment for photobooks, hand need to get dry, and grains must be selected according to the soil. And the harvest, if we work well, won’t be ours.

What if We Stopped Claiming the Photobook?

Stefan Vanthuyne

In a written conversation with Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, I asked him if the contemporary documentary photographer hadn’t become extinct to the same critiques to which people like Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler subjected photographic documentaries in the 1970s. Because if documentary is thought to be art ‘when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as a work of art, as an expression on the part of the artist’,[94] as Sekula wrote, then the same can be said about the contemporary photobook. In his response, Sekula felt that was ‘dangerous’ to use their concerns as a fixed rule for this moment, because ‘photographs are not works of art; although a big conversation is many orders of magnitude smaller now than it was then.’[95] He also pointed out how, in the last decade, the work of both Sekula and Sekula—the latter with two gallery shows in London and New York just last summer—had been embraced by the art world and itself now shown as fine art (rightly so, we agreed). Yet, there seems to be an annoying side effect to being embraced or taken in by the art world: being put under a glass bell where there’s little oxygen tends to slowly kill the original scope of the book. And that once in, it becomes very hard to reach out again.

It seems to me this is what David Campany meant when, a couple of years ago, he wrote that the term ‘photobook’ is recent and that both previous makers and audiences of photographic books really didn’t require the term to exist. ‘Indeed they might have benefitted from its absence.’ Perhaps photographic book making was so rich and varied precisely because it was not conceptualized as a practice with a unified name.[96] Naming is claiming, and today the photographic book resides firmly and comfortably within the art world, even the documentary photobook. This naming and claiming sometimes takes on strange forms, like in 2016, when Aperture’s The Photobook Review coined the term ‘the accidental photobook’, referring to books that were never made with the intention of being ‘photobooks’ and therefore exist ‘outside the photobook radar’.[97] Most examples given were vintage—and somewhat didoctrinaire—cookbooks, scientific books or manuals.

The fact is that now ‘a photobook radar’ isn’t a bad thing. The renewed attention—from both the art world and from scholars—for the contemporary photobook is now shown as fine art (rightly so, we agreed). Yet, this seems to be an annoying side effect to being embraced or taken in by the art world: being put under a glass bell where there’s little oxygen tends to slowly kill the original scope of the book. And that once in, it becomes very hard to reach out again.

We Stopped Claiming the Photobook? How do we keep its content alive? How can we create an audience for its content?

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Thinking outside of the book is another line of investigation when talking about dissemination, one that Costa also addresses. But since the manifest that he presents departs solely from the viewpoint of the artist or photographer, I’d like to finish with an example of the photobook being thoughtfully handled by someone other than an artist. Kristof Titeca is an associate professor in development studies at the University of Antwerp. His book *Rebel Lives* presents an impressive visual account of life inside the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, based on photographs taken by the militia’s commanders between 1994 and 2004. Here, we have an archive handled not by an artist but a scholar. Dealing with photographs, and also text and drawings, the book clearly makes use of the creative design used in contemporary photobooks—this comes as no surprise, as it was published by an art and photobook publisher. It also accompanies an exhibition at the Foto Museum of Antwerp. It reminds me of Forensic Architecture, another exciting example of researchers finding an entrance into the art world, using artistic media and platforms to present their results and, while they’re at it, causing an interesting friction with and challenge to conventional ideas about art.

One of the characteristics of ‘accidental photobooks’ was that they were in fact free from an artist’s agenda. Perhaps if we stopped claiming the photobook, the medium might find more breathing room and more space to move; it might find new forms and new life, perhaps even new audiences. It’s possible that, in the hands of others, and in fields or disciplines other than art, the photobook can keep expanding.
Society at Royal Academy of Art The
enrolled in the Master Photography &
Institute India and is currently
artist-in-residence at the Goethe
He studied at National University
emphasis on intimate portraiture
long-term documentary work with
Chris Becher is an author of
She's a professor of modern culture
curator, filmmaker and theorist of
Ariella Azoulay is an author, art
Authors
Savannah Dodd is an anthropolo-
programme at KABK.
Latin America while attending the
in São Paulo, he's now based in The
and independent editor and teacher special-
London.
photography at University of the Arts
published and taught internationally
gence gathering. He has exhibited,
property development of London and
have explored topics including the
the historiography of photography;
photographic history and theory;
Her research interests include
the Maseter's of Art and Visual
scholar and the course leader for
Dr. Sara Dominici is a writer,
ethics in the archive at Queen's
pursing her PhD in photography
the aim of increasing ethical literacy
the Photography Ethics Centre with
photographs. In 2017, she founded
modes of access and engagement
with the people and places she
photography. In 2017, she founded
the Photograph Ethica Centre with
sannah Dolisi is an anthropolo-
grapher. She places
particular importance on the
mation and Interpretation of Iconic and
Visual Memory. A Study of the Recog-
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